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Citation for the original published chapter:

Alena, M., Barbara, T P., Yurchuk, Y. (2018)

Humour as a Mode of Hegemonic Control: Comic Representations of Belarusian and Ukrainian Leaders in Official Russian Media

In: Niklas Bernsand and Barbara Törnquist-Plewa (ed.), *Cultural and Political Imaginaries in Putin's Russia* (pp. 211-231). Leiden, Boston: Brill Academic Publishers  
Eurasian Studies Library

[https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004366671\\_011](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004366671_011)

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# Cultural and Political Imaginaries in Putin's Russia

*Edited by*

Niklas Bernsand  
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# Humour as a Mode of Hegemonic Control: Comic Representations of Belarusian and Ukrainian Leaders in Official Russian Media

*Alena Minchenia, Barbara Törnquist-Plewa and Yuliya Yurchuk*

## Introduction

The existing multidisciplinary scholarship on political humour widely agrees about the discursive power of jokes. The recurrent patterns of joking (who is laughing at whom and why) reflect and create power structures (Purdie 1993, 129; Attardo 2014). Inspired by this insight, we want to inquire and reflect on the function, dynamics, and social effects of political humour in framing and conveying the political imagination in a particular political context – relations between Russia and its two neighbours, Belarus and Ukraine. Thus, in the following, we will examine the content of a selected number of Russian political jokes and humorous cartoons dealing with Belarusian and Ukrainian leaders and ask how Russian-Belarusian and Russian-Ukrainian relationships and Russia's self-perception feature in these representations. The aim is to explore what geopolitical ideas define the content of these jokes. We find this discussion more than timely in the context of the strengthening of imperialist tendencies in the region of Eastern Europe as expressed by the Russian annexation of Crimea and the war in Ukraine.

Belarus and Ukraine have a lot in common, but still differ in many respects, which leads us to inquire about the similarities and differences in representations of these two countries in Russian satirical programmes. Both became independent states as late as 1991 in connection to the fall of the Soviet Union and are situated in a geopolitically contested scene, between Russia to the east and the EU and NATO to the west. Both countries have a long history of political, economic, and cultural dependency on Russia. Throughout the 19th and almost the whole of the 20th centuries, Belarusian territory and most of Ukraine belonged first to the Russian and later to the Soviet empires. Belarus and Ukraine are Slavic-speaking and, though they have their own national languages, the Russian language holds a strong position and is recognized as official in Belarus. Moreover, Russian media are widely accessible in both Belarus and Ukraine, and therefore their inhabitants are exposed to messages coming

from Moscow. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, the two countries took quite different tracks in relation to Russia. While Ukraine underwent changes of government in its pursuit of democracy that were often turbulent, and oscillated between the EU and Russia, Belarus chiefly remained under the rule of one president and its economic dependence on the Russian Federation increased.

The Belarusian government has long pursued the policy of close cooperation with Russia, which is discursively framed in terms of familial intimacy between the two countries and as the enactment of their brotherly ties. The Russian government financially supports Belarusian authority, providing credits and low prices for natural gas and oil (e.g. Ioffe 2008). At the same time, since 2015 Belarus has searched for support in Europe. The circumstances that lead to this are twofold. On the one hand, in 2015 the EU first suspended and then, in February 2016, lifted sanctions against Belarusian officials, which had been introduced in 2010 because of the violent suppression of the peaceful protests against fraud in the presidential election. On the other hand, the Russian authorities, confronted with the economy suffering from the restrictive European measures and low oil prices, are not willing to finance Lukashenka's system without real concessions on important issues (e.g. the placement of a Russian military airbase in Belarus, recognition of the Republic of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and support of Russian politics in relation to Ukraine). Going in either direction – turning towards Europe or continuing negotiations with Russia – can endanger Lukashenka's personal power and, therefore, is considered dangerous. This dubious setting defines the current geopolitical orientation of Belarus.

The case of Ukraine seems to be different given the openly hostile relationship between Russia and Ukraine since 2014 when the Russian Federation annexed Crimea and supported separatists in Eastern Ukraine that led to the long-term military conflict in the country (Grant 2015; Wilson 2014). The war shapes its own dynamic in terms of power relations. Therefore, in order to make the cases taken up here more comparable, we decided that it would be of particular interest to see how Ukraine was presented in the Russian satirical media preceding the open hostility between the countries and in media aiming at entertainment rather than political analysis. Thus, the analysed data refer to the time when Russia and Ukraine had a complex relationship oscillating between the coolness of antipathy and the warmth of friendship. A cool, antagonistic relationship was characteristic of the period when Viktor Iushchenko was the president of Ukraine. His aims of closer integration with NATO and the EU were treated as a betrayal of Russian interests. A return to a friendly Russian-Ukrainian relationship happened chiefly when Viktor Ianukovych

became president in 2010, as he supported closer cooperation with the Russian Federation.

In what follows, we will attempt to show that popular cultural products, in the form of humour, can shed light on some lesser noticed aspects of Belarusian-Russian and Ukrainian-Russian relations. They can disclose the geopolitical imagination that underlies politics and lay bare the deeper cultural subtext of power relations between political players.

### **Studying Humour: Presenting Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Data**

Our argument about the entanglement of geopolitical ideas based on power relations and humorous representations originates in the recent theoretical development in the field of geopolitics. Since the 1990s, there has been a shift from the classical understanding of geopolitics as focusing on states and official policy-makers to a broader perspective that asks for the incorporation of mundane phenomena, such as popular culture, as a site for analysing knowledge (re)production, and (re)enactment of international relations and political inequalities (Dittmer and Gray 2010; Dittmer and Dodds 2008; Sharp 1996). As Dittmer and Gray put it, “[c]entral to the development of critical geopolitics has been the recognition of geopolitics as something everyday that occurs outside of academic and policymaking discourse; this form of geopolitical discourse has been termed ‘popular geopolitics’” (2010, 1664). The shift towards popular geopolitics was based on the rethinking of a narrow understanding of power and political agency. Engaging with the Foucauldian conceptualization of power as multiple and diffused, the scholarship on popular geopolitics approaches different cultural phenomena (e.g. cinema, literature, television, magazines, etc.) as mobilizing and enacting politics (Dittmer and Dodds 2008; Sharp 1996). From this perspective, everyday culture is saturated with interpretation of geographical entities on different scales (local, national, transnational) in political terms, such as the loci of power vs. margins and peripheries, sources of threat or danger vs. places of safety, or borders as divisions vs. territories of alliances.

Within this framework separate attempts have been made to define humour as a revealing and relevant object for geopolitical analysis (Ridanpää 2009; Purcell, Brown and Gokmen, 2010; Dodds and Kirby 2013). For example, for his analysis Juha Ridanpää takes the case of the reception of the Muhammad cartoon controversy in Finland. What is important for us is that the author not only concentrates on the Othering of Muslims and the inequality constructed

through these representations, but, by looking at the resulting discussions on the issue of comic images of the Other, he analyses a specificity of Finnish society (Ridanpää 2009). This way of asking questions and approaching humorous representations, which relies on the classic postcolonial critique that the Other implies a particular construction of the Self (Said 1978, Gandhi 1998, Harper 2002), is also at the heart of this paper.

Next, we would like to present some foundational ideas about humour and political humour in particular. The philosophical understanding of humour connected to the writings of Aristotle, Kant, and Kierkegaard highlights incongruity as its main feature. Humour is seen as “the enjoyment of incongruity” (Tsakona and Popa 2011, 4; also see Morreall 1987; Attardo 2014). This understanding became the foundation for more recent research done in the field. Employing this perspective, Tsakona and Popa propose to conceptualize political humour as “a communicative resource spotting, highlighting, and attacking incongruities originating in political discourse and action” (Tsakona and Popa 2011, 6). At the same time, Billig adds another criterion, besides incongruity, to define humour. He suggests that humour is always embedded into the system of social hierarchies (2005). This in turn brings us to the issue of power.

Another line of theoretical discussion that sets the background for the following analysis is connected to conflicting interpretations of humour as, on the one hand, being subversive and challenging the power of the normative, and, on the other, humour as supporting and strengthening the existing social order (e.g. Klumbyte 2011; Paletz 1990; Tsakona and Popa 2011; Weaver 2010). There is substantial empirical support for both of these two positions in existing scholarship. For example, research on a Lithuanian Soviet satirical magazine (Klumbite 2011), the humorous actions of the Serbian Otpor movement (Sorensen 2008), or the emotions linked to protests in Central Europe in the 1980s and 90s (Flam 2004) demonstrates how humour serves as a tool for diminishing power and challenging its omnipresent character.

At the same time, there is a substantial amount of research revealing the other aspect of humour, namely that it supports and reproduces the dominant order (e.g. Gouin 2004; Pearce and Hajizada 2014; Tsakona and Popa 2011). For instance, Krikman and Laineste (2009) show that jokes and anecdotes in different (post)socialist countries function as part of the existing socio-political system and Weather (2011) and Perez (2016) reveal that antiracist, anti-Muslim, and anti-Semitic jokes become a mechanism ensuring stability of social inclusion/exclusion.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, humour is directly employed by powerful agents of

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1 For irony and humour in the service of the existing power system, also see the chapter by Ekaterina Kalinina in this book.



different scale (from individual to official media and state representatives) to maintain and reproduce systemic domination. For example, Pearce and Hajizada (2014) show that humour, being recognized as a tool appealing and accessible to a wide audience, is used by the official regime in Azerbaijan to discredit its opponents. Research dealing with racism and islamophobia compiles an archive of cases that explicates how asymmetries between different geopolitical regions and white Western privileges are preserved in humour (e.g., Cotter 2014, Hervik 2018, Malmqvist 2015, Weather 2011). After ten years Hervik (2018) refers back to the so-called Muhammad cartoons controversies to show how hegemonic imagination of race, religion, and space already heavily criticized in 2005 is easily evoked and employed in perceptions of the “Copenhagen Shooting” and discourses on terrorism in 2015.

Furthermore, the examples presented above point to the tendency, observed among others by Tsakona and Popa (2011, 7), that humour communicated through official media channels mostly does not intend to bring about political changes, but rather preserve the status quo.<sup>2</sup> This idea is especially instructive for the analysis of humour in the context of state-controlled media, which is the case in our study. In the following, we will deal with humour produced by the major Russian TV channel *Pervyi kanal* that serves the needs of Russian political elites. Therefore, we see the analysed jokes and cartoons as humour produced from a position of power and a way of translating the Russian elites’ mainstream perception of Russian-Belarusian and Russian-Ukrainian relationships and Belarusian and Ukrainian leaders into a popular form.

Our sample of humorous representations was constructed based on the following criteria. We selected video clips: (1) produced by the Russian TV channel *Pervyi kanal*; (2) that are fragments of entertaining and humorous TV-programmes; (3) in all which satire and mockery are directed at Belarusian and Ukrainian political leaders, namely Aliaxandr Lukashenka (among the Belarusian political figures), and Iulia Tymoshenko, Arseniy Iatseniuk, Viktor Ianukovich, and Viktor Iushchenko (among the Ukrainian politicians). We analysed 31 cartoons from the project “*Mul’tlichnosti*” (CartoonPersonalities) and 11

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2 This does not mean that the humour transmitted by the unofficial media is generally subversive. For example, Miazhevich (2015) and Minchenia (2016) show the contrary to the established perception, on-line humour has a limited potential to counter the hegemonic state order for a number of reasons. As Miazhevich shows, Ukrainian and Belarusian states employ different strategies in controlling internet media. Moreover, alternative media have a marginal position while TV continues to dominate the media sphere (Miazhevich 2015). Research by Minchenia (2016) adds that independent internet media in Belarus, although being sensitive to the power imbalance between Russia and Belarus, reproduce other normative divisions, such as West vs. East and a gendered construction of politics.

episodes of the programmes “*Projektorparishilton*” (ParishiltonSearchlight), “*Bol'shaya raznitsa*” (Big Difference), and “*Vechernii Urgant*” (Evening with Urgant). “*Bol'shaya raznitsa*” is a co-production of Ukrainian and Russian channels. The Ukrainian TV channel *Inter* broadcasted the programme in its “Ukrainian version”, which included some guests from Ukraine but chiefly the same content as was shown in Russia. We analysed the videos that were shown in Russia.

Our visual data consists of two types of video clips: animated cartoons and fragments of TV programmes with skits. The analytical difference between them is connected to the importance of visual data *per se*. In other words, cartoons are to be analysed by taking into account both their content – themes, stories, and dialogues – and form, which are visual signs that create their own meanings. At the same time, fragments of TV programmes mostly construct humorous representations by the means of narration. In the programme “*Projektorparishilton*”, four male TV presenters partake in humorous banter while reading and discussing issues taken from newspapers, while in “*Vechernii Urgant*” the host deliver a humorous speech at the beginning of the programme. Therefore, in these cases we concentrate our analysis on the discursive level of TV humour. The analysed material belongs to the period of 2008 to 2013. The TV show “*Mul'tlichnosti*” was closed in 2013 and “*Projektorparishilton*” in 2012. We did not include material after the Maidan Revolution in 2014 since the open Ukrainian-Russian conflict created a new media situation in Ukraine that would have made the comparison with Belarus related material problematic. With the annexation of Crimea, Ukraine began to redefine its information and media politics (e.g. Bolin, Jordan & Ståhlberg 2016, Pantti 2016, Nygren & Hök 2016). Russian TV channels were banned in Ukraine and the cooperation between TV production companies was interrupted. Thus, this development deserves a separate analysis that cannot be covered here.

### **The Power of Money and the Cold War Imaginary: Representing Russian-Belarusian Relationships in Russian TV Humour about Lukashenka**

Let us begin with discussing what the personage of Lukashenka looks like in the cartoon series “*Mul'tlichnosti*” and how these representations mirror Russia's own image of politics. Then we will discuss the main themes and plots identified in the visual data and look at how the political relationship of Russia to Belarus and *vice versa* are imagined.

The animated character of Lukashenka from the show “*Mul'tlichnosti*” lives alone in a wooden house and, in the background, one can hear the sound of cattle. No other person is portrayed living in the area. Its emptiness and Lukashenka's loneliness are emphasized by the scarcity of furniture – there is only a throne standing in the room and Lukashenka's portraits hanging on the walls. At the same time, these signs of ambition and egocentrism are countered by the straw and logs lying just near the throne and big sacks full of potatoes that Lukashenka is portrayed as peeling by himself. His wooden house with modest, village interior (except the throne), the sound of cattle, and his surprise at discovering some technical possibilities (like the turning chairs from the show “The Voice” in which he is portrayed as a judge in one of the episodes) are signs representing Belarus as backward and unmodern. Similar images are constructed in other TV-shows. In “*Vechernii Urgant*”, the host Ivan Urgant says, while showing a portrait of Lukashenka on his MacBook, “We try to combine all incompatible things. Lukashenka and Apple have never been this close to each other before.” (*Vechernii Urgant*, May 14, 2012)<sup>3</sup>. Thus, the figure of Lukashenka is presented as intensely old-fashioned and alien to everything technologically advanced and popular, as signified in the show by the Apple products. Moreover, in the other evening shows under analysis, the hosts address topics that construct Belarus as still living in Soviet times or discursively connect its products with old (Soviet) symbols. For example, *Vechernii Urgant* mocks the proposal of Belarusian members of Parliament of reintroducing gymnastics at work places (April 2013)<sup>4</sup>, “*Projektorparishilton*” (June 2009)<sup>5</sup> states that no one (except Russians) would buy Belarusian tractors, as they have not seen the Soviet cartoon that shows how the machine works.

Although in these comical representations Lukashenka wears a suit and tie, he is presented as an uneducated peasant. He speaks a kind of *trasianka* – the mixture of Russian and Belarusian languages with the distinct accent of a

3 Unfortunately, the video of the joke is no longer available, but there are numerous reports quoting exactly this representation of Lukashenka in Belarusian Internet media – e.g. <<https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=73443&lang=ru>>, <<http://udf.by/news/nopolitic/59683-cenzura-ont-vyrezalashutku-urganta-pro-lukashenko.html>>, accessed March 5, 2018.

4 Unfortunately, the video of the joke is no longer available, but there are numerous reports pointing to this representation of Lukashenka in Belarusian Internet media – e.g. <<https://gomel.today/rus/news/belarus/41732/>>, <<http://5min.by/news/-populjarnij-rossijskij-televeduschij-ivan.html>>, accessed March 5, 2018.

5 *Projektorparishilton* (Video) <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=45RoZFG\\_klk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=45RoZFG_klk)>, accessed March 5, 2018.

Belarusian village person.<sup>6</sup> Sometimes, he is also represented as playing the bayan – a folk musical instrument – signifying that Lukashenka and his context are backward, simple, and rural. Thus, Lukashenka's otherness is created by the classic incongruity between high and low, or, as in this case, a particular combination of provinciality and lowbrow qualities and claims to the highest power in the country, so that the former makes the latter look ungrounded and ridiculous. In turn, this means that Russia's image is implicitly constructed as economically and culturally superior in contrast, as a centre and a modern, urban, and technologically advanced state with modern, educated, and sophisticated leaders. Needless to say, this kind of representation is typical for ethnic stereotyping in the context of unequal power relations such as colonial or postcolonial dependency (Said 1978).

This analytical observation receives further support when interactions between different animated personages and the presented topics of discussion in cartoons and evening shows are taken into account. The main theme present in all of the video fragments analysed here is the financial deficiency of Belarus and its dependency on Russia. Lukashenka is portrayed as desperately needing money. In cartoons he not only literally begs for money by singing and dancing in front of the Russian Minister of Finance Kudrin (episode 15)<sup>7</sup>, but also steals some things like a candlestick from the British Queen (episode 15)<sup>8</sup> or tries to sell a tractor to Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton (episode 39, "Taxi-2")<sup>9</sup>. Significantly, no one seems to take him seriously. In episode 15 Lukashenka approaches Berlusconi, Merkel, and Elizabeth II to ask for money, but does not succeed in getting any financial help. In this context, Russia is literally presented as the only solution as Lukashenka comes back to sing and dance for the Russian minister Kudrin later in the episode.

This idea of Russia's financial superiority and Belarus's unescapable dependency can be found in other cartoons and evening shows as well. In episode 4, "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?"<sup>10</sup>, the personage of Lukashenka comes to the popular game show to win some money. Exactly the same story of Lukashenka, coming to the Russian game show to improve his finances, was later presented

6 For a thorough explanation of the linguistic situation in Belarus in general and the phenomenon of *trasiianka* in particular see Tsykhun (2006, 61-76).

7 Mul'tlichnosti. Episode 15 (Video) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jv30xdcJvEg>>, accessed March 5, 2018.

8 Mul'tlichnosti. Episode 15 (Video) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fqfAtrZxAmY>>, accessed March 5, 2018.

9 Mul'tlichnosti. Episode 39 (Video) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MkJgdHm66lE>>, accessed March 5, 2018.

10 Mul'tlichnosti. Episode 4 (Video) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mslpLzXftI4>>, accessed March 1, 2018.

in the show *“Bol’shaya raznitsa”* (episode 23)<sup>11</sup>. The hosts of the other show, *“Projektorparishilton”*, in an episode in June 2009, are discussing tensions around new credit requested by Lukashenka from the Russian government, when one of them says: “Alexandr Grigorievich [i.e. *Lukashenka*], those who know you, do not invite you to visit them”<sup>12</sup>. They then conclude that Belarusians, in their search for money, can only go to the penguins in Antarctica. In this joke, penguins are the only creatures on Earth that can be deceived by Belarusian financial credibility. It should be noted that the discursive move from Lukashenka as an object of mockery to the state and its people (e.g. from Lukashenka being an unwelcomed guest as a politician to Belarusians who should go to Antarctica with the hope of persuading penguins to economic collaboration) has an important function in this joke. In this way, the object of mockery is gradually expanded from the Belarusian leader to the Belarusian state and Belarusian people.

It cannot be denied that the continuous Russian financial support of Belarus does have a place in the economic relationship between Russia and Belarus, but what is important here is how this fact unfolds and is interpreted by popular culture. Not only is it constructed as an extreme economic dependency and disparity to such an extent that Russian game shows become a source for Belarus’s budget improvements, but also Russia is represented as the only possible choice, the only possible salvation from poverty and backwardness. In two of the episodes of *“Mul’tlichnosti”*<sup>13</sup>, the personage of Lukashenka comes back to Russia after his attempts of searching for support elsewhere.

Another dimension of Russia’s superiority can be found in the portrayal of Lukashenka’s personality. In cartoons and evening show narratives, he is presented as a person with little knowledge and limited intellectual abilities, uncritical of himself and sometimes not well-mannered. The cartoons portraying his participation in different popular TV shows, such as “What? Where? When?” (episode 37)<sup>14</sup>, “The Voice” (episode 42)<sup>15</sup>, and “Who Wants to Be a Million-

11 Bol’shaya Raznitsa, Episode 23 (Video) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gBlmGLSong>, accessed March 1, 2018.

12 Projektorparishilton (Video) <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=45RoZFG\\_klk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=45RoZFG_klk)>, accessed March 5, 2018.

13 Mul’tlichnosti. Episode 15 (Video) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fqfAtrZxAmY>, Mul’tlichnosti>. Episode 22 (Video), <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VPsExmNAP\\_Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VPsExmNAP_Q)>, accessed March 5, 2018.

14 Mul’tlichnosti. Episode 37 (Video) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tPrSJygfDHs>>, accessed March 1, 2018.

15 Mul’tlichnosti. Episode 42 (Video) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5gxAkFOoAmk>>, accessed March 1, 2018.

aire?" (episode 4)<sup>16</sup> use the same pattern. Lukashenka is never able to give the right answers to even very basic questions, but he boasts a lot of his abilities and values himself highly. He is presented as a cunning peasant that usually compensates for his bad education either with various tricks and deception or by manipulating someone's feelings. He is typically portrayed as speaking about feelings of brotherhood between Russia and Belarus whenever he asks Russia for money. Although this reference to the historically strong and special ties between Russians and Belarusians has a direct relation to Lukashenka's real speeches, in this particular context it also allows for the construction of Russia as the intelligent counterpart that sees through the cheap, deceptive tricks yet remains benevolent and prepared to help the Belarusian younger brother. This discursive construction occludes Russia's own political interest in preserving the *status quo* in Belarus and masks the power it exercises over the Belarusian state by presenting its involvement as a form of aid.

Significantly, Lukashenka is never portrayed as communicating directly with the president of Russia (either Medvedev or Putin) on equal footing and professionally. At the same time, the personage of Lukashenka interacts with American president Obama, American foreign secretary Hillary Clinton, and the British queen Elizabeth II, although this is not the case in reality, providing that his legitimacy is unrecognized by the EU and the USA and he and some other governmental officials in Belarus were under sanctions at the time. In episode 22, "*Skolkovo*"<sup>17</sup>, Lukashenka conceals his personality by pretending to be a journalist first from Mahileu (a regional Belarusian town, called Mogilev in Russian), then from Kyrgyzstan, and finally from Moldova, attending a press-conference by President Medvedev. This is not only a reference to Lukashenka's tricks to get money from Russia, but an explicit construction of hierarchy – who can approach the Russian leader and how should it be done.

In episode 16, "*Den' Militsii*" ("The Police Day")<sup>18</sup>, the personage of Lukashenka addresses Medvedev, who is never shown but is presumably among the audience, in a scene during a concert celebrating the day of the police. Lukashenka apologizes for the critical statements he had made previously about Russia. It is the host of the evening, Malakhov, who is portrayed as communicating with Lukashenka directly in the scene. He asks different kinds of tough questions and demands that Lukashenka make a choice of whom he will be friends

16 Mul'tlichnosti. Episode 4 (Video) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mslpL2XftI4>>, accessed March 1, 2018.

17 Mul'tlichnosti. Episode 22 (Video) <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6rh\\_Rvj7fOU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6rh_Rvj7fOU)>, accessed March 1, 2018.

18 Mul'tlichnosti. Episode 16 (Video) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sb5A4YjrzE>>, accessed March 1, 2018.

with – Russia or Europe. Interestingly, this comic episode was transmitted before the presidential election in Belarus in 2010. This was the period during which some EU politicians, such as the Ministers of International Affairs of Germany and Poland, Guido Westerwelle and Radoslav Sikorski respectively, came to Minsk to meet Lukashenka personally and promised significant financial support for the country on the condition that an open, democratic election was conducted.

A number of important analytical points should be made in this respect. First of all, the dichotomous view of international relations made up of two poles, with Russia on one side and the EU and/or the USA on the other, underpins all the scripts presented here of Lukashenka searching for money. Secondly, this dichotomous choice reveals world politics being imagined in terms of the Cold War era, with the explicit idea of enemies and alliances of protection. The represented dialogue between the personage of Lukashenka and the compère Malakhov is based on the assumption that collaboration between Belarus and Europe closes any possibility for cooperation with Russia. It also shows that dichotomous thinking about geopolitical power has long been present in Russian popular culture, before any explicit political actions such as Russian aggression in Ukraine.

### **Between Traitors, Thieves, and Old Little Bothers: Representing Russian-Ukrainian Relationships in Russian TV Humour on Ukrainian Political Leaders**

Judging from the coverage on TV, Ukraine does not seem to be as interesting as Belarus as a recipient of mockery and humour. This might be based on the fact that there is no one political figure that would stand for the whole country in Ukraine. In other words, there is no Lukashenka-like figure that would provide consistency, continuity, and simplicity for media representations. In TV programmes, the Ukrainian political spectrum is represented by Iulia Tymoshenko, Arsenii Iatseniuk, Viktor Ianukovych, and Viktor Iushchenko.

In the period of time under analysis (2008-2013), the Ukrainian theme became most popular in the winter of 2009/2010 (e.g. *Mul'tlichnosti* December 2009, January 2010)<sup>19</sup> and almost disappeared starting in the autumn of 2010. From October 2010 to the end of 2012, for example, *Mul'tlichnosti* only aired three episodes in which Ukraine was depicted. The popularity of the Ukrainian

<sup>19</sup> *Mul'tlichnosti* (Video) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1RbXpnboI7M>>, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iT6nVv580Bc>>, accessed March 5, 2018.

theme coincided with the presidential election in the country. A whole episode of *Mul'tlichnosti* was dedicated to the Ukrainian elections<sup>20</sup>. This episode was broadcast on the evening of January 17, the day on which Ukrainians cast their ballots. Iushchenko, Ianukovych, Tymoshenko, and Iatseniuk are shown together in court where an imaginary jury, obviously impersonating the Ukrainian people, has to pass its sentence. Tymoshenko expects to win more votes even while she worries about her lack of popularity among the Ukrainian people. Ianukovych boasts about his popularity among the people of one specific region of Ukraine, Donbas, and regrets that the whole country is not like Donbas. In this manner, Ianukovych is portrayed as a “regional choice”, which can prove to be problematic when it comes to the second round of the elections. The choice of clothing is emblematic in representing the Ukrainian political figures – Iushchenko wears a traditional, embroidered Ukrainian shirt (*vyshtyvanka*), which represents his connection to popular peasant culture and thus implies his populism and nationalism. Ianukovych is dressed in a simple, striped T-shirt that probably emphasizes his working class background. Tymoshenko wears a fashionable dress and her recognizable hairstyle (she also underlines that the visit to the hairdresser cost her a lot of money that she will not be paid back since she had not received as many votes as expected). Iatseniuk, meanwhile, wears a suit and tie, which is the least noticeable costume in comparison with other candidates in this context, and thus presents him as Mr. Nobody, a boring figure without personality.

The second round of the elections, with candidates Tymoshenko and Ianukovych, was held on 7 February. Yanukovych received the majority of votes and became the president. Interestingly, this victory was not directly reflected in the TV programmes under analysis. On February 13, 2010, the programme *Mul'tlichnosti* mentioned it indirectly through the figure of Iulia Tymoshenko, who was portrayed as suffering because the “people do not love her”<sup>21</sup>. Remarkably, Tymoshenko always gets a strongly gendered representation based on stereotypes of women as beautiful, emotional, and concerned with their appearance and the opinion of others. It is worth pointing out that this gender bias is characteristic not only of the representations of Tymoshenko in the analysed segments, but is also common of her representation in Ukraine and in the international press and similar to the representation of other women in politics (Kis' 2007; Voronova 2014; Zhurzhenko 2008). In this respect, humour-

20 *Mul'tlichnosti* (Video) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jQoPCGowmlo>>, accessed March 5, 2018.

21 *Mul'tlichnosti* (Video) <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X3E\\_1Woud\\_E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X3E_1Woud_E)>, accessed March 5, 2018.



istic media follow suit and play on stereotypes. However, this gendered representation paradoxically allows, in our view, the portrayal of Tymoshenko's character to be more complex than the male leaders. She is presented as wise, keen, intelligent, and subjugated at the same time. Her gender makes her different from the other candidates since she deviates from the stereotypical image of a political leader (who is a man), on the one hand, and from the stereotypical image of a woman (a docile subject that depends on men), on the other. Thus, Tymoshenko's gender allows the TV producers to portray her both as strong and weak at the same time. She is shown as a ruthless politician who has her own agenda but still, as a woman, she is seen as not quite equal to her opponents, who are all men. In this context, her mere existence on the political scene is pictured as a source of humour.

Ukrainian politicians are portrayed as petty thieves that steal resources (gas) from their bigger and richer neighbour Russia (*Mul'tlichnosti* November 15, 2009; December 13, 2009; December 28, 2009)<sup>22</sup> in a highly unprofessional manner. They are lazy and preoccupied only with their small worries about keeping power and establishing alliances with those who would guarantee them in securing their power. Thus, Iushchenko's and Tymoshenko's attempts of establishing contacts with NATO, the USA, and the EU are represented as a pursuit of their own personal interests, which are at the same time a betrayal of the larger geopolitical interests of Russia. Iushchenko and Tymoshenko are presented as unreliable people without any ideals or values except money. In one of the episodes, Iushchenko and Tymoshenko sing the song "We need to become a NATO member" in which they explain that if this happens, NATO will give them money and they will become rich. They are also ready to sell the whole country "in retail" to the EU (*Mul'tlichnosti* 28.12.2009)<sup>23</sup>. Tymoshenko and Iushchenko continuously nag Barack Obama for money (e.g. *Mul'tlichnosti* 13.12.2009)<sup>24</sup>. They also ask Russia for money and are even ready to sell the Crimean city of Sevastopol, but Russia refuses their offer (*Mul'tlichnosti* 28.12.2009)<sup>25</sup>. Sometimes they are shown in the company of Belarusian president Lukashenka and Georgian president Saakashvili, who are also presented as beggars in this context. Interestingly, Ianukovych is not portrayed in this way. Only those who seek the help of other geopolitical players beyond Russia

22 Mul'tlichnosti (Video) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1RbXpnboI7M>>, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iT6nVv58OBc>>, accessed March 5, 2018.

23 Mul'tlichnosti (Video) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iT6nVv58OBc>>, accessed March 5, 2018.

24 Video on Youtube is no longer available.

25 Mul'tlichnosti (Video) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iT6nVv58OBc>>, accessed March 5, 2018.

are presented as thieves and traitors. While Ukraine is portrayed as governed by people who have no interests except their own, leaders of the USA, the EU, and Russia, on the other hand, are presented as equal partners who have their own geopolitical interests.

Distinguishing features in the portrayal of Ukrainian political figures are provincialism, orientalism, and an unwillingness to see them as distinct subjects, which is represented by underlining their dependency on Russia. These traits are chiefly revealed through representations of Iushchenko and Tymoshenko. They are most often shown as funny neighbours and petty thieves who are continually trying to steal something (i.e. gas) from their wealthy and big neighbour (Russia). Iushchenko is portrayed as a stereotypical peasant interested only in singing and enjoying his life, which is a popular representation of Ukrainians in Russian literature starting from the 19th century (Thompson 2000). Tymoshenko is also portrayed as a provincial type of lord who is nevertheless dependent on the benevolence of more influential lords (Russia or the USA).

In *Projektorparishilton*, one of the hosts, Oleksandr Tsekalo, is of Ukrainian origin (he was born in Odessa). This mere fact is constantly the target of jokes from the other programme leaders. They make fun of his laziness, slowness, and at times he is even discarded as an “alien” (*inoplanetianin*) because of his origin.<sup>26</sup> Tsekalo’s lack of humour is constantly underlined by other programme leaders who demonstratively do not laugh when he is making jokes. In this way, “un-laughter” (Smith 2009, 158; Zimbardo 2014, 64) becomes the instrument of bordering which reveals unequal power relations – those who do not laugh are deciding what is funny and what is not and make a signal to the audience how the joking subject should be interpreted. In this context, it is worth mentioning an instance when a Russian joke about Ukraine caused an international scandal. This occurred when Ivan Urgant, the host of the show “*Vechernij Urgant*”, who is also one of the hosts in *Projektorparishilton*, while chopping some herbs during one of his culinary shows, said, “I am chopping [them] as a red commissar chopped the residents of a Ukrainian village”. In Ukraine, there was a wave of outraged responses in social media with demands that Urgant be banned from entering Ukraine. The right wing party Svoboda even initiated the collection of signatures for such a ban at the state level. When Ivan Urgant realized that his joke was a serious offence to Ukrainians, he said, significantly not without some contempt and irony, that he was sorry for his joke and that he did not realize that it would mean so much to Ukraine, a country that he

26 *Projektorparishilton* [video] (2017), accessed February 21, 2018. <<http://www.itv.ru/shows/prozhektorperishilton>>.

“loves dearly”.<sup>27</sup> This incident illustrates yet another instance of the phenomenon of “un-laughter” (Smith 2009, 158; Zimbardo 2014, 64), which can occur in cases of radically unequal power relations between those who laugh and those who are laughed at. In a situation of “un-laughter”, humour functions as a method for heightening group boundaries between those who laugh and those who refuse to join in the laughter, not least because they or their values are the object of ridicule and the laughter normalizes their denigration. In this case, it was Ukraine which through “un-laughter” was trying to reclaim its status of a subject (not object) of the laughter or, in this case, of “un-laughter”.

Moreover, it is noteworthy to add that representations of Ukrainian politicians disclose an interesting characteristic of Russian-Ukrainian relations. On the one hand, they show a great degree of resentment originating in the apprehension that Ukrainians do not wish to acknowledge Russian supremacy, which is why Ukrainian leaders are presented as traitors. On the other hand, this reveals that Russia’s self image is dependent on such an acknowledgement. Such an ambivalent relation is typical in colonizer-colonized relationships, as suggested by proponents of the postcolonial critique (e.g. Said 1978, Gandhi 1998, Harper 2002).

### Concluding Remarks: Humour as a Tool of Hegemony

As a result of the above analysis, we would like to argue that the representations of Belarusian and Ukrainian leaders in Russian humour illustrate striking similarities. Although the countries have chosen different political paths, the Russian approach to them has been relatively uniform until 2013. It seems to be built on the old, Cold War imagination of a world that sets Russia and the West against each other and where the West contests the Russian zone of influence to which Belarus and Ukraine belong. Both countries are presented as a field of geopolitical struggle in which the main actors are Russia, the EU, and NATO, while both Belarus and Ukraine are just pawns in the big game. They are not subjects but rather the objects of big politics. The Russian humour analysed here clearly shows that the relationship between Russia and Belarus and Ukraine has a post-colonial character. The two countries are formally independent but still depend on Russia in political, economic, and cultural spheres.

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27 “Urgant priznal svoiu shutku glupostiu i publichno izvinilsia pered ukrainsami” Zerkalo Nedeli, 18 April 2013, available <<http://zn.ua/UKRAINE/urgent-priznal-svoiu-shutku-glupostyu-i-publichno-izvinilsya-pered-ukraincami-120969.html>> (accessed 29 December, 2016).

The scrutinized jokes disclose the maintenance of a colonizer-colonized relation in the cultural and mental spheres. They display a clear hierarchy of power, with Russia presented as superior and its neighbours Belarus and Ukraine portrayed as peripheral and inferior. Russia is represented as a modern, wealthy, and technologically advanced country with modern, educated leaders, while Belarus and Ukraine are backward and have leaders that are uneducated or at least unsophisticated, lazy, unreliable, cunning, and prone to thievery. Russia endures disobedience from these leaders in the way adults endure naughty children. When the leaders behave in line with Russian interests, they are encouraged and pardoned even if they are not quite good enough (such as in representations of Lukashenka or even Ianukovych). If the leaders do not follow Russian geopolitical interests (as in the case of Iushchenko and Tymoshenko), they are portrayed as not only anti-Russian but also as traitors of their own people from whom they are stealing instead of serving.

Since humour may be used to create a sense of community, to build solidarity through in-group inclusion and out-group exclusion, in this context it is important to discuss what function the comic representations of Belarusians and Ukrainians may fulfil when presented to a Russian audience and what effect they may have on Belarusian and Ukrainian audiences.

In the Russian context, the analysed comical representations must be perceived as reiterations of the ethnic stereotypes of Belarusians and Ukrainians that had already previously been established in Russian culture and politics (e.g. Thompson 2000; Shkandrij 2001; Nilsson 2010). Moreover, the content of these stereotypes is typical for expressions of superiority being lauded over colonial subjects, who are usually seen as backward, lazy, childish, cunning, unreliable, etc. (Weaver 2014, 215-218). Thus, the humour in this context serves to conserve the existing stereotypes, to maintain the Russian feeling of superiority over its neighbours and endorse among the Russians the ruling logics of domination. Moreover, it bolsters nationalism and upholds the image of Russia as a powerful state entitled to play an important role in world politics.

At the same time, this humour covers up the dark aspects of Russian politics and life in Russia. Emphasizing the backwardness of the neighbours can make the audience forget the backward parts of Russia and, by mocking the Belarusian and Ukrainian leaders, may divert the audience's attention from Russian leaders who deserve mockery as well. Furthermore, this humour tries to conceal Russia's imperialist stance by presenting it as a benevolent power that is ready to support and help its neighbours. Thus, representations of Belarus as a country that does not produce or have anything valuable (the quality of Belarusian products is deprecated in the cartoons and shows) allow the audience to perceive Russian credits as an act of sheer altruism, which strengthens the

circulation of the idea of Russia's generous and disinterested support of Belarus, and obliterates its political threat for Belarusian independence as well as its own interests in the region. In fact, this perception of Russia as a benevolent power can emerge both in Russian as well Belarusian and Ukrainian audiences as an effect of the humorous representations. Russian humour here becomes a tool of hegemony, i.e. the power of the ruler to convince subjects that their interests coincide with the ruler's. The outmost sign of the successful hegemony of a colonial power is when a colonized people see the imperial power as synonymous with the greater good, stability, and advancement (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2013: 134) and when they internalize a conviction of their own cultural inferiority in relation to the civilization of the empire. A number of researchers (Korek 2009; Grabowicz, 1995; Oushakin 2013; Ousmanova 2007; Pavlyshyn 1992; Riabchuk 2009, 2012; Shkandrij 2009 and 2015) have pointed out that Belarusian and Ukrainian societies, to a large extent, display these features, typical of other colonized societies, even after their declarations of independence. Seen in this context, the Russian political humour mocking Belarusian and Ukrainian leaders supports and maintains Russian hegemony in these two states. It feeds the inferiority complex of Belarusians and Ukrainians and pictures Russia as a benevolent empire and saviour in troubled times. Moreover, in many instances, visible especially in the Ukrainian case, Russian humour aims at increasing distance and raising boundaries between people and the leadership in these two countries by presenting the leaders as unreliable, selfish, and ridiculous, or even as thieves or traitors. Thus, the potential laughing in-group constructed by this form of humour is Russians together with imagined Belarusian and Ukrainian audiences while the leaders of these two countries are constructed as out-group. How influential is this operation in terms of hegemonic control? Since our analysis above was focused on representations and not reception, we do not want to jump to conclusions on that matter. However, we would like to point out that in our research material, we saw some noticeable signs of critical positions towards this kind of Russian humour (e.g. Ukrainian outrage against Urgant) expressed in "un-laughter" – the refusal to laugh in the face of structural inequality and domination (Smith 2009). This observation has also been made in an earlier study by Minchenia (2016), which analyses the Belarusian Internet audience's reception of Russian cartoons and shows mocking Lukashenka. The construction of Belarus as dependent on Russia, underpinning the analysed data, fuels a range of emotions associated with un-laughter that aims at balancing the power differential by pointing to Russia's own interests and influence on preserving the Belarusian political situation unchanged.

To sum up, in our study we concentrated on demonstrating how humour is used by Russia as a tool for hegemonic control in relation to its neighbours Belarus and Ukraine. However, we also noticed that humour of this type does not exist without resistance, a fact that needs further exploration and presents an excellent opportunity for future research.

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### ***Empirical Data***

- Archive of *Mul'tichnosti* <<https://www.itv.ru/shows/mult-lichnosti/vypuski>> (accessed March 1, 2018)
- Archive of *Projectorparishilton* <<https://www.itv.ru/shows/prozhektorperishilton>> (accessed March 1, 2018)