

Political Humor on Russian Television

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Abstract

Russian television broadcasts a variety of comedy shows that include jokes about politicians and political topics. However, the jokes about President Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev do not break the rules of official discourse and are not threatening to the regime since they merely give the appearance of satirizing the regime.

Political Communication and Jokes

Humor in Russia has always had a political dimension. In the Soviet era, low-brow humor was a valve, through which people could express their uncensored ideas. Stories and jokes from that time boldly described the absurdity of Soviet reality and the attitudes of simple people toward it.¹

In the post-Soviet era, Russia's political engineers discovered humor as a power instrument for influencing the masses. Television is the most suitable platform for this purpose.

On Russian television today, humor has gained an increasing share of broadcast time, and the number of shows with humorous contents—comedy shows, parodies, sketch comedies, and concerts featuring popular comics—has grown ubiquitously on all broadcast networks. Many critics of the Putin regime have described the expansion of the entertainment industry as an attempt to demobilize Russians away from political activism.² By telling jokes, Russia's humorous television shows transmit the core values and views of the state system.

This article will describe the three most popular comedy-entertainment shows on Russian television of recent years: KVN (Klub veselykh i nakhodchivyykh—Club of the Funny and Inventive), ProzhektorParisHilton, and Comedy Club. These shows demonstrate the nexus of humor, entertainment and politics in contemporary Russia. Despite their different formats, the jokes in these shows form a united official humorous discourse, characterized by the increasing importance of the ideology of glamour³ and simulated satire.

1 See e.g. Seth Graham. 2004. *A Cultural Analysis of the Russo-Soviet Anekdot*. Doctoral Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh. Ben Lewis. *Hammer and Tickle. The Story of Communism, a Political System Almost Laughed out of Existence*. New York 2009.

2 Robert Orttung and Christopher Walker. 2013. "Putin and Russia's Crippled Media." *Russian Analytical Digest* No. 123, 21 February 2013. Available at: <http://www.css.ethz.ch/publications/pdfs/RAD-123.pdf> (accessed 14.03.2013)

3 On the ideology of glamor, see Helena Goscilo, Vlad Strukov, ed. 2011. *Celebrity and Glamour in Contemporary Russia: Shocking Chic*. New York: Taylor & Francis; Larissa Rudova and Brigit Menzel ed. 2008. "Glamorous Russia." *kultura. Russland-Kul-*

KVN

The KVN acronym is probably known to every resident of Russia regardless of age. It stands for the Club of the Funny and Inventive. KVN is a humor game and one of the oldest shows in the history of Russian TV. It is broadcast on the country's premier network, First Channel.

KVN is a Soviet invention and is based on student amateur performances. At the core of the game, student teams compete among themselves on stage, seeking to find the funniest answers to questions, improvising sketches, and demonstrating their non-professional musical, dance, and theatrical talents. Since its appearance in the period of the Khrushchev thaw in 1961, this show brought humor and a variety of other progressive elements to Soviet television—dialogue with the viewer, interaction, and improvisation (though in circumscribed amounts)—making it immediately popular with the Soviet audience.

In the 1970s, the show was cancelled for ideological reasons: the student teams too frequently made fun of Soviet life and ideology. KVN returned to the screen at the beginning of Perestroika, in 1986, launching a large-scale KVN movement in the USSR, and after its break-up, in many of the CIS countries. Today KVN contests continue in the universities of Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Latvia and the best teams end up on TV. Additionally, wherever there are emigrants from the former Soviet Union, there are local KVN teams and leagues.

KVN shows include several competitions, but only the "workout" (razminka) includes real improvisation in which the teams try to come up with clever answers to the questions of the opposing teams, jury, and public. Generally, the performances of the teams are prepared in advance and edited. As experience has shown, controversial moments are often cut from the televised broadcast.

The majority of KVN-teams represent their cities and regions as is clear from their names: Team Chechnya, Team Kazakhstan, Team Krasnodar Krai, Team St.

turanalysen, vol. 6 December. Available at: http://www.kultura-rus.uni-bremen.de/kultura_dokumente/ausgaben/englisch/kultura_6_2008_EN.pdf (accessed 17.03.2013).

Petersburg, etc. The reason for such affiliations is that a team's participation in KVN is expensive, so regions sponsor local teams. The teams therefore advertise their regions or cities, building their image on the image of their home town.

The Allowed Satire of KVN

The phenomenon of KVN is interesting and unique in that it has existed for many decades and has survived the change of several epochs. Each successive period—the Perestroika years, the collapse of the USSR, the disastrous 1990s—produced its own themes and heroes, which were directly reflected in KVN and its jokes. In the 1990s, KVN energetically discussed Russia's interaction with the rest of the world and the impact of American culture. At that time, the key audience was the intelligentsia, political liberals, and advocates of Western democracy. A typical person on KVN of that era was an intelligent, politically-informed young person who spoke English. In the 1990s, the KVN teams made sharp and critical jokes about political and social topics, giving the viewer a lot to think about. In general, the jokes were longer and more satirical, with an accent on wordplay. There were some stage props, but they were typically modest.

1991. The disintegration of the USSR. *If Marx were alive... He would die.*

(Joke of the KVN Team TMI (Tyumen) 1991)

The contemporary KVN, or Maslyakov's Empire as it is frequently called based on its changeless leader Aleksandr Maslyakov, has transformed from amateur student performances into a commercial entertainment industry, a professional television show that brings considerable income to its creators. The teams, formed today through casting searches, pay large fees to participate in the television broadcasts. After the competition season, the teams tour the country giving performances, paying about 10% from each appearance to the show's creators. Almost every team employs special writers who prepare texts for their appearances.

The contemporary KVN continues to make political jokes, however their character has changed. The political content is delivered in an entertaining manner which neutralizes its social-political sting and transfers them from the political sphere to the realm of entertainment. Freaks, marginals, and punks who have been rejected by society are the typical butts of jokes on today's KVN. Most jokes focus on chanting "Russianness," emphasizing the exceptional status of Russia and its people. Jokes about international political topics highlight the confrontation between Russia and its political "opponents"

from the time of the Cold War in the style characteristic of jokes popular during Soviet times about Stierlitz, Gorbachev, and Reagan, or an American, French, and Russian.

Immigrants tamed the Wild West and many of them were Russians.

(the following verses are sung to St1m's "I—Rap")

Barak Obama could not get to work quickly,

If Sikorsky had not invented the helicopter.

If Popov had not been involved in radio engineering,

Then the USA would not hear the Voice of America.

If our boys did not play in the NHL,

Then I'd like to know who would actually watch it.

Leonardo di Caprio is a sensitive Russian,

At home he as an Orenburg shawl.

- Song of the "Bad team," Team Krasnodar Krai

A particularly popular topic is life in Moscow—the burning desire of all non-Muscovites to obtain a permit to live in the capital city, arriving in Moscow from the provinces, Moscow's traffic jams, the Russian police, bribes, etc. Additionally, teams from the provinces frequently joke about the backwardness of their cities:

Announcement at the railway station: Attention Passengers! The Sapsan train from Nyagan to Moscow will depart in 12 years!

(Joke of the Team Kefir from the city of Nyagan)

In honor of the upcoming Olympics in Sochi, there are many jokes about corruption cases in the course of preparing Olympic sites. One example is the following joke based on the party game Mafia:

Television news anchor: Sochi Olimpstroj has finished building all the Olympic sites and now is playing Mafia. (The audience laughs.) The city sleeps. (All participants standing on the stage close their eyes.) The Mafia wakes up. (All participants who had closed their eyes, open them.)

(Team BAK-Souchniki, Krasnodar Krai)

Examining the jokes about daily life and politics shows that they are similar to Soviet jokes in which politics and daily life were regarded "as a ritual, but not real life, which could change," each individual was portrayed as a "victim of circumstance and not an active shaper of his own life."⁴

Further evidence of KVN's shift from an intellectual broadcast to one focused on entertainment can be found

4 Birgit Beumers. 2005. *Pop Culture Russia. Media, Arts, and Lifestyle*. Santa Barbara, Denver, Oxford: ABC Clío. p. 173.

in its relationship with its current viewer and how the viewer sees the show. Today the viewer is less interested in hearing sharp-witted truth-telling and instead seeks an opportunity to be entertained and relax. Accordingly, the audience is not interested in gray reality. An important reason to participate in KVN today is an opportunity to “shine” on television in the company of celebrities—famous people of Russian culture, show business, and sport, who appear in the broadcasts either as members of the jury or in the audience. Additionally, a new trend among KVN teams is to invite Russian show business stars to participate in their performances. Teams demonstrate their popularity and high ranking by attracting cool and well-known stars.

Of course, the consistently high ratings of KVN attract famous people not only from the field of culture and show-business, but also from the realm of politics. Since the beginning of the Putin era, the program has regularly attracted the attention and personal presence of Vladimir Putin himself, as well as Dmitry Medvedev, and other A-list members of the government, including Krasnodar Krai Governor Aleksandr Tkachev, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyannin, and many others.

Two factors explain the authorities’ attention to the show. First, KVN has a unique, long-standing successful experience in mobilizing Russian young active people. Russian spin doctors in the field of youth policy can only dream of working on the scale of the constantly growing Russian KVN movement.

The second motivation for paying attention to the show is the policy of promoting “Russian brands” and products made in Russia that Putin has actively backed. The specific format of the show and its long-running success allows KVN to position itself as a unique show that does not have an analog in the West. Accordingly, Putin calls the show “our domestic intellectual product.”

The presence of Putin, and Medvedev at the show is always a special event, which is broadcast in prime time. In Putin’s presence, the games follow a consistent scenario: the “premiersident”—a blurring of president and prime minister that was particularly apparent when Putin was prime minister—sits in the middle of the audience surrounded by exemplary members of the KVN cast. All attention is focused on him and the teams cautiously try to make him laugh. It is considered a big coup if one of the participants successfully jokes about the president in his presence, as happened at the KVN anniversary in 2011:

Question to the teams: “What Russian car will be the first to enter the German market?” A KVN participant looks into the audience and answers: “A yellow Lada Kalina, whose driver is sitting here somewhere.”

Another example was a joke during the summer KVN in Sochi in 2009 in the presence of Medvedev, then president, and his wife:

“I live in Sochi. Where can I go to relax?”
 “To Bocharov Ruch’e [the president’s summer residence], it’s free at the moment.”

The image of the “president/prime minister beloved by the population” has become a “key brand of contemporary Russian pop culture”⁵ and continues to be exploited successfully by the KVN teams and other humor shows, despite Putin’s declining popularity after the 2012 elections. These jokes remain in “demand” among viewers and among humorists and make up a significant share of all jokes. The best KVN teams not only have their own jokes about the country’s leaders, but also their own imposter “Putin” and “Medvedev,” actors who parody the originals.

Given their outward physical similarity to the men they parody, Dmitry Grachev (Putin) and Anton Sasin (Medvedev) have made careers portraying the leaders, also appearing in comic films and a variety of other productions.

Figure 1: Putin Double Dmitry Grachev



Source: <http://miniatury.net/tags/%EF%F3%F2%E8%ED+%EA%E0%EC%E5%E4%E8/> (accessed 03.04.2013)

Joking about Vladimir Vladimirovich and Dmitry Anatolevich requires a specific style. Each has a specific “allowed” image which the KVN teams exploit consistently. Putin is usually portrayed as a serious leader who has invincible authority, commanding respect and fear. Frequently, jokes about him make fun of his efforts to promote Russian-made cars. Medvedev appears as a fan of Deep Purple and an advocate of nanotechnology. In gen-

5 Helena Goscilo 2011. “The ultimate celebrity. VVP as VIP Objet d’Art.” In: Helena Goscilo, Vlad Strukov, ed. 2011. *Celebrity and Glamour in Contemporary Russia: Shocking Chic*. New York: Taylor & Francis, pp. 29–55, here p. 37.

Figure 2: Medvedev Double Anton Sasin



Source: <http://www.amik.ru/Article/1/12747.html> (accessed 03.04.2013)

eral, the media image of Putin and Medvedev is impeccably positive and congruent with the official presidential/prime ministerial cult in Russia. Required elements of their image include the closeness to the people, concern about the state, and their human face. In this context, sketches that place Putin and Medvedev in ordinary day-to-day situations familiar to all Russians are very popular: a working day for Putin in the office, Putin registering in social networks, Medvedev playing the drums in his office, Putin scolding presumptuous bureaucrats in his office.

The public particularly liked the parody of Medvedev dancing at a reunion of his classmates to the hits of the 1990s.⁶ The subject of the parody was the appearance of an amateur video in the internet showing Medvedev dancing in a somewhat old-fashioned style.⁷ When this episode of KVN was broadcast on television, the First Channel leadership decided to cut the sketch. However, following a stormy reaction from the viewers in internet forums and social networks, the dance was restored during repeat broadcasts. This example once again demonstrated the presence of censorship in the televised version of KVN and the growing influence of the currently uncensored internet in Russia.

Further evidence of censorship on KVN and what can and cannot be said from the KVN stage is the fact that some topics are almost never discussed, including the trial of Pussy Riot, protests on Bolotnaya Square, and the opposition movement in general. Jokes about the main leader of the opposition Aleksey Navalny are extremely rare. However, his election to the Aeroflot board of directors was examined in the following joke, which emphasized his difficult position in Russia:

“I called Navalny and said: ‘Since you are so independent, why did you go to work for Aeroflot?’” He answered, “I am in a situation in which it is necessary to have a plane handy.”

(Team BAK-Sauchastniki Krasnodar Krai)

Today, KVN’s role as an incubator producing humorists for comedic and entertainment shows on Russian and CIS television networks is growing. The majority of popular comics on Russian television today have roots in KVN. Many graduates of KVN work as actors, anchor people, and screen writers for shows and series broadcast on a variety of networks.

Humor as a Political Statement on ProzhektorParisHilton

A year ago, if you asked Russians “What does Paris Hilton and Russian television have in common?” they would have answered “ProzhektorParisHilton,” having in mind the popular Russian television show with record high ratings that was broadcast on First Channel from 2008 to June 2012. The unusual name of the show in reality has no connection to the American celebrity/hotel-owner, but, as the show’s creator explains, comes from the name of an older show, Prozhektor perestroiki, which was broadcast at the end of the 1980s. The second part of the name “parishilton”⁸ apparently is a tribute to the “ideology of glamour,” which currently dominates Russia, and symbolizes scandals, intrigue, and money.

This evening infotainment show was broadcast every Saturday at prime time. Millions of viewers watched it. Almost every year during its existence, it won a TEFI, the most prestigious prize in Russian television.

The core of the show was four anchors, sitting at a table and drinking tea, discussing in a humorous style newspaper articles from the previous week describing events in Russia and abroad and the statements of politicians. The improvisation of the anchors charmed the audience with their endless joking, which was sometimes successful. A key part of the show’s appeal was the

6 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VUG6l96gl-s>

7 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Hzq2IL9xQ0

8 In Russian, the title is one word and only the first letter is capitalized.

stars who worked as anchors, including some of Russia's most popular and sought after comedians, including Ivan Urgant, Sergei Svetlakov, Garik Martirosyan, and showman Aleksandr Tsekalo, who are well known to the Russian viewer, particularly those aged between 10 and 45, from other programs.

Joke about the situation in Greece: "The ongoing crisis in Greece reminds me of a soap opera, where the daughter 'Greece' slips into a coma. When she wakes up, she loses not only her memory, but her conscience." (Prozhektorparishilton, November 5, 2011)

Joke about Putin's visit to the Volkswagen Factory in Kaluga

Putin tells the workers in the Volkswagen plant: "You make a good car here."

Someone asks: "Better than the Niva?"

Putin hesitates and says: "The Niva is mine. What can be better than that?"

Then Putin goes home and opens his garage where his Niva sits and looks at him reproachfully like a wife examining a wandering, cheating husband.

Niva: "Vladimir Vladimirovich, where have you been?"

In a shaky voice, "Did you see the Volkswagen?"

Putin: "No Niva, you are mine, my one and only."

Niva (crying): "Then why do you smell like foreign accessories?"

A clear factor in the success of the show and an innovation for Russian television was the participation, along with Russian stars, of invited international stars like Will Smith, Daniel Radcliffe, Hugh Jackman, Til Schweiger, Mila Yovovich, Rowan Atkinson, and Mickey Rourke.⁹ The guests joined their hosts in discussing local and foreign news. For example, the politician and billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov joined the hosts for a rap song about how he and Jay-Z purchased the New York Nets basketball team.¹⁰ Rowan Atkinson, a lover of race cars, had to pick out the sound of the Russian Lada Granta Sport from among three car sounds. The Lada is one of the favorite objects for teasing among Russian humorists.¹¹

Many Russian journalists criticized Prozhektorparishilton as offering only biased and one-sided criticism of Russia's "officially declared" enemies—America, Ukraine, Georgia, and Belarus—when the leaders of Russia's allies were not the subject of a single cutting joke.

Prozhektorparishilton was one of the few shows that

included a comparatively large amount of political humor, particularly given that it was focused on discussing the press. Of course, they could not avoid making jokes about the main political tandem—Putin and Medvedev. Nevertheless these jokes were limited to three specific styles. The most popular jokes about Putin made fun of his promotion of Lada automobiles; second place belonged to jokes about Putin's publicity stunts, such as diving for amphorae; and third place was Medvedev and Putin's efforts to monitor the construction of the Olympic sites.

The sudden cancellation of the show at the peak of its popularity aroused considerable speculation in the Russian media. The official reason announced focused on economic and legal issues: two of the hosts, Sergei Svetlakov and Garik Martirosyan, had signed contracts according to which they could not work on First Channel. Both of them were simultaneously involved in another growing comedy project—Comedy Club on TNT.

Nevertheless, several journalists were inclined to see political undertones in the show's demise, connecting the date of the closure with the end of Medvedev's period of "liberal" rule. For example, Mikhail Zakharov wrote in *polit.ru*, "Prozhektorparishilton first hit the airwaves on May 17, 2008. Now it has been closed, surviving less than a half a year after the liberal presidential rule of Dmitry Medvedev. A bit too much of a coincidence,"¹² In practice, just like the "spotlight" in the first part of its name, Prozhektorparishilton, using its platform on the country's main network, directed viewers' attention, although in a humorous style, to topics that the authorities would prefer to keep in the dark, such as electoral violations, cutting down the Khimki forest, and the law on the police.¹³

The Glamorous Scoundrels of the Comedy Club

Comedic actors from the humor show Comedy Club are called the reformers of Russian humor on TV. They have provided an alternative to the dominance of humorists/comics, who appeared in another famous Russian show called "Full House," which was broadcast in the 1990s.

The most talked about show Comedy Club was originally created by the KVN team New Armenians and is an analog to American stand-up comedy. In contrast to the two shows already discussed, this show is broadcast on TNT. TNT belongs to the Gazprom-Media holding company and specializes in the production of reality shows and various entertainment programs.

Comedy Club consists of a series of independent

9 For some examples, see PPH with Will Smith <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DTRcQEBMvC4>, PPH with Daniel Radcliffe <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eML9EjBGE8Q>

10 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oljztVyseY>

11 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N8iKb3MprK0>

12 Zakharov, Mikhail 2012. Prozhektoram zdes' ne mesto. *Polit.ru* 27 sentyabrya 2012, 18:18 Available at: <http://polit.ru/article/2012/09/27/projektor/> (accessed 19.03.2013)

13 Ibid.

mini-shows by individual humorists, presented by a master of ceremonies. Each of the skits contains a solo, duet, or group of actors with the use of various props, such as musical instruments, video, photos, and decorations. All residents of the Comedy Club—about 30–40 comics are in the cast—are young, self-confident, well-dressed men, the majority of whom are alumni of KVN who do not have professional actors' training.

From its first shows, the Comedy Club actors conquered a part of the Russian media space. Comedy Club participants are invited to perform on other networks as their Comedy Club characters. The original show began to multiply, begetting spinoffs, such as Comedy Women and Comedy Battle, among others. In addition, First Channel broadcasts a special show "Comedy Club on First." For contemporary young people in Russia, Comedy Club is the embodiment of a new way of life since it is a show combining and broadcasting everything that young people strive for today: money, glory, leisure, beauty, pathos, and coolness.

The appearance of Comedy Club on Russian television with its innovations shocked Russian society and provoked a heated reaction, particularly among representatives of the old generation. Among the controversial features are:

- At the beginning of each show, Comedy Club participant Pavel Volya, calling himself a "glamorous scoundrel," makes fun of the invited stars sitting in the audience in the style of a stand-up comedian. Nothing like this had ever happened on Russian television. The stars who are brave enough to come to the show, despite their fear of being ridiculed, desire the honor of participating in the broadcast and a chance to showcase their sense of humor.
- The Comedy Club comedians use curse words in their jokes, which previously were not permitted on television.
- Many of the cast members rely on "below the belt" humor.
- The Comedy Club has transgressed against the holy of holies—the classical canon of Russian culture, ridiculing and parodying Russian writers like Vladimir Mayakovsky,¹⁴ Lev Tolstoy, Feodor Dostoyevsky, Nikolai Gogol, Kornei Chukovsky, and others.

According to a member of the Comedy Club cast, their guiding principle is that "jokes can be cocky, offensive, dirty, stupid, but most importantly, actually funny."¹⁵

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Their goal is to "put people in a good mood" and they do not claim to be providing moral or educational material. Nevertheless, I think that the Comedy Club cast does not always consistently follow their principled lack of principles regarding the quality of their jokes. Logically since the majority of the comedians in residence support the current president, which they openly declared during the electoral campaign,¹⁶ they cannot be as unprincipled as they claim. They cannot make "dirty, stupid, and offensive" jokes about everyone and everything. Even as their jokes about Russian writers often are obscene, their jokes about Putin and Medvedev continue to follow the official media image of the political leaders, as for example, in a typical sketch about Putin that employs his double and Comedy Club resident Dmitry Grachev. Putin is presented in the role of reading fairy tales to the Russian people about how they should live and what not to do in the show "Good night, adults," a parody of the children's show "Good night, kids."¹⁷

"You are watching the show 'Good night, adults.' Today I will tell you about Little Red Riding Hood. Once upon a time, mama sent Little Red Riding Hood to take Grandma some cakes. We have information that, in several regions of the Russian Federation, not all cakes make it to their grandmas. We intend to combat the problem. And additionally, we plan to index the received cakes by 14%...."

Conclusion

This summary of three popular humorous shows on Russian television has traced several common features. First, the existence of a unified humorous discourse on Russian television is explained not only by state-controlled censorship on Russian networks, but also because one and the same popular Russian comedians wander from one show to the next, from one network to another, thereby replicating one and the same comedic images, and together with them, specific values and views. Second, even though politics continues to remain one of the main sources of material for jokes, political jokes are really just simulations, merely giving the appearance of political satire. Finally, the reduction in the critical potential of contemporary Russian humor is the result of the establishment of glamour as the reigning ideology in Russia.

14 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ILgu-FuJ4cA>

15 See e.g. TV show Gordon Quichote from 07.11.2008 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wYUAgsluGDE&list=PL0309021C05BE33CE&index=1>

16 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pXCNzKrsGZc&feature=endscreen>

17 <http://rutube.ru/video/3b4fbb49d4a54aee415ea245063f56dd/>