

Polarised but similar: Russian and Belarusian pro- and anti-democratic humour in the public sphere

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Abstract

Conflict divides society by bringing out opposing opinions and social, political and cultural difference. Humour becomes a way to disseminate and comment on opinions as well as to mark divisions in the public sphere. Even though humour is ambiguous in nature, its stance (Shifman 2014) is made evident through content and/or context. In cases where the content of pro- and anti-democratic humour is similar, meta-discourse decides the stance.

In this article we look at the (mainly online) humour that has emerged as a reaction to politically polarising conflicts. We use as examples the 2020 protests in Belarus and the Russian war in Ukraine. We analyse common and unusual motifs in pro- and anti-democratic humour born from these conflicts and discuss the sources used to create this humour. The results show that anti-democratic humour has fewer layers of reference and is less subtle than pro-democratic humour as the latter needs to circumvent censorship. Pro-democratic humour makes ample use of self-irony in contrast to the more rigid and offensive position taken in anti-democratic humour. Pro-democratic humour also needs to be more inclusive as it often spreads within a wider, more global audience catering for wider tastes in humour.

Keywords: humour, pro-democratic, anti-democratic, public sphere, Russia, Belarus.

1. Introduction

Conflict often generates humour in people who hold opposing viewpoints. Both sides want to ridicule their opponents, draw boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’ and manifest their belonging to a group that appreciates similar humour. While it is clear that the stance (i.e. the creators’ position in relation to the text, audience and context, cf. Shifman 2014: 40) of the two sides’ humour is in opposition, there are, equally clearly, similarities in the form and content of such humour, and this we intend to study in more detail here.

To shed light on these issues, we analyse humour revolving around two conflicts: the 2020 protests in Belarus, and Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The 2020 Belarusian presidential elections were followed by mass protests all over Belarus when the Central Electoral Commission announced that Alexander Lukashenko (who was Belarusian president from 1994) had won the election, with 80.1 per cent of votes. Because the election was independently monitored, and because of Belarusians' active participation in the election, fraud became apparent causing public outrage. The first days of protest (9-11 August) were especially intense with thousands of people being beaten by the police and detained; later the protests increased in size and were directed not only against electoral fraud but also against the police brutality of the first days after the election (Onuch, 2020; Nikolayenko, 2022). In contrast to the violent activities of the Belarusian government and police, protesters underscored the peaceful nature of their resistance. The pro-democracy demonstrations by part of Belarusian society against the Lukashenko regime made use of carnivalesque aesthetics and were accompanied by the prolific use of humour, both on the streets and online in social and mainstream media.

The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine (following Russia's previous aggression in eastern Ukraine and Crimea) is a conflict of a different nature, but there are nevertheless some similar patterns in the ideological clashes and the use of humour throughout. Immediately after Russian troops attacked Ukraine, on February 24, 2022, democratic Western countries announced their political, economic and military support for Ukraine, thus turning the war into a global confrontation between democratic forces and authoritarian regimes, similarly to the national-level events in Belarus in 2020. Military operations in Ukraine have been accompanied by an information war actively waged from the very first hours after the Russian invasion (Stănescu, 2022). Humour, particularly in the form of memes, has played an important role in this information war. Apart from the humorous memes created by both sides, internet users from all over the world created memes, mainly in support of Ukraine (Ukrainian Meme Squad¹ on Facebook and Ukrainian Meme Forces² on Twitter are two prominent examples of such initiatives). However, pro-Kremlin social media channels such as, for example, the Telegram channels Terrikon and Z memes, were also created to post anti-democratic humorous memes in support of the war.

Our aim in this article is to compare recent pro- and anti-democratic humour in Belarus and Russia. As anti-democratic humour in Russia and Belarus has received less academic attention so far, we set out to show how – if at all – it is similar to pro-democratic humour. The cases are comparable, because (1) these conflicts triggered diffuse and abundant reactions that differed in terms of their content, form and stance; (2) reactions can be considered part of the hybrid conflict; and last but not least, (3) a lot of humour is created in the public sphere as a result of these conflicts. Our research questions are the following:

RQ1: What are the differences and similarities in the sources, forms, content and visual motifs of pro- and anti-democratic humour?

RQ2: Within public discourse, are pro- and anti-democratic humour completely unrelated?

2. Theoretical background

Humour is both an object of, and reason for, sharing on social media. People take part in online communication for entertainment purposes (Shifman, 2014). The participatory nature of social media promotes (humorous) interaction in the online public sphere, although at times of conflict

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/UkrainianMemeSquad>

² <https://twitter.com/uamemesforces>

the entertainment aspect becomes subordinate to other communication aims. Conflict and crisis have in fact been shown to prompt the production of humour (see, for example, Kuipers, 2002; Ellis, 2003; Yehorova et al., 2023), making it a way to express one's stance in a playful manner.

There is an idealistic belief that humour can be used as sometimes the only available way to speak truth to power. Studies have shown that online memes and jokes bring forth issues like equal rights, environmental crises, feminist ideas (Chattoo & Feldman, 2020; Friedmann & Friedmann, 2020), especially in authoritarian societies (Korkut et al., 2022) such as the two studied in the present article. The subversive quality of humour has not disappeared with the advent of social media. Quite the contrary, online humour often plays with – and on – the borderline between the socially appropriate and inappropriate (see Laineste & Chłopicki, 2023) while new forms of internet humour often draw upon older genres of subversive humour (Dynel & Poppi, 2019).

It would be incorrect to assume that political humour in the public sphere is only used to subvert authority and resist authoritarian power while promoting a liberal, democratic agenda. Firstly, humour can have many layers, not all of which are always politically correct or acceptable, nor do they always necessarily speak truth to power. Secondly, there are subcurrents in humour that voice conservative, alt-right, chauvinist and anti-democratic points of view. In Russia and Belarus, for example, humour is used, among other means, to transmit anti-democratic and pro-war propaganda. The internet – and social media in particular – allows for this by providing a public platform on which practically everybody can not only receive but also produce content (see Chovanec & Dynel, 2015). Endless possibilities stimulate the creativity of internet users and inspire debates about freedom of speech, finding voice in jokes, sketches and other forms of humour (Davies & Ilott, 2018). In democratic countries these debates often normalise the liberal pro-democratic stance, while showing that all kinds of idea can be smuggled in under the disclaimer of something being “just a joke”. These discussions, however, raise the ambiguity of humour and the subjectivity and context-dependency of being offended by humour. Discussions often involve offensive rhetoric towards an opponent while people who condemn the aggression that they sense in the jokes are accused of lacking a sense of humour (Zijp, 2024), which is a serious insult given that “the sense of humour... lies very close to self-image” (Kuipers, 2006, p. 19).

The power dynamics of alt-right and other anti-democratic humour has shifted into focus after the popularisation of the notion of post-truth in 2016 (McIntyre, 2018, p. 1). Propagated by (humorous) memes, this continues to be popular in the post-Trump era (Webb, 2022) and contributed to the valorisation of politically incorrect humour under the banner of free speech. This has resulted in a public display of racist, sexist and other potentially offensive humour, embodied for example by meme characters like Pepe the Frog. Donald Trump's active online presence and his indirect contribution to alt-right humour, too, played a role in legitimising racist and other politically incorrect humour in the United States (Dixit, 2022, p. 137). There is a market for all kinds of humour both for democratic countries where different kinds of humour co-exist thanks to (relative) media freedom, and for non-democratic countries such as Russia and Belarus. In the latter case, humour that does not support state ideology is mainly confined to the internet as other media are government controlled. As Sienkiewicz and Marx state, much of conservative and/or alt-right humour is not funny to people with less “palaeolithic” tastes in humour, but it does exist, which means it does have an audience (2022, p. 1-2, on the popularity of right-wing comedy shows). This has duly and finally reached scholarly attention, giving rise to more and more studies analysing the humour of the far right (Sienkiewicz & Marx, 2022; Attardo, 2023).

Our contribution furthers this debate and expands the field of research to examples outside the English-speaking world, analysing the cases of Russian and Belarusian humour between 2020 and 2023. In this study, we use the terms pro- and anti-democratic humour to denote,

respectively, subversive humorous criticism directed against authoritarian governments (pro-democratic humour), and humour supporting authoritarian regimes in general directed against anti-government actions (i.e. protesters or people who criticise the war in Ukraine, or Ukrainians themselves; anti-democratic humour). This terminology captures the contrast between the liberal form of humour and the conservative humour on the rise both in our data as well as on a global scale (cf. the Polish case in Chłopicki 2023). The presidential elections in Belarus (2020) and the now long-term conflict in Ukraine (2022) are taken as exemplifying these categories.

2.1. New media and humour in the Russian and Belarusian public spheres

Social media has reformed the way information is presented and consumed today (Picard, 2015). It has brought about two-way communication between the mainstream journalistic media and internet users posting their opinions on and reactions to daily news. This has changed the way conflict communication is framed (see Urman & Makhortykh, 2022) and the way power relations are established and negotiated (Moreno-Almeida, 2021; see also Crilley & Chatterje-Dood, 2021). The coexistence of multiple active information sources can, on the one hand, increase societal polarisation and lock audiences into information bubbles that they share with people who think alike (Cinelli et al., 2021). This includes spreading disinformation and demonisation of internal and external opponents. However, it can also have the opposite effect: the multitude of voices and opinions can be co-opted by pro-democratic bloggers and activists to subvert state propaganda in authoritarian countries, breaking free from information bubbles. Among other strategies, pro-democratic actors in social media use humour to make their messages more accessible and attractive. At the same time, the promoters of anti-democratic ideas also employ humour to support state propaganda.

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014, Russian state news reporting became more propagandistic and showed Russian citizens totally different stories from the ones available to Western audiences (Schimpfoss & Yablokov, 2014). In 2022, the restrictions on Russian media became even more drastic, and all reporting that does not conform to the approved discourse is prohibited (Pavlik 2022). Similar processes have occurred in Belarus, where independent media have been oppressed for decades, although the oppression culminated in the aftermath of the 2020 presidential elections when dozens of media outlets were closed and hundreds of journalists detained for reporting on state atrocities (Greene 2022).

In the context of such a prominent state monopoly on legacy media, it is not surprising that social media is on the rise in Belarus and Russia. In Russia, 40 per cent of internet users use Telegram daily (as of January 2023, see *The Moscow Times*, 2023); in Belarus the proportion is 43 per cent (as of January 2021, see Auseyushkin, 2021). Telegram is often used not only to communicate, but also to obtain information (66 per cent of Belarusian respondents use it for this purpose, see Doroshevich, 2021). Alongside channels publishing news and other serious content, there are several Russian and Belarusian channels that focus on entertainment, posting jokes, humorous memes and funny videos, among other content. Moreover, some Telegram news and bloggers' channels alternate between humorous and serious posts, thus creating different ways of presenting news stories to their audiences. Twitter, Facebook and Vk are avidly used as well, but are not as popular as Telegram. Social media presents an opportunity to bypass censorship, although a more pessimistic account by Denisova (2019, p. 152) notes that social media users in Russia acknowledge the fragmentation of publics (division into niche streams of communication, making liberal discourse more dispersed), while believing that, on the whole, "the Russian media have fallen victim to state pressure and self-censorship" (*ibid.*, p. 154).

Referring to the on-going information wars in these two countries (see Introduction), social media users in Russia and Belarus surely recognise the effect of internet humour in creating and

maintaining digital communities (Vásquez, 2019). Communities mobilise their members and build solidarity with the help of humorous expressions (e.g. Carlson & Frazer, 2021). Blank (2013, p. 21) compares digital communities to neighbourhoods in the analogue world. The internet diminishes social and spatial distance and thus creates a form of collective identity (Gal et al., 2016), a process that applies equally to anti-racist, neutral and racist or extremist groups (and other groups with potentially harmful views). The shared identity premise offers proof that there are others out there who share the views expressed (Gerstenfeld et al., 2003), whatever they may be.

3. Data and methods

The data for our study comes from pro- and anti-democratic social media pages that were chosen via snowballing, i.e. by following links to find other relevant platforms that share similarly themed memes. At the same time, the everyday social media activity of the authors of this study is limited to pro-democratic platforms and thus there might be important sources that we have missed. The humour was collected from four main online platforms in Russia and Belarus: Telegram, Twitter, Facebook and Vk as well as the authors' personal collections and a book of Belarusian protest placards (Pearce 2021). Telegram is the primary source of our data as it is one of the most popular social media platforms in Russia and Belarus (see above).

The data was collected during the August 2020–November 2021 period (Belarusian pro-democratic humour about Belarusian protests) and February 2022–March 2023 period (Belarusian and Russian pro-democratic humour on the war in Ukraine). Anti-democratic humour was collected in the March–April 2023 period, although most of the content that was included in the dataset dates back either to August–October 2020 (data on the Belarusian protests) or February–September 2022 (data on the war in Ukraine). When choosing the examples for our database, the humorousness of the content – especially in cases when it was posted in channels that do not position themselves as humorous – was assessed with the help of verbal and non-verbal meta-comments surrounding the posts, i.e. the use of emoticons and words such as “funny”, “joke”, “laugh” by the posters and/or multiple laughing reactions.

The pro-democratic data (746 items) derives from datasets that the authors compiled for their previous studies on the same topics (Laineste et al., in press; Laineste & Fiadotava, 2023; Fiadotava, 2022; Troitskiy et al., in press). The pro-democratic Belarusian protest humorous dataset (371 items) consists of humorous protest placards that are either in the authors' personal collections (70 photos of placards) or among the photos of protest placards that were published in *Ya vykhozhu* [I'm coming out] by Lesha Pearce (101 photos; placards that also appear in the authors' personal collection were excluded). The photos were taken at protest rallies in Belarus between August and November 2020. Additionally, 200 items of internet humour that were collected by one of the authors from her family and friends, as well as four humorous pro-democratic Telegram channels (Chaj z malinavym varennem [Tea with raspberry jam], Ha-ha, ya tut zhivu [Ha-ha, I live here], BelMemy [Belarusian Memes], Zn [Zn]), Belarusian pro-democratic news media and personal Facebook and Twitter profiles were included in the dataset. The pro-democratic humour on the war in Ukraine derives from the dataset the authors and their colleagues have compiled for their previous projects and consists of 375 items of internet humour from Russian and Belarusian Telegram, Twitter and Vk channels, groups and profiles (a detailed description of the dataset is available in Laineste et al., in press).

The anti-democratic humorous data (500 items, 303 of which comment on the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine and 197 of which comment on the Belarusian protests) were collected from pro-Kremlin and pro-Lukashenko Telegram channels. For the current study we have collected data from seven Russian and eight Belarusian Telegram channels that openly support the

Russian and Belarusian regimes. Among the Russian channels, three (Nos [Nose], Terrikon and Z memes) positioned themselves as satirical and posted almost exclusively humorous/satirical content, whereas the remaining four (Gorizont [Horizontal], Dorogaya Khurma [Dear/Expensive persimmon], Pozdnyakov³ 3.0 and Imperiya ochen' zla [The empire is very angry]) contained a mix of humorous and serious posts. Only one of the Belarusian Telegram channels from which we collected data (ZmagarOK [A little protester]) explicitly positioned itself as satirical even though it has also posted and reposted serious news; others (ZhS⁴ Premium, Shkvarka News [Pork rind news], Polesskij Partizan [Polesian Partisan], Usy Tikhanovskoj [Tsikhanouskaya's moustache], Zhivet zhe Belarus'! [Belarus does live⁵], Ostorozhno, pravda! [Beware, truth!], Eto drugoe [That's something else]) posted both humorous and serious content and did not identify themselves as (primarily) humorous.

The total dataset consists of 1,346 items. The format of both the pro- and anti-democratic internet humour in our dataset is predominantly (audio)visual (see Figure 1; the Belarusian protest placards' photos were excluded from the count of pro-democratic forms of humour because their form is significantly different from that of internet humour as they are mainly text-only). In the rare cases when items in our dataset consist of only verbal text, they adopt the form of canned jokes or constitute text comments on current news. As illustrated in Figure 1, the distribution of forms between pro- and anti-democratic humour in our dataset is very similar.

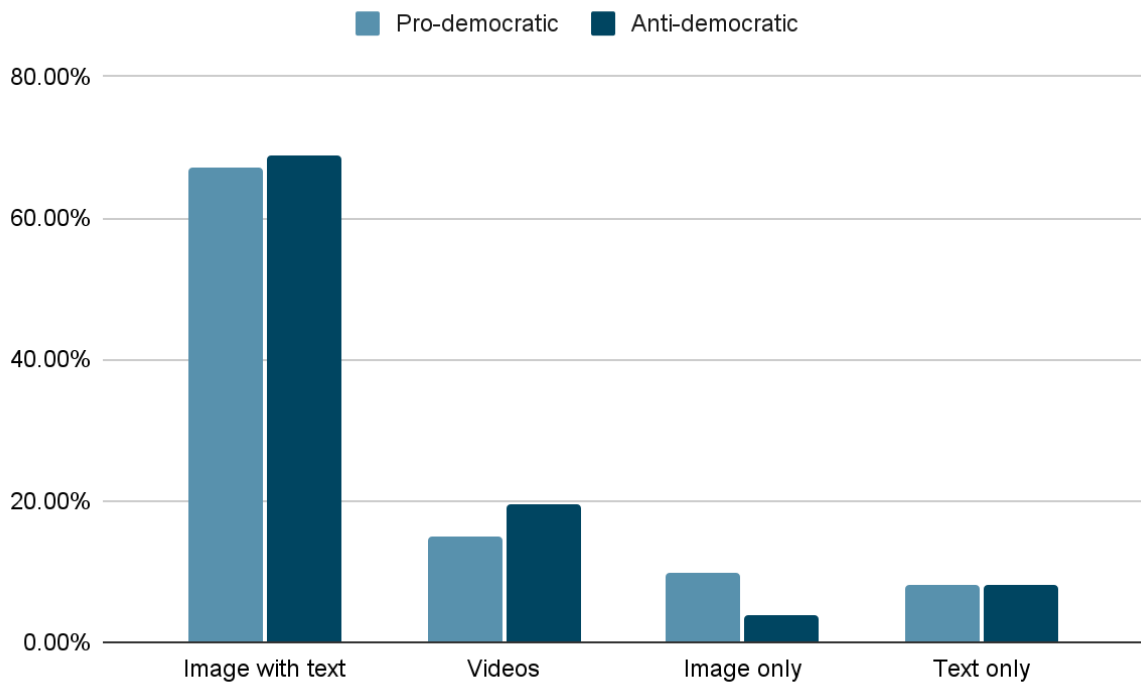


Figure 1. Forms of pro- and anti-democratic internet humour

The data was stored and annotated in AirTable, a collaborative hybrid database, and coded by the country where it was created/shared (based on the Telegram channels and Facebook and Twitter users' countries of origin), the event that it comments on (the war in Ukraine or Belarusian protests), the source (if annotation is possible), form, content keywords, and visual motifs. We used qualitative thematic analysis with open coding (Braun and Clarke 2006) to

³ Last name of the channel's author

⁴ ZhS is an acronym for Zheltye Slivy, which can mean both yellow plums and yellow (tabloid) press leaks.

⁵ The name is the reference to one of the most popular protest slogans, Long Live Belarus.

identify frequent trends in the source, form, content and visuals (RQ1) of our data. Coding methods were first jointly developed using a sample dataset compiled of 10 items from both cases and stances. The few ambiguous cases were discussed and re-coded by the authors or excluded from the dataset if no consensus was reached. In order to outline the similarities and differences between pro- and anti-democratic humour commenting on the Belarusian protests and the war in Ukraine (RQ2), we compared the overlap of annotated categories in democratic and anti-democratic examples of humour.

4. Analysis

While the stances of the humorous examples in our dataset naturally differs, the nuances of the similarities and differences are not obvious. We analyse them in the following section through a comparison of motifs and through analysis of sources and forms.

4.1. Similarities in pro- and anti-democratic humour

There are examples in our dataset of similar motifs delivering an anti-democratic point of view either on the Russian war in Ukraine or on Belarusian protests. For example, the same background – a flag-coloured boot kicking a person making a Nazi salute – was used to refer to the anti-government opposition and their alleged nationalism in Belarus⁶, and to the alleged nationalism of Ukrainians in Russian memes⁷. The boot, in either the colours of the Belarusian or Russian flag, illustrates how strong authoritarian power wants to stop nationalism, which is equal to Nazism from the point of view of authoritarian regimes.

Other similarities were found across sources, formats, and content (both verbal and visual), as described below.

4.1.1. Sources and formats

Both pro- and anti-democratic humour that comments on conflict often uses news stories as its source (cf. the concept of newstore, Frank, 2011). As memes and other forms of humour aim to satirise and ridicule, it is not surprising that both sides of the conflict use news stories published by the opposing side's media outlets (see also section 4.1.6.) rather than their own. This implies that the people who create these memes observe their opponents' media closely and understand – even if not appreciate – the messages and ideas therein. This tends to mean finding logical errors, inconsistencies, incongruities, etc., and exaggerating them for comic effect. This tendency is also evident in the similar distribution of forms (see Figure 1) in both datasets, with anti-democratic humour appearing slightly more often as videos, and pro-democratic humour making more use of the image-only form.

4.1.2. Slogans

Similarities can also be found in the slogans and key words both sides use. An interesting case is the word *khuylo* (a Russian, Ukrainian and Belarusian profanity meaning 'dickhead'). Initially this word became part of the slogan "Putin – *khuylo*" during the 2014 Ukrainian revolution (Monticelli & Ahi, 2022, p. 177), which persisted and was used during the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine both in serious and in humorous communication (see Figure 2). However, the creators of anti-democratic memes (try to) reappropriate this obscene nickname, for

⁶ <https://t.me/carbatushka/3453?single>

⁷ https://t.me/nos_chanel/365

example, in one of the anti-democratic video memes Zelenskyy is saying “*Ya khuylo*” (I’m *khuylo*)⁸. In another video meme the Ukrainian military are forced to shout that Zelenskyy is *khuylo*⁹. Although labelling Zelenskyy with this nickname has not become quite as popular as the “*Putin khuylo*” slogan, it is possible to see the anti-democratic meme creators’ intention to deprive the nickname *khuylo* of its univocal association with Putin.



Figure 2. Caption in Belarusian (mimicking a verse from Aleksandr Pushkin’s “The Tale of the Dead Princess and the Seven Knights”): “Mirror, mirror on the wall. Am I the strongest, richest and most courageous of all?” – “No”, replies the [mirror] glass, “You are still *khuylo*”.

Image source:

<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=2284546745016945&set=g.1716227065346657>

Pro- and anti-democratic humour also targets each other’s slogans. One of the slogans that was recontextualised from serious to humorous communication was “*Za Bat’ku*” (“In favour of Bat’ka”¹⁰). During the 2020 Belarusian protests it was used in earnest by Lukashenko supporters, while protesters humorously altered it to “*Sabachku!*” (“[We want] a [little] dog!”), taking advantage of the phonetic similarities between the two expressions. “*Sabachku!*” was often heard at protest rallies with protestors even sometimes bringing their dogs in response to the ‘plea’. Subsequently, anti-democratic channels started making fun of the “*Sabachku*” slogan, for example, by hinting that it refers to the figure of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya¹¹ (Figure 3).

⁸ <https://t.me/c/1751874359/654>

⁹ https://t.me/Z_memes/291

¹⁰ Bat’ka is a Belarusian word for father and has been Lukashenko’s nickname for a long time; it is mainly used by Lukashenko’s supporters (in Belarus as well as in Russia).

¹¹ Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya became a candidate in the 2020 presidential elections after her husband, the famous blogger Siarhiej Tsikhanouski, was arrested and barred from running for president. Later Tsikhanouskaya became the leader of the united opposition after two other prospective candidates (Viktar Babaryka and Valery Tsapkala) were not registered as candidates by the Central Electoral Commission, and their teams and Tsikhanouskaya decided to unite forces in the presidential campaign.



Figure 3. Caption in Russian: Why do all MY people call me “A DOG”? Image source: <https://t.me/belshkvarka/3568>

4.1.3. Body

Another content-level similarity between pro- and anti-democratic humour is use of reference to the body. For example, humorous anti-democratic memes revolving around the 2020 protests compared the Belarusian national white-red-white flag¹² to a used menstrual pad (Figure 4), mainly relying on the colour similarity. The background for this comparison partly lies in the prosecution of people for putting the Belarusian national flag in their window and the creative ways pro-democratic protesters used to bypass this censorship, one of which was hanging white and red underwear on their clothes lines, which in turn motivated government supporters to exaggerate the protesters’ connection with bodily functions.

¹² The Belarusian national flag (white-red-white, as opposed to the official Belarusian red and green flag) has become a symbol of protest.



Figure 4. Veranika Tsepkala, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and Maria Kalesnikava marking their alliance during the 2020 presidential elections, with one of the most popular protest slogans “Long Live Belarus”. Image source: <https://t.me/belshkvarka/1564>

There were also bodily references within pro-democratic protest humour, although the motif was used from a different perspective. One of the ways this was done was to underscore the primacy of moral and existential values (for example democracy and freedom) over bodily values. For example, the protest placard below (Figure 5) points out that fighting for democracy is more important than chasing one’s personal (sexual) pleasures.



Figure 5. A protester at an anti-government rally in Minsk, Belarus. Image source: Pearce 2021, p. 162.¹³

Another way to employ bodily references was to subtly ridicule the authoritarian state’s attempt to control even the most intimate aspects of life. For protesters, subtle but visible protests

¹³ Due to the copyright restrictions and in order to protect the privacy of people who are depicted holding the protest posters we have replaced the photos with their schematic representations. The text on the posters is left unchanged.

such as the underwear flags mentioned above were a means of making fun of the government's overarching control, while anti-democratic humour used this and similar examples to accuse protesters of pushing unpleasant, "dirty", aspects of the body.

Ukraine war humour, too, has bodily references, for example, anti-democratic humour implied that Western military instructors taught Ukrainians to masturbate with the help of the weapons they were sent¹⁴. Pro-democratic humour also showed physical ways of attacking the opposition's bodies, for example by sticking the Ukrainian coat of arms – a trident – into Putin's butt¹⁵) and humorously suggesting that Zelenskyy's speeches are better than sex¹⁶.

4.1.4. Animals

Both pro- and anti-democratic humour employs animal references. In Belarus pro-democratic protest humour, for example, often compared Lukashenko to a cockroach, a reference to the opposition's pre-election slogan "Stop the cockroach", where Lukashenko was depicted as a cockroach from a popular fairy tale by Korney Chukovsky (Makhovsky, 2020). The protesters also ironically referred to themselves as sheep and rats, reappropriating insults Lukashenko made about them (Fiadotava, 2021). In pro-democratic humour revolving around the war in Ukraine animal references are also rather frequent. Curiously, Russians are compared not only to 'dirty' animals (such as, for example, pigs), but also to animals that cannot cause any significant harm (for example, hamsters¹⁷). Animals are used to represent several other prominent war-related politicians, for example, Lavrov is often depicted as a horse¹⁸, while Lukashenko is alluded to through a visual reference to his dog¹⁹ (see more on his dog in Laineste et al., 2022). Animal references are also used in a more generalised manner. In Figure 6six, for example, a truck full of Russian soldiers displays the sign "People" ("Люди") implying that otherwise it would be impossible to distinguish the soldiers from animals, while Z – a symbol of Russian aggression – is turned into the first letter of the word Zoo (*Zoonaprk*).



¹⁴ https://t.me/gorizon_tall/343

¹⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=10224947050136880&set=a.4539668343162>

¹⁶ https://vk.com/belmems?z=photo-83285883_457240112%2Falbum-83285883_00%2Frev

¹⁷ <https://t.me/belarusiana/2192>

¹⁸ See, for example, <https://t.me/belteanews/22182> and <https://t.me/belteanews/22259>

¹⁹ See, for example, <https://t.me/belteanews/22199> and <https://t.me/belteanews/22212>

Figure 6. “Zoonapк”, Zoo in Russian. Image source: https://vk.com/belmems?z=photo-83285883_457240104%2Falbum-83285883_00%2Frev

Using animal metaphors to denigrate opponents is even more common in anti-democratic humour. Typically, Belarusian protest humour portrays protesters in general, and their leaders specifically, as chicken²⁰ and monkeys²¹, while in pro-war humour Ukrainians are depicted as pigs²², the Ukrainian army as sheep²³, and Zelenskyy as a pig²⁴, a goose²⁵ or a hen²⁶. Puns are also involved: the Russian *Solntsepyok* (“Scorching sunlight”) multiple rocket launcher is called “*Svinopyok*” (a neologism that can mean a device for baking pigs)²⁷. Russia is also occasionally represented as a bear (Figure 7), which is an established symbol for the country. The allusions to animals can be more subtle, for example, in one of the Belarusian protest videos music from the *In the World of Animals*²⁸ TV show was superimposed over protesters dancing in a city square²⁹.

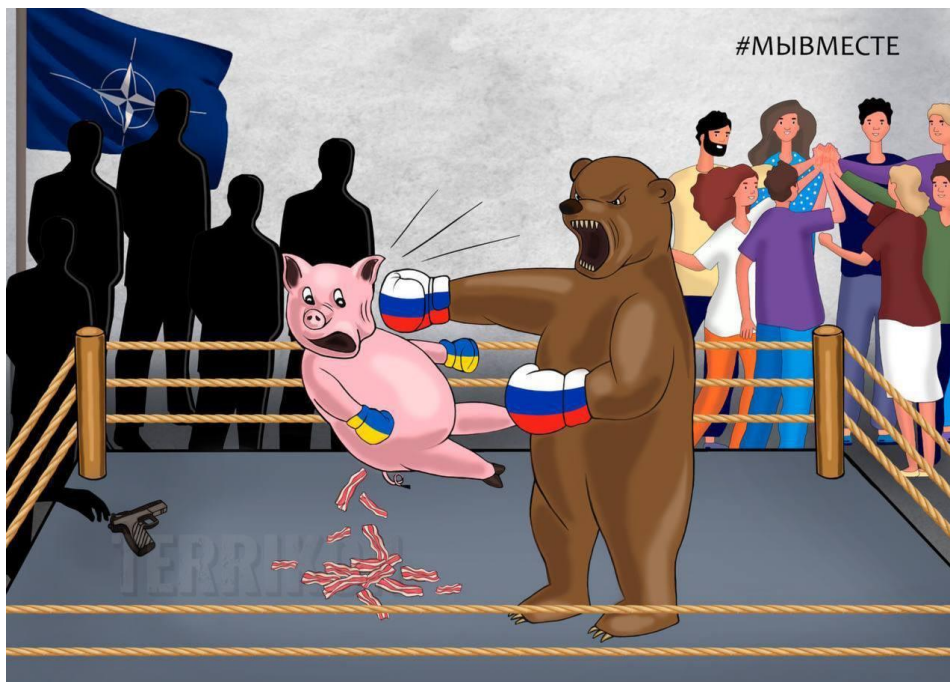


Figure 7. Russia as a bear defeats Ukraine as a pig. Image source: <https://t.me/c/1751874359/786>

4.1.5. *Opposite sides, same jokes*

In rare cases pro- and anti-democratic sides use exactly the same jokes or memes. For example, when one of the leaders of Belarusia’s democratic opposition Maria Kalesnikava was forced to

²⁰ <https://t.me/belshkvarka/5336>.

²¹ https://t.me/kak_polozeno/637.

²² https://t.me/Z_memes/2980.

²³ <https://t.me/c/1751874359/27>.

²⁴ https://t.me/gorizon_tall/306.

²⁵ <https://t.me/c/1751874359/121>.

²⁶ <https://t.me/c/1751874359/113>.

²⁷ https://t.me/Z_memes/3028.

²⁸ *In the World of Animals* is a well-known Soviet and Russian TV programme about animals in the wild. Its opening tune has become one of its signature features.

²⁹ <https://t.me/carbatushka/3801>.

leave Belarus in September 2020, but refused to do so and tore her passport to pieces to prevent her extradition, a number of jokes appeared in Belarusian pro-democratic media accounts. The jokes playfully exaggerated Kalesnikava's power and commitment (one pro-democratic Belarusian media outlet compared them to Chuck Norris jokes, see Belorusskij Partizan 2020) and usually took the form of one-liners (for example "COVID-19 decided to leave Belarus when it found out Kalesnikava is staying"), though some memes were also created on this topic (Figure 8). At the same time, these same jokes and memes were posted by anti-democratic social media as a way to ridicule Kalesnikava's behaviour (for example, Figure 8, but also Chuck Norris jokes about Kalesnikava appear both in pro- and in anti-democratic media)



Figure 8. The arrow pointing straight ahead says "leave and become a hero", the arrow pointing right says "tear up your passport and become a legend". The car is labelled "Maria Kalesnikava".

Sources:<https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:sCDJZppyxuYJ:;https://belaruspartisan.by/enjoy/511789/&cd=1&hl=ru&ct=clnk&gl=pl> and <https://t.me/belshkvarka/3670>

Some of the 2022 Ukraine war humour was also posted both by pro- and anti-democratic media. After the EU and USA appealed to their citizens to leave Russia at the beginning of the Russian war in Ukraine, the Pezduza pro-democratic Russian Telegram channel³⁰ (which publishes short verbal jokes mimicking news headlines) posted the following text on March 27, 2022: "EU and USA call their citizens out of the jokes about a Russian, an American and a German"³¹. The anti-democratic Z memes channel reposted it as a screenshot (including the title of the channel) and accompanied it with the comment "It's not fake!"³². Another popular meme of the early

³⁰ The name is a compound of the obscene word "pizdet" (to lie) and the name of one of the major Russian pro-democratic media outlets Meduza.

³¹ <https://t.me/pezduzalive/1828>.

³² https://t.me/Z_memes/2987.

months of the war – Lukashenko saying “I’ll show you the direction of the attack”³³ – was also published in numerous versions by pro- and anti-democratic media alike³⁴.

While instances of posting the same Maria Kalesnikava jokes and the same war-related memes in both pro- and anti-democratic social media channels seem similar, the reasons behind their use in media from contrasting stances are different. In the EU and US appeals to their citizens, and Lukashenko’s words about the direction of the attack, there is a certain consensus among meme creators and sharers of different political stances: these statements seem ridiculous and point to the gap between politicians’ ideas about reality, and reality itself (cf. Davies, 2011). The jokes about Maria Kalesnikava, however, can be read differently by different audiences. While democratic opposition supporters see them as a (slightly) exaggerated version of reality, anti-democratic media consumers read them as a grotesque attempt to valorise a character whom they despise (see the highly improbable suggestion that COVID-19 left Belarus because Kalesnikava decided to stay in the joke cited above).

4.1.6. Meta-humour

Sometimes anti-democratic social media channels create their humour based on their opponents’ self-deprecating memes and jokes by claiming that this self-deprecation should be taken seriously. Pointing out how real and serious such humour feels, they first try to make a claim about the (inadequate) sense of humour of their opponents, and then indicate that the situation that is being commented on is essentially absurd rather than simply humorous. For example, in the case of the Belarusian protests, pro-Lukashenko Telegram channels often posted photos of humorous protest placards (such as a photo of a woman holding a placard saying “A decent prostitute wants to meet an unmarried drug addict”³⁵, following Lukashenko’s comment that the protesters were prostitutes and drug addicts). The Telegram posts were accompanied with captions saying that the protesters were not joking but rather revealing their true selves with these placards. Russian pro-war meme channels used a similar technique. For instance, one channel posted a video³⁶ of a Ukrainian man who recounted how he had trained his “ethnic duck” to fly over Russia and defecate there, thus helping Russians to heal from what he called “the poo virus” (a pun on Putin’s name). Despite the serious tone of the duck owner’s voice, the video was probably a tongue-in-cheek humorous reply to Russian conspiracy theories about Ukraine creating biolabs for military purposes (Collins & Collier, 2022). However, the Russian channel that posted this video added a caption (in Ukrainian) saying “That’s how they’ll win!” thus depriving the video of its original humorous connotation and using it as ‘proof’ of Ukrainian stupidity and military ineptitude.

4.2. Differences between pro- and anti-democratic humour

Apart from the many similarities, both on the level of content and form, some features are found only in pro- or anti-democratic humour.

³³ During one of his discussions with Putin, Lukashenko claimed that if Russia hadn’t invaded Ukraine, Ukraine would have attacked the Belarusian and Russian armies. He then mentioned that he had a map where he could show the directions of the Ukrainian attack that he was alluding to. The absurdity of this claim inspired many parodies.

³⁴ See, for example, <https://t.me/nashaniva/44172>, <https://t.me/belarusiana/2235>, <https://t.me/memyby/351>, https://t.me/Z_memes/2867, https://t.me/Z_memes/2873, https://t.me/Z_memes/3685.

³⁵ <https://t.me/carbatushka/4040>.

³⁶ https://t.me/Z_memes/3532.

4.2.1. *Sexual preferences*

As we mentioned earlier, both sides use bodily references in their humour, although the anti-democratic humour in our dataset often focuses specifically on what are considered deviations from traditional patriarchal norms. In particular, this humour often ridicules alleged sexual preferences. The caption to a Belarusian meme, written as if by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, reads: "... I'm supporting you, my little LGBT... oops, I mean my little white-red-white protesters"³⁷. War-related antidemocratic memes are even more prolific in this regard, often hinting that Zelenskyy is homosexual, for example, via photos and videos from his career as an entertainer. Western politicians supporting Ukraine (Joe Biden, Justin Trudeau³⁸), or their supporters, are also depicted as LGBT. The Azov Brigade was depicted particularly often as being gay; videos and image-based memes hinted at gay orgies in the dungeons where the Azov Brigade was stationed³⁹.

The popularity of LGBT references in anti-democratic humour and their (almost total) absence in pro-democratic humour can be explained by the fact that the liberal ideology of those creating and sharing pro-democratic humour does not consider LGBT an anomaly that should be ridiculed. By portraying their male opponents as gay, feminine, or generally as having non-masculine tastes, anti-democratic humour aims to belittle their masculinity and thus symbolically deprive them of power (see Figure 9).



Figure 9. Zelenskyy wearing a military Hello Kitty vest and helmet. Image source: https://t.me/Z_memes/3415

³⁷ <https://t.me/belshkvarka/4484>.

³⁸ https://t.me/gorizon_tall/277.

³⁹ See, for example, a video here: <https://t.me/c/1751874359/13>.

4.2.2. Immaturity and age

As well as belittling opponents' masculinity, anti-democratic humour also belittles their maturity. This motif is particularly recurrent in anti-democratic Belarusian protest humour. Sometimes such humour directly references protesters' youth by using press or amateur photos of children among the protesters and pointing out that they were too young to participate in the elections against which they were protesting⁴⁰. Alternatively, they use a generalised image of the protester as a child whose mother is beating them for participating in the protests⁴¹. This aims to underscore the opponents' lack of experience and hint that they should not have agency. The age motif is represented slightly differently in anti-democratic humour about the war in Ukraine, with memes depicting Ukrainian weapons as those from video games⁴² thus hinting that the Ukrainian army should not be taken seriously.

On the other hand, pro-democratic humour embraces the idea that they represent the younger – and thus more progressive – part of the population. They label their enemies old and decrepit. Both Putin and Lukashenko are called “*dzied*”/“*ded*” (“old man”) in pro-democratic humour, with their age associated with ineptitude and an inability to make sound decisions (Figure 10).



Figure 10. Placard (in Belarusian, the original rhymes): We won't trust nuclear weapons to an old man with a gun⁴³. Image source: Pearce 2021, p. 171

4.2.3. Drug addiction

Another feature that anti-democratic humour often attributes to its opponents is drug addiction. In Belarusian protest humour it is easy to trace the origin of this motif to Lukashenko and his claim that protesters often use drugs. The origin of the drug addict reference is harder to pinpoint in anti-democratic humour about the war in Ukraine, although humorous references to drug

⁴⁰ <https://t.me/belshkvarka/4484>.

⁴¹ <https://t.me/carbatushka/4122>.

⁴² https://t.me/Z_memes/3600.

⁴³ The “old man with a gun” refers to Lukashenko carrying a gun on his helicopter flight at the end of one of the protest rallies in Minsk in August 2020. See an overview in Fiadotava 2021.

addictions are even more recurrent. Zelenskyy himself as well as his officials (Vitalii Kim, Oleksii Arestovych) are targets of these jokes⁴⁴. Some self-deprecating pro-democratic humour from the Belarusian protests reappropriated this accusation, for example when protesters referred to themselves as “drug addicts” on their protest placards, and in protest chants, although they did not use this motif to ridicule their opponents.

5. Discussion

5.1. Study results

Both pro- and anti-democratic humour is present and visible in the public sphere in Belarus and Russia. Those who create this humour use well-established templates and stereotypes as well as some formulas that work well (for example exaggeration, among others). They situate their jokes and memes within the information flow that they are a part of and use humour to strengthen the in-group connections while making fun of opposing opinions. This study establishes that regardless of the globally wide-spread pro-democratic tendencies in humour about the Belarusian protests and the Russian war in Ukraine (for example a pro-democratic stance is obvious in the largest humorous international social media groups dedicated to the war in Ukraine, such as Ukrainian Meme Squad⁴⁵ on Facebook and Ukrainian Meme Forces⁴⁶ on Twitter), plenty of anti-democratic ideas are disseminated via memes and jokes. These are not confined to the dark web or to particular platforms hidden from public access. While humour communicates the ideological stance of its creators and sharers (Shifman, 2014; see also Wiggins, 2019) – stances that for the pro- and anti-democratic movements oppose each other – examples of humour that express opposite stances often draw upon the same sources, for example the same slogans or news stories.

Our first research question (RQ1) concerned the sources, form, content and visuals of humour in the public sphere. We found that humour reacting to the Belarusian protests and the Russian war in Ukraine use the other side’s media outlets as inspiration, indicating that the two sides are aware of each other’s actions and opinions. The humour is created to point out incongruities and to make potentially embarrassing allusions (references to the body, to taboo and illegal topics, to sex, etc.), which can be added to press photos, among others. Forms of pro- and anti-democratic humour overlap considerably (see Fig. 1). Content-wise, both in terms of verbal expressions and visuals, anti-democratic humour often makes reference to strong, macho characters juxtaposing them to ridiculous, immature and feminine ones (e.g. Figure 9). Power equals masculinity in anti-democratic humour. Opponents are stigmatised by showing them as weak, young, fragile and female. On the other hand, pro-democratic humour frequently plays on the young versus old opposition, extending the image of the strong macho man to a ridiculous extreme or showing autocratic leaders as old men (*dziady*; see Figure 10). Because pro-democratic protesters are accused of acting immaturity, or being too young to know how a state works, they play on this with humour depicting authoritarian leaders as old men who belong to the past, are backward, have lost their virility or generally cling on to power. This creates a contrast with the masculinity and power discourse of those who make anti-democratic humour, subverting it with subtle ridicule.

The more general research question (RQ2), which compares pro- and anti-democratic humour, shows that the two sets of humour do not exist in parallel, rather they intertwine in various ways. There are certain differences in motif (for example jokes concerning maturity and

⁴⁴ See, for example, https://t.me/Z_memes/3536, https://t.me/Z_memes/2901.

⁴⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/UkrainianMemeSquad>.

⁴⁶ <https://twitter.com/uamemesforces>.

age), although the content and visual motifs are much more similar than expected. Denisova (2019) observed that the trope of portraying Putin as a bear (cf. Russia as a bear in Figure 7), or of him being accompanied by one, was used both by anti- and pro-Kremlin meme makers; its wide usage was supported by an easily available and accessible image that is prone to different, sometimes contradictory, interpretations. In our data, some slogans or tropes have been appropriated by both sides of the conflict (for example *khuylo*). The same applies to content motifs such as animal and bodily references, and metajokes ridiculing the humour of the other side. Sometimes motifs overlap but are used in different ways. Humour creators from both stances are aware of each other's production and comment on it, use the same or similar motifs, and interact with their opponents' humour in other ways. The data also indicate that pro- and anti-democratic humour often uses the same sources, such as global news media, or use local news voicing opposing opinions in order to make fun of actions, leaders or ideology. They seek to know the enemy, which includes being aware of the channels that advocate opinions one does not approve of. Both sides use news as a source of inspiration, their strategy being to follow media producing the opponent's 'information bubble' and then to use this information to ridicule their allegedly false assumptions, backward ways, and general stupidity.

5.2. Implications for humour research

The current research shows that there is no clear link between stance and the form or content of humorous internet memes. Motifs (and the intertextual references employed by memes) are adapted and/or (re)appropriated to create new meanings. As pro- and anti-democratic humour is diametrically opposite, while other aspects easily overlap, we can conclude that stance does not influence the choice of source, visual and content-related motif, or form of humour. Stance is always set apart from the sources, content and technical means used to forward the ideological underpinnings of humour, something that is confirmed by our findings that only a few motifs can be found exclusively in pro- or anti-democratic humour. Even if some of these motifs appear more in memes that express a particular stance, it does not follow that stance obliged a particular choice.

Both pro- and anti-democratic memes about the war in Ukraine and the Belarusian protests use widely disseminated meme templates, with few pop culture references among the anti-democratic humorous items. This can be explained by the fact that the demographic group that supports democracy and shares pro-democratic humour in Belarus and Russia are probably more exposed to Western and global media and are more willing to share it, while anti-democratic meme creators (at least partly) support the ideas of Russian and Belarusian propaganda about the harmfulness of Western media. Therefore, preference for certain templates (for example those with popular cultural references) is conditioned not by the stance per se, but rather by more general patterns of media consumption.

Change in stance can be a metapragmatic function (with context giving away a meme's stance; see Tsakona, 2020) or a matter of successful appropriation and adaptation. In our data, anti-democratic humour relies more on metapragmatic information, for example stereotypes and other markers that clearly indicate stance, and does not expend much effort adding subtle references. Pro-democratic humour tends to be more subtle, especially in anti-democratic societies where it needs to get round censorship (cf. the notion of humour as a subversive way of "speaking truth to power", see Theoretical background). Pro-democratic humour also makes ample use of self-irony, in contrast to the more rigid and defensive position taken by the anti-democratic humour. Finally, pro-democratic humour has to be more inclusive as it spreads within a wider and more global audience and needs to cater to wider tastes both in humour and cultural reference. Anti-democratic humour has fewer motif choices and displays fixed ideas common in anti-democratic discourse in general (cf. Sienkiewicz & Marx, 2022). Pro-

democratic humour takes advantage of audiences' desire to interpret this stance as supporting democracy and freedom of speech, and so its choice of motifs is wider.

The existence of the gap between stance, on the one hand, and form and content of humour, on the other, has several important implications for humour research. Firstly, it shows that humorous items cannot be studied in a vacuum but should be analysed in the context of their creation and dissemination. Further research should focus more on the meta-discourse around humour and analyse the contexts of dissemination (where, when, by whom, for whom) in more detail, especially of anti-democratic political humour in Russia and Belarus. Secondly, similarities between the content and form of humour belonging to different stances (sometimes directly borrowed from one another) points to the existence of (mediated) dialogue between the two sides. It would thus be relevant to learn more about how this dialogue – even if it is irregular and hostile – shapes the public sphere and its permitted forms and topics of humour. Finally, the research paves the way to further exploration of stance as a category. Future research will hopefully explore in more detail how the context-dependency of stance influences humorous communication in the public sphere.

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