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"Our Shmuck": Russian Folklore about American Elections

Throughout the course of the 2016 US presidential election, hundreds of jokes dealing with the topic appeared on the English-speaking internet. While Russian folklore could have simply exploited translations of existing American texts, representing Trump as incompetant, a statistical and semantic analysis of the corpus of jokes that appeared on Russian social media during the 2 weeks following the election shows that a different type of joke, one juxtaposing the election systems in the United States and Russia, was much more popular. Yet 70 percent of the reposts of the jokes suggested an unrelated base meaning—the idea that Russia and the United States exist in a state of constant competition, trying to influence each other's internal and international policies. For the audience that opposes the Russian president and the loyalist mass media, Trumplore becomes a way to laugh not at the American president-elect, but at Russia's own administration.

Keywords

AFS ETHNOGRAPHIC THESAURUS: Jokes, joke cycles, political humor, political jokes, internet, social media

Introduction: The Hidden Agenda of Putin's Trump Joke

On June 2, 2017, at the Economic Forum in Saint Petersburg, Vladimir Putin was asked to comment on the United States withdrawing from the Paris Climate Accord. As a part of his reply, Putin said:

> We should be grateful to President Trump. In Moscow it's raining and cold and even, they say, some snow. . . . Now, we could blame this all on American imperialism, that it's all their fault. But we won't. (Spargo 2017)

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The Russian-speaking audience burst into laughter while the rest of the participants maintained a puzzled silence. These differences in reactions were due to the fact that Putin used a pattern familiar to the Russian speakers from then-current jokes about America and its presidents. That pattern, while very popular in Russia, was hardly known to outsiders.

Putin's joke is based on conspirological ideas rooted in the Cold War. As early as the 1960s, a popular belief was born that America tried to manipulate Russia with some sort of a "climate weapon." Contemporary political folklore in Russia exploits this belief to demonstrate the absurdity of the media coverage of natural disasters. In Summer 2015, for instance, when heavy rains led to unexpected floods in some regions of Russia, social media users joked that "this week alone, the US Armed Climate Forces attacked Kursk, Kazan, Lipetsk, Krasnodar, and Sochi."[1]

These ideas are part of a belief system that has been actively present in both the USSR and contemporary Russia. Its key idea is that the United States is unceasingly meddling with Russia's internal affairs. This can be observed in another of Putin's remarks addressed to an American speaker at the same forum: "This is a systematic and unceremonious meddling in our domestic affairs. This has to stop."[2] In other words, while answering a question about American policy dealing with the Paris Climate Accord, Putin begins by reminding the audience about unusually cold weather in Moscow and then states that "we" might have blamed said weather on our habitual external enemy, reproducing the common stereotypical views that the United States was responsible for all things bad in Russia. But then he unexpectedly adds "but we won't," refusing to make that accusation. By doing so, he demonstrates that the proposition *we feel that we are victims of a predatory American president* has changed after the election of Trump—since he is a president that we happen to like. Putin speaks of Trump as *one of us*, emphasizing that stance by using a colloquial word close to *bloke* while referring to him (the Russian word *muzhik*).[3] Moreover, now it is Russia that is being accused of interfering with the internal policy of the United States (the World Economic Forum took place in June 2017—after several months of fierce discussions about Russia's impact on the results of the presidential election in the United States). In Putin's joke, Russia is unexpectedly put in a strong position (which can be summarized as *we are able to accuse the United States of the same sort of act we've been accused of, but we won't be doing that*) and the United States in a weak position. Laughing at this joke was a physical expression of the Russian audience's unity with Putin—they laughed because the president shared common language and common knowledge with them.

The same views regarding US-Russia relations (and the overall position of Russia on the international scene), albeit for different reasons, are expressed by modern Russian protest folklore. In this article we will discuss the phenomenon of Russian political folklore through a representative case study of a cycle of jokes about the newly elected US president, Donald Trump. We present the kinds of jokes about Trump that are produced and shared in Russia and describe their structure and the stereotypical ideas upon which they are based. Our goal is to bring to light the hidden processes that make certain Trump jokes popular and leave others on the roadside. In other words—When and why do jokes about Trump become protest folklore?

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Political Newslore in Contemporary Russia: Research Methods

The media coverage of a political or social event is often followed by a string of vernacular jocular texts (both offline and online) that make it possible for the audience to discuss those events. Russell Frank labeled these texts "newslore" (2004, 2011) because they were similar to various forms of folklore in many aspects (anonymity, variability, mass transmission, etc.). As an indirect form of communal response to current events, newslore is not just a reflection of popular attitudes where these events are concerned—as, for example, is shown by Robert Cochran in his analysis of Ceausescu jokes (1989)—but newslore also fulfills a number of social functions, from affirming one's group identity (see Duffy, Page, and Young 2012) to adapting members of the society in question to a changing context.

In Autumn of 2016, Russian state-funded press and television channels (especially the most pro-governmental "Channel 1," representing the official ideology of the state) were closely focused on the election campaign in the United States and on the personalities of the candidates. A vernacular reaction to the Russian media image of the Republican candidate formed a cycle of newslore that we will hereafter call "Trumplore."

The very dependence of Russian jokes about Trump on the media context defines their two key features, features that might be seen as enigmatic by an external observer. In the early stages of writing, we shared a draft of this paper with a well-known American specialist in Slavic studies. The person in question was absolutely fluent in the language, culture, and political life of Russia. Yet he could neither understand the jokes nor the reasons why Russians would consider them funny. "Is it really a joke?," he kept asking us. The structure and the context of Russian political newslore therefore requires an extended commentary for a non-Russian audience.

Firstly, the Russian newslore texts frequently have a specific structure: instead of a traditional dialogical form and/or a description of some situation that has an unexpected twist or punch line, they either parody a news piece or provide an imaginary answer to it. In the first case, the listener has to be familiar with the typical structure of a news message in the state-owned media to appreciate the joke. In the second case, one has to reconstruct the initial media statement, which is not present in the joke itself. Secondly, these jokes lack explicit "bisociation" (Koestler 1964) produced by two overlapping incompatible frames of thought (Raskin 1985). Bisociation can develop only if the listener manages to reconstruct a dialogue with an imaginary agent relying on their knowledge of the media context. Without knowledge of the media context, the first piece is missing.

For example, on the second day of discussing the election results (November 9, 2016), a text by a Twitter user from Belarus was trending: "I just wonder how one feels when a president changes."[4] The structure of this text lacks an explicit dialogue; however, we can reconstruct it by adding implicit remarks:

> *Remark 1 (news message): There is a new president in the United States.
> *Remark 2 (a comment from the audience): And we've had the same president for many years. *I just wonder how one feels when a president changes*. I wish I were in their shoes.

Elliott Oring discusses three levels of meaning in jokes: "base meaning" (the key opposition that forms the plot); "propositional meaning" (the way the key opposition

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is implemented using specific characters and settings); and "performance meaning" (a performance of a joke in a specific communicative context) (1987:278–9).

The base meaning of the joke cited above suggests that there are two political systems: one of them is based on a presumption that the state leader may and will be replaced; the other is not. Its propositional meaning suggests that the speaker has never been in the former situation and is unlikely to ever end up in one like it. On the performative level, the joke hinges on the stance the speaker takes. The Belarusian users who launched the joke were hinting at their president, Alexander Lukashenko, who has held his position since 1994 and, according to popular opinion, is going to pass the post on to his son, making it a hereditary one. Russian users, in turn, were speaking of Vladimir Putin, who has been in power since 2000, and the generally positive stance on that fact from the modern Russian media, who portray it as a sign of stability.

The base meanings of this text are the key oppositions that form a vernacular political worldview. We use the term "vernacular" to mean the knowledge that is acquired not through formal education but rather by adopting a set of basic ideas that are rarely articulated in their entirety. However, these ideas often serve as a base for political humor and everyday discussions. Explicating them requires a specific analytical operation. Base meanings reflect important mores (or the concepts of the norm); the difference between the observed reality and these normative concepts often becomes a trigger for generating a humorous text (and its propositional meaning).

A joke would be unable to get through what Petr Bogatyrev and Roman Jakobson term the "preventive censorship of the community" (1982) and would die out on two conditions: if the audience does not understand its propositional meaning (for example, if we are dealing with a foreign audience that is not aware of the context), and/or if the audience does not agree with the propositional meaning (e.g., a Russian who favors Putin as an irremovable fixture of Russian politics would understand the joke but would be unlikely to pass it on). If a joke is widely republished on social networks, one has grounds to conclude that the joke is not just witty but that it also meets the expectations of the audience and reflects their views and opinions. Consequently, a propositional meaning that happens to be more valid for a particular audience will generate more popular jokes. Successful jokes serve as identity markers for various groups that share a common ideology.

If we accept the above presupposition, studying jokes stored on archive-like websites takes us nowhere. We are first and foremost interested in the extent to which a text is endorsed by the audience—that is, in the dynamics of its transmission and dissemination. These dynamics are expressed through "likes" and "shares" on social media.[5] The object of our research is the corpus of vernacular newslore jokes circulating on social media, and we therefore begin collecting jokes and other types of vernacular reactions on social media immediately after a political or social event takes place.

The resulting corpora of jokes are organized into a database and studied using two approaches. The first one is quantitative: we measure the daily number of reposts of the studied text on social media sites (Vkontakte [In Contact], Odnoklassniki [Classmates], Twitter, LiveJournal, etc.[6]) to estimate its popularity.[7] This parameter does not show us the scale at which the text is disseminated in absolute numbers; however, it allows us to see the repost trends and compare them. The second, qualitative approach is based on semantic analysis. Following Elliott Oring (1992), we

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extract the "propositional meaning" of each text by transforming the ironic content into a direct statement revealing the implicit meaning of the text. Since a proposition might not be obvious, it is necessary to reduce the meaning of the joke to a simple non-ambivalent statement by explicating all the structural elements of the opposition involved and by analyzing its context (Oring 1992:14–5).

This operation allows us to build a typology of texts based on their propositional meanings. The quantity of daily reposts on social media of each text makes it possible to estimate the popularity of each propositional meaning in question—in other words, to capture the popularity of certain ideas and models of event interpretation.

The present paper is based on a corpus of 127 jokes about Donald Trump collected during the election week (from November 7 to 13, 2016), when they were most popular (i.e., they collectively gained 16,890 reposts). The distribution of propositional meanings is not uniform; some of the topics are more popular than others and therefore more important for the Russian audience. The semantic analysis of this corpus, based on Oring's theory, has shown that 95.2 percent of all reposts share only three base meanings. We shall now discuss each base meaning and the incongruities that attract the attention of the audience and produce jokes.

Table 1. Key topics of Russian Trumplore

Russian Trumplore						
Base meaning						
I. *The "ideal president":* The president of a country has to possess a number of specific qualities (competence, lack of personal rapacity, masculinity, etc.).			II. *"On the plus side, they've got elections in America":* The real elections have to conform to a certain set of expectations (to be competitive, independent, transparent, etc.).	III. *"Who influences whom?":* A state has to be strong and for that reason both the United States and Russia are always meddling with each other's affairs.		
Propositional meaning						
a. Both Putin and Trump are incompetent/mentally unstable.	b. Both Putin and Trump have personal wealth and comfort as their main priorities.	c. Trump is more masculine than Putin.	a. The American elections conform to the standard and ensure the electoral rotation, while the Russian ones do not.	a. The Russian president is so powerful that he can influence the results of the US elections.	b. Russian authorities excuse all internal problems by citing US interference.	c. "Loyalist citizens" cannot figure out whether the United States is friend or foe.
The share of reposts per propositional meaning						
7.4%	0.8%	1.9%	15.1%	15.1%	33.9%	21.1%

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Base Meaning I: The "ideal president"

Many of the American jokes about Trump that were circulating during the 2016 election week ridiculed those qualities of the then-president-elect that run contrary to an expected image of a president. It seems that Russian jokes do the same—both with Trump and with Putin, who is in turn compared to the American president-elect.

Both in Russian and American texts, Trump is shown as an ineffectual creature who is not up to doing his job: "Trump, November the 8th: 'Ok Google, how does one run the country?'"[8] In Russian jokes he is represented as incompetent and mentally unstable, and so is Putin. These texts also communicate a certain kind of ironic message: *We've been living with just such a "crazy president" for ages, and we're still here*.

> The people in the US are anxious about entrusting the nuclear football to a dysfunctional person. We did that 16 years ago and nothing that horrible has happened yet.[9]

> On the radio Americans keep complaining that they have to live in a country where 40 percent of the population supports Trump. Well, try a country where 80 percent supports Trump???![10]

Another group of texts aims at mocking Trump's passion for luxury and conspicuous consumption and his (and Putin's) powerful interest in personal profit:

> Just imagine the redecoration of the White House under Trump. Columns, fretwork, and golden toilet bowls. Rich and expensive![11]

Yet there is an important difference. The American audience often accuses Trump of sexism and racism. These accusations turned out to be irrelevant where the Russian audience is concerned. Actually, the Russian-speaking users of the internet see Trump's machismo as a positive feature.

For the last decade, the Russian media have developed and supported the image of Putin as macho (see, for example, a photo series of topless Putin riding a horse[12]). This accentuated masculinity is welcomed by the loyalist public and is mocked by the Russian opposition media[13] as well as the Western one. Donald Trump's penchant for the same (expressed through his marriage to a model and his sexist statements) allows the audience to compare the two presidents using an imaginary scale measuring masculinity. It is on that scale that Trump overpowers Putin (while Obama was perceived as a loser). After the elections, Russian social media users shared snide remarks about the height of both presidents:

> Apparently Trump is 3 (or even 5) centimetres taller than Obama, so Putin will have to wear 10-cm high stilettos to the meeting.[14]

> —Where's Trump?
> —In front of you, Vladimir Vladimirovich. Raise your head. Higher, higher, this is just his stomach, then the chest, the neck, and here comes Trump himself.[15]

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In the post-election week, Russian-speaking social media users were actively republishing a collage made of two photos: one depicting the American president-elect surrounded by attractive young women, and the other portraying Putin with a group of senior women. The ironic commentary to this picture stated that in the upper photo, the women want the man's money, and below, women are donating their pensions to the man.

The base meaning of these jokes is the following opposition: a "proper president" (competent, well-behaved, etc.) vs. an "improper president" (incompetent, ill-mannered, and with bad taste). The alleged incompetence, mental instability, and drive for personal gain of both Trump and Putin serve as a propositional meaning—the discrepancy between the real president and the image of an ideal one.

Yet the total number of reposts dealing with Trump's personality did not exceed 10 percent of the total number of reposts of the jokes in our corpus (though the sheer volume of those texts was over 1,000 reposts). This means that the texts in question were, in fact, produced but did not meet the needs of the audience and therefore were not shared by it.

Base Meaning II: "On the plus side, they've got elections in America"

The second group of texts is slightly more popular (15 percent of the total number of reposts). In these texts, the American electoral system is compared to the Russian system and is treated as superior, despite making Trump the head of state. Even in this case, the existence of elections, which ensure regular changes where authorities are concerned, is considered to be better than the lack thereof. This propositional meaning is what unites the two following texts:

> I just wonder how one feels when a president changes.[16]

> Americans are slow at counting votes, you can see at once that they're a backward nation! Our Russian election committee knows the results before the elections even take place.[17]

Within the Russian mentality, the second base meaning suggests that in order to be legitimate, the elections should conform to a number of standards (competitiveness, transparency, and independence), and the propositional meaning claims that this system is violated in Russia (*there are no real elections in our country; the process is based on doctoring and deception*).

Those jokes project the typical image of Russian elections onto the United States, making the contrast between the two political systems even more visible. The opposition media presents certain features as common for Russian elections, but those features appear absurd when imagined in the US context: for example, the pressure put on the employees of the state-funded organizations (*budgetniki*) via the state administration (*adminresource*) to ensure the election results; fake voters (the so-called "*carrousel*"—a technique enabling hired imposters to vote on more than one occasion

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at various polling stations); and bribing the voters. This contrast is illustrated in texts such as the following:

> Neither *adminresource*, nor *carrousels*, nor even *budgetniki* could help the former US administration to stay in power.[18]

The base meaning of these jokes reflects the liberal-democratic worldview that values the idea of electoral rotation and transparency, which made these texts quite popular among pro-opposition Russian social media users. On the other hand, the texts containing the above propositional meaning are not shared by supporters of the current authorities because, for them, the lack of changeability is a positive feature, providing for economic and political stability.

Base Meaning III: "Who influences whom?"

The lion's share of the jokes—70 percent of the total number of reposts—shows that the majority of the audience is interested in yet another topic (the same base meaning that gave birth to Putin's joke at the Economic Forum): the idea of competition between the two countries, with each trying to influence the other. Some jokes carry to the point of absurdity the idea that Russia can influence the United States to the degree of having an impact on the election results. Others mock the idea of a purposeful American influence on Russian internal affairs. Both groups are based on the stereotypical views of the Cold War era. Finally, the third group ridicules the about-face that took place in the media discourse where the American president-elect was concerned.

Propositional Meaning a: *The Russian president is so powerful that he can influence the results of the US elections*

During the election campaign, the American opposition to Trump started to disseminate an idea that the Republican candidate was advancing because Russia was secretly helping him. As early as March 2016, there appeared the first accusations that Russians had hacked the email account of the Democratic Party and provided WikiLeaks with email messages endangering Hilary Clinton's reputation. On December 9, 2016, the *Washington Post* reported that the CIA was convinced Russia had interfered with the presidential campaign using hacking attacks (Entous, Nakashima, and Miller 2016). In January 2017, this theory of Russian impact acquired a new basis: American intelligence agencies (the CIA, FBI, and NSA) issued a general report about the hacking attacks and their links to the Kremlin, causing a long-term media uproar.

The notion of the Kremlin meddling with the results of American elections proved to be a common theme for both the American opposition to Trump and Russian social media users. We cannot say with certainty whether this idea was (to a degree) imported to Russian-speaking segments of social media from English-speaking ones or if it emerged independently. Yet it is significant that Russian official media has endorsed it using various means to demonstrate the interest of the Russian authorities in the election results, even hinting that rumors about the power of the Kremlin

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(referred to as the "the long hand of the Kremlin" in vernacular contexts) are not entirely groundless. During the inauguration of the new US president, a well-known television show host on an influential pro-Kremlin channel, Dmitry Kiselev (who had the reputation of being Putin's number one propaganda man), commented on Trump's speech in the following manner:

> [Trump] finished the first sentence of his speech in an unusual way, saying "People of the world, thank you!" Russian president Vladimir Putin who is likely to have watched the speech might have answered, "You are welcome." Or even, "My pleasure." (Kiselev 2017)

In the jokes about the "Kremlin's hand," Donald Trump's victory turns out to be that of Vladimir Putin: "The elections in the US were won by Vladimir Vladimirovich."[19] Such jokes are fairly popular (14.8 percent of the total number of reposts). The American elections in these jokes are orchestrated by Russian agents:

> Vladimir Churov [the Head of the Russian Electoral Committee] secretly leaves the US via the Bering Strait. Report to Centre: mission accomplished.[20]

The real "organizers" of Trump's victory receive awards (which are deliberately Soviet-style: "*dachas*" (summer houses) and "*Volga*" cars):

> That's it. Trump is the 45th president of the US. The members of his election campaign team are singled out for state rewards, some receiving Volgas as well as keys to new apartments and dachas.[21]

Still, the idea of Russia's meddling became popular not only because of the modern media context, but also due to the continuing persistence of the Cold War views that saw the USSR influencing every single thing on the planet via the services of its extensive spy network. A lot of Soviet jokes were built upon the same idea. Such jokes implied, for example, that all the pro-Soviet leaders of developing countries were actually Soviet secret agents. For example, here is a Soviet joke about Babrak Karmal, the leader of a pro-Soviet party in Afghanistan, and Fidel Castro, the leader of the Cuban Revolution (their names were correspondingly changed to sound like Russian ones):

> Borya Karamelkin [Babrak Karmal] came to Brezhnev: "I cannot cope with that bloody Afghanistan! I spend all my time watching out to avoid getting a knife between my ribs."—"You should learn from Fedya Kostrov [Fidel Castro]. He's spent twenty years in Cuba and he is not complaining." (Melnichenko 2014:912)

Later, a joke about Trump appeared that was based on the same model (a leader of another country turns out to be a Soviet undercover agent):

> Stierlitz [a character from a popular 1970s TV series about a Soviet secret agent in Nazi Berlin] was walking through Washington feeling rather irritated. He was vexed by his red wig and his new Pierre Cardin suit, and the fact that for the next four years he would have to live with somebody else's broad.[22]

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Finally, in the USSR of the 1970s–1980s there existed a considerable volume of jokes based on the idea that at some point in the future, the United States or other countries would unavoidably become member republics of the Soviet Union. One of the most popular and variable was a joke about a nightmare of yet another American president:

> Ronald Reagan wakes up early in terror, white as a sheet, and says he has had a nightmare. "It is the 30th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The chair rises and says: 'I give the floor to the First Secretary of the Californian Regional Committee of the Party, Comrade Ronald Reagan' . . . And I have not done my homework!" (Melnichenko 2014:910)

A joke, based on the same plot (the United States becoming an administrative unit within the Russian Federation), cropped up after Trump had been elected. Russian internet users started sharing a photo of Putin signing a decree that ostensibly stated:

> Donald Trump is appointed a Plenipotentiary Representative to the North American Federal District.
> 08.11.2016.
> V. V. Putin.[23]

These jokes, appearing after November 8, describe the competition between the United States and Russia that finishes with a total geopolitical victory of the latter:

> Tomorrow we'll wake up—and what a lovely sight! Trump is president, the US is falling apart, the US dollar is worth 15 kopecks [the official USD to RUB exchange rate in the 1970s], the Ukraine is part of Krasnodar Region, and tweets allow 254 letters.[24]

Propositional Meaning b: *Russian authorities excuse all internal problems by citing US interference*

The idea that the United States is not just meddling with Russia's internal affairs but is also involved in doing premeditated harm to its citizens in their everyday lives is also quite far from being a novel one. In the 1950s, there was a rumor alleging that Americans were dropping Colorado potato beetles off their planes to destroy Russian crops. In the 1960s, on the newly built Siberian railway called Baikal-Amur Mainline (BAM), someone allegedly found test tubes with strange insects representing a bacterial weapon; in the 1970s–1980s, rumors circulated accusing Americans of distributing chewing gum with razor blades inside, or detonating pens, or jeans that were infested with lice or laced with poison (for more details, see Arkhipova, Kirzuyk, and Titkov 2017).

The notion that American presidents might want to harm not just Russia in general but also its ordinary citizens in particular was ridiculed in a number of jokes emerging in 2014–2015. During this period, the key issue raised by the official media was the conflict with the West caused by the annexation of Crimea and the ensuing sanctions against Russia. The United States and Barack Obama were portrayed as the originators of the conflict. Russian propaganda was constantly repeating that Russia was in the right, that it was unfair to accuse them, and that the country is not

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respected—nurturing a sense of deprivation, undeserved humiliation, and aggression against the United States amongst Russian citizens. The vernacular response included the placing of signs on many doors of shops and homes claiming "Obama is not served/not welcome here" as well as "Obama is a shmuck" stickers on cars (see Arkhipova, Radchenko, and Titkov 2017).

In 2014–2015, Russian citizens ended up in a kind of "double bind" (Bateson 1972): on one hand, they'd heard on television that sanctions were not to be feared; on the other, their quality of life started to decline. According to polls run by the Levada Opinion Poll Centre,[25] in 2015, Russians were worried about rising consumer prices, poverty, unemployment, and the economic crisis more than external affairs. This factor stimulated the circulation of jokes in which Barack Obama was portrayed as wrecking the everyday lives of Russian people: he was destroying roads, raising the cost of maintenance bills, and cancelling commuter trains. The worldview of the loyalist audience eager to blame external enemies for Russia's internal problems was ridiculed in a plethora of jokes, demotivators,[26] GIF animations, and doctored photo images.

Yet the damage done by the American president was mainly portrayed not as harm to the economic system as a whole, but rather as petty everyday depredations. It took only a short while after such jokes had begun to circulate for an expression to be coined: to live under Obama. The joke "Russia has never had it worse than under Obama"[27] became one of the most popular texts of 2015. This model allowed expression of one's views on everyday problems, using irony to foist the responsibility onto an external enemy: "Obama canceled commuter trains to Moscow. So I had to take a bus."[28]

In many jocular texts, Trump is, as Obama was before him, portrayed as the chief villain. For example, during the post-election week, a mock-Donald Trump account on Twitter produced a number of widely retweeted texts about the nefarious plans (or accomplishments) of the US president-elect to destroy Russia:

> I'm not yet a president, but I've already:
> (1) cut oil prices,
> (2) promised to extend anti-Russian sanctions,
> (3) plundered the city of Novosibirsk's public purse.[29]

During the post-election week, Russian social media users generated a number of versions of the story whereby Trump, following in Obama's footsteps, planned to sabotage the everyday life of ordinary Russians in the simplest way possible—by relieving himself in the communal entrance hallways of Russian apartment blocks. This grassroots form of sabotage was portrayed as the key responsibility of the American president: "Trump a president, duh! He does not even know how to enter a hallway!"[30] Within such texts the complaints concerning the state of Russian hallways were supposed to be sent to the White House administration:

> Trump's press service has officially stated that until January 20, no claims dealing with the cleanliness of Russian hallways shall be processed![31]

The change of authority in the United States is reflected in Russian jokes as a change of the person said to urinate in Russian hallways. The key symbolic procedure where the president-elect is invested with authority is seen as "the moment when the microchip

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keys to the Russian house intercoms are handed over"[32] (a parody on the handover of the "nuclear briefcase"). In other versions of this joke, the Russians themselves present the key to the US president:

> People of Ryazan are ready to hand to Trump the symbolic key to the front doors of the city's dwellings.[33]

Why did the entrance halls become a symbol of the damage done by Obama? We might suggest a number of reasons.

Firstly, the state of these hallways (as well as the quality of the roadways) is one of the problems perceived as typically Russian. The communal entrance hall is a zone of both individual and collective responsibility; a resident of an apartment block perceives it as both a private space and a shared space. Maintaining it is traditionally problematic (Utekhin 2004:33); the residents do not want to invest time and effort in that common space. However, they want to see it well-kept and tidy. Thus the figure of a mock enemy who can be made responsible for the situation becomes very handy.

Secondly, the entrance hall is a space separating home from the street (the outer world). Within the loyalist discourse, Russia is metaphorically referred to as "home." Slogans suggesting that *Russia is our home* and *Russia is our common home* have been used at patriotic festivals and political events for decades, leading to the use of this metaphor to describe a situation where enemies from outside intend to barge into our home/Russia, bring their own order, and destroy our traditions. During a pro-Putin, "Anti-Maidan" public action in 2015,[34] one of the messages frequently seen on picket signs read: "Russia is my home, and Maidan is not allowed in."

While official propaganda suggests that the American president is causing harm on the macro-level of the economy, political affairs, and the like, folklore states the same harm on the micro-level of private homes. This difference of scale can be seen in the above examples: in state-supported media, the US president is accused of attempting to invade our country ("our home"), and the jokes, satirizing that message, imply he is encroaching upon the entrance halls leading to citizens' private flats. In international affairs, there's a "nuclear briefcase" with the codes enabling the missiles to be launched; in the world of the pro-Kremlin propaganda, there are American "demographic" or "climate" weapons; and in the world of folklore: dirty entrance halls and the codes giving access to them. Summarizing all of the above: within folklore, the proverbial entrance hall functions as a symbolic substitute for a gateway to the country as a whole. In other words, official propaganda is mocked in the vernacular discourse, though at first glance, they seem to be in perfect consonance.

Then the situation changes. In statements made in 2016, Trump spoke of respecting the Russian president and, when asked whether he would recognize Crimea as Russian and lift sanctions on Moscow, replied that this might be considered (Pager 2016). This stance offered both the Russian elites and ordinary citizens hope that international respect and recognition might be restored to them. During Autumn of 2016, Russian media promoted the idea that the results of the elections were very important to Russians: in November, Trump was mentioned in the state-sponsored media more often than Putin was (according to Integrum media collection service,[35] 165,306 and 146,317 times, respectively). The media fuss around the elections

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strengthened the image of the United States having influence over the lives of ordinary Russians.

After Trump's victory had been officially announced, Margarita Simonyan, the editor-in-chief of the pro-Kremlin TV channel *Russia Today*, declared on her Twitter feed that she was eager to "drive through Moscow with an American flag,"[36] and an activist of the loyalist National Liberation Movement, Maria Katasonova, shared photos of herself dressed in a T-shirt with portraits of Putin, Trump, and Le Pen. This was not just a sign of respect offered by the former haters of the United States, but a demonstrative destruction of the opposition "bad America/good Russia." Loyalists broke down this opposition offering open support to former enemies through these performative actions. In this way, Trump became not just a friend—he was appropriated. The change was reflected in the widespread transmission of #Trump_is_ours[37] (a reference to the slogan #Crimea_is_ours,[38] which was very popular among the supporters of the 2014 annexation).

As soon as he became "one of us," Trump—as is every "our" man—was recognized as someone in need of protection and support. This support manifested itself in the forms that have been commonly used in Russia to show support for the "friends of our country" since Soviet times. A collective demonstration took place in Obninsk on November 19, with an aim "to support the legally elected new president of the US" (Frantsuzova 2016). Trump's fans in Ryazan suggested in their petition[39] that a local road called 2nd Bezbozhnaya (2nd Unbeliever) Street should be renamed "Trump Street," because

> the name of the street—"Unbeliever"—runs contrary to Russian values and offends the feelings of the believers. And the recent winner of the US presidential elections, Donald Trump, is a big friend of Russia and a supporter of traditional values.[40]

Some of the jokes that appeared on November 7, the day before the official election results were announced, parodied the propaganda discourse and popular views concerning US influence on Russia, as well as the hopes that Trump would do good for Russia (rather than cause harm) by changing his mode of operation from that of a chief villain to that of a chief benefactor:

> Tomorrow the key problems of our country will be solved! Our economy will start growing, our rouble will grow stronger and Russia will rise again! Tomorrow Obama is leaving for good!!![41]

The person who is supposed to make that statement is a presumed "loyalist citizen" (like those from Obninsk or Ryazan) who supports the current political worldview and would never criticize the government for internal problems, but would rather hope for the arrival of an external benefactor:

> Kids in a Bashkir village walk to school with axes, because there are no buses, but there are plenty of wolves. I hope Trump wins and organises the buses![42]

> Trump hasn't yet become a president, but it is already warmer in Russia! I feel old Donald will lift us from our knees and our life will be better at last![43]

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After the first few days of intense circulation of the jokes about Obama/Trump and Russian entrance halls, and after an endless flow of jokes portraying paroxysms of political delight by loyalist citizens, the role of the Chief Benefactor became a permanent fixture of modern folklore. This model was used not only on social media and in Putin's speeches but also at protest rallies. At one of the rallies against the city transport fare increase in Saint Petersburg (November 19, 2016), one could see an ironic slogan, *Trump, save us!* The protesters demanded that the local government put a stop to fare increases, though they tried to disguise that demand as a complaint to the higher authorities, parodying the slogan *Putin, help us!*, which was highly popular among the protesters putting forward social demands in 2015–2016.[44] Since the media of the time was devoting more attention to Trump than to the Russian president, Trump ended up replacing Putin in this ironic slogan.

Propositional Meaning c: *"Loyalist citizens" cannot figure out whether the United States is friend or foe*

The unexpected change of rhetoric on the part of the politicians and pro-governmental media—the performance of an about-face from their habitual anti-American stance to one of outright approval—gave birth to a series of jokes, which ridiculed the excessive political flexibility of the officials and loyalist citizens. Twenty-one percent of the jokes ridiculed the assumption that these groups were, on the one hand, quite ready to take the opposite stance, but were, on the other hand, unable to do it quickly enough to stay abreast of the ever-changing agenda:

> It's tough times for the Russian propaganda. They'll have to find someone who is going to urinate in our entrance halls, now that Trump is our friend.[45]

> The papers say, "In Yekaterinburg the roof above one of the floors of a defense plant has collapsed due to the heavy snow load." I am confused as to who is to blame—is it still Obama, or Trump?[46]

People who share the jokes commenting on this situation are mimicking a person who is unable to quickly understand where the media party line will now go, but who is, nevertheless, ready to agree with it anyway.

This concept of a "loyalist Russian" who is ready to quickly change their political attitudes is actively mocked in jokes playing with the notion of the anti-Obama car stickers popular in 2014–2016. A huge number of texts emerged on November 8, 2016, joking about a cautious Russian, who, while not in any way certain that the current political affections are going to hold, is trying to decide what kind of sticker they need, anti-Trump or pro-Trump:

> Some Russian car owners, unable to decide whether to buy a sticker saying "Trump is ours" or the one with "Trump is a shmuck" [*Trump—chmo*!], have bought an "Our shmuck" [*nashe chmo*] sticker instead and are sitting down to wait for future changes.[47]

As a result of such musings, the stereotypical loyalist citizen arrives at a compromise: they leave the decision of whether to approve of or criticize the new American president for the future but are still treating that figure as an influential agent. This

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stability of function is especially clear in one of the versions of this joke in which the car owner chooses a sticker "Trump is our shmuck!" that is built upon the popular formula "X is our everything," which, in turn, follows the catchphrase by Russian poet and literary critic Apollon Grigoryev, "Pushkin is our everything," coined in 1859 (2008). The jokes about the doubts of a loyalist citizen are in fact acting as metatexts, describing the situation of poles being reversed in the key opposition of the widespread political worldview (which may be verbalized as *we are the victims* and *the United States is the aggressor*).

So what causes the anxiety of the Russian audience? Russian Trumplore is focused on three base meanings. These key elements of political worldview form the idea of the world-as-it-should-be, which allows the audience to judge and evaluate various political events. The discrepancy between the ideal and the observed reality forms propositional meanings of the humorous texts (see Table 1). Yet their power (as measured by the number of reposts) varies: some propositional meanings are more important than others and therefore generate more popular texts.

The first base meaning assumes that the ideal president has to have certain qualities, yet neither Trump nor Putin conforms to this standard. These jokes gain less than 10 percent of the reposts. The lack of reaction seemingly correlates with the lack of a developed ideal of a democratically elected president in the Russian political worldview (which instead is centered around the image of a strong leader who cares about simple folk); consequently, a breach of the democratic ideal does not produce a significant vernacular response.

More important is the second base meaning: the need for legitimate (competitive, transparent) elections, which—according to the opposition—are absent from Russian life. This topic touches upon the interests of the liberal audience that is angling for urgent reforms, and for that reason, such texts are reposted and commented on more frequently.

Yet the lion's share of the reposts (70 percent of the corpus) falls to the jokes using a different type of base meaning—the idea that Russia and the United States exist in a state of constant competition and strive to influence each other's internal and international policies. This relic of Cold War ideology was reinvented by the loyalist mass media—and consequently, protest folklore sets out to mock both the imagery itself and the loyalist citizens who support it.

The majority of the jokes ridicule the super-strong position taken by the Russian president in the media. Despite being powerful enough to pretend to influence a foreign state, the Russian authorities are unable to cope with local everyday problems like road maintenance, preferring instead to blame an external agent. In the jokes in question, this agent is personalized—even bad weather becomes the responsibility of a malicious person or a group. Under the circumstances, a direct complaint to the authorities rarely seems to help to solve the problem.

Conclusion

Researchers of jokelore dealing with totalitarian and authoritarian environments normally describe the role taken by jokes as "sublimation" (giving an outlet to fears or social discontent through folklore; see Dundes and Banc 1986; Dundes and Hauschild

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1983), “resistance” (opposing the regime through folklore; see Scott 1990; Thurston 1991:541–62; Stokker 1996, 1997), or “self-defense” (Obrdlik 1942; Wierzbicka 1990; Moser-Rath 1972–1973).

These three approaches are criticized in works that can be united into a “theory of substitution,” developed by Oring (2004). He postulated that dissemination of humorous folklore in totalitarian and authoritarian societies was neither an act of symbolic resistance nor a way to sublimate one’s aggression toward the authorities, but rather a *substitute* for real political actions. Symbolic resistance theory, developed by James Scott, sees jokes (representing “hidden transcripts”) told in the offstage space as a vent for sharing attitudes that one cannot risk expressing otherwise (1990). Oring, on the other hand, argues that, for example, Soviet citizens had options for directly addressing the regime or discussing it (through writing letters to various state authorities, lodging official complaints, and offering unofficial laments in the privacy of their homes) and therefore did not need to sublimate or to disguise their critical thoughts by resorting to jokes (2004). According to Oring, a Soviet citizen jested because they were barred from engaging in actions that might have influenced the political situation (2004). A joke allowed someone to generate a controlled symbolic reality that was impenetrable by the regime’s agents and, at the same time, to invite into this reality those people whom one trusted. Alexei Yurchak has a similar opinion on the matter: he suggests that joking allowed people to find some comfort in the late phase of the Soviet era when the very idea of fighting the regime seemed ridiculous (1997).

In the case of Russian Trumplore, we cannot interpret the jokes disseminated by the opposition as an act of sublimation because they name their targets directly. On the other hand, Trumplore cannot be treated as symbolic resistance since there is no defined oppressed group that is using it to resist its oppressors—the protest is directed against state propaganda and its supporters among the loyalist majority rather than against the regime as such. Moreover, the key texts of this corpus are actually used to draw the line between “us” and “them,” the latter being, on the one hand, the supporters of the official worldview and, on the other hand, the “social others” who actually do perform acts directed against the daily order of things (like urinating in the entrance halls). Trumplore, therefore, is not only a way of building a network of politically like-minded people (serving as an identity marker), but also a way to form an illusion of political action, since the situation cannot be worked on directly—a “substitution,” in Oring’s terms (2004).

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Notes

1. The initial post appeared on Twitter, June 25, 2015, https://twitter.com/pchikov/status/614084449001713664. All jokes in this article have been translated from Russian by Alexandra Arkhipova, Daria Radchenko, and Anna Kirzyuk.

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2. "Top 5 Jokes Putin Made during SPIEF-2017 That You May Have Missed," *Sputnik*, June 3, 2017, https://sputniknews.com/politics/201706031054279825-putin-spief-jokes/.

3. In this instance, the word "muzhik" bears a slightly familial connotation, but not a derogatory meaning or implications of "simplicity" or "rusticality," which in other situations can be embedded in this word.

4. Post on Twitter, November 8, 2016, https://mobile.twitter.com/Belyaaaeva_/status/796223626932588544.

5. The methodology is explained in Arkhipova et al. (2017). The project "Monitoring of Contemporary Folklore" was started in 2015 at the Laboratory of Theoretical Folkloristics at the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration to study the dynamics of folkloric reactions to current events (the production and transmission of various newslore genres—jokes, visual jokes, rumors, etc.). The research includes research done with both social media and fieldwork.

6. The Russian social media market is dominated by two local platforms: Odnoklassniki and Vkontakte, the latter being modeled after Facebook but with significant add-ons like audio and video sharing options. Facebook and Twitter are predominantly popular in large cities (particularly within a more internationally thinking audience aged 25–50) and are considered to be more "free-thinking" than local media, whereas local social media dominates over 80 percent of social media usage in Russia and is also popular in former Soviet states.

7. This approach has certain limitations, which are discussed in Arkhipova et al. (2017). These limitations include lack of access to private web pages and social network profiles and possible bot activity (which, for the most part, is eliminated in research).

8. Twitter, November 9, 2016, https://twitter.com/BuzzFeedRU/status/796210077141258241.

9. Twitter, November 8, 2016, https://twitter.com/KermlinRussia/status/796081521392287745.

10. Twitter, November 8, 2016, https://twitter.com/Bombay_Dak/status/791240339076026368.

11. Twitter, November 8, 2016, https://twitter.com/Fake_MIDRF/status/796361478592991233.

12. For example, Rodgers (2009).

13. It is important to note that the notion of opposition here embraces a number of various political phenomena, from officially established parties and movements that oppose the state policy, to volunteer movements (for example, in support of political prisoners), to people who are not involved in any systemic political action but are active in publicly criticizing governmental policy via social media and taking part in public protest actions.

14. Twitter, November 10, 2016, https://twitter.com/StalinGulag/status/796272315067723777.

15. Twitter, November 10, 2016, https://twitter.com/Buddy_Judge/status/796811921425108992.

16. Twitter, November 8, 2016, https://mobile.twitter.com/Belyaaaeva_/status/796223626932588544.

17. Twitter, November 8, 2016, https://twitter.com/StalinGulag/status/796159349613883393.

18. Twitter, November 9, 2016, https://twitter.com/ANAKOYHER/status/796277231098150912.

19. Twitter, November 8, 2016, https://twitter.com/Fake_MIDRF/status/796208458777378817.

20. Twitter, November 9, 2016, https://twitter.com/cot_olginonet/status/796247740275654656.

21. Twitter, November 8, 2016, https://twitter.com/nourlnews/status/796260867117645824?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw.

22. Twitter, January 22, 2017, https://twitter.com/gun1man/status/823239860198768643.

23. Twitter, November 8, 2016, https://twitter.com/romangromadskiy/status/795980345925599232.

24. Twitter, November 8, 2016, https://twitter.com/_Josef_Mengele/status/796064410049593345?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw.

25. Levada Opinion Poll Center, press release, March 7, 2017, https://www.levada.ru/2017/03/07/samye-ostrye-problemy/.

26. A genre of visual internet folklore. Also called demotivational posters, they initially parodied motivational posters and consisted of photographs typical of motivational posters with pessimistic or cynical texts below them, but later they moved to a broader variety of topics.

27. For example, this joke is used as a headline for a Livejournal post criticizing the health system (September 19, 2015, https://miggerrtis.livejournal.com/773164.html).

28. Field observations by the authors in Moscow, 2015.

29. Twitter, November 12, 2016, https://twitter.com/DonaldTrumpRF/status/797393739937447936.

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30. Twitter, November 9, 2016, https://twitter.com/Shulz/status/796261568119980032.

31. Twitter, November 10, 2016, https://twitter.com/anekdotru/statuses/796780982854676480.

32. Twitter, November 10, 2016, https://twitter.com/DonaldTrumpRF/status/796984866642477056.

33. Twitter, November 8, 2016, https://twitter.com/VictorKvert2008/status/796100724136493056.

34. The Russian "Anti-Maidan" movement has appeared as a counter to the "Euromaidan"—a colloquial term for the 2014 Ukrainian revolution, which started with public political activity on Maidan Nezalezhnosti (a square in the center of Kiev). The movement has aimed to protect Russia from so-called "color revolutions" (a series of revolutions that took place in several post-Soviet countries and in the Balkans, allegedly organized and supported by international agents) by actively supporting Putin's policy.

35. https://integrum.ru/.

36. Twitter, November 9, 2016, https://twitter.com/m_simonyan/status/796281481874329600.

37. https://twitter.com/hashtag/%D1%82%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BC%D0%BF%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%88.

38. https://twitter.com/search?q=%23%D0%BA%D1%80%D1%8B%D0%BC%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%88&src=typed_query.

39. Change.org petition, November 11, 2016, https://u.to/d23rFw (accessed March 27, 2020).

40. Twitter, November 7, 2016, https://twitter.com/StalinGulag/status/795586243967025152.

41. Twitter, November 8, 2016, https://twitter.com/StalinGulag/status/795933131232702464.

42. Twitter, November 9, 2016, https://twitter.com/StalinGulag/status/796279116408426496.

43. Twitter, November 9, 2016, https://twitter.com/stalingulag/status/796279116408426496?lang=tr.

44. Field observations of "monitoring of contemporary folklore" (over 100 rallies and pickets in 2015–2016).

45. Twitter, November 9, 2016, https://twitter.com/antonsemakin/status/796346765234622464.

46. Twitter, November 9, 2016, https://twitter.com/twitted_knitter/status/796281053358895104.

47. Twitter, November 9, 2016, https://twitter.com/andykrim65/status/796432544388546567.

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