

# HUMOUR AS A COMMUNICATION TOOL: THE CASE OF NEW YEAR'S EVE TELEVISION IN RUSSIA

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## Abstract

Humour entertains, but can also be used for propaganda purposes if it reaches a large audience and influences their emotional response to specific topics. The article focuses on humour as a comprehensive concept: elements of humour that serve a propagandistic function, including shared knowledge, the target audience, the perception of humour, the functions of humour, and the communication process, are identified and analysed in New Year's Eve programming on Russian television.

**Keywords**—*communication, functions of humour, humour, media settings, perception of humour, shared knowledge*

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## Introduction

In 2017, the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence published the study *Stratcom Laughs. In search of an analytical framework*.<sup>1</sup> The main goal of the study was to elaborate an analytical tool that could be used to gain an understanding of how humour is constructed and communicated in political settings. The proposed tool could assist in distinguishing humour that fulfils the functions of entertainment from humour that also contributes to certain political goals, thus supporting the narratives directed by the Russian government, intentionally or not. This study caused a wide range of reactions, from appreciation of its innovative methodology to negative, highly politicised comments from Russian authorities and the entertainment industry. At the very least, the richness and diversity of the debate on the main findings of the study highlighted the potential of the approach. The scholars who produced the study brought to light the process of designing and communicating humour for different purposes, including propaganda and counter-propaganda.

This article capitalises on the findings and conclusions of the initial study and expands the theoretical aspects of humour that were not sufficiently presented in the original report. Additionally, a new case study is introduced to illustrate the function of the proposed analytical tool.

Although our work focuses on humour as a tool in Russian propaganda, we assume that both the theoretical framework and the methodology used in the empirical analysis can be generalised and are valid for other socio-political and cultural settings. We do, however, acknowledge that there is a variety of culture-specific features of Russian humour (just as there are specific features characterising humour of other cultures and communities). A closer analysis of those culture-specific features will be the focus of a different study.

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<sup>1</sup> Žaneta Ozoliņa, Ivars Austers, Solvita Denisa-Liepniece, Jurgis Škilters, Sigita Struberga, and Maksym Kyiak, *Stratcom Laughs: In search of an analytical framework*, (NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2017).

This article begins with a short presentation of the main components constituting humour, including shared knowledge, the target audience, the perception of humour, the functions of humour, and its communication process.<sup>2</sup> It will also introduce new aspects of the concept of humour, relevant for honing the analytical tool. In the second part of this article, we use the tool to analyse New Year's Eve broadcasts on Russian television. Cabaret-style shows broadcast on holidays, and especially on New Year's Eve, are a deeply-rooted tradition in Russian society, going back to the Soviet era.<sup>3</sup> These programmes 'offered an opportunity to explicitly dramatize and reimagine the relationship between state and citizens, cultural authorities and audiences, in heightened, festive setting'.<sup>4</sup> This framework has been further developed in recent years, as political humour has become an integral part of these shows. We focus on analysing jokes aimed at the most important international events, foreign policies, and key international actors of the year in review. We assess the content of the programmes in order to identify how humour is used to denigrate the Western world. In the final part we draw conclusions from the case study and improve the analytical tool.

### **Humour: some theoretical considerations**

In contemporary research, humour is considered a cross-disciplinary field involving such disciplines as psychology, communication science, political science, and cognitive science. While studies of humour from the perspective of these several disciplines inevitably overlap to some extent, there is substantial diversity in terms of both theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches. We propose an open and inclusive approach<sup>5</sup> in terms of theoretical background. Further, our framework assumes that humour is not only entertaining, funny, satirical, and joke-laden, but is also among the foundations of group identity, and can therefore be a tool for strategic communication. In some cases, humour can be used as a tool for the latent manipulation of groups whose members share certain types of knowledge (e.g. have a shared past).

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2 For a detailed explanation of the analytical framework see: *StratCom Laughs: In Search of an Analytical Framework* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2017), pp. 6–45, 140–56.

3 The study does not intend to compare Russian New Years' eve programmes with those of other countries as cultural traditions differ.

4 Christine E. Evans, *Between Truth and Time: A History of Soviet Central Television* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2016), p. 82.

5 This article is an extension of the study *Stratcom Laughs*.

There are several prominent ways of defining humour:

- In *psychoanalytic* traditions humour is often defined as aggression, where telling a joke is taken as an attack on another party.<sup>6</sup>
- In *arousal-safety theory* humour is defined as a tension-resolver. To perceive a joke is to perceive tension between two co-existing meanings; the tension is resolved once the meaning of the joke is discovered.<sup>7</sup>
- When considered within a *frame-shifting model*, humour can be also defined as an *incongruity* between two different and possibly incompatible frames of knowledge.<sup>8</sup> This model can also be applied to a variety of other semantic phenomena such as metaphor or polysemy.<sup>9</sup> Seana Coulson explains that 'Frame-shifting is semantic reorganisation that occurs when incoming information is inconsistent with an initial interpretation, and conceptual blending is a set of cognitive operations for combining frames from different domains.'<sup>10</sup>
- Humour also seems to involve *analogical reasoning*: something can be perceived as humorous because of the analogy between different (surprising, inconsistent, or incompatible) situations.<sup>11</sup>

Although these definitions highlight different aspects of humour, they all presuppose shared knowledge between the author or sender and the audience or recipient. Humour is more multifaceted and more context-dependent than any single definition allows. It is thus possible that humour has some aspect of (a) aggression (although this is not always the case) and (b) tension-resolution, but is more likely to involve (c) blending different frames of knowledge according to (d) the principle of analogy. Further, (c) and (d) are possible only because of shared knowledge. Humorous messages are subversive in the sense that they are perceived as less offensive than the same content expressed in a non-humorous way.<sup>12</sup> However, use of a subversive buffer is not unlimited: if the message is radically inconsistent with the attitudes or values of the listener, then it is likely to be rejected and can result in anger or a breakdown of communication.

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6 Dolf Zillmann and Joanne R. Cantor, 'Directionality of transitory dominance as a communication variable affecting humour appreciation', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, No 24, (1972): 191–98.

7 Foubelo M. Yus, 'Humour and the search for relevance', *Journal of Pragmatics*, 35, (2003): 1314. Quoted in David Ritchie, 'Frame-shifting in humour and irony', *Metaphor and Symbol*, 20 (4), (2005): 275–94.

8 Viktor Raskin, *Semantic mechanisms of humour* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1985).

9 Seana Coulson, *Semantic leaps: Frame-shifting and conceptual blending in meaning construction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Ritchie, 'Frame-shifting'.

10 Coulson, *Semantic leaps*, p. xii.

11 Diedre Gentner, and Linsey A. Smith, 'Analogical learning and reasoning' in *The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Psychology*, ed. D. Reisberg. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013).

12 Thomas E. Ford, 'Effects of sexist humour on tolerance of sexist events', *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 26, (2000): 1094–1107; Ritchie, 'Frame-shifting'.

Even in such cases, shared knowledge is a precondition for interpreting the message. Humour is inherently social in the sense that it activates one's sense of belonging to a community. The social aspect of humour derives from shared knowledge among the actors and components of humorous communication, such as laughter. Humour is inherently social and has a communicative role that is always person-oriented.<sup>13</sup>

By studying various concepts of humour it is possible to identify a series of five steps that can be used to analyse the phenomenon. The first step is to identify **shared knowledge**, 'the initial and mandatory domain of knowledge [...] enabling the interpretation of jokes'.<sup>14</sup> The second is to identify the **target audience**. The third step is to analyse how the audience **perceives the humour**. The fourth step is to identify the relevant **functions of humour** from the long list of functions that 'represent a diversity of domains where humour has the greatest capacity for impact [...]'.<sup>15</sup> The last step is to consider the way in which **humour is communicated**.

**Shared knowledge** is the most important factor enabling recognition of humour (whether or not one agrees with it). Shared knowledge (worldviews, beliefs, practices, assumptions, conventions, and skills) may be implicit (we are not aware of some specific piece of knowledge that determines the way we reason) or explicit (we are aware and can verbalise this knowledge). Furthermore, sometimes shared knowledge is relatively universal or culture-independent (the knowledge prerequisite for humour is not related to some shared social or cultural past). More frequently, however, the knowledge prerequisite for humour is culture-dependent (e.g. a shared socio-cultural and/or political past). This type of shared knowledge (either implicit or explicit) is most efficient in political contexts and can be used as a tool for strategic communication.

Humour that invigorates emotional attachment can be applied to both individuals and groups. Certain characteristics should be taken into consideration when analysing the **target audience**, such as the size of the audience and the age and sex of its members, the strength of the ties between members and existing vertical hierarchies, the degree of dependence exhibited among members of the group, its moral standards (restrictive, permissive), and the impact of existing political and religious structures.

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13 Robert R. Provine, 'Laughing, tickling, and the evolution of speech and self', *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 13(6), (2004): 215–18.

14 *Stratcom Laughs*, p. 12.

15 *Ibid*, p. 29.

Shared knowledge has a direct impact on the **perception of humour** by individuals, but more importantly by the groups to which they belong. According to Clark, *culture-dependent* shared knowledge consists of two subgroups. First, culture-dependent shared knowledge consists in part of *inside information* (mutually shared by the members of a community—Group A); this knowledge typically includes shared information related to nationality, religion, political knowledge, culture or subculture, residence, education, age, and language, thus creating the sense of *us*. Second, culture-dependent shared knowledge also consists in part of *outside information* (mutually shared knowledge by Group A—*us*, about some other Group B—*them*; this knowledge is Group A's assumed knowledge about Group B's inside information).<sup>16</sup> The dynamic between *us* (in-group) and *them* (out-group) directly impacts the perception of humour: an event that portrays an out-group member in a substantially more negative light than an in-group member will be perceived as more humorous.

Identifying the **functions of humour** in a particular context helps us to understand the impact of humour on the targeted individuals or groups. The list of functions enumerates what aims can be achieved, what messages have been constructed, and what communication tools have been selected in order to reach a target audience. Among the most important functions are the following: knowledge accumulation and problem-solving, persuasion and strategic-image construction, cultural interaction, aggression and defence/offence, belonging and social balance, stress relief, expressing or suppressing political freedom, support and justification of political leadership and agenda setting, weakening the opponent via soft forms of communication, such as the delegitimisation of leaders. The impact of these functions depends on the extent of and perception of shared knowledge within the target group.

Analysing the functions of humour provides guidance for organising the communication process. The communication of humour consists of four elements: the content of the message (and its level of subversiveness), the delivery of the message (through visual and behavioural codes), the messenger (either an individual or a group), and the setting (in this case, television programmes).<sup>17</sup> The communication of humour is 'a situation-dependent, multidimensional structure containing a message that depends on internal communicative processes such as reference-establishing and coordinating, but also on a variety of media settings and situational features constraining and

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<sup>16</sup> Herbert H. Clark, *Using language* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012): 101, 103.  
<sup>17</sup> *Stratcom Laughs*, p. 33.

transforming the impact of the humour'.<sup>18</sup>

To summarise, we have identified five main components of humour—shared knowledge, the target audience, the perception of humour, the functions of humour, and the way in which humour is communicated. In order to test how this analytical framework can be applied, we analyse the New Year's Eve cabaret shows broadcast on Russian television in the next section.

### **New Year's Eve television shows in Russia: applying the analytical tool**

The programme chosen for this case study is *Novogodnij parad zvezd* or *The New Year's Parade of Stars* (hereafter—NYPS) broadcast on the Rossiya 1 [Россия 1] television channel. According to *Mediascope*, a large company that provides businesses with diverse statistical data, for the last three years *The New Year's Parade of Stars* was the second most viewed programme in Russia during the final week of the year (right after the President's New Year Address).<sup>19</sup> In 2016 Rossiya 1 was the most-watched television channel in Russia, with an audience share of 12.9%.<sup>20</sup>

The period of analysis for this case study is December 2012 to December 2017, covering six years of New Year's Eve programming on the Rossiya 1 channel. We made this choice because a number of international events influencing Russia's position towards its neighbours Ukraine and the Baltic States, and towards the West in general took place within this period (*Euromaidan*, the Ukraine crisis, sanctions against Russia, the deterioration of the US-Russia relationship), making it possible to monitor whether and how these events were reflected in the programmes analysed. We focus on a thematic analysis of constructed narratives, exploring three main components in the representation of the message: how the performance was carried out (including visual aspects), the content of the performance, and the narrative forms used. The results are

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 38.

<sup>19</sup> According to *Mediascope*, the most watched broadcast in Russia during the week 26.12.2016–31.12.2016 was *Novogodnee obraščenie Prezidenta Rossijskoj Federacii V. Putina* [President Vladimir Putin's New Year's Address], broadcast on Russia's central television channels with an audience share of 57.3% (29.8% on Pervyj Kanal and 27.5% on Rossiya 1), followed by *Novogodnij parad zvezd* [The New Year's Parade of Stars, hereafter—NYPS] on Rossiya 1 with an audience share of 22.0%. [Mediascope TV Index survey for the period 26.12.2016–31.12.2016](#). [Accessed 05 April 2017]. In the preceding year, the most watched broadcast during the week 28.12.2015–03.01.2016 was *President Putin's New Year's Address* with an audience share of 59.4% (35.4% on Pervyj Kanal and 26% on Rossiya 1). NYPS obtained an audience share of 19.8%. At the end of 2014 the President's speech attracted an audience share of 60.5% (32.2% and 28.3%), while NYPS ranked second with an audience share of 24.3%. [Mediascope TV Index survey for the period 29.12.2014–04.01.2015](#). [Accessed 05 April 2017]

<sup>20</sup> *Federalno'e agencstvo po počati i massovym kommunikacijam, Televidenie v Rosii v 2016 godu Sostojanie, tendencii i perspektivy razvitiija* [Television in Russia in 2016. Layout, Tendencies and the Perspectives for Development], from the website of the [Federal Agency for Press and Mass Communications](#). [Accessed 4 December 2017]

presented using the five analytical steps described above—shared knowledge, the target audience, the perception of humour, the functions of humour, and the way in which humour is communicated. These steps allow us to identify how a particular media outlet becomes an instrument of specific foreign policy tactics used by the Russian government, how actors on the international stage are portrayed, and how the humour used either embeds certain actions within a larger cultural context or, alternatively, tries to ground particular issues in a much narrower context than the one in which they should be considered. Our main aim is to describe the content of the message and the forms of communication used to reach the intended audience. Information about the audience serves as background for a deeper understanding of messages and forms of communication chosen by the communicator.

### *Shared knowledge*

Television in Russia today can be considered one of the most important mechanisms supporting the political regime.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the extent and impact of Russian television's activities is remarkably wide. As Russian cultural expert and film critic Daniil Dondurei has accurately expressed, it 'holistically shapes the content of human capital, thereby actively influencing various areas of people's lives. [...] This institution is an unprecedented one, when we take into consideration the number of functions it performs, including the creation and popularisation of the basic concepts, and the meaning of life',<sup>22</sup> as well as its access to a wide audience. Despite television's loss of its former monopoly on home entertainment, it is still the most accessible mass information medium in Russia.<sup>23</sup>

The state has an almost unlimited capacity to influence these processes as it governs the media in general and television assets in particular, and owns the TV network infrastructure, as well as some channels,<sup>24</sup> including Rossiya 1. This channel was established in 1991, when the government had to react to structural changes in the media space. Today it is one of the largest national channels in Russia and is part of the *Vserossijskoj gosudarstvennoj televizionnoj radioveščatel'noj*

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21 Ilya Kiriya and Elena Degtereva, 'Russian TV Market: Between State Supervision, Commercial Logic and Simulacrum of Public Service', in *Central European Journal of Communication*, 1 (2010), ISSN 1899-2101, p. 37; Stepan Goncharov and Denis Volkov, *Rossijskij media-landšaft: televidenie, pressa, Internet* [Russian Media Landscape: Television, Press, Internet], from the website of the [Levada Centre](#) for sociological research. [Accessed 20 April 2017]

22 'TV formatiruet Žizn', Vera Zverjeva's interview with Daniil Dondurei, from the webjournal *Iskusstvo Kino*, № 10, 2014. [Accessed 30 April 2017]

23 *Federal'noe agentstvo po pečati*, 2015. [Accessed 17 September 2016]

24 Sigitia Struberga, 'Case Study: Late-Night Shows on Pervyj Kanal and the Discreditation of Western Political Leaders', in *Stratcom Laughs*, p. 48.

*kompanii* [All-Russian State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company]. Its broadcast range covers almost all of the territory of the Russian Federation, while the international versions—Rossija in the former Soviet Union including the Baltic States, and RTR-Planeta in Western Europe, North America, the Middle East, North Africa, and China—provide access to secondary target audiences.<sup>25</sup>

In addition to the news, other popular genres include TV shows, feature films, and entertainment programmes. The content of Russian television can be described as generally entertainment-oriented, but increasingly addressing ideological and political themes.<sup>26</sup> To depict how pro-Kremlin discourse is created and distributed within the shows, it is necessary to highlight a number of specific communication techniques used by the state-owned TV channels in Russia. Among the most visible are blurring the lines between truth, half-truth, and untruth, and between fact and fiction; and defining and identifying the (negative) *other* while simultaneously creating a positive self-image.<sup>27</sup>

Humour has always had a political dimension in Russia.<sup>28</sup> During the Soviet period, the regime considered it a means to influence the masses. Television was an effective platform for achieving those goals. In turn, low-brow humour used by ordinary people became a valve through which they expressed their uncensored attitudes toward and ideas about the regime.<sup>29</sup> During the post-Soviet period the practices of the Soviet regime were picked up by political campaigners and adapted to fit the new conditions. According to Maria Tagangajeva St. Gallen, ‘many critics of the Putin regime have described the expansion of the entertainment industry as an attempt to demotivate Russians away from political activism. By telling jokes, Russia’s humorous television shows transmit the core values and views of the state system’.<sup>30</sup>

25 ‘O telekanale’ [About the TV channel], From the Rossija website.

26 Kiriya and Degtereva, ‘Russian TV Market’: 44.

27 Edward Lucas and Peter Pomeranzen, ‘Winning the Information War. Techniques and Counter-strategies to Russian Propaganda in Central and Eastern Europe’, Center for European Policy Analysis, August 2016; Brian P. Cotter, ‘Russkiy Mir’, *Per Concordiam: Journal of European Security and Defence Studies*. Special Edition: Countering Russian Propaganda. (2016): 32 (30–35); Žaneta Ozoliņa, Gunda Reire, Solvita Denisa-Liepniece, Arturs Kvesko, and Sīgita Struberga, ‘Euro-Atlantic values and Russia’s strategic political communication in the Euro-Atlantic Space’ (NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2016).

28 *Russkij političeskij fol’klor. Issledovanija i publikacii* [Russian political folklore. Research and publications], ed. A. Pančenko, (Moscow, Novoe izdatel’stvo: 2013); Maria Tagangaeva, ‘Political Humour on Russian Television’, *Russian Analytical Digest*, № 126, 10 April 2013: 11.

29 Tagangajeva, ‘Political Humor’.

30 *Ibid.*

Shared cultural memory and specific allusions are used to achieve transference of cultural, social, and political codes that require knowledge of the Soviet and post-Soviet social structures, and of the accompanying style of linguistic expression. No less important is the conservation of the former Soviet way of thinking and the pro-Russian sentiments of the audience.<sup>31</sup> These sentiments are tethered to the idea of a 'Russian World' as a factor unifying Russian speakers around the globe, regardless of any other identities they may have. Moreover, common historical memory and an understanding of social structure based on the elements of the Soviet system are the common ground upon which the idea of the 'Russian World' is built. These unifying elements—the shared memories, rituals, and traditions that combine Soviet and modern aspects of social reality—are nourished and maintained via different forms of communication. One of the most important rituals inherited from the Soviet period is a particular way of celebrating the New Year, based in traditions mostly produced by the Soviet regime.

In Russia, the New Year celebration is considered the central and most important holiday of the entire year. According to the *Levada Centre*, an NGO conducting sociological research in Russia, when asked to name their most important holiday 83% of the Russian population named the New Year's celebration. The next most important celebrations were personal birthdays (44 %) and Victory Day on the 9<sup>th</sup> of May (38 %).<sup>32</sup> Similar trends can also be found in other post-Soviet societies,<sup>33</sup> and among those emigrants and their descendants in different parts of the world whose origins are rooted in the Soviet cultural space.<sup>34</sup>

This is not surprising, as the now iconic NYE celebration was introduced during the Great Purge<sup>35</sup> with the intention of uprooting the Christian Christmas. Not

31 Marlene Laruelle, 'The "Russian World": Russia's Soft Power and Geopolitical Imagination', Center on Global Interests, May 2015; Anna Klyueva and Anna Mikhaylova (2017), 'Building the Russian World: Cultural Diplomacy of the Russian Language and Cultural Identity', *JOMEC Journal* 11:127–43; Idil Osman, ed., 'Diaspora beyond Nationalism'; Orysia Lutsevych, 'The Long Arm of Russian "Soft" Power', *Atlantic Council*, 4 May 2016.

32 *Ežegodnik Obsčestvennoe Mnenie* [The Yearbook of Public Opinion], (2016), p. 264. [Accessed 02 May 2017].

33 For example, when asked to list the most important festivities of the year in Latvia, 69 % of the population named the New Year's celebration, followed by Christmas (64 %) and Midsummer (46%) according to 'DNB Latvijas barometrs: vairākums iedzīvotāju būtu gatavi aizstāvēt Latviju no ieinaidniekiem', [Most Latvians Would be Ready to Protect Latvia from its Enemies], Luminor website, 17 November 2015. [Accessed 14 May 2018].

34 However, in Ukraine 74% of the population consider the New Year to be among the most beloved festivities together with Easter (81%) and Christmas (78%) in 'Samim popul'arnym oficial'nym prazdnikom sredi ukraincev javljaetsja Passxa' [The Most Popular Official Celebration for Ukrainians is Easter], Information Agency UNIAN, 29 April 2016. [Accessed 03 May 2017]

35 For example, Maria Belousova said of the Russian-speaking diaspora in the United States that 'these Russian speakers share an attachment to Russian/Soviet culture and traditions and these customs serve to unite them into social networks in their new home' in Maria Belousova, 'The Russian Diaspora in the US', *Russian Analytical Digest*, № 107, 27 January 2012: 2.

36 The Great Purge or the Great Terror was a campaign of repressions and persecutions in the Soviet Union led by Joseph Stalin. It occurred from 1936 to 1938. The estimated number of executed during this period is 1.2–1.7 million people (data vary from source to source).

unrelated, 'the use of the symbolic capital of the New Year's celebration started during the modernisation period of Stalinism, [...] whereas a festive canon was created at the beginning of the 1960s'.<sup>36</sup> It 'became a civic, celebratory holiday, one that was ritually emphasised by the ticking of the clock, champagne, the hymn of the Soviet Union, the exchange of gifts, and big parties'.<sup>37</sup> This was accompanied by a number of traditional activities for children, such as waiting for *Ded Moroz* (Grandfather Frost, the Soviet version of Santa), masquerading, and playing games around a decorated spruce. Other rituals, established some years later, include the *President's New Year's Address* broadcast on television five minutes before midnight and the cabaret-style entertainment programmes that are shown on Russian television all evening long on New Year's Eve.<sup>38</sup> 'New Year, more effective than any propaganda,<sup>39</sup> carried out the task of merging age, social, political and national differences'.<sup>40</sup> As Rilkin, Kruglova, and Savras point out, this celebration with its attendant rituals is the most important method of creating 'collective bodies':<sup>41</sup> 'while maintaining a private festive aura at home, it also allowed for each individual to share a common experience of the passing of the year, the eternal circle of nature, and a distancing from intense socio-ideological pressure. This celebration like no other contributed to the creation of Soviet society as a flat family'.<sup>42</sup> Many of these rituals have become part of the modern version of this iconic celebration in Russia and among Russian-speakers who share a common historical memory of the Soviet times. The event is a uniquely significant institutionalised festivity, during which expressions of collective memory are realised, leading to the expression of great emotion.

36 Tat'jana Anatol'evna Kruglova and Natal'ja Vladimirovna Savras, 'Novij god kak prazdničnyi ritual sovetško-vo epoxi' [The New Year as Celebrative Ritual of the Soviet Era], *Izvestija Yralskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta*. Ser. 2, Gumanitarnye nauki, 2010. № 2 (76): 7.

37 Emily Tamkin, 'How Soviets Came to Celebrate New Year's Like Christmas (and Why Russians Still Do)', *Foreign Policy*, 30 December 2016. [Accessed 15 May 2017].

38 From its inception in 1962, the programme *Goluboj ogoňek* [The Blue Flame] was transmitted as a musical entertainment on weekends. However, from 1964 it transformed into a traditional Soviet New Year's television programme and was broadcast annually until 1985. More than a decade later, in 1997, it was picked up again by the Rossija television channel and the tradition was restored. Once competing channels were introduced, the entertainment programming on New Year's Eve became much more extensive, and the repertoire of NYPS was also expanded.

39 According to Kruglova and Savras, the celebration of New Year's Eve in the Soviet Union 'at first look may be seen as a "humanised feast" in the totalitarian and later authoritarian Soviet system. However, it is precisely the programme's popularity that requires a closer analytical look, as the pragmatism of the totalitarian system leaves no free space for any kind of cultural phenomenon'.

40 Kruglova and Savras, 'New Year as Celebrative Ritual': 6.

41 Mikhail Rilkin, 'Ot likovanija k gallyucinacij: postsovetskie kollektivnye tela', [From Glee to Hallucination: Post-Soviet Collective Bodies], *Literaturno-filosofskij žurnal TOPOS*. 10 May 2006. [Accessed 23 April 2017]; Kruglova and Savras, 'New Year as Celebrative Ritual': 7.

42 Kruglova and Savras, 'New Year as Celebrative Ritual': 7.

### *Target audience*

According to information provided by Rossiya 1, the principal audience of the channel comprises 98.5 % of the Russian Federation's population.<sup>43</sup> According to data provided by the Fond Obščestvennoe mnenie [Public Opinion Foundation], more than 90 % of adults in Russia watch television at least once a week, while 70 % do so on a daily basis. Only 5 % of inhabitants in Russia do not watch television at all.<sup>44</sup> Meanwhile, the secondary target audience is made up of several sectors of viewers in foreign countries, depending on their regional affiliation: the more than 50 million viewers who watch Rossiya 1 in the CIS<sup>45</sup> and the Baltic States, as well as those who watch RTR-Planeta. According to information provided by the channel itself, its audience is made up of more than 30 million viewers around the world.<sup>46</sup> It 'broadcasts 24 hours a day in 3 versions with time shift programming specially adapted for viewers from Europe, Asia and North America. RTR-Planeta broadcasts free-to-air from satellites for Europe, Asia, the Middle East and Africa. Also the channel is available in the networks of a great number of operators throughout the world including the USA and Canada'.<sup>47</sup> Additionally, it should be noted that many Russian-speakers in Western and other countries use the opportunities provided by cable, internet, and social media, such as YouTube.<sup>48</sup> This serves as a limiting factor in obtaining accurate audience measurements.

Traditionally *The New Year's Parade of Stars* is broadcast during prime time, just before the President's New Year's address, a time slot popular with Russian speakers of diverse genders, ages, social roles, status groups, and political and religious orientations.<sup>49</sup> The Russian-speaking audience that tunes in to watch the NYPS is roughly identical to the population defined as the 'Russian World'. Watching traditional Soviet-style television entertainment programming during *zastol'e* (a feast of favourite Soviet-era dishes)<sup>50</sup> with family and friends continues

43 'O telekanale'. [Accessed 04 December 2017]

44 Fond Obščestvennoe mnenie [Public Opinion Foundation], cited in 'Televidenie v Rossii v 2015 gody', *Federal'noe agentstvo po pečati*, p. 22. [Accessed 4 December 2017]

45 Russian TV channels are still very popular in Armenia, Belarus, and Moldova. They are far less popular in Azerbaijan, Ukraine, and Georgia. In the case of the last two countries, armed conflicts with Russia have caused a notable decline in their popularity (EaP Civil Society) Forum, *Messages of Russian TV: Monitoring Report 2015. Executive Summary and Recommendations*, p.3.

46 'O kanale' [Information about the channel], RTR-Planeta. [Accessed 04 December 2017]

47 'To Advertisers', RTR-Planeta. [Accessed 04 December 2017]

48 For example, Youtube videos of *NYPS 2017* had more than 570 000 reviews by 04 December 2017. [Accessed 04 December 2017]

49 'The New Year has become so ingrained in the society', says [Valentina] Izmirlijeva, 'it is unifying'. In addition, 'It's for those who are not Christian, those who are anti-Christian, or members of other religions. It is still very strong.' Tamkin, *How Soviets Came to Celebrate New Year*. [Accessed 15 May 2017]

50 For example, special salads such as *salata Oliv'e* [Olivier salad] and *Sečedka pod šuboj* [Herring under a fur coat].

to be a unifying collective experience practised by Russian-speakers, who share a common Soviet era influenced memory. When asked how they spent New Year's Eve 2016, 81% of Russians stated that they watched television.<sup>51</sup> And as popular Russian anchor-person Vladimir Solovëv for *The New Year's Parade of Stars 2012* emphasised: 'We are somehow used to it, and whether we want it or not, all our New Year's traditions come from the Soviet past.'<sup>52</sup>

The experience of a common celebration in which viewing television is of critical importance includes several major elements: watching TV with friends and family at home feels like a private party, but is actually a collective experience designed to achieve certain effects; family members of all generations spend time together, strengthening the bonds between young and old (those too young to remember the Soviet era are taught to regard it as the 'good old days' by participating with their elders);<sup>53</sup> certain themes are repeated and developed; 'real life' is temporarily superseded by faith in miracles; and a childlike enjoyment of *Ded Moroz*, the Christmas tree, and other New Year's Eve traditions create a social buffer. Thus, the New Year and Soviet childhood are in equivalent positions within the nostalgic complex<sup>54</sup> and help activate old and persistent sentiments within a wide audience of Russian-speakers at home and abroad.

All of these factors give substance to Russia's 'nation-building project' and allow the country's official discourse to address a larger number of people through supportive entertainment. At the moment of celebration, the television screen attracts segments of the population who do not usually watch it (young people have moved on to more modern media) or are critical of the usual broadcasts (critics of the existing regime or the apolitical). This provides an opportunity for the television channel to deliver pro-Kremlin narratives using soft forms of communication that might, in other circumstances, be rejected for targeting too wide an audience and being bland in consequence.

### *Perception of humour*

Language, in this case the Russian language, is crucial to understanding verbal humour, including the allusions, sayings, and proverbs upon which many jokes are built. No less important is knowledge of the Soviet and post-Soviet social

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51 Opinion Poll. *Norogodnye Teleperedachi* [New Year's Eve TV programs], Levada Centre, 26 January 2017. [Accessed 18 May 2017]

52 *NYPS 2012*.

53 For example, singers of the younger generation sing together with old (Soviet) performers, demonstrating their respect and readiness to learn. See: Josef Kabzon and Polina Gagarina singing on the *NYPS 2017*.

54 Kruglova and Savras, 'New Year as Celebrative Ritual': 14.

structures, and awareness of political and social codes embedded in social life. In this cultural space, ‘the notions of “stability” and “norms” have traditionally overshadowed the messier discourse of democratic exchange, symbolic authority in language has tended to buttress more readily political ideologies rooted in essentialism, preservation, and restoration’.<sup>55</sup> This orientation toward ‘stability’, along with political and social values and ideals reflecting prescribed ideological standpoints, have been embodied in political joking and have thus influenced the development of a specific perception of political humour.

Within this framework, the audience’s political and social memory plays an important role, as does their knowledge of Russian pop culture, particularly as the main content of the programmes analysed is closely related to singers (Soviet and contemporary) and other celebrities considered popular among Russian-speakers. This is part of a wider layer of the contemporary cultural space, where communication with secondary target audiences takes place through special concerts, visiting theatre tours, and other cultural events specially designed for Russian-speakers abroad. These activities strengthen a sense of belonging within the group; as group members enjoy familiar cultural tropes and laugh about the same jokes, they share a positive experience that forges social bonds.

Taking a closer look at the jokes, we observe that general entertainment programmes on Russian television can be described as having humorous content directed towards traditional gender, ethnic, racial, and other basic stereotypes and prejudices.<sup>56</sup> Jokes including gender stereotypes were particularly widespread in the programmes we analysed. They were attributed to all spheres of social activities, including politics. The very traditional social roles of women (mother, housewife, object of sexual desire) in Russian society are perceived as ideal forms of social interaction, deviations from which become a source for humour, especially when addressing women in positions of power equal to men.<sup>57</sup> As a result, female politicians in Russia are more often subject to

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55 Michael S. Gorham, *After Newspeak: Language, Culture and Politics in Russia from Gorbachev to Putin* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2014), p. 198.

56 Struberga, ‘Case Study: Late-Night Shows’, pp. 57–59.

57 For example, jokes about German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s appearance, femininity, and sexuality in *NYPS 2013*. Sketches about three female Western leaders—Angela Merkel, Theresa May, and Hillary Clinton—appeared in *NYPS* in 2016 and 2017. The jokes were based on the premises that a woman’s place is not in politics, but rather behind her man, and that femininity is not compatible with being a political leader; *NYPS 2016*; *NYPS 2017*.

gendered critique and jokes in media content than men.<sup>58</sup>

The effectiveness of such political humour relies in part on reinforcing stereotypical thinking. It resembles pure propaganda, as stereotypical thinking reduces ‘the ability for analytical thinking about political processes and phenomena, and leads to an instantaneous reaction to a stimulus’.<sup>59</sup>

The enjoyment of powerful, unambiguous emotional experiences in reaction to unsophisticated political humour and the attraction of belonging to the dominant social group, demonstrated by ‘laughing in all the right places’, influence the way in which the viewing audience perceives the jokes in the programme.<sup>60</sup> The annual national catharsis also helps audience members deal with internal and external stressors, from personal tragedies to societal- and state-level issues that influence quality of life for many Russians. This set of factors strongly affects the demand of the audience—bathed in a ‘warm, fuzzy’ emotional atmosphere and encouraged to feel that they are not alone—for humorous content that reaches minimum aesthetic and ethical standards and promotes avoidance of analytical and critical thinking.

#### *Functions of humour as a tool for strategic communication*

We have identified several categories of humour present in the case study that may serve as specific encoders of political content in the jokes, and therefore fulfil the functions of strategic communication in accordance with what was intended. Below is a more detailed presentation of the most significant categories.

#### 1. Knowledge accumulation and problem solving

Whenever an international-level political event is mentioned, it has a certain significance for the audience. The following events were highlighted as the most significant over the last five years:

1. the Winter Olympics in Sochi;
2. EU sanctions;

58 D. Tatarkova, ‘Stendap-komik, scenarist sitkoma i ix kollegi o sostojanii jumora v Rossii’, [The stand-up comic—sitcom screenwriters and their colleagues about the state of humour in Russia], 01.04.2015, [www.wonderzine.com](http://www.wonderzine.com); Liudmila Voronova (2015), ‘Gendering in Political Journalism in the Framework of Other “ing-s”’: Russian and Swedish Political Journalists about Gender, Ethnicity and Sexual Identity as Politicians’ Characteristics and Political Categories’, ECPR, p. 14.

59 Viktor Savka and Uliana Yatsyshyn, ‘Media as Actors of Propaganda Influence: Portrayal of the Russian-Ukrainian Armed Conflict in Ukrainian Religious Media’, *Media i Spolozhenstvo*, № 5/2015.

60 Struberger, ‘Case Study: Late-Night Shows’, pp. 58–59.

3. the US presidential elections,
4. the economic recession (with particular emphasis on Europe);
5. Conchita Wurst's victory in the Eurovision Song Contest;
6. a decrease in oil and gas prices.

The attitudes present in the jokes indicate to members of the audience how they are expected to react to these international events. On one hand, humour provides 'political information' and 'political education' in a subtle form; on the other it humanises politics, thus making it more accessible and easier to understand.<sup>61</sup> Although this applies directly only to the interpretation of certain events, it also refers to a broader set of positions regarding common in-group values and moral standards—the most acceptable form of governance, the best way to structure society, and the most suitable model for cross-state relations within the Russian Federation. The jokes also imply how individuals should react to international political conflicts. The issue of sanctions is widely discussed in the programmes; the audience is told that, 'many talk about it, but hardly anyone understands',<sup>62</sup> and the official narrative is that the economic constraints are facilitating economic development.<sup>63</sup> The emotions elicited by the featured jokes not only affect how individuals perceive what options are open to them and what the costs and benefits of different options may be, but they also impact future decisions they might make—it is likely that members of this feel-good group will choose to reinforce group membership with their decisions, even to their own detriment.<sup>64</sup> This example demonstrates how it is possible to turn a topic into nonsense, while simultaneously presenting it as a reason for national pride.

## 2. Strategic-image construction, belonging, and persuasion.

In reviewing the jokes in the NYE programmes, we found that the humour reflected a particular image of Western leaders and the countries they represent. In the discourse of the jokes, the most influential world leaders are Vladimir

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61 Or easy to understand within the proposed vision of reality.

62 This expression was used by the anchorperson during *NYPS 2014* to assert that although everyone talks about sanctions against Russia, most people do not understand their real meaning and consequences. The following language arrives at the conclusion that nothing has happened and 'no sanctions are intimidating to us', *NYPS 2014*. [Accessed 05 December 2017]

63 For example, the message promoted on *NYPS 2017* was that Russia's economic situation had stabilised, it was out of recession, and that next year would bring improvement in the personal economic situation of its inhabitants *NYPS 2017*.

64 Helena Flam, 'Corporate Emotions and Emotions in Corporations', in Jack Barbalet, ed., *Emotions and Sociology*, (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), p. 94.

Putin,<sup>65</sup> Barack Obama (after the elections—Donald Trump), Angela Merkel, and David Cameron (later—Theresa May); however, Putin is always shown to be superior in all aspects. The jokes not only place Russia among world superpowers,<sup>66</sup> but also demonstrate its superiority by discrediting the leadership of the other powers.<sup>67</sup>

The image created for Russia's neighbouring countries is noteworthy. In all instances, the jokes emphasise strong historical ties with Russia and the belief that sooner or later there will be a rapprochement between the countries. This is particularly striking in the case of Ukraine: with the help of humour, the current political elite and their politics are ridiculed and discredited,<sup>68</sup> even as the jokes assert the 'consanguinity' of the two countries and their inevitable future reunion in some form.

The second level of image-construction is associated with the creation of a positive self-image. Here, given that the joke itself anticipates laughter as a collective experience, it automatically promotes a sense of belonging among audience members. One such shared experience is the celebration of New Year's Eve following the traditions described above. An important aspect of the shared experience is how 'Russianness' is conceptualised by the concept of the 'Russian World' and the idea of a common cultural space that Russian-speakers share regardless of national affiliation. Russian language and identity play the main role here, as 'all strata of the Russian World—polytechnic, multi denominational, socially and ideologically heterogeneous, multicultural, geographically segmented—are unified through the recognition of a sense of belonging to Russia'.<sup>69</sup> Thus borders between states are downplayed, while the idea of an informational and cultural space shared by all Russian-speakers is instilled in the minds of the viewers according to a 'national project'.

The promotion of collective pride is used to boost the self-image of Russian-oriented populations. Russian athletes and their successes on the international stage are widely promoted. The Olympics have been used to bolster collective pride by showing that Russia can organise a successful event far better than

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<sup>65</sup> Intelligence, knowledge, physical fitness, mental stability.

<sup>66</sup> For example, this song about the Russia-US relationship, which includes the text 'don't be stupid America, we are two superpowers, two coasts. Just know your place...' *NYPS 2017*.

<sup>67</sup> For example, sketches about 'weak' Western leaders Theresa May, Angela Merkel, and Hillary Clinton, *NYPS 2016; NYPS 2017*.

<sup>68</sup> For example, performances dedicated to the Russia-Ukraine relationship, *NYPS 2016; NYPS 2017*.

<sup>69</sup> Gorham, *After Newspeak*, p. 162.

other countries can, and they beat their competitors in the events as well.<sup>70</sup> Collective pride and a positive collective emotional experience increase the sense of solidarity and cohesiveness felt by in-group members.<sup>71</sup>

### 3. Support for and justification of Russia's political leadership: setting the agenda

Demonstrating the superiority of Russian President Vladimir Putin is an integral part of the political humour of these programmes. His personal qualities have never been portrayed in a negative light in any context. On the contrary—with the help of various techniques the audience is motivated to accept Russia's political leader as someone who has supremacy in a direct and figurative sense.<sup>72</sup>

As a result, foreign policies implemented by Russia are presented as legitimate responses to the international challenges the country faces, policies related to the creation of the 'Russian World' are presented as necessary to raise the welfare of the state, and support of them as incumbent upon Russian speakers<sup>73</sup> as a duty to their homeland.<sup>74</sup>

Russian TV plays a supportive role for Putin's regime and commonly promotes stories about the power and legacy of the nation in the international system.<sup>75</sup> The narratives used help to enhance the power of the state and the legitimacy of the regime in its internal and external actions.

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70 In jokes about the Olympics in a 2015 broadcast, it was proposed that for other countries 'winning is not as important as participation', whereas for Russians ('us', indicating the nation as a whole) both winning and participation are important, *NYPs 2015*. The implication is that other countries should get used to losing to Russia.

71 Gavin Brent Sullivan, 'Collective Pride, Happiness, and Celebratory Emotions: Aggregative, Network, and Cultural Models', in Christian von Scheve and Mikko Salmela, eds., *Collective Emotions: Perspectives from Psychology, Philosophy, and Sociology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014): 277.

72 For example, a sketch by Jurij Stoyanov where US President Donald Trump is ridiculed in a sketch that plays out a phone conversation between him and Vladimir Putin. Putin is portrayed as a competent master of all life's situations, but Trump as clearly inferior *NYPs 2016; NYPs 2017*. Stoyanov plays Elton John dropping hints about Putin's skill in determining the course of events, but also his direct link to higher powers. This is in line with general public discourse in Russia: the President is portrayed as prevailing in all spheres of life, not only politics, *NYPs 2015*. It may be described as kind of resurrection and adaptation of the adulation of the Tsars—the Russian president is thought to be blessed by an extraordinary power to control all aspects of life, and is placed above all other people, including the leaders of foreign countries.

73 *NYPs 2015*.

74 This closely correlates with Soviet traditions, when holiday celebrations were 'an essential medium for defining and promoting new revolutionary and Soviet social relations and symbolic systems, for imagining the communist future and bringing it closer'. Then television took a central role in the 'Soviet festive system', Evans, *Between Truth and Time*, p. 83.

75 Interestingly, the programmes reviewed tend to ridicule domestic political problems too, such as corruption, disorganised infrastructure, general irresponsibility, and alcoholism. However, these problems are rarely associated with public administrators.

#### 4. Stress reduction and recreation

New Year celebration rituals designed to intensify and concentrate a sense of joy and pleasure. New Year's broadcasts on television are intended to disseminate this feeling across Russia and abroad. They are conducive to reducing stress with the help of jokes, a general sense of fun, and a festive atmosphere. Broadcasts strive to inspire the audience to a state of euphoria, in which they start believing in a happy future with unlimited possibilities.<sup>76</sup> *The New Year's Parade of Stars* is a kind of social theatre whose function is to enable the audience to achieve catharsis. By encouraging a free flow of joke telling and spontaneity (supposedly grass-roots and unregulated by government), the socio-structural policies of the existing regime are, in fact, strengthened.

#### 5. Weakening the opponent through soft forms of communication: delegitimising other leaders

In addition to open mockery and challenging political leaders considered unfriendly towards Russia,<sup>77</sup> some deeper psychological mechanisms are activated by the content of television programmes. They offer an alternative identity for audiences at home and abroad that tend to oppose the current Russian regime, particularly through mild jokes that are acceptable and easy to understand. Russian-speaking minorities residing abroad may have assimilated foreign values and orientations. Sooner or later, mutually competing identities lead to an ideological confrontation. The preservation of the identity of these diasporic groups in accordance with the Russian perspective is directly dependent on the media.<sup>78</sup> Therefore, it can be argued that humour is being used as an instrument of Soft War.<sup>79</sup> In other words, the jokes told on entertainment television help Russian-speakers, especially those living abroad, internalise the 'correct' interpretation of significant events. They communicate particular values with the aim of subverting the discourses of foreign governments and producing instability when it is congenial to Russia.

76 Using continuous repetition, as well as appealing to the emotional state of individuals engaged in New Year's celebration, audiences are encouraged to believe that everything is possible and that the New Year will bring positive change.  
77 *NYPs 2017*.

78 Daniel Dayan, 'Particularistic Media and Diasporic Communications', in Tamar Liebes and James Curran, eds., *Media, Ritual and Identity* (London, New York: Routledge, 1998): 106–07 (104–13).

79 The Islamic Development Organization (IDO) has defined soft war as: 'Any kind of psychological warfare action and media propaganda which targets the society and induces the opposite side to accept the failure without making any military conflict. The subversion, internet war, creation of radio-television networks and spreading the rumours are the important forms Soft War. This war intends to weaken the ... thought processes of the given society and also causes the socio-political order to be annihilated via the media propaganda. [sic]' Islamic Development Organization cited in Monroe E. Prince, *Free Expression, Globalism and the New Strategic Communication* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 138.

### *Communicating humour*

The setting of *The New Year's Parade of Stars* can be described as a complement to the tradition-rich *Novogodnij Goluboj ogoněk* [New Year's Little Blue Flame], which is still transmitted on Rossija 1 as part of the New Year's programme. The format of these complementary programmes draws on the Soviet analogue *Goluboj ogoněk* [Little Blue Flame]. As in the past (the format of the programme has not changed since the 1960s), musicians, sportsmen, actors, politicians, poets, and other celebrities who were popular during the Soviet period<sup>80</sup> participate in a cabaret-style show, sitting around tables laden with fruit and champagne, chatting and telling jokes.

Role-playing and masquerades (in which actors play members of the opposite sex and are thought to be particularly funny) are often used in humorous sketches and covers of popular songs adapted to contain humorous content. This not only provides additional fun, but also serves to create the illusion of an imaginary realm where everything is possible, wishes come true, and adults can recapture, just for a moment, the sentimental feelings of childhood. This nostalgia is strengthened by referring to events, personalities, well-known and once popular songs, movies, allusions to shared history, and memorable objects. Many of the songs feature humorous lyrics written especially for the NYE programme. The melodies chosen may be taken from a Soviet children's song, a well-known film, or some other popular song. This form of communication is characterised by the repetition of certain phrases and semiotic codes in order to maximise emotional uplift for the television audience.

Famous Russian television host Vladimir Solovëv hosts the programme. He reviews the important events of the previous year and predicts what is likely to happen in the year to come, providing a capsule foreign policy report for his viewers. He is traditionally accompanied by Russian politicians Gennadij Zjuganov and Vladimir Žirinovskij, who pontificate on what has happened and what may be expected in the future. Thus not only is the political sphere of life personalised, but it connects the government's political agendas with festive performances in the minds of the viewers, creating a sense of continuity and integrity in the daily lives of average Russians.

Significant changes have occurred in the intensity and sharpness of international political jokes featured on the programme between 2012 and the present day. For

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<sup>80</sup> For example, Iosif Kabzon, Alla Pugačova, Lev Leščenko, Vladimir Vinokur.

example, in *The New Year's Parade of Stars 2012*, other countries or representatives of other nations were mentioned only when depicting scenes of everyday life (discussing Chinese firecrackers, or the French original of the Olivier salad), taking up less than five minutes of the programme overall; politics did not take up significant transmission time.<sup>81</sup> In 2016, the content of *The New Year's Parade of Stars* referred to various countries and people, particularly ridiculing representatives of the Western world, and the total time spent on long sketches referring to Western countries and Ukraine, together with four shorter political sketches, was about 25 % of the programme. The most virulent criticism was directed against Ukraine and its President Petro Poroshenko, stating 'it's about time he befriended his head and his neighbours',<sup>82</sup> in an attempt to discredit his abilities as the highest representative of Ukraine and emphasising the importance of maintaining good relations with Russia. By 2017, almost half of the overall content was related to international relations, while domestic economic and political problems were left far behind. The most frequently mentioned political entities were the US, Ukraine, and the EU.<sup>83</sup>

We identified the basic messages delivered through humour by analysing jokes regarding international affairs used in the New Year's broadcasts:

- The Russian Federation plays a central role on the international stage, alongside the US, Germany, and the UK;
- Russia is more powerful and preeminent than the others;
- President Putin is an outstanding leader with extraordinary abilities;
- Western political leaders are weak, with a fairly low level of intelligence;
- Russia is a unique, tradition-rich, and morally pure country. 'One cannot make sense of Russia', therefore foreigners do not understand the Russian people, the soul of this nation;
- Europe is weak, immoral, and burdened with economic and political crises;
- Sanctions against Russia cannot cause it harm; on the contrary, they stimulate economic growth and enhance quality of life;
- Russia provides stability and security in the world;

81 *NYPS 2012*. [Accessed 18 May 2017]

82 *NYPS 2016*. [Accessed 18 May 2017]

83 According to data provided by the Levada Center, in December 2017, 68 % of Russia's inhabitants see the US as an enemy, 29 % see Ukraine as an enemy, and 14 % see Europe, the EU, and the West in general, as adversaries. 'Vragi Rossiï', 10 January 2018. [Accessed 10.01.2018]

- Ukraine has ‘deviated from the right political course’; its actions now are neither logical, nor comprehensive. Sooner or later it will return ‘home’ and the close friendship between the countries will be restored;
- The ‘Russian World’ is a special cultural space that unites all Russian speakers, regardless of national borders. All members must strengthen this space from wherever they are and fulfil their obligations towards the Russian nation.

The above observations suggest a strong trend directed towards instrumentalising the New Year’s broadcasts in accordance with the needs of the regime. Since the political jokes told on the New Year’s programme are focused on the international dimension, they fail to reflect the real concerns of the Russian people.<sup>84</sup>

## Conclusions

The aim of this article was to identify the main components of humour and apply them to an analysis of New Year’s Eve television programming in Russia. We identified five interrelated components of humour: shared knowledge, the target audience, the perception of humour, the functions of humour, and the communication process, which constitute the basic elements of the analytical tool we used to investigate entertainment programming on Russian television. The application of the tool with its five components allowed us to identify the main political messages that appeared in the programmes and how they were communicated using humour, making it obvious that the jokes serve Russia’s political establishment and its ideological propositions. The proposed theoretical tool enables scholars to approach humour from a multidisciplinary perspective and to obtain a comprehensive picture of humour.

The celebration of the New Year as a ritualised collective experience that comprises a range of traditions, including viewing particular television broadcasts, has a special significance for the Russian-speaking population. The great popularity of these traditions is made possible by the existence of shared knowledge and shared experience, based at least partly on Soviet habits and

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<sup>84</sup> According to data provided by the Levada Center, in March 2017 the deterioration of international relations was seen to be a serious problem by only 6% of the population surveyed in Russia, ‘*Samye Ostrye Problemy*’, 07 March 2017. [Accessed 25 April 2017]. According to the Levada Centre, Russians surveyed in December 2016 said the five most important events of the previous year were—price increases and the depreciation of money; Trump’s victory in the US elections; the exclusion of Russian athletes from the Olympic Games/Para-Olympic Games; the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro; and the military conflict in Syria. Of these five, only Donald Trump is mentioned in *NYPs 2016*. Levada Centre, ‘*Važnejšie sobytija goda*’, 22 December 2016. Levada. [Accessed 05 December 2017]

values, which might also be transmitted to younger generations. The shared knowledge encoded in the Soviet past strongly influences the identity of the Russian-speaking audience.

Since the New Year's broadcasts are watched by Russians and Russian-speakers worldwide, the audience reach is wide. These humour shows are targeted at two strategically important but distinct audiences: (a) domestic audiences in Russia, (b) secondary audiences in Post-Soviet countries and the Western countries with Russian or Russian-speaking minorities. Therefore, it may be argued that the authors of the television content are afforded the opportunity to address the widest possible group of geographically dispersed people. These are diverse in age, sex, education, and occupation. However, certain basic psychological features are capable of bringing these groups together: the phenomenon of *nostalgia*, sentimentality, and the shared knowledge that exists among these populations. The analysis of the entertainment programmes broadcast on New Year's Eve in Russia demonstrates the validity of a further theoretical assumption, namely, that the use of humour frequently induces in-group effects and activates a sense of belongingness. This arises from intentional trigger-words such as *we* and *all of us* (the Nation, the Russian World), words that are linked to a shared Soviet or Post-Soviet past and to an identity consisting of allusions to shared narratives and well-known films, personalities, actors, musicians, and events from the Soviet period. Some of these Soviet or Post-Soviet celebrities are featured moderators on Russian Television programmes, and also for pop-culture events in Russia and those that are exported for diaspora.

As far as the *perception of humour* is concerned, the distinction between in-group and out-group is strongly linked to differences in emotional valence: the in-group is portrayed positively, but the out-group—negatively. This corresponds to the value and emotionally positive character ascribed to the in-group: *we* as the correct, truthful group or nation (the 'right Russia') securing real democracy and true values, albeit frequently victimised for embodying the struggle for correct values against the morally doubtful, dangerous, disastrous, and in general negative out-group. Therefore, emotional valence is intentionally attached to the content of jokes and messages according to the strategic aim of generating in-group and out-group divisions among the audience. The result of this communication is a mental model embedded in shared knowledge and consisting of specific components such as ethnic and gender stereotypes, masculinised values, and tolerance of aggression towards out-groups.

Our analysis of the New Year's broadcasts demonstrates the increasing politicisation of television entertainment content. In other words, we can now talk about signs indicating the instrumentalisation of humour in accordance with the needs of the regime. Furthermore, we argue that the specific form of these broadcasts, which stimulates the generation of collective emotions, together with the collective practice of laughter and overall joviality, promotes the intensification of associated and shared emotions. This reinforces the feeling of social ties among the members of the group while they focus on a particular topic presented in the broadcast and share a pre-conditioned emotional response.

The intensification of positive collective emotions in the context of references to a Soviet past mentioned above, fulfil just one of the *functions of humour*—socialisation. Other important functions that are activated through humour are persuasion and strategic image construction; this is done by highlighting real and imagined abilities and by discrediting opponents (countries identified as important 'others', such as the US, Ukraine, the Western allies). Together with supporting and justifying the political leadership, agenda setting, stress reduction, and recreation, these functions can serve as important links in the chain of a common media discourse orientated towards serving the interests of the existing political regime.

It is possible to crystallise the most important *messages* regarding the international environment and Russia's place and role in it. These messages form a basis for desired responses among target audiences towards external and internal processes, such as sanctions against Russia and the effects they produce in the Russian economy. The 'appropriate' reaction entails an avoidance of critical thinking. Instead, messages tend to induce emotionally unidimensional reactions, avoiding critical analysis of their content.<sup>85</sup> We argue that such shows are used, and in the Russian case may be purposely instrumentalised, to provide a self-defence system for the regime and to strengthen its perceived legitimacy. Concurrently, it is used to discredit and weaken the designated and strategically constructed external enemy, with the aims of achieving foreign policy results and of generating internal public demand for the government's actions.

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85 Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion* (Newbury Park, California: Sage Publications: 1992): 260–65.

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