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Killjoy and the Politics of Laughter. Russian Television Humour about Alyaksandr Lukashenka and its Reception in Belarusian Online Media

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— Alena Minchenia, »Killjoy and the Politics of Laughter. Russian Television Humour about Alyaksandr Lukashenka and its Reception in Belarusian Online Media«

— A B S T R A C T —

Drawing upon the perspective of the cultural studies of emotions, this article examines the reception of political satire and the re-contextualization of humour. More precisely, it investigates the multiplicity of tensions that come into play in the production, erasure, rediscovery, and reception in Belarusian Internet media of politically oriented Russian television humour mocking the Belarusian president Alyaksandr Lukashenka. The very phenomenon of comical representation aims at triggering a particular type of viewer response: laughter. But what if there is no laughter? To study this phenomenon, the concept of unlaughter, coined by Michael Billig, is drawn upon. Resonating with Sara Ahmed's term killjoy, it helps to uncover inequalities reproduced in the circulation of humour. Who laughs and who is laughed at? The article looks at the construction of subjects and objects of laughter, as well as the emotions helping to shape the two. The extent to which the particular case discussed in this article might be illustrative of a broader function of political humour and unlaughter in creating and challenging power differentials is considered.

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— Keywords: Belarus, humour, Internet-media, killjoy, politics of emotions, unlaughter

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■—KILLJOY AND THE POLITICS OF LAUGHTER.

Russian Television Humour about Alyaksandr
Lukashenka and its Reception in Belarusian
Online Media—■

■—INTRODUCTION—■

The idea for this research came from a certain feeling of puzzlement and curiosity while monitoring charter97.org, the popular Belarusian opposition website, over a period of five years from 2008 onward. During this period, I noticed the existence of a particular type of news that frequently recurred on the site. These were reports about skits or political cartoons about the Belarusian president Alyaksandr Lukashenka, which were aired on evening shows on the main Russian television channel Pervyj Canal and then censored by Belarusian editors for broadcasting in Belarus.¹ However, the parts of the programmes that were cut out from telecasting appeared in Belarusian opposition Internet sites (first on charter97.org, then reposted on nn.by, naviny.by, and belaruspartizan.org), becoming the subject of intense discussion and extensive commentary on all these forums. Unlike Belarusian television programmes that are not shown in Russia, it is worth noting here, in Belarus the programmes of the major Russian channels (Pervyj Canal, RTR, NTV) are retransmitted even to basic subscription audiences. The very direction of the media flow, in other words, if I may be allowed to jump ahead a little, is instructive of the power relations prevailing between the two countries.

The charter97.org featuring in this article is an oppositional media project in Belarus. The initiative was launched in 1997, with one hundred civic rights activists, intellectuals, independent journalists, and public figures in the country jointly signing an open letter criticizing the direction the Belarusian state had taken and demanding its democratic transformation.² The following year, the group set up the website for itself as a press centre for its activities; subsequently, however, it developed into an independent media project acting on its own. A telling sign of its perceived influence is that access to charter97.org was blocked during the country's 2001 presidential elections, which was the first time such Internet sites were blocked for political reasons in Belarus. Since then, the site and its team have regularly been subjected to different forms of pressure from the Belarusian authorities (including searches, confisca-

tion of technical equipment, and interrogation of journalists working for it). Nevertheless, charter97.org has become more and more directly involved in the country's politics. During the 2010 presidential elections, for instance, it openly supported the politician and former Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Andrei Sannikov's bid for the presidency. Following the political repression in the aftermath of the elections, the team running the site was forced to flee abroad. Its editor-in-chief Natallia Radzina spent six weeks in a KGB prison, then escaped from her house arrest, and finally was granted political asylum in the Netherlands. Since 2012, charter97.org has its office in Warsaw, Poland. Thus, this media project has clearly emerged as an openly political actor representing the liberal, pro-European part of the Belarusian opposition.

At first glance, Russian humorous representations of Lukashenka as retransmitted and debated in the Belarusian media sphere appear to offer rather straightforward evidence of a particular construction of the Belarusian state, and of the existence of censorship in Belarusian official media that targets whatever it perceives to constitute a critical portrayal of the country in general or president Lukashenka in particular. They also provide telling examples of how politics and media frequently intersect, influencing access to information for the broader public. In this article, however, I argue that the topic is of interest because it reveals something important about the function, dynamics, and social effects of political humour in the framing and conveying of social asymmetries. Furthermore, since Internet media are interactive, allowing the audience to comment, it sheds light on the issue of how political claims and assumptions underpinning visual representations and jokes are actually received.

The official relations between Russia and Belarus might look unproblematic on the surface. The Belarusian government has for long pursued a policy of close co-operation with Russia, discursively framed in terms of familial intimacy between the two countries based on close bonds of brotherhood. In turn, Russia has provided financial support for the Belarusian state, for instance through credits that were not associated with demands for liberal reforms, and reduced-price natural gas and oil. The geopolitical imagination underlying this politics, including its tensions and its consequences for Europe as a whole, are worth considering. In this article, one of my more theoretical goals is to examine how popular culture can shed light on these issues and thereby contribute toward a deeper understanding of power differentials and their significance in the region.

The main aim of this article is to scrutinize, through the analytical lens of the politics of emotions, discrepancies between expected (such as laughter) and received reception of

Russian television humour in a Belarusian online context. I attempt to analyse the reception of political humour transplanted from one geopolitical and media context to another, and to reveal the work of power involved in the politics of humour. To investigate these, the concepts of unlaughter and killjoy are employed as heuristic tools. The analysis will focus, first and foremost, on online comments given in response to Russian political satire posted on charter97.org. Methodologically, I look at the dialectics of laughter and unlaughter and changes in the object and the subject of humour in the process of reception. The main research question guiding the investigation is how the reception of political humour relates to the work of power behind the humour – whether it supports/reproduces or challenges the asymmetries constructed in the media representations. The more specific sub-questions addressed are as follows:

- What emotions are actualized in the reception of Russian television humour to describe and discuss it in its new context, and how are objects and subjects of these emotions constituted? What emotions are connected with unlaughter?
- What do killjoy comments do in relation to the power structures behind the humorous representations of Lukashenka (e.g., the positioning of the object of humour and those who are seen as laughing)?
- What are the limits of the critical potential in killjoy comments? What normative constructions are overlooked in the reception of the humour?

As demonstrated by previous research along qualitative and feminist lines, academic scholarships and writings are always »positioned«.³ When analysing the video materials and the Internet users' comments drawn upon as the research data for this article, I do so as a leftist Belarusian feminist scholar with a critical attitude towards the country's authorities, state, and dependency on Russia and Russian imperialist discourse, but also towards insensitivities and exclusions in oppositional discourses in Belarus. In what follows, I first present the theoretical background informing my analysis, discussing some important aspects regarding the conceptualization of humour, the notion of unlaughter, and the perspective of the cultural politics of emotions and a feminist »killjoy« in the investigation of the work of humour. After that, I describe the empirical data used in the study. Before turning to the actual analysis of these data, I first look at visual representations of, and then audience engagement with, Russian television humour about Belarusian president Lukashenka. Finally, I conclude by summarizing my findings and reflecting on the broader significance of my research.

— THE POLITICS OF HUMOUR AND AUDIENCE RESEARCH: CHALLENGING POWER THROUGH KILLJOY AND UNLAUGHTER? —

Defining humour as »the enjoyment of incongruity«,⁴ Tsakova and Popa have not only engaged with philosophical traditions of looking at humour as matter of recognized incongruity (e.g., Aristotle, Kant, and Kierkegaard), but also created a direct link to its reception as a particular type of viewers' reaction: enjoyment. However, what if the presumed amusement and pleasure are not there? »This is not funny« is a frequent response posted by readers on charter97.org in reaction to Russian television humour. To better understand this phenomenon, the notion of unlaughter as proposed by Billig promises to be helpful.⁵ For Billig, unlaughter refers to a deliberate withdrawal of enjoyment that reveals unequal geographies of humour.⁶ A similar idea is conveyed by Ahmed's term »feminist killjoy«, which refers to a feminist who spoils the easiness of others' pleasure by refusing to laugh, in a gesture that questions complacently ignored sexist content in anecdotes and jokes.⁷ Focusing on the work of killjoys and unlaughter enables me to conceptualize how the power asymmetries perpetuated by Russian television representations of Lukashenka can be challenged. This perspective also makes it possible to recognise the transformation of (un)laughter into shame and embarrassment, to capture discourses of fear and aversion, and to identify signs of pride and national belonging with greater clarity.

An important line of theorizing here concerns conflicting interpretations of humour as, on the one hand, subversive, challenging the power of normativity, and, on the other hand, something that supports and strengthens the existing social order.⁸ There is a substantial amount of empirical support demonstrating humour's capability in both of these respects in the existing literature. What is important for the present purposes, however, is that this ambivalent quality of humour becomes particularly salient in repressive political systems. What characterizes the attitude of official power towards humour in general and humorous representations of itself in such systems can be described using Bakhtin's notion of »the culture of seriousness«.⁹ Also the case under study in this article offers evidence of a high degree of sensitivity of the repressive state in this very regard. Indeed, humour can serve as a seemingly innocent tool for undermining the power and challenging its omnipresent character. Research on Lithuanian Soviet satirical press, the humorous actions of the Serbian Otpor movement, and emotions in protests in Central Europe in the 1980s and 1990s, for instance, has developed this argument further in the context of oppressive regimes.¹⁰

At the same time, humour can also serve to support and reproduce the dominant order.¹¹ As Pearce and Hajizada have

shown, in Azerbaijan humour is recognized as a tool that is both appealing and accessible to the broader public, leading it, therefore, to become frequently resorted to by the country's ruling elite bent on discrediting its opponents.¹² Also other research has taken a rather sceptical position towards the assumed subversive potential of humour. Krikman and Laineste have proposed that jokes and anecdotes in different (post) socialist countries, ultimately support the broader socio-political system.¹³ Still others have pointed out how the mediated character of contemporary humour in particular contributes to its function as something that can only help to preserve the status quo: the mass media disseminating it do not usually aim at promoting political change.¹⁴ This is especially relevant in contexts where the media remain state controlled. The humour examined in this article is broadcast by the major Russian television channel Pervyj Canal, a media actor that, owing to the paternalistic relationship between the state and the media in present-day Russia, serves in the first place the needs of the country's political elites.¹⁵ The jokes and cartoons analysed below can thus be seen as representing a way of translating Russian political and media establishment's perceptions of the Russian–Belarusian relationship and the Belarusian president into a popular form. What is important to note here is that the appearance of Russian television humour on a Belarusian Internet site alters the geographic and social context of the reception, allowing a different audience to engage with the images and texts put forth. A reception setting comparable to the one in this study is found in Ridanpää's research on the Finnish reception of the Muhammad cartoon controversy in Denmark in 2005.¹⁶ What is relevant for the present article is not only that the study concentrates on the othering of Muslims and the inequality constructed through the resulting representations, but also that, through this focus, it goes on to ultimately reveal something of the specificity of Finnish society. In a similar vein this article, too, by explicating the effects of a de-contextualization of humour, is interested in investigating what the Belarusian reception of Russian humour might say about Belarusian society itself.

In recent years, audience research appears to have become more popular in cultural studies, not least as an attempt to balance the preoccupation in the field with analyses of representations and the resulting tendency to overestimate the power of these representations.¹⁷ In the field of critical geopolitics, reception is seen as a form of everyday social encounters that enact and express common geopolitical ideas.¹⁸ In their study of the comic skits with Ahmed the Dead Terrorist, Purcell, Brown, and Gokmen have defined this layer as »non-elite geopolitics.«¹⁹ According to them, »[l]egitimation of non-elite popular geopolitics gives a voice to those actually affected by the geopolitical

practices of nation-states, and thus opens another empirical and grounded window in public (non-elite and/but popular) perceptions of geopolitical issues and realities.«²⁰ In line with this, the focus of this article is not so much on media and political power centres in Eastern Europe and/or the Russian-speaking world (Russia, Moscow, and Pervyj Canal) and their messages per se, as it is on those who consume these media products in their highly particular context of a Belarusian opposition website, feeling compelled to share their perceptions and responses with others through posted comments.

— »(NO) LAUGHING MATTER«: DATA AND METHOD

The sample of online comments forming the empirical material for this research was selected using the following two main criteria:

- The comments (all on charter97.org) had to be to messages or stories posted on charter97.org about segments of Russian television shows mocking Lukashenka having been deleted from television programmes in Belarus but re-posted on charter97.org;
- the comments had to be »killjoy« comments or express reactions other than enjoyment and laughter.

As a first step, all entries on charter97.org reporting about redacted Russian humour about Lukashenka in the period 2008 through 2013 were collected. The resulting sample comprised a total of 13 cartoons from the project *Mul'tichnosti* (»Cartoon Personalities«) and a total of 11 episodes of the Russian television programmes *Prozhektorparishilton* (Searchlight Paris Hilton), *Bol'shaya raznitsa* (Big Difference), and *Vechernij Urgant* (Evening with Urgant). All the video segments had been produced and originally broadcast by Pervyj Canal and then retransmitted on the territory of Belarus by the Belarusian television channel ONT. Following the period 2008–2013, the kind of news materials in the interest of this study disappeared from charter97.org.²¹ Altogether, the number of comments posted to all videos on charter97.org amounted at the time of the research to 975, or 35,591 words in total. These differed in length, ranging from brief exclamations to highly elaborated opinion pieces of several paragraphs in length.

Two circumstances related to these reader comments need to be noted here. First of all, every item on the website informing about redacted Russian jokes about Lukashenka allowed readers to participate in an online discussion about it. The number of comments posted in the period under study was regularly quite high: the average number of comments received

by an item was 54, with the maximum number of comments received by a single item being 142 and the minimum 32.²² In other words, the humorous Russian videos about Lukashenka can be said to have undoubtedly gotten the Belarusian audience's attention. Secondly, for this analysis only comments expressing unlaughter and speaking from the position of a killjoy were looked at. In general, the fact that the Belarusian state exercised censorship over television did not come as a surprise to the website's audience. It was barely commented on in the discussions around the Russian television jokes about Lukashenka. The typical pattern followed by the online discussions on the site was this: following a few relatively brief comments expressing enjoyment about the video under discussion, other opinions that introduced new dimensions, either emotional or political, appeared. It should also be noted here that, as the latter, quite typically, were more verbal, wordy, and elaborate (instead of being just standard »thumbs-up« type comments marked graphically with »+1« or a smiley face entered to indicate a shared reaction), they offered substantially more material for the analysis. Any posts of a more technical nature (such as questions about access to videos, possibility to download them, etc.) were excluded from the research data. All in all, the sample then came to consist of a total of 816 individual comments. What is important to note here is that the study was not interested in measuring the popularity of any particular posting or response to it; rather, the aim was to inquire into the dynamics of »unlaughing« reception of Russian television humour among Belarusian Internet audiences of charter97.org.

For this study, the method of discourse analysis as developed by Potter and Gill was relied on when analysing the comments in the sample.²³ Focusing on the way language is used, on its function as a social practice embedded in power relations, this method showed a good fit with the aim of the study to examine »what emotions do«, as Ahmed has put it.²⁴ Its toolkit likewise promised to be helpful for analysing how unlaughter is constructed and what killjoy comments present as the subject and the object of the humour in question.

— THE AUDIENCE AS KILLJOY: NEGOTIATING
EMOTIONS AND QUESTIONING OBJECTS AND
SUBJECTS OF RUSSIAN TELEVISION HUMOUR
IN BELARUSIAN ONLINE FORUM DISCUSSIONS

This section begins with a short discussion of the various representations of Lukashenka as found in the Belarusian-censored parts of Russian television programmes. The discussion provides a necessary background for the subsequent analysis of what happens after these media messages are sent

to their audiences. What kind of reactions result from the enlarged circulation, made possible by modern technology, of the humour in question, and how do killjoy comments to it position themselves vis-à-vis the power structures that that humour bolsters or makes manifest?

— **Representations of Lukashenka in Russian television satire**

The images of the Belarusian president Lukashenka in the Russian television humour combined signs of provinciality and claims to power, with the former rendering the latter rather unfounded and ridiculous looking. An animated character of Lukashenka, for example, lives alone in a wooden house, with lowing of cattle heard in the background. There is little furniture in the picture: only a throne standing in the room and portraits of Lukashenka himself hanging on the walls. Such signs of ambition and egocentrism are, however, countered by straw and logs lying around right by the throne and big sacks of potatoes that Lukashenka is portrayed as peeling by himself. Although dressed in a suit and tie, Lukashenka speaks Trasianka, a Belarusian-Russian mixed speech with negative connotations that is used mainly in the countryside; sometimes, he is also presented as playing the bayan, a folk musical instrument signifying Lukashenka and his context as being out of date, simple, and rural.

In the cartoons and in the evening show narratives, Lukashenka was also presented as a person with little knowledge and limited intellectual abilities, as someone uncritical of himself and oftentimes not well mannered. The cartoons portraying him participating in different popular television shows relied on the same pattern.²⁵ In them, Lukashenka is depicted as never being able to give the correct answers to even the most elemental questions, while at the same time boasting about his abilities and, clearly, taking pride in himself. He is shown compensating for his poor education by either resorting to various tricks and deception or manipulating the feelings of others.

The main theme in all the video fragments examined was the economic problems of Belarus. Typically, Lukashenka was portrayed as being in desperate need for money. In the cartoons, he not only literally begged for alms by singing and dancing in front of then Russian finance minister Kudrin, but also stole things like a candlestick from the British queen or tried to sell a tractor to Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton.²⁶ Significantly, none of these other characters appeared to take him seriously. Lukashenka is also seen approaching Italy's Berlusconi and Germany's Merkel to ask them for money, without succeeding in getting any help from either. In this context, Russia was then always presented as the only solu-

tion, with Lukashenka having to come back to sing and dance for Kudrin every time.

While it is true that the financial support indeed offered by Russia to Belarus to a large extent shapes the relationship between the two countries, what is of interest for this study is the way this circumstance is played out and depicted in popular culture. Not only is that relationship couched in terms of extreme economic dependency and disparity, of even such a magnitude that Russian game shows are portrayed as representing the best strategy for budget improvements for Belarus: Russia is also depicted as being in fact the country's only hope. In many cartoon episodes, the Lukashenka character must in the end turn back to Russia following his failed attempts to obtain support elsewhere.

Underpinning all these depictions of Lukashenka in search of monetary help, there is a dichotomous view of international relations, with the two poles of Russia and the United States/ European Union structuring world affairs. This binary opposition reveals that the imagination of world politics in Russian media still relies on a Cold War-era configuration of terms, with its explicit ideas of the enemy and the protecting ally. In one cartoon episode, Lukashenka is confronted with a demand to choose who he wants to be friends with – Russia or Europe.²⁷ While the general assumption behind the demand was that a closer collaboration with Europe would jeopardize Belarus's ties with Russia, it also reveals that Russian popular culture was characterized by dichotomous thinking about geopolitical power already long before the developments that explicitly drew upon and cultivated it, such as the Russian aggression in Ukraine from 2014 onward.

Lastly, it is worth paying attention to the particular context in which the Lukashenka character in the materials studied is represented. In one talk show programme, the Russian host Ivan Urgant is shown flashing his MacBook computer with the portrait of Lukashenka on it, uttering: »We try to combine all incompatible things: Lukashenka and Apple have never been this close to each other before.«²⁸ This short expression posits Lukashenka as being in opposition to everything that, like the MacBook, is considered to be modern, fashionable popular and technological. In other evening shows, Belarus is portrayed as outdated and connected to a bygone (Soviet) era. In a *Prozhektorparishilton* programme it is joked that no one (except Russia) will buy Belarusian tractors, having not seen the Soviet cartoon demonstrating how they work.²⁹ Thus, there is another layer of meanings constructed by these humorous representations, connected to the discursive work of othering and the construction of hierarchical relationships between the two countries of Russia and Belarus.

— **Unlaughter I: Focusing on the object of humour and feeling subjects**

Before turning to the actual analysis of the comments studied, a brief description of the composition of the audience of charter-97.org is in order. Although comments posted in Internet media do not allow for the identification of any precise social characteristics of their authors, the sample nevertheless contained several cases where commenters openly presented themselves as Russian citizens or as inhabitants of Russia. Usually, this happened in response to anti-Russian views, posted on charter-97.org by, presumably, its Belarusian viewers. Another important observation regarding the characteristics of the website's audience is that, in their comments, its members made no attempt to deny the political realities in Belarus as reflected through the humorous representations, for example by defending Lukashenka or the legitimacy of his rule. This is likely due to the oppositional identity of website itself and the audience the media project consequently attracts. A shared assumption underlying all comments studied for this article was the recognition of the contested nature of Lukashenka's presidency, as being of virtually unlimited power and, apparently, duration as well.

In examining the comments in question from the perspective of the politics of emotions, I was interested in the shifts and dynamics in what could be identified as the object and the subject of (un)laughter, as well as in the emotions that the website viewers expressed when responding to the messages. At first glance, Russian media were the subject here, producing jokes about Lukashenka as the object of their humour. The jokes themselves were expected to create an experience of amusement and enjoyment for their audiences, so that they in turn would become a laughing subject. Here, responses expressing approval and enjoyment of jokes as such could be questioned as to their ability to perceive and problematize the power structures behind the humour: who was speaking, about whom, and why in just this particular manner. The issue, as already suggested, was rather more readily confronted by comments classifiable as representing the phenomena of killjoy and unlaughter, showing an unwillingness to comply with the politics of mockery. Accordingly, it was necessary to differentiate between the various comments offered, based on how they related to the work of power in the humorous Russian television representations of Lukashenka.

To begin with, there were comments that did not openly engage with the power structures expressed or manifested through the television jokes. Two main functions could be identified for this type of discussions. First of all they, served to create distance to the object of the humour (Lukashenka) and, second, contributed to the construction of a feeling subject (the viewers) as a particular community.

One of the ways a killjoy reaction could manifest itself in the comments was through anti-Lukashenka statements. Here viewers openly expressed strong negative sentiments (e.g. hatred, disgust and contempt) towards, and personal frustration with, the object of the television laughter. Importantly, in these cases the object of the television humour and the object of the emotions expressed coincided. The emotions prompted by the encountered images of Lukashenka were aimed at creating distance from, and negating, their object. In this kind of comments, posters frequently resorted to using the shorthand «ИИОС» (from «Wish He'd Die») that, in the aftermath of 19 December 2010, had become a well-known signifier of oppositional feelings towards Lukashenka.³⁰ Comments along these lines could state, for example, that:

— This psychotic man is not funny anymore. (Poster «Bel», 30 May 2011) To this one user replies: 100 %, fed up, I feel sick of seeing his face (even in Multlichnosti) («oHo666», May 30 2011).³¹

— He doesn't hold anything sacred, shows not even a shred of shame, no conscience. HEROD will burn in HELL («Nika Kalinovskaya», 25 October 2010).³²

It is worth noting the reference to Herod, the ancient king of Judea, in the last quotation. In everyday language «Herod» holds a meaning of an extremely cruel person, whose actions are morally corrupted and violent, which in this context functions as a metaphor for Lukashenka.

In some comments the posters also turned the attention towards themselves. In these cases, a feeling subject was constructed against the backdrop of an anti-Lukashenka rhetoric. Interestingly, this was done based on predominantly negative emotions. Some of these commenters reported themselves to feel sad and wanting to cry, not laugh when watching the videos, while others stated that they felt ashamed. There were also commenters who spoke about feeling frightened by the fact that the portrayed situation is actually truthful and those who spoke of their experience of the Russian television humour about Lukashenka in terms of offence and humiliation. Examples of this type of comments include the following:

— This is not laughter; this is the fear that someone from abroad can say things you yourself are afraid of talking about publicly («Frau Mila», 21 April 2013).³³

— I should speak about disgust, aversion and shame, for living in the best (?) country with such a ruler («Lysy», 23 March 2009).³⁴

— So I watched this cartoon and feel ashamed, just ashamed («Zhenka», 1 January 2013).³⁵

— Funny, but it is frightening to live («Irina», 1 January 2013).³⁶

Importantly, these emotions were ascribed not merely to the authors of these comments themselves, but to an entire social group, the Belarusian people in general. One of the discursive means through which this was typically attained was the employment of the first-person plural pronoun »we«, which extended the speaking subject to the entire nation or »the people«. Such generalizations appeared to have a two-fold task. Firstly, they all, explicitly or implicitly, were geared to construct a particular community, based on articulated divisions and comparisons between those supporting Lukashenka and those standing in opposition to him in Belarus or between Belarusians and Russian. The following case is an example of the latter:

— It's time to REMEMBER! It's time to LEARN! These people sitting on their oil wells don't know and don't want to know that WE Belarusians are not their brothers and not beggars! Ours is the first constitution in the world!³⁷ We fought Tatars and Germans until they had their tails between their legs! («Dzmitry», 26 April 2013).³⁸

Secondly, the constructed communities were frequently presented as distinguished by their internally shared positions, feelings, and challenges. Among the issues identified in this regard as particularly Belarusian problems, revealed as such by the very existence of the main Russian television channel's humorous cartoons and skits about Lukashenka, were the absence of national pride, inability to stand up for oneself, and excessive patience and obedience. The quote above is instructive in this regard, as it shows the Russian television's representations of Lukashenka to be perceived as implying an unequal relationship between the Belarusian president and the Russian political elite. The nationalist reactions it exemplifies were aimed at restoring national dignity, indicating a sense of discomfort with this relationship. The comment quoted above takes distance from both the political discourse that posits there to be brotherhood between Belarusians and Russians and any type of media discourse that suggests the (financial and intellectual) incapacity of Lukashenka to be representative of Belarusians as a people or the nation of Belarus as such. In this manner, such comments expanded the object of the mockery and criticism in the Russian jokes: it was now presented to be not only, or even at all, about Lukashenka as a person, but

rather about the Belarusian people in general. The following quote illustrates this well:

— This is the problem – with us – the Belarusians! Right now we’re scolding Batska,³⁹ but give us free elections and we’ll again choose a similar »batska« and then we’ll be surprised ... And we won’t live, but decay once more (»Tamara«, 30 May 2011).⁴⁰

In general, the unlaughter in this kind of comments can be understood as expressing emotional work related to discomfort about both the object of the humour reacted to (Lukashenka) and laughter, perceived as a humiliating gesture in the context of the videos.

— Unlaughter II: Challenging the legitimacy of those laughing

There were also many comments that could be classified as unlaughter, challenging the power system behind the jokes. These comments questioned both the appropriateness of the enjoyment felt for the television programme fragments and the right of those producing the programmes to direct the laughter to their chosen object. The following two comments serve as an example:

— I am amused by those who’re laughing. What are they laughing at? That our salaries in Belarus are low? HA-HA-HA! That the country is governed by a petty tyrant? HA-HA-HA! Our neighbours are laughing at us and we’re laughing at ourselves together with them (»Evgenij Vaganovich Petrosyan«, 20 April 2013).⁴¹

— [Urgant, the Russian talk show host] knows perfectly what one is allowed to say and what one isn’t. Don’t buy his jokes; he is there exactly for this. Luka [Lukashenka] can be teased [...] but [Urgant] doesn’t touch the Russian assholes (»Konstantin«, 2 March 2013).⁴²

The latter quote is instructive also in that politics and power relationships are seen to be part and parcel of any media product. Both of the quotes, however, are representative of the comments in the sample overall in that they challenge Russian media politics for its role in enabling the kind of humorous representations of Lukashenka as protested against here, while at the same time pointing to blind spots in the Russian-made humour. The main discursive strategy relied on by those critical of that humour in this study was to construct an analogy, first, between Russian and Belarusian media in terms of their servility toward official state power and lack of free-

dom of expression and independence of thought, and, second, between Medvedev/Putin and Lukashenka in terms of the kind of political systems they have built. The following quotes from Belarusian online comments provide good examples of this:

- How brave. This is like back in the Brezhnev era on Red Square shouting »Down with Reagan!« But your own Medveput [Medvedev-Putin] is completely untouchable (»Bekish«, 9 May 2012).⁴³
- I'm not a fan of Luka [Lukashenka], but it'd be more in order for the Muscovites to mock their own man Putomedved [Putin-Medvedev]. But they can't do that, I'm ready to bet (»aaa«, 16 November 2009).⁴⁴
- Completely agree. The jokes on Putomedved are a taboo on Russian TV (»Raman«, 16 November 2009).⁴⁵
- Isn't it just a big joke how things are in Russia? Two men take turns in eating the food from the people's plate and billions are spent on prostitution and debauchery (»Inokentij«, 25 October 2010).⁴⁶
- Two thievish clans: one is in our country, the other – in the Kremlin. All they do is thievery. They, bastards, rob their own people (»Yadviga«, 2 January 2013).⁴⁷

The legitimacy of Russian media representations of Belarus was also questioned in other ways. The silence about poverty in Russia's small towns and villages could be pointed out, Russia's direct support to the Belarusian state and its interest in preserving the country's state system unchanged was often noted, and the media and political relationships in Russia were frequently described as corrupt (characterized by political control, clientelism, and bought-and-sold loyalty). All such comments, notably, came from explicitly anti-Russian positions critiquing the Russian state. »With such a friend you don't need an enemy«, concluded one commenter, for instance, after bringing up the financial support received by Lukashenka from the Russian government.⁴⁸ The comments killing the joy of humour thus issued from a critical attitude towards the political system in Russia. When the object of the discussions and emotional investments moved away from the Russian humorous representations of Lukashenka and the feeling subjects themselves to Russian (media) politics, the hierarchical power relations between the two countries underpinning these representations became problematized.

Finally, I will discuss how the image of Russia and its geopolitical interests was constructed in the comments. In

addition to what has already been stated about the subject, two further interpretations of Russian political motivations for mocking Lukashenka were proposed by commenters in the sample. Firstly, several Belarusian commenters suggested that the ongoing production of humorous representations of Lukashenka was a warning signal targeted to him, in response to his efforts to improve his relationships with the European Union (especially before 2010). In this interpretation, the humorous Russian representations of Lukashenka were seen as not being about any direct criticism of his politics, but merely a sign of the very high dependence of the Russian and Belarusian regimes on each other. Secondly, the choice of this particular object (Lukashenka and Belarus) for media humour was considered a Russian strategy for diverting ordinary Russians' attention away from the country's own problems. In the comments, Russia was discursively defined using the terminology of poverty, corruption, social and economic disparity, fear of ordinary citizens, and absence of justice and freedom. The following quotations offer examples of this:

- I've started to wonder why Russia, after being silent for some time, suddenly remembered Lukashenka again. My conclusion is that Moscow wants to warn him: you are looking in the wrong direction; you are searching for help in wrong places (»Rubtsov Mikhail Yur'evich«, 26 October 11).⁴⁹
- Moscow is encircled by NATO, in every direction; therefore they are going to support Lu [Lukashenka] no matter what...and give money no matter what. Just so there won't be NATO tanks rolling in towards Smolensk.⁵⁰ This how the Russians look at it (»dsdasakjnhlkkml«, 30 May 2011).⁵¹
- For »Mother of God, Chase Putin Out«, two years in prison for mothers of small children.⁵² Is that a free country? For defacing the fence of governor Tkachyov who built a dacha for himself in a national park ... a three-year suspended sentence⁵³ ... Is that a free country? (»Astrakhanka«, 2 January 2013).⁵⁴

Comments like these challenge the image of Russia as a safe, fair and advanced country as suggested by the jokes contrasting Lukashenka and Belarus with the Russian leadership and Russia. In addition, the notion of Russian financial superiority, in particular, was constantly questioned by commenters, with the kind of differences the video clips claimed to be there between the two countries regularly downplayed. Interestingly, only this type of comments received attention from viewers

openly identifying themselves as Russian. These, in turn, went on to argue against any attempts to find fault with Russian economics or politics, claiming all speculations about poverty in their country to be unfounded. They also defended the right of Russian television channels to produce cartoons and jokes about Lukashenka, asking why Belarusians did not for their part produce their own satire about Russia.

This way, moving from laughter and sympathy for the implied message in the visual representations (unequal power relationship between Belarus and Russia) to the position of a sorry and ashamed subject (whether Lukashenka or the entire nation), the online discussions created a specific space for critical interpretations of Russian television humour about the Belarusian president Lukashenka. While, in due course, these interpretations moved beyond any initial criticism of Lukashenka, there was, however, no attempt to defend him, either. At the same time, the critical comments posted were heterogeneous in terms of their functions and rhetorical tools. Some of them ventured alternative imaginings of Belarus in its highly particular geopolitical settings as a neighbour to Russia. What is interesting here, however, is that even these comments did not end up challenging the dominant (in Russia), dichotomous representation of world politics. In them, Belarus (because of Lukashenka's politics) was portrayed as trapped in its dependency on Russia, a condition, to be sure, that the commenters in the charter97.org site's audience would rather have wanted to change. Besides this dichotomous view, another blindly accepted framework among the commenters was one that resulted in a gendered imagination of politics. The representation of politics as a personal accomplishment of male leaders – Putin/Medvedev and Lukashenka – was not challenged in the comments.

— CONCLUSION —

As the analysis presented in this paper shows, focus on emotions can offer insights into how the work of humour in creating hierarchies and making claims for power and superiority may be challenged. Paying attention to the process of reception in this study helped research the subversive potentials of humour, even where its accompanying visual representations and, indeed, actual content, preserved the normative order intact. Unlaughter and killjoy reactions by online commenters were my way of identifying, on the one hand, signs of marginalization and othering and, on the other hand, sites of possible interventions and critical reflection on the politics of humour. The role of the Internet in helping actors overcome geographical boundaries separating media audiences and engage in the monolithic media politics of repressive states also became evident. It should, however be noted that the critical potential associated

with the reception process was to a large extent premised on the de-contextualization of humour and the particular characteristics of the Internet audience (e.g. its oppositional political views, interests to politics, etc.). The discussions and debates examined in this study, moreover, appear extremely topical for our world today, given the increasingly imperialist tendencies we are currently witnessing as affecting the Eastern European region, including war in Eastern Ukraine, and in light of the potential, identified by many, of humour and satire to evoke even physically violent responses (as in the case of the tragic events in Paris and Copenhagen in 2015, and, earlier, the reactions to the publication of the Muhammad cartoons in a Danish newspaper in 2005).

The recurrent appearance of certain type of entries on charter97.org over the period of five years provides a salient example of how the object of emotion circulates over time. This process of repetition features in emotional dynamics – as Ahmed puts it: »the more signs circulate the more affective they become«. ⁵⁵ The emotional reactions provoked by the censored Russian jokes varied, ranging from simple amusement and expressions of melancholy submission to openly and deliberately anti-Russian sentiments. Both the jokes themselves and the process in which their messages were received ultimately caused the object of the humour to expand. While the original target of the Russian television humour was Lukashenka, in the end it was seen to be Belarusians in general. At the same time, while Russian media representations kept silent about Russia's own geopolitical interests in Belarus, the online comments were to a notable extent preoccupied with denouncing them. Accordingly, as no comments at all were put forth in defence of Lukashenka, one might conjecture that the decisive emotional trigger for the majority of the posters was not any perceived unfair portrayal of Lukashenka as such, but the unequal power position of those identified as the producers behind these portrayals: Russian media and Russian politicians.

At the same time as they were able to express and sustain their critique of Russia's corrupt political class and political system and its financial stranglehold on Belarus, the commenters on charter97.org came to reproduce and perpetuate a simplified image of a bipolar world, one in which their country was caught between a strong but autocratic and badly behaving Russia in the east and a free, democratic, and liberally minded Europe in the west. Interestingly, though, while this contrast was always implied, it was never openly articulated. The same dichotomy – indeed, an irreconcilable opposition – between Russia and Europe also underpinned the visual representations of the video clips themselves. This blind acceptance of an inherited (but today largely outdated) way of looking at the world is what appears to continue to mark the

geopolitical imagination in the region still in our time. In this respect my contribution as a researcher in this study is also to reveal the limit of the critical potential of unlaughter by pointing out both the normativity of a bipolar imagination of the world and the gendered order of the politics in Eastern Europe. The same imagination, when addressing politics in general, presents it all as strictly »men's work«, with major blind spots about class and gender privileges, reproduced in both the humorous portrayals of Lukashenka as well as in the viewer comments to these portrayals. ■

■ — E N D N O T E S —

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1 It is not possible to point out who directly is responsible for censorship in Belarus as it is closed information. In order to edit Russian TV-programmes the Belarusian authorities use the time differences between different regions in Russia and Belarus, so they record the broadcasting for the eastern part of Russia that happens several hours earlier.

2 This was the third year of Lukashenka's presidency. On 26 November 1996, on the basis of a referendum not recognized, among others, by OSCE, the European Council, and the EU, the country's constitution was significantly amended to expand the power of the president.

3 E.g., Shulamit Reinharz: *Feminist Methods in Social Research* (New York, 1992); Donna Haraway: »Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspectives« in *Feminist Studies* 14:3 (1988).

4 Villy Tsakona and Diana Elena Popa: »Humour in politics and the politics of humour« in Villy Tsakona and Diana Elena Popa (eds.): *Studies in Political Humour: In between Political Critique and Public Entertainment* (Amsterdam, 2011), 4.

5 Michael Billig: *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour* (London, 2005).

6 Ibid.,

7 Sara Ahmed: *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham and London, 2010), 50–88.

8 E.g. Neringa Klumbyte: »Political intimacy: Power, laughter, and coexistence in late Soviet Lithuania« in *East European Politics and Societies* 25:14 (2011); David L. Paletz: »Political humor and authority: From support to subversion« in *International Political Science Review* 11:4 (1990); Simon Weaver:

»The 'Other' laughs back: Humour and resistance in anti-racist comedy« in *Sociology* 44:1 (2010).

9 Mikhail M. Bakhtin: *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin, 1981); see also Klumbyte: »Political intimacy«, 658.

10 Klumbyte: »Political intimacy«; Majken Jul Sorensen: »Humor as a serious strategy of nonviolent resistance to oppression« in *Peace & Change* 33:2 (2008); Helena Flam: »Anger in repressive regimes: A footnote to *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* by James Scott« in *European Journal of Social Theory* 7:2 (2004).

11 E.g., Rachel R. Gouin: »What's so funny? Humor in women's accounts of their involvement in social action« in *Qualitative Research* 4:1 (2004); Katy Pearce and Adnan Hajizada: »No laughing matter: Humor as a means of dissent in the digital era: The case of authoritarian Azerbaijan« in *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 22:1 (2014); Tsakona and Popa: »Humour in politics and the politics of humour«.

12 Pearce and Hajizada: »No laughing matter«.

13 Arvo Krikmann and Liisi Laineste (eds.): *Permitted Laughter: Socialist, Post-Socialist Socialist and Never-Socialist Socialist Humour* (Tartu, 2009).

14 Tsakona and Popa: »Humour in politics and the politics of humour«.

15 See, e.g., Elena Vartanova: *Postsovetskie Transformatsii Rossijskikh SMI i Zhurnalistiki*

[Post-Soviet Transformation of Russian Media and Journalism] (Moscow, 2013).

16 Juha Ridanpää: »Geopolitics of humour: The Muhammed cartoon crisis and the Kaltio comic strip episode in Finland« in *Geopolitics* 14:4 (2009).

17 Pertti Alasuutari (ed.): *Rethinking the Media Audience: The New Agenda* (London, 1999).

18 Jason Dittmer and Nicholas Gray: »Popular geopolitics 2.0: Towards methodologies of the everyday« in *Geography Compass* 4:11 (2010); Klaus Dodds and Philip Kirby: »It's not a laughing matter: Critical geopolitics, humour and unlaughter« in *Geopolitics* 18:1 (2013).

19 Darren Purcell, Melissa Scott Brown and Mahmut Gokmen: »Achmed the dead terrorist and humor in popular geopolitics« in *GeoJournal*, 75:3 (2010), 377–379.

20 Ibid., 379.

21 This might be explained, at least in part, by the changes that Belarusian television channels underwent in 2008–2013 in developing their own content, which led to a decrease in the number of Russian materials broadcast. Interestingly, although *Projectorparishilton*, one of the constant headaches for the Belarusian censors, was simply closed in 2012, in 2011 a new Belarusian television programme *Klub redaktorov* («Edi-

tors' Club») was launched. The new programme openly follows the format of its Russian predecessor, the *Projectorparishilton*, but, as expected, chooses other targets for its humour.

22 For comparison, 21 out of the total of 54 entries on the current (at the time of this writing) main page of charter97.org have no comments at all to them, while the rest of the entries have between 2 and 41 comments to them.

23 Jonathan Potter: »Discourse analysis and constructionist approaches: Technical background«, in Richardson J.T.E. (ed.): *Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods for Psychology and the Social Sciences* (London, 1996); Rosalind Gill: »Discourse analysis: Practical implementation«, in Richardson J.T.E. (ed.): *Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods for Psychology and the Social Sciences* (London, 1996).

24 Sara Ahmed: *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York, 2004).

25 E.g., »What? Where? When?« (*Mul'tlichnosti*, episode 37); »The Voice« (*Mul'tlichnosti*, episode 42); »Who Would Like to Be a Millionaire?« (*Mul'tlichnosti*, episode 4).

26 *Mul'tlichnosti*, episode 15 and *Mul'tlichnosti*, episode 39, »*Taxi-2*«.

27 Interestingly, this episode was aired just before the 2010 presidential elections in Belarus, a period when some notable EU politicians such as the foreign ministers of Germany and Poland, Guido Westerwelle and Radoslav Sikorski, came to Minsk to meet Lukashenka in person and promise significant financial support for the country in case the elections would be free and democratic.

28 *Vechernij Urgant*, May 14, 2012.

29 *Prozhectorparishiltol*, June, 2009.

30 This was the date of the fourth presidential elections in Belarus that saw severe police violence towards peaceful political protesters.

31 <http://www.charter97.org/ru/news/2011/5/30/39067/comments/> [accessed 1 October 2015]. All translations by the author.

32 <http://www.charter97.org/ru/news/2010/10/25/33226/comments/> [accessed 1 October 2015].

33 <http://charter97.org/ru/news/2013/4/20/68207/comments/> [accessed 1 October 2015].

34 <http://www.charter97.org/ru/news/2009/3/22/16446/comments/> [accessed 1 October 2015].

35 <http://charter97.org/ru/news/2013/1/1/63452/comments/> [accessed 1 October 2015].

36 Ibid.

37 A reference to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, a European state from the 13th century until 1795 that, at its heyday, comprised the territory of contemporary Belarus, Lithuania, Ukraine, and parts of Russia and forms an important histori-

cal reference point to Belarusian oppositional intellectuals in their work in imagining their nation.

38 <http://charter97.org/ru/news/2013/4/20/68207/comments/> [accessed 1 October 2015].

39 *Batska* is Belarusian for »father« and a popular nickname for Lukashenka, conveying his patriarchal stance and attitude towards the Belarusian people.

40 <http://www.charter97.org/ru/news/2011/5/30/39067/comments/> [accessed 1 October 2015].

41 <http://charter97.org/ru/news/2013/4/20/68207/comments/> [accessed 1 October 2015].

42 <http://charter97.org/ru/news/2013/3/1/66050/comments/> [accessed 1 October 2015].

43 <http://charter97.org/ru/news/2012/5/9/51930/comments/> [accessed 1 October 2015].

44 <http://charter97.org/ru/news/2009/11/16/23708/comments/> [accessed 1 October 2015].

45 Ibid.

46 <http://www.charter97.org/ru/news/2010/10/25/33226/comments/> [accessed 1 October 2015].

47 <http://charter97.org/ru/news/2013/1/1/63452/comments/> [accessed 1 October 2015].

48 <http://www.charter97.org/ru/news/2013/3/1/66050/comments/> [accessed 1 October 2015].

49 <http://charter97.org/ru/news/2011/10/24/43923/comments/> [accessed 1 October 2015].

50 A Russian town on the border of Belarus.

51 <http://www.charter97.org/ru/news/2011/5/30/39067/comments/> [accessed 1 October 2015].

52 A reference to a performance-prayer by the feminist punk rock protest group Pussy Riot in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior and the subsequent imprisonment of two members of the group.

53 Alexander Tkachyov, governor of the Krasnodar region at the time. Yevgeny Vitishko, an environmental activist, allegedly spray-painted »This Is Our Forest« and »Sanya Is a Thief« on an illegally erected fence on protected lands, wanting to attract attention to rare pine trees being cut down in the area to make room for a palatial summer home there for Tkachyov. Vitishko's suspended sentence was later upgraded to an unconditional three-year prison sentence.

54 <http://charter97.org/ru/news/2013/1/1/63452/comments/> [accessed 1 October 2015].

55 Ahmed: *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 45.