https://doi.org/10.7592/EJHR.2025.13.4.1078

The European Journal of Humour Research 13 (4) 118–137
www.europeanjournalofhumour.org

The Belarus-Poland migrant crisis: views from both sides of the wall

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Abstract

The migrant crisis on the Polish-Belarusian and Lithuanian-Belarusian borders has resulted in border crossing restrictions and the construction of walls separating Poland and Lithuania from Belarus. It has also provoked humorous reactions in online media. We discuss the targets of these humorous reactions and illustrate how humour highlights the gap between Belarusian and Polish authorities' activities/claims and reality. We analyse conservative (pro-government) and liberal (anti-government) humour from both sides, and reflect on the similarities and differences across countries and political stances. We argue that Belarusian humour contextualises the migrant crisis within the broader Belarusian political crisis rather than within the international political landscape, though international references are not uncommon in Belarusian conservative humour. In Polish humour, however, what prevails are meme topics on Polish politics or people and institutions. The migrants themselves become targets more frequently in Polish jokes and memes than in Belarusian ones, although only in conservative humour. The analysis illustrates how different political forces use humour to promote their own agenda. It also paves the way for future studies of liberal and conservative humour, as the adoption of either of the two types of humour is dependent on individual psychological factors and political stances. It is also subject to changes in the political situation as has been the case in Poland.

Keywords: migrant crisis, Poland, Belarus, conservative, liberal, targets.

1. Introduction

Since 2021, tens of thousands of migrants from Iraq, Afghanistan and other Asian and Middle Eastern countries have attempted to cross the border from Belarus to Poland and Lithuania (and, to a slightly lesser extent, Latvia) and settle in the EU. At times these attempts have caused major upheavals in Belarus-EU relations, the most prominent episode being the migrant crisis

of November 2021 when hundreds of migrants gathered near the Bruzgi-Kuźnica border crossing and attempted to enter Poland (Baziur, 2022). The migrant crisis has restricted border crossings and led to the construction of fences separating Poland and Lithuania from Belarus.

Alongside these serious consequences, the crisis has also provoked humorous reactions in online media. Humour has flourished on both sides of the border and across the political spectrum. During conflicts and crises, humour has an important coping function and bonds groups of like-minded individuals together while at the same time partly exacerbating conflicts (Lewis, 2006, pp. 7–8; Zelizer, 2010). Therefore, it is unsurprising that each of the national and political groups has created its own palette of humorous expressions that aligns with its ideological stance and draws on the political, economic and social contexts within which each group functions.

In such crisis contexts, it is worth exploring the connections between the political stance as expressed in humour and the targets of ridicule. By political stance we mean "an affective or attitudinal position expressed toward a given target" (Bestvater & Monroe, 2023, p. 236). Wiggins (2019) incorporates stance into the discussion of humour as "content and stance often merge into one ideological, semiotic, and intertextual act of meaning construction" (Laineste & Shilikhina, 2024, p. 351). The stance was defined slightly differently in the two countries: while in Polish data the main dividing line lay between conservative and liberal humour, in Belarusian humour it is more accurate to distinguish between pro- and anti-government humour. Even though the politics of the current Belarusian government are largely conservative/right-wing (for example, traditional patriarchal values, cult of the strong leader etc.), it combines these values with left-wing economic and social policies (such as universal healthcare and the crucial role of state property), so the dividing line between the Belarusian government and its opponents does not follow the classical left-/right- wing dichotomy.

However, in this case it is possible to draw some parallels between Belarusian pro-government humour and Polish conservative humour (especially the nationalist agenda and pro-welfare and effectively socialist policies), on the one side, and Belarusian anti-government humour and Polish liberal humour, on the other side. Because conservatives governed Poland during the migrant crisis of 2021, conservative humour can be regarded as humour made from the position of power, i.e., "punching down", whereas liberal humour ridiculed those in power and was thus "punching up" (see, e.g., Hietalahti, 2024, who distinguishes between "punching up" and "kicking down"). Similar dynamics can be traced in Belarusian pro- and anti-government humour, respectively. Although it is sometimes argued (especially by supporters of the superiority theory of humour and laughter, e.g. Baruchello & Arnarson, 2021) that all targeted (satirical) humour involves an element of cruelty or involves negative emotions—Phiddian (2020, p. 3) even claims that the purpose of satire it to "mobilise the CAD triad of public emotions: contempt, anger and distrust"—this may be difficult to assess in an internet meme study since researchers are reduced to reconstructing emotions of meme creators based only on the verbal and visual data. While plotting the stances of humour in our dataset, we took into account both the sources of humour (i.e., social media that consistently advocate for a certain stance) and its content. As the data distribution across stances shows, Polish humour was less polarised (as some of the examples did not express a clear stance and were marked as neutral), whereas Belarusian humour was as polarised as Belarusian society after the 2020-2021 protests (see also Laineste and Fiadotava, 2024).

Earlier research has shown that devoted supporters of a certain political stance might be particularly receptive to the humour that targets their opponents (Becker, 2012) and that "internal political efficacy" increases when humour ridicules political opponents (Becker, 2014). Therefore, by analysing the targets of humour with regard to the stance of its creators and sharers, we can uncover the aspects of the crisis that different groups bring to the forefront and consider the most controversial and joke-worthy in the polarised political circumstances.

We aim to perform said analysis based on a case study of the 2021 migrant crisis and respond to the following research questions:

1. What targets were most prevalent in Belarusian and Polish humour across different political stances?
2. How did Belarusian and Polish humour contextualise the crisis within the broader political landscape of the two countries?
3. Which aspects of political context affected digital political humour in times of crisis?

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Humour and crisis in the digital age

Humour goes hand-in-hand with conflicts and crises, which tend to generate prolific humour production (Kuipers, 2002; Yehorova et al., 2023). In times of conflict, humour can make the boundaries between religious and/or political groups more visible (Kuipers, 2011; Nieuwenhuis & Zijp, 2022), thus increasing political polarisation in a society (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017; Herkman, 2019). Alongside serious discourse on controversial topics, humour can be used to express opinions and promote various agendas, making complex social and political issues more understandable but also introducing elements of ambiguity and playfulness into their discussion (Fiadotava et al., 2023).

Humour can also stimulate public involvement in politics (Becker, 2014; Chiaro, 2018), which becomes essential at times of crisis. However, the role of humour in relation to political participation remains ambiguous, as in some cases—for example, in authoritarian societies—it becomes a way to acknowledge that the situation is unacceptable, while not being able to do anything about it, except for ridiculing the situation (Yurchak, 1997). In such instances, humour becomes a safe space outside of official propaganda where its creators and sharers are in control (Oring, 2004). This applies both to the oral practices of joke-telling (Yurchak, 1997) and internet memes, which become a "digital analgesic" for people who can only voice their criticism via humour (Wiggins, 2019, p. 75).

The digital age has opened up new opportunities and challenges for humour, in general, and for humour during crises, in particular. The participatory nature of digital (social) media has allowed a greater number of people and more diverse social groups (including previously underrepresented ones) to voice their points of view and spread their ideas both in serious and humorous forms (see, for example, Shrodes, 2021). These groups create and maintain digital communities; humour thus becomes one of the ways to mobilise them and express solidarity (Carlson & Frazer, 2021) while offering an alternative perspective on politics (Lukianova et al., 2019, pp. 72–73). One of the most recurrent forms of digital humour—namely, internet memes—can occasionally become a tool of political activism (Wagner & Schwarzenegger, 2020). The (semi-)anonymity of digital spaces also provides a fruitful ground for both non-humorous aggression and aggressive forms of humour; the latter might become particularly effective as humour sometimes—though not always—falls below the radar of institutional censorship (see, for example, Flores-Borjabad, 2018).

2.2. Humour and political stance

Political and social conflicts, and subsequent polarisation, bring one more important consequence: the siloing of audiences, as conservative and liberal audiences start drifting apart through the consumption of different media products and, among others, different sources and forms of comedy (Sienkiewicz & Marx, 2022). Whereas many (mostly liberal) academics have

largely focused on liberal humour and consider right-wing humour unfunny (Attardo, 2023, p. 219), conservative humour is on the rise (Sienkiewicz & Marx, 2022). This happens also in the less-researched contexts of Central and Eastern Europe, including such authoritarian regimes as the Belarusian one. Therefore, the comparative study of conservative and liberal humour in these contexts seems to be a timely endeavour. Supplementing Sienkiewicz & Marx's (2022) study, which uses data from Western democratic countries, our comparative approach offers new perspectives on how the same topic (in this case, the 2021 migrant crisis) can be reflected in conservative and liberal humour, and helps shed a new light on these notions.

Analyses of pro- and anti-government humour in authoritarian regimes reveal that they often rely upon the same motifs, both content-related (for example, comparing opponents to animals) and visual (for example, recurrent meme templates) (Laineste & Fiadotava, 2024). In some cases, audiences of both stances even share exactly the same jokes, thus making the implicit political stance of the humour creators the only feature that distinguishes the humour of the two audiences (Attardo, 2023, p. 158-160; Laineste & Fiadotava, 2024). Other differences between pro- and anti-government humour in authoritarian societies might stem from a more general context of political and media landscape in these societies and beyond. For example, anti-government humour must be more subtle in order to (try to) avoid state censorship (Laineste & Fiadotava, 2024; see also Flores-Borjabad, 2018).

In democratic societies, liberal and conservative humour face fewer constraints, and thus their differences stem largely from the cultural and social backgrounds of their target audiences and discourse spaces. They do, however, tend to rely on a tradition of humour use as well as general political divides, e.g. between cosmopolitan and nationalist, pro- and anti-European, or pro- and anti-Christian stances (cf. Brzozowska & Chłopicki, 2024). Recent research has also shown interesting differences between Polish liberal and conservative humour, with the former being more ironic and indirect, and the latter more sarcastic and explicit (or being in need of closure; see Young 2019). The differences also extend to the general attitude towards audiences, with conservative humour relying on omniscient narrators who possess knowledge, of which they "remind" their audiences, while for liberal humourists shared factual knowledge is less essential and the need for ambiguity is greater (cf. Chłopicki, 2023).

3. Methods and data

We collected 239 Belarusian and 103 Polish humorous items—i.e. textual, visual and audiovisual internet jokes and memes found on meme and jokes aggregators and humorous social media accounts—revolving around the migrant crisis of 2021. The data was collected for 1 month (November 1-30, 2021) when the migrant crisis was most acute and most covered in the news in both countries. We have first identified a list of Polish and Belarusian online sources that continuously post humorous content on current political events in the two countries. Then, we surveyed all their publications in November 2021 and selected all the posts (regardless of their popularity) on the topic of the migrant crisis, i.e. those that used explicit verbal or visual references to migrants, their activities, countries of origin, Polish-Belarusian border region and other locations associated with migrants. While both in Poland and in Belarus the media coverage of the migrant crisis was extensive, the Belarusian sources yielded more data. This can possibly be explained by the general increase of online political humour production after the 2020 presidential elections in Belarus, with dozens of new humorous social media accounts coming into existence and the previously existing accounts posting more and more political jokes and memes (cf. Fiadotava & Zakharkevich, 2025).

Belarusian items were collected from the social media platforms X and Telegram, with a particular focus on the latter, as it is one of the most popular social media platforms in Belarus,

with 43% of the population using it daily (as of January 2021; see Auseyushkin, 2021). Belarusian pro-government humour (78 items, 32.6% of Belarusian data) was collected from Telegram channels that openly support the Lukashenko regime and post both serious and humorous content, including such channels as "Shkvarka News" [Pork rind news], "Polesskij Partizan" [Polesian partisan], "Zhivet zhe Belarus'!" [Belarus does live], "Ostorozhno, pravda!" [Beware, truth!], "Pereobutaya real'nost'" [The reality that has changed its tune] and "ZmagarOK" [A little protester]. Belarusian anti-government humour (161 items, 67.4% of Belarusian data) was collected from popular humorous Telegram channels that post humorous and satirical comments on Belarusian politics, including such channels as "Chaj z malinavym varennem" [Tea with raspberry jam] and "Ha-ha, ya tut zhivu" [Ha-ha, I live here], as well as from the X accounts of various Belarusian comedians and satirists. It should be noted that anti-government political humour in Belarus was largely expressed by Belarusian activists from outside of the country.

Polish data (35.9% of which we have classified as representing liberal humour, 42.7% as conservative humour, and 20.4% as neutral) were collected from a range of online sources, including popular meme aggregators, such as memsekcja, paczaizm,pl, kwejk.pl, joe-monster.org, demotywatory.pl and blasty.pl. Meme targets and political stances were not always easy to recognise as these aggregators tend to collect memes from across the political spectrum and sometimes use non-political memes as well. Hence our choices were based on the sociopolitical context of November 2021 and the best contextual interpretations of the memes, including the identification of stances and targets as they could be reconstructed back then.

The data were subsequently coded by these two criteria: stance and target. Target was selected as a criterion because it is one of the identifiable elements of joke or meme content, i.e., target is one of the knowledge resources of humorous texts (cf. Attardo & Raskin, 1991) that is closely connected with the values of people who produce and share these humorous texts (Davies, 2011) and their stance (Becker, 2012). Unlike formal characteristics of online humorous texts such as genre, targets differ across political stances (cf. Laineste & Fiadotava, 2024). While coding for the targets, we used the inductive content analysis method (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008). The first stage was open coding: we explored our dataset and listed all the particular targets of the jokes (for example, Putin, Lukashenko, Belarusian border guards, and European politics). Then, we made categories using our codes. The final stage was abstraction, during which we grouped the categories to make them as concise as possible. The final list of categories included: Belarusian people and institutions, Belarusian government politics, Belarusian protesters, Belarusian government rhetoric, Ethnic, General situation, International, Migrants, Polish people and institutions, Polish politics, and Polish rhetoric. Some of these categories were found across both Polish and Belarusian datasets, whereas five of the categories were found only in the Belarusian dataset: Belarusian people and institutions, Belarusian protesters and opposition, Belarusian government rhetoric, General situation, and Polish rhetoric. In some examples categories overlapped. For instance, quite a few Belarusian anti-government memes and jokes simultaneously targeted both Belarusian government rhetoric and Belarusian government politics. Polish and Belarusian datasets were coded by both authors together, and in the rare cases any disagreement on the target arose, the authors discussed it and reached a consensus.

We singled out the most popular categories and applied the comparative method both across countries and across political orientations. In our analysis, we paid close attention not only to the content, but also to the context of the humour in our dataset in order for our interpretation to be applicable beyond the limits of this case study.

4. Analysis

As Table 1 shows, local opponents are among the most popular targets of both pro- and anti-government Belarusian humour. Anti-government jokes and memes make fun of the official Belarusian government's words and actions, while pro-government humour often ridicules the Belarusian opposition's reaction to the migrant crisis. Four examples below illustrate both of these polarised stances.

Table 1. Belarusian humour: recurrent targets (most frequent targets in terms of % marked in bold)

	Anti-government dataset	Pro-government dataset	Total dataset
Belarusian government rhetoric	**47.8**	0	32.2
Belarusian government politics	**38.5**	0	25.9
Belarusian people and institutions	10.6	1.3	7.5
International organisations and politics	10.6	**29.5**	16.7
Migrants	6.8	1.3	5
Polish politics	0.6	**20.5**	7.1
Belarusian protesters and opposition	0	**38.5**	12.6
Polish rhetoric	0	11.5	3.7
Polish people and institutions	0	15.4	5

One of the textual jokes illustrates how anti-government humour ridiculed Belarusian government rhetoric that blamed the EU for instigating the migrant crisis:

> *EU, stop torturing migrants! Why are you provoking people's reluctance to stay in Belarus with your standard of living?!* (Posted on November 15, 2021. Source: https://x.com/m_for_mixacb/status/1460250873280569348)

This ironic comment asserts that the EU is indeed to blame, but recontextualises the Belarusian government's rhetoric by implying that the "guilt" of the EU lies in the fact that the standards of living there are high, and therefore that migrants from the Middle East prefer not to apply for asylum in Belarus but try to get across the border to the EU. Figure 1 humorously compares a large group of migrants being transported towards the Polish border by the Belarusian government to the orcs army marching in *The Lord of the Rings.* The leader of the orcs (visible in the picture) is implicitly compared to the Belarusian security services. Depicting the Belarusian authorities, who pretend that their actions are "legal" (as stated in a caption that summarises the Belarusian government's position), as the villains underscores the hypocrisy of the Belarusian government and presents them as the evil side of the conflict.

Figure 1. Belarusian politics (anti-government stance). Caption (in Russian)[1]: "Belarusian security forces lead a large column of migrants to a Polish checkpoint to try to get them into Poland 'legally'". Source: https://t.me/belteanews/21296. Posted on November 15, 2021

On the other side of the political spectrum, Belarusian pro-government humour often targets their political opponents, i.e., people who participated in the 2020-2021 protests against electoral fraud and police brutality. In Figure 2, these people are collectively portrayed as a pig with a superimposed Belarusian national flag, which became one of the symbols of the post-electoral protests. The meme not only tries to denigrate the opponents of the Belarusian government by portraying them as pigs but also implies that their attitude towards the current migrant crisis is hypocritical as they only became alarmed when the migrants started going to Germany via Poland and did not react at all to previous waves of immigrants who arrived through other countries. Poland, according to the Belarusian propaganda narrative, is one of the puppet-masters of Belarusian protesters; therefore, the meme suggests that the Belarusian opposition does not care about the migrants per se but only follows their "Polish masters."

[1] The Belarusian examples presented here are originally in Russian language because, despite Belarusian and Russian being both official languages in Belarus and legally having equal status, the majority of Belarusian population use Russian in daily communication (see, for example, Zeller and Sitchinava, 2019).

Figure 2. Belarusian protesters (pro-government stance). Upper caption: "Migrants are going to Germany via". Top image: "Italy". Middle image: "Hungary". Bottom image: "Poland". All captions are in Russian. Posted on November 9, 2024. Source: https://t.me/orsha_pereobutaya/21553

Another feature of the Belarusian dataset of humour on this topic is that Belarusians of both political orientations have created only a few jokes targeting migrants themselves. Given that migrants are frequently a part of the joke situation[2] (such as in Figures 1 and 2), such a small number of jokes at their expense might indicate that Belarusians did not regard them as important perpetrators of the conflict, but rather as one of the manifestations of the larger crisis. As can be seen from the quantitative distribution of targets in Table 1 and the figures discussed above, this crisis was regarded largely as a continuation of a large-scale internal conflict between the Belarusian government and opposition that had started in 2020.

However, there were also international targets in Belarusian humour. A notable difference between pro- and anti-government humour is the number of jokes each of the groups makes at the expense of the external targets—the Polish government's words and actions, Polish people and institutions, and international organisations and politics. Belarusian anti-government humour rarely features these targets, and when it does, the specific targets within this group are not always the same as the international targets of pro-government humour. For example, several anti-government jokes ridicule Russian politics or rhetoric and hint that Russia is also actively contributing to the crisis. In contrast, none of the Belarusian pro-government jokes targets Russia, even though they ridicule other political actors (such as the Polish government) for believing that Russia is to blame for the conflict. Alongside Poland, Belarusian pro-government humour also targets the EU and NATO. It often suggests, however illogically, that the NATO invasion of Iraq—in which Polish armed forces also took part—caused the migrant crisis of

[2] This is one of the six parameters of jokes known as Knowledge Resources (script opposition, logical mechanism, situation, target, narrative structure and language), see Attardo & Raskin (1991).

2021. A Belarusian pro-government caricature features then Polish president Andrzej Duda and then Prime-Minister Mateusz Morawiecki hiding from migrants from Iraq behind a door adorned with the EU and NATO symbols. At the same time, a poster behind their back says that they plan to "democratise" Belarus in a similar way as they did in Iraq, i.e., by invading it. This interpretation is enhanced by the use of the term Kresy[3] in the poster (in Polish).

One aspect that Belarusian pro- and anti-government humorous datasets have in common with regards to the international targets is that both of them feature several jokes ridiculing such international organisations as the Red Cross, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the United Nations (UN) for their activities with regard to the crisis. The emphasis is placed differently though: pro-government humour accuses the international organisations of reacting too slowly (Figure 3a), whereas anti-government humour ironically comments on the fact that these organisations cooperate with the Belarusian government and disregard Belarusians' problems while (pretending to) help migrants (Figure 3b).

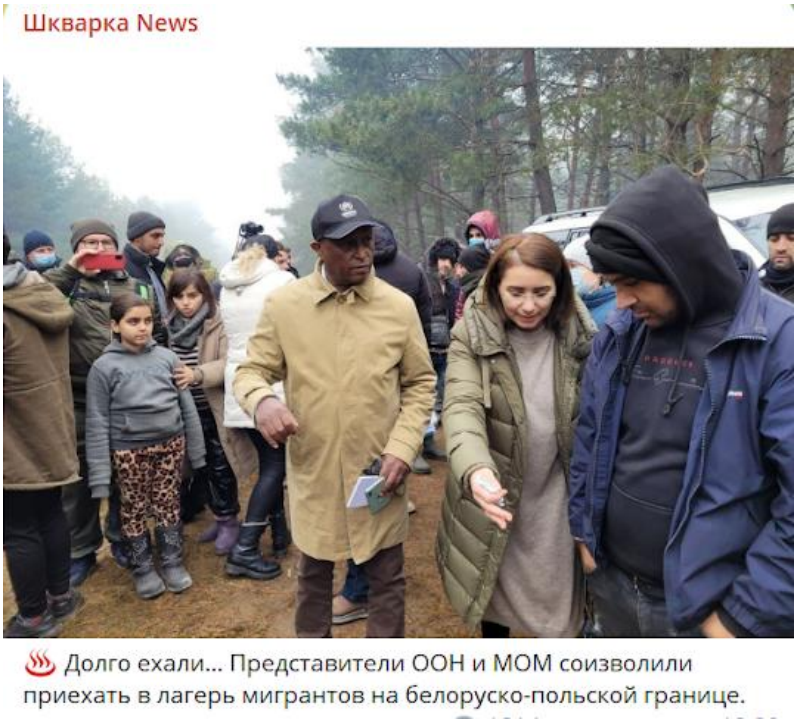

Figure 3a. International targets (pro-government stance). Caption (in Russian): "It was a long journey... UN and IOM representatives deigned to come to the migrant camp on the Belarusian-Polish border". Posted on November 11, 2021. Source: https://t.me/belshkvarka/28117

[3] Kresy (Borderlands in Polish) is a term that refers to the Eastern part of the Second Polish Republic in 1918-1939. This territory comprises the present-day Western Belarus, Western Ukraine and Eastern Lithuania, and was inhabited largely by ethnically non-Polish populations. Nowadays, the term is politically loaded: it is negatively perceived in Belarus as it reminds Belarusians of Poland's attempts to colonise this area, while it is perceived with nostalgia in Poland.

Figure 3b. International targets (anti-government stance). Lower caption: "The Red Cross has announced a USD 10,200,000 donation collection campaign to help the migrants". Caption on the stage: "Belarusians' problems". Caption on the column: "The migrants on the border". All captions are in Russian. Posted on November 27, 2021. Source: https://t.me/belteanews/21424

Our analysis of the targets indicates that Belarusian humour creators on both sides of the political spectrum used the migrant crisis to make fun of their political opponents. Humour—especially the pro-government part of the dataset—also ridiculed international targets, but in many cases such ridicule indirectly referred to the situation in Belarus as well (as can be seen from the mention of Belarus on the poster in the pro-government caricature described above and the mention of Belarusians in Figure 3b). This indicates that the vernacular perception of the migrant crisis on both sides of the Belarusian political spectrum mostly tied it back to the 2020-2021 post-electoral protests rather than treating it as an isolated political event.

Moving on to Polish humour, we can see the statistics of targets in Table 2. What is striking here is the prevalence of meme topics on Polish politics or people and institutions (60.8% in total) as opposed to those on international or specifically Belarusian politics (17.2% in total, which largely focuses on Lukashenko) and migrants as such (21.3%). This suggests that the migrant crisis on the Belarusian border was largely perceived in terms of local political polarisation or local personalities (citizens in general, the army, border guards, police, celebrities or even the healthcare system), rather than the expected international politics. There are some explanations for this phenomenon, which point to the media propaganda of the conservative government at the time: these focused on the support of the police and border guards activities and the threat of and deceit on the part of migrants, as well as the treacherous opposition media stance that supported the delivery of humanitarian aid and generally the activities of NGOs in the border area.

Table 2. Polish humour: recurrent targets (in %). The most frequent targets are marked in bold

	Conservative dataset	Liberal dataset	undefined/neutral dataset	Total dataset
Polish politics	15.9	**64.9**	9.5	31.7
Polish people and institutions	22.7	**35.1**	**33.3**	29.1
Migrants	**45.5**	2.7	14.3	21.3
International (incl. Russian, Lithuanian, German, British, EU)	11.4	5.4	14.3	8.5
Belarusian government politics	6.8	0	33.3	8.7
Ethnic	6.8	0	0	2.9

Some elements of Table 2 clearly stand out and as such marked in the table in boldface. The creators of memes on Polish politics and Polish people and institutions tended to take a liberal stance which went hand-in-hand with their position in Polish society at that time: the liberals were in opposition to the conservative government and targeted its politics and institutions as a way to criticise the government. On the other side of the spectrum, nearly all creators of memes on the subject of migrants took a conservative stance, which aligned with the anti-migrant policy of the government at the time. This could be explained by the political situation in Poland in 2021 when the memes were collected. The conservative government was then in power and, as suggested above, the border situation had become a contentious political subject. Liberal meme creators were apparently inspired by the government's actions, which included closing the border area or "pushbacks," i.e. forcing the migrants back across the border. Conservative meme creators usually accepted the government line of argument, which was particularly evident in a famous press conference by the Ministers of Internal Affairs and Head of Security Services on 27 September 2021, who showed pictures allegedly acquired from migrants' phones and who claimed that the migrants were dangerous, deviant, armed, mainly male and not necessarily poor at all.[4]

A very good illustration of the liberal opposition perspective on the crisis was offered in the feature film by the internationally renowned and awarded Polish filmmaker Agnieszka Holland entitled *Zielona granica* (Green Border). The film, released in September 2023, criticises the lack of humanity on the part of the Polish government and border guards and praises the selfless involvement of human right activists and organisations as well as local people at the border who often endangered their own well-being and safety. Predictably, the film was heavily criticised by the governing party, including the conservative President of Poland himself, who, in a television interview, incongruously and controversially cited the Polish slogan from the Second World War, "Only pigs sit in the cinema," thus trying to discourage viewers from seeing the

[4] See TVN24 (2021). Notably, after the government change, both ministers were accused of spreading pornographic images and acting beyond their competences (TVN24, 2023).

film in the cinemas, just as the Poles had been discouraged from visiting Nazi cinemas in occupied Poland.[5]

Below we discuss selected examples from our dataset in order to illustrate the most representative categories of the memes and to explain their political stances. Figure 4 is a mocking response to migrants frequently cutting the barbed wire fence that was raised along the Polish-Belarusian border by the conservative Law and Justice government in response to the crisis. The liberal opposition criticised the government for being incompetent and for building a makeshift barrier, which was easily crossed by both migrants and Belarusian border guards, who could cut it by means of garden shears or get across it by climbing small ladders (sarcastically called "heavy-duty siege equipment" in the meme). Thus, a criticism of the state of the barrier is a clear signal of a liberal, anti-conservative government opposition stance at the time.[6]

Figure 4. Polish politics (liberal stance). Upper caption: "We are doomed." Lower caption: "They have heavy-duty siege equipment."

Figure 5 clearly represents a liberal stance as well. The conservative Polish president is also here represented as a naive but over-confident politician: he attempts to show his leadership, especially through his body language (an outstretched hand and arm) and advises the border guards on site to undertake absurd measures.

[5] See "Green Border" (2024) for detailed description of the critical reception. Notably, in 2024 the president was sued by an organisation monitoring racist and xenophobic behaviours and the case is to be heard in October 2025, soon after the President will end his term of office.

[6] Interestingly, the criticism of the government's tough stance against migration through the Belarusian border has continued after the government change in 2023 and came from both sides of the political spectrum; thus, new memes expressing a conservative stance appeared (among others), which does change the claim we make in this paper. Still, they do fall outside the scope of the present study.

Figure 5. Polish people and institutions (liberal stance). Dialogue line at the top (President Duda): "Sow nettles here". Border guard: "Nettles, Mr President?" President: "Yes, they pinch awfully. Nobody will get through."

Figure 6 is interesting as it does not display any particular stance, but simply ridicules (or possibly praises?) the entrepreneurship of the Polish people, a stereotype inherited through centuries of foreign occupation and economic shortages. "Polak potrafi" (A Pole can do it), a widely known saying, expresses this belief. Thus, Polish businessmen are portrayed as immediately seizing any opportunity to advertise their businesses for free, thus showing a pragmatic approach and turning the border fence into a billboard. The meme could potentially be considered as displaying a liberal stance too, since the state of the border fence and its purpose are indirectly criticised here, but this is perhaps too far of a stretch. The nature of the meme aggregator and the environment where the meme first appeared could also signal its stance, but this was not obvious in this case (memsekcja does not have a clear political affiliation).

Figure 6. Polish people (undefined stance). Upper caption: "Any fence on the Belarusian border after two weeks in Poland." Selected advertisements: "Marbles." "The largest flooring exhibition." "You can do more." "Storage space" [with an arrow pointing towards it]

Figure 7 is an example of a meme which expresses a conservative stance both topically and politically. As mentioned above, migrants were ridiculed only by conservative meme creators and users. The deeply sarcastic tone is characteristic. So is the ridicule of both leftist buzzwords, such as "cultural enrichment" and "migrant women with children," and the supposed naïveté of the left, which is exposed through the mention of the axe that the "women" were supposed to have carried in their on-board luggage on the plane.

Figure. 7. Migrants (conservative stance). Caption: "An ice cold and hungry woman with children cuts down two pine trees with an axe which she had brought along in her on-board luggage for the sake of cultural enrichment."

Lastly, Figure 8 expresses a conservative stance as well with its unmistakable sarcasm (which can perhaps also be interpreted as callousness). This time the targets are contemporary journalists, who are portrayed as weak and too sensitive to handle the reporting of scenes on the border with the migrants trying to cross it. The juxtaposition of the current migrant situation, where a journalist is touched to the quick by a soldier who uses a profanity when addressing him, with a much more brutal wartime situation, where a journalist (with his jacket marked "The Press" on his back) accompanies frontline soldiers, sends a very clear message: leftist journalists are much too weak to handle conflict scenes and they focus on the wrong things. This example reflects the crucial difference between the liberal and conservative stances: sensitivity to the plight of the unfortunate on the part of the leftist politicians versus "everyone is responsible for one's own plight" and the "one must be tough" approach on the part of the conservative politicians (usually combined with their support for harsher prison terms and sometimes capital punishment).

Figure 8. Polish journalists (conservative stance). Above: Journalist in the past. Below: Journalist today. Speech bubble: "This soldier said to me… Fuck."[7]

5. Discussion

Our analysis of the frequency of targets in Belarusian and Polish humour (RQ1) reveals that in both countries the choice of targets and their relative popularity depended largely on the stance of the humour creators. The divide between the ratio of external vs internal targets was similar in Belarusian pro-government humour and Polish conservative humour, on the one hand, and Belarusian anti-government humour and Polish liberal humour, on the other. Pro-government humour in Belarus and conservative humour in Poland, both representing "punching-down" humour, tended to ridicule external targets, such as international organisations, migrants or the Polish and Belarusian governments respectively. In contrast, Belarusian anti-government humour and Polish liberal humour, which both displayed a "punching-up" approach, ridiculed the internal targets more often by showing that their respective governments and institutions were to blame for the situation. Curiously, it meant that the choice of targets was somewhat similar between Belarusian pro-government and Polish liberal humour: in both datasets there are jokes about Polish politics and Polish people and institutions and (almost) no jokes about Belarusian government politics and migrants.

The latter target—migrants—is perhaps the best illustration of the ways humour contextualises the crisis within the broader political landscape of the two countries (RQ2) since it appears prominently only in the Polish conservative dataset, while Polish liberal and neutral humour infrequently targeted migrants, preferring domestic targets instead. While its absence in the Belarusian pro-government dataset is understandable (the Belarusian government openly

[7] Actually, there is an extra twist in the meme, since the intended Polish profanity *kurwa*, is spelled with the euphemising #, replacing the letter "r", thus offering a meta support for the interpretation expressed by the meme: "leftist journalists cannot even swear properly."

promoted the migrants' attempts to get into Poland), it is notable that the Belarusian anti-government dataset also rarely ridicules the migrants despite often mentioning them, because, as we see in the memes above, the migrant crisis was perceived by some Belarusian humour creators as yet another episode in the long-lasting internal conflict between the Belarusian government and its opposition. Therefore, the creators of the Belarusian anti-government humour focused on their key opponent (the Belarusian government) to make their point that the migrant crisis was orchestrated by Lukashenko's regime. Thus, the topic of migrants is a good illustration of how context-dependent the humour datasets we have collected are.

The aspects of political context that affect digital political humour in times of crisis (RQ3) include such broad factors as the presence of a democratic system, freedom of speech and the use of (social) media, as well as more narrow and temporal factors, such as the intensity of the internal political struggle, often referred to in the literature as political polarisation (see, for example, Prior, 2013). In the Belarusian dataset the gap in the popularity of targets between pro- and anti-government humour was larger than in the Polish dataset (the latter also featured humour of a neutral stance), because the intensity of political confrontation in Belarus was higher than in Poland at the time of the migrant crisis, with the Belarusian government imprisoning thousands of its political opponents and causing tens of thousands of opposition supporters to flee the country. Our dataset thus illustrates that the more intense political crisis conditions a wider gap in the popularity of humour targets across the political spectrum.

Our study supplements and develops previous research on the differences between liberal and conservative humour. While Young (2019) and Young et al. (2019) pointed to the psychological differences between liberal and conservative audiences and the impact of such differences on the humour styles they prefer (satire in the case of liberals and outrage in the case of conservatives), we focus on the differences between the content of humour—represented by the targets—across the different ends of political spectrum. We also compare humour on the same topic cross-culturally, with one of the countries being democratic and the other authoritarian. This gives an opportunity to see how the political and social context conditions the choice of targets, as well as their popularity both across countries and across the two ends of the political spectrum. Such research paves the way for further studies on the similarities and contrasts of conservative and liberal humour that would account not only for humour creators' and recipients' individual psychological characteristics and political stances, but also for the broader national and international context within which this humour is created.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the projects Narrative and Belief Aspects of Folklore Studies (EKM 8-2/20/3) and Digital methods and scholarly networks in folklore studies (EKM 8-2/25/3).

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