

The cute and the fluffy: pets, humour and personalisation in political communication

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Abstract

When serious official political statements are not enough to get people's votes, politicians often turn to attention-grabbing and emotion-triggering self-presentation. They give the public access to their "normal, everyday" lives through personalisation and use other tools of "new" politics to create a favourable image of themselves. They can also show the unexpected, backstage aspects of their lives, such as their interactions with their pets. The paper analyses four case studies from different countries (Belarus, Estonia, Slovakia and Spain) in which politicians' references to their pets became a prominent topic in internet communication and provoked numerous humorous reactions in the form of memes. By looking at various degrees of politicians' personalisation strategies, we show that "new" and "old" politics should be regarded as the poles of a continuum rather than a binary opposition. We also discuss the content, form and stance of the humorous internet memes posted in reaction to the appearance of politicians' pets in the news. Our research indicates that such memes function to provoke a discussion and, as a result, form a polyvocal commentary on events; the politicians, however, must take risks accompanying unconventional, revealing political communication and hope that "there's no such thing as bad publicity".

*Keywords: political communication, personalisation, internet memes, humour, pets.
...besides kissing babies, nothing may be used more than animals to try to highlight the
[political] candidate's softer, more human side...
(Fritz 2012)*

1. Introduction

Seeking to boost their popularity and gain votes, politicians are increasingly motivated to show themselves as ordinary, approachable people and distance themselves from rigid, faceless and anonymous party publicity. As one strategy to achieve this, politicians can introduce pets into their communication with the public. In the current paper, we focus on politicians' use of pets as a branding tool.

Animals as characters in different genres of folklore (myths, tales, legends, songs, rites, festivities, etc.) have been an inseparable part of cultures all over the world. Humanisation of animals and animalisation of humans is one of the universal principles in traditional narrative culture (Mencej 2019) and, as we see in the cases below, it is no different in online folklore. Crossing the borders between humans and animals destroys the natural order, violates taboos, and reveals incongruity. According to Shifman (2007), animal jokes are not a prominent research topic in humour studies (cf. Dundes and Abrahams 1987 and Oring 1992 for exceptions to this regarding the symbolic meaning of the elephant in jokes). While pets as agents of political discourse have been featured in a few scholarly works (see, for example, Mutz 2010; Maltzman et al. 2012), we extend the existing research both in terms of geography and genre. Our angle provides new evidence about animal topics in humour, but more than that, it shows that pets are a frequently used element of self-promotion for political leaders, and how this kind of backstage element works in different socio-political contexts. Our study is informed by four case studies from Belarus, Estonia, Slovakia and Spain that enable us to analyse the public memetic reaction to bringing pets into political discussions or self-promotion. We aim to show the different degrees to which the politicians of these countries have adapted to strategies in "new" political communication through the notions of privatisation and individualisation of political discourse, which often fulfils emotive and phatic functions (Keller & Kleinen-von Königslöw 2018). We will investigate how these strategies become triggers that carry humorous potential and thus provoke memetic reactions from their audience. Political image management making use of pets is thus a high-risk gamble that can either create emotions of positive solidarity in the audience, or result in negative emotions expressed through ridiculing and mocking.

2. Frontstage and backstage in political communication

The concept of change in politics has been much discussed over the past 30 years, concerning the question of the content, speed, intensity and extent of political communication and describing it with the help of concepts such as Americanisation, privatisation, mediatisation, personalisation (Isotalus & Almonkari 2011). What these discussions have in common is an emphasis on the media and a close attention to politicians' private lives and personal features (see, for example, Van Aelst et al. 2011; Stanyer 2013). One of the covert aims of such personalisation is to attract apolitical voters who are not actively interested in the political agenda *per se* but might be drawn by the politicians' personalities (Maarek 2014: 17–18). Personalisation can take various forms. Van Aelst et al. (2011: 207) distinguish between individualisation (i.e. the focus on particular politicians rather than on political parties and

institutions) and privatisation (i.e. the depiction of a politician as a private person rather than a public figure). Within anti-politics discourse (Wood et al. 2016 in Selva-Ruiz & Caro-Castaño 2017: 912), privatisation allows political leaders to avoid being seen as professional politicians. Instead, they position themselves as “one of the crowd”, a “normal person” (cf. François Hollande’s 2012 presidential campaign where his central claim was that he would be “a normal president”; see, for example, Gaffney 2015: 17–18).

Personalisation is closely connected to what has been called “new” politics (Selva-Ruiz & Caro-Castaño 2017), signifying the humanisation of politics through foregrounding the personal and the private aspects of politicians’ lives. According to Selva-Ruiz and Caro-Castaño (2017: 908), “new” politics and “new” parties are defined by the increasing use of social media as a tool for political communication, both at personal and professional levels. The social media activity of politicians themselves as well as their PR teams and different interest groups (Maarek 2014; Abidin 2017) help to communicate their ideas, gain new sympathisers and increase voting activity. There is a growing consensus that online party campaigning (on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, etc.) can lead to voter mobilisation (Quintelier & Vissers 2008; Anduiza et al. 2010; Turnbull-Dugarte 2019), especially among the younger population (O’Toole et al. 2003).

The means and modes of technologically mediated communication make the line between the public and private spheres less distinct (Thompson 2014) and thus illuminate aspects of politicians’ lives that used to be unknown to the general public (Selva-Ruiz & Caro-Castaño 2017). According to Goffman (1956), social interaction takes place both on the frontstage and backstage, or front and back regions. When talking about political communication, *frontstage* is where the desired image is displayed. *Backstage* is the hidden area where politicians can prepare for or set aside their role. Within the paradigm of “new” politics, politicians grant access to both their frontstage and backstage. Showcasing politicians’ domestic settings, private roles, feelings, pets, etc. is shown to receive more reactions (likes, comments) from audiences who are thirsty for details and emotions; this is politicians’ way to connect with citizens (Gordillo Rodríguez & Bellido-Pérez 2021: 131). Politicians who represent the paradigm of “old” politics, on the other hand, are cautious in sharing personal or private content. Their interactions with the public tend to remain in the frontstage that exclusively displays their role as a politician (Selva-Ruiz & Caro-Castaño 2017), e.g., by appearing in a suit or giving a press conference to show a sense of trustworthiness.

Recent studies show that people vote based on the personal characteristics conveyed by the politicians’ PR teams or displayed by the politicians themselves through their social media channels (Lalancette & Raynaud 2019). As Van Aelst et al. (2011: 206) state, “the politician is no longer presented solely as a policy maker or a spokesperson but rather as a dedicated parent or a passionate music lover”, among other roles. Politicians, like celebrities, perform a *phatic* communicative function in social networks to “establish presence and keep fans updated and connected” (Jerslev & Mortensen 2015: 249). The voters want to hear stories, thoughts and feelings; they are interested in intriguing plot outcomes rather than in knowing what the candidate plans to achieve after being elected to office (McLaughlin & Macafee 2019). This leads to a situation in which people know less about the programme than the personal life of a politician. The strategic use of emotions to mobilise public support is not a new thing in itself (for an overview, see Szabó 2020), but its interactions with humour, its context and especially the audience reactions have not been sufficiently studied so far.

The turn towards tabloidisation and sensationalism in political news (Otto et al. 2017) has conditioned the depiction of politics as a series of battles during which certain tropes, key words and catchphrases become popular (e.g. as “winged words”; see Chlebda 2005; Brzozowska 2009). As Poprawa (2012) contends, contemporary political discourse highlights the “spirit of fun” (Magdoń 1995) through the carnivalisation of the language of politics (see e.g. Ożóg

2004). Humorous elements often appear during election campaigns (e.g. humorous memes, satirical video clips, cartoons). Scholars have pointed to parallels between political and celebrity culture (Stanyer 2013; Wood et al. 2016; Ekman & Widholm 2017; cf. the concept of *peopolisation politique* in Dakhli & Lhéroult 2008). Being a political celebrity implies, among other things, that even the tiniest drawbacks will not pass unnoticed and can be ridiculed by the general public, journalists, comedians and other politicians alike (Maarek 2014: 19). Therefore, politicians must not only be conscious of the risk of becoming a target of humour but also be willing to take it and—in the best-case scenario—turn it to their own advantage.

However, politicians themselves have also been prone to making jokes and using them to boost their popularity. There have been some examples of comedians who go into politics, e.g. Al Franken in the United States and Jón Gnarr in Iceland. The roles of the professional comedian and politician have recently been synthesised also by Volodymyr Zelensky, who was elected to the Ukrainian presidency in 2019 after a successful career as a comedian. While such transitions from comedy to power are not (yet) common, humour is one strategy that politicians can employ in political communication to enhance their popularity while diverting attention from more important issues (Archakis & Tsakona 2011: 63), create a favourable image of themselves (Wickberg 1998), or as an effective means of political branding (Saftoiu & Popescu 2014: 294). For example, it has been shown that Greek parliamentarians employ humorous narratives to persuade the voting audience and create and maintain bonds with them (Archakis & Tsakona 2011: 61). In doing so, they employ diverse and mixed sociolinguistic resources that Fairclough (1995: 138) defines as *conversationalization* of public discourse. Terms such as “pop entertainment” and “pop persuasion” (Olczyk 2010) have been used to refer to an entire set of communicative strategies and genres through which politicians try to influence voters (Poprawa 2012: 118). Furthermore, humour can have a disinhibiting effect and stimulate affective communication (Ziv & Gadish 1990), appealing not just to the minds, but also to the emotions of the voters (Martins 2018). Affect—often epitomised by humour—thus can no longer be regarded as “something natural and spontaneous [...] we might see it as another tool used in ideological struggles” (Webber 2013). Curiously, the success of such instrumental use of humour largely depends on whether politicians can use it subtly; if it is too obvious that humour is used solely to achieve a political goal, it is less appreciated by potential voters (Morreall 2005: 75).

Nevertheless, not all politicians embrace these trends and resort to showcasing their private lives, making their personalities a part of their branding strategies, and employing humour in their political communication. This is true both for some leaders in Western liberal democracies (for two cases in point, see Van Zoonen 2006), and especially for politicians in non-democratic countries. Unlike their colleagues in democratic countries, authoritarian and totalitarian leaders allow only some fragments of their private lives to be known by the general public, and these are often carefully chosen and presented to avoid ambiguous connotations. In doing so, authoritarian and totalitarian leaders still follow the conventions of “old” politics. This, of course, does not prevent them from becoming targets of user-generated humour, including jokes about their personalities and private lives that are created by people who do not belong to any political parties or interest groups.

While it seems tempting to juxtapose the personalised and humanised “new” politics with the formal and impersonal “old” politics, these modes of political communication should be regarded as the ends of a continuum rather than a binary opposition. Many contemporary politicians try to combine elements of “old” and “new” politics, blending them in various proportions that they consider appropriate and useful for their activities. The degree of personalisation varies according to the particular temporal and spatial socio-political contexts, which is evident in our case studies.

3. Internet memes as agents in public political discussions

One of the most recurrent forms of user-generated political humour is internet memes. The term *meme* can be understood from two perspectives. The first is based on Richard Dawkins' original conception of the term as a biological metaphor for the way cultural content spreads, reproduces and adapts to new contents (Heimo & Koski 2014: 5–6; Shifman 2014: 37–39; Miltner 2017: 413). The other, narrower perspective contends that an *internet meme* can be any artefact (a film, spoof, rumour, picture, song, etc.) that internet users remix, recycle, imitate and disseminate through virtual space in many variants and formats (images, GIF files, videos; Sturken & Cartwright 2009; Shifman 2014: 41–42; Dynel 2016;). One common format for internet memes is an image macro that combines visual (photography, drawing, movie scene) and textual contents and usually (but not necessarily) is humorous.

Like verbal political jokes, internet memes are a form of vernacular reflection, critique and commentary that sometimes can grow into political activism (Wagner & Schwarzenegger 2020). Their creation remains beyond state control, but their spread can be regulated to some extent; some (authoritarian, totalitarian) countries ban them, while others (democratic regimes) embrace them not only as free units of cultural communication but also as propaganda devices (Beskow et al. 2020: 12). The attempt to regulate or purposefully use memes indicates that they are believed to affect internet users both on the emotional and cognitive levels (Lukianova et al. 2019: 72). Humorous memes are particularly provocative and attention grabbing in political communication as they show an alternative way of looking at politics (Lukianova et al. 2019: 72–73). This said, researchers have not yet agreed upon how memes influence their audience. Memes have been shown to create communities of like-minded individuals, reaffirm people's views and help them to experience temporary relief from the pressure of serious political issues (Denisova 2019: 162). Their mass circulation and the attention they draw make them an important aspect of contemporary political communication that deserves close investigation by policymakers and scholars alike.

4. Methodology

In this article, we analyse four cases from four countries—Belarus, Estonia, Slovakia and Spain—where politicians introduce pets to appeal to the public, as well as related humorous reactions in the form of internet memes. We start our analysis by providing contextual information about each case (see Section 5), and look at the aspects belonging to public or private spheres that the politicians communicate. This enables us to identify the degree of personalisation in each case.

In order to study the humorous memetic reverberations unleashed by these politicians' words and deeds, we have focused on those aspects of the original post that were most commented on and, therefore, have demonstrated the greatest humorous potential (Laineste 2013). We also looked at the highlighted personal characteristics of these leaders in the memes, such as physical features, political skills (or lack thereof), and other traits, hence detecting whether the frontstage or backstage regions of the politicians' actions are mentioned. Finally, we have grouped them according to their common themes or topics.

As Shifman (2014: 39–40) points out, memes should not be looked upon as singular ideas but as cultural items consisting of three dimensions: *content*, *form*, and *stance*. Content refers to the ideas and ideologies conveyed by the meme, and form is the physical incarnation of the message (visual, audio, animation, etc.). Lastly, stance is used to depict the ways in which meme creators position themselves in relation to the content, its linguistic codes, their own group and the potential audience. Stance consists of three subdimensions: *participation*

structures (who is entitled to participate and how), *keying* (the tone and style of communication) and *communication functions* (referential, emotive, conative, phatic, metalingual and poetic) (Shifman 2014: 41; based on Jakobson 1960: 357). We focus particularly on emotive and phatic functions by looking at how emotions become involved in the political discourses of the four countries.

In the analysis of both the cases and the related humorous reactions in the form of memes, there is no predefined set of characteristics and traits. As Van Aelst et al. (2012: 208) point out, certain characteristics may involve public as well as personal aspects, therefore making it difficult to place them in a pre-established classification. An inverse procedure has been adopted: the cases and reactions are first analysed, and categories are established later.

5. Data

The four cases were selected based on the following common points: they all feature a politician and a pet, they involve the political strategic use of the animal, and they have all inspired significant humorous reactions in the form of internet memes in their respective countries. Related internet memes were found through web searches with the aid of different search engines and on humour groups, personal and company accounts, and politicians' profiles in social media.

6. Belarus

6.1. Lukashenko's dog

Unlike the other countries discussed in this paper, Belarus remains an autocratic state, and all Belarusian politicians other than Alexander Lukashenko remain in the shadows in terms of political discourse. As their activities have (almost) no effect on Belarusian politics, their personal lives also rarely come into focus in the media. The private life of Alexander Lukashenko is, however, often discussed both in social and mainstream media. The discussions touch upon his children, especially the younger son Nikolay, his residences and, recently, also his dog Umka.

Umka the spitz first appeared in the media in April 2020, when Lukashenko was "working" in a field while carrying the dog around in a basket. The spitz immediately attracted the attention of the media. While some discussed the incongruity of carrying a cute dog while working in the fields, others pointed to the possible political reasons behind his appearance, such as, for example, a wish to turn people's attention away from the record number of COVID-19 cases in Belarus at the time (*Seldon.news* 2020). The next public appearance of the dog was in July 2020, when he accompanied Lukashenko to a spring in his native village.

However, the spitz went truly viral in January 2021. On 10 January, Russian journalist Nailya Askerzade released an interview with Alexander Lukashenko. The interview included a dinner during which Lukashenko put Umka on the dinner table. The photos and videos of Umka on the table immediately inspired discussions, serious and humorous alike, on the appropriateness of putting a dog on the table. Many of the social media responses included the original images of Umka on the table accompanied by internet users' comments (Figures 1, 2, 3).



Figure 1. Caption in Russian: *На столе шицц, а в соседней комнате похрюкивает поросёнок.* (A spitz is on the table and a piglet is grunting in the neighbouring room.)

While some comments (such as in Figure 1) hinted only at the impoliteness/dirtiness of putting a dog on the dinner table, many more reactions linked the spitz on the table with Lukashenko's politics (Figures 2, 3).

Что общего у правил этикета за столом и Конституции РБ? В одной белорусской семье на них клали хуй.



Figure 2. What do the rules of the etiquette at the table and the Belarusian constitution have in common? One Belarusian family [Lukashenko family] doesn't give a fuck about them at all.



Figure 3. The inscription on the dog: Belarusian people.
The dog's speech bubble: Why the hell are you sitting here?

Another episode that featured Umka appeared on social media 9 days later, on the Orthodox Feast of the Baptism of the Lord. The Telegram channel “Pul Pervogo” (which is allegedly run by Lukashenko’s press secretary) posted several videos of Lukashenko performing household tasks and Baptism of the Lord rituals.¹ The only other character of the videos was Umka—he was running around while Lukashenko chopped wood, refusing to drink the holy water that Lukashenko offered him, and barking hysterically when Lukashenko dove into the water following the baptism day ritual. Although he was only a side character, Umka got his share of humour in the social media reactions to these videos:

Cook

If you keep missing [the dog while chopping the wood], we’ll never get to cook this spitz.²

The appearance of the dog on the table and in the baptism day videos also evoked another reference to Lukashenko’s attitude towards animals. In 2016, he mentioned in an interview that he “grew up among the animals” (*Naviny.by* 2016). The parallels between that statement in 2016 and using Umka in home settings in 2021 can be traced both on the levels of production and reception. In both cases, Lukashenko clearly intended to show his humanity by highlighting his affectionate attitude towards animals, and in both cases, many (younger) Belarusians reacted with laughter. “Growing up among the animals”, however, also alludes to Lukashenko’s agricultural background, which is one of his selling points to the older portion of his voters, many of whom are themselves either currently engaged in agriculture or are first-generation urban dwellers who cherish their connections with their native villages. Putting the dog on the table, on the other hand, violates both urban and rural dwellers’ ideas about proper etiquette, and thus, it is more difficult to use it as a tool to promote Lukashenko. Offering holy water to a dog is also a deviation from the Christian rituals associated with the baptism day.

Moreover, the circumstances have changed dramatically. In 2016, much of the Belarusian population took a rather passive stance towards Lukashenko and his politics, and his

¹ See *Telegram* (2020), examples 1-3.

² Message written as if on behalf of Lukashenko’s chef. See *Telegram* (2020), example 4.

preposterous remarks—such as the one discussed here—elicited no more than a spark of attention on social media and, thus, were not of crucial importance to his image. In contrast, the year 2020 saw an unprecedented wave of protests against Lukashenko; open falsifications during the presidential election and police brutality in the post-election period resulted in a decrease in his popularity, even among some of his former supporters. In this context, putting the dog on the table and having it around on Jesus' baptism day was interpreted as another manifestation of Lukashenko's impropriety and refusal to behave in a civilised manner.

6.2. Analysis

Bringing Umka into the media spotlight can be regarded as an attempt at privatisation (Van Aelst et al. 2011). The photo and the videos discussed in this chapter feature Lukashenko's dining room and his baptism day rituals; he and the surrounding people are dressed and positioned casually. The media messages aim at communicating informality not only through content but also through their form. The photo of the dinner with the journalist (Figures 1 and 2) looks like a casual snapshot rather than a staged photograph; the videos of the baptism day rituals also look like they were shot with a non-professional camera. These glimpses into Lukashenko's backstage were likely envisioned by his PR-team as a much-needed diversion of public attention away from his role in Belarusian politics and the discussions about his monstrous political repressions that have been widely circulating in Belarusian and international media since summer 2020.

As the humorous examples above demonstrate, this effort backfired: not only did it fail to improve the personal image of Lukashenko, it also provoked sarcastic comments targeting his politics. The creators and sharers of the jokes and humorous internet memes that followed these events have clearly shown their stance towards the situation. Lukashenko's activities were ridiculed as grotesque and inappropriate; by showing some elements of his private life, he has not become "one of us"—quite on the contrary, it further alienated him from Belarusians (at least from active internet users). Thus, the humorous memes and comments had both emotive and phatic communicative functions: by sharing them, people signalled their belonging to an in-group of those who oppose the Lukashenko regime. The sarcastic tone of the communication and the references to an earlier humorous meme about Lukashenko and animals signalled that the media representations of Lukashenko and his dog fit well into the established paradigm of humorous Belarusian political internet discourse. However, it also reaffirmed the idea that this discourse is very critical of Lukashenko, and it showed that a fluffy dog is not enough to distract people from serious political issues.

7. Estonia

7.1. Martin Repinski and his goat farm

Martin Repinski (born in 1986) is an Estonian politician and entrepreneur. He was born in Kohtla-Järve, a town with a considerable share of Estonia's Russian-speaking population. Fluent in both Estonian and Russian, he nevertheless has a quite modest history of formal education. Instead of attending a secondary school to prepare for a university education, he graduated from Olustvere School of Service and Rural Economics—a vocational school—and later earned a degree from the Estonian Entrepreneurship University of Applied Sciences after serving as the Minister of Agriculture in 2019. Prior to becoming a politician, he had worked simple jobs (e.g. as a welder) and was known for his goat farm business in Konju, Eastern Estonia. His current public image (Riigikogu 2021) stresses his fight for the interests of the people of Ida-Virumaa (the region in Eastern Estonia where he was born) and those of young

people, agriculture and environmental issues. Some of his stated goals from his public messaging include developing the local economy and creating jobs. As of 2021, he has been a member of the parliament for two terms and belongs to the Estonian Centre Party.

The current case dates back to 2016, when Repinski started making frequent public appearances as a young, single and active politician. By that time, he was already known as a goat farmer in Eastern Estonia and had sought publicity through images showing him at the goat farm.

In February 2016, he got into a fight with a fellow party member, Dmitri Dmitrijev, during a party outing because he was trying to stop Dmitrijev from harassing Siret Kotka, another Centre Party member present at the event. Soon after the incident, Kotka and Repinski got married (2017, divorced in 2020). His next moment of fame on the political stage also did not end well. In November 2016, he was the Minister of Agriculture for a short period of 14 days. He had to leave office due to scandals tied to the careless and even illegal management methods of his goat farm in Konju. At that time, this made him the minister with the record for the shortest time in office. Repinski's short but visible stay in the government was accompanied by public photos of him, his goats and the goat farm; that public presentation was also picked up later during his divorce in 2019/2020. Connecting his political identity to goats even more, he is said to have stated during the 2015 parliamentary election process, "If I can take care of the goats, I can also take care of things in the parliament" (Kundla 2019).

The accusations of his unsuitability as a minister had mostly to do with his management of the goat farm. For example, he advertised Konju farm eco-label local goat products, while many of the products were, in fact, imported from the Netherlands (see Männi 2016). Similarly, he advertised the benefits of drinking goat milk, especially its positive effect on male virility and potency (Võsoberg 2016), without backing up his claims with recent scientific proof. The product was branded as a biostimulator with the name "Intimate". The formula—a glass of walnuts flushed down with two glasses of Konju goat milk—promised to enhance sexual performance. The information was taken down from the Konju farm web page after the Consumer Protection Agency confirmed that this is not supported by scientific evidence (Lakson 2016). It did resonate with the people, however, and his potency potion was frequently referred to in online comments and memes.

Memes that appeared as a response to his rather embarrassing public activity in 2016 make ample use of available images of him and his goat farm, making connections between his personal characteristics (e.g., his education level) and his career as a goat farmer:



Figure 4. The goat farmer becomes a minister.³

³ This is a reference to Lenin's quote "The kitchen maid that will rule the state." For a thorough discussion of that quote, see Klots (2017).

The memes picture him as something of a ladies' man, both because of his active promotion of goat milk for potency and his chivalrous actions at the party outing. This trend was revived in May 2019, when rumours about Repinski's affair with a bikini model, Jekaterina Vassiljeva, gained ground, although he only admitted to the affair after the 2019 elections and consequently was divorced from Kotka. In another frequent example, a reference to the proverb "like a goat between two stacks of hay" is used, building on an established connection between Repinski and his farm animals. In this case, it refers to him as someone who cannot make up his mind about which woman to stay with. By way of exaggeration, he is labelled as "a goat" and thus acquires the ability to run fast, escaping from hordes of ladies in wedding gowns:



Figure 5. Repinski running away from a herd of brides while carrying a sign reading *Kits 1* (Goat 1).

Most memes about Martin Repinski refer to goats, whether by directly using the image of a goat or simply a label like in the previous example (Figure 5). Another typical memetic strategy plays with phrases that contain a reference to goats.



Figure 6. Who put a goat on Repinski? (meaning "Who told on Repinski?")⁴

⁴ The image refers to scandals about Repinski, insinuating that the disclosures came at an uncomfortable moment for the new minister.



Figure 7. A sculpture at the Heltermaa port on the Estonian island of Hiiumaa with the caption: “Goat as the gardener: stop Repinski!”⁵

7.2. Analysis

Repinski’s personalisation strategy involved displaying the backstage of his life as a farmer—wearing simple everyday clothes or those necessary for working with milk products in a dairy farm (e.g. protective disposable plastic overalls; see Figure 4). The form of most Repinski memes springs from this image: his public pictures were photoshopped to comment on the scandals that accompanied his time as minister and his subsequent political career and to play with intertextual references to goats in general. Although goats are not traditional pets, they carry a similar function in this case, showing the human and private side of an owner who seems to have a sweet spot for the animals.

Repinski deliberately and purposefully invited the public to his backstage—his goat farm—so that his private and professional life as a goat-aficionado and farmer would be visible to all. He urged the audience to recognise the medicinal effects of goat milk products and stressed his aim to create more jobs in the otherwise less-developed area of Estonia through his goat farm. This was a strategic step to build his image as a man of deeds: a practitioner and not a theoretician. In his interviews, Repinski often highlighted his agricultural practice and contrasted himself with politicians who only speak but have no first-hand experience with entrepreneurship, agriculture or—generally speaking—life. In a way, this could have been a counterstrategy to silence the critique about his modest education, which was a frequent topic of internet comments during his time in office in 2016. However, this did not work out as planned because of the accusations of illegal management practices at his farm, which overthrew his argument by laying bare the sketchy foundations of his management ethics. Privatisation of political communication (Van Aelst et al. 2011) did not yield positive results for him in this case, and the comic potential outweighed the serious and professional image he was trying to convey. Content-wise, the memes reflect on the apparently detrimental decision to foreground his role as a goat-farmer by playing on this image and the connotational possibilities of the trope in an unflattering way. The stance is parodic and stresses the absurd. Meme-makers express the random and peculiar details of Repinski’s goat-related affairs. The

⁵ “Goat as the gardener” is a widely known trope for bad management, here referring to Repinski as an inept farm manager and an incompetent Minister who is likely to make harmful decisions for Estonia’s agriculture, should he stay in office.

memes communicate the emotive, phatic and, at times, poetic engagement of an audience that is eager to disclose and pin down the politician's weaknesses through humour.

8. Slovakia

8.1. Matovič and Mačiak

Igor Matovič is the leader of the Slovak political party Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OĽaNO), which got the most votes in the 2020 elections. After that, Matovič became the Prime Minister of Slovakia in March 2020, at the same time as the COVID-19 pandemic began in Slovakia. He resigned from his post in March 2021 after the government crisis that arose due to many problematic decisions about its handling of the pandemic situation. Starting in April 2021, he has been the Minister of Finance in the Slovak government.

Matovič, like other members of his party, is not a conventional politician. He has brought together people from different fields of interests, largely public activists, persons from non-governmental organisations and public initiatives, and others without a political background or political experience. The main statement that welds these different people together is anti-corruption politics.

Matovič is a distinctive person, and he likes to be in the spotlight. He entered politics in 2010 and became popular with his open, simple, (passive-)aggressive, and emotional speeches calling for action against his opponents (and coalition partners, too), easy-to-understand and often politically incorrect language, figurative examples and comparisons, and unpredictable political steps. He organised many oppositional events (he threw syringes at a deputy at the National Parliament, made videos in front of the houses of his political opponents, and organised protests). Naturally, social media is an important part of his communication strategies. He uses a Facebook profile to communicate with opponents, political partners and the Slovakian public; to publish political commentary on Slovakian and global issues; and as a self-presentation platform, which includes posts about his private and family life. He constructs an image of himself as a good husband and father and posts photos of his food and everyday work life.

It was no surprise when Matovič shared a photo of his new family cat Mačiak at the end of April 2021 (*mačiak* is a grammatically incorrect masculine noun created from the female noun for a cat; the real name of the cat is unknown). With this, he gave a new target for internet meme creators. The rise of Mačiak in the Slovak political meme landscape was quick. The photo was used in representations of different current and past affairs. Mačiak was substituted for his owner, assuming his speech, conflicts and affairs (Figure 8). The memes assigned the cat various jobs—the cat as a new prime minister, a secret agent of Vladimir Putin (Figure 9), or a Slovakian ambassador in Hungary responsible for buying the COVID-19 Sputnik vaccine from Victor Orbán.



Figure 8. How Igor chooses political ideas: Igor: “Mačiak, if you think it is a perfect idea, say mňau.” Mačiak: “Mňau.” Igor: “Great! I will call a press conference tomorrow morning!”



Figure 9. Man on the left: “Master, our best secret agent - Boris Ivanovich Zajcev alias Mačiak.” Putin: “Great! Send him to Slovakia.”

A new impulse for making memes was given by a funny anecdote about how Matovič accidentally used cat shampoo and shared it as a funny post on Facebook. One of the primary motifs of the memes was the transformation of Matovič into a cat, often referring to popular culture (*Tom and Jerry*, the *Harry Potter* movies, the musical *Cats*, and the band *The Pussycat Dolls*; see Figure 10). One of these memes was even shared by Matovič on his own Facebook page without any additional comments (Figure 11).



Figure 10. Photo of the band The Pussycat Dolls photoshopped with the face of Matovič.

Igor Mňaukovič po dopísaní
statusu, ako sa ozmýval
šampónom Mačiaka na lepšie
rozčesávanie srste



Figure 11. Igor Mňaukovič⁶ after he finished writing a Facebook comment about washing his hair with Mačiak's shampoo to make it easier to comb.

⁶ The name is a combination of an interjection for cat sound and family name of the Minister of Finance.

**"Prečo musí minister
financií zverejňovať, že sa
umýva šampónom pre mačky?"
Minister financií:**



Fig. 12. "Why does the Minister of Finance have to publish that he washed his hair with cat shampoo?" Minister of Finance: "..."

Some other memes criticise Matovič for having a style of self-presentation that is inappropriate for the Minister of Finance (Figure 12). These memes responded to public and media discussions, and this inspired Matovič to write another Facebook post related to the shampoo incident:

[It is below their dignity to share such anecdotes like those about the cat's shampoo, and they would never, God forbid, condescend to it... nothing similar ever happened to them, and actually it can't happen to those superhumans.
That is how precise they are ... anyway, some people can't see their own pettiness behind their sky-high ego. #Mnau 🐱]

8.2. Analysis

Igor Matovič has constructed his political image as "one of us" and a "new" politician. The leader of OĽaNO provides a typical example of the individualisation of politics in Slovakia as defined by Van Aelst (2011). His self-promotion as an eccentric and non-conforming politician puts him—rather than the political movement and ideology that he represents—in the focus of public discussion. Moreover, his social media posts revolve around both the frontstage and backstage of his life, with Mačiak memes as an example of the latter. Besides revealing aspects of his personality and everyday life, posting about Mačiak has provoked an array of internet memes.

The content of these memes alludes to Matovič's role as a politician and touches upon different aspects of national and international politics. By using the form of image macros and including references to popular culture, Slovak meme creators not only contributed to the spread of memes among the general public, but also triggered Matovič's reaction. On the one hand, he presented himself as a person who tolerated, understood and enjoyed humour about him (because he is different from other politicians). On the other hand, his subsequent

Facebook post (cited above) shows the limits of his tolerance and acceptance of humour; his reaction, however, also fit into the paradigm of “new” politics as it asserts that he is still willing to share the details of his everyday life.

The stance of the creators of Mačiak memes is rather critical. This goes in line with the general attitude towards Matovič: political humour (including memes) has criticised his every political step. While Matovič’s media and political strategy was very successful, especially during a socially and politically tense period after the murder of the Slovak journalist Jan Kuciak and his fiancée, archaeologist Martina Kušnírová, in 2018 and during the elections in 2020, his political decisions, communication and conflicting character during the coronavirus pandemic brought about the loss of his mandate and the trust of the public. After his resignation from the position of Prime Minister, Mačiak entered the Slovak meme space as a cute and fluffy element that now offers a new opportunity to ridicule his owner.

9. Spain

9.1. Lucas: Albert Rivera’s “Milky” dog

Until the most recent general elections in Spain, held in November 2019, Albert Rivera had been the *golden boy* of Spanish politics. At some point, some thought he could become president.⁷ He started his political career in Catalonia when he was elected president of the new Citizens’ Party in 2006. This organisation stood out in Catalonia by openly opposing Catalan sovereignty in a region then dominated by regionalist, and later pro-independence, parties. As a highly symbolic act, the elected members of the Citizens’ Party always spoke Spanish, not Catalan, in the regional parliament.

As the pro-independence movement gained momentum in Catalonia, the Citizens’ Party increased its visibility and popularity amongst Catalans who did not wish to secede from Spain. This organisation also represented a new political style. For example, when launching the Citizen’s Party campaign for the Parliament of Catalonia in 2006, Rivera published a number of leaflets in which he posed naked (Figure 13).

⁷ Spain is a constitutional monarchy in which the reigning monarch is the head of state and the president—called *prime minister* in other countries—is the head of the government.



Figure 13. Your party is born. We care about people only. We do not care where you were born. We do not care which language you speak. We do not care what kind of clothes you wear. We care about you.

Rivera was young, and he loved appearing in popular TV shows, insistentlly denounced corruption cases in traditional Spanish political parties, declared himself in favour of a united, strong Spain, and spoke of regeneration of the political life in the country, which was burdened by corruption scandals. Rivera succeeded in being elected to the Parliament of Catalonia and served from 2006 to 2015. He then left Catalan regional politics and started a national-level career in Madrid. That same year, the Citizens' Party could have formed a coalition government with the Socialist Party, but an agreement was not reached. From 2016 to 2019, Spanish politics was in turmoil, and several general elections were held. In a highly fragmented Congress, the Citizens' Party had about 10% of the seats and was therefore courted by other parties wishing to form a coalition government.

However, the Citizens' Party had started a slow decline. For the general election on 10 November 2019, polls predicted major losses. Prior to this, on 4 November, Albert Rivera participated in a debate with four other politicians. These five men were considered to be the main candidates for the presidency. On 3 November, a video appeared on Instagram. In it, Albert Rivera showed a puppy named Lucas and assured viewers that the pet was his "secret weapon" for the debate. Rivera boasted that Lucas would defend him from the attacks of his opponents. The video became surreal when, after smelling the animal, the politician stated that it was so young that "it still smells of milk". Lucas is not even owned by Rivera; he belongs to a member of the Citizens' Party communication team. Nevertheless, Rivera celebrated the popularity that his video, and the dog, rapidly gained (Figure 14).



Figure 14. Lucas, we have recorded one video on Instagram and all the rivals talk about you. Welcome, you are now part of the Citizens' Party family.

It seemed like a good strategy: Lucas became extremely popular in social networks for a while, and a Twitter account named “Lucas on the Move” was even created for the dog. According to Lucas’s biography, if given the right to vote, he would choose the Citizens’ Party. Rivera was trying to mobilise the voters. Some users replied by posting pictures of themselves with their pets to show that they were getting ready for the debate. However, many humorous memes followed, some of which were created by other politicians or political parties (Figures 15 and 16).



Figure 15. A meme created by Gabriel Rufián, an MP for a Catalan pro-independence party.



Figure 16. A meme created by Vox, a far-right political party, with the caption: “Rivera is bringing an assistant to the debate? So does Santi Abascal.”⁸

Many of the memes were created by anonymous Spanish citizens (Figure 17).



Figure 17. It got out of hand.

References to popular culture were made, as in the following meme in which a famous quote from *The Silence of the Lambs* is rephrased (Figure 18).



Figure 18. Can you hear it, Clarice? It still smells of milk.

⁸ Santi Abascal is Vox's leader, who was also taking part in the debate.

In the following meme, Rivera is linked to Cruella de Vil, the evil character from Disney's animated film *One Hundred and One Dalmatians* (1961) who only loves dogs superficially, i.e. only for their fur (Figure 19).



Figure 19. Albert Rivera as Cruella de Vil.

Many memes focused on the dog, hinting at the fact that the animal was becoming more popular than Rivera himself (Figure 20).



Figure 20. Albert Rivera depicted as the secret weapon for the debate.

Alas, “likes” are not “votes”. On 10 November, the Citizens’ Party suffered a large electoral setback, losing over 80% of its seats in the Congress and one third of its seats in the Senate. The following day, Rivera resigned from his position as president of the party and left politics entirely to focus on his personal life. A dog’s life.



Figure 21. Albert Rivera resigns. The new leader of the Citizens' Party holds a press conference.

9.2. Analysis

After recording the video with Lucas, Albert Rivera posted it immediately on Instagram (Figure 15). Later, a Twitter account was created for the dog. In this case study, Rivera uses social media as a tool for political communication, thus showing that he is a worthy representative of the “new” politics and belongs to a “new” party, the Citizens' Party, many of whose fellow members make extensive usage of social networks to communicate with voters (Selva-Ruiz & Caro-Castaño 2017). However, it is noteworthy that, in this particular case, Rivera does not grant the audience access to the backstage. For instance, he does not show pictures of his private residence or photographs of a weekend out with friends or relatives. He remains in the frontstage area, and his acts are linked solely to his political activity.

For this reason, we believe that the case study of Albert Rivera and Lucas is more of an example of individualisation than of privatisation. In the video, he is not trying to depict himself as a regular citizen or a private person. He acts and behaves only as a politician, although he is able to highlight some personal characteristics. In rather informal attire, he announces that he is arming himself for political combat. Rivera is in dire straits: he is about to engage in an oral discussion with other candidates. Later, he will come under the voters' scrutiny, knowing that the polls do not augur well. However, when he unexpectedly produces a pet, he uses it to enhance his visibility as a leader, not as an average individual. The appearance of Lucas allows Rivera to add a refreshing touch to his political image in a distressing situation. Furthermore, his staging enables him to show some personal, non-political features that nonetheless are desirable in a professional politician: a sense of humour, a capacity for surprising and improvising, and an informal, nearly juvenile, attitude.

Rivera's actions and words in the video with Lucas caught immediate attention. On the one hand, the recording spread like wildfire in social networks and gained the politician and his party a much-needed boost—in terms of “likes”, at least. On the other hand, the inappropriateness of his presentation was widely commented upon in the media, particularly in the form of memes. Looking at these memetic reverberations through the three dimensions defined by Shifman (2013) reveals that, in terms of content, the memes that sprung up after the

publication of the video mainly refer to Rivera's sloppiness, which put him in a laughable position. His spontaneity is interpreted as a lack of self-control (Figure 17). In some other memes, his doings are also linked to indifference or desperation, suggesting that his carelessness is related to the foreseen poor election results.

As in the Slovak case, in many of these memes, the animal stands in for the politician (Figure 21). Rivera crosses the border between animals and humans when he uses a dog to stand out and stir the crowd. Meme creators humanise the animal, which even takes Rivera's place as the leader of the Citizens' Party (Figure 21), thus downgrading him as a human being and again calling into question his political competence. As in memes about Matovič, many references to popular culture can be found. He is presented as Cruella de Vil (Figure 19), the antithesis of a dog-lover, and Hannibal Lecter (Figure 18). Both are evil characters and not the kind of people with whom you would trust your dog, possibly implying that Rivera is not fond of animals and uses them exclusively for political reasons.

Regarding the form, or the physical incarnation of the message, most of the derivative products are retouched screenshots from the original video. They usually capture an image with Rivera and Lucas and introduce diverse additions and modifications. Many also include a brief text. A few refer indirectly to the original by choosing other images that, nevertheless, feature a human being and a dog (even in a cartoon version, such as the one in Figure 15). In terms of stance, the memes generally maintain the humorous keying of the source but incorporate a parodic dimension. The emotive communication function is most commonly found in the texts of these meme reactions, since the majority insinuate or illustrate the addressers' opinions or attitudes towards Rivera's video. As for the addressers, or participation structures according to Shifman's (2013) terminology, the creators of the memes featuring Rivera and Lucas are not only anonymous citizens but also include Rivera's direct political rivals, who willingly acknowledge their authorship (Figures 15 and 16).

10. Discussion. Nothing beats a funny story?

Our analysis of the four cases from Belarus, Estonia, Slovakia, and Spain indicates how adaptation to the norms and methods of "new" politics occurs on a continuum in the context of social media. The Spanish case illustrates how the use of a pet in political communication fits into an already established paradigm of personalisation in Spanish politics, even though it did not bring Rivera the desired votes. The Slovak example shows that, while the politician himself might want to engage in personalisation and expose even the most dubious details of his backstage, it is still considered rather unconventional in the country's political landscape. The Estonian case is situated further down the "new"/"old" politics scale towards the "old" end of the scale, as the politician's pet-related communication was looked upon as rather embarrassing, especially in combination with other shameful and awkward details from his private and business life. Finally, the Belarusian case is an example of how the "old" political communication style can (accidentally) go wrong and function as a manifestation of "new" politics, although with merciless ridiculing as a result. The activation of "affective publics" (Papacharissi 2015), whereby people are drawn into an exchange of emotional opinions about the actions or words of politicians or other public figures, is prone to happen if pets are concerned. The politicians in our case studies made use of the phatic and emotive functions of communication. However, the emotional opinions triggered henceforth often took the form of humorous internet memes that highlighted the ambiguity of using animals in political communication.

The pets that feature in the political realm because politicians have brought them to their frontstage are laughable because of their owners, not in themselves as animals. They may

trigger humour if their owners refer to them in incongruous settings, such as Rivera's allusion to the dog as a tool in a political debate or Repinski comparing his skills at the goat farm with the skills necessary for working in the parliament. Alternatively, animals may inspire humorous reactions if the context points to their owner's drawbacks, such as the lack of good manners at Lukashenko's dinner party or the anecdotal but inappropriate self-presentation of the Slovak Minister of Finance. Primarily in the Slovak and Spanish cases, we can see the animalisation of leaders and humanisation of animals, resulting in incongruity and mockery. Playful memes exchange the heads of pets and leaders or transform humans into animals (e.g., as the effect of using cat shampoo), show pets in political functions (as party leaders, prime ministers), etc. Memes mock the politicians who use the cute "milky" dog or the kitten called Mačiak in the social media to highlight their "human" character and engage actual and potential voters' feelings.

Laughter is a "social gesture" that wakes us out of collective and individual lapses and draws attention to the automated, the rigid and the irrational (cf. Bakhtin 1984). It is necessarily communal, triggering the emotions of the audiences who are always keeping their eyes open for a potentially humorous stimulus. Online laughter does not differ in its essence, either, although it maximises the aspect of reflexive laughter and intertextuality as it "erupts momentarily and ferociously, bringing together hundreds of discordant voices, who laugh at each other as much as at the target" (Kravets 2021). Internet users worldwide disseminate information in the form of memes while adding intertextual allusions and elements that may drift far from the originally intended message. This is also what can be seen as the main difference in laughter between earlier times and today: laughter now projects in ways and to distances that, for example, medieval laughter could not (Kravets 2021). It is cited and reframed by the media, as a result of which the potential audience grows exponentially—which is precisely the aim of political communication. In all our cases, the humour spread quickly across different popular social media, and some of it was even quoted by mainstream media outlets (see, for example, *Diariocritico.com*, *Telegraf.by*, *Topky.sk*). The spread of countless repetitions in varied forms and contexts guarantees maximum fun derived from playing with the original message or image. What often dominates is the wish to create something nonsensical, weird and absurd, amateurish and half-ready (Shifman 2014). This can be taken as one of the guarantees of humorous potential, and also as a provocative application of emotive function in the bottom-up political communication.

Jokes that are spontaneous and fresh are open to multiple audience interpretations and trigger the imagination of the crowds. Humour also needs to be unexpected (see also the notion of appropriate incongruity; Oring 1992, 2003) and seem effortless for its audiences to have the most positive possible reception (Hale 2021). In the cases analysed here, the spontaneity and impulsiveness of the original posts is difficult to establish, but many of the visual triggers are indeed low quality, clumsy and amateurish (see also Pahl 2017), in contrast with carefully staged official campaign images of politicians. The reactions are not always poignant and relevant to the initial discussion—instead, the intertextual references in memes run in wild directions—but they nevertheless signal an attentive participation in an attempt not to miss out, but to take part, think along, express feelings and understand. Humorous potential is conditioned by the unexpected or inappropriate appearance of a stimulus that triggers affect in the audiences (in our cases, a puppy dog in the debate, goats as the primary concern of a politician, a dog on the reception table, or using shampoo for cats). Moreover, the reactions are of a different nature and display a wide array of emotions. The stance (in the sense described by Shifman 2013) that these memes adopt in reference to the original posts differs significantly in our cases: the memetic reverberations about Lukashenko's dog are rather sarcastic and, in the Slovak case, some of them censure the inappropriate behaviour of the politician. The Estonian, Spanish and some Slovak memes are, on the other hand, rather playful.

Intertextuality is not only produced by memes but also functions as a guarantee for their popularity. Popular culture references abound in our data as well, primarily in the Spanish and Slovak cases (e.g. memes that feature templates from *The Simpsons*). Memes aim for relatability because meme makers want them to be shared and spread further (Shifman 2013). Therefore, memes represent common shared knowledge. Dynel (2016), in her linguistic analysis of advice animal memes, stresses that they present a case of recognisable, repeatable and universal blocks that can be used to build something unique. Thus, repetition and variation, the core notions in folklore, also lie at the heart of memes, and make them appealing to a wider audience.

Humour is an effective attention grabber. When perceiving something as humorous, people are drawn to the content because they want to have a good laugh. Others want to know what people were laughing at and find out more about the situation. The figure of the politician is thus something of a modern Don Quixote who needs to take the risk of being laughed at to achieve his or her goals, even if this means—in the case of failure—looking like a fool. In the Slovak case, Matovič even mentions this explicitly in one of his Facebook posts. Provoking audiences and triggering their emotions in the name of popularity is connected to the advent and development of “new” politics. Although contemporary politicians seem to believe that there is no such thing as bad publicity (Wagner & Schwarzenegger 2020: 314), things can go awry or even become explosive when humour is added to the mix, thus maximising the risk of being misunderstood and, as a result, ridiculed. The desired next step—that audiences will want to know more about the politician’s actual agenda and will become more aware of politics as a result – may not come at all because, as is widely known to all, laughter is a double-edged sword. As the four case studies illustrate, pet-related political communication may result in the ridicule of the politician in question. Humorous communication is used more and more in “new” politics and its accompanying political communication as a tool for personalised political self-representation. It may not always be intentional (and the degree of intentionality of humour is often difficult to establish; see Attardo 2020: 170–175), and the risks are high, but its potential to win the attention of the audience is immense. At the same time, it seems that the humorous potential of personalised posts—including those about politicians’ pets—is greater than that of professional posts, although this phenomenon needs to be investigated in further studies.

Taking the analysed data and theoretical backdrop into account, it is appropriate to recall Christie Davies’s (2010) idea of humour as a thermometer, not a thermostat. These memes coincided with the discussion of the original statement or image posted by the politicians, but it is difficult to estimate their impact on the politicians’ popularity and votes. Humour instead signalled that there was a questionable, dubious or incongruous aspect to the political communication, and the subsequent memes that commented on the original stimulus made the most of that discovery. The fact that this often means an over-literal, corporeal, concrete and simplified interpretation of the stimulus (Kravets 2021) is of secondary importance. As the cases analysed above illustrate, memes aim to provoke a discussion and often move the political agenda from the rational to the emotional level. Humour is a frequent, but not compulsory, addition to the commentary. Although some memes are explicitly critical and political in their content, there is a simultaneous, strong emphasis on comic entertainment: pointing out the absurd, stretching meanings, and establishing unusual and incongruent references.

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