

To make fun of power: political cartoons and memes about President Zelensky. Quantitative and qualitative analysis

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Abstract

The paper deals with Ukrainian President's Zelensky image in political cartoons and memes. They are forms of political humour and can be examined in an interdisciplinary manner. The first part describes theoretical aspects, functions, and elements of political humour and political satire, main features and types of cartoons and memes. In the second part, the corpus of 198 political cartoons and 1121 memes from March 2019 to December 2020 is analysed with computer-aided content analysis and multimodal discourse analysis. The analysis units are social context, formed by the domestic and foreign political events in Ukraine in the research period, joke techniques and communication levels in the cartoons and memes. These units are examined chronologically and thematically. The research is based on the hypothesis about the interdependence of social context and subversive/supportive humour in the construction of Zelensky's image.

Keywords: political cartoon, memes, political humour, multimodal discourse analysis, content analysis.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the rapid development of social media has led to the emergence of new forms of media culture, political humour and social engagement. These forms are particularly represented by Internet memes. At the same time, political cartoons as “classical” genres of political humour continue to play an essential role not only in the real (press), but also in the virtual (Internet) media space. “Political humour” is an umbrella term that encompasses any humorous text dealing with political issues, people, events, processes, or institutions. This

concept is related with the notion “*political satire*”. Satire is a genre of the visual, literary, and performing arts, usually in the form of fiction and less frequently non-fiction, in which vices, follies, abuses, and shortcomings are held up to ridicule, often with the intent of shaming or exposing the perceived flaws of individuals, corporations, government, or society itself into improvement. Although satire is usually meant to be humorous, its greater purpose is often constructive social criticism, using wit to draw attention to both particular and wider issues in the society. Political satire is playful and is designed to elicit laughter, while simultaneously casting judgment. It is this function of “casting judgment” that separates satire from broader notions of political humour. Jokes and texts that treat political topics in a light-hearted manner but offer no criticism of institutions, policies, or societal norms do not constitute satire. Political satire opposes the existing political or social order and visions of what could or should be. And finally, if politics is a serious matter and humour a funny one, we can ask how and why the boundaries between the two are blurred: politics can be represented in a humorous manner and humour can have a serious intent (Test 1991; Holm 2017; Young 2017).

The **objectives of this paper** are: 1) to investigate how the socio-political context determines the features of political humour (subversive vs. supportive) in memes and cartoons; 2) to analyse the implementation of subversive/supportive humour in cartoons and memes (most frequent plots, visual metaphors and/or symbols).

As a **case study** we define the phenomenon of President of Ukraine, former comedian, Volodymyr Zelensky. Before his election as President of Ukraine in April 2019, Zelensky was the artistic director and actor of a comedy show. In his sketches, he mocked Ukrainian politicians, businessmen, ordinary citizens, violating social and moral taboos. After his election as President, he gradually became an object of ridicule due to his incompetence in public affairs. We are going to investigate this “boomerang effect” when a person who laughed at others becomes someone they laugh at. More precisely, we will analyse how this ridicule as a kind of subversive humour is implemented in memes and cartoons with special attention to parallels between sketches performed by Zelensky and memes/cartoons containing allusions to these sketches.

Our **hypothesis** is: the scope and presentation of subversive/supportive humour in construction of President’s Zelensky image are determined by social and political context.

2. Political humour, cartoons and memes: main approaches

2.1. Political humour vs. political satire

The rich scholarship on political humour tends to diverge along two lines: emphasising the corrective constraints or the ludic possibilities. That is, scholars either stress the conservative ways in which humour relies upon and redoubles existing shared expectations at the expense of errant targets, or they affirm the radical ways in which it can sponsor cognitive shifts and thereby liberate human energies (Tsakona & Popa 2011; Kessel & Merzinger 2012; Holm 2017; Rehak & Trnka 2019; Damir-Geilsdorf & Milich 2020; Mpofu 2021). Since humour is by definition based on incongruity and serves as criticism, political humour can be defined as a communicative resource spotting, highlighting and attacking incongruities originating in political discourse and action. Within that broad category, political satire occupies a specific role. Political satire is “a pre-generic form of political discourse containing multiple humour elements that are utilised to attack and judge the flawed nature of human political activities”. (Holbert 2014: 28). This definition includes all four components (aggression, play, laughter, and judgment) suggested by Test (1991). The attack will be a mix of aggression and play, but different satirical forms will vary proportionately in these elements. Political satire is also pre-

generic, allowing it to assume any existing format or genre within which political discourse can be offered. In addition, it is defined as a humorous message and is a form of political discourse that communicates judgment, either explicitly or implicitly. If we treat political satire as a unique type of political discourse (Jones 2010; Day 2011), then The Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse (Benoit et al. 2002) can help to better understand this type of political discourse according to its main functions: (1) to acclaim (positive statements about oneself); (2) to attack (criticisms of an opponent); and (3) to defend (refutations of attacks from opponents) (Benoit 2007).

Political satire as a form of political discourse questions the existing political or social order, usually by juxtaposing the existing imperfect reality with visions of what could or should be. This questioning is determined by four elements: target, focus, social acceptability, and presentation. Together these elements regulate the range of political satire directed against political order/authority: from supportive to subversive. Humour that is supportive of authority can relieve tension in one or several ways: by using a punch line, containing a reassuring conclusion and, most commonly, through laughter. Subversive humour, on the other hand, frequently lacks resolution or, worse for the audience's psychological security, offers a conclusion that is widely believed to be both undesirable and painful (Paletz 1990). The higher the target (level), the more fundamental the authority is likely to be, thus the humour has the potential to be at its most subversive. In contrast, humour that attacks the political system itself usually incorporates lower levels of authority in its ambit. Focus is the particular aspect of the (individual) authority level the humour emphasises e.g. hollow rhetoric, crass pieties, betrayal of principles. The more socially acceptable a humorous text, the less subversive it is. And vice versa: daring and outrageous humour tends to be rejected or just ignored. According to Paletz (1990), *presentation* describes the environment in which humour is actualised. Regarding the social role of political humour, we should explore it not as alternative to political information, but as an alternative form of political information (Baym 2009). This alternative form of political information or "a type of counternarrative" should contest the singularity of perspective engendered by the internalisation of dominant discourse, and in so doing, it should provide citizens with different, yet equally legitimate pairs of lenses by which to view experience. In this sense, political satire provides a plurality of perspectives by disrupting and dispelling the mythical consensus created by master narratives (Hill 2013).

In assessing the relationship between political humour and actual political power, it is necessary to theorise politics not only in terms of the vertical power that is manifested in formal institutions and distributional hierarchies of membership, but also as the horizontal power of discursive fields within which these institutions and members are constituted. Contemporary political humour owes much of its popularity to the media: most of the genres belonging to political humour are produced and/or disseminated via the media (e.g. political jokes, memes and cartoons, satirical shows and webpages, political advertisements). Even when such humour surfaces in non-prototypical humorous contexts (e.g. political or parliamentary debates, political interviews, news reports, slogans, graffiti), it is often (re)framed and reinterpreted by the media (Tsakona & Popa 2013). Humour, then, should be understood not only as a weapon of the weak or the strong but as a relational modality implicated in discourse and power, one through which agents and audiences alike can form and manifest oppositional identities (Zekavat 2017). Contemporary political humour has three parodic forms: carnivalesque politics, parodic reworkings of political discourses, and political protests (satirical activism). The ambiguity of political parody, its reflexivity, and its capacity to build or reconfigure affective communities are the workings of political humour. This enables individuals to embrace their own involvement and vulnerability. These reworkings help to grasp the ambiguous moral consequences of their complex positioning as an authentic and productive form of political engagement (Petrovic 2018).

To make fun of power is not to say: “I oppose you” but rather it is to claim: “your power has no authority over me”. To make fun of power is sometimes linked with transgression. This concept is derived from the verb *to transgress* (‘go beyond the limits of what is morally, socially, or legally acceptable’) and is used in two senses. Firstly, transgression points to the energy that fuels the media ecology – from content production to audience practices. It is the (conscious) overstepping of moral and legal boundaries that challenges written and unwritten rules. Secondly, political humour is characteristically uncontained and uncontainable within products and forms of communication, their effects and affects. *Transgression* also means overcoming the boundaries between different humorous genres and the emergence of new hybrid genres.

2.2. Political cartoons and memes: features and typology

There is a significant number of publications that cover the historical, typological, pragmatic, and semiotic aspects of political cartoons. Publications on political cartoons cover two main areas of research: a) communicative functions, such as *political communication and agenda setting* (Walker 2003; Minix 2004), *pragmatic aspects, impact on the audience and the formation of public opinion* (El Refaie 2009, 2010), *political cynicism* (Hogan 2001), *political scandals* (Benoit et al. 2001); and b) constructive functions, such as *forming ideologies, social and political identities* (Najar 2007; Tehseem 2015). Summarising the theoretical approaches of various disciplines, the political cartoon can be defined as “a pictorial representation that uses the means of distortion or generalisation to formulate a normative commentary with an emotional impact intention regarding political phenomena (persons, organisations, events)” (Achtenberg 1998: 216).

Contrary to more traditional and institutionalised forms of political humour, Internet memes could be classified as unconventional political humour, since it appears that citizens are the main creators and participants in such genres, while state or media control is relatively more limited or less conspicuous. The media offers publicity to public political protests, which may exploit humour for their purposes. As a result, the audience are informed not only on what activists and grassroots organisations think about a variety of social, political, ecological, etc. issues, but they can also witness on their (TV, computer, or mobile phone) screens how they express their views and protest against state, corporate, etc. decisions and policies (Sørensen 2013). At a time when our social and political movements are growing more complex and open-ended—when governments are learning to wield the internet as effectively as protestors—memes become the “street art of the social web” (Mina 2019: 12). They reinforce, amplify, and shape today’s politics. The concept *meme* was originally stamped by the biologist Richard Dawkins. Dawkins wrote that evolution depended not on the particular chemical basis of genetics, but only on the existence of a self-replicating unit of transmission—in the case of biological evolution, the gene. For Dawkins, the meme exemplified another self-replicating unit with potential significance in explaining human behaviour and cultural evolution. Dawkins used the term to refer to any cultural entity that an observer might consider a replicator. He hypothesised that one could view many cultural entities as replicators and pointed to melodies, fashions and learned skills as examples. Memes generally replicate through exposure to humans, who have evolved as efficient copiers of information and behaviour (Dawkins 2000: 15). Memes can be regarded as a “complex idea that organises itself in a separate entity and unfolds through external manifestations expressed in the memes” (Dennet 1999).

Political Internet memes are a phenomenon situated at the intersection of digital and political communication that is becoming an increasingly popular object of study. Two main approaches are worth mentioning: 1) memes as a *mechanism of political participation* and the manifestation of anonymous networked creativity (Shifman 2013; Shomova 2021); 2) memes as a *mechanism for the transfer and storage of cultural information* (Dennet 1999; Dawkins

2000). Memes are “digital content units with common characteristics that are created in mutual consciousness and distributed, imitated and transformed by many users over the Internet” (Shifman 2013: 7). But “memes are more than internet humour; research shows them to function by appropriation and, resistance to dominant media messages, expanding understanding of the way memes function in a participatory media culture” (Huntington 2013: 4).

The debate on memes is based on two main premises. While enthusiastic advocates argue that the meme explains everything and their opponents assert it explains and changes absolutely nothing, it might be worth asking whether the meme concept may be useful for something. Many authors propose to use the meme as a prism for understanding certain aspects of contemporary culture without embracing the whole set of implications and meanings ascribed to it over the years (Bennett 2003; Johnson 2007; Knobel & Lankshear 2007). In recent years, researchers of political internet communication have been emphasising the fact that political memes are increasingly becoming a means of online trolling of political opponents (Nagle 2018; Bhungalia 2019; Uzuegbunam 2020; Vasilyeva 2021). These authors claim that Internet trolling has now come to mean the posting of messages or images (via a public communications network) that are either provocative or offensive but also transgressive.

Political Internet memes and cartoons are objects of different disciplines: cultural studies, communication studies, media linguistics, political science, cognitive linguistics, etc. Accordingly, there is a large number of interpretations of these phenomena and, consequently, different research methods (Johann & Bülow 2019). Despite different approaches to cartoons and memes, these multimodal texts can be defined by their a) goals; b) frame of reference; c) means. The main features are topicality, criticism, partiality, alienation, and satirical stance. These features are acknowledged transdisciplinarily (Marienfeld 1990; Knieper 2002). Most typologies of cartoons and memes are based on *formal* and *content-related criteria*.

There are three main types: *personal individual cartoon*, *non-personal cartoon* and *group cartoon* (Marienfeld 1990). A *personal individual cartoon* is the most common type. Individual body features of famous people are alienated; gestures and facial expressions are related to a depicted situation. The *non-personal cartoon* has no images of a person. The problem is represented by symbols and objects (e.g. national colours or heraldic animals) in combination with verbal elements (captions or inserts). These elements are then transferred mentally by the viewer to particular events or states. *The group cartoon* shows large social groups (entrepreneurs, employees, etc.) represented by a typical representative of this group (see Figure 1 for respective examples).



Figure 1. Types of political cartoons

In addition to the content-related and formal criteria, the criterion “relationship between text and image” is used. There are the following types: *no text*, *text in picture*, *text as caption*, *text in picture and caption*, *caption* (Schneider 1988: 70). The last criterion is also used for

memes' typology. Accordingly, there are *textual memes*, *pictorial memes*, *video memes*, and *multimodal memes*.

Since political cartoons and memes are hybrid genres belonging to political, media and humorous discourse, we use our own operational term *humorous media-political discourse*. This discourse works on the individual, group and social level. At the *individual level*, an individual, as the bearer of the political consciousness and of a mediated worldview, determines certain 'problem areas' of politics for him/herself. When these problems or solutions do not match the person's values and ideas, it causes their emotional response. Through discursive practices and the emotional component, a person either identifies with or opposes a political problem and the possibilities to solve it. It is a social categorisation. At this level, we talk about the cognitive and emotional aspects of identification. At the *group level*, the identity of the group influences the choice of certain discursive practices and means of implementing them. At this level, the social categorisation of group members becomes even clearer. On the *social level*, the humorous media-political discourse becomes an instrument of communication between society and the political elite in order to overcome the contradictions between the social notions of *how it should be* and *how it really is*. In addition, the analysis of this discourse makes it possible to follow the change in existing, or the emergence of new, ideological priorities of the society and their interpretations of political reality. So, we define this discourse as an *interdiscursive hybrid phenomenon* that is actualised in *multimodal media texts* on an *individual, group and social level* and has identifying, ideological, communicative, cognitive-emotional, constructive, and epistemological functions.

3. Corpus, analysis levels, and methodology

The **corpus** consists of 198 cartoons and 1121 memes (a total of 1319 documents). We explain the significant difference in the number of memes and cartoons in our corpus by the fact that Ukrainian political cartoons as a genre of humorous discourse is gradually being displaced by Internet memes. The main character depicted in all of them is the Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. The research period covers 18 months (from March 2019 to December 2020). The research material comes from Ukrainian and international freely accessible sources: social media and web-galleries. The analysis units are *social context*, formed by the domestic and foreign political events in Ukraine in the research period, and *joke techniques* and *communication levels* in the cartoons and memes. The methodology is based on *computer content analysis* (MAXQDA 2020) and *multimodal discourse analysis* (MDA). The choice of material, period and methods is determined, firstly, by the research objectives, and, secondly, by the fact that Zelensky's 1.5 years of holding the presidency are sufficient to analyse his activities and its discursive reflection in political humour and to collect proper amount of data.

The main operational units in content analysis are codes (categories). There are two types of codes: formal and informative. We developed a code system containing **formal codes** (*type of cartoon / meme* with the **subcodes** *cartoon with text*, *cartoon without text*, *personal cartoon*, *group cartoon*, *impersonal cartoon*, *hybrid cartoon*, *multimodal meme*, *textual meme*, *image meme*) and **informative categories** (*joke techniques* and *levels of communication*). Informative categories correlate with analysis units. Every political cartoon or meme functions in a certain social context, which we have analysed using the **generic code** *Chronotopos*. This generic code includes codes: *Campaign and elections*, *Inauguration*, *100 days*, *Domestic policy*, *Foreign policy*, *1.5 years in power*. These subcodes are divided into subcodes reflecting major events related to the activities of President Zelensky since his election in April 2019.

In the first step, we applied a *quantitative content analysis for formal and informative codes*. The results show that multimodal memes (900 documents – 68.2%) and cartoons with

text (173 documents – 13.1%) dominate our corpus. Accordingly, cartoons and memes are multimodal texts and their communicative intention is implemented through the interplay of verbal and non-verbal elements. For other results, see Table 1.

Table 1. Frequency of formal categories

Multimodal meme	68.2%	Individual cartoon	6.1%
Cartoon with text	13.1%	Hybrid cartoon	5.6%
Textual meme	9.1%	Cartoon without text	1.9%
Pictorial meme	7.7%	Group/impersonal cartoon	1.8%/1.5%

In the **second** step, we have analysed the *frequency of communication levels* that describe different manifestations of the verbal element in the multimodal texts. We use the typology with 4 elements: a) *direct communication* (headlines and sublines); b) *internal image communication* (speech/thought bubbles); c) *inserts*; d) *onomatopoeia* (Fiedler 2012: 48). See Table 2.

Table 2. Frequency of communication levels

Internal image communication	48.5%
Inserts	35.4%
Direct communication	15.6%
Onomatopoeia	0.5%

As can be seen from Table 2, *internal image communication* (48.5%) and *inserts* (35.4%) occur most frequently in our corpus. *Speech bubbles* are more frequent than *thought bubbles*. They complement the non-verbal element, contradict it and create a humorous effect. Inserts are the geographical, institutional or personal markers of the people, institutions or countries depicted. In the third step, we have analysed the frequency of *joke techniques*. These techniques use various cognitive-logical operations ensuring communicative purpose and providing humorous effect. We use the typology with 11 different techniques: *association, transposition, transformation, contradiction, exaggeration, parody, punning, disguise, satire, narration and appropriation* (Roukes 1997: 12). The most frequent techniques in the corpus are *satire, association, contradiction, and parody* (Table 3). Cartoons or memes usually contain two or more ‘overlapping’ joke techniques. We will now briefly describe the most frequent techniques in our corpus and illustrate them with examples.

Table 3. Frequency of communication levels

Satire	75.1%
Association	49.7
Contradiction	31.3
Parody	29.9%
Narrative	23%
Punning	12.7%
Disguise	9%
Appropriation	5.6%
Transformation	5.2%
Transposition	3.4%

Satire

It is a visual-verbal mockery, irony and sarcasm expressed by the cartoonist to depict social and political shortcomings or to criticise politicians and their actions, possibly violating social taboos (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Satire



Figure 3. Association

Association

This technique uses juxtapositions, connections, analogies, comparisons (Figure 3).

Contradiction

This technique works with the twisting of content, emphasises the inconsistencies or ambiguities and uses metaphors (Figure 4).

Parody

This technique “works” with imitation, references and allusions to behaviours, manners, customs, attitudes, and artifacts (Figure 5).



Figure 3. Contradiction



Figure 4. Parody

Therefore, the final step in the first phase of the study was a quantitative analysis of the generic code *Chronotopos*. This analysis showed that most of the cartoons and memes are devoted to the first 18 months of V. Zelensky's tenure as well as domestic and foreign policy issues (Table 4). At this stage, we used *quantitative* (computer-aided content analysis) and *qualitative* (multimodal discourse analysis) methods. The analysis levels are: 1) *distribution of joke techniques* in the codes of the generic code *Chronotopos*, represented by the largest

number of cartoons and memes; 2) *thematic focus* in these categories; 3) *multimodal means* of subversive political humour. The largest number of cartoons and memes have categories *1.5 years in power* (439 documents) and *Domestic politics* (435 documents). A slightly smaller number of documents is in the categories *Foreign Policy* (192), *Local Elections 2020* (143) and *Election Campaign 2019* (115).

Table 4. Main topics in the corpus

1.5 years in power	33.3%
domestic politics	33%
foreign policy	14.6%
local elections	10.8%
election campaign 2019	8.7%
100 days	1.5%
inauguration	1.3%

4. Results

4.1. Category "1.5 years in power"

In the category *1.5 years in power*, the most common subcodes are *economic decline* (82 documents) and *falling ranking* (62 documents). In the cartoons and memes, which deal with the economic decline during Zelensky's time in power and his declining popularity, joke techniques of *satire* (216), *association* (125) and *contradiction* (98) dominate.



Figure 6. Black Friday

Figure 6 contains a combination of the techniques *parody*, *satire* and *association*. The meme shows Zelensky with a present in his hands with the inscription "31.2%" on it and next to it the numbers 73% and 52%, which are crossed out. In combination with the inscription *Black Friday*, the pictures of gifts and figures with percentages activate the joke technique *Parody* (traditional discounts on so-called "Black Friday"). The interplay of verbal and non-verbal elements simultaneously activates the joke techniques of *association* (with the falling popularity of Zelensky) and *satire*.



Figure 7. Zelensky's ranking

Figure 7 shows the president rushing up the treadmill with a heavy rucksack on his shoulders (the Parliament). A sign *Ranking* hangs on the handrails. This verbal element, combined with the non-verbal elements (a red arrow pointing downwards, the tired, sweaty face of Zelensky trying to ascend to the throne), activates the technique of *satire*.

A slightly lower share in the sub-category *1.5 years in power* have memes and cartoons devoted to Zelensky's press conference on the occasion of his first year in office (26 documents) and his indictments against the former president Poroshenko (32 documents). The most frequent joke techniques here are *satire* (43), *association* (34), and *narration* (18).

Figure 8 is a sequence of images that conveyed Zelensky's comical facial expressions during the press conference and the caption *Reagan We Deserve*. The contrast between verbal and non-verbal elements activates the technique of *contradiction* and, at the same time, the *association* one with the efforts of Zelensky's political advisors at the beginning of his election campaign to draw analogies between himself and the 40th US President (1981-1989). The interplay of verbal and non-verbal elements activates the joke technique of *satire*.



Figure 8. Reagan we deserve



Figure 9. Ze-doll

Figure 9 shows Zelensky on the lawn on which he held his press conference. However, the president is depicted as an inflatable doll. Fragments of phrases that he said at the press conference fly out of his sleeves (*everything will be fine, but I have no time ... little time*). The roofline is a quote from O. Sentsov:¹ “no respect, no substance, and no recognition of mistakes.

¹ Ukrainian film director. On May 11, 2014 Sentsov was arrested in Crimea on suspicion of planning terrorist acts and transferred to Moscow. Sentsov was released on September 7, 2019 as part of a prisoner exchange between Russia and Ukraine.

This show will be offered to us for the next four and ... another five bonus years”. The image of Zelensky as an inflatable doll in combination with the inserts and roofline activate the joke techniques of *satire* and *contradiction*. The non-verbal element is also a parody of the custom of placing such dolls in front of shops to attract visitors. The memes and cartoons dedicated to Zelensky’s 1.5 years of presidency use satire, contradiction and association, commenting on his statements and activities and emphasising the inconsistency of president’s words and actions in economic, military, social, and cultural policy, as well his unfulfilled promises, and, as a result, the deteriorating financial situation of Ukrainians and falling presidential rating.

4.2. Category “Domestic Policy”

In this category (435 documents) most of the cartoons and memes are devoted to the Corona virus (93 documents) and Zelensky’s efforts to end the war in Donbass (46 documents). The most common joke techniques in the subcategory *Covid-19* are *association* (26%), *satire* (23.3%), *contradiction* (15.1%) and *parody* (14.2%).

The cartoons and memes in this subcategory reflect all events in the country related to the pandemic’s outbreak and lockdown. A large number of memes addressing Covid-19 alludes to two statements by Zelensky: “We have to stop shooting” and “I saw a desire for peace in Putin’s eyes” (Figure 10). In this textual meme, it says: “I looked into the eyes of the corona virus and saw there the desire not to spread any more”. In this case, we have the joke techniques of *parody*, *contradiction* and *satire*.



Figure 10. I looked into Corona’s eyes



Figure 11. Social distance

Figure 11 contains a combination of the techniques of *association*, *contradiction* and *satire*. The interplay of non-verbal and verbal elements (caption “Simple things save Ukraine”) evokes an association with social distance, as well with the slogan “Simple things help”. At the same time, another text “Get as close as possible to pro-Russian politicians” activates the *contradiction* technique and reinforces the satirical effect.

A lot of memes and cartoons addressing Zelensky’s activities against the pandemic parody his statements about the conflict in Donbass and possible negotiations with Putin. Main criticism points are ill-considered decisions in the fight against the pandemic, Zelensky’s violation of quarantine norms, misuse of reserves from the State Covid Fund, and low rates of vaccination of Ukrainians.

In the cartoons and memes devoted to the war in Donbass and Zelensky’s attempts to stop this war, the most frequent joke techniques are *satire* (23.4%), *association* (19.3%) and *contradiction*. (15.9%). In Figure 12, the non-verbal element is missing. The verbal element

activates the joke technique of *association* with the sentence Zelensky said when talking to a soldier at the front (“I am not a loser”) and the “Ze” logo in political advertising. At the same time, this text is a parody of the famous phrase “Je suis Charlie”. The combination of Latin and Cyrillic script enhances the humorous effect of this meme. It should be emphasised here that some of the cartoons and memes dealing with the war in Donbass are devoted to relations with Russia and its aggressive politics (Figure 13). Here we have the joke technique of *contradiction*, which is realised through the interplay of verbal element (insert “МИР” = peace) and non-verbal element (figures with axes instead of heads with the inserts “Russia”, “ОРЛО”, “ОРДО” – temporally occupied regions of Donetsk and Luhansk). There is also the joke technique of *punning*: the idiomatic expression “to bury a hatchet of war” is activated by non-verbal element, which in turn contrasts with blood on the axes.

Cartoons and memes covering Zelensky’s military policy sharply criticise his reluctance to call Russia an aggressor, the appointment of former Soviet officials as members of the negotiating team, their unprofessionalism, mental and physical weakness, as well and the President’s inappropriate behaviour during his visits to the front line in Donbass.



Figure 12. I am not a loser



Figure 13. Hatchets of war

4.3. Category “Foreign Policy”

In the category *Foreign Policy*, most of the cartoons and memes deal with Russian-Ukrainian (51 documents) and Ukrainian-American relations (34 documents). The most common joke techniques here are *satire* (25.5%), *disguise* (20.8%), and *association* (19%).

Individual cartoon (Putin) dominates here. The Russian President is often portrayed alongside Hitler, Stalin, or Lenin as a DEVIL, SOVIET SOLDIER, CHAMELEON, or PUPPETEER, who pulls the strings of the separatists depicted as puppets in the occupied territories or those of Zelensky (Figure 14). Another metaphor is “PUTIN = CORONA VIRUS”. In this cartoon, we also see the joke techniques of *association* with totalitarian leaders of the Soviet Union and *satire*. (Figure 15).



Figure 14. Puppeteers and puppets



Figure 15. Russian corona viruses

The second topic of cartoons and memes in the category *Foreign policy* is Zelensky's visit to the United States in September 2019 and his telephone conversation with Trump, after which the US-President was threatened with impeachment.

Satire (33.8%), *parody* (13.2%), *contradiction* (11.8%), *association*, and *disguise* (10.3%) are the most frequent joke techniques in this category. Figure 16 and 17 have a common socio-political context. In Figure 16 (*Monica Zelensky*), the Ukrainian President is depicted with a woman's hair. The interplay of verbal and non-verbal elements evokes allusions to the former White House intern Monica Lewinsky and her possible affair with President Clinton which nearly led to his impeachment. The meme draws parallels with the investigation into the impeachment of the US President Donald Trump initiated on September 24, 2019. The investigation, which preceded the official impeachment, was launched in connection with a statement by an anonymous informant who claimed that President Trump in July 2019 put pressure on the Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in his own personal and political interests, in order to persuade the Ukrainian government to the investigation into the involvement in the corruption schemes of Hunter Biden, the son of former Vice President Joe Biden, in exchange for financial and military assistance. Figure 17 is textual meme. Slightly modified slogan "Ze suis Monika" (*Ze* – the initial letters of the name Zelensky) instead of "Je" is used in a new context (*appropriation*). This activates an *association* with a) terrorist attack on the office of the French satirical weekly "Charlie Hebdo" on 7.01.2015 in Paris, after which the posters of solidarity appeared in the social media, and b) the story of the above-mentioned Monica Lewinski. The combination of *association* and *appropriation* enhances the satirical effect of this meme. As we can see, Figures 16 and 17 are the examples of different ways of a humorous depiction of the same event using verbal and non-verbal means.



Figure 16 Monica Zelensky



Figure 17. Je suis Monika

5. Conclusions

The national and international context of President Zelensky's activities from April 2019 to December 2020 was shaped by the following events: inauguration, formation of his own team, appointment and dismissal of the prime ministers and governments, parliament speakers, peace initiatives, the pandemic and Covid-19, visits to Donbass, foreign visits, and interviews for international media. Political, economic, social, humanitarian, and military challenges and risks that Zelensky faced during the analysed period mostly did not receive adequate and timely reactions from the newly elected president. This was determined by the lack of experience in public administration and international activities. Consequently, this led to the gradual loss of Zelensky's popularity and trust in the President, who was supported by 73% of voters. The unfulfilled campaign promises and the deteriorating economic situation in Ukraine led to social criticism of Zelensky's activities. Accordingly, the initial electoral support of the President has turned into a critically mocking attitude. These developments have been reflected in numerous memes and cartoons. Their main message is Zelensky's unprofessionalism and social criticism against it.

Accordingly, political humour in memes and cartoons depicting Zelensky's presidential activities is subversive, aiming at his military, economic, social, cultural, and foreign policies, as well at personnel assignments and peacekeeping initiatives. Multimodal memes (68.2%) and cartoons with text (13.1%) dominate our corpus. The interplay of verbal and non-verbal elements in these multimodal texts provides the humorous effect. Satire (75.1%), association

(49.7%), contradiction (31.3%), parody (29.9%), and narration (23%) are the most frequent joke techniques. They are implemented by verbal and non-verbal elements (captions, visual metaphors, symbols). The memes and cartoons dedicated to Zelensky's 1,5 years of presidency emphasise the inconsistency of the president's words and actions in economic, military, social, and cultural policy, and his unfulfilled promises. Subversive humour in cartoons and memes targets economic decline, wrong decisions in the fight against the pandemic, low vaccination rates, and, consequently, dropping popularity. Cartoons and memes covering Zelensky's military policy sharply criticise his reluctance to call Russia an aggressor, the appointment of former Soviet officials as members of the negotiating team, their unprofessionalism, mental and physical weakness, as well as the president's inappropriate behaviour during his visits on the front line in Donbass.

The hypothesis about the interdependence of the social context and subversive/supportive humour in the construction of Zelensky's image was confirmed. The features of particular decisions or statements made by the President have determined the choice of plot, type of cartoon/meme, metaphor or symbol. This enabled efficient implementation of the humorous effect. The majority of studies in political humour have concentrated on its goals, functions, and meanings as perceived and interpreted by the researchers themselves. But recent research tendencies show that humour scholars have started to investigate what recipients themselves make out of political humour, namely how they interpret and evaluate it. Central to this turn in the analysis of political humour is the importance attached to context as a parameter shaping its production and interpretation.

It should be noted that qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis of the social context and structural elements of cartoons and memes are well developed (e.g. frame analysis, multimodal analysis, narrative analysis, semiotic analysis, and content analysis). The volume of research material, which is mostly freely available, as well as the research period is determined by the researcher. If the researcher is to examine the motives of the cartoonist in creating a cartoon, or his political preferences, then it becomes appropriate to use sociological methods (such as questionnaires, interviews, sociometrics, and social experiment). These methods can also be helpful for the analysis of humour perception and humour effects (audience). The comprehensive research of political humour (cartoonist-cartoon/meme-audience) and a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods will not only optimize the results, but also become a new impetus for humour studies.

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