

Laughing at political opponents: Poroshenko's vs. Zelensky's supporters in memes

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Abstract

The paper is devoted to the analysis of the discursive dimension of the standoff between supporters of 6th Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and those of his predecessor Petro Poroshenko. This dimension is implemented in Internet memes as one of the forms of political satire. Memes can be defined by their goals, frame of reference and means. The discursive practices used in memes aiming at the symbolic defamation of a political opponent and his electoral base are considered, taking into account the target, the focus, and the presentation of political satire about the protagonists Zelensky and Poroshenko. The corresponding parameters (goal-target, frame of reference-focus, means-presentation) constitute the analytical framework for the examination of the interrelations between political participation, political humour, political satire, and political discourse in this paper.

Keywords: political participation, political humour, political satire, political discourse, Internet memes.

1. Introduction

“I’m not interested in any story if it’s related to politics... I honestly don’t want to get dirty in all this,” comedian Volodymyr Zelenskyi said on June 11, 2018. And six months later, on New Year’s Eve of the same year, he officially announced that he is running for president of the Ukraine. This statement was preceded by two seasons of the series “Servant of the People”, in which Zelensky played a history teacher who is complaining about the corruption and lies of state officials, explaining why Ukrainians constantly elect bad rulers and how he himself would lead the country in the position of president. The “Servant of the People” became the most popular Ukrainian series (98 million views on the official YouTube channel). The series added to Zelensky’s popularity as well to his activities as a comedian who ridiculed and criticised the government for many years. In April 2019, Zelensky won the presidential election in Ukraine (gaining as much as 73.22% of votes). The former president Petro Poroshenko was defeated with only 24.45% of the votes.

The election caused a confrontation between supporters of the former and newly elected president followed by the explicit divisions within Ukrainian society. It was intensified by the

personal animosity between Zelensky and Poroshenko. This rivalry formed a special discourse, which was realised on both verbal and non-verbal levels and later on ‘migrated’ to the Internet: to blogs, web pages and memes. Poroshenko’s supporters began to be called *porokhobots* (from *bot* and *Porokh* – abbreviated form of the name of the Fifth President) and *zebils* (from *Ze* - the first letters of the name of the newly elected President and *debil* ‘imbecile’) or *ze(leno)bots*. The discursive dimension of this confrontation has been implemented in the symbolic discrediting of opponents. Mutual accusations of *porokhobots* and *zebils* were related to the inability to run the state, the betrayal of national interests, and the low intellectual level. These accusations found expression in various memes depicting these two social groups. Accordingly, the paper aims to analyse how the discursive dimension of the standoff between *porokhobots* and *ze(leno)bots* is implemented in political humour. To achieve this goal, it is necessary to:

- 1) define the essence and the interrelations of concepts *political participation*, *political humour*, *political satire*, *political discourse*;
- 2) describe the main features of memes;
- 3) analyse the main discursive practices used by the supporters of Poroshenko and Zelensky to defame the opponents;

This paper is part of series of publications aiming at a comparative analysis of Ukrainian, Russian and World political memes targeting the President Zelensky and his political trajectory since 2019 (Semotiuk, 2021b; Semotiuk, 2022). Since Internet memes are a phenomenon understudied by Ukrainian researchers, this paper will: 1) introduce the research material that is not well known to the Western audience; 2) to document the representation of fragments of the Ukrainian modern history in political humour.

2. Methodology

This paper as a part of the research project “Humour as transgression: mediallyinguistic analysis of the cartoons and memes on President V. Zelensky” analyses a small fragment of the project corpus. The fragment contains 8 memes depicting the virtual ‘battles’ between Poroshenko’s and Zelensky’s supporters. The whole project is based on the corpus of ca. 2500 political memes targeting Zelensky and his voters. The corpus was compiled using free web galleries and special groups in Facebook and Twitter. The research period covers 4 years (2019-2022).

Political Internet memes as one of the forms of political satire can be defined by its goals, frame of reference and means. 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 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 (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: hollow rhetoric, crass pieties, betrayal of principles, etc. 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. *Presentation* means the medium in which the humour is displayed (Paletz, 1990, pp. 486-488).

These corresponding parameters (goal-target, frame of reference-focus, means-presentation) are analytical framework for this paper. The analytical units are the target, the focus, and the

presentation of political satire about the supporters of 6th Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and his predecessor Petro Poroshenko.

Internet memes are multimodal texts functioning in a certain social context. The social context of the study is shaped by the confrontation between the supporters of the former President Poroshenko and the newly elected president Zelensky followed by a further social polarization in Ukraine. Therefore, in this paper I use Discourse Analysis (DA) to investigate the representation of these phenomena in memes. The paper is based on a multidisciplinary approach using elements of the Superiority Theory and Functional Theory. The Superiority Theory has its beginnings in ancient Greek philosophy (stupidity, immorality, incompetence of other people makes our sense of superiority possible) and was further developed by Bergson (2014) who introduced the concept of the socially useful function of humour as social adjustment. Later interpretations of this theory consider our reaction (i.e. ridicule) to the shortcomings of others in two ways: as a result of evolutionary competition and as a way of exercising social control (Billig, 2001).

If we treat political satire as a unique type of political discourse (Jones, 2010; Day, 2011), then Functional Theory can help us to better understand this type of political discourse according to its main functions: (1) to acclaim (positive statements about oneself); (2) to attack (criticism of an opponent), and (3) to defend (refutations of attacks from opponents) (see Benoit et al., 2002; Benoit, 2007).

In this paper, political memes are regarded as units of Humorous Media Political Discourse. This term was introduced by (Semotiuk, 2021a) to refer to the interdiscursive hybrid phenomenon which is actualised in multimodal media texts on the individual, group and social level using discursive practices. On the individual level,

a person as a bearer of political consciousness determines for himself certain ‘problem areas’ of politics. They become the subject of discursive reflection: we either identify with a political problem and ways to solve it or oppose ourselves to them. This enables the social categorization of ‘*me*’ vs. ‘*they*’. On the group level, the formation of group identity occurs in accordance with the values and ideas shared by the group.

(Semotiuk, 2021a, p. 138)

Collective identity is determined not only by internal factors (i.e. self-awareness) but also by external components, or ‘*others*’. At the same time, the identity of the group influences the choice of certain discursive practices and the social categorisation of ‘*we – they*’ becomes more expressive.

One of the most effective strategies for the legitimisation in political discourse is proximization, i.e. the speaker’s presentation of events on the discourse stage as directly affecting the addressee, usually in a negative or a threatening way. The axiological proximization “involves a growing conflict between the system of values adhered to by the speaker and the addressee” (Cap, 2009: 2) as well a conflict between the group values.

In this paper, the group level is analysed with special attention to its actualisation in memes depicting the standoff between Poroshenko’s and Zelensky’s supporters (‘*we – they*’). At this level, the Superiority Theory comes in handy: supporters of the 5th and 6th Ukrainian president mock each other, making fun of certain negative traits of the antagonists and considering themselves a better part of society and morally higher than their opponents. On the social level, political discourse is determined by the cultural context. It becomes an instrument of communication between society and the political elite, a means of overcoming the contradictions between social notions of ‘how it should be’ and ‘how it really is’.

3. Political participation and political humour: state of the research

The thorough analysis of the main approaches to political participation (henceforth PP) was conducted by Conge (1988) providing the overview of PP repertoires in the 1980s-1990s and later by Weiss (2020), analysing PP research in the 2000s and differences between youth and adult political participation. Reflecting on the limits of the traditional ways through which the nature of a participatory act has been defined, Pitti (2018) proposed the term *unconventional political participation*. As Weiss (2020) states,

Political Participation research has undergone significant developments [...] and multiple disciplines have contributed to broadening our understanding of the field, but because of this multidisciplinary input, it has become less clear what the underlying core assumptions and definitions are that make up the term Political Participation.

(Weiss, 2020, p. 2)

Political participation can be defined as “individual or collective action at the national or local level that supports or, opposes state structure authorities and/or decision regarding allocation of public goods” (Conge, 1988, p. 247). This action can be verbal or written, violent or non-violent and it can be of any intensity. This definition focuses on supportive vs. opposing actions and can be linked with supportive vs. subversive humour as a form of political participation. The rapid development of Internet technologies and social media created new opportunities to express ideas, demands, and frustrations.

Political participation on social media has opponents and supporters. Opponents label PP on social media as *slacktivism* and consider it meaningless. *Slacktivism* (slacker + activism) is a term used to describe feel-good online activism that has zero political or social impact. It gives those who participate in slacktivist campaigns the illusion of having a meaningful impact on the world without demanding anything more than joining a Facebook group (Morozov, 2009).

The supporters claim that digital technologies offer opportunities for engaging in a wide range of civic activities. These actions have mostly underlying motivations related to self-efficacy, empowerment, and participants’ feeling that they can have influence over decision makers (Lilleker & Michalska, 2017). In recent years, the rapid development of social media has led to the emergence of new forms of media culture, political humour and civic engagement. These new forms and activities are based on the locus (polity), targeting (government area or community problems), and circumstance (context or motivations) of these activities (van Deth 2016) and particularly represented by Internet memes.

The scholarship on political humour includes two main approaches: researchers either stress the conservative ways in which humour relies upon and redoubles existing shared expectations at the expense of errant targets (Lockyer & Pickering, 2005; Sørensen, 2013; Rehak & Trnka, 2018) or they affirm the radical ways in which it can sponsor cognitive shifts and thereby liberate human energies (Kessel & Merziger, 2012; Brok, 2018; Damir-Geilsdorf & Milich, 2020).

Since humour is by definition based on incongruity and serves as criticism, political humour can be regarded 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 can be defined as a humorous message. It is a form of political discourse that communicates judgment, either explicitly or implicitly.

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 (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 (Krys et al., 2017; Zekavat, 2017).

Other than traditional and institutionalized forms of political humour, Internet memes could be regarded 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 (Tsakona & Popa, 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 “the street art of the Internet and the newest tool shaping political contention today” (Mina, 2019: 201). Political Internet memes are situated at the intersection of digital and political communication (Shomova, 2021). They reinforce and shape today’s politics.

Two main approaches to memes should be mentioned here: 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, 2001; Schurina 2012). Memes can be regarded as an “a complex idea that organises itself in a separate entity and unfolds through external manifestations expressed in the memes” (Dennet, 2001: 307). An essential feature of memes is the constant experimentation with verbal and nonverbal means, the use and reinterpretation of these means in a new context. It is thus “secondary semiosis of verbal and nonverbal units, which attributes new meanings in the virtual communication space to them” (Nezhura, 2012: 49).

As Shifman (2013, p. 362) states,

memes debate 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 (Johnson, 2007; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007). In recent years, researchers of political satire have been stressing that Internet memes are increasingly becoming a means of online trolling of political opponents (Uzuegbunam, 2020; Vasilyeva, 2021). These authors claim that Internet trolling has now come to mean the posting of messages or images (via a public communication network) that are either provocative or offensive but also transgressive.

The perception of cartoons and memes is regulated by the individual characteristics of the audience and by its structural elements. The interaction of these elements (verbal and nonverbal) and audience’s perception determine what kind of contribution a recipient will make and hence what that meme or cartoon will ultimately come to mean. The constructing of the meme’s meaning and cognitive contribution made by the recipient depends on what he or she brings to the table: political knowledge, political beliefs or ideology, as well as psychological characteristics and viewing motivations (Young, 2017).

Until now, research on political humour in Ukraine has been fragmentary, focusing primarily on a summarising of existing post-Soviet approaches (Gudzenko, 2014; Hrabarchuk, 2018), on humour in Ukrainian political discourse (Kondratenko, 2019), and on the framing of Ukrainian politics and politicians in political sketches (Ryabinska, 2020). These studies were mainly descriptive and focused on the analysis of verbal aspects of political humour (e.g. political speeches or TV shows).

Summarising the existing approaches to political participation, political humour and political satire, we can state that these concepts are interacting as mechanisms for social change

and civic engagement. They can be supportive or oppositional and aim at the filling the gap between imperfect political/social reality and ideas about ‘how should it be’. The rapid development of Internet technologies and Social Media stimulated new forms of media culture, political humour and civic engagement. These new forms can be defined as unconventional political participation based on the locus, targeting and context. Internet memes could be regarded as unconventional political humour and mechanism of a) political participation and b) transfer and storage of cultural information. The perception of memes is determined not only by the individual characteristics of the audience but also by its structural elements. Political satire as a form of political discourse questions the existing political or social order and is regulated by target, focus, social acceptability, and presentation. The popularity of modern political humour is determined by the media: traditional and untraditional genres are produced and/or disseminated via the media.

4. Discursive practices of opponent’s symbolic discrediting in memes

The demarcation of “we” and “they” and the setting of subversive humour in memes targeting supporters of Poroshenko and Zelensky are based on differences in political preferences. Despite the differences in political views and the resulting antagonism, both groups use the same discursive practices to tarnish the rival: a) accusations of opponents’ prevalence in the Ukrainian society, b) exclusion from the ‘normality’ and hate speech, c) appeal to unite in a common struggle against antagonists, and d) mutual blaming of flattery in social media. Mutual accusations of both groups were related to the politicians’ inability to run the state, the betrayal of national interests, and the low intellectual level of supporters. These accusations found expression in various memes depicting these two social groups. Here are some examples.

In Figures 1 and 2 the same nonverbal element is used, i.e. the plot from the cartoon “Toy Story” as a background. The main semantic load is carried by the verbal element, the first part of which is common to both memes (*they are everywhere*) and the second - points to the supporters of Poroshenko (*porokhobots*) and Zelensky (*zebils*). Accordingly, the main message of these memes is that “*our opponents are everywhere*” and the demarcation from the opponents (“we” and “they”). The target of this meme are members of rival ‘camps’ and it is focused on the mutual accusations of opponents’ prevalence in the Ukrainian society.



Figure 1. ‘Porokhobots are everywhere’



Figure 2. 'Zebils are everywhere'

The textual meme (Figure 3) has the caption *levels of hell* and a slightly modified list of mortal sins: limbo, salacity, gluttony, greed, anger, for heretics, violence, fraud, betrayal. At the end of this list are the *porokhobots*. The main focus of this meme rendering the messages “to be a *porokhobot* is the gravest sin” and “*porokhobots* are the bottom of hell” implies an exclusion from ‘normality’ and the distinction between ‘we’ and ‘they’ based on political preferences. Another meme (Figure 4) shows human skulls with the captions “man”, “woman”, “white”, “black”, “poor”, “rich”, “Asian”. The last in the bottom row is not a human, but a monkey skull with the signature “zebil”. This meme is also focused on exclusion based on political sympathies and renders the messages “all people are equal, regardless of gender, race or income level” and “zebils are not human”.



Figure 3. Levels of hell



Figure 4. Skulls

Figure 5 depicts the wrapper of the popular chewing gum *Love is...* with the explanation to *hate zebils together*. It uses a technique of contrast (i.e. “love is to hate”). This interaction of the verbal and nonverbal elements as well the word *together* in the explanation forms the main focus of the meme: a call to unite against political opponents. Figure 6 is a multimodal narrative (3 images and speech bubbles). This meme uses the visual plot from the fantasy film *Finding Neverland*. The man asks the boy “Why are you crying, little one?”. He answers: “because the whole my family are *porokhobots*” and, finally, the man hugs this boy sympathetically. The main focus of this meme is “to be *porokobot* is sad” and “*porokhobots* deserve compassion”.



Figure 5. Love is...



Figure 6. Why are you crying?

Another topic of memes depicting the supporters of Poroshenko and Zelensky are their virtual battles in social media, as well as the activities of bots. The main focus here is the flattery, which colloquially is depicted as “ass licking “. Here, we are shown how Poroshenko’s and Zelensky’s fans are praising their ‘idols’ in the social media. Figure 7 is an example for the hybridisation of humorous genres (cartoons and memes), when Internet users modify successful cartoons with no caption by adding text to enhance the satirical effect of the original image. The nonverbal element is an original cartoon (without caption) by the Ukrainian cartoonist George Kliychnyk. It depicts a classroom, students and a teacher. Students are kneeling in front of Poroshenko’s portraits, kissing them, while others are literally “licking asses”. The added verbal element is a caption “*School of porokhobots, lovers of state power and other bloggers*”. The last word in the caption is *блоХер* (modified ‘blogger’). The ‘хер’ in Russian and Ukrainian is a curse word used for ‘penis’. Figure 8 has both nonverbal (i.e. Facebook owner Mark Zuckerberg and President Zelensky) and verbal elements (i.e. *Volodya, I’m tired of banning your vaselinobots*). In the last word, we have a play of words *vaseline* and *zelebots*. This meme focuses on the flattery of Zelensky’s adepts depicting them as sycophants and on the violation of the Facebook’s ethical standards by their comments.



Figure 7 ‘Porokhobots school’



Figure 8 ‘Zelenobots banning’

5. Conclusion

The memes analysed here represent a fragment of the discursive representation of the standoff between Poroshenko’s and Zelensky’s supporters (‘we – they’). The analysis of supportive vs. subversive humour in political memes depicting the confrontation between ‘*porokhobots*’ and

'zebils' was based on Discourse Analysis with special attention to the *presentation*, affected by the *target* and the *focus* of political satire.

The *social context* of the study was shaped by explicit divisions within Ukrainian society after the presidential elections of 2019 and the confrontation between the supporters of the former president and those of the newly elected president. This confrontation was based on the non-acceptance of opponents' political preferences and the mutual accusations related to the politicians' inability to run the state, the betrayal of national interests, and the low intellectual level of their supporters (*focus*). These accusations found expression in various memes depicting these two social groups.

The setting of supportive vs. subversive humour was analysed considering the text-image relations in memes and the interaction between verbal and nonverbal elements. Accordingly, memes depicting the 'enemy camp' (*target*) are always subversive ("to attack"), but also supportive for the own 'camp' ("to acclaim"). This correlation between subversive/supportive humour and the functions of political discourse is accounted for in terms of the Superiority Theory. The setting of memes depicting political opponents includes different discursive practices: a) exclusion from normality, b) hate speech, c) appeals to unite in a common struggle against antagonists, and d) mutual blaming of flattery in social media. The analytical framework suggested in the paper reflects the logical connections between the structural (verbal and non-verbal) elements in the memes and correlates with Superiority Theory, Functional Theory, and Discourse Theory. This enabled a comprehensive analysis of the opponent's symbolic discrediting in memes.

6. Perspectives

This paper is a part of the above-mentioned project "Humour as transgression: mediallyinguistic analysis of the cartoons and memes on President V. Zelensky". The project aims to analyse the discursive dimension of the Zelensky's political trajectory since 2019. It combines quantitative and qualitative approaches and integrates national (Ukrainian) and international (global) levels of political humour taking into account the social context and intercultural aspects. The project corpus (2500 memes) will be extended by political cartoons from North and South America, Europe, Asia, Australia, and Africa as another genre of political humour. The methodological framework suggested in this paper (Discourse Analysis) will be supplemented by the semiotic analysis, framing analysis, and computer based content analysis. This will allow us to track and to quantify the discursive representation of Zelensky's political trajectory with special attention to similarities and differences in Zelensky's depiction in international, Ukrainian, and Russian cartoons and memes. The setting, target and focus of memes and cartoons regulate the distribution of supportive/subversive humour. But the interaction of these elements also shapes the self-image and the public image of the persons represented in such cartoons or memes. The following questions are to be answered in the further research:

- 1) Does supportive vs. subversive humour depend only on the cartoonist's attitude/political affiliation or is it determined also by the social and political context?
- 2) Can the subversive humour turn into supportive and vice versa?
- 3) What factors influence the correlation between self-image/public image and supportive/subversive political humour?
- 4) Is aggression in political satire/subversive humour always linked with transgression and are they both social acceptable?

To answer these questions a larger corpus and interdisciplinary methodology (social anthropology, discourse and humour studies, political science) will be needed. They can serve as a starting point for the future research.

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