

Canned jokes in Russian public political discourse

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Abstract

The paper addresses a well-documented genre of Russian canned jokes from a socio-pragmatic perspective. The goal of the paper is twofold: firstly, it aims at examining a relatively new phenomenon of telling jokes in public political discourse. Secondly, it argues that jokes – a typical example of a non-bona fide genre – can nevertheless be used to convey bona fide messages. As a specific sphere of communication public political discourse incorporates official interaction of professional politicians as well as publicly expressed attitudes of ordinary people. Because jokes capture our experience and reflect ongoing social processes, modern Russian political discourse in many of its forms eagerly employs the genre. But, whenever a joke is used in the official political communication, we face the discrepancy between the premise of the bona fide mode of political discourse and non-seriousness of jokes. On the surface telling jokes in political discourse might seem to be a temporal switch from the bona fide to the non-bona fide mode of communication. However, the content of canned jokes told by politicians reveals deep social implications: for instance, Vladimir Putin's frequent references to Soviet realia are signs of superiority and control over the situation. Jokes told by Putin's opponents, on the one hand, reveal disappointment; on the other, they are part of the struggle for power. Telling jokes in public political discourse shows that the borderline between two modes of communication – bona fide and non-bona fide – is fuzzy since jokes transmit serious messages for the participants of political communication.

Keywords: canned jokes, public discourse, political discourse, bona fide mode of communication, non-bona fide mode of communication.

1. Canned jokes as a genre of *non-bona fide* communication

The urge to tell jokes seems to be deeply implanted in humans. To most people jokes are funny stories told with the purpose of entertainment; to humour researchers they are tokens of the genre that captures basic stereotypes of our social behavior: important social practices and relations regularly become the targets of jokes. According to Ritchie (2012: 34), jokes have

become “laboratory animals’ on which ideas about textual humour can be tested”. Formerly a genre of private oral communication, today canned jokes exist in multiple printed collections and on Internet sites. In Russian culture popularity of the genre guarantees success in competition with other genres of folklore and forms of popular culture.

Though today Russian canned jokes function mostly as an urban genre of jokelore, folklorists claim that their roots go back to the traditional ludic culture (Sheygal-Plachek 2009). As short narratives, canned jokes reconstruct our experience of interacting with various social groups and dealing with typical situations (Kashkin & Shilikhina 2009). In everyday conversations, we tell jokes about obscure people as well as about celebrities.

Russian canned jokes are a well-documented genre of urban jokelore (Shmeleva & Shmelev 2002, 2009). They attract researchers’ attention because of their specific cultural functions: for instance, researchers suggest that one can study the history of the Soviet Union by reading canned jokes from different political epochs (Adams 2005). In general, canned jokes capture our social and cultural values, as well as political attitudes and ideas.

The “blueprint” of a typical canned joke comprises several properties:

- 1) it is an anonymous short story that can be reproduced for an unlimited number of times with some minor changes in the text;
- 2) unlike spontaneous jokes, canned jokes are not totally context-dependent. They are not improvised, and their existence in printed collections is yet another proof of their relative context-independence;
- 3) telling jokes necessarily involves play and pretense: in oral conversations canned jokes are not simply narrated but performed (e.g., the voices or typical accents of the characters are imitated). Play and pretense are natural forms of human behavior; they are governed by socially accepted rules (Huizinga 1971). Performance is a meta-message that what is being said contains implicit meaning and should not be taken at face value.

Jokes are a clear example of the *non-bona fide* mode of communication. In his description of the nature of jokes Davies (2011: 3) states that “[t]he joker has broken the rules of serious *bona fide* communication in a pleasurable way, for example by using false logic or exploiting the double meanings of words, and we have entered another domain, that of humor, where different rules apply”.

The opposition of *bona fide* vs. *non-bona fide* mode of communication was introduced by Raskin (1985). For him, *bona fide* communication is “the earnest, serious, information-conveying mode of human communication” (Raskin 1985: 100). Another important characteristic of the *bona fide* mode is that it is based on Grice’s Cooperative Principle (Grice 1989). In contrast, the purpose of the *non-bona fide* communication is not cooperation. Instead the speaker aims at making the hearer laugh (Raskin 1985: 100). The *bona fide* / *non-bona fide* opposition is important for my further discussion of jokes in public political discourse: if the *non-bona fide* communication is a flippant and non-cooperative way of talking, does it mean that by telling jokes the speaker avoids providing the addressee with any relevant information? The use of jokes in public political disputes shows that this is definitely not the case.

So, in Section 2 I will briefly introduce the two modes of discourse and discuss their properties relevant for Sections 3 and 4, I will discuss the properties of public political discourse and the role of humour in public discussions of important social issues. Sections 5 and 6 will be devoted to canned jokes told by politicians and the audience respectively: I will focus on the functions and pragmatic effects of *non-bona fide* messages in public communication. In particular, I will argue that political jokes reflect the existing anxiety and

social tension, and illustrate how certain events bring to life new portions of humour. The majority of jokes will be presented in the contexts of their occurrence: mass media publications, political interviews and transcripts of videos. The jokes were collected in the period of 2010-2012.

2. *Bona fide* and *non-bona fide* modes of communication

As language users we are well aware of the two ways of presenting information: *bona fide* (serious) and *non-bona fide* (e.g. humorous or ironic). Constant switches between these two modes of discourse are characteristic features of everyday spontaneous communication. Sometimes, when both serious and humorous interpretations of the utterance are possible, the border between the two modes becomes blurred. The ambiguity can be resolved with meta-pragmatic comments, e.g. “I’m joking / kidding” or “This is not a joke”.

It is an oversimplification to talk of serious and non-serious communication in terms of a binary opposition. Firstly, this is due to the fact that these modes are not homogenous and there are different types of serious and non-serious communication. Secondly, these types overlap in having some common features and differ in others.

The differences between the *bona fide* and the *non-bona fide* modes can be captured if we introduce a set of features. Three of them – the utterance-reality relationship, the element of play and pretense, and the degree of cooperativeness – are the most important.

The major difference between the two modes lies in the utterance-reality interface: while *bona-fide* discourse correlates with the real-world situations, *non-bona fide* utterances usually describe a non-existing situation or present a real situation in a strange and unusual way.

The already mentioned element of play and pretense is the property shared by all humorous and ironic communication: if the utterance does not correspond to the real situation but we still assume the speaker is rational and cooperative, pretense and acting become good explanations for talking about something that does not correlate with reality.

The third feature – the degree of the speaker’s cooperativeness – is a disputable characteristic. For many researchers cooperativeness is a binary concept: one is either cooperative (that is, absolutely rational and intentional) or non-cooperative. For instance, Attardo states that “[h]umor, just as lying, involves a different mode of communication which does not abide by the CP” (Attardo 2011: 139). However, cooperativeness should rather be treated as a scalar concept: one can be cooperative to some degree. In humorous discourse the speaker disguises his/her cooperativeness and pretends to be incongruous, but the intention behind the joke or ironic remark remains rational.

In his analysis of jokes as a genre of the *non-bona fide* communication, Raskin (1985) suggests that the speaker makes a joke either intentionally or unintentionally, and the hearer may or may not expect the joke. A joke told in a public political interaction, then, can be described as intentional (since all political discourse is highly intentional) and unexpected on the part of the hearer (since political communication is based on the *bona fide* premises). In other words, whenever a joke is told in political discourse we face the oppositions of formal vs. informal, official vs. unofficial, and, perhaps the most importantly, *bona fide* vs. *non-bona fide* communication. The question is this: how does the combination of the two modes function in public political discourse? To answer the question, it is necessary to define the concept of public discourse and discuss the relation between humour and political communication.

3. Public discourse: What are the rules of the game?

The boundary between public and private communication in modern discursive communities is fuzzy. Yet, the importance of defining public discourse lies in the fact that it is governed by a set of rules of information exchange other than private communication, and the switch from the *bona fide* to the *non-bona fide* mode can have effects that are different from those in private interactions.

Sarangi defines public discourse as a “social processes of talk and text in the public domain which have institutionally ratified consequences” (Sarangi 2011: 248). Public discourse includes political and mass-media communication as well as professional and organizational verbal interactions, both oral and written. Because public discourse centers around issues that are important to society as a whole or to particular social groups, “speakers give evidence of careful attention to their choice of words and manner of phrasing, and the relations of implications and entailment between propositions” (Labov & Labov 1986: 225). Moreover, according to Labov & Labov (1986: 231), public discourse is governed by specific rules of logical argument and inferential reasoning, on the one hand, and by the rules of emotional appeal and persuasion, on the other.

Public discourse communication necessarily includes a set of social roles played by its participants. Social roles and discursive practices of public communication are mutually dependent: on the one hand, roles sanction or ban certain linguistic activities. On the other hand, speakers can use various linguistic markers to identify their social positions.

Political discourse is by default public, and all the properties of public communication can be applied to verbal interactions in the sphere of politics. As a discourse of power it necessarily involves argumentation, namely “a complex speech act consisting of a constellation of statements designed to justify or refute an opinion. Argumentation is directed towards obtaining the approbation of an audience” (van Eemeren 1986: 301). In this context, it could be suggested that, whenever a joke is used in a public political debate, it becomes a tool for argumentation. The question is, what is so special about jokes as political arguments? To answer this let us turn to the characteristics of political communication as a specific form of public discourse and the role of humour in political interactions.

4. Political discourse and humour

The first and foremost property of political discourse is its tight connection with language (Wright 2009: 21). Political activity, in essence, is a linguistic (i.e. symbolic) action of a very specific kind. Political discourse is rarely spontaneous, and even when it is unprepared it cannot be a total improvisation (Reisigl 2009: 243). In other words, it is a highly intentional form of linguistic behavior aimed at transmitting and negotiating group values.

To a large degree, political discourse overlaps with mass media discourse and computer-mediated communication. Mass media and the Internet are the two main “stages” on which political discourse is presented to the audience. Their major function is to provide publicity for the content: “the relationship between original talk and text on the one hand and reports of that talk and text on the other can be assumed to be a crucial link in the production of a public sphere in which citizens participate in the political process” (Chilton & Schäffner 2002: 8). However, the role of mass media cannot be reduced to that of a neutral mediator: in exchange for the service, the media shape the content and the format of political communication and ritualize it (Lauerbach & Fetzer 2007: 5, Alekseevskij 2010: 3). In my research, I will treat the politics-media relation as a system in which political content is selected and presented to the audience with a pragmatic purpose of persuasion. Mass-media

texts will serve as illustrations of how political messages are shaped and jokes are presented to the audience.

Traditionally, political discourse is described as a uni-directional communication, namely, politicians talking to their audiences. Within this tradition linguists analyze various genres and texts in terms of their persuasive potential and their role in the discourse of power. In this respect presidential or parliamentary discourses (which are clear examples of the discourse of power) are among the most popular objects of research (see, for instance, Kendall 1995, Mueller 2011). Nevertheless, in reality political discourse is an interaction of various social groups through texts and talks in a public domain. The participants of political communication get a chance and a channel to express their opinion and affect each other's thoughts and actions. Political communication is a discourse of power, hence a lot of political talk takes a form of a debate in which different points of view compete with the aim to hold or come to power.

Although political discourse is expected to comply to the rules of the *bona-fide* mode of communication, it is not totally void of humour. Researchers in political humour claim that it is "a communicative resource spotting, highlighting, and attacking incongruities originating in political discourse and action" (Tsakona & Popa 2011: 6). They also stress the fact that "political humour brings to the surface the inconsistencies and inadequacy of political decisions and acts, and the incompetence, recklessness, and corruption of politicians and political leaders. It is usually based on how political reality is, while, at the same time, points out that this is in fact an incongruous reality: political affairs and politician are not what they are expected to be" (Tsakona & Popa 2011: 6). Humorous discourse can inflate or deflate the bond of trust between the politician and the audience. If allowed by social and cultural norms in a public discourse, the jokes come handy in political debates: they allow manipulating societal myths and cultural values. By telling a joke the speaker can form an implicit message and influence the audience's attitudes and beliefs.

There is a long-standing tradition of telling political canned jokes in Russian culture. Every Soviet political leader deserved his portion of ironic criticism in series of jokes, and, since the jokes ran counter to the official ideology (the so-called anti-Soviet jokes), their public telling could easily lead to legal prosecution. It comes as no surprise that in the Soviet epoch oral canned jokes were a "non-grata" genre; personal communication was the only possible form of their existence. Telling political jokes in private "kitchen talks" was a sign of in-group bonds and a kind of psychological safety valve: people expressed their discontent with the incongruity between the official ideology and the reality.

Official Soviet political discourse was known for its rigid discursive practices and rituals. Naturally, no humour in any form (let alone canned jokes) was allowed in public events and official speeches of the politicians. The situation changed in the late 1980s, when the rules of public communication became less rigid and telling jokes in public (including political ones) became socially acceptable. Despite the fact that the conventionalized goal of jokes (which is entertainment) contradicts the purposes of *bona-fide* communication in the sphere of politics, Russian public political discourse has incorporated the genre of canned jokes. Jokes can now be heard in official speeches of politicians and in analytical reports published in mass media. In Section 5, I will address the issue of using jokes in official political discourse by Russian politicians.

5. Canned Jokes in Russian Public Political Discourse

Vladimir Putin is credited for his spicy speeches. The most vivid and emotional expressions and passages are widely cited by all kinds of mass media and discussed by Internet-users.

Putin employs canned jokes in different settings on various occasions for the purpose of critique and social control. The victims of the President's jokes are either bureaucrats (who, ironically, also happen to be his major supporters) or political opponents.

The following passage is a report on Putin's visit to the State Duma:

Example 1

Завершилось общение Путина с депутатами спором премьера с представителем КПРФ о советском животноводстве. Депутат-коммунист утверждал, что с советских пор в России значительно сократилось поголовье крупного рогатого скота, а Путин парировал: «У нас голов много, а мяса мало было всегда». В ходе спора премьер рассказал депутату советский анекдот: «Длинное, зеленое, мясом пахнет. Что такое? Электричка в Москву!» (Strokolsky 2012).

The dialogue between Putin and the members of the Parliament ended in a dispute about Soviet farming with a representative of the Communist Party claiming that the number of heads of livestock has dramatically decreased since the Soviet time. Putin retorted: "We've always had lots of heads and very little meat". The Prime Minister also told the MP a Soviet joke: "What's long, green and smells of meat? A local train from Moscow!"

The joke refers the audience and the readers back to the Soviet epoch with its total shortage of food. To buy meat people had to commute to Moscow, hence the local train "smelled of meat". The dialogue between Putin (at the time of the discussion he was the Prime Minister) and the Communist Party member illustrates the long-standing dispute between those who believe that the socialist economic system was more efficient and those who support reforms and market economy.

For Putin, telling jokes is a sign of political superiority, because he criticizes and mocks not only his rivals, but also those who support him. Let me illustrate this kind of presidential discourse with several examples of mass media reports. Example (2) is an excerpt from the report on Putin visit to Chelyabinsk, one of the Russian cities in the Urals:

Example 2

Напомним, что вчера Владимир Путин по дороге с «Челябинского трубопрокатного завода» осмотрел пляж рядом с медицинским центром ЧТПЗ и остался недоволен его состоянием. Путин заметил неподготовленность города для полноценного отдыха людей. Премьер не увидел на пляже ни одного туалета, и тут же вспомнил анекдот:

– Гриша, иди купаться!

– Зачем, мама? Плавать я не умею, а писать пока не хочу.

Это было бы смешно, если бы не было так грустно, сказал тогда глава правительства.

В спешном порядке, в присутствии губернатора Челябинской области и главы администрации Челябинска Сергея Давыдова, рабочие привозили песок, устанавливали шезлонги и зонтики (Varivoda 2010).

Yesterday, on his way back from the "Chelyabinsk Tube-Rolling Factory" Vladimir Putin inspected the beach near the factory medical center and was discontent with what he saw. Putin pointed out that the city is not comfortable for the recreation of the city-dwellers. The Prime Minister did not see a single toilet on the beach and remembered a joke:

"Grisha, go and have a swim!"

"Why, mom? I can't swim and I do not want to pee yet".

The joke would be funny if it was not so sad, remarked the Prime Minister.

Urgently, in the presence of the Governor of the Chelyabinsk region and the Mayor of the city Sergey Davydov, the workers brought sand, installed beach chairs and umbrellas.

The opposition of the *bona fide* and the *non-bona fide* modes is a good starting point for the discussion of example (2). The joke along with the direct critique had an important social impact: normally the reconstruction of the beach does not require the presence of the governor and the city mayor. However, the Prime Minister's mocking words were taken seriously, so

the short switch from the *bona fide* to the *non-bona fide* mode and back did not entertain the audience. Rather, its implicit message was interpreted seriously: the local authorities had to take the responsibility and personally control the situation.

Another example comes from a TV interview with Putin recorded in October, 2011, before the parliamentary elections. Again, the joke told by Putin refers us back to the shortages of goods in the Soviet Union:

Example 3

Владимир Путин, премьер-министр РФ: «Для наших оппонентов с левого политического спектра – компартия, леворадикальные наши граждане – могу напомнить конец 1980-х годов. Помните, много было анекдотов на этот счет? В гости приходят друзья к друзьям и спрашивают: „Вы руки будете мыть с мылом? – Да. – Ну, тогда чай будете пить без сахара“. Потому что и то, и другое – слишком много, слишком жирно».

Путин напомнил, что тогда царила монополия в идеологии и в политике и правящая в те годы политическая сила сформировала условия для развала страны (Putin напомнил о razvale SSSR 2011).

Vladimir Putin, the Prime Minister of Russia: “Let me remind our left-wing opponents – the Communist Party, left-wing radicals – what it was like at the end of the 1980s. You remember, there were a lot of canned jokes about that time. Some people come over their friends place. The hosts ask: ‘Would you like to wash your hands with the soap?’ ‘Yes, please’. ‘Then you won’t have sugar in your tea’. Because both soap and sugar are too much, that’s a bit thick”.

Putin reminded that at that time there was a monopoly in ideology and politics and that the political force governing at that time formed the necessary conditions for the collapse of the country.

The utterance “because both soap and sugar are too much, that’s a bit thick” is interesting here: Putin explicates the meaning of the joke, thus killing its potentially humorous effect. Again, the joke is meant seriously: it is an argument in a dispute with the opponents and an implicit reminder that Putin ascribes the rise of standards of living in Russia to his regime. Though on the surface the journalists’ comments that immediately followed the joke summarized what he had said as a reported speech, in fact they explicate the idea of Putin’s superiority over the Communist leaders for those members of the audience that may have not got the meaning of the joke, as intended by Putin.

Putin’s critical remarks mixed with jokes are intentional steps in presenting him as a politician who “speaks the language of common people”. The next example is an illustration of Putin’s public expression of discontent with the level of bureaucracy and corruption in Russia. The joke was widely cited by mass media, since Putin, the former KGB officer, as an illustration to his point told a joke about bureaucracy in the KGB in the Soviet times. Here is the report about Putin’s speech presented by the Russian Information Agency:

Example 4

Выступая на заседании президиума совета при президенте РФ по развитию местного самоуправления, Путин отметил, что "такие вещи как мздоимство, чиновничий произвол – хроническая болезнь нашей страны, и в царское время, и в советское время – одно и то же".

В качестве подтверждения своих слов он рассказал участникам заседания анекдот.

"Приходит американский шпион на Лубянку:

– Я шпион, хочу сдать.

– Чей шпион?

– Американский.

– Тогда в пятую комнату.

Приходит в пятую комнату.

– Оружие есть?

– Да.

– Тогда в седьмую.

– А средства связи?

- Есть.
- Тогда в 20.
- А задание есть?
- Есть.
- Ну идите и исполняйте, не мешайте людям работать"
(Putin rasskazal anekdot o shpione dlya illustratsii proizvola chinovnikov 2011).

In his speech at the meeting of the Presidium of the Presidential Advisory Board on the Development of the Local Self-Government Putin remarked that “things like bribes and lawlessness of the bureaucrats have been chronic illnesses of our country – in the Tsar’s times and the Soviet epoch – they are the same”.

To illustrate his point Putin told the members of the meeting a joke.

An American spy comes to Loubianka:

“I am a spy. I want to give in”.

“What state do you spy for?”

“The USA”.

“Then you should go to office no. 5”.

So he goes there.

“Do you have a gun?”

“Yes”.

“You have to go to office no. 7”.

He goes there.

“Do you have a portable radio set?”

“Yes”.

“Go to office no. 20”.

“Do you have a mission to complete?”

“Yes”.

“Go away and do not meddle here”.

This example has several implications for our discussion of switching from the *bona fide* to the *non-bona fide* mode of discourse. By telling a well-known joke Putin again makes a comparison between the Soviet past and the present situation. However, on this occasion the reason for telling the joke is different: the text illustrates the similarities between the two epochs, thus the present high level of bureaucracy is no more the responsibility of the President. It has always been like this in Russia – this is the message of the joke.

What is common about examples (1-4) is that jokes function as tools of argumentation in a dispute. Putin utilizes jokes when he is prompted to talk about conflicting issues. However, the choice of topics and constant references to Soviet realia can be interpreted as a sign of Putin’s conservativeness. Jokes allow Putin to conceptualize modern state of affairs in terms of past experience. The aim of comparison of the two epochs is to convince the audience that he leads the state in the right direction.

However, not all occasions of telling jokes are successful for Putin. Here is the comment made by the NTV channels in 2007 after Putin’s interview with the journalists at the G8 summit:

Example 5

А вообще к интервью Путина за рубежом отнеслись слишком серьезно. Говоря о влиянии США, президент вспомнил анекдот. В Восточной Германии шутили: как узнать, какой телефон стоит на столе Хонеккера для связи с Москвой? Ответ: тот, у которого есть прибор только для того, чтобы слушать. По мнению российского лидера, также дела обстоят с НАТО, только связь осуществляется не с Москвой, а с Вашингтоном.

Сегодня этот анекдот обсуждали в штаб-квартире альянса в Брюсселе и едва ли не с обидой признавали: да, на столе генсека НАТО Ян де Хооп Схеффера есть один аппарат спецсвязи, но связь эта все-таки не с Вашингтоном, а с Москвой — напрямую с Министерством обороны России. Шутку поняли слишком буквально, возможно, из-за сложности перевода. (Trudnosti perevoda: shutka Putina ne doshla do adresata 2007)

Abroad Putin's interview was taken too seriously. Talking about the USA's influence the President remembered a joke. In East Germany people asked: what kind of telephone does Erich Honecker use for talking to Moscow? The one that has only the earphone for listening. According to Putin, NATO operates in the same manner, only they have a direct connection with Washington, not with Moscow.

Today the joke was discussed in the NATO headquarters in Brussels. They acknowledged with resentment that the NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, indeed, has a phone on his office desk, but it connects him not with Washington, but with Moscow – with the Defense Ministry of Russia. The joke was taken too literally, perhaps, because it was hard to translate.

The last example shows that instead of solidarity-building the joke produced the adverse effects. The audience did not interpret Putin's words as a switch to the *non-bona fide* mode of discourse. Humorous intention failed and caused misunderstanding.

Jokes demonstrate one of the fundamental properties of political discourse: they appeal to the emotions of the audience with the purpose of transforming the system of values that exists in a particular social group. This property is widely exploited by other Russian politicians and public figures. A good example here is Gennady Ziuganov, the leader of the Communist Party. Ziuganov (who is also known as the author of a published collection of political jokes) is an example of quasi-opposition to Putin and the pro-Putin "United Russia" Party. In his speeches he advocates communist ideas and criticizes the market economy. The victims of his jokes are also his colleagues in the Parliament. Example (6) is a fragment of Ziuganov's interview to one of the radio stations. It is an answer to the journalist's question why the politician published a book of jokes:

Example 6

Началось с того, что я рассказал в Думе анекдот, все смеялись, кроме "Единой России". Пошел мужик в лес и заблудился. И бегает по лесу, кричит: "Помогите, спасите, хоть кто-нибудь придите". Вдруг в плечо его кто-то толкает, он обернулся - стоит огромный медведь и говорит: "Ты что, чудак, орешь? Что ты весь лес взбаламутил?" "Ну как - что ору? Испугался, заблудился." "Ну вот, я пришел, что, тебе легче стало?" (Shibanova 2007)

It all started with my telling a joke in the Parliament. Everybody laughed except for the "United Russia" members. A man went to the forest and got lost. He started to run around and scream: "Help! Save me! Let somebody come and save me!" Suddenly someone taps him on the shoulder. The man turns around and sees a huge bear. The bear says: "Why are you screaming, stupid! You've disturbed the whole forest!" The man says: "Why am I screaming? Well, I am scared, I got lost." "So, here I am", says the bear. "Does it feel any better?"

Since the bear is the official symbol of the "United Russia", the joke about the bear that made the life of the lost man even worse is an implicit symbolic critique. The implications of the joke are serious: the party in power made the life of ordinary people harder. This explains why only some members of the Parliament laughed at the joke.

The book of jokes published by Ziuganov attracted the attention of mass media because it was used in the election campaign. The next example is a review of the book published by *Rossijskaya Gazeta*:

Example 7

"В России две беды: дураки и дороги. Сегодня в Думе одна беда улучшает другую", – честно написал в сборнике депутат Зюганов (Vladimirov 2007).

"There are two disasters in Russia: the fools and the roads. Today in the State Parliament one disaster is trying to improve the other", the MP Ziuganov wrote frankly in his book of jokes.

The joke cited by the journalist refers to the well-known saying that Russia has two disasters: the fools and the roads. By making an ironic reference to the members of the State Parliament

as “one disaster”, i.e. the fools, and to the problem of bad roads as “the other”, Ziuganov (an MP himself) criticizes the poor quality of the Parliament’s work – hence the comment “wrote frankly” made by the journalist.

Ziuganov also tells jokes in his public speeches. The following example is a transcript of the joke that was told at the meeting with the students of MGIMO University – one of the most prestigious and expensive educational institutions in Russia:

Example 8

Лежат два бомжа в подворотне. Один второму говорит:

- Кризис, кризис, все шумят: «кризис!» А меня теперь ничего не коснется, я все пережил!
- Второй говорит:
- Неправда, тебя первого коснется!
- А как?
- Да очень просто! У тебя друзья-банкиры были?
- Нет!
- Скоро будут! (Anekdot ot Ziuganova pro krizis 2009)

Two homeless men are lying on the ground in the backstreet. One says:

“Crisis, crisis, that’s all everybody is talking about! It won’t affect me, I’ve survived everything!”

The other says:

“You’re wrong! You’ll be the first to be affected by crisis!”

“How come?”

“That’s easy! Have you ever had friends who happen to be bankers?”

“No!”

“You’ll have some soon!”

Ziuganov’s joke illustrates the point he was trying to make in his speech: Russian economy is in such a bad state that the crisis will affect everyone, even the richest people – hence their chances of going bankrupt and making friends with the poorest people are quite high.

Ziuganov’s jokes address the daunting social and economic problems and appeal to the emotions of his voters. By using jokes in his speeches the Communist leader critically evaluates the present state of affairs in Russia.

Other leaders of the opposition also tell canned jokes, but they do not refer to the Soviet realia. Rather, they tell the same jokes that common people tell about the so-called “staged democracy” and the Putin–Medvedev reshuffle. The following joke was told by Vladimir Ryzhkov, a former MP, who is now one of the leaders of opposition:

Example 9

Кроме того, на съезде В. Рыжков рассказал анекдот, комментируя известие о выдвижении В. Путина: «Сидят Путин и Медведев и обсуждают, кто пойдет за пивом. Путин: «А ты не помнишь, кто из нас сегодня президент, а кто премьер?» Медведев: «Да какая разница, ну пусть я буду премьером». Путин: «Ну раз ты власть исполнительная, тебе за пивом и бежать» (Ryzhkov 2011).

Besides, at the party convention commenting on Putin’s nomination [for presidency] Vladimir Ryzhkov told a joke: “Putin and Medvedev discuss whose turn it is to go and get some beer. Putin asks: ‘Do you remember who is the President and who is the Prime Minister today?’ Medvedev: ‘What’s the big difference? Ok, I’ll be the Prime Minister for today’. Putin: ‘Great. Since you are the executive authority, it’s your turn to fetch the beer’”.

There are two targets of the joke. The first is Putin’s role in Russian politics: no matter what position he occupies officially, he remains the leader and Medvedev functions as his shadow. The joke also reflects the idea that elections are not necessary – Medvedev’s question “What’s the difference?” shows that all the decisions have already been made and the politicians are not interested in voters’ opinion. By telling the joke Vladimir Ryzhkov creates

a clear-cut opposition between “us” and “them”, “us” being the supporters of the democratic opposition and “them” Putin’s followers.

6. Public political discourse: Internet and mass media

Canned jokes are also widely used in public discussions of political issues in mass media and the Internet. Journalists, political scientists and ordinary people express their stance as publicists, participants of radio talk shows, or as Internet users. Events of the past decade gave rise to a large number of new jokes in which Vladimir Putin is indisputably the most popular politician (a detailed analysis of the origin and circulation of jokes about Putin is given in Arkhipova 2009). Dmitry Medvedev is not as popular; usually he appears as a background character with childish ambitions.

The jokes used by the journalists and political scientists mirror the current political situation and express critical attitudes towards it. Example (10) is a fragment of a radio talk show where the journalist and the political analyst discuss TV debates before the winter parliamentary elections:

Example 10

- (Татьяна Лазарева) Сначала послушаем специалиста, Станислава Белковского. Может, он нам что-то еще разъяснит, может, мы чего-то не поняли.
- (Станислав Белковский) Сегодняшние дебаты еще раз показывают, что вся современная российская политика исчерпывающе описывается двумя известными старыми анекдотами. Первый анекдот более старый, о том, как Рабинович раздавал листовки у Мавзолея. Листовки были без текста, и когда удивленные сотрудники КГБ СССР подошли к Рабиновичу и спросили, почему он раздает пустые листовки, Рабинович ответил – а что писать, и так все понятно. А анекдот номер два, более современный, таков: у России четыре беды, две из них все знают, а еще две – это дураки и дороги (Occupy Gosduma 2011).

(Tatiana Lazareva) “First let’s listen to a professional, Stanislav Belkovsky. Perhaps, he can give us more explanations. Perhaps, we just did not get something”.

(Stanislav Belkovsky) “Today’s debates show that modern Russian politics can be exhaustively described by two well-known old jokes. The first is the older one, about Rabinovich giving out the leaflets in the Red Square. The leaflets were blank pieces of paper. The KGB people were surprised and asked Rabinovich why he was giving out just blank pieces of paper. Rabinovich answered, why write anything if everything is already clear. And the second joke is slightly more modern; Russia has four disasters: two are very-well known, and the other two are the fools and the roads”.

Belkovsky, the political analyst, uses the jokes from different epochs with the implication of impossibility of any political changes. The first joke is a reference to the Soviet practice of voicing down the anti-communist views. It points to the similarity of the present political situation in Russia to the Soviet times. The second joke is yet another intertextual reference (see example 6) to a well-known phrase: “There are two disasters in Russia: the fools and the roads”. By saying that there are four disasters, the speaker refers to the President and the Prime Minister of Russia.

The majority of jokes reflect the idea about Putin’s absolute power and the impossibility to make any changes for the time being. The next joke told by the journalist Artemy Troitsky in a radio interview is another good illustration of the above point:

Example 11

- А. ТРОИЦКИЙ: Естественно, Путин выборы уже выиграет. Уже есть анекдот:
- Владимир Владимирович, для вас есть две новости – хорошая и плохая.
- Давайте сначала хорошую.
- Вы выиграли на выборах.

- А теперь плохую?
- Но за вас никто не проголосовал (Svoimi glazami 2011).

Artemy Troitsky: Of course, Putin is going to win the elections. There is already a joke about it: “Vladimir Vladimirovich, I’ve got good and bad news for you”.
“Ok, start with the good news”.
“You’ve won the elections”.
“What’s the bad news then?”
“Nobody voted for you”.

The joke reflects the general reaction to the news of Putin’s decision to run for presidency in 2012. The official mass media presented the news as a great step in developing democracy in Russia while for a lot of people it was a step back to dictatorship. The two contradictory utterances reflect people’s disbelief in fair presidential elections, on the one hand, and Putin’s unpopularity, on the other.

The journalists evaluate Russian politicians by telling jokes about them in the newspapers. The following passage published by the *Moskovsky Komsomolets* newspaper is a description of the role other candidates played in the presidential elections of 2012:

Example 12

Что же до реальной политической роли Сергея Миронова, то о нем лучше всего сказано в классическом российском политическом анекдоте о походе Путина в ресторан в сопровождении спикеров Миронова и Грызлова. Официант: — Владимир Владимирович, что желаете? — Мясо! — А овощи? — Овощи тоже будут мясо! (Rostovsky 2011).

As for the real political role of Sergei Mironov, it is best described in a classic Russian political *anekdot* how Putin went to a restaurant accompanied by two Parliamentary Speakers Mironov and Gryzlov. The waiter said: “Vladimir Vladimirovich, what would you like to eat?” “Meat!” “How about vegetables?” – “The vegetables will also have meat!”

The joke activates the double reference of the word *vegetables*: while the waiter refers to Putin’s choice of food, Putin refers to Mironov and Gryzlov. This kind of reference shows Putin’s superiority over other politicians: he is the only person who can influence political situation in Russia while the rest lack initiative and all they can do is play the role of Putin’s retinue.

The biggest source of political jokes is the Internet – anonymous joking reflects the attitudes of the ordinary Internet users. To some extent, telling a joke online is similar to private communication: the identity of the joke-teller is usually disguised under a nickname. On the other hand, online joking is public, since the site can be visited by thousands of users and the successful joke can be reproduced for an unlimited number of times.

Until recently there were several major topics people joked about: the absolute power of Putin, his reshuffling with Medvedev, political weakness of the opposition and the falsification of the results of the parliamentary elections in December 2011 and the presidential elections in March 2012. The elections triggered a lot of discussions and gave rise to a large number of jokes with a new character, Vladimir Chourov, the chair of the Central Election Commission. The texts contain allusions to the falsified statistics, namely the numbers of votes shamelessly presented by the central TV channels. The following statistical data on Rostov region appeared on TV screens and the screenshot was widely reposted on the Internet:

Table 1. The Results of Parliamentary Elections in Rostov Region, December 2011

1	Единая Россия (The United Russia)	58,99%
2	КПРФ (The Communist Party)	32,96%
3	ЛДПР (The Liberal Democratic Party)	23,74%
4	Справедливая Россия (Fair Russia)	19,41%
5	Яблоко (Yabloko)	9,32%
6	Патриоты России (Patriots of Russia)	1,46%
7	Правое дело (The Right Cause)	0,59%

When added up, the numbers show that 146% of voters took part in the parliamentary elections. The obviously falsified data proved Vladimir Chourov's claims about the transparency of the elections totally wrong, and Chourov's name is now associated with the absurd number. It comes as no surprise that it appears in most jokes about Chourov:

Example 13

Хроника происшествий. Вчера при пожаре глава ЦИК Владимир Чуров получил 146%-ный ожог тела. (*Anekdoty iz Rossii* 1995-2013)

Hot news: yesterday the head of the Central Election Commission Vladimir Chourov got a 146% burn on his body in a fire.

The joke presents the situation as surrealistic, while the number 146% used in the joke refers the readers to the falsified data of the State Duma Elections.

The next example is a parody of an advertisement slogan. The Central Election Commission supposedly advertises presidential elections:

Example 14

Проголосуй за Путина дважды и получи его на третий срок без выборов!

Vote for Putin twice and get him for the third term without elections!

The contradiction between the formal properties of the text (a commercial) and its content (the elections) is a signal of the *non-bona fide* mode. However, the implicit message of the joke is not humorous: the elections are categorized as a commercial enterprise and the bonus that the voters can get (another presidential term without elections) apparently runs contrary to democratic values and principles.

Examples (13) and (14) refer the Internet users to the well-known genres of news presentations on television and advertisements. This kind of intertextual connection is what Vasta calls *contratextual* references (Vasta 2004, see also Tsakona & Popa 2011: 5-6): the words and actions are echoed to mock and discredit the victim of the jokes.

Putin's image of an omnipotent man capable of anything – from flying a plane to diving in the sea – has become a popular object of jokes. The following joke appeared after Putin's dive into the Azov Sea in August 2011, before the presidential elections:

Example 15

Ныряет Путин на дно моря и находит там две амфоры.

На берегу он отдаёт одну амфору Медведеву, другую тут же откупоривает.

Из неё вылетает джинн с вопросом:

– Чего желает мой повелитель?

– Третьего срока!

– Будет сделано.

Медведев со словами "о, здорово" открывает свою амфору. А там лежит iPhone3.

Putin dives into the sea and finds two amphoras at the bottom of the sea.
On the shore he gives one of the amphoras to Medvedev and opens the other one right away.
A genie comes out of the bottle and asks:
“What do you want, master?”
“The third presidential term!”
“You will have it!”
With the words “Wow, cool!” Medvedev opens his amphora and finds an iPhone3 inside.

The *non-bona fide* comparison of Putin and Medvedev’s catch reflects the real political landscape. The joke, again, conveys a *bona fide* message, albeit implicitly. The presentation of Medvedev finding a new gadget mirrors his image as a politician who lacks initiative and whose decisions depend on Putin’s will.

Putin’s image as an almighty leader has become the target of jokes after his flight with cranes. The event was widely covered in the official mass media. Internet users also commented on the action. The same day new jokes appeared on the Internet sites of canned jokes:

Example 16

Узнав о полете Президента с журавлями, Премьер планирует ответный удар: оденет спасательный жилет, возьмет флейту, зайдет в рабочий день в ГосДуму, и, насвистывая веселую мелодию, поведет всю толпу депутатов к Москва-реке... (Anekdoty iz Rossii 1995-2013).

After the Prime Minister [Dmitry Medvedev] learned about the President’s flight with cranes, he has planned a counterstroke: he is going to put a life vest on, take a flute and go to the State Duma on a workday [i.e. the Parliament]. There he will start whistling a merry tune and will lead the crowd of Members of Parliament to the Moskva river.

The joke refers to the well-known fairy tale about the Pied Piper of Hamelin. Instead of children Medvedev plans to lead the Members of Parliament away. The joke manipulates the symbolic meanings of the legend and carries a plethora of implications, from Putin’s constant superiority over Medvedev to taking away the obedient members of Parliament.

The next joke is also based on Putin’s flight with the cranes:

Example 17

Животные ленивцы занесены в Красную книгу, как вымирающий вид. Они не знают, как заниматься сексом. Путин, а-у! (Anekdoty iz Rossii 1995-2013).

Sloths are on the Red List of Threatened Species as a dying species. They do not know how to have sex. Putin, you-hoo!

The humorous effect of the joke relies on the logical inference: since Putin was able to train the birds to fly after the leader, he is competent enough to teach sloths to have sex and breed. In general, the flow of fresh jokes reflects public critical evaluation of the present state of affairs. All the derogatory implications of political jokes are a sign of an emotional “breakthrough” indicating political crisis. As Draitser put it, “[h]umor expresses serious anxieties in lighter terms; it is this ability that makes laughter so attractive” (Draitser 1998:9).

7. Conclusion

Many genres of political discourse are highly ritualized and structured linguistic activities; the *bona fide* mode of speaking is the premise political communication is built upon. Serious and

truthful conveying of information (ideally) allows the speaker to be clear and accurate. Telling jokes, on the contrary, involves a considerable amount of play and pretense on the part of the speaker. Thus, the incorporation of jokes into public political communication creates a collision between the *bona fide* and *non-bona fide* modes. On the other hand, the mixture of the two modes shows how thoroughly the discourse is suffused with attitudinal implications and associations.

Contextual analysis of jokes shows that switching from the *bona fide* to *non-bona fide* mode and back is a regular practice in modern Russian political discourse. Several reasons for mixing serious and non-serious messages can be mentioned here. For politicians, telling jokes becomes an essential component of strategy of demonstrating their superiority. Jokes also allow the speakers to create a clear-cut opposition between “us” and “them”. Political discourse is the sphere where humour gets rich social meaning and jokes function as meta-messages of competitiveness and authority, especially when the values of the opponents usually become the targets of the jokes.

Telling jokes can also be a strategy of pretence: speaking the language of common people does not necessarily mean the politician thinks he belongs to people. Rather, it is a technique that allows politicians to maneuver and get the attention of the mass media and the audience without being punished by the authorities.

The analysis of jokes in context also demonstrates the absence of a clear-cut border between the *bona fide* and *non-bona fide* modes of communication: entertaining on the surface, political jokes carry serious implications. From the social perspective, jokes reflect the existing political landscape and illustrate people’s dissatisfaction with those in power. From the pragmatic point of view, for those in power telling jokes is an argumentative tool and a rhetorical strategy that legitimizes their actions; for the audience they function as a “safety-valve” that “lets out” disagreement and disappointment.

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