



## POPULAR CULTURE AND POLITICS

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## Post-Apocalypse, Intermediality and Social Distrust in Russian Pop Culture

By Ulrich Schmid, St. Gallen

### Abstract

Pop culture is not just entertainment. It conveys values, beliefs and even historic knowledge to a broad audience. Often, pop culture even overrides institutionalized education and shapes ideological attitudes in the public sphere. In the Russian case, bestsellers, blockbuster movies and video games present peculiar narratives of societal or political orders that need to be taken into account when analyzing Russia's potential for democratization.

### Metro 2033: A Multi-Media Success

In an age when the modern mass media is converging, it has become difficult to talk about isolated cultural events in Russian pop culture. Frequently specific content surfaces in one medium, but shortly afterwards undergoes several transformations and appears in another reincarnation as a movie, book or computer game.<sup>1</sup> Such an intermedial diversity buttresses the public presence of a certain style in a successful product.

A good case in point is Dmitry Glukhovsky's "Metro 2033" science fiction project. In 2002, the journalist (born 1973) created a dark world in a post-apocalyptic setting. The main idea is that in 2013 a global atomic war will turn the earth into a radioactive desert. Sunlight no longer reaches the planet's surface. All human beings who were above ground die, leaving only mutant animals and dinosaurs. Only 70,000 people survive in Moscow: individuals who happened to be in the metro during the atomic strikes. Twenty years after the devastating war, several communities exist in different metro stations, they fight each other for water, food and other supplies.

Glukhovsky started off with the publication of single chapters in his LiveJournal blog. He also instructed his readers as to the music they should listen to while reading. In doing so, he shaped the situation of reception and made sure the readers were in the right mood for his dark fiction. Later, he collected the various entries and published the story as a book.<sup>2</sup> Eventually, other writers were hired and produced their own novels in the "Metro 2033" universe. Finally, a video game was produced—the aesthetics of the literary fiction were transposed into the visual world of an Ego Shooter. The task of the player consists in defending his own people from the attacks of mysterious aliens, called "the Blacks." The player has to fight both Communist and Fascist enemies and eventually manages to destroy the base of the "Blacks" (see screenshot on p. 5).

However, apart from the usual bleak conclusion, the game also provides the possibility of a happy ending. If the player engages in good deeds like giving alms or sparing enemies from death, he is able to eventually arrange peace with the "Blacks." This second solution requires a high ethical commitment, otherwise the game falls back into the standard "Live and let die" mode. The basic *weltanschauung* (worldview) of the game is that of an eternal fight. The anthropological condition of the game "Metro 2033" implies a fragile individual existence—the hero constantly has to monitor his own wounds, radiation levels, oxygen supply, equipment and ammunition. Only a highly ethical player can influence the virtual reality in a way that changes the nature of the adversary. Contrary to the book, the video game thus assumes not a hopelessly lost world, but allows for redemption, though one that requires a strong moral effort from the player.

"Metro 2033" is just one example of the wanderings of a fictional topic through different media in contemporary Russian pop culture. Economic aspects have to be taken in account when analyzing similar phenomena. Initially, Glukhovsky brought his idea to the public without financial risks—LiveJournal is a popular platform where blog entries can be posted for free and reach a broad audience without production or marketing expenses.<sup>3</sup> In Russia, LiveJournal is widely read and a literary success in this virtual medium usually opens a path to the big publishing houses. Glukhovsky was thus able to test the economic potential of his fiction—and in 2005 his novel came out with EKSMO-Press, one of Russia's leading publishers.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the electronic version of his text was deleted in order to force the reading public into buying the printed book. Before that, Glukhovsky explored in his LiveJournal the possibility of selling fan items to his virtual readers—

1 Henry Jenkins. *Convergence Culture. Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York University Press, 2008.

2 Polyarnye sumerki. *Zhurnal Dmitriia Glukhovskogo*, <http://dglu.livejournal.com/profile>

3 Henrike Schmidt. *Russische Literatur im Internet. Zwischen digitaler Folklore und politischer Propaganda*. Bielefeld 2011, 126.

4 Ulrich Schmid. "Bestseller in Russland." In: *Kodex. Jahrbuch der Internationalen Buchwissenschaftlichen Gesellschaft*. Wiesbaden 2012, 91–105

but ultimately refrained from doing so in light of negative polling results.

“Metro 2033” gained success despite the rather clumsy literary artistry of its creator. In fact, the narration follows clichés that are notorious for socialist realist novels. The main reason it produced an enormous echo lies in its symbolic power. The post-apocalyptic setting of “Metro 2033” seems to hit a nerve in contemporary Russian society. Traditionally, Russian culture is very much oriented towards the future. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the most popular novels dealt with utopian scenarios for Russia, and the whole Soviet project in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was obsessed with the future happiness not only of the Russian people, but mankind as a whole.<sup>5</sup> In 1991, this utopian design was destroyed—time itself seemed to fall apart.

### Apocalypse Now in Post-Soviet Russia

The breakdown of the Soviet Union was perceived by many Russians as a catastrophe. Chernobyl, the political chaos of the early 1990s, the hyperinflation, the war in Chechnya—all these elements contributed to an apocalyptic mood in Russia that was not really overcome but only suppressed in the consciousness of most citizens during the era of stabilization at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>6</sup>

The first production of pop culture that came to terms with this post-apocalyptic atmosphere was the movie “Night Watch” (2004).<sup>7</sup> The movie is based on a popular novel by science fiction writer Sergei Lukyanenko, who originally was trained as a psychiatrist. Director Timur Bekmambetov set his film in contemporary Moscow, but constructed a mythological narrative that provided a striking explanation for the unstable situation in Russia: The forces of good and evil are equally strong and agreed on a truce ages ago. During the day, representatives of the evil power control the good, and during the night, representatives of the good watch over the bad. This Manichean concept provided a convincing explanation for the ideological void of the post-Soviet period. All ethical norms were lost—for most Russians, life seemed to be an endless fight without a final goal. Bekmambetov’s film embedded this mental state into a mythological narrative that gave little comfort, but

at least endowed the struggles of Russian everyday life with a deeper sense. This narrative was told in a visual language that by that time was very familiar to the Russian audience: The special effects of “Night Watch” borrow extensively from popular American films like “Star Wars,” “The Matrix” or “The Terminator.”

In his first Hollywood movie, “Wanted” (2008), Bekmambetov presented a similar interpretation of the world. His hero is an insignificant accountant working in a cubicle. He becomes a member of a fraternity which has existed for the last 1,000 years. The activities of this conspiracy are guided by a mysterious loom, which produces a symbolic cloth with secret messages. The fraternity carries out assassinations and thus keeps a balance between good and bad in a cursed world. The final scene of the movie shows the hero, taking control of his life, by killing the assassin of his father. As in “Night Watch,” Bekmambetov presents a world at war in which the individual has to fight and eventually to kill for his own happiness. There is even a new kind of “invisible hand” in this conception: The assassins of the fraternity kill not only for their own advantage, but are hunters in the global ecology of mankind.

The post-production of the movie “Wanted” and the creation of the visual effects were carried out by Bekmambetov’s own company “Bazelevs” in Moscow. For the Russian version of the film, Sergei Lukyanenko translated the dialogue. Lukyanenko is a good example of an intermediary between books, films and computer games. His novel “The Rivals” (2008) was based on the Russian video game “Starquake,” in which human pilots have to defend themselves against invaders from outer space. Lukyanenko builds his narrative on the idea that the uncertainty of real life is a computer game. His protagonists come to the conclusion that in either case they have to abide by the rules of the game. This kind of world interpretation seems to apply for many Russians—especially the young generation in urban areas.<sup>8</sup>

The popular video game S.T.A.L.K.E.R. (2007) also creates a post-apocalyptic world. The setting assumes that a second nuclear disaster happens at Chernobyl. The natural environment turns into a polluted zone with strange objects and aggressive mutants. Evidently, the game conflates two sources: The real events in Ukraine in April 1986 and Andrei Tarkovsky’s acclaimed science fiction movie “Stalker” (1979) based on the novel *Roadside Picnic* by the Strugatsky brothers. S.T.A.L.K.E.R. is also an Ego Shooter. The protagonist who has lost his memory at the beginning of the story has to explore both the mysterious zone in which he lives and his own

5 Leonid Heller, Michel Niqueux. *Histoire de l’utopie en Russie*. Paris, 1995.

6 Olga Shevchenko. *Crisis and the Everyday in Postsocialist Moscow*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2009.

7 Vlad Strukov. “The Forces of Kinship: Timur Bekmambetov’s Night Watch Cinematic Trilogy.” In: Helena Gosילו, Yana Hashamova (eds.): *Cinematernity. Fathers and Sons in Soviet and Post-Soviet Film*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010, 191–216.

8 Rossiiskoe kino i film Nochnoi dozor. [http://bd.fom.ru/report/cat/cult/art\\_art/cinem/dd043311](http://bd.fom.ru/report/cat/cult/art_art/cinem/dd043311)

identity. Objects, as well as human beings, are endowed with consciousness. As in “Metro 2033,” the hero is vulnerable and has to cope with several problems: radiation, hunger, bleeding. The game features more than one ending—but only one of them is happy: The protagonist has to kill all his adversaries. After the victory he has to destroy all things in the zone that contain the zone’s consciousness—and the zone will vanish. The alternate endings imply a self-mutilation of the player. He may, for instance, wish the disappearance of the zone, which will cause his own blinding, or he may wish his own immortality, which will turn him into a metallic statue.<sup>9</sup> These endings show the two fundamental modes of the relationship between the individual and the surrounding world: Either the protagonist shapes reality according to his wishes or he changes himself in order to comply with external challenges.

The post-apocalyptic mode has also diffused into the Fantasy bestseller market. The giant publishing house EKSMO features a series with the programmatic title “Russian apocalypse”. The covers are clearly modeled on the aesthetics of S.T.A.L.K.E.R., and the book titles promise doomsday: “Death City” (Viktor Glumov 2012), “Food and Ammunition. The Renegade” (Artyom Michurin 2012), “Atomic Autumn” (Viacheslav Khvachov 2012), “Russian Dawn” (Oleg Kulagin 2011). This series was preceded by another series called just “Apocalypse” with titles like “The Midnight World” (Aleksandr Yan, 2011) or “There won’t be a second chance” (Suren Tsormudian, 2011). The plots of all these books are set in a devastated world after an atomic war. The hero has to fight for his own survival, very often he is threatened by Manichean forces. There is no security for the individual, neither from the state nor from society. In all post-apocalyptic tales, the hero is wounded and has to pay attention to his own diminishing forces. However, the will to kill and survive will guarantee the individual’s place in a hostile environment.

### Social Homelessness

The homelessness of the post-apocalyptic hero corresponds to the dominating self-perception of Russian society. Economic, political and social uncertainty is a wide-spread phenomenon in Russia. The eminent sociologist Lev Gudkov has identified “fear” as one of the constituents of the “negative identity,” which dominates the self-description of the average Russian post-Soviet citizen. The individual uses “fear” as one of the dominant models of his interpretation of the world. Fear affects most realms of individual life: family, health, politics,

economy, ecology. Such a perception significantly limits the individual range of action, since most factors that influence life are out of control and thus to be “feared.” Russian society defines itself as an in-group, which is threatened by various fears. Its core does not rely on a positive set of values, but is constituted as a defense against everything that seems to be hostile. “Negative identity” means that Russians try to describe themselves through a discursive process of “othering.” Potentially, everything that comes from outside is perceived as threatening and calls for resilience.<sup>10</sup>

In line with this argument, Lev Gudkov, Boris Dubin and Natalia Zorkaya hold that today’s Russian society is exclusively dominated by values of survival that imply passive or reactive behavior to social change.<sup>11</sup> Post-apocalyptic narratives in films, video games and literature exploit these fears and fill the void with dark visions that act like a *tremendum fascinosum*: Excitement may be derived not only from pleasure, but also from horror.<sup>12</sup>

Fear corresponds to a general feeling of disenfranchisement and helplessness when it comes to questions of political or social participation. In 2007, 72% of all respondents in Russia maintained that they are not able to influence state decisions, and 80% thought that they had no possibility to shape the political or economic situation in Russia.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, social capital in Russia is very low. Only 26% of Russians thought in 2006 that they could trust fellow citizens, while 70% held that contact with people from the street is dangerous.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, the category of the future in Russia has melted down to a very short period ahead of the present. In 2007, 48% of all respondents said they could imagine their future life for the next year or two, not longer.<sup>15</sup> Time is not perceived as a continuous evolution, but in terms of traumatic events that either already happened or are expected to happen. The official Soviet culture may have been false and flawed, but it had one advantage: It promised a bright future. Communism was close, even imminent. In 1961, Nikita Khrushchev announced a perfect communist society for 1980.<sup>16</sup> This

9 Charles Onyett: S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl Review, <http://uk.ign.com/articles/2007/03/19/stalker-shadow-of-chernobyl-review>

10 Lev Gudkov. *Negativnaia identichnost'. Stat'i 1997–2002*. Moscow 2004, 81, 272.

11 L.D. Gudkov, B.V. Dubin, N.A. Zorkaya: *Postsovietskii chelovek i grazhdanskoe obshchestvo*. Moscow 2008, 18.

12 Eliot Borenstein. *Overkill. Sex and Violence in Contemporary Russian Popular Culture*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2008.

13 *Ibid.*, 31.

14 *Ibid.*, 72.

15 Boris Dubin. “Kordinata budushchego v obshchestvennom mnenii Rossii.” In: *Puti Rossii. Budushchee kak kul'tura. Prognozy, reprezentatsii, stsennarii*. Moscow 2011, 500–513, 507.

16 William J. Tompson, Khrushchev: *A Political Life*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997, 238.

optimism is lost now, and for good. Time has reversed its interpretational vector: The Russian present is no longer interpreted in terms of the great future to come, but in terms of what happened (and failed). The most prominent attribute of time today is the category “post”—the post-apocalypse is already here, the artistic imagination just finds new metaphors for this dominant model of societal self-perception.<sup>17</sup>

The various manifestations of Russian pop culture have clear implications for Russia’s potential for democratization. If fear and post-apocalypse remain the main categories for the social perception of the future, the possible range of political action and participation is severely limited. In the United States, Obama could win the presidential elections in 2008 with the slogan “change.” Such an announcement would evoke nothing

but horror in Russia—“change” would immediately be interpreted as “change for the worse.”

Putin’s popularity among the Russian population has suffered a severe blow after the presidential elections in 2012. However, 65% of respondents still think that Putin did more good than bad to Russia during his term in office.<sup>18</sup> Against the background of pop culture’s predominant world view, Putin may appear as the hero who fights dangerous foreign influences and tries to keep the Russian in-group together. Putin’s face and body have even become one of the most recognizable state insignia for Russia.<sup>19</sup> Thus the implicit Manichean and post-apocalyptic world view of Russian pop culture products in their various intermedial manifestations fosters political passivity, social distrust and reliance on the leader in power.

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*Figure 1: Screenshot from “Metro 2033”, Developed by the Ukrainian Company 4A Games (<http://enterthemetrom.com/>)*



Source: [http://article.techlabs.by/53\\_9028.html](http://article.techlabs.by/53_9028.html)

- 17 Yulia Liderman. “V storonu travmy. Kak vremia priobretayet kachestvo ‘post.’” In: Puti Rossii. Budushchee kak kul’tura. Prognozy, reprezentatsii, stsennarii. Moskva 2011, 522–533.
- 18 God so dnja prezidentskikh vyborov 4 marta 2012 goda. Otsenka deiatel’nosti Putina. <http://www.levada.ru/28-02-2013/god-so-dnya-prezidentskikh-vyborov-4-marta-2012-goda-otsenka-deyatelnosti-putina>
- 19 Helena Gosילו. Putin as Celebrity and Cultural Icon. London, New York: Routledge, 2013. Rosalinde Sartorti. “Politiker in der russischen Ikonographie. Die mediale Inszenierung Vladimir Putins.” In: Bianka Pietrow-Ennker (Hg.): Kultur in der Geschichte Russlands: Räume, Medien, Identitäten, Lebenswelten. Göttingen 2007, 333–348. Alexandra Engelfried. “Das Porträt des Präsidenten. Putin zwischen Kunst, Kult und Kommerz.” In: Osteuropa 10/2007, 51–66.

## Glamour Russian Style: The Putin Era

By Birgit Menzel, Germersheim

### Abstract

This article describes the uses of glamour in Russian culture today. While glamour can help sell leaders, celebrities, and journalists to the public, it has a dark underside, which can lead vulnerable young women into the sex trade.

### The Role of Glamour

The phenomenon of glamour has conquered post-Soviet Russia in the new millennium. In the past decade, it became the main ingredient and a symbol of Vladimir Putin's leadership.<sup>1</sup> For some Russian sociologists, it even serves as a substitute for the *national idea*, which was supposed to fill the empty void after the fall of the Soviet Union, just as TV has become the virtual space of *national unity*.<sup>2</sup> Although glamour is a global phenomenon,<sup>3</sup> its Russian version has some distinct features which are inseparable from the conditions in which it occurs, historical as well as contemporary.

This article offers a brief survey of glamour, followed by an analysis of three of its main Russian features: first, the connection between Russian nationalism and Western commercial culture, exemplified by the iconography of Putin; second, the connection between Soviet and post-Soviet stardom linking several generations together as shown by Estrada-superstar Alla Pugacheva; and third the versatile nature of glamour in the world of Russian female journalists, exemplified by Ksenia Sobchak. The article concludes with a brief examination of the dark side of glamour in the age of crisis, which is, in particular, a crisis of the male gender, the connection between seduction, cynicism and crime, and ultimately human trafficking.

### Features of Russian Glamour

Russian glamour has become the cultural equivalent of unchallenged globalized capitalism. It is closely linked to global economic and political developments, especially the media and communications technology that have appeared during the last decade. It is a mixture of the new elite's ostentatious self-representation and a uni-

versal cult of luxury and fashion as the embodiment of a modern, urban lifestyle. Promoted by the mass-media as well as word of mouth, certain images of an exotic and erotic lifestyle are connected with what are to be considered basic values like youth, beauty, health, love and joy of life, spiced up with the intensifying ingredients of passion and adventure, therefore promising freedom and the realization of dreams. Materialism and outer appearance are equally promoted as values as aggressiveness by both sexes. The simulation of risky gambling as a successful model of behavior and an attitude towards life (epitomized by the "hedge-funds" generation and the use of designer drugs) implies simple solutions to problems that do not require work and responsibility and an almost religious faith in recovery after loss.

In Russia, glamour has become a catch-all word covering varying phenomena, aesthetic as well as social and political. According to the Oxford dictionary definition, glamor is "an attractive and exciting quality, especially sexual allure" with a second archaic meaning of "enchantment, magic." It made a new appearance (adopted from the French pronunciation "glamur") before the 2008 presidential election. In 2007, when the central press published 428 articles on glamour and more than one thousand articles appeared on the internet, it was declared "word of the year." Glossy magazines, alongside TV series, fashion and celebrity talk shows, and popular literature, became the most notable means of cultivating glamour as the "dominant aesthetic mode" (Olga Mesropova).<sup>4</sup>

From a social perspective, glamour is ambivalent: as a cult of consumption, it epitomizes freedom and, with its massive popularity, especially among women, it has the positive socio-therapeutic functions of individual self-improvement, promoting a civilized lifestyle and liberating sensuality, especially in a less normative and upwardly mobile society. Sociologist Vera Zvereva pointed out the particularly ambivalent nature of glamour in Russia, appearing unique and exclusive for the elite and at the same time accessible and vulgar for the masses.<sup>5</sup> This symbolic distance between the prosper-

1 Helena Goscilo and Vlad Strukov: *Celebrity and Glamour in Contemporary Russia. Shocking chic*, London, New York: Routledge, 2011, Introduction, 1

2 Boris Dubin, "Strana zritelei: Massovye kommunikatsii v segonashnej Rossii," *Zhit' v Rossii na rubezhe stoletii*, Moscow 2007, p. 187–201; Levada-Tsentr 10.9.2009, <http://gtmarket.ru/print/2171>; see also Figure 1 on p. 10.

3 Birgit Menzel, "Russian Discourse on Glamour," *kultura* 6 (2008), 4–8, [www.kultura-rus.de](http://www.kultura-rus.de); Dmitrii Ivanov, *Glëm-kapitalizm*, St. Petersburg, 2008.

4 [www.kinokultura.com/2008/20-gloss-om.shtml](http://www.kinokultura.com/2008/20-gloss-om.shtml)

5 Vera Zvereva, "Glamur v sovremennoi rossiiskoi kulture," *Puti*

ous elite and the masses has shrunk in proportion to the widening gap in income during the past decades, as brands and attributes of luxury, accessories, clothes and perfume have become cheap and accessible in Chinese replicas.

### Putin as a Glamorous Hero

With the election of Vladimir Putin, the public image of the leader radically changed. For the first time in Russian history, the public persona of a political leader has become orchestrated by new (political) technologies and media, and carefully designed by professional managers.<sup>6</sup> Connecting the return to a *vertical of power* with the glamorous appearance of a male hero, Putin has become “Russia’s ultimate celebrity”<sup>7</sup> and *Putin-glamour*<sup>8</sup> the embodiment of the New Russia. The iconographic renaissance of both the Russian Empire and the Soviet past have merged with commercial Western culture, especially Hollywood-glamour.<sup>9</sup> Along with a cult of the president’s hyper-masculinity turning the population into a fan club, this has become one of the main attributes of Putin’s undisputed popularity (he is supported by 70–80% of the population).

Featuring remoteness as an ingredient of any star as well as national hero, Putin remains elusive and enigmatic like the nation’s White Knight (Goscilo, 21), aided by the newly designed biography of an international spy. His public image is shaped in part after the image of Stirlitz, the spy-hero of the Soviet cult TV series of the 1970s—whose actor he celebrated posthumously with a special FSB award—while he, in part, displays a James-Bond-lifestyle. At the same time, his “glamor-

ous image of intrepid (self-) mastery” echoes the slogan of the Stalinist 1930s: “Everyone can become a hero.” Along with the mediatic rituals of annual citizen consulting, real fandom flourishes with *chastushki* (poems), carpets from Turkmenistan, and women fainting for the ideal Putin-husband.

Examples of the crafty choreographed linkage with the imperial past include the ostentatiously luxurious renovation of the Constantine Palace for the president’s personal representation purposes; the replica of the Shapka Monomakha, the legendary crown of the Romanov dynasty (as a present for his 50th birthday in October 2002, by sixty craftsmen from the Urals); and Putin’s appearance in May 2011 at a charity event in St. Petersburg in the presence of several Hollywood stars, where he performed Fats Domino’s song “Blueberry Hill” in English to the enthusiasm of his audience, later multiplied by YouTube.

Implying transcendence, another attribute to glamour and celebrity has been promoted by the quasi-religious “narrative of salvation”—Christian or Leninist—even if at times ironically expressed, for instance in guided tours along paths and stations of his visits throughout the country. Putin’s public persona, a “comics-cum-Hollywood-action-film-image pop culture and new (polit)technology,”<sup>10</sup> combines the energetic virility of a decisive, effective leadership, sketched on the image of both a Machiavellian prince and the Hollywood star<sup>11</sup> Arnold Schwarzenegger, illustrated not only by the world-famous photographs of his bare chest in hunting, shooting and fishing activities, but also at the end of the YouTube comic-film parody “a vova rulit” (now taken off the net), when he kills his enemies with a machine gun from a motorcycle in Schwarzenegger’s “Terminator” style, announcing with his final words, “I’ll be back.”

### Alla Pugacheva: Soviet and Post-Soviet Russian Celebrity

Although barely known in Western countries outside of émigré circles, Alla Pugacheva belongs to the leading world superstars, both in duration of celebrity and quantitative success. For nearly four decades, the musical star whom the *New York Times* described as “the goddess of Russian pop, Moscow’s Tina Turner with a hint of Edith Piaf, whose songs have given voice to the yearning of millions”<sup>12</sup> has been “Russia’s most famous

*Rossii 2008: Kultura—Obshchestvo—Chelovek*, Moscow, 2008, p. 130–134

6 Rosalinde Sartorti, “Politiker in der russischen Ikonographie: Die mediale Inszenierung Vladimir Putins,” in: *Kultur in der Geschichte Russlands*, ed. Bianka Pietrow-Ennker, Tübingen: Vandenhoeck&Ruprecht, 2007, p. 333–348

7 Helena Goscilo. “Russia’s Ultimate Celebrity. VVP as VIP objet d’art.” In: *Putin as Celebrity and Cultural Icon*, ed. H. Goscilo, London, New York: Routledge, 2013, 8

8 “‘Putinskii glamur’ v klubakh.” Radioprogram by Elena Fanailova (20.1/16.3.2008) <http://www.svobodanews.ru/Transcript/2008/01/20/20080120120004333.html>.

9 Recent studies have shown the strong impact of Russian emigrants in shaping the Hollywood dream factory. Harlow Robinson. *Russians in Hollywood, Hollywood’s Russians. Biography of an Image*, Boston: Northwestern UP, 2007. Another curious fact is that some of the major designers of the post-war American Lifestyle, long-term editors of leading fashion journals such as *Vogue* and *Cosmopolitan* and co-founders of one of the most powerful trusts for fashion-media, Condé Nast, were Russian emigrants, namely Vladimir Mayakovskii’s last French lover and her husband Tatiana Yakovleva and Alexander Silverman. See their recommendable biography by Francine du Plessix Gray: *Them. A Memoir of Parents*, New York; Penguin, 2005.

10 Goscilo, op. cit., p. 8, 21, 27

11 Helena Goscilo. “Putin’s Performance of Masculinity. The action hero and macho sex-object,” *Putin as Celebrity and Cultural Icon*, 180–207

12 Alison Smale, “A Superstar Evokes a Superpower,” *New York Times*, February 28, 2000.

woman,<sup>13</sup> among the most highly paid, with great devotion in the media and continuing public interest. Her popularity has been unshaken by the collapse of communism and dissolution of the Soviet Union, the chaotic 1990s and the new glamourized era of the Putin administration. With twenty million copies of her albums sold, she has been elected eleven times as best singer of the year, and in 2007 *Forbes* rated her third among Russia's fifty greatest living celebrities.<sup>14</sup>

How can this enduring fame be explained especially since to non-Russian eyes Pugacheva does not match any Western conception of a superstar with her heavy figure and often bizarrely tasteless eccentric appearance? According to Olga Partan, with professionalism fading in the post-Soviet decades and "popsa" or fast-track music coming to dominate the entertainment business (named "raskrutka"), Alla Pugacheva has steadily presented a highly professional musical show, which in Soviet times was called Estrada,<sup>15</sup> distinguishing features of which included powerful vocal skills, emotionality and direct personal contact with the audience.<sup>16</sup>

Pugacheva rejected the "return of Rock" in the 1980s and kept seeing herself as a singer for the people, always loyal to her audience and based on cultural tradition. By using texts from both classical poetry, Shakespeare, and Russian poets, like Tsvetaeva, Mandelshtam and Pasternak who had been repressed in Soviet times, for her lyrics, she always connected high and low culture. And, just like in the Soviet past—on stage where she faced less censorship—the diva has rebelled against conventions in post-Soviet years. This applies especially to the gender-roles offered by society, but also to norms of language and style, for instance by using vulgar slang and obscenities next to high romance and classical literary texts.

In the post-Soviet decades, her eccentric on-and-off-stage persona has been covered extensively by the media. Only she could allow herself to rebel against Church decorum, being accepted and even admired by Orthodox priests when she appeared as godmother of her young protégé's baby daughter at her June 2005

church baptism ceremony ignoring the dress code with her usual eccentric clothes and make-up, accompanied by film and media-hype.

Pugacheva's public appearance, in which she generously displays the details of her private life, thus connects what Stephen Gundle has outlined as the oxymoronic qualities of glamour: "sleazy elegance [in her case an incongruity, matched, however by a self-ironic parody of bodily imperfections and the performance-role of a jester-queen], accessible exclusivity, democratic elitism." Sex-appeal, the aristocratic elegance of the elite and excessive vulgarity combines the realization of romantic dreams with the prostitution of the concubines.<sup>17</sup> Most successful stars and celebrities often originate from lower social strata. "The most glamorous figures of the past two hundred years have not been the hereditary rich or legitimate holders of power. They have been outsiders, upstarts, social climbers, and parvenus."<sup>18</sup>

But there is another key to Pugacheva's unsinkable stardom by which she connects and at the same time juxtaposes the Soviet past with the post-Soviet present: she demonstratively lives her life on stage and in private as a mistress, mother and grandmother at the same time, thus offering a liberating message to Russian women, especially at older age. She has repeated affairs with much younger men and celebrated her fiftieth birthday in 1999 in a TV-party next to four former husbands on stage.

But much more significant is that Pugacheva, by constantly co-starring with her daughter Kristina Orbakaite, a big star in her own right, and recently with her grandson, publicly demonstrates the ties of family as primary bonding. This is, however, a primarily female bonding, in which male partners are frequently changing, i.e. dispensable, and females have control over their independent personal and professional life.

This gender-construction confirms what Vera Dunham has called the "strong-woman motif" in Russian culture,<sup>19</sup> but at the same time it strongly contradicts traditional roles of a female in Russia, where mothers and, in particular, grandmothers have always been mythologized as the gendered nation, connected with the soil ("Moist-Mother-Earth") and represented exclusively as post- or a-sexual females. Babushka and sex-appeal is an oxymoron and promiscuity an exclusive right of men.

Pugacheva's public performance of matriarchal autonomy over three generations, including songs about children in the 1980s and about grandchildren in the

13 Olga Partan. "Alla. The Jester-Queen of Russian Pop Culture," *Russian Review* 66 (July 2007), 483–500

14 Olga Partan. "Feminism à la Russe? Pugacheva-Orbakaite's celebrity construction through family bonds," *Celebrity and Glamour*, 2011, 174.

15 E.D. Uvarova (ed.), *Ruskaia sovetskaia Èстрада. Ocherki istorii*, vol. 1–3, Moscow, 1976–1981; David MacFadyen, *Songs for Fat People: Affect, Emotion, and Celebrity in the Russian Popular Song, 1900–1955*, Montréal 2003.

16 According to David Marshall, these features have been main conditions of a musical celebrity status in the early twentieth century. David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power. Fame in Contemporary Culture*, Minneapolis, London: U of Minnesota Press, 1997, 155.

17 Stephen Gundle, *Glamour. A History*, Oxford University Press, 2008.

18 Gundle, p. 389.

19 Vera Dunham: The Strong Woman Motif. In: Black, C.E. (ed.): *The Transformation of Russian Society*. Cambridge 1960.

2000s, contradicts both Western and Russian gender roles for stars in the entertainment business. In the discourse on glamour, according to Olga Partan, Alla Pugacheva gives a “specifically Russian twist to the feminist stand of the celebrity image.”<sup>20</sup>

### Glamorous Amazons in the Russian media

Brian Mc Nair has described the main characteristics of Russian journalism in the 1990s as “power, profit, corruption and lies.”<sup>21</sup> In the new millennium, females have become dominant in the Russian media, both the big-run printing press and in TV. “The professional structure of journalism is becoming younger and more attractive to females.”<sup>22</sup> The number of women along with their professional training has grown considerably over the past decade, much more in sensational than in qualitative and investigative journalism. How to explain this phenomenon, especially regarding the re-Sovietization of society, with an economy pushing women out of the professions or to lower levels of income and reputation?<sup>23</sup> And how is it connected to the patriotic turn to a macho-society? I will focus on one aspect, namely female journalists for whom a glamorous appearance is not incompatible with quality journalism, with differing ideological leanings. I argue that Tina(tin) Kandelaki (born 1975), Iulia Pankratova (\*1977), Tatiana Vedeneyeva (\*1953), Olga Bakushinskaia (\*1965), Olga Romanova (\*1966), Larisa Verbitskaia (\*1959) and Yekaterina Andreyeva (\*1961) represent such a new type of Russian journalism<sup>24</sup> and that it is not incompatible with liberal attitudes. Even opposition to the regime has lately been demonstrated by Ksenia Sobchak’s (\*1981) turn after the duma election in December 2011. The daughter of former St. Petersburg mayor Anatolii Sobchak, a former disciple of the famous Kirov school of ballet and graduate in political sciences from the pres-

tigious Moscow diplomatic school MGIMO, Sobchak started out as a journalist of what Zvereva named the radical mainstream-glamour, hostess of demonstratively trite TV-shows like “Blondinka v shokolade” and the TV-reality-show Dom-2, an adaptation of the Western Big-Brother shows. Being a scandalous glamour-girl, intelligent, beautiful, rich, Sobchak mainly provoked her audience by breaking taboos in sex-related topics and language, and excessive consumption (i.e. a Moscow exhibition of her 450 pairs of shoes). When in May 2006 a delegate of the National Health Committee publicly accused her of “inciting an unhealthy interest in sex” among the population, Sobchak founded a youth-organization “All are Free,” especially for children of the elite. “For me, capitalism is the best means of contraception. If you can live a normal life, with job, education, money and possibilities, why would you want to waste it with diapers, borshch and other pleasures.”<sup>25</sup> But like Pugacheva, Sobchak also propagates family as the highest value in Russian society and repeatedly promotes the reestablished rituals of Soviet marriage and wedding-ceremonies, thus stabilizing the patriarchal type of society. Together with Olga Robski, author of numerous glamour-novels, Sobchak published the novel “How to gain a Millionaire?” an ironic recommendation to climb up the social ladder via marriage by trading female qualities for money.

Since the contested December 2011 Duma election, leading to public protests against Putin’s authoritarian regime, Sobchak has undergone some changes and, following the presidential election returning Putin to the Kremlin in March 2012, openly joined the opposition.<sup>26</sup> During the trial against the music group Pussy Riot, she skillfully conducted a controversial discussion in a TV talk-show, bringing representatives of the church and alternative economy together with underground artists and militant nationalists. In an atmosphere of rising political repression, Sobchak continues to openly provoke the authorities with her now critical political opinions in the public media, especially on state-controlled TV.<sup>27</sup>

### The Dark Side of Glamour

The glamorization of Russia in politics, media and society as a symbol of global capitalism has a dark side, just as globalized crime has been another aspect of the global economy and a consequence of global media-communi-

20 Partan, 174.

21 Brian Mc Nair, “Power, Profit, Corruption, and Lies: The Russian Media in the 1990s,” Curran, J., M.-J. Park (eds): *The Westernizing Media-Studies*. London 2000, 79–94.

22 Svetlana Pasti. “A New Generation of Journalists.” *Russian Mass Media and Changing Values*, ed. A. Rosenholm, K. Nordenstreng, E. Trubina, London 2010, p. 57–75, p. 60; eadem: The St. Petersburg Media in Transformation, *Nordicom Review* 2006, 1 (26), November, p. 69–84; eadem: *The Changing Profession of a Journalist in Russia*. Tampere 2007. See also Andrei Konchalovskii’s film *Glyanets* (RF 2007).

23 Elisabeth Cheauré. “Frauen in Russland,” *Länderbericht Russland*, ed. H. Pleines, H.H. Schröder Bonn, 466–493.

24 According to Russian statistics, in 2011 the following female journalists were most popular: Irina Petrovskaia, Tatiana Lysova, Olga Romanova, Mariia Sittel’, Elena Denezhkina, Larisa Kaf-tan, Yuliia Alekhina, Tatiana Vedeneeva, Ekaterina Andreeva, Natalia Timakova (presidential press secretary), Mariia Shukshina, Larisa Guzeva, Yuliia Kovalchuk and Svetlana Sorokina.

25 Quoted in Goscilo, Strukov: *Celebrity and Glamour*, 2011, p. 10.

26 See the episode with Sobchak in the Documentary online film project “Srok” by Aleksandr Rastorguev and Pavel Kostomarov from April until December 2012. I owe this information to Eva Binder.

27 “Gosdep” 19.3.2012 [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QFhPV\\_FIDRk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QFhPV_FIDRk)

cation. As one of the keys of glamour is the “language of seduction, as bourgeois ethics has always been related to its attitude towards sexuality, and commercial establishments have always attracted attention and persuaded through suggestions of sex and excess (next to showmanship, magic and religion),”<sup>28</sup> the global economy in the post-communist world has developed its own strategy of exploitation. High rates of unemployment have affected many women and children. Human trafficking has become the largest source of organized crime revenue worldwide since 2000, leaving even the trade with weapons and drugs behind, and—along with children—women from Central and Eastern Europe have become the leading victims of this extremely brutal organized crime.<sup>29</sup> They are being trafficked for various purposes, but commercial sexual exploitation is one of the main purposes. Russia is one of the most significant sources of women trafficked to over fifty nations. The promise of social mobility and success through the *sexbiznes* has seduced a great number of girls and women in countries of the former Soviet bloc, often from provincial towns and remote villages without prospects for a

non-miserable life, who, manipulated by media, promises and illusions, find themselves sold and kidnapped. Hundreds of thousands end up trapped for life in sex-slavery all over the world.

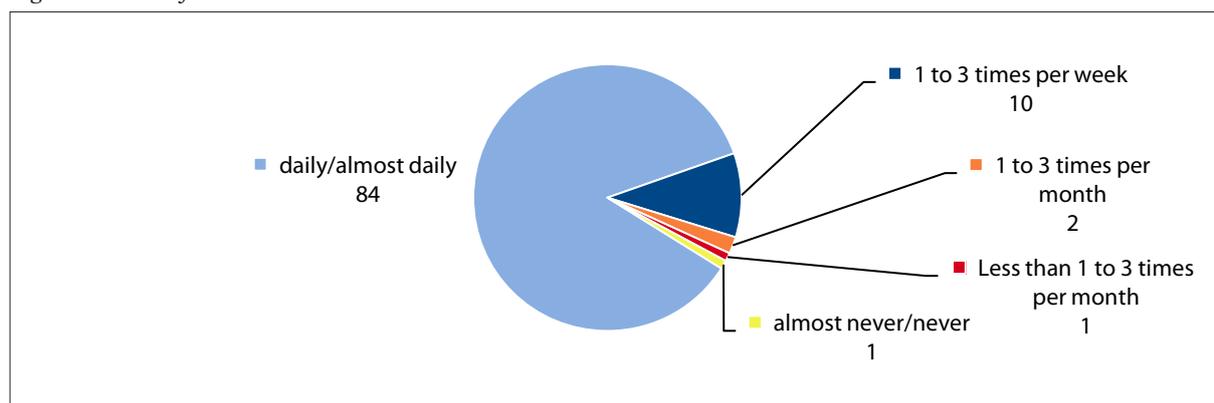
### Conclusion

It remains an unsolved dispute whether glamour is an attribute of certain people, requiring aura and talent, or whether it is a quality attainable for everyone, by training or just money. Since Putin has reestablished an authoritarian regime with a patriotic turn and centralized media, especially TV, glamour, in the social and political elite as well as in the mainstream, has become the main ingredient of the new Russian self-image, expressing the “two main practices of the post-Soviet era—nostalgia and consumption.”<sup>30</sup> Political leaders, pop stars and journalists of both sexes have used glamour for various, sometimes contradictory ends, as weapon, protection or seduction,<sup>32</sup> with results which range from social-therapeutic effects to manipulation and crime. If only in its intensity, mixtures and contradictions, Russian glamour, indeed, has its own face-lifting physiognomy.

#### About the Author

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Figure 1: How Often Do You Watch Television?



Source: representative opinion poll by Levada-Tsentr, January 2010, <http://www.levada.ru/archive/kulturnoe-potreblenie-i-otdykh/kak-chasto-vy-smotrite-televizor>

28 Gundle, p. 9

29 For Human Trafficking, see Victor Malarek: *The Natashas. Inside the Global Sex Trade*, Penguin 2004; <http://www.humantrafficking.org/links/83>. *The CNN Freedom Project* <http://thecnnfreedomproject.blogs.cnn.com/> and Vitalii Manskiij's documentary film *Deustvennost'* (RF, 2008).

30 Julie Cassiday, Emily Johnson. “A personality cult for the postmodern age: reading Vladimir Putin's public persona,” *Putin as Celebrity and Cultural Icon*, p. 37–64, p. 40.

31 Gundle, Introduction, *Glamour*, 9

## Political Humor on Russian Television

By Maria Tagangaeva, St. Gallen

### Abstract

Russian television broadcasts a variety of comedy shows that include jokes about politicians and political topics. However, the jokes about President Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev do not break the rules of official discourse and are not threatening to the regime since they merely give the appearance of satirizing the regime.

### Political Communication and Jokes

Humor in Russia has always had a political dimension. In the Soviet era, low-brow humor was a valve, through which people could express their uncensored ideas. Stories and jokes from that time boldly described the absurdity of Soviet reality and the attitudes of simple people toward it.<sup>1</sup>

In the post-Soviet era, Russia's political engineers discovered humor as a power instrument for influencing the masses. Television is the most suitable platform for this purpose.

On Russian television today, humor has gained an increasing share of broadcast time, and the number of shows with humorous contents—comedy shows, parodies, sketch comedies, and concerts featuring popular comics—has grown ubiquitously on all broadcast networks. Many critics of the Putin regime have described the expansion of the entertainment industry as an attempt to demobilize Russians away from political activism.<sup>2</sup> By telling jokes, Russia's humorous television shows transmit the core values and views of the state system.

This article will describe the three most popular comedy-entertainment shows on Russian television of recent years: KVN (Klub veselykh i nakhodchivyykh—Club of the Funny and Inventive), ProzhektorParisHilton, and Comedy Club. These shows demonstrate the nexus of humor, entertainment and politics in contemporary Russia. Despite their different formats, the jokes in these shows form a united official humorous discourse, characterized by the increasing importance of the ideology of glamour<sup>3</sup> and simulated satire.

1 See e.g. Seth Graham. 2004. *A Cultural Analysis of the Russo-Soviet Anekdot*. Doctoral Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh. Ben Lewis. *Hammer and Tickle. The Story of Communism, a Political System Almost Laughed out of Existence*. New York 2009.

2 Robert Orttung and Christopher Walker. 2013. "Putin and Russia's Crippled Media." *Russian Analytical Digest* No. 123, 21 February 2013. Available at: <http://www.css.ethz.ch/publications/pdfs/RAD-123.pdf> (accessed 14.03.2013)

3 On the ideology of glamor, see Helena Goscilo, Vlad Strukov, ed. 2011. *Celebrity and Glamour in Contemporary Russia: Shocking Chic*. New York: Taylor & Francis; Larissa Rudova and Brigit Menzel ed. 2008. "Glamorous Russia." *kultura. Russland-Kul-*

### KVN

The KVN acronym is probably known to every resident of Russia regardless of age. It stands for the Club of the Funny and Inventive. KVN is a humor game and one of the oldest shows in the history of Russian TV. It is broadcast on the country's premier network, First Channel.

KVN is a Soviet invention and is based on student amateur performances. At the core of the game, student teams compete among themselves on stage, seeking to find the funniest answers to questions, improvising sketches, and demonstrating their non-professional musical, dance, and theatrical talents. Since its appearance in the period of the Khrushchev thaw in 1961, this show brought humor and a variety of other progressive elements to Soviet television—dialogue with the viewer, interaction, and improvisation (though in circumscribed amounts)—making it immediately popular with the Soviet audience.

In the 1970s, the show was cancelled for ideological reasons: the student teams too frequently made fun of Soviet life and ideology. KVN returned to the screen at the beginning of Perestroika, in 1986, launching a large-scale KVN movement in the USSR, and after its break-up, in many of the CIS countries. Today KVN contests continue in the universities of Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Latvia and the best teams end up on TV. Additionally, wherever there are emigrants from the former Soviet Union, there are local KVN teams and leagues.

KVN shows include several competitions, but only the "workout" (razminka) includes real improvisation in which the teams try to come up with clever answers to the questions of the opposing teams, jury, and public. Generally, the performances of the teams are prepared in advance and edited. As experience has shown, controversial moments are often cut from the televised broadcast.

The majority of KVN-teams represent their cities and regions as is clear from their names: Team Chechnya, Team Kazakhstan, Team Krasnodar Krai, Team St.

*turanalysen*, vol. 6 December. Available at: [http://www.kultura-rus.uni-bremen.de/kultura\\_dokumente/ausgaben/englisch/kultura\\_6\\_2008\\_EN.pdf](http://www.kultura-rus.uni-bremen.de/kultura_dokumente/ausgaben/englisch/kultura_6_2008_EN.pdf) (accessed 17.03.2013).

Petersburg, etc. The reason for such affiliations is that a team's participation in KVN is expensive, so regions sponsor local teams. The teams therefore advertise their regions or cities, building their image on the image of their home town.

### The Allowed Satire of KVN

The phenomenon of KVN is interesting and unique in that it has existed for many decades and has survived the change of several epochs. Each successive period—the Perestroika years, the collapse of the USSR, the disastrous 1990s—produced its own themes and heroes, which were directly reflected in KVN and its jokes. In the 1990s, KVN energetically discussed Russia's interaction with the rest of the world and the impact of American culture. At that time, the key audience was the intelligentsia, political liberals, and advocates of Western democracy. A typical person on KVN of that era was an intelligent, politically-informed young person who spoke English. In the 1990s, the KVN teams made sharp and critical jokes about political and social topics, giving the viewer a lot to think about. In general, the jokes were longer and more satirical, with an accent on wordplay. There were some stage props, but they were typically modest.

1991. The disintegration of the USSR. *If Marx were alive... He would die.*

(Joke of the KVN Team TMI (Tyumen) 1991)

The contemporary KVN, or Maslyakov's Empire as it is frequently called based on its changeless leader Aleksandr Maslyakov, has transformed from amateur student performances into a commercial entertainment industry, a professional television show that brings considerable income to its creators. The teams, formed today through casting searches, pay large fees to participate in the television broadcasts. After the competition season, the teams tour the country giving performances, paying about 10% from each appearance to the show's creators. Almost every team employs special writers who prepare texts for their appearances.

The contemporary KVN continues to make political jokes, however their character has changed. The political content is delivered in an entertaining manner which neutralizes its social-political sting and transfers them from the political sphere to the realm of entertainment. Freaks, marginals, and punks who have been rejected by society are the typical butts of jokes on today's KVN. Most jokes focus on chanting "Russianness," emphasizing the exceptional status of Russia and its people. Jokes about international political topics highlight the confrontation between Russia and its political "opponents"

from the time of the Cold War in the style characteristic of jokes popular during Soviet times about Stierlitz, Gorbachev, and Reagan, or an American, French, and Russian.

Immigrants tamed the Wild West and many of them were Russians.

(the following verses are sung to St1m's "I—Rap")

Barak Obama could not get to work quickly,

If Sikorsky had not invented the helicopter.

If Popov had not been involved in radio engineering,

Then the USA would not hear the Voice of America.

If our boys did not play in the NHL,

Then I'd like to know who would actually watch it.

Leonardo di Caprio is a sensitive Russian,

At home he as an Orenburg shawl.

- Song of the "Bad team," Team Krasnodar Krai

A particularly popular topic is life in Moscow—the burning desire of all non-Muscovites to obtain a permit to live in the capital city, arriving in Moscow from the provinces, Moscow's traffic jams, the Russian police, bribes, etc. Additionally, teams from the provinces frequently joke about the backwardness of their cities:

Announcement at the railway station: Attention Passengers! The Sapsan train from Nyagan to Moscow will depart in 12 years!

(Joke of the Team Kefir from the city of Nyagan)

In honor of the upcoming Olympics in Sochi, there are many jokes about corruption cases in the course of preparing Olympic sites. One example is the following joke based on the party game Mafia:

Television news anchor: Sochi Olimpstroj has finished building all the Olympic sites and now is playing Mafia. (The audience laughs.) The city sleeps. (All participants standing on the stage close their eyes.) The Mafia wakes up. (All participants who had closed their eyes, open them.)

(Team BAK-Souchniki, Krasnodar Krai)

Examining the jokes about daily life and politics shows that they are similar to Soviet jokes in which politics and daily life were regarded "as a ritual, but not real life, which could change," each individual was portrayed as a "victim of circumstance and not an active shaper of his own life."<sup>4</sup>

Further evidence of KVN's shift from an intellectual broadcast to one focused on entertainment can be found

4 Birgit Beumers. 2005. *Pop Culture Russia. Media, Arts, and Lifestyle*. Santa Barbara, Denver, Oxford: ABC Clío. p. 173.

in its relationship with its current viewer and how the viewer sees the show. Today the viewer is less interested in hearing sharp-witted truth-telling and instead seeks an opportunity to be entertained and relax. Accordingly, the audience is not interested in gray reality. An important reason to participate in KVN today is an opportunity to “shine” on television in the company of celebrities—famous people of Russian culture, show business, and sport, who appear in the broadcasts either as members of the jury or in the audience. Additionally, a new trend among KVN teams is to invite Russian show business stars to participate in their performances. Teams demonstrate their popularity and high ranking by attracting cool and well-known stars.

Of course, the consistently high ratings of KVN attract famous people not only from the field of culture and show-business, but also from the realm of politics. Since the beginning of the Putin era, the program has regularly attracted the attention and personal presence of Vladimir Putin himself, as well as Dmitry Medvedev, and other A-list members of the government, including Krasnodar Krai Governor Aleksandr Tkachev, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyannin, and many others.

Two factors explain the authorities’ attention to the show. First, KVN has a unique, long-standing successful experience in mobilizing Russian young active people. Russian spin doctors in the field of youth policy can only dream of working on the scale of the constantly growing Russian KVN movement.

The second motivation for paying attention to the show is the policy of promoting “Russian brands” and products made in Russia that Putin has actively backed. The specific format of the show and its long-running success allows KVN to position itself as a unique show that does not have an analog in the West. Accordingly, Putin calls the show “our domestic intellectual product.”

The presence of Putin, and Medvedev at the show is always a special event, which is broadcast in prime time. In Putin’s presence, the games follow a consistent scenario: the “premiersident”—a blurring of president and prime minister that was particularly apparent when Putin was prime minister—sits in the middle of the audience surrounded by exemplary members of the KVN cast. All attention is focused on him and the teams cautiously try to make him laugh. It is considered a big coup if one of the participants successfully jokes about the president in his presence, as happened at the KVN anniversary in 2011:

Question to the teams: “What Russian car will be the first to enter the German market?” A KVN participant looks into the audience and answers: “A yellow Lada Kalina, whose driver is sitting here somewhere.”

Another example was a joke during the summer KVN in Sochi in 2009 in the presence of Medvedev, then president, and his wife:

“I live in Sochi. Where can I go to relax?”  
 “To Bocharov Ruch’e [the president’s summer residence], it’s free at the moment.”

The image of the “president/prime minister beloved by the population” has become a “key brand of contemporary Russian pop culture”<sup>5</sup> and continues to be exploited successfully by the KVN teams and other humor shows, despite Putin’s declining popularity after the 2012 elections. These jokes remain in “demand” among viewers and among humorists and make up a significant share of all jokes. The best KVN teams not only have their own jokes about the country’s leaders, but also their own imposter “Putin” and “Medvedev,” actors who parody the originals.

Given their outward physical similarity to the men they parody, Dmitry Grachev (Putin) and Anton Sasin (Medvedev) have made careers portraying the leaders, also appearing in comic films and a variety of other productions.

Figure 1: Putin Double Dmitry Grachev



Source: <http://miniatury.net/tags/%EF%F3%F2%E8%ED+%EA%E0%EC%E5%E4%E8/> (accessed 03.04.2013)

Joking about Vladimir Vladimirovich and Dmitry Anatolevich requires a specific style. Each has a specific “allowed” image which the KVN teams exploit consistently. Putin is usually portrayed as a serious leader who has invincible authority, commanding respect and fear. Frequently, jokes about him make fun of his efforts to promote Russian-made cars. Medvedev appears as a fan of Deep Purple and an advocate of nanotechnology. In gen-

5 Helena Goscilo 2011. “The ultimate celebrity. VVP as VIP Objet d’Art.” In: Helena Goscilo, Vlad Strukov, ed. 2011. *Celebrity and Glamour in Contemporary Russia: Shocking Chic*. New York: Taylor & Francis, pp. 29–55, here p. 37.

Figure 2: Medvedev Double Anton Sasin



Source: <http://www.amik.ru/Article/1/12747.html> (accessed 03.04.2013)

eral, the media image of Putin and Medvedev is impeccably positive and congruent with the official presidential/prime ministerial cult in Russia. Required elements of their image include the closeness to the people, concern about the state, and their human face. In this context, sketches that place Putin and Medvedev in ordinary day-to-day situations familiar to all Russians are very popular: a working day for Putin in the office, Putin registering in social networks, Medvedev playing the drums in his office, Putin scolding presumptuous bureaucrats in his office.

The public particularly liked the parody of Medvedev dancing at a reunion of his classmates to the hits of the 1990s.<sup>6</sup> The subject of the parody was the appearance of an amateur video in the internet showing Medvedev dancing in a somewhat old-fashioned style.<sup>7</sup> When this episode of KVN was broadcast on television, the First Channel leadership decided to cut the sketch. However, following a stormy reaction from the viewers in internet forums and social networks, the dance was restored during repeat broadcasts. This example once again demonstrated the presence of censorship in the televised version of KVN and the growing influence of the currently uncensored internet in Russia.

Further evidence of censorship on KVN and what can and cannot be said from the KVN stage is the fact that some topics are almost never discussed, including the trial of Pussy Riot, protests on Bolotnaya Square, and the opposition movement in general. Jokes about the main leader of the opposition Aleksey Navalny are extremely rare. However, his election to the Aeroflot board of directors was examined in the following joke, which emphasized his difficult position in Russia:

“I called Navalny and said: ‘Since you are so independent, why did you go to work for Aeroflot?’” He answered, “I am in a situation in which it is necessary to have a plane handy.”

(Team BAK-Sauchastniki Krasnodar Krai)

Today, KVN’s role as an incubator producing humorists for comedic and entertainment shows on Russian and CIS television networks is growing. The majority of popular comics on Russian television today have roots in KVN. Many graduates of KVN work as actors, anchor people, and screen writers for shows and series broadcast on a variety of networks.

### Humor as a Political Statement on ProzhektorParisHilton

A year ago, if you asked Russians “What does Paris Hilton and Russian television have in common?” they would have answered “ProzhektorParisHilton,” having in mind the popular Russian television show with record high ratings that was broadcast on First Channel from 2008 to June 2012. The unusual name of the show in reality has no connection to the American celebrity/hotel-owner, but, as the show’s creator explains, comes from the name of an older show, Prozhektor perestroiki, which was broadcast at the end of the 1980s. The second part of the name “parishilton”<sup>8</sup> apparently is a tribute to the “ideology of glamour,” which currently dominates Russia, and symbolizes scandals, intrigue, and money.

This evening infotainment show was broadcast every Saturday at prime time. Millions of viewers watched it. Almost every year during its existence, it won a TEFI, the most prestigious prize in Russian television.

The core of the show was four anchors, sitting at a table and drinking tea, discussing in a humorous style newspaper articles from the previous week describing events in Russia and abroad and the statements of politicians. The improvisation of the anchors charmed the audience with their endless joking, which was sometimes successful. A key part of the show’s appeal was the

6 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VUG6l96gl-s>

7 [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_Hzq2IL9xQ0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Hzq2IL9xQ0)

8 In Russian, the title is one word and only the first letter is capitalized.

stars who worked as anchors, including some of Russia's most popular and sought after comedians, including Ivan Urgant, Sergei Svetlakov, Garik Martirosyan, and showman Aleksandr Tsekalo, who are well known to the Russian viewer, particularly those aged between 10 and 45, from other programs.

Joke about the situation in Greece: "The ongoing crisis in Greece reminds me of a soap opera, where the daughter 'Greece' slips into a coma. When she wakes up, she loses not only her memory, but her conscience." (Prozhektorparishilton, November 5, 2011)

Joke about Putin's visit to the Volkswagen Factory in Kaluga

Putin tells the workers in the Volkswagen plant: "You make a good car here."

Someone asks: "Better than the Niva?"

Putin hesitates and says: "The Niva is mine. What can be better than that?"

Then Putin goes home and opens his garage where his Niva sits and looks at him reproachfully like a wife examining a wandering, cheating husband.

Niva: "Vladimir Vladimirovich, where have you been?"

In a shaky voice, "Did you see the Volkswagen?"

Putin: "No Niva, you are mine, my one and only."

Niva (crying): "Then why do you smell like foreign accessories?"

A clear factor in the success of the show and an innovation for Russian television was the participation, along with Russian stars, of invited international stars like Will Smith, Daniel Radcliffe, Hugh Jackman, Til Schweiger, Mila Yovovich, Rowan Atkinson, and Mickey Rourke.<sup>9</sup> The guests joined their hosts in discussing local and foreign news. For example, the politician and billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov joined the hosts for a rap song about how he and Jay-Z purchased the New York Nets basketball team.<sup>10</sup> Rowan Atkinson, a lover of race cars, had to pick out the sound of the Russian Lada Granta Sport from among three car sounds. The Lada is one of the favorite objects for teasing among Russian humorists.<sup>11</sup>

Many Russian journalists criticized Prozhektorparishilton as offering only biased and one-sided criticism of Russia's "officially declared" enemies—America, Ukraine, Georgia, and Belarus—when the leaders of Russia's allies were not the subject of a single cutting joke.

Prozhektorparishilton was one of the few shows that

included a comparatively large amount of political humor, particularly given that it was focused on discussing the press. Of course, they could not avoid making jokes about the main political tandem—Putin and Medvedev. Nevertheless these jokes were limited to three specific styles. The most popular jokes about Putin made fun of his promotion of Lada automobiles; second place belonged to jokes about Putin's publicity stunts, such as diving for amphorae; and third place was Medvedev and Putin's efforts to monitor the construction of the Olympic sites.

The sudden cancellation of the show at the peak of its popularity aroused considerable speculation in the Russian media. The official reason announced focused on economic and legal issues: two of the hosts, Sergei Svetlakov and Garik Martirosyan, had signed contracts according to which they could not work on First Channel. Both of them were simultaneously involved in another growing comedy project—Comedy Club on TNT.

Nevertheless, several journalists were inclined to see political undertones in the show's demise, connecting the date of the closure with the end of Medvedev's period of "liberal" rule. For example, Mikhail Zakharov wrote in *polit.ru*, "Prozhektorparishilton first hit the airwaves on May 17, 2008. Now it has been closed, surviving less than a half a year after the liberal presidential rule of Dmitry Medvedev. A bit too much of a coincidence,"<sup>12</sup> In practice, just like the "spotlight" in the first part of its name, Prozhektorparishilton, using its platform on the country's main network, directed viewers' attention, although in a humorous style, to topics that the authorities would prefer to keep in the dark, such as electoral violations, cutting down the Khimki forest, and the law on the police.<sup>13</sup>

### The Glamorous Scoundrels of the Comedy Club

Comedic actors from the humor show Comedy Club are called the reformers of Russian humor on TV. They have provided an alternative to the dominance of humorists/comics, who appeared in another famous Russian show called "Full House," which was broadcast in the 1990s.

The most talked about show Comedy Club was originally created by the KVN team New Armenians and is an analog to American stand-up comedy. In contrast to the two shows already discussed, this show is broadcast on TNT. TNT belongs to the Gazprom-Media holding company and specializes in the production of reality shows and various entertainment programs.

Comedy Club consists of a series of independent

9 For some examples, see PPH with Will Smith <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DTRcQEBMvC4>, PPH with Daniel Radcliffe <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eML9EjBGE8Q>

10 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oljztVyseY>

11 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N8iKb3MprK0>

12 Zakharov, Mikhail 2012. Prozhektoram zdes' ne mesto. *Polit.ru* 27 sentyabrya 2012, 18:18 Available at: <http://polit.ru/article/2012/09/27/projektor/> (accessed 19.03.2013)

13 Ibid.

mini-shows by individual humorists, presented by a master of ceremonies. Each of the skits contains a solo, duet, or group of actors with the use of various props, such as musical instruments, video, photos, and decorations. All residents of the Comedy Club—about 30–40 comics are in the cast—are young, self-confident, well-dressed men, the majority of whom are alumni of KVN who do not have professional actors' training.

From its first shows, the Comedy Club actors conquered a part of the Russian media space. Comedy Club participants are invited to perform on other networks as their Comedy Club characters. The original show began to multiply, begetting spinoffs, such as Comedy Women and Comedy Battle, among others. In addition, First Channel broadcasts a special show "Comedy Club on First." For contemporary young people in Russia, Comedy Club is the embodiment of a new way of life since it is a show combining and broadcasting everything that young people strive for today: money, glory, leisure, beauty, pathos, and coolness.

The appearance of Comedy Club on Russian television with its innovations shocked Russian society and provoked a heated reaction, particularly among representatives of the old generation. Among the controversial features are:

- At the beginning of each show, Comedy Club participant Pavel Volya, calling himself a "glamorous scoundrel," makes fun of the invited stars sitting in the audience in the style of a stand-up comedian. Nothing like this had ever happened on Russian television. The stars who are brave enough to come to the show, despite their fear of being ridiculed, desire the honor of participating in the broadcast and a chance to showcase their sense of humor.
- The Comedy Club comedians use curse words in their jokes, which previously were not permitted on television.
- Many of the cast members rely on "below the belt" humor.
- The Comedy Club has transgressed against the holy of holies—the classical canon of Russian culture, ridiculing and parodying Russian writers like Vladimir Mayakovsky,<sup>14</sup> Lev Tolstoy, Feodor Dostoyevsky, Nikolai Gogol, Kornei Chukovsky, and others.

According to a member of the Comedy Club cast, their guiding principle is that "jokes can be cocky, offensive, dirty, stupid, but most importantly, actually funny."<sup>15</sup>

#### *About the Author*

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Their goal is to "put people in a good mood" and they do not claim to be providing moral or educational material. Nevertheless, I think that the Comedy Club cast does not always consistently follow their principled lack of principles regarding the quality of their jokes. Logically since the majority of the comedians in residence support the current president, which they openly declared during the electoral campaign,<sup>16</sup> they cannot be as unprincipled as they claim. They cannot make "dirty, stupid, and offensive" jokes about everyone and everything. Even as their jokes about Russian writers often are obscene, their jokes about Putin and Medvedev continue to follow the official media image of the political leaders, as for example, in a typical sketch about Putin that employs his double and Comedy Club resident Dmitry Grachev. Putin is presented in the role of reading fairy tales to the Russian people about how they should live and what not to do in the show "Good night, adults," a parody of the children's show "Good night, kids."<sup>17</sup>

"You are watching the show 'Good night, adults.' Today I will tell you about Little Red Riding Hood. Once upon a time, mama sent Little Red Riding Hood to take Grandma some cakes. We have information that, in several regions of the Russian Federation, not all cakes make it to their grandmas. We intend to combat the problem. And additionally, we plan to index the received cakes by 14%...."

#### **Conclusion**

This summary of three popular humorous shows on Russian television has traced several common features. First, the existence of a unified humorous discourse on Russian television is explained not only by state-controlled censorship on Russian networks, but also because one and the same popular Russian comedians wander from one show to the next, from one network to another, thereby replicating one and the same comedic images, and together with them, specific values and views. Second, even though politics continues to remain one of the main sources of material for jokes, political jokes are really just simulations, merely giving the appearance of political satire. Finally, the reduction in the critical potential of contemporary Russian humor is the result of the establishment of glamour as the reigning ideology in Russia.

14 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ILgu-FuJ4cA>

15 See e.g. TV show Gordon Quichote from 07.11.2008 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wYUAgsluGDE&list=PL0309021C05BE33CE&index=1>

16 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pXCnzKrsGZc&feature=endscreen>

17 <http://rutube.ru/video/3b4fbb49d4a54aee415ea245063f56dd/>

**ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST**

Editors: Stephen Aris, Matthias Neumann, Robert Ortung, Jeronim Perović, Heiko Pleines, Hans-Henning Schröder, Aglaya Snetkov

The Russian Analytical Digest is a bi-weekly internet publication jointly produced by the Research Centre for East European Studies [Forschungsstelle Osteuropa] at the University of Bremen ([www.forschungsstelle.uni-bremen.de](http://www.forschungsstelle.uni-bremen.de)), the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich (ETH Zurich), the Resource Security Institute, the Institute of History at the University of Zurich (<http://www.hist.uzh.ch/>) and the Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies at The George Washington University. It is supported by the German Association for East European Studies (DGO). The Digest draws on contributions to the German-language Russland-Analysen ([www.laender-analysen.de/russland](http://www.laender-analysen.de/russland)), the CSS analytical network on Russia and Eurasia ([www.css.ethz.ch/rad](http://www.css.ethz.ch/rad)), and the Russian Regional Report. The Russian Analytical Digest covers political, economic, and social developments in Russia and its regions, and looks at Russia's role in international relations.

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