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JOKE AND MEME AS WEAPONS IN THE UKRAINIAN INFORMATION WAR

ABSTRACT: The aim of this article is to analyze the phenomenon of the use of humor in information warfare based on the example of the Russo-Ukrainian War. Ethnic jokes and ‘border jokes’ that are present in the relations between the two nations are presented. Internet memes prepared and distributed by the Ukrainian side were also presented. The comedy series ‘Bunker’ is also discussed. The article concludes with a summary. The means used in order to achieve the said aim are theoretical methods, such as analysis, synthesis and inference on the basis of available sources, especially the Internet, and academic studies. The study found that Internet memes now play an important role in the information warfare used by Ukrainians against Russia. Through the use of humorous means, they manage to influence both the morale of their own society and soldiers, as well as the enemy and the international community. The Russian-Ukrainian war has shown that actions in the information sphere also play a major role in a classic military conflict and that the means of information warfare, as available to almost every citizen, can become an element of the state's general defense.

KEYWORDS: border joke, hybrid warfare, Internet meme, information warfare, Russo-Ukrainian War

ŻARTY I MEMY JAKO BRÓŃ W UKRAIŃSKIEJ WOJNIE INFORMACYJNEJ

ABSTRAKT: Celem artykułu jest analiza zjawiska wykorzystania treści o charakterze humorystycznym w walce informacyjnej na przykładzie wojny ukraińsko-rosyjskiej. Zaprezentowane zostały „żarty etniczne” i „żarty graniczne”, funkcjonujące w relacjach między obu narodami. Przedstawiono również memy internetowe przygotowywane i rozpowszechniane przez stronę ukraińską. Omówiony został komediowy serial „Bunkier”. Tekst wieńczy podsumowanie. Do realizacji przyjętego celu wykorzystane zostały metody teoretyczne, takie jak: analiza, synteza i wnioskowanie na podstawie dostępnych źródeł, w tym przede wszystkim internetowych, oraz opracowań naukowych. Wykazano, że memy internetowe odgrywają obecnie ważną rolę w wojnie informacyjnej prowadzonej przez stronę ukraińską przeciwko Rosji. Za pomocą środków o charakterze humorystycznym udaje im się wpływać zarówno na morale własnego społeczeństwa i żołnierzy, jak i nieprzyjaciela oraz społeczności międzynarodowej. Wojna rosyjsko-ukraińska pokazała, że działania w sferze informacyjnej odgrywają istotną rolę także w klasycznym konflikcie zbrojnym, a środki wojny informacyjnej, jako dostępne dla niemal każdego obywatela, mogą stać się elementem powszechnej obrony państwa.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: mem internetowy, wojna hybrydowa, wojna informacyjna, wojna ukraińsko-rosyjska, żart graniczny

Every joke is a tiny revolution.
George Orwell

Human laughter is a deadly weapon.
Juliusz Słowacki

INTRODUCTION

Propaganda, disinformation, and information warfare have always been an integral part of any war, but the armed conflicts of the first decades of the 21st century have given them a much greater importance, thus contributing to the formation of a new concept, i.e. information warfare¹. The tools used in information and psychological warfare include diplomacy (linked to the political field), propaganda, psychological campaigns, actions at the level of influencing political or cultural processes, disinformation and manipulation of local media, and infiltration of computer networks and databases².

Cartoons as a humorous form of social criticism have a long tradition. The number of caricatures and memes skyrockets when times are tough, perhaps because they can be a way to deal with real-life horrors, such as the German occupation of Polish territory during World War II³ or the current war in Ukraine. Despite the heavy subject matter, they ideally make people smile, serving as a form of encouragement to not be defeated. They also ridicule, subtly or overtly, people in power, exposing truths those rulers may try to deny. Various cartoons and memes suggest that Ukraine might turn out to be more resilient than Vladimir Putin thought⁴.

The main objective of the article is to analyse the use of humour by the Ukrainian side in its fight against the Russian Federation after the outbreak of a full-scale conflict on 24 February 2022. In this article the author tries to answer the following research question: How does the Ukrainian side use humour in the information war against Russia? The author also seeks answers to specific questions:

- What are ethnic jokes and what impact do they have on Russian-Ukrainian relations?
- What are ‘border jokes’ and how do both sides of the conflict use them?
- How do Ukrainians use internet memes in the information fight against the Russian aggressor?
- How does the Ukrainian series ‘Bunker’ fit into the propaganda fight against Russia?

The article discusses use of various forms of humour by Ukraine in its fight against Russia. The analysis focused primarily on sources available on the Internet.

The author adopted the following research assumption: Information warfare is an integral element of the Russian-Ukrainian war, which was used to formulate the following hypothesis: Humour, as an element of information warfare, has a strong impact on strengthening the morale of one’s own society and army and weakening the morale of the enemy.

¹ P. Pacek, *Informacja i psychologia na wojnie nowej generacji*, Warszawa-Siedlce 2022, s. 54.

² T.R. Aleksandrowicz, *Podstawy walki informacyjnej*, Warszawa 2016, s. 133.

³ W. Warszawiak, *Humor w czasie okupacji 1939-1945*, Warszawa 2009.

⁴ T. Landsberg, 2022, *Memes and cartoons in times of war*, <https://www.dw.com/en/memes-and-cartoons-thrive-in-times-of-war/a-61082221> (06.10.2023).

ETHNIC JOKES

Jokes involving ethnic divisions and stereotypes of the peoples living in the Soviet Union were very popular in the country even before its break-up in 1991. By making fun of the ‘smaller’ nations living in the empire, the Russians expressed a sense of superiority towards them. Almost all nations living on the periphery of the USSR were ridiculed for their poor command of the Russian language. Moreover, a recurring theme of such jokes was the portrayal of the Chukchi (inhabitants of the Chukotka Peninsula) as stupid; the Estonians were portrayed as lacking energy and lazy; the Jews were greedy; the Georgians lacked good manners. It is worth noting here that jokes aimed at the Ukrainians were rare; if they did appear in jokes, it was not in a malicious context as they were regarded as the ‘younger brothers’ of the Russians⁵.

The situation changed after the collapse of the Soviet Union and especially after Kyiv began to pursue a policy independent of Moscow. It was then that jokes about Ukraine and Ukrainians became political and aimed at ridiculing Ukraine’s aspirations for independence. Ukrainians began to be portrayed as mean and spiteful Russophobes, rural ‘lard lovers’, characterised by an absurd obsession with the modern-day West. A well-known Russian proverb, ‘Even if the night is calm in Ukraine, you’d better hide your lard’ directly portrays Ukrainians as thieves. Another joke from the 1990s mocks Kyiv’s fascination with the Western lifestyle, resulting in a grotesque mix: the Ukrainian version of a Snickers bar would be ‘chocolate-coated lard’⁶.

Furthermore, the pejorative terms *Moskal* and *Khokhol* began to be used more and more frequently as reciprocal stereotypes. The first term, indicating the newcomers from Moscow, was already used in the Middle Ages. The second term refers to the traditional haircut of the Cossacks consisting of a single lock of hair on an otherwise fully-shaved head.

From the 2000s onward, it could be observed that the anti-Ukrainian jokes were increasing malicious and aggressive. An example is this joke, which circulated as early as 2007:

“A Khokhol has caught a hare.

He brings it to his wife: ‘Roast it!’

Her: ‘There’s no gas!’

Him: ‘Put it in the microwave then.’

Her: ‘There’s no electricity!’

Him: ‘Well, chop some wood, light the stove.’

Her: ‘There’s no wood!’

The Khokhol throws the hare out the window in a fit of anger. The hare gets up, shakes himself off and shouts, ‘Long live free Ukraine!’”

In 2014, during the Maidan events, the Russian nationalist politician Vladimir Zhirinovskiy told a joke allegedly found on the Internet:

⁵ R. Lanza, 2023, “All Funny on the Eastern Front”: war humor in Russia and Ukraine, <https://aspeniaonline.it/all-funny-on-the-eastern-front-war-humor-in-russia-and-ukraine/> (01.10.2023).

⁶ Ibidem.

“Khokhols are strange people. They pray to the Europeans; they work under the Jews; they die for the Americans; and they hate the Russians for all that.”

The core message contained in this humour focused increasingly on Kyiv’s ‘betrayal’ of Russia and the negative and ridiculous consequences it entailed for Ukrainians themselves:

“Do you know why the Ukrainians celebrate independence on 24th August?”

‘Because in winter they need Russian gas.’”

“A Ukrainian dies and stands before God:

‘Lord, why did you give the everything to the Russians – oil, gas, intellect, honour, history, poets, and scientists – and nothing to us, Ukrainians?’

God: ‘But I have given you all these things.’

Man: ‘When?’

God: ‘When you were Russians.’”⁷

BORDER JOKES

An interesting part of the struggle is the so-called ‘border jokes’, until recently used mainly by Russians. They have now become a weapon in the hands of the Ukrainians. In a TV programme broadcast in 2015, Vladimir Putin tested children’s knowledge of world geography. He asked a child where Russia’s border ended. The boy started to answer correctly when Putin interrupted him and said, ‘Russia’s border does not end anywhere’. The joyful reaction of the audience to Putin’s punchline relieved the boy from his embarrassment⁸. This way Putin revived the ‘imperialist humour’.

However, with the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 ‘border jokes’ were soon used against Russia, an early example of which became the issue of the annexation of Kherson to the Russian Federation. In September 2022, the Kremlin declared victory in referendums in the four occupied regions of Ukraine and their incorporation into Russia. When Putin signed the annexation documents, some of these territories had already returned to Kyiv’s rule as a result of the Ukrainian counteroffensive (including Kherson in the autumn)⁹.

However, the Russian propaganda wanted to cover up the military and political setbacks accompanying the referendum, and hence its message had to be triumphant. The Russian official media repeated the slogan, *Rossiya zdes navsegda* (Russia is here forever). Giant billboards appeared in the annexed regions, like the one below, photographed in Kherson (Figure 1).

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ T. Embury-Dennis, *Vladimir Putin says Russia's borders 'do not end anywhere'*, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/putin-russia-border-do-not-end-anywhere-comments-quote-eu-us-tensions-a7438686.html> (03.10.2023).

⁹ R. Lanza, op. cit.



Figure 1. Billboard “Russia is here forever”
Source: R. Lanza, op. cit.

The gap between the Russian triumphalism and the reality was exploited by the Ukrainians to create another humorous material online. When Kherson was liberated by the Ukrainian army and the Russian army had to surrender the occupied area, the same photo was cynically updated by the Ukrainians: *Rossiya zdes do noyabrya* (Russia is here until November).



Figure 2. Photo “Russia is here until November”
Source: R. Lanza, op. cit.

INTERNET MEMES

Currently, memes on the Internet play a key role in information warfare is played by Internet memes. Typically, they are made in the form of a funny photo or graphic with a comment, although they can also be animations, videos, and texts (along with various combinations thereof). The characteristic features of memes include variability, susceptibility to copying, transmission, and processing. They are often rapidly modified, transformed (e.g. by adding new text, rearranging a photo or illustration), and spontaneously distributed online.

Internet memes are usually designed according to specific patterns or combinations thereof. Those that need to be mentioned here include:

- memes showing a specific reaction (memetic response) to an event/situation/state (e.g. the ‘facepalm’ meme);
- ‘template’ memes in which there is a characteristic image to which a text is added referring to the behavior of the person depicted in the image. When the meme is created anew, the image remains unchanged; it is the text that is modified;
- memes containing a distinctive linguistic expression, well established and popular on the Internet. When the meme is created anew, the text remains unchanged, and the graphic content (e.g., a photo or illustration) is modified;
- memes depicting fictitious schematic diagrams of various objects;
- memes containing a direct message to the target audience (in the form of a text, e.g. ‘and you?’ or graphics, e.g. pictures showing a person with their eyes directed at the onlooker);
- memes containing a comparison or juxtaposition (e.g. how a phenomenon, event or object is seen by different people);
- memes in the form of comic strips – these contain several juxtaposed photographs or illustrations, often captioned, with some pieces of dialogue to create a short narrative.

A popular type of meme is called demotivators; these contain a captioned photo or graphic placed typically on a black background. The content can be entertaining, edifying, or educational, but it can also be a commentary or criticism.

Internet memes can be an expression of involvement in current public, political, and social issues, but they are also a kind of commentary on current events or an expression of protest. Due to the lack of control in the creation of memes, the lack of verification of the information they present, and the rate of dissemination online, they can also become means of spreading false or manipulated contents¹⁰.

Since the full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine on 24th February 2022, humour, in particular memes has become one of the important components of Ukrainian resistance and warfare in the information space.

¹⁰ P. Motylińska, *Mem internetowy*, [in:] *Vademecum bezpieczeństwa informacyjnego*, O. Wasiuta, R. Klepka (red.), Kraków 2019, s. 637-639.



Figure 3. Russian Death

Source: O. Semotiuk, *Ukraine: Humour as a Weapon of War*, <https://www.zois-berlin.de/en/publications/zois-spotlight/ukraine-humour-as-a-weapon-of-war>, (04.10.2023).

The meme above (Figure 3) employs the visual metaphor of Russia as a figure of Death. It alludes to Russian military aggressions against Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014), and the intervention in Syria (2015), all involving suffering and bloodshed. The attack against Ukraine in 2022, however, ends differently: behind the door opened by Russia there can be seen the horrified face of Death confronted with armed resistance by Ukrainian troops¹¹.

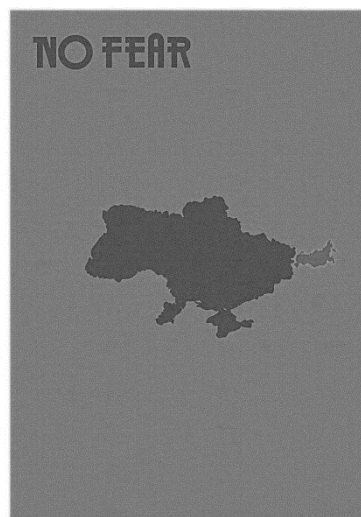


Figure 4. No fear

Source: O. Semotiuk, op. cit.

¹¹ O. Semotiuk, *Ukraine: Humour as a Weapon of War*, <https://www.zois-berlin.de/en/publications/zois-spotlight/ukraine-humour-as-a-weapon-of-war> (04.10.2023).

The next example is the visualisation above consisting of two components, one non-verbal (the contours of Ukraine and Russia) and one verbal (the inscription in English ‘No fear’). The author used contrast as a humour technique by reversing the land areas of the proportions of the two countries. It is also an allusion to the biblical story of David and Goliath when a seemingly weaker opponent defeats the stronger one. The combination of non-verbal and verbal components reinforces the satirical effect of the meme¹².

The web was also full of memes and jokes aimed directly at the President of the Russian Federation and his closest associates, pointing out their stupidity, cowardice, or alcoholism. For example, such a joke mocking Russia’s defeat began to circulate on social media: “Putin to Shoigu, Russia’s Minister of Defence: ‘Have you taken all of Kherson?’ Shoigu: ‘No, just Kher for now.’” (‘kher’ meaning ‘dick’ in Russian)¹³.



Figure 5. Putin’s conversation with Shoigu.
Source: R. Lanza, op. cit.

In another joke, its author pointed to the lack of communication between Putin and his associates and the fear of the president prevailing in the Kremlin:

“Putin: ‘So what, are we winning?’
Shoigu: ‘Well, sort of ...second place.’”¹⁴

The Ukrainian communication machine and social media users came up with another humorous theme which became popular during and immediately after the liberation of Kherson. Watermelons are the symbolic fruit of Kherson. According to traditional accounts, they were allegedly brought to the region by Crimean Tatars centuries ago. The image of the watermelon as the mascot of the city was used after the outbreak of the war as a symbol of the fight for

¹² Ibidem.

¹³ R. Lanza, op. cit.

¹⁴ Ibidem.

freedom and the repelling of the invaders from Kherson. President Zelensky himself joked during his visit to newly liberated Kherson that he was there because he ‘wanted a watermelon’¹⁵.

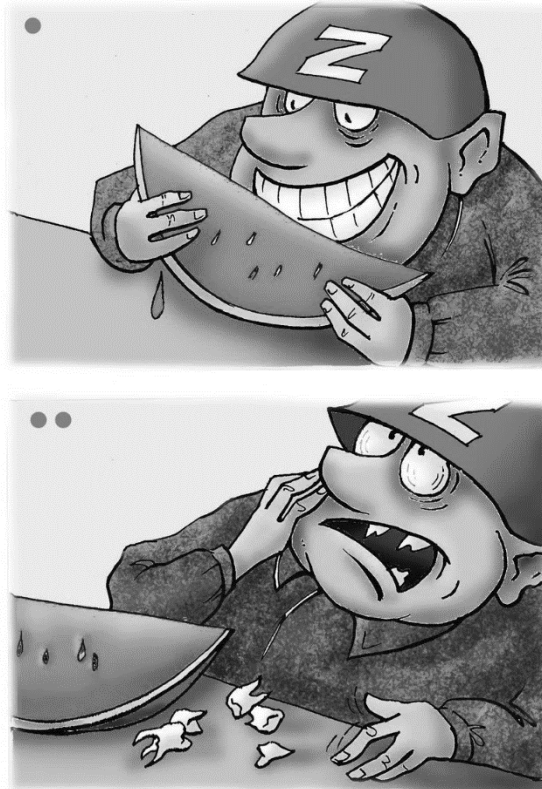


Figure 6. Watermelon from Kherson
Source: M. Bubalo, op. cit.

The meme above (Figure 6) shows a jubilant Russian soldier in a helmet with the letter ‘Z’ about to bite a piece of watermelon. In the second image, the soldier’s teeth are broken: As a result of attacking Kherson and Ukraine in general, the Russian army had its teeth broken.

When at least over a dozen explosions rocked the Russian military base in Crimea on 9th August 2022 and the Russian propaganda tried to cover up the events, the Ukrainians also reacted in their media coverage. Initially, the Russian Defence Ministry avoided admitting that there had been an effective attack by Ukrainian forces inside Crimea claiming that the explosion was caused by a ‘detonation of several aviation ammunition stores’¹⁶.

Neither did the Ukrainian army officially acknowledge responsibility for the destruction of the Russian aircraft or for the subsequent drone attack on the Russian naval headquarters in Crimea. Instead, the Ukrainian Defence Ministry mockingly issued a warning on Twitter about the dangers of smoking – ironically suggesting that Russian soldiers themselves had caused the explosions by mindlessly leaving lit cigarettes unattended. In the following days, an avalanche of similar ridiculing posts appeared on various Ukrainian military profiles on Twitter. Someone even

¹⁵ M. Bubalo, *Why did Zelensky want a watermelon in Kherson?*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-63624456>, (04.10.2023).

¹⁶ *Blasts rock Russian military airbase in annexed Crimea*, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/9/large-explosions-rock-russian-military-air-base-in-crimea> (10.10.2023).

shared the warning from the World Health Organisation that ‘smoking kills’. Another tweet (Figure 7) included a mosaic of photographs of burnt aircraft with instructions that read, ‘Prove you are not a robot: Please click each image containing an airplane. If there are none, click Skip’¹⁷.



Figure 7. Russian aircraft destroyed
Source: Blasts..., op. cit.

Interestingly, in addition to mocking the actions of Moscow and its soldiers, the Ukrainian army emphasises tender care for animals to highlight the humanity of its soldiers. Memes and videos show how they evacuated pets and zoo animals, and they are juxtaposed with scenes of Russian brutality. Ukrainian military websites often publish photos of soldiers cuddling kittens and puppies. These adorable creatures sit or lie in helmets and next to heavy weapons. By way of example, a Jack Russel Terrier named Patron has become extremely popular online with videos published of him running and jumping around while wearing his little bulletproof vest to search for unexploded ordnance and thus save the nation.

THE COMEDIC ‘BUNKER’

A very interesting example of a humour weapon used by the Ukrainians is the war comedy series entitled *Bunker*, available on the YouTube channel. It has been broadcast since October 2022 and shows events related to the ongoing conflict and makes fun of the Russian government and armed forces. Its producer is the media company Kvartal 95.

The synopsis of the series, available online, reads:

“Bunker is based on real events taking place in the most hideous country in the world, i.e. Russia. The Russian authorities have the ambitious task of taking over Ukraine even though they cannot even cope with their own stupidity. Putin and Lukashenko, Shoigu

¹⁷ Ibidem.

and Konashenkov, Solovyov and Simonyan... Are they as black as they are painted? The truth has never been so... funny.”

In the series, Ukrainian comedians impersonate and ridicule major Russian politicians. So, for example, the secluded Putin gives orders while sitting on a suitcase toilet which is regularly replaced by his entourage after every presidential speech. Dmitry Medvedev, sitting in the lap of luxury, is shown as perpetually drunk and writing aggressive, anti-Western tweets. In addition, this former president of the Russian superpower is bullied by his wife, Svetlana, who accuses him of lacking character when he is sober. The Minister of Defence of the Russian Federation, Sergei Shoigu, on the other hand, is constantly busy with children’s war games (playing with toy soldiers or assembling a toy gun with great effort) which are interrupted by phone calls from Vladimir Putin. He continues to lie to the Russian president about the events on the front, hiding the numerous defeats of the ‘second army of the world’. Then, there is the Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenko, portrayed as a greedy man who is always asking Putin for money in return for his support.

The series also features Vanya, a simple Russian soldier talking to his ‘beloved wife’ on a video call and telling her about the ‘special military operation’. He has been brainwashed into believing that he is saving Ukraine from the Nazis and is surprised that it is just him that the ‘liberated’ population treats as a fascist. He gets food poisoning due to poor food supplies in Russia and he is always claiming to be close to death. His wife, in turn, having lost hope of seeing her husband again, regularly cheats on him with other men. The series is broadcast in Ukrainian and Russian¹⁸.

CONCLUSIONS

Ukrainians are well aware that they cannot go too far in using laughter as a weapon, especially in the face of the death and suffering that their people are experiencing. Ukrainian sarcasm is aimed at the invaders, not their own soldiers or victims of the war. The jokes go silent when Ukraine suffers heavy losses or particularly horrific atrocities. For example, laughter and irony were not seen when the Ukrainian army suffered defeats at the front, but they were revived after it regained the initiative. Some topics remain taboo to be made fun of with people’s clear understanding that war is a horrific phenomenon with great sorrows, deaths, and tragedies. Ukrainians know the red line which will not be crossed in terms of what can be laughed at¹⁹.

Interestingly, despite having previously worked as a comedian, President Zelensky avoids telling jokes or publishing funny memes during the war. It was apparently considered that as president of a belligerent state he must be perceived as a serious person.

¹⁸ R. Lazna, op. cit.

¹⁹ S. Maksymiv, *How Humor Helps Ukrainians Withstand War Atrocities*, <https://ukraineworld.org/en/articles/opinions/how-humor-helps-ukrainians> (07.10.2023).

Catchy and humorous memes, pictures, and slogans are directed both inward (increasing the sense of strength and confidence in the Ukrainian army and society by showing that the image of the Russian army as invincible and powerful is just a myth) and outwards, to the invaders (undermining their morale and confidence) and the international community (arousing sympathy for the fighting nation and supporting the official Ukrainian narrative on the international stage). Messaging systems operated by the government push a consistent narrative in which they portray Vladimir Putin and his army as a waning power.

One has to agree with Ukrainian psychologist Hanna Hromowa, who says: “Humour in wartime is a coping mechanism to deal with stress, fear, and the aggression that has accumulated within us. If you can't go out and fight the Russians, telling jokes is, in a sense, a way of fulfilling those desires”²⁰.

The use of humour as a weapon online is further evidence of the pervasiveness of the Ukrainian defence. Indeed, everyone is tweeting, from the leaders through civilians to soldiers in the trenches. Websites such as Ukrainian Memes Forces create a reservoir of propaganda content that is then widely distributed.

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²⁰ *Psycholog o czarnym humorze na wojnie: Sposób na radzenie sobie ze strachem*, 2022, <https://www.tvp.info/61141104/wojna-na-ukrainie-psycholog-o-czarnym-humorze-to-sposob-na-radzenie-sobie-ze-strachem>, (02.10.2023).

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