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From an Art Form to a Weapon – Pranksters

The art form of impersonating others is not exempt from this trend and has been incorporated into the soft-power arsenal. This precise and meticulously chosen tool for conducting information attacks may be far more effective than simple hard power: it can affect millions, discredit influential people, and split societies into factions based on the behaviour, speeches, and expressions of public figures. For example, if the prime minister of a neighbouring country expresses an opinion on sensitive issues in an official statement about upcoming events in the country, it could lead to the loss of population trust in that leader and, simultaneously, leave the message open to competing interpretations. One of the lesser-known tools for conducting information attacks in the Russian soft power arsenal is telephone trolling by pranksters. Thus, like a chef de cuisine, Russia's political-military establishment is searching for recipes to prepare meals for the 'public's eyes and minds. What would be the most suitable ingredients to prepare a popular dish? How should the final product be delivered? Who should be the target audience? Will it be aimed at a domestic audience or directed abroad (for example, at neighbouring countries and/or other regions and continents)? Ingredients for the dish might be personal dissenting opinions of influential politicians, famous actors, etc. The careful selection of targets and the use of different methods to extract information by provoking a target person allow attackers to obtain sensitive material and then build campaigns to publicise such information or to use it in subtle geopolitical games. These operations can play a crucial role in influencing people – such as a targeted country's political leaders and influential celebrities – to steer an ongoing process in a desired direction.

Keywords

joke, telephone hooliganism, prankster, information attack, Russian Federation, soft power arsenal

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Introduction

Until 2024, influencing other countries through the use of hard power, mainly the military force, was relatively uncommon. In the author's opinion, one of the explanations for why military interventions have become less popular in the last 50 years is the difficulty a nation faces in fighting battles outside its own territory. A second reason is the following: hard power has become less popular due to its obvious and severe consequences for societies. For example, using military force to convince someone to change their mind leaves ruins, causes deaths and injuries, and triggers influxes of migration. By contrast, soft power primarily targets people's mindsets and approaches to certain processes'. The term "soft power" was coined by Harvard University professor Joseph S. JR. Nye in 1990; he defined soft power as the ability of a country to influence other countries by attraction and persuasion rather than by coercion. According to Nye (2004, p. 5), a country may obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries – admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness – want to follow it. In this sense, it is also important to set the agenda and attract others in world politics, not only to force them to change by threatening military force or economic sanctions. This soft power – getting others to want the outcomes that you want – co-opts people rather than coerces them. Soft power rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others. Although recent events in the world, such as the ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine since 2014 and the Iran–Israel conflict in 2025, show that hard power is re-emerging, it appears to be a renaissance of an older instrument in international relations. The growing ambitions of the Russian Federation in the political arena arguably began with Vladimir Putin's speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007 – a speech driven by nostalgia for the Soviet Union's superpower status, which later manifested as aggressive behaviour in international relations. The art form of impersonating others is not exempt from this trend and has been incorporated into the soft-power arsenal. This precise and meticulously chosen tool for conducting information attacks may be far more effective than simple hard power: it can affect millions, discredit influential people, and split societies into factions based on the behaviour, speeches, and expressions of public figures. For example, if the prime minister of a neighbouring country expresses an opinion on sensitive issues in an official statement about upcoming events in the

country, it could lead to the loss of population trust in that leader and, at the same time, leave the message open to competing interpretations. One of the lesser-known tools for conducting information attacks in the Russian soft power arsenal is telephone trolling by pranksters. Thus, like a chef de cuisine, Russia's political-military establishment is searching for recipes to prepare meals for the 'public's eyes and minds. What would be the most suitable ingredients to prepare a popular dish? How should the final product be delivered? Who should be the target audience? Will it be aimed at a domestic audience or directed abroad (for example, at neighbouring countries and/or other regions and continents)? Ingredients for the dish might be personal dissenting opinions of influential politicians, famous actors, etc. (Buciunas, 2021, pp. 373–397). The careful selection of targets and the use of different methods to extract information by provoking a target person allow attackers to obtain sensitive material and then build campaigns to publicize such information or to use it in subtle geopolitical games. These operations can play a crucial role in influencing people — such as a targeted country's political leaders and influential celebrities — to steer an ongoing process in a desired direction.'

1. Methodology

The research paper is divided into 12 sections, starting with an introduction and ending with a reference list. The structure of the work is as follows:

- The first/introductory section presents the concept of the research paper.
- The second section presents the methodology, the topic of the study, the purpose of the research, and the methods used.
- The third section presents the concept of a joke and its transformation from a literary genre to a powerful tool for information campaigns both inside and outside a country to achieve ideological objectives and obtain valuable political information.
- The fourth section presents the genesis of jester activity from the Middle Ages to 1917 in the Russian Empire and other countries located on different continents.
- The fifth section describes the transformation of a joke from a literary genre to a propaganda tool and a source of insight into life behind the 'Iron Curtain' during the existence of the Soviet Union.

- The sixth and seventh sections analyse telephone hooligans as predecessors of modern pranksters and the evolution of prankster activity in the Russian Federation after the dissolution of the Soviet Union on 26 December 1991 and up to 2014.

- The eighth section is dedicated to analysing trends in prankster activities in the Russian Federation after Ukraine's Revolution of Dignity in February 2014.

- The ninth section of this research paper presents a detailed analysis of real situational events regarding the *modus operandi* of Russian pranksters and their activities in gathering information of political or military value.

- The tenth section of this work aims to stimulate discussion among the intelligence community and academics about intelligence and prankster activity and to explore the topic of unwitting and intentional espionage.

- The eleventh and twelfth sections present the conclusions of this research paper and the list of references.

This article analyses the genesis of the joke as a literary genre performed by jokers from the Middle Ages to the present day and its transformation into a method for collecting sensitive information from political leaders and influential people in foreign countries through well-prepared and meticulously planned operations conducted by pranksters from the Russian Federation –the prankster as part of the Russian Federation's soft-power arsenal, used to influence foreign policy'. Firstly, to achieve the objective of this research, the author presents the concept of the joke as a soft-power tool to understand how the art, namely the joke, might be used as a weapon in today's realities. Secondly, the prankster's evolution from the jester is explored, providing readers with a full picture of the joke's transformation – from the simple telling of amusing stories and the jester's role in conveying unwelcome news to rulers, to the joke's use as a powerful instrument for extracting valuable political information from high-ranking politicians and influential celebrities, mainly in Western countries, for later exploitation by the Russian Federation in the political arena. Finally, the practical part of this work presents an analysis of situational events through the prism of the *modus operandi* of two notorious Russian pranksters who targeted foreign politicians and celebrities and managed to extract information of political or military value, including their perspectives on sensitive topics related mainly to the aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine.

The article contributes to academic research by introducing the joke as a literary genre and detailing its transformation from an entertainment device into a tool of foreign policy.

The methodological basis of this research paper includes general scientific and special research methods, enabling a presentation of the evolution of performance from the Middle Ages to the present and showing how telephone hooliganism was used to collect sensitive information from political leaders and influential celebrities who opposed Russian foreign policy. The main methods used are systematic, historical, descriptive, and comparative approaches, as well as content analysis of selected situational events in the global political arena, starting from the first phase of the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine from 2014 and its continued aggression to the present day – 2025.

The author presents a literature overview and the sources used for the analysis of the topic of this work separately in each section of this research paper.

2. A Joke as a Tool for a Soft-Power Arsenal

Taiwanese writer and social activist Yang Kui (2014, p. 87) states that a work of literature is, at root, the manifestation of its author's thoughts and feelings. The only purpose of structure and description is to make as vivid and lively as possible the expression of these thoughts and feelings (the subject matter). Therefore, one should choose their material based on its effectiveness in bringing the subject matter to life. All descriptions of the physical world and character psychology should have closely connected to the subject matter, too. We must be clear on this point: the subject is what we try to convey to the reader, and the source material, the portrayal of characters, and the description of scenery all serve to bring the subject to life. Works of pure literature that have flooded the market and that we have grown sick of have lost their appeal because the authors have forgotten this fundamental purpose of art. Legend, saga, myth, riddle, saying, case, memory, fairy tale, joke – Dutch literary scholar André Jolles (2017) understands each of these 'simple forms' as the reflection in language of a distinct mode of human engagement with the world and thus as a basic structuring principle of literary narrative. A joke is a humorous word, sentence, or action intended to provoke laughter and is not meant to be taken

seriously. A joke is usually told as a story, often with dialogue, ending in a punch line. It is the punch line that is the main point of the joke – the element that makes the audience laugh and reveals another meaning of the situation or dialogue. This is often achieved through puns, irony, lack of logic or other forms. Probably, there is no region in the world where jokes cannot be found in life and in literature (Jolles, 2017, pp. 42–47, 192–201).

According to André Jolles, the joke is one of the oldest genres of oral literature and is often anonymous. Jokes are told both privately and publicly – a joke can be told by a friend to another friend during ordinary conversation, and at the same time, jokes can form part of a special public performance. Jokes persist in written form and, more recently, on the internet. When telling jokes, stage comedians use certain rules for timing, rhythm, and precision in their performances, making audiences laugh with both words and actions (Jolles, 2017, pp. 192–201). This is illustrated by the popular saying by Ed Wynn, an American actor and comedian, ‘A comic says funny things. A comedian says things funny.’

Leyla Önen (2021, pp. 131–147), in her academic paper ‘Soviet Art Movements between 1917–1990’, wrote that according to Vladimir Lenin, founder of the Soviet Union, art should serve the people and the working class. V. Lenin argued that art belongs to the people and must serve the working class by revealing people’s feelings and thoughts. Art propaganda, which was created based on these thoughts, was instrumental in achieving unity and solidarity in society, exemplified in the ‘one heart, one fist’ idea. This can be considered a philosophical justification for using art as soft power in both domestic and international domains to achieve geostrategic and tactical objectives.

The use of military hard power is not popular even nowadays; there are many explanations for this. In the author’s opinion, one of the reasons why military interventions have become less popular in the last 50 years is the unwillingness of nations to fight battles outside their territory. Are soldiers and military commanders psychologically ready to sacrifice their lives for the greater good? The Winter War in Finland in 1939 and the Soviet–Afghan War in 1979–1989 did not go very well for the Soviet Union. Russian people would fight to the death to protect the Motherland and their families, but if they do not believe in the cause, that level of determination may be absent (Buciunas, 2021, pp. 373–397). On the other hand, glorifying military victories on the battlefield and successful intelligence operations are powerful

instruments for mobilising a country's population or distracting their attention from the painful domestic issues, such as poverty and endemic corruption. This can be achieved through the cinematic arts and different genres of literature, which can be potent tools in a country's soft-power arsenal. An inspiring film or novel can affect millions of souls and minds, especially those who are young and impressionable. Political and business leaders must take decisive action to maintain the population's trust if they wish to remain in power. How should the final product be delivered? Who is the target audience? Is the film intended only for the country's own population, or will it reach the neighbouring countries or even other continents? Could the components include the country's history, the achievements of its citizens in the fields of science or the arts, or the country's victorious military battles or secret intelligence operations both abroad and inside the territory of the country in the past? What would be the right blend of these elements to produce the desired effect? Soft power makers deploy an increasing variety of tools in their soft-power weaponry arsenal, and literature is not no exception. Increasingly, literary works are being used as instruments of soft power. It is regrettable that literature and art — creative expression in visual or textual form — are becoming more prevalent in political fights, geopolitical games, and intelligence operations (Buciunas, 2021, pp. 373-397).

The National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation, approved by Decree No. 400 of the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, on 2 July 2021, in the chapter on 'Information security', point 57, states that the goal of information security is achieved through the implementation of public policies aimed at addressing the following objectives: 10) the development of the forces and means of information warfare. The above-mentioned stance of the Russian Federation on information warfare highlights the importance of soft-power weaponry in modern times.

To sum it up, soft-power weaponry ranges from different tools, such as political statements, which might lead to the fluctuation of prices for some raw materials in the world market, to the creation of films, literature, or political cartoons that use humour as an effective weapon to influence the country's population, victimise certain individuals, or collect valuable information for intelligence agencies and for political decision makers.

3. The Jester's Evolution – from the Middle Ages to 1917

This paper presents the prankster's evolution from the jester. The Britannica Dictionary states that a jester is a man who, in the past, was kept by a ruler to amuse people by acting silly and telling jokes. Jesters entertained with a wide variety of skills, such as storytelling and telling jokes, including puns and imitation. Much of the entertainment was done in a comedic style. Similar descriptions of a joker or a jester can be found in other dictionaries, encyclopaedias, and the research papers of scientists such as B. Otto, C. Littlechild, J. Euchner, and J. Doran.

Someone may confuse a jester with a fool, but they are not the same; a fool cannot become a jester, but a jester can act like a fool. In fact, jesters were often highly intelligent entertainers (Doran, 2019, pp. 1–231). Nobody ever took jesters seriously or saw them as a threat, and because of that, jesters could see and hear things others could not and then report on those things to their patron. Jesters were often from a lower-class background; they had a different perspective on things that could also be useful in an environment where almost everyone else would only tell you what they thought you wanted to hear. This leads us to wonder whether jesters were the ears of the rulers.

Some noblemen and kings during the Middle Ages had at least one person in their entourage/staff who would always tell them the truth, no matter what. At the same time, a jester's performance was an indicator of how some social groups or individuals responded to jokes, and jesters even used their talents to deliver bad news to the ruler of the country. For example, in 1340, King Philippe VI's French fleet was destroyed in a battle with the British navy, and his jester was tasked with bringing the King the news. The jester, carefully considering his delivery, told him, 'They don't even have the guts to jump into the water like our brave French.' Here is one example of the true role of a jester (Littlechild, 2024). Another similar case is mentioned in the book *Fools are Everywhere: The Court Jester around the World*, written by Beatrice Otto and published in 2001. According to the book, in 1386, the Duke of Austria, Leopold the Pious, planned to attack Switzerland, but before beginning the war, he asked his jester for his opinion on attacking the Swiss. The name of the personal jester of the Duke of Austria was Jenny von Stockach. He reportedly answered the Duke bluntly, 'You fools, you're all debating how to get into the country, but

none of you have thought about how you're going to get out again.' The Duke of Austria ignored his jester and began the war. However, the result of this war wasn't good for Austria, as the army suffered, and a full brigade of knights collapsed from thirst and heat and couldn't even make it to the battlefield (Otto, 2001, pp. 1–420).

According to Diane Rosen, the jester was a personification of a provocateur. By the Middle Ages, the jester had become a familiar figure as a comic entertainer whose madness or imbecility, real or feigned, made him a source of amusement. Historian Jacques Barzun notes that the institution of the king's fool was 'a political device based on sound psychology, as well as ancient religious belief'. Court jesters functioned as traditional political humourists (Rosen, 2012, pp. 31–326).

Jim Euchner (2020, pp. 10–11) states in his work "The Corporate Jester" that in Shakespearean literature, the court jester is the only person who can speak truth to power. It is the jester in *King Lear*, for example, who provides critical insight to the king, and he can do so only because of his special licence to speak freely, even about things the monarch does not want to hear. Jesters were common in medieval courts in Europe and across the globe. Wherever jesters were found, they had remarkably similar roles. As Beatrice Otto notes in *Fools are Everywhere: The Court jester around the World*, 'it is in the nature of jesters to speak their minds when the mood takes them, regardless of the consequences. They are neither calculating nor circumspect, and this may account for the "foolishness" often ascribed to them' (Otto, 2001, p. 245).

Jesters disappeared, however, in the 16th or 17th century in China, and by the 18th century in Europe, for reasons that are still unknown. Court jesters were valuable, and they shone light into corners that were typically very dark under an absolute monarchy. They were able to do so not only because of the permission conferred by the role but also because they made their comments with humour and at the right time and place. Academics like Beatrice Otto (2001) take a strong position: jesters did act as genuine advisors to monarchs despite their lowly status. B. Otto (2001) states that 'of at least equal importance with his entertainer's cap was the jester's function as adviser and critic. This is what distinguishes him from a pure entertainer who would juggle batons, swallow swords, or strum on a lute or a clown who would play the fool simply to amuse people. The jester everywhere employed the same techniques to carry out this delicate role, and it would take an obtuse king or emperor not to realise what he was driving at, since other court functionaries cooked up the king's facts for him before

delivery; the jester delivered them raw. An informal survey of the man in the street has shown that most people will pinpoint the jester's right to speak his mind as one of his salient characteristics.'

B. Otto (2001) notes the particular importance of the court jester as an important advisor not only in Europe but also in China: 'We have seen numerous examples of a jester advising or correcting his monarch, and the recorded instances are particularly abundant in China. The Chinese records give us an idea of just how effective a jester could be in tempering the ruler's excesses.'

Stańczyk (1480–1560) was the most famous Polish court jester. He was employed by three Polish kings: Alexander, Sigismund the Old, and Sigismund Augustus. Stańczyk became a popular historical figure in Polish literature after the partitions of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth that took place towards the end of the 18th century and ended the existence of the state, resulting in the elimination of sovereign Poland and Lithuania for 123 years. Stańczyk was also one of Jan Matejko's favourite historical figures, and he appears in several of his paintings – for example, Stańczyk during a ball at the court of Queen Bona in the face of the loss of Smolensk (Websites of Polish History and Polish Art Center).

Jesters entertained not only European kings but also the nobility. They were popular among the Russian czars and emperors, too. Many folk rituals performed during the Christmas, Maslenitsa, and Ivan Kupala Night holidays aimed to confuse or scare away evil spirits in medieval Russia. Such performances also included entertaining acts from musicians, acrobats, jesters, and singers. The most popular entertainment genre at the time in Russia was folk comedy. Boyars, royals, and government officials hired talented folk jesters to permanently live and work in their homes. The hired performers acted as court jesters, entertaining the nobles and their guests. Court jesters appeared in Russian public life under Ivan the Terrible. It is possible that the first Russian czar tried to imitate Henry VIII (1491–1547), at whose court the jesters lived (Manaev, 2022).

Although some boundaries were set by some influential social groups and institutions in Russia, not everyone was pleased with the performers, since their antics often contradicted the traditional Russian way of life. The Orthodox Church eventually condemned the wearing of immodest clothing and proceeded to persecute many of the folk artists. This paved the way for censorship of content and the essence of performance, including jokes. Russian history witnessed the

killing of jesters for performing unacceptable jokes. Historian Nikolay Karamzin reports that, 'dissatisfied with some joke, the czar (author's note: the first Moscow czar, Ivan the Terrible) poured a bowl of hot soup over him. The poor jester yelled and wanted to flee: Ivan then stabbed him with his knife.' The English doctor who was summoned declared the death of Gvozdev, the jester, to which the czar shook his head and called the dead jester a disgraceful dog (Manaev, 2022). Even in Peter's Russia, jesters continued to live with the Russian nobility and the czars. In total, in Moscow in 1710, there were 34 domestic jesters (Manaev, 2022). However, until the end of the 17th century, Russian culture was under the Orthodox Church's influence of extreme ascetic distaste for the things of the world. That may be the reason why jesters turned to the musician's direction (Manaev, 2022). Western influence on different aspects of Russian life has been steadily growing from the 17th century and has touched different areas, from industry to culture. The theatre as a fundamental part of culture was a foreign seed in Russia, and it acquired a professional face during the 17th century. By decree of Alexei Mikhailovich, the czar of all Russia, who reigned from 1645 until his death in 1676, a Lutheran pastor named Gregory founded the Imperial Theatre, recruited a group of talented artists, and began to teach them short comedies (Kelly, 1999, pp. 18–40).

So, can be concluded that actors performing jokes in comedies were in high demand.

Due to different sources of financing, we can distinguish the Imperial Theatres of the Russian Empire, financed by the Imperial exchequer and managed by a single directorate headed by a courtier director. Imperial Theatres functioned as prominent showpieces of Tsarist propaganda (Frame, 1994, pp. 164–191). Private and public theatres were funded mostly by private founders. However, despite the source of income, according to the 1843 regulations, a private theatre could be organised only with the permission of the Directorate of the Ministry of the Imperial Court and Appanages of the Russian Empire (Frame, 1994, pp. 164–191). So, it can be concluded that Tsarist Russia controlled the cultural life of its citizens and presented Tsarist propaganda.

4. Transformation of a Joke into Propaganda and a Source of Valuable Information

The Bolsheviks who came to power in 1917 were in no hurry to abandon theatrical art, and the repertoire was completely revised. The Soviet government focused on the propaganda of ideas of collectivism and supported the development of art in this direction, with some genres removed and new ones added. The heroes in the different genres were stories about ordinary Soviet people, the so-called proletarians, while alcoholics and other anti-Soviet figures were portrayed with much satire in the role of antagonists. Satire and comedy remained popular. One of the prominent figures of such productions in this genre was the director-producer, Vsevolod Meyerhold. By adding humour and satire to classical works, V. Meyerhold turned them into spectacular performances relevant to his audience. He soon became known for his propaganda performances (Braun, 1995, pp. 1–313).

According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, works in print, such as the press, advertisements, product labels, and books, were censored by Glavlit, an agency established on 6 June 1922. Censorship was also applied to all genres of art, including the repertoire of satirical plays and comedies, which leads us to conclude that the actors performing jokes were forced to participate in Soviet propaganda. After Joseph Stalin came to power, the theatre, including jokes, began to ridicule everything related to the West, but it was forbidden to parody USSR officials and party workers. Despite the strict censorship in the Soviet Union, the joke, one of the oldest genres of oral literature and often anonymous, obtain a second life and went underground (Chamberlin, 1959, pp. 27–34). William Henry Chamberlin (1959, pp. 27–34), in his article 'The "Anecdote": Unrationed Soviet Humour', wrote that humour in official Soviet publications was rationed, controlled, and directed. Anecdotes began to crop up as soon as the Soviet regime was established, and the freedom of the press was taken under strict control. The number of jokes told was greater, and the telling more open, in the later years of the Soviet regime rather than in the earlier years of terror and extreme hardship, especially during J. Stalin's rule from 1924 to 1953. Even though jokes have always saved people from difficult experiences and absurd government decisions, an anecdote, a sharp and timely phrase, or a political couplet could land you in Siberia. An example of one of these jokes is 'The greatest gardener in the Soviet Union is J. Stalin. He keeps planting and planting.' This joke about

J. Stalin could be recognised as an assault on the leader's life. It leads to another joke that the Lubyanka (KGB headquarters in Moscow) is the tallest building in the Soviet Union, with a view of Siberia from its basement window (Važgauskaitė, 2019).

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, the term 'anecdote' means a short, often funny story, especially about something someone has done. Another meaning of the term 'anecdote' is a brief story. In casual speech, anecdotes are often shared among friends and family members. For example, there is a joke about the names of the two main leading newspapers in the Soviet Union, 'Izvestiya' (in English 'News') and 'Pravda' (in English 'Truth') – the joke is that 'there is no news in "Truth", and there is no truth in "News"' (Chamberlin, 1959, pp. 27–34).

There are also some illicit jokes about real events that occurred in the Soviet Union – for example, 'People complain to Nikita Khrushchev (author's note: the head of the Soviet Union during 1953–1964) that there is nothing to eat, and he responds: "We are going to communism. When we go, nobody eats"' (Važgauskaitė, 2019).

The jokes were also an indicator of the real feelings of the Soviet citizens towards some issues, events, and decisions of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, despite the censorship and strict control from the Secret Service of the Soviet Union and the Communist Party itself. This served as a source of information for Western countries and their societies about what was happening behind the Iron Curtain. According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, the Iron Curtain is the political, military, and ideological barrier erected by the Soviet Union after World War II to seal off itself and its dependent eastern and central European allies from open contact with the West and other non-communist areas. The term Iron Curtain has been in occasional and varied use as a metaphor since the 19th century, but it came to prominence only after it was used by former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill in a speech in Fulton, Missouri, the US, on 5 March 1946.

So, the number of jokes was a product of the extent of political control, not its intensity. At the same time, jokes – namely political jokes about the Soviet Union, KGB, leaders and their decisions, communist ideology, and the shortage of basic products – coming from common people were an excellent indicator of the real feelings, expectations, dreams, and worries of the Soviet citizens. Censorship was applied to all genres of art, including a repertoire of satirical plays, comedies, and even jokes.

5. A Telephone Hooligan as a Predecessor of a Prankster

Another type of joke that became popular during the dissolution of the Soviet regime was the so-called 'telephone hooliganism', which may have been one of the first indications of the prankster's development. Psychologists say there is a child in each of us who is responsible for creativity, spontaneity, and the ability to enjoy little things. Back in the Soviet era, children used to ring doorbells and run away, hiding in entrances and waiting for the person's irritated reaction. This prank was fun and gave the perpetrators a rush of adrenaline, especially when the tenant ran out of the flat or burst into anger. The presence of landline telephones then brought a new type of joke called 'telephone hooliganism'. It may be considered the predecessor of the modern prank. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, a prank is a trick that is intended to be funny but not to cause harm or damage. The Britannica Dictionary states that a prank is a trick that is done to someone, usually as a joke. In Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, a prank is a trick that is played on someone as a joke. In English, the term 'prank' is used synonymously with 'practical joke'. According to the Russian dictionary, Bab.la, the word 'prank' might be translated into such words as anecdote, crack, fun, funny story, gag, game, jape, jest, jocularly, joke. Also, in Russian linguistic culture, the word 'prank' relates specifically to telephone pranking. Comparing the content and scope of the Russian-language notion of 'prank' and the English-language term 'prank', it should be said that in Russian, 'prank' was originally related to phone trolling/mocking, and in English, to simply a joke not intended to cause harm or damage (Чернова/Chernova, 2016, pp. 189–198). According to the Cambridge Dictionary, a 'prank call' is a telephone call in which the caller pretends to be someone they are not, or says something that is not true, usually as a joke. The word 'prank' appears along with the latter. Initially, the term 'prank' meant only pranks on the phone – for example, calling one number several times and asking a completely different person until the caller loses his or her temper (Чернова/Chernova, 2016, pp. 189–198).

The telephone prank appeared almost as soon as humans invented the telephone. There is even speculation that the first pranksters were employees of the Bell Telephone Company (Garber, 2014). With the invention of the telephone, and its availability and accessibility for a

limited number of Soviet Union citizens, mainly children came up with the fun hooliganism of making phone calls and jokes. During the Soviet era, only a limited number of citizens had phone lines at home (Kleberg, 2012, pp. 18–24). Soviet pranksters would look for potential targets, but how did they find victims for their entertainment? The answer is simple: phone directories. Phone directories were released in each city, including big megalopolises such as Moscow, Saint Petersburg (formerly known as Leningrad), regional centres, and districts, and they contained details such as names, surnames, addresses, and phone numbers. However, thousands of diplomats, journalists, and businesspeople from foreign countries living in the Soviet Union were omitted from the listings, presumably in keeping with Soviet policy intended to isolate foreign residents as much as possible from ordinary Soviet citizens (Shabad, 1973).

Openly accessible phone directories became the main source of information and entry point for telephone hooligans – predecessors of modern pranksters – to plan further actions against the target, who was selected at random. The reasons for choosing the target varied, from having a funny-sounding surname to blindly picking up the phone number in the directory. Especially popular became those who reacted aggressively to phone calls and used rude words. The topics for such a conversation were varied, and the main objective was to affect a person's emotional status and get a heated response. For example, during the Soviet times, one of the topics that triggered a person's reaction was related to the shortage of hot water. The following scenario might be an excellent example:

Late in the evenings, during wintertime, many people would come back to their homes from work or school. Some of them had also spent long hours in queues waiting to buy consumer goods and food in shops. They were tired of the shortages of everything and not having hot water to wash themselves, or even any water at all. Suddenly, their phone would ring, and someone on the other end of the line would greet them with, 'Good evening, Mr. Dmytro. We're your new neighbours and we would like to know if you have hot water.' Further development of the conversation depended on the answer. If the answer was 'Yes, we have hot water', it would lead to the following punchline: 'So, wash your feet and go to bed.' If the target's reaction to the question was more violent, especially accompanied by rude words, the pranksters would have achieved their aim, and there was a high probability of the individual becoming a repeated target. This type

of joke might also be called a 'verbal prank'. For Soviet pranksters, respecting the law and personal boundaries wasn't a concern, but they knew they could not make political jokes that targeted the Soviet system and leadership of the Communist Party (Чернова/Chernova, 2016, pp. 189–198).

The same *modus operandi* might be used for other reasons, including checking if there was someone at home or in a workplace, in order to commit unlawful actions, such as theft, against the target person's assets and property – although this is not the object of this academic research. Telephone pranks were also reflected in the products of mass Soviet culture. The most memorable telephone prank in Soviet cinema was performed by the artist Leonid Kuravlyov, who played a thief named George Miloslavsky in the 1973 movie *Ivan Vassilyevich Changes Occupation* (12:08–14:25, available on YouTube). By imitating a woman's voice, the thief found out how long the dentist, Shpak, would be out so that he could clean out (steal some goods) the flat before Shpak returned.

During the Soviet times, few people dared to prank responsible persons, such as leaders of the Communist Party, including regional and local officials from law enforcement agencies and the Soviet Committee for State Security (hereinafter referred to as the 'KGB'). The main barrier to pranking the above-mentioned officials was the fear of facing criminal liability. People's memories are still vivid, and they remember life under Stalin's rule, with repression among Soviet citizens and imprisonment for long years in Siberia, just for a simple joke about the ruler of the country.

So, the key to avoiding the negative consequences of telephone trolling or making jokes lay in the creativity of the joke or prank creator, in the essence and content of the joke, and the next important point to avoid negative consequences was the proper selection of a target person to play a prank on.

Despite strict control of different genres of oral or written literature by repressive structures of the Soviet regime, practical jokers masterfully used the opportunity to play pranks and jokes on 1 April – April Fools' Day – celebrated around the world, even in the Soviet Union. In fact, April Fools' Day is widely celebrated in Odessa and has had the special local name 'Humorina' since 1973.

When Mikhail Gorbachev became the leader of the Soviet Union, he brought new changes in political, cultural, and economic areas. In May 1985, two months after coming to power, Mikhail Gorbachev

delivered a speech in Saint Petersburg on the inefficient economic system of the Soviet Union, making him the first Communist leader to criticise the Soviet model of economy. In February 1986, Mikhail Gorbachev delivered a speech to the Communist Party Congress, in which he drew the attention of the participants to the need for political and economic restructuring (in Russian it was called 'perestroika') and announced the start of a new era of transparency and openness (in Russian 'glasnost'). M. Gorbachev launched the glasnost campaign, and the Soviet Government developed an information policy which promised nothing less than 'freedom of the spoken and printed word...a real socialist pluralism of opinions...the open exchange of ideas and interests' and 'legal guarantees for the rights of the minority'. The first objective of the glasnost campaign was to restore the balance between the 'positive' and 'critical' dimensions of glasnost as defined by V. Lenin (McNair, 2006, pp. 1–201). While the propagandising of positive economic and social phenomena remained an important function of the Soviet media, they were now called upon to engage in genuine criticism, including self-criticism. The first blow to 'critical' glasnost was an article published in Pravda on 13 February 1986 about the sensitive issue of Party privilege (McNair, 2006, p. 44). Glasnost also had an impact on art development and led to fewer restrictions and less control from repressive institutions on the content of different forms of art, including literature. So, it created a domino effect on different genres of literature through step-by-step changes in repertoire, essence, and content, including the joke.

Before, nobody recorded the telephone trolling process on tape, and no one transmitted it openly. According to Meduza, the Russian and English-language independent news website, in 1989, the phone rang in the apartment of the Muscovite Aleksandr Bogomolov, a former employee at a computer centre. The first caller was Yaroslav, a first-year student at the Moscow Technological University, who was once called A. Bogomolov by accident, and when his friend met a woman named Katya on the street, she gave him her phone number, but he misremembered it. The recorded call with A. Bogomolov – whose decades-long victimisation made him a cult figure in Russia's prank-caller community – is considered the first documented prank phone call in Russia (also in the former Soviet Union). At first, they recorded it on an Electronica-302 tape recorder. The first ten calls came out on a special cassette 'album', which passed through many hands. A. Bogomolov's phone number was listed on the tape (Meduza, 2016).

An analysis of the presented examples of telephone trolling in academic papers mentioned above shows that the telephone hooligans' activity during the Soviet era had the following objectives:

1. To entertain themselves and laugh at the reactions of the targeted person
2. To embarrass the telephone interlocutor
3. To experience vivid, positive, and funny emotions
4. To provoke negative emotions in the target person
5. To provoke the target person to use rude words and expressions
6. To engage in conversations on various topics without critiquing the Soviet political system
7. To select target persons for such activity randomly from telephone directories

Therefore, it leads to the conclusion that the so-called Soviet pranksters or telephone hooligans primarily used jokes, or verbal pranks, for entertainment during the Soviet times. Pranksters were mainly children who were having fun and were entertained by other people's emotions. Perestroika and glasnost, launched in 1985–1986 by the leader of the Soviet Union, M. Gorbachev, affected different forms of art and genres of literature, including jokes.

6. The Genesis of Prankster Activity in the Russian Federation after the Dissolution of the Soviet Union on 26 December 1991 and up to 2014

Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika loosened the strict controls of communist rule, allowing greater freedom of expression and introducing political pluralism. The collapse of the Soviet Union affected every aspect of Russian culture. The wind of change swept through each corner of social life, including culture. The entertainment industry, including jokes as a genre of oral literature, gained almost unlimited freedom of expression. Omnipresent censorship, as one of the main traits of the Soviet regime, disappeared without a trace. Boris Yeltsin, the first elected president of the Russian Federation, went much further in political reform, introducing Western democratic institutions and principles, which were codified in the new constitution of the Russian Federation adopted in 1993.

Observing and analysing the above-mentioned reforms in the

former Soviet Union and the establishment of the independent state – the Russian Federation – as the successor of the Soviet Union, we can witness a correlation between the political system, the existence of democratic institutes and freedom of expression, and the boundaries of self-expression in different genres of oral and written literature.

Joking, as a universal form of human expression and a form of entertainment, and as one of the literary genres, obtained new life and transformed into different types of jokes. Jokes can be spoken – during a stand-up routine, for example – or written down in comedy writing, poetry, and even song lyrics. Comedy clubs, comedy theatres, and TV shows appeared in Russia like mushrooms after a rain. Different types of jokes, such as observational, anecdotal, situational, one-line, and ironic, penetrated TV and radio stations, theatre, and concert halls.

So, bread and circuses became a reality for most people in many post-Soviet countries, including the Russian Federation.

The author of this academic paper is going to analyse the development of joke culture through the prism of the prankster genesis in Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union on 26 December 1991, the start of the era of the presidency of B. Yeltsin, and the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine in 2014.

By the late 1990s, Russia had made a decisive shift towards a market economy, although politically and socially, the dominance of the state fluctuated from liberal during B. Yeltsin's presidency to strict control under V. Putin's presidency. Many Russians, like citizens of independent countries in Eastern Europe – the former backyard of the Soviet Union – faced hardships in daily life: high unemployment rate, inflation, rising criminality, growing corruption, etc. The state relied on national television channels as an invaluable political resource. All TV stations, radio, and other media outlets were owned by the state, and only toward the end of the Soviet Union did private media outlets, like magazines and newspapers, started to appear in the mass media field. Russia wasn't exempt from these processes. NTV was the first privately owned television channel in Russia, launched in 1994 following approval by B. Yeltsin's presidential decree. Later, privately owned TV stations and radio stations appeared in different regions of the Russian Federation, stretching from the Kaliningrad region in the West to the Primorsky region in the Russian Far East (Lipman, 2009).

According to M. Lipman (2009), television was instrumental in B. Yeltsin's 1996 election victory over Gennady Zyuganov, a popular communist challenger; it played an equally crucial role four years

later, when the incumbent elites put up V. Putin himself as a status quo candidate against their political rivals. National TV stations effectively shaped public opinion by boosting, playing down, or ignoring any figure or event.

The first and most important objective of a private business organisation is typically to generate profits for its owners or shareholders. Private TV and radio stations aren't exempt from this business rule. This leads to competition for the audience with the aim of taking a share of the market and advertising services, programs, and talk shows on different topics through airing them to customers and efficiently managing resources. Producers of TV or radio talk shows try to attract audiences to their programs by launching new projects, including performances conducted by radio hosts and comedians. Some radio hosts call unsuspecting participants at random, aiming for spontaneous conversation, but with a scenario prepared in advance. All conversations with a target person are aired to the audience in real time. In some cases, prank phone calls are staged and involve the target person in creating humorous scenarios, as recording or airing a telephone call without informing the person on the other end is illegal in many countries. This obligates the hosts of radio shows to get consent or at least inform the individuals involved after the fact. This approach helps avoid potential legal litigation and minimises the risk of distress for those being pranked. Some comedians and hosts manage to attract numerous audiences and, at the same time, earn money from advertising services during a program/show.

The author of this academic paper is only going to analyse the verbal joke, which is different from a 'practical' joke, which implies an 'action' element, namely the performance of some physical acts for the purpose of amusement – for example, when a prankster pretends to be a statue and suddenly starts to move towards approaching people. It might cause the victim to experience embarrassment, perplexity, confusion, or discomfort.

April Fools' Day became the peak day of the year for a surge in the number of pranks conducted within one day. According to the poll results published on TASS, the Russian state-owned news agency website, around 79% of Russians have been pranked on April Fools' Day by someone close to them at some stage in their lives. On April Fool's Day, 48% play jokes on their friends and relatives, while 40% do. People aged 55 and older are more likely to play jokes on this day. The overwhelming majority of Russians (96%) like funny content,

including memes and joke videos. Thus, 53% often watch humorous content, 36% sometimes watch humorous content, and 8% rarely watch humorous content. According to the results of the poll, most respondents (58%) think that there is enough humorous content on the internet today. The poll was conducted by the Dialogue Regions non-profit organisation on 20 March 2024, using the River Sampling method on 1,200 respondents aged 18 and over.

The development of new communication technologies and wide accessibility to the internet brought pranking to another level. It opened an enormous field for prank activity by both ordinary people and influential figures, such as businessmen, politicians, celebrities from the fashion world, famous actors, and pop stars. It led to the word 'prank' becoming widely known because stories about successful pranksters were then covered on the radio and TV stations, and they appeared on the first pages of newspapers or magazines, on social media, and on internet platforms. Pranksters were invited to lead different show programs, mainly light-hearted ones with a lot of fun elements, but at the same time, their pranks served as an indicator of society's needs and a reflection of the political processes ongoing within the Russian Federation. Some pranksters became influential figures at local and regional levels or even became internationally well-known. For example, Vovan and Lexus (real names Vladimir Kuznetsov and Aleksey Stolyarov) are Russia's most prominent political pranksters with a regular media presence (Kornilova & Kuznetsov, 2020, pp. 94–102).

The expression 'give them bread and circuses, and they will never revolt', formulated by the Roman poet Juvenal (circa 55–127 AD), remains relevant today. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, the phrase 'bread and circuses' refers to activities or official plans intended to keep people happy and prevent them from noticing or complaining about problems. The activities of pranksters that we observe are in line with V. Putin's policy regarding the media's role in the state. In a political context, the phrase means to generate public approval, not through excellence in public service or policy, but through diversion, distraction, or by satisfying the most immediate or basic needs of a populace, namely: food (bread) or entertainment (circuses). When V. Putin assumed the presidency in 2000, he moved to reassert the authority of the state, which had been weakened during the years of B. Yeltsin's first presidency (Lipman, 2009).

The empirical basis of this academic paper was derived from publicly available information on the internet, namely on social

networks such as YouTube, mass media websites, and academic papers such as Chernova S. V's "'Prank' as a Speech Genre of Entertainment Discourse and Its Cultural Aspect" (in Russian 'Пранк как речевой жанр развлекательного дискурса и его культурологический аспект'), and Stepanov V. N.'s 'Provocative Discourse of Mass Communication' (in Russian 'Провокативный дискурс массовой коммуникации'). These sources provide a comprehensive understanding of how pranksters operate in the Russian Federation and allow us to present seven key observations regarding their activity:

1. Pranksters can be considered a subcultural social group. Like many modern subcultures, they primarily engage in virtual communication and information exchange through dedicated groups, chats on social networks, and online platforms.

2. Pranksters are predominantly young people. They have their own leaders, preferred targets, and psychological techniques designed to remove a target from their comfort zone, eliciting strong emotional responses and potentially causing loss of self-control, including shouting insults and using impolite language or slang. Pranksters also get satisfaction from sharing recordings of a target person's outbursts with an audience.

3. During interactions with their targets, pranksters strive to maintain anonymity for as long as possible, which increases interest in their pranks.

4. With the development of new technologies, pranksters are now widely present on social media platforms such as YouTube, RUTUBE, VKontakte (in Russian 'ВКонтакте') – the social media platform created by P. Durov, founder of the platform 'Telegram', located in Saint Petersburg – as well as other internet platforms.

5. Pranksters create videos and audio recordings for the public to attract attention from audiences and, at the same time, have fun.

6. Pranking is a lucrative business, and pranksters can earn money online through advertising and monetisation based on the number of views on their content. In other words, pranksters are people who make money from other people's emotions.

7. In general, pranksters try to observe ethical norms. For example, it is unacceptable to target disabled individuals, the seriously ill, or children, and they avoid joking about tragic events.

Among many pranksters operating in the Russian Federation, Vovan and Lexus are two of the most widely known. Their rise began in 2011 with pranks related to domestic politics and sports officials.

For example, in 2011, after controversial parliamentary elections in Russia, Vovan telephoned the chairman of Russia's Central Election Commission, Vladimir Churov, introducing himself as Deputy Prime Minister Arkady Dvorkovich and almost convinced V. Churov that President Dmitry Medvedev intended to dismiss him.

In June 2012, Vovan phoned Vitaly Mutko, the Russian Minister of Sports, and persuaded him to apologise for the drunken behaviour of athletes. Other targets were Bulgarian-born Russian pop singer Philipp Kirkorov, a Russian public figure, TV anchor, journalist, socialite and actress Ksenia Sobchak, and Boris Nemtsov, a Russian physicist, liberal politician, and outspoken critic of Vladimir Putin (not once he was targeted by them in 2012).

In 2012, when asked about the purpose of their pranks during an interview with journalists about prankster activity, Vovan replied that the main aim of their prank activity is to expose the officials' true faces. On TV, we only get to see their mask, which has little resemblance to the person behind it. I give that person a chance to show their authentic self (Komsomolskaya Pravda, 2012).

An analysis of information publicly accessible on social media, on internet platforms, shows that pranksters mainly use phone calls to prank someone and air or place the content of a conversation openly. The ideal target person of a 'prank' is, as a rule, an adult person with a choleric temperament, preferably with a low level of emotional intelligence, and with rude and arrogant traits. Temperate people with a good sense of humour rarely become victims of pranks.

The introduction of new communication technology has facilitated the change in how a target person is selected. We can now monitor the process of selecting a defined target person instead of randomly picking target persons from telephone directories. The criteria for selecting someone to prank include a person's position in state service or social status – anything that would attract the attention of society. The main aim of the prank is to provoke a negative reaction and get an emotional rise out of a particular famous person.

7. Tendencies of Prankster Activities in the Russian Federation after Ukraine's Revolution of Dignity in February 2014

You can fool some of the people all of the time and all of the people some of the time. But you can't fool all of the people all of the time.

Abraham Lincoln

Narratives play a central role in communicating international events to the public, mobilising popular support, legitimising foreign policy, and influencing outcomes. Through narratives – stories with a plot that explain political realities, causation, and purpose and are shaped by the interests of those who tell them (Patterson & Monroe, 1998; Subotić, 2016) – political actors construct shared meanings, shape perceptions and behaviour, and compete for credibility. In competitive information environments, politics is ultimately about ‘whose story wins’ (Ronfeld & Arquila, 2020), and international actors seek to maximise the appeal and outreach of their narratives over others. It became crucial in the geopolitical field after the Russian Federation launched the first phase of an aggressive war against Ukraine in 2014. Here's a brief history of it: on 21 November 2013, the Ukrainian government announced its decision to suspend preparations for signing the Association Agreement with the EU. In late November 2013, Ukrainians took to the streets in peaceful protest after then-president Viktor Yanukovich decided not to sign an agreement that would have integrated the country more closely with the European Union. As the protests in Kyiv's Independence Square continued into 2014, the government began cracking down on the demonstrators. The size of the protests grew in reaction and turned into what was termed the ‘Revolution of Dignity’. Those who remained in Kyiv's Independence Square risked assault or unlawful arrest. On 16 January 2014, the government of Ukraine, under the presidency of pro-Russian-oriented president V. Yanukovich, introduced a series of repressive laws severely restricting civil society and the right to protest. On 22 January 2014, the first protesters were killed in clashes in Kyiv, and over 100 mostly civilian protesters died – the majority, though, were killed on 20–21 February 2014. On 22 February 2014, after President

V. Yanukovich had fled the country, parliament voted to oust him and hold new elections. Russia used military power and all available soft-power instruments against Ukraine. This brought new challenges and new trends to the national security agenda in many countries around the world and also affected the activity of pranksters in Russia.

The author of this academic paper will analyse prankster activity in the Russian Federation from February 2014 to September 2024 by constructing a frame based on the modes of persuasion introduced by the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle in his book *Rhetoric*. According to Aristotle, the first three modes of persuasion are ethos, pathos, and logos. The first mode depends on the character of the speaker – in the context of this paper, this refers to the target person. The Greek word ‘pathos’ means ‘suffering’, ‘experience’, or ‘emotion’. As explained by Aristotle, this mode concerns putting the readers/receivers of the message – in the context of this paper, the audience – into a certain frame of mind. In short, the intention is to trigger emotions among readers through a delivered narrative and/or message (Cope, 1867, pp. 1–464). New means of communication, such as the internet, combined with traditional media such as TV, radio, newspapers, and magazines, allow narratives to be spread on the hottest topics in a short period to a wide audience worldwide and to plant seeds of doubt or suspicion in their minds. The most effective way to do that is through statements and interviews conducted by the target people during a prank call. The term ‘logos’, used by Aristotle, in Greek means ‘word’ or ‘reason’, and it refers to appealing to the reason or logic of the audience. Emotions and reason are cognitive resources and are deeply interconnected. Emotion leads to action, and reason leads to conclusions, while some people can be persuaded solely by emotions. Others may feel that someone is trying to deceive them, and therefore need facts to be present. The last mode of persuasion, according to Aristotle, is ‘Kairos’. Webster-Merriam explains the meaning of ‘Kairos’ as a time when conditions are right for the accomplishment of a crucial action.

In the context of this academic paper, it is important to select the hottest social and political topics in the country and region and prank the selected target person at the appropriate time. The individual who is to be in command of the means of effecting persuasion must be able to (1) reason logically, (2) understand human character and goodness in their various forms, and (3) understand emotions – that is, to identify and describe them, know their causes, and understand how they are triggered (Cope, 1867, pp. 1–464). These points can be considered the

main requirements for a prankster's occupation. Pranksters should also have good critical thinking skills that allow them to analyse the facts in the given case, identify the hottest social, cultural and political topics, and interpret obtained information to make decisions.

8. Analysis of Russian Prankster Activities through Real Events

The author of this academic paper is going to analyse the selection criteria for the target persons, the topics of pranks, previous events closely related to such topics the communication methods used to prank target persons, and how pranking activity was used by the Russian Federation on internal and international levels from February 2014 to September 2024. The empirical basis for conducting such an analysis consists of publicly available audio and video recordings and other information about interactions between pranksters and target persons posted in Russian and English language segments of social media platforms, such as YouTube, RUTUBE, Telegram, Rumble (an online video platform), and other online platforms, including the websites of news portals, newspapers, and magazines such as Baltic News Network; The Independent; RBC-Ukraine; New Delhi Television (an Indian news media company); Deutsche Welle (a German multilingual TV news network); CNBC (an American business news channel); The BBC (the British public service broadcaster); The Guardian (a British daily newspaper); Inside the Games (an Olympic news website); Sky News; The Irish Examiner (an Irish national daily newspaper); Snopes (fact-checking research on popular topics); Georgia Today (Georgia's leading English-language newspaper); Town & Country Magazine; The Portland Press Herald; Nation; LRT (the television channel of Lithuanian National Radio and Television); English Pravda (a digest of Russia's investigative reports and news analysis); Meduza; The Indian News (an Indian news media publishing company); Politico (an American political digital newspaper); The Washington Post (an American political digital newspaper); The New York Times (an American political digital newspaper); Der Spiegel (a German newspaper); Le Monde and Le Figaro (French newspapers); La Repubblica and Corriere della Sera (Italian newspapers); Delfi (a news portal in the Baltic States); the Prank.Ru website; Brussels Signals

(a media outlet located in Brussels); Sputnik (a Russian state-owned news agency and radio broadcast service); official Vovan and Lexus channels on RUTUBE; among others.

The author of this academic paper presents the topics of conversations during phone calls between Russian comedians Vladimir Kuznetsov (Vovan) and Aleksey Stolyarov (Lexus), who impersonated officials from other countries or organisations to prank politicians and celebrities, in chronological sequence. This approach allows the reader to track changes in activity of pranksters, the hottest topics, and their correlation with other events and the prankster tactics used to obtain information from interlocutors.

In September 2015, they tricked Sir Elton John, a British singer, into believing that he had spoken to the President of the Russian Federation, V. Putin, about gay rights, which later led to subsequent actions. Here's a brief history: Russia has long faced huge international criticism for its laws on homosexuality, including the law on prosecuting people for providing information about homosexuality to people under 18 (24 September 2015, BBC).

In March 2016, Vovan and Lexus pranked the Ukrainian officer Nadiya Savchenko, who began a hunger strike on 3 March 2016 after accusing the court of denying her the chance to make a final statement in her trial. Vovan and Lexus sent one of her lawyers, Mark Feygin, a letter purportedly written by Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko. The letter urged N. Savchenko to begin eating again and admit her guilt while promising her a place in his government. The next day, N. Savchenko ended her hunger strike (10 March 2016, RT International).

Vovan and Lexus introduced themselves as P. Poroshenko during a phone conversation in February 2017 and asked the NATO Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, whether Ukraine could become a NATO member within the next two years (BBC Monitoring, 2018). Here's a brief history: after the Dignity Revolution in 2014, Ukraine took all necessary steps towards its membership in NATO and the EU. Amendments to the Constitution of Ukraine were then underway. For more information about amendments to Ukraine's membership in NATO and the EU and to the main law of the country, you can find the Constitution on the official website of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine under the title 'Проект Закону про внесення змін до Конституції України (щодо стратегічного курсу держави на набуття повноправного членства України в Європейському Союзі

та в Організації Північноатлантичного договору)'. Spanish Defence Minister Maria Dolores became a target of the Russian comedians in October 2017 during a tense period in the political life of Spain. On 27 October 2017, the Catalonia region announced independence from Spain, and Charles Puigdemont declared himself the leader of the new self-proclaimed state. About a month later, the Russian pranksters called the Spanish Minister of Defence, posing as the Latvian Minister of Defence, and convinced her that Puigdemont was a Russian spy with the nickname 'Chipolino', and that there was evidence that the fake minister would deliver to the Spanish government. The conversation was made public several months after the Referendum for the Independence of Catalonia (*Fighting false news narrative*).

Russian pranksters Vovan and Lexus spoke with Georgian Interior Minister Giorgi Mghebrishvili over the extradition of Georgia's ex-president Mikheil Saakashvili in August 2017. During the telephone conversation, Lexus, posing as Ukraine's Interior Minister Arsen Avakov, offered the Georgian minister the handover of M. Saakashvili. However, the minister said that Georgia did not want Ukraine to extradite M. Saakashvili to Georgia. 'We do not want to create a hero out of him. The situation has been stabilised here. We are coping fine without him, (Georgia Today). This topic was prompted by events in Ukraine – the arrest of the former President of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili, in Kyiv in December 2017 (Mortimer, 2017; Kupfer, 2017).

A Russian prankster impersonated David McAllister, the European Union Parliament lawmaker in charge of foreign affairs, while speaking with Epiphanius Dumenko, who was elected by the Unification Council on 15 December 2018 at the St. Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv as the new head of the independent Ukrainian Orthodox Church. During the phone conversation, they discussed such topics as the church's conservatism and Ukraine's stance towards the LGBT community. Epiphanius Dumenko stated that the church should work to increase understanding of LGBT people. However, the interlocutor (prankster) raised sensitive topics. 'One day, you will bless the army to free Crimea and Donbass from the occupation and separatists, so I hope this will happen soon', the man pretending to be McAllister said. 'I also believe that we will manage to bring reclaim Donbass and Crimea, and the war, which is currently raging in Ukraine, should end, because God is on our side', Epiphanius Dumenko responded, pointing to army chaplains and his plans to travel to the conflict zone and 'bless' the soldiers. 'But how can you get Crimea back to Ukraine?'

the prankster asked. Epiphanius Dumenko replied, 'If Ukraine becomes a strong state, and we manage to unite the Orthodox believers in one local Orthodox Church, I believe that the people would (...) themselves want to return to Ukraine' (DW, 2018).

Representing themselves as the newly elected Ukrainian President, Vladimir Zelensky, Vovan and Lexus tricked French President Emmanuel Macron into a hoax phone call in 2019. One of the pranksters, impersonating Zelensky, joked that his winning 73% of the vote in the Ukrainian election was reminiscent of Russian President V. Putin's own strong election results. In the recording, a voice resembling E. Macron joked that Ukraine was not like Russia in at least one respect: 'You haven't yet put all opponents in jail.' Later in the conversation, the prankster told E. Macron that outgoing President Petro Poroshenko wasn't 'the right person' to implement the Minsk agreements to halt the war in eastern Ukraine. 'I agree', Macron said, adding, 'I am counting on your commitment for this purpose' (Euronews, 2018, 2019). The US South Carolina Republican senator Lindsey Graham was duped into phone conversations with the Russian pranksters posing as Turkish officials, namely Turkey's minister of defence, Hulusi Akar, in August 2019. L. Graham mentioned Trump's personal interest in a 'Turkish bank case' in the call, which appears to refer to a US case involving Reza Zarrab, an Iranian-Turkish gold trader and client of Trump's personal lawyer, Rudy Giuliani. The Senator also urged the 'minister' to drop plans to use a Russian anti-aircraft system. The call came in light of the South Carolina senator's push for sanctions on Turkey as punishment for their offensive against the Kurds in northern Syria. That call received further development. According to the news division of the American broadcast television network NBC News, the pranksters contacted L. Graham again a few days later after their first conversation, and the South Carolina Republican told them that he'd spoken to Trump about their call (NBC News, 2019; Chen, 2019). Vovan and Lexus pranked Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in 2020 in a phone call during which he believed he was talking to climate change activist Greta Thunberg. The pranksters advised Trudeau about world politics. During the 10-minute phone call, a third person – playing the teenage climate activist – told Trudeau she was worried about the 'growing international crisis and anticipation of the world war'. 'It already leads to disaster,' said fake Greta, adding, 'It's very scary.' To which Trudeau replied, 'Yes indeed.' 'You are adults, but you act

like children', she then said. 'We can create a world where there is a place for everyone. 'No, that is exactly, exactly the right perspective', Trudeau responded. Fake G. Thunberg then said, 'But leave NATO. Drop your weapons. Pick flowers. Smile at nature.' A diplomatic Trudeau responded, 'I also dream of a world in which soldiers are not necessary, but we don't live in that world yet, unfortunately.' The call was made in January 2020, days after the crash of a Ukrainian passenger jet, killing the 176 people on board. Victims of the crash included 82 Iranians, 63 Canadians, 11 Ukrainians, 10 Swedes, four Afghans, three Germans, and three Britons (Karp, 2022).

Two Russian pranksters posed as representatives of Russian opposition politician Alexei Navalny and obtained a hearing from the Australian Senate and the Foreign Affairs and Trade Committee, to discuss the Magnitsky sanctions regime, taking their (the pranksters') evidence on a sanctions bill in April 2021. The unofficial private hearing was attended in person by the now deceased Labour senator Kimberley Kitching, the Greens senator Janet Rice, the former Liberal senator Eric Abetz dialled in remotely, and Jacqui Lambie heard some evidence via phone. During the phone conversation, routine questions about Navalny's health were raised and the effectiveness of the Magnitsky sanctions. The pranksters suggested the idea that Australia could help A. Navalny by sending money via Bitcoin and subscribing to their YouTube channel. Later, the pranksters presented evidence, alleging that Russian oligarchs were involved in stealing Australian wildlife, such as kangaroos, platypuses, and echidnas, all of which were delivered by direct flights to Russia for the fun of the crazy Russian oligarchs who would arrange dirty safaris. The pranksters also said they had been warned against meeting the Australian senators due to allegations of sexual harassment in the parliament, including the incident of a coalition staffer masturbating on his boss's desk. The senators acknowledged the issues and condemned such behaviour.

The conservative Lithuanian member of parliament and the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Pavilionis, known for his staunch pro-Americanism, became a victim of Russian pranksters who impersonated the Russian opposition figure Leonid Volkov, the chief of staff to Alexei Navalny. The conversation was in 2021. Expressing his views on various foreign policy issues, Pavilionis, at the end of the conversation, stated that Lithuania's president is just a 'symbolic figure' and can be ignored. This incident led to opposition members

presenting around 50 signatures, more than enough, to launch a no-confidence procedure against Parliament Speaker Viktorija Čmilytė-Nielsen (LRT English, 2021).

One of the pranksters called Polish President Andrzej Duda, posing as France's Emmanuel Macron, to have a conversation about a missile that struck Polish territory in the village of Przewodów near the border with Ukraine, killing two people. The incident occurred during attacks on Ukrainian civilian infrastructure on 15 November 2022. The prankster asked Mr. Duda who he thought was responsible. During the call, Mr. Duda said, 'Do you think I want to have war with Russia? Believe me, I don't want to. I don't want to have war with Russia, and believe me, I am extra careful, extra careful.' He continued, 'I'm talking only about Article 4; I don't talk about Article 5' – referring to the clause that says that an attack on one member state of NATO is an attack against all members (BBC News, 2022).

On Monday, 12 January 2023, the office of former German Chancellor Angela Merkel said that she had received a call from someone claiming to be Ukraine's ex-President Petro Poroshenko. The recording includes A. Merkel saying that the much-criticised Minsk agreement had bought precious time for Ukraine (DW, 2023).

Vovan and Lexus called Italian Prime Minister Meloni, with one of them pretending to be the president of the African Union Commission, Moussa Faki Mahamat, in September 2023. The call occurred prior to the UN General Assembly, where the Italian prime minister had meetings with African leaders. The call may be related to public opinion on Russia's war against Ukraine, as published on the European Parliament website on 23 February 2024. According to the above-mentioned document, key findings were based on eight multi-country surveys as well as on surveys conducted in Austria, Czechia, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, and Sweden. It found that 60% of Italians disagree with the idea of the EU offering weapons to Ukraine, see source. This result was echoed by another survey that found Italian respondents were divided on the proposal to send military aid to Ukraine, with 57% in favour and 42% against (Opinions, moods, and preferences of European citizens). Results of surveys and polls have shown that there is increased scepticism about financial aid and military aid to Ukraine among citizens of some EU member states; however, the ongoing conflict is proving difficult to support. As another poll published in late February by Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*

showed, 45% of Italians were against sending weapons to Ukraine, with 34% in favour (*Armi all'Ucraina, la maggioranza degli italiani è contraria Corriere della Sera*). Meloni, the Prime Minister of Italy, said that her country would continue to back Ukraine against Russia, even if it affects the approval rating of the government (Zapperi, 2024).

The pranksters Vovan and Lexus introduced themselves to Finland's Foreign Minister Elina Valtonen as African politicians during a phone call in October 2023. During the conversation with them, the minister spoke about the conflict in Ukraine and assessed the possibility of the deployment of nuclear arms on Finnish territory. Events correlated with the above-mentioned phone call. Finland applied to join NATO on 18 May 2022. Following ratification, Finland became a member of NATO on 4 April 2023. Finland's Minister for Foreign Affairs, Elina Valtonen, attended the Nordic–African Foreign Ministers' meeting in Copenhagen, Denmark, on 2 May 2024 (Antonova, 2023).

Pranksters impersonated an African Union representative during a phone conversation with the Head of the Government of Ireland, Leo Eric Varadkar, in December 2023. Earlier in the year, L. E. Varadkar took part in a virtual meeting with a representative of the African Union Commission. On the call, the prankster started the conversation with L. E. Varadkar by praising his excellent speech at the United Nations about grain export and migration issues. Later, the conversation touched on NATO. L. E. Varadkar said that Ireland did not intend to change its policy of neutrality and there were no plans to join NATO in the future. He added that Ireland had faced issues with Russian diplomats engaging in 'unwelcome activities', meaning there needed to be further cooperation with the EU. He also noted that Ireland took between 15 and 20 years to become a member of the EU and that Ukraine joining the EU soon was 'not very likely' (Irish Examiner, 2022).

In a call with Boris Akunin in December 2023, Vovan and Lexus hired voice actors to impersonate Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and his culture minister, and they recorded Akunin saying that he supported Ukraine and had even organised a fundraiser to support Ukrainian troops. Here's an excerpt from the conversation: 'I'm very proud to be useful to you. If you had a book published, we'd use all the royalties on drones. – That's a good suggestion. – Can I do it? – Sure. – I'd be very happy. Thank you very much.' In December 2023, after the conversation with the pranksters, a criminal case was opened against Boris Akunin (real name Grigory Chkhartishvili)

under two articles: justification of terrorism (Point 2, article 205 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation) and public dissemination of ‘fakes’ about the Russian army (Point 3, article 207 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation). Boris Akunin was charged in absentia by Moscow’s Basmanny District Court in February 2024. Rosfinmonitoring put the writer on the list of extremists and terrorists. People on this list are deprived of the opportunity to use banking services, including opening accounts and using money. In addition to that, the Russian Interior Ministry put Boris Akunin on the wanted list, Russian publishers pulled his books from the country’s largest bookstore chain, and all Russian theatres staging plays based on his works removed his name from posters (Ukrainian National News, 2024; The New York Times, 1973).

Pranksters pretending to be an African leader as a representative of the African Union, called Thomas Bach, President of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), and Margaritis Schinas, Vice-President and Head of the European Commission’s Unit for Promoting the European Way of Life, in April 2024. Bach and Schinas accepted the interview to campaign against the Friendship Games, and during the conversation, they were asked about their views on the Friendship Games and the IOC’s stance on them, as well as whether some European athletes had been asked to take part in the Friendship Games, or even about the possibility of Russian athletes competing in the Olympics under the Ukrainian flag. ‘They could end up in prison for fifteen years. Or they could be sent to Siberia’, said Bach. During a pre-arranged video call, both Bach and Schinas attempted to persuade the prankster – the fake African leader – to convince African athletes not to take part in the competition in Russia. When speaking about the Friendship Games, Margaritis Schinas said that Russia’s so-called Friendship Games were being organised against the backdrop of Russia’s unabated war of aggression against Ukraine, its peaceful neighbour: ‘Russia is misusing sport and its peaceful values to legitimise an illegal and unjustified war. Bach said that by participating in the Friendship Games, these countries and these governments would be taking sides in the Russian–Ukrainian war, and they would be siding with Russia. ‘They are taking part in a manifestation of support for Russia’s war in Ukraine and its violation of Ukraine’s territorial integrity. (*Inside the games. Bach and Margaritis support politicisation of sport in prank video call*).

The Prime Minister of North Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, became the victim of Russian pranksters Alexey Stolyarov and Vladimir Kuznetsov

several times in the period between 2018 and 2019. The Prime Minister of North Macedonia believed he was talking to the former President of Ukraine, Petro Poroshenko, one time, and he also had one hoax conversation with a prankster impersonating NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg. During the conversation via WhatsApp, they discussed the problem of the independence of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, as well as other regional issues, including the sensitive question of the tensions between Serbia and Kosovo. But the most controversial point concerned Macedonia's relations with the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. Zaev had tried to leverage his warm and friendly relationship with the fake Poroshenko to establish closer relations with Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople. The contact with Bartholomew was crucial for securing the recognition of the autocephaly of the Macedonian Orthodox Church by the Patriarch, which has a contested international status. In early 2019, Bartholomew officially recognised the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, granting it the status of autocephaly. During conversations, Zaev revealed the leak of sensitive information on negotiations between the Presidents of Kosovo and Serbia to the fake Poroshenko. The outcome of the above-mentioned conversations was that Russian politicians and the Russian propaganda machine used the Sputnik portal to spread misinformation about the 10 municipalities that would be given from Kosovo to Serbia. Later, the Prime Minister of North Macedonia apologised to the Presidents of Kosovo and Serbia for revealing sensitive information. The situation created political tension in North Macedonia over the breach of protocols by the Prime Minister (Dimitrievska, 2019).

Members of the British, Latvian, Estonian, and Lithuanian parliaments were also pranked by Vovan and Lexus. The pranksters called Berlin Mayor Franziska Giffey and at least four other mayors of large European cities, while posing as Kyiv Mayor Vitali Klitschko. Posing as Ukrainian Interior Minister Arsen Avakov, they also pranked the Director of Manpower and Personnel of the National Guard Bureau of the United States of America, Major General Kevin McNeely, in 2014. McNeely disclosed information to the pranksters about the supply of US military aid to Ukraine during the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War.

Lexus then duped Jean-Claude Juncker, a Luxembourgish politician who was the 12th president of the European Commission from 2014 to 2019, and Federica Mogherini, an Italian politician who served as High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission from

2014 to 2019, in July 2018, while posing as Armenian prime minister Nikol Pashinyan in both phone calls. Full transcripts of conversations are available on the Euro News website.

The Russian pranksters posed as Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky once again in April 2019; this time calling the Kosovo Prime Minister, Ramush Haradinaj, on behalf of former Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko. The topic was the recognition of Kosovo.

Horror novelist Stephen King was another target of Russian pranksters posing as Ukrainian President V. Zelenskyi in 2022. Vovan and Lexus took credit for a prank on Harry Potter author J.K. Rowling in 2022, too.

The above-mentioned pranked politicians and celebrities were all duped targets of Russian comedian-pranksters Vladimir Kuznetsov (Vovan) and Aleksey Stolyarov (Lexus) and their joint activity since 2014. The analysis of the above-presented materials about the activity of the most famous Russian comedians, Vovan and Lexus, leads to the conclusions detailed below.

Russian comedians Vovan and Lexus focused predominantly on foreign policy issues and Ukraine. Since the start of the Russian aggression against Ukraine on February 24, 2014, they have targeted foreign high-profile cultural and political figures who oppose Russia's political agenda and who are critical of Russia. By calling their victims and impersonating public figures they would find credible, Vovan and Lexus have engaged in candid conversations on hot political and social topics and have tried to extract personal assessments, informal opinions, and thoughts on hot topics or even sensitive information from their targets. Subsequently, these conversations in full or as excerpts were published online. The pranksters primarily focus on the targets' lack of familiarity with the contact-interlocutor and the element of surprise.

However, there are still untouchable public officials, such as the Head of the Chechen Republic, Ramzan Kadyrov. According to Lexus, trolling R. Kadyrov would be like trolling Putin. It would immediately destabilise the country. We don't see the point in causing great harm. We also wouldn't call [Syrian President Bashar] al-Assad because it would disrupt relations between our two countries (Meduza). Also, leaders of the global North, leaders of African countries who are in favour of Russia in international affairs, and politicians from some of the EU member states, such as the Prime Minister of Hungary, Viktor Orban, have not been targeted by Vovan and Lexus. The reason for this might be that Russia doesn't want to disrupt relations with leaders

of the countries who are acting in favour of Russia in international fields.

Russian mass media outlets inside the country and outside, through social networks and internet platforms, widely cover the pranksters' activity. Obtained information, especially sensitive intelligence, interpreted in favour of the Kremlin's plans for geopolitical games, is in use in relations with other countries. At the same time, information obtained by pranksters is often presented publicly as evidence that Western democratic countries are acting in an aggressive manner, using the 'rule and divide' principle in their political agenda. Also, Russian authorities, through statements made by high-ranking officials and pro-Russian media, not only in Russia, present these revelations as solid proof of Western prejudice and double standards towards Russia.

The pranksters' main goal was and is to provoke officials and celebrities selected by them into saying something that the Russian mass media and the Kremlin could effectively use when arranging hybrid attacks on the information space abroad. Posing as friendly interlocutors to entice their victims into informal chatter, Vovan and Lexus touch on a wide range of different topics, from homosexuality, climate change issues, to the nuclear policy of some countries. During their conversations, they raise questions to deliberately provoke a negative reaction and get an emotional rise out of a particular famous person, trying to influence domestic and international events through possible next steps, or actions which might be taken by a target person after the phone conversation. For example, the US's South Carolina Republican senator Lindsey Graham communicated with the US president about issues touched upon during his phone conversation with the pranksters.

One of the pranksters, Lexus, explained during his interview with Daniil Turovsky, Meduza's special correspondent, on their tactics by saying, 'We go from the smallest person and higher and higher. Everyone gives little information, and that's how we get as high as we need to. Before we get all the way to our target, we design something like a diagram showing the linkages between people. There was a chain of ten people to the Turkish president R. Erdoğan. We found this chain of people through conversations with the smallest to the biggest. In some ways, it's the social-engineering principles used by Anonymous International' (Meduza).

Vovan and Lexus have worked as a pair for more than ten years, but they have also had a team to support them. For example, they

will have someone who looks for all available information about the schedule of high-ranking officials who are going to be targeted in the future by the duo.

Vovan and Lexus present their activity as messianism, aiming to reveal democratic society's true face and posing themselves as saviours of Russia from Western influence. Open-source intelligence tools and social engineering are employed on a full scale with the aim of divulging confidential information from the interlocutor. Selection of topics for conversation and sometimes following events are in close correlation or even used as a push factor to gain control over the interlocutor through emotional means. Some scenarios are even created artificially with the involvement of a child. An example of this was when Vovan and Lexus spoke with the prime minister of Canada, and before the phone call, an event had occurred that had emotionally touched the Canadians – the death of dozens of citizens of Canada, including children, in a plane crash near Tehran.

According to the American cybersecurity company, Proofpoint, Vovan and Lexus have also targeted CEOs of large companies in North America and Europe, in a campaign to lure them into saying potentially volatile things on video and phone calls. In emails to the targeted individuals, the pair have presented themselves as Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal, Ukrainian Member of Parliament Oleksandr Merezhko, and Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny's Chief of Staff Leonid Volkov. Other emails have purported to be from the 'Embassy of Ukraine to the US' and the 'Embassy of Ukraine in the US' and were sent from plausible-looking, embassy-themed email addresses. For example, Ukraine's embassy in Washington uses addresses such as embassy.usa@ukr.net. Also, the above-mentioned pranksters tend to cycle through various email addresses tied to different fake identities, such as emails purporting to come from oleksandrmerezhko.com, and from the domain of navalny.team. Through the emails, which do not contain malware, they attempt to solicit information and entice recipients into agreeing to a remote video or phone call (*DARKREADING Russian Influence Duo Targets Politicians, CEOs for Embarrassing Video Calls*).

According to Stanislav Budnitsky, an academic in Russian media and politics at the Wilson Centre in Washington, Vovan and Lexus' activities have reinforced 'the anti-Western consensus within the Russian society, thanks to the consistent and widespread positive coverage of their pranks by Russian state-aligned media'. The pair

have helped exacerbate internal divisions within the West, supporting the Kremlin's longstanding narrative about the chaotic nature of liberal democracy.

The deliberate use of humour by state and proxy actors to promote instrumental interpretations of events, deflect external criticism, undermine competing narratives, and legitimise policy through broader outreach and persuasion has been theorised as 'strategic humour' (Chernobrov, 2022). Strategic humour is not simply a tactic to make a story more engaging, but it also conveys a wider narrative that delivers complex political messages, intertwines them with broader contexts, and pursues multiple objectives (Chernobrov, 2023).

This brings to the forefront the questions of audience reception (how audiences react to the message and whether they reproduce it) and persuasion (whether the message has an impact on their political views). It is in line with Aristotle's modes of persuasion introduced in his book *Rhetoric*: personal character of the speaker, putting the audience into a certain frame of mind, and the proof, or apparent proof, provided by the words of the speech itself. According to Miller (2012), persuasion has three main outcomes: response shaping (where an individual has no clear prior attitude to the issue), response reinforcement (where an individual confirms already held views and becomes even more committed to them), and response change (where an individual alters their views or behaviour). Evidence suggests that political humour can shape public opinion, particularly among those with lower factual knowledge of the issue in question (Young, 2004).

Vovan and Lexus' political pranks always coincide with the agenda of Russia's state media, and their recordings often air on national television. In contrast to their pre-February 2022 activities, the pair almost exclusively focused on topics relating to the Russia–Ukraine war from the second full-scale invasion of the Russian Federation into the territory of Ukraine in 2022.

The pranksters spoke with their targets in English – although in some cases, with heavily accented English, even interspersed with Russian words. For example, during a conversation with the Head of the Government of Ireland, Leo Eric Varadkar, one of the pranksters used the following Russian word 'Rossija' instead of 'Russia' in the wording 'to Black Sea initiatives to "Rossija"' (the above-mentioned phrase was pronounced in recorded conversation – the exact time is 00:28–00:31 seconds). This conversation was publicly placed on the

online website platform Rumble, founded in 2013 by a Canadian entrepreneur, Chris Pavlovski.

Due to their work often targeting and compromising people of interest to the Russian state, Vovan and Lexus have been given a top state award in the Kremlin. According to the RIA state news agency, Vovan and Lexus were seen at a Kremlin award ceremony wearing the Order of Friendship. This award is given to Russian and foreign nationals for strengthening peace and friendship, cooperation, and understanding between Russia and other nations.

However, if Vovan and Lexus can impersonate one side of the conversation, it is reasonable to assume that they can impersonate the other side, too. Here's a clip of McCain speaking on 15 February 2017 for comparison purposes. Some viewers maintain that the real John McCain's voice seems to have a higher pitch than the voice in the prank call video. In addition to the apparent differences between the real voice of John McCain and the one in the prank audio, this viral clip also featured a Ukrainian prime minister apparently conversing easily in a language that is foreign to him – according to a report from Deutsche Welle, V. Groysman is not fluent in English. Moreover, Senator McCain is likely aware of this fact and would thus be unlikely to be fooled by a fluent English-speaking prankster posing as the Ukrainian Prime Minister, especially as he had previously met with V. Groysman in June 2016. Vovan and Lexus created a similar video allegedly featuring Representative Maxine Waters of California speaking to a prankster pretending to be V. Groysman on 13 February 2017.

9. Intelligence and Prankster Activity. Unwitting or Intentional Espionage?

In the 16th century, the philosopher and statesman of Florence, Niccolò Machiavelli, one of the founding fathers of realism, in his best-known treatise *The Prince*, wrote: people tend to be self-centred, work for their personal benefits and don't think about society. There is no moral basis on which to judge the difference between legitimate and illegitimate uses of power Since good laws require good arms, I will not consider laws but speak of arms (*Prince* CW 47) (Nederman, 2019). Thus, Machiavelli justified all means for achieving a goal, including corruption, deception, and military power. We can find a lot

of examples in history of how countries were able to survive: they were driven by selfishly motivated human beings who had the flexibility to swiftly adapt to the rapidly changing social, political, moral, and spiritual environment. Examples of this are Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and the Soviet Union's dictator Joseph Stalin. A leader's life experience, character and worldview obviously impact on decision-making policies, visions for a country's future development, and the kind of tools used to achieve objectives both domestically and abroad. For example, the Bolshevik leaders Vladimir Lenin, Leon Trotsky, Joseph Stalin, and Felix Dzerzhinsky spent many years in jail or exile, experiencing harsh environments and fighting for survival. They also lived through the vibrant times at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century: the first Russian Revolution, the First World War, the October Revolution, and the Russian Civil War in 1918–1920. The valuable knowledge they obtained through these life experiences helped them to survive the risky situations in 1917–1922 and taught them how to swiftly adapt to changing situations. They managed to keep the main instruments of power firmly in their hands in the newly established country with a vast territory, mobilising millions of people to follow their ideas and accept their values, even though the methods used to achieve objectives were very often violent. This enabled the Bolshevik party, headed by Lenin and later by Stalin, to instil their new ideology in the minds and hearts of millions of people. These leaders also actively participated in modelling and shaping the future trends of foreign policy in Soviet Russia (later the Soviet Union), especially with its neighbouring countries (Buciunas, 2021, pp. 373–397).

Spokesperson for the UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, speaking after the leader was allegedly pranked by Vovan and Lexus, was quoted by Forbes as saying, 'This is standard practice for Russian information operations. Disinformation is a tactic straight from the Kremlin playbook to try to distract from their illegal activities in Ukraine and the human rights abuses being committed there.'

The Russian pranksters have admitted they have multiple mobile phones, SIM cards, and volunteers to help them with the pranks. 'We work for ourselves, for nobody else. People are always offering us to get involved in their dirty games. But we only choose the subjects we are interested in ourselves', they said.

Pranksters themselves can be considered a subcultural social group located in the virtual world. Relatively, they can be split into

several groups – one of these groups deals specifically with politicians, and another may not act in favour of Russian policy. Pranking is also considered a type of trolling, i.e. a form of social provocation or bullying in online communication. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, the word ‘provocateur’ describes someone who intentionally causes arguments or discussions, or makes other people feel angry, offended, or uncomfortable. Provocation is a form of communication and is the movement of ‘emotions, emotional experiences, and volitional influences in social time and space’.

The objective of the prankster is not only to get information from the victim but also to elicit an outburst, and all for the purpose of fun. Pranksters, mostly young people, communicate and exchange data through groups and chat rooms on social networks. They have their own leaders, favourite targets, and techniques of psychological influence used to take a target person out of their comfort zone and trigger emotions, forcing them to lose self-control and push them into emotional disbalance, which may result in shouting insults and using impolite words and slang. Pranksters also get satisfaction from sharing recordings of a target person’s outbursts with an audience. Pranksters are very active on social networks and mass media outlets. Victims of prank calls are often media personalities, such as politicians, musicians, and actors. It is rarer for pranksters to target ordinary people. After a victim is identified, contact is sought, information about the victim is studied, and a dialogue scheme is constructed. Russian pranksters Vovan and Lexus usually choose politicians from unfriendly countries and dissidents (for example, Valeriya Novodvorskaya, 1950–2014). You can’t just find the phone number of a victim online, and high-ranking officials and politicians often do not answer calls from unfamiliar numbers. This leads to a discussion about using open-source intelligence tools, or even non-visible support from secret security agencies, to obtain phone numbers of potential targets. Political pranks immediately become the focus of media attention, especially if the victim has ‘said too much’ or contradicted their own public statements. It is crucial for a prankster to establish contact with the victim, receive detailed answers, and provoke harsh statements. No one will be interested in a routine conversation. The more expression the interlocutor of the prankster shows, the more attention from the public. It is ideal for the pranksters if the victim uses impolite language or jargon during the conversations, or makes rude comments about other people, state officials, or events.

The Russian state routinely uses humour strategically, and the Russian state-controlled international news television network RT has emerged as something of a pioneer in using humour to legitimise Russia's actions or neutralise critiques. Other Russian state-owned TV channels include humour in the soft power weaponry list. For example, a popular Russian TV and online program aired on the YouTube channel 'International review' (in Russian, 'Международное обозрение') provides a weekly overview of the political and economic situation in the world with frequent use of cartoons and short excerpts of funny scenes from movies connected to dedicated topics.

Is prankster activity unwitting or intentional espionage? Pranksters can represent a real threat to national security. This is because a head of state, a senior government minister, or a politician is not only part of the inner circle of policymakers but also privy to the country's national security secrets and those of other nations. During a video call, you have some probability of seeing documents on the desk of high-ranking officials or even reading headlines or titles. A prank could have huge implications if secret policy strategies are explored. There's a British Second World War cautionary poster issued by the Ministry of Information in London saying, 'careless talk costs lives'. In 2022–2023, Russian comedians were often called Western and Ukrainian politicians. During such conversations, pranksters received confidential information about the situation in Ukraine and the participation of Western countries in the conflict. For example, in October 2022, Ukrainian politician S. P. said that the United States was in control of all operations of the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

Conclusions

A jester, as a predecessor of the prankster, was the trusted advisor of the ruler during the Middle Ages and the one person in their entourage/staff who would always tell them (the rulers) the truth, no matter what. At the same time, a jester's joke was an indicator of how some social groups or individuals accepted a joke or even how to deliver bad news to the ruler of the country.

So-called Soviet pranksters, or telephone hooligans (predecessors of modern pranksters), mainly used jokes, or verbal pranks, for entertainment during the Soviet era. The telephone hooligans were primarily children. Their activities during the Soviet period had the

following objectives:

1. To entertain themselves and laugh at the reactions of the targeted person
2. To embarrass the telephone interlocutor
3. To experience vivid, positive, and funny emotions
4. To provoke negative emotions in the target person
5. To provoke the target person to use rude words and expressions
6. To engage in conversations on various topics without critiquing the Soviet political system
7. To select target persons for such activity randomly from telephone directories

The number of jokes was a product of the extensiveness of political control, not its intensity. At the same time, jokes – especially political jokes about the Soviet Union, the KGB, leaders and their decisions, communist ideology, the shortage of essential goods – coming from ordinary people were excellent indicators of the real feelings, expectations, dreams, and worries of the Soviet citizens. Censorship was applied to all genres of art, including satirical plays, comedies, and even jokes.

Perestroika and glasnost, launched in 1985–1986 by the leader of the Soviet Union, M. Gorbachev, affected different forms of art and literary genres, including jokes. Jokes, as a universal form of human expression and a form of entertainment, as one of the genres of literature, obtained new life and transformed into different types of jokes.

Telephone hooligans used phone calls to prank others during the Soviet times – the ideal target person of a ‘prank’ is, as a rule, an adult person with a choleric temperament, preferably with a low level of emotional intelligence, and with rude and arrogant traits.

The introduction of new communication technology has facilitated the change in how the target person is selected. We can now monitor from randomly picking the target persons from telephone directories to deliberately selecting defined targets. The criteria for choosing someone to prank include the person’s position in public service or social status – anything that would attract public attention. The main aim of the prank is to provoke a negative reaction and get an emotional response from a particular famous person.

Since the start of the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014, Russian pranksters have focused predominantly on foreign policy

issues and Ukraine. They have targeted high-profile foreign cultural and political figures who oppose Russia's political agenda and who are critical of Russia.

Russian mass media outlets, both domestic and international, through social networks and internet platforms, widely cover the pranksters' activities. Obtained information, especially sensitive intelligence, interpreted in favour of the Kremlin's plans for geopolitical games, is used by policymakers in the Russian Federation to shape strategies and prepare tactics in international affairs.

Pranksters can represent a serious threat to national security. This is because a head of state, a senior government minister, or a politician is not only part of the inner circle of policymakers but also has access to the country's national security secrets and those of other nations.

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