

With App, Play Politics Is Taking on New Sense

By [Jonathan Earle](#)

February 14, 2012



The  **Moscow Times**

Political satire has been enjoying a renaissance since the appearance of Russia's newly emboldened opposition.

Opposition activists are trading YouTube videos and Web art that lampoon the ruling elite with the same zest that Soviet dissidents once traded banned literature.

Now that trend has found its way to the mobile phone in the form of a [game](#) called "Demokratia," which has become one of the most popular iPhone applications in the country.

The premise of the game is as simple as it is subversive: build Russian democracy by developing ballot boxes, voters and the electorate — represented by sheep — while fending off pro-Kremlin activists, bureaucrats and other baddies.

"We weren't expecting it to be this popular," said Valentin Merzlikin, who helped develop

the game for Minsk-based NeskinSoft.

He attributed the game's success to good design and timing.

Demokratia was launched Dec. 10, the date of the first large opposition rally in Moscow against the results of the Dec. 4 State Duma elections, which were tarnished by allegations of widespread fraud.

Subsequent protests have drawn tens of thousands of people, many holding clever anti-Putin signs whose public display would have been unthinkable just a few months ago.

Each day seems to bring a new satiric Internet sensation. On Tuesday, a fake news report showing Prime Minister Vladimir Putin behind bars became the most-discussed YouTube [video](#) on LiveJournal.

Even satiric poetry, a Russian art dating back to tsarist times, has received a second wind in the form of the [Citizen Poet](#) series, which features actor Mikhail Yefremov reading barbed political poems by writer and opposition leader Dmitry Bykov.

"Demokratia" has been a hit with the Internet-savvy opposition — the game was briefly the most downloaded free Russian-language application on the Apple store — but it's also won over Kremlin-linked gamers.

Merzlikin says several Duma assistants and pro-Kremlin activists have started following NeskinSoft on Twitter, suggesting that they're playing despite the game's unflattering portrayal of their bosses.

A cartoon version of Putin in a judo uniform appears in the game, as do caricatures of President Dmitry Medvedev and opposition leader Alexei Navalny, all unnamed to avoid legal problems, Merzlikin said.

Even so, the game's interpretation of the country's political system was controversial enough for the social network Odnoklassniki to refuse to carry it, Merzlikin said, adding that the game appears on the more popular Vkontakte network.

To download the game, search for "Demokratia" in Cyrillic letters on the Apple App Store.

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