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No Laughing Matter: Comedy and Censorship in Putin's Russia

In today's Russia, there are limits to what you can and can't joke about.

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An angel and two demons live inside President Vladimir Putin's brain. Every day, they decide how to rule Russia. The angel, being outnumbered, always loses, and the demons are left to do as they please.

Such is the repeating motif of "God, How Embarrassing," a pilot animation series that never, in the end, reached Russia's television screens. The show proved too provocative even for Dozhd, Russia's only independent television channel.

"They told us it was a step too far," says the series' author, Belarussian sketch writer

Sasha Filippenko. Having previously worked in state television, Filippenko was excited by the prospect of doing comedy without being censored. But, as he soon found out, in Putin's Russia, there are always limits on what you can and can't write about.

Political satire comes under particular scrutiny in Russia. In the 16 years of Putin's rule, many Russian comedy shows have suddenly been axed; others have been subject to restrictions. Perhaps the first prominent victim of the new rules was the "Kukly" puppet satire show, which featured an unflattering puppet of the president, and was pulled early in Putin's reign.

At the same time, Filippenko says Russia still offers more breathing space than back home. "At least you can still make political jokes on television in Russia," he says. "In Belarus it only happens online."

Changing Rules

Slowly but surely, Russia seems to be heading that way too. During Putin's time in the Kremlin, the very nature of jokes have changed. At the beginning of the Putin era, Russian comedians were relatively free to joke about anything. When he first came to power in 2000, Russians loved to laugh about their president's KGB past. "There used to be loads of jokes about Putin and the way he carries himself," says Alexandra Arkhipova, a folklore historian specializing in Russian humor.

She cites one: "A hungry Vladimir Putin woke up at night and made his way to the fridge. Inside, there was a portion of meat jelly. "Stop trembling," he said. "I'm coming for the yogurt."

When Putin began to fight the oligarchs in the mid-2000s, sketch artists began to present him as a cynical and power-hungry leader. The longer he stayed in the Kremlin, the more Russian comedians recycled old Stalin jokes. But today, Arkhipova says, Putin is almost never the butt of a joke.

Instead, the overwhelming majority of political jokes in Russia today are about the people who surround Putin — never the president himself.

"Russians laugh at the elites but not directly at Putin," says Arkhipova. The Russian president himself is never seriously exposed for any gaffes he might make, whereas the same protection is not afforded to ministers.

Most recently, those opportunities came from Russia's former Children's Ombudsman Pavel Astakhov and Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev. Astakhov, who has since stepped down, had asked children who survived the sinking of a boat in northern Russia in which 14 people drowned, "How was your swim?" The Russian Internet immediately reacted to the untactful question. "How was your dinner?" said one meme that depicted a photograph of Holocaust survivors.

But the gaffe of the year went to Medvedev, who told angry Crimean pensioners "There's no

money but you hang in there." It kept Russia laughing (and crying) for weeks. On average, Arkhipova says, jokes that follow a political event have a life span of three days; more significant events will keep people laughing for seven to twelve days. "The Medvedev joke lasted over three weeks," she says.

Embed:

The Censors

The Crimean annexation and the war in Ukraine was a turning point for Russian political satire. Every sketch writer and comedian in Moscow knew that joking about this was a risky business.

"There are people who are paid to go through your jokes and cut what they think is too much," says Filippenko, who worked on a popular satirical show on state television called "Spotlight of Paris Hilton," a parody of a 1980s news program called "Spotlight of Perestroika." The sketch writers, Filippenko says, are often surprised at what the censors decide to cut and what they deem harmless. "Nobody tells you where the boundaries are," he says. "It is all based on unwritten rules."

Paradoxically, Filippenko says, censorship made his jokes funnier. Russian political satire has historically been an art of who can make the most poignant joke while staying within the rules of the game. Censorship has forced sketch writers to draw on the Soviet tradition of joking "between the lines." When he left state television in 2012, he found it harder to make people laugh.

"When I came to Dozhd and they told me I could joke about anything, I was less creative," he says, adding that sketch writers need to make their jokes sharper in order to bypass the censors. When that limit is no longer there, he says, you lose the sophistication of the joke.

Filippenko fell into the business by chance: a television producer overheard his jokes while he was out with friends at a St. Petersburg restaurant. Soon, he was invited to Moscow for an interview at Channel One's glossy office. A shy performer, he was recruited as part of a team of 20 sketch writers. "Not everyone there is for or against Putin," he says. "The producers actually want plurality to make the jokes better."

Servile Satire

Most of the writers and stand up artists working in Russian comedy are veterans of the "Club of the Funny and Witty People," the longest-running comedy show on television.

The Club, known in Russian by the acronym KVN, has had the same host, 74 year-old Alexander Maslyakov, since 1986. It even has its own unofficial national holiday on Nov. 8. During Perestroika, the show produced some of the best political satire in Russia, often irritating Soviet authorities.

Today, however, KVN has turned into just another branch of the Kremlin's propaganda. "KVN is dead — it's only interested in songs about the great leader," says Filippenko, adding that comedy should be "fearless." Putin himself is a big fan of the program and even came to the opening of the show's new arena in Moscow.

Xenophobic and sexist sketches have replaced KVN's witty political past. "Jokes about racial and gender stereotypes dominate the show," says Arkhipova. Almost no KVN episode takes place without a racial joke about U.S. President Barack Obama.

If there are any political sketches at all, they are inherently anti-Western and in praise of the Kremlin. One recent sketch about Russia's economic crisis, showed Putin and the Russian ruble defeating the euro and the dollar. "You don't know where the boundary is between what is serious and what is a joke," says Arkhipova.

Still, some KVN stars have succeeded in mass producing comedy on surprisingly sensitive topics. One of them is comedian Semyon Slepakov, whose songs break many unwritten rules. His latest song lampooning Medvedev went viral on the Russian Internet.

But even Russia's celebrity jokers know their limits. Slepakov never touches Putin and his songs are strongly anti-Western. In many cases, censorship comes from the comedians' sponsors, afraid of losing their television contracts.

Filippenko, who now spends most of his time writing short stories, believes the doors are closing for Russian comedians. A powerful propaganda machine has made political satire a dying business in Russia. "People have lost their sense of humor," says the sketch writer.

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