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Under Growing Pressure, Russian Stand-Ups Vow to Joke On

By Ola Cichowlas for AFP

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Stand-up comedian Pavel Dedishchev. **STAND UP / YouTube**

In the loft of a trendy Moscow bar, stand-up comedian Pavel Dedishchev walks up to a microphone under a spotlight.

"I have seven coronavirus antibodies, they all know each other, it's like a family living inside me," he tells the audience of around 50 mostly young people.

"Of course, I know they are from the government. Vladimir Vladimirovich (Putin) gave us all seven antibodies before the election, right? Twelve to the security services!" he says to roaring laughter.

Dedishchev was making a sly reference to cash handouts that President Putin gave out before last month's parliamentary elections – and that the security services often get special treatment in Russia.

During his 40-minute performance, the bearded 30-year-old joked about corruption, the powerful Russian Orthodox Church and the National Guard, a security force that has been at the forefront of suppressing protests.

Stand-up comedy is booming across Moscow and videos of sketches often get more than a million views on YouTube, with many Russians hungry for humor that is not tightly controlled, unlike the comedy that is shown on television.

After a year that saw Putin's main opponent Alexei Navalny jailed and a severe crackdown on independent media, comedians say they, too, are feeling the pressure.

A Belarusian-Azerbaijani comedian living in Moscow was arrested this summer and deported over a joke, and stand-ups told AFP they have recently spotted security agents at their gigs.

But many said they intend to carry on making jokes, and that their work resonates with so many Russians precisely because of the country's increasing lack of critical voices.

"Of course, the situation is bad. But either you get upset, or you improve your repertoire," Dedishchev said.

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In an interview before his performance, Dedishchev said Moscow's comedians began earlier this year seeing what they believe are security agents turning up to their shows.

"We all started noticing it. We know they come and film things," he said.

"We can't tell them to go away. So we accepted them as our most loyal audience," he joked.

Because of Russia's many restrictive laws – such as bans on offending religious beliefs and spreading so-called "gay propaganda" — comedians often check with lawyers if their material could get them into trouble.

Tomas Gaysanov, a former producer of television comedies who now organizes stand-up nights, said it has become a trend on social media to find old videos by comedians and threaten them.

He said comedians are most often targeted after jokes about nationalities.

"We are a former empire, this is still a sensitive issue," said Gaysanov, who is from the Caucasus republic of Ingushetia.

The deported Belarusian-Azerbaijani comedian, Idrak Mirzalizade, was accused of spreading hatred against Russians for a joke about how difficult it is to find an apartment in Moscow as a non-Slav.

Comedian Ariana Lolayeva recently posted a tearful apology after she received social media hate for a joke about an Ossetian pie — a traditional cheesy dish in her native Caucasus region — in a sketch last year.

Comedians have faced such a backlash in recent weeks that one of them — Kirill Sietlov — set up a channel on social media platform Telegram documenting it.

"I have something to write about every week," Sietlov said.

After a year in which authorities have "cleared the field" of independent media and places where Russians can talk in public "without censorship," he said there is a growing demand for stand-up and that is why it has become a target.

While on television there is almost no political satire and no swearing, in Moscow's bars comedians can allow themselves more freedom.

"It's one of the few places left where you can say what you want," Sietlov said.

Vera Kotelnikova, one of a growing number of women stand-up artists in Russia, said she can still joke about most things when performing in cafes and bars.

"It's unlikely you will go to prison," she said, before quickly adding: "Though that's still an open question."

In a male-dominated industry, the Siberian-born 26-year-old says she finds it harder to joke about weighty issues as a woman.

"Audiences have a less serious attitude towards women comedians, they are considered more stupid," she told AFP.

She called stand-up a "democratic genre" and said she hopes it will survive in Russia.

Comedians AFP spoke to expect authorities to continue putting pressure on them, but not to shut down stand-up altogether.

"They want people to go let off some steam somewhere and not take to the barricades," said Dedishchev.

On stage, Dedishchev impersonated a Moscow metro police officer trying to choose which of the many passengers not wearing a mask to fine. The officer settled on fining the few passengers who were smiling.

"If you want to smile in this country, wear a mask!"

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