COGNITIVE STUDIES | ÉTUDES COGNITIVES, 24
Warsaw 2024
Article No.: 3097
DOI: 10.11649/cs.3097
Citation: Semotiuk, O. (2024). Crime and punishment: Prigoshin's mutiny and Putin's revenge in Ukrainian and Russian cartoons and memes. *Cognitive Studies | Études cognitives*, *2024*(24), Article 3097. https://doi.org/10.11649/cs.3097

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Crime and Punishment: Prigoshin's Mutiny and Putin's Revenge in Ukrainian and Russian Cartoons and Memes

Abstract

The paper deals with the discursive dimension of two episodes of the Russo–Ukrainian war: The rebellion of Yevgeny Prigoshin (founder of the Wagner private military company) on 23 June 2023, and his death in an airplane crash on 23 August 2023. This dimension is implemented in Ukrainian and Russian political humor. Political satire, as a form of Humorous Media Political Discourse, can be described by its target, focus and setting. Political cartoons and memes, as genres of Humorous Media Political Discourse, can be defined by their goals, frame of reference and means. These corresponding parameters (goal–target, frame of reference–focus, means–setting), as well as the correlation between the discursive dimension and social context, provide the analytical framework for the paper. The methodology is based on the discourse and multimodality theories. Special attention is paid to the interaction of verbal and nonverbal elements in cartoons and memes, as well to similarities and differences in Ukrainian and Russian cartoons and memes depicting Yevgeny Prigoshin's rebellion and his death.
Keywords: political humor; political satire; memes; political cartoons; Humorous Media Political Discourse; multimodal discourse analysis

1 Introduction

Political humor is a relevant part of modern culture. It has an impact on politics, especially in times of war, and thus the real and discursive dimensions of each military conflict are interconnected. The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 has revived research interest in Ukrainian topics and has led to the appearance of a huge number of memes and cartoons in Ukraine and Russia, in which both sides of the conflict mock each other, using humor as weapon. The weaponization of humor is a relevant research topic, as it significantly affects the image of each side in the conflict. Cartoons and memes, as genres of political humor, along with media and political discourse on the national and international level, are shaping the discursive dimension of the Russo–Ukrainian war.

The paper aims to analyze the discursive reflection of two episodes of the Russian–Ukrainian war: 1) The rebellion of Yevgeny Prigoshin (founder of the Wagner private military company) on 23 June 2023, after a period of increasing tensions between Wagner and the Russian Ministry of Defense, and 2) his death in an airplane crash on 23 August 2023. For this purpose, it is necessary to: 1) define the interconnections between political humor and political satire; 2) describe common features of cartoons and memes; 3) analyze the similarities and differences in the discursive reflections of these episodes in Ukrainian and Russian political humor. The author's intention is to show how these two particular events from the Russo–Ukrainian War were depicted in humorous discourse on both sides of the conflict.

2 Political Humor and Political Satire: Features and Genres

One of the most frequently discussed topics in political humor research is its impact on politics and on public opinion. This impact is considered in two ways. One school of thought states that humor is a reflection of the ideas and opinions spreading in society. It is based on stereotypes which are a part of the existing background knowledge shared by the audience (Davies, 1998; Marín–Arrese, 2008; Raskin, 1985). Another school of thought views political humor as a tool for shaping negative impressions or stereotypes of targeted people, ideas or situations (Jones, 2009; Lockyer & Pickering, 2005). As we can see, these implications of political humor, as well as humorists' intentions, can be underestimated or emphasized. As Mulkay argues, the audience chooses the way to deal with these implications: ignore them (pure humor) or exaggerate them (impure/applied humor) (Mulkay, 1988).

Political satire, as a narrower category within political humor, represents an efficient channel for political commentary and criticism. As Becker states, "at times satire can be more Horatian in nature, while at other times satire can be more Juvenalian in nature" (Becker, 2020, p. 274). In other words, this ability to comment on the current social reality can be both aggressive/judgmental and playful/fun. Political satire offers the reinterpretation of a political event or text and can have an inward direction (self-ridicule) or an outward direction (laughing at others) (Becker, 2012; Holbert et al., 2011).

This twofold nature of political satire has also been described by (Paletz, 1990) in terms of subversive and supportive humor. The spectrum of both kinds of humor is determined by four elements: target, focus, social acceptability, and presentation. Focus is the particular aspect of the social reality highlighted by the humor. Presentation describes the "medium, the setting in which humor is presented, the humorist's delivery" (Paletz, 1990, p. 487). Another typology distinguishes four types of humor: self-enhancing, affiliative, self-defeating, and aggressive humor (Martin et al., 2003). Political satire, as a different form of political information, is intended to attract an audience in a more demanding and cognitively appealing way. This discursive reflection of the social reality is determined by political and social experience, as well as by psychological characteristics and viewing motivations (Young, 2013, 2020).

Political humor, as Tsakona & Popa state, "brings to the surface common views on how politics should be conducted and recycles popular political idea(l)s" (Tsakona & Popa, 2011, p. 14). It is worth mentioning that the perception of political satire and political humor is determined by cultural context. By reinterpreting social reality, satire and humor shape the culture of popular laughter. This laugher culture is context dependent: cultural differences in humor perception have a direct impact on humor usage and people's opinions of what can be regarded as humorous is different in various cultures (Bryant & Bainbridge, 2022; Jiang et al., 2019).

"Cartoons can be seen as artistic work, historical documents, forms of humor or satire (analogous to literature), and as artefacts of journalism history, as well as rhetorical texts. Perhaps it is the multi-dimensional aspect of political cartoons that has constrained their study. This aspect also compels study" (Edwards, 1997, p. 20). Since this definition was given in 1997, the number of publications on political cartoons has grown significantly. These publications have been reviewed exhaustively in (Chen et al., 2017) and "can be allocated … to six major sections: meta-studies of political cartoons, the properties of political cartoons, political cartoons' function as a cultural mirror, political cartoons' impact, audience reception, and the political cartoon ecosystem" (Chen et al., 2017, p. 129).

Political cartoons, as a multifaceted phenomenon, have 5 main characteristics: topicality, criticism, partiality, alienation, satirical stance (Knieper, 2002). These characteristics are transdisciplinarily accepted and connected with the multimodal interaction of the verbal and nonverbal elements of the cartoon. The multimodal interaction of these elements enables the humorous effect which is provided by joke techniques. In our research, we use a classification that includes 10 techniques based on different cognitive operations: *association*, *transposition*, *transformation*, *contradiction*, *exaggeration*, *parody*, *punning*, *disguise*, *narration*, and *appropriation* (Roukes, 1997).

We define the political cartoon as „a basic unit of Humorous Political Discourse which is multimodal, transtextual, topical, critical and partial. These features support its main functions: identificational, ideological, communicative, cognitive, emotive, constitutive, and epistemological" (Semotiuk, 2021, p. 161).

The connection between the humorous and the political in Internet memes is defined as playfulness. This feature describes the ability to animatedly draw boundaries between "us" and "them" in the political sphere, promoting integration or increasing polarization. (Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021). The initial idea of memes, proposed by Richard Dawkins in 1976 in *The Selfish Gene* (the replication of pieces of information spreading through Internet users' communication), can be traced in later definitions of Internet memes that include the following aspects: a) digital units, with common characteristics of content, form, communicative stance, and meme-landscape awareness, circulated by Internet users (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017; Shifman, 2013, 2014); b) *artefacts* on the Internet, which form derivatives using imitation, remix and diffusion in Internet communication (Dynel, 2016); c) popular intertextual combinations of image and text that are disseminated by Internet users (Laineste & Voolaid, 2016). The functional characteristics of memes can be divided into three main domains: political participation (Shifman, 2014); knowledge creation and transfer (Dennett, 2001; Harbo, 2022) and users' identity (Yus, 2018).

Two recent tendencies in meme research should also be mentioned here – 1) elaborating strategies for preserving memes as elements of web culture and methods for exploring base memes in Web archives (Acker et al., 2020); 2) applying traditional cognitive and narrative approaches in memes research. (Ostanina-Olszewska & Majdzińska-Koczorowicz, 2019; Pidkuĭmukha & Kiss, 2020).

3 Methodology

The discourse theory and multimodality theory form the methodological framework basis for this paper. Political cartoons and memes are genres of Humorous Media Political Discourse. This is an „interdiscursive hybrid phenomenon, which is shaped by social context and actualized in multimodal texts, using discursive practices" (Semotiuk, 2021, p. 139).

Regardless of the significant differences between political cartoons and memes, these genres have common parameters by which they can be described. These parameters are: a) goals; b) frame of reference; c) means. They correspond with the elements of political satire defined by (Paletz, 1990): target, focus, social acceptability, and presentation (Paletz, 1990). Goal/target means the politician and/or institution depicted in the cartoon, frame of reference (focus) describes the particular aspect of the political reality/activity, and means (paper) refers to the verbal/nonverbal elements, metaphors, symbols used in cartoons/memes.

These interrelated parameters form the analytical framework for this study. They are considered in the social context: the mutiny of Yevgeny Prigoshin (founder of the Wagner private military company) on 23 June 2023 and his death in an airplane crash on 23 August 2023. Accordingly, the discursive reflection of these events in Humorous Media Political Discourse is investigated with multimodal discourse analysis (MDA). MDA has its theoretical background in (1) systemic functional linguistics (Halliday, 2006), (2) social semiotic (Hodge & Kress, 1988; van Leeuwen, 2005); and (3) conversation analysis (Sacks, 1995; Schegloff, 2007). This method focuses on the interaction of different modes, which are studied not individually, but in their interdependence. This interaction constructs semiotic meaning. Accordingly, visual modus and textual modus of memes and cartoons are not analyzed separately and in line with the analytical framework of the paper. The research corpus contains 15 Ukrainian cartoons and memes collected between 24 June and 24 August 2023. This paper is part of the research project "Laughter during the war: Russian aggression in Ukraine in political cartoons and memes", based on a corpus of 3,717 political cartoons and 2,836 memes from 83 countries (including Ukraine and Russia as conflict parties) from North and South America, Europe, Asia, Australia, and Africa.

The research material has been collected from freely accessible Web galleries, Telegram channels and Facebook groups: *The Cartoon Movement*, which receives between 60 and 100 cartoons each day from over 220 freelance cartoonists in over 80 countries, *Cartoon Stock* (12,000 subscribers), the international Facebook group *The National Strategic Stockpile of Memes and Satire* (62,000 subscribers), *Ukrainian Meme Squad Club* (6,600 subscribers), the Ukrainian Telegram channels *Political Humor* (400 subscribers) and *GO Memes* (6,308 subscribers), and the Russian Telegram channel *"Z-Karikatura"* (515 subscribers).

4 Research Results

This section contains the results of the MDA of Ukrainian and Russian memes and cartoons focusing on a) the "Wagner" rebellion on 23 June 2023; b) Prigoshin's airplane crash on 23 August 2023. The analysis units are the aforementioned parameters goal–target, frame of reference-focus, and means-setting.

The memes and cartoons focusing on Prigoshin's mutiny have four thematic cores: 1) his past as Putin's cook; 2) the internal struggle between Russian power structures; 3) the staged character of the mutiny; and 4) his relocation to Belarus at the invitation of president Lukashenko. These real events (the real dimension of the war) form the context of the study.

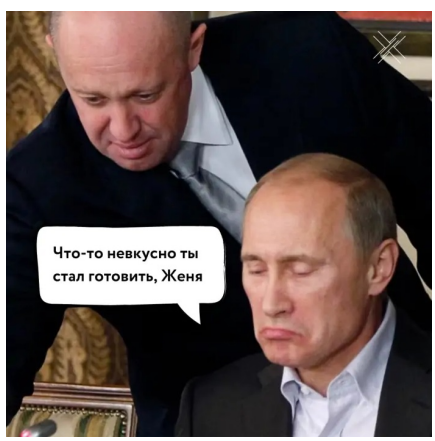


Figure 1. https://t.me/polit_gumor



Figure 2. https://www.facebook.com/groups/655806642139792

Figure 1 is a multimodal Russian meme containing both nonverbal and verbal elements. The nonverbal element shows Putin and Prigoshin, but the main semantic value is contained in the verbal element "*You have started to cook tasteless, Zhenya*". The speech bubble interacts with the facial expression of the Russian president and this metaphorical interplay reveals Putin's displeasure with Prigoshin's actions. Figure 2 is a Ukrainian meme that uses the same visual plot but the verbal elements here have different functions. Prigoshin's speech bubble alludes to the traditional question of the cook, but it is slightly modified: "*How do you like my* ***mutiny****?*". Putin's response "*I tell you exactly in 2 months!*" contrasts with the custom of evaluating a meal immediately, but metaphorically suggests that Putin probably planned his revenge in advance. Both memes are examples of subversive humor targeting Putin and Prigoshin and using disguise and contradiction as joke techniques.



Figure 3. https://www.facebook.com/groups/655806642139792



Figure 4. https://t.me/gonimems

Figure 3 is a Ukrainian meme showing a street fight between two dwarfs. The fight is being observed by filming spectators. The inserts "*Wagner*" and "*Shoygu*" actualize the metaphors "SHOYGU IS A DWARF" and "WAGNER IS A DWARF". Another insert, "*ЗСУ*" (Armed Forces of Ukraine), activates the metaphor "THE UKRAINIAN ARMY IS A SPECTATOR". The main message of this meme, "*Prigoshin's mutiny is an internal Russian power struggle*" is provided by the interaction of nonverbal and verbal elements.

Figure 4 is a Russian meme showing a big dog. The visual insert shows the logo of the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Two small plastic dog figurines with the heads of Shoygu and Prigoshin contrast with the image of the big dog. This stresses the falsity of both actors of Russian military policy. The meme has a caption in Russian which says "*Fuck each other*". The interaction of verbal and nonverbal elements in figures 3 and 4 is an illustration of subversive humor targeting Prigoshin and Shoygu as two rivals in an internal power struggle in Russia. The memes use the joke techniques of punning, appropriation and disguise. The power struggle between Prigoshin and Shoygu and the theatrical character of the mutiny is reflected in Figure 5 (a Russian meme), showing them as two clowns fighting with fake weapons.



Figure 5. https://t.me/polit_gumor

The staged character of the mutiny has also been mocked by Ukrainian and Russian cartoonists.



Figure 6. https://cartoonmovement.com/



Figure 7. https://t.me/caricaturaru

Figure 6 is a Ukrainian cartoon depicting the modified logo of the PMC "Wagner group". The skull in the original logo has been replaced by a clown's face. The joke techniques of appropriation and transformation are used here and are activated by the interplay of the original text and the modified image.

Figure 7 is a Russian cartoon. It shows a teacher with a microphone. Behind him we see Prigoshin in a cage. The teacher says: "*Look who it is, kids! But it is Prigoshin! Let's take a closer look at him!*". This phrase interacts with Prigoshin's image in the cage and is a kind of parody on school trips to the zoo. The interaction of text and image activates the metaphor "PRIGOSHIN IS A WILD ANIMAL". The last part of the speech bubble "*And then we'll play mutiny, too!*" alludes to the theatricality of the event.

Lukashenko's initiative to relocate Prigoschin to Belarus has spawned another wave of memes. Almost all of them are based on the stereotypical vision of Belarussians as a nation that consumes huge amounts of potatoes.



Figure 8. https://t.me/polit_gumor

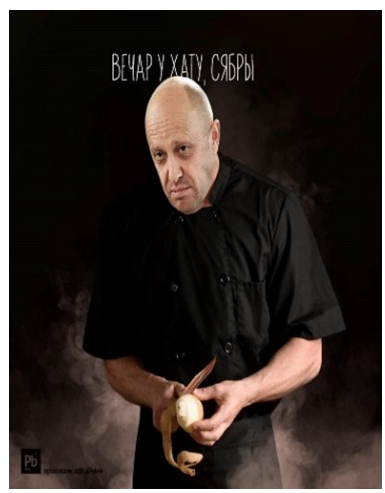


Figure 9. https://www.facebook.com/groups/782707065615014

Figure 8 depicts Belarussian President Lukashenko on a background of potatoes, with the caption in Russian "*24 June is a new Holiday: Potato Spas!*". This is a satirical allusion to three

holidays in Orthodox Christianity (*Spas* is a popular Eastern Slavic name for the Feast of the Transfiguration: Apple Feast, Honey Feast and Nut Feast of the Savior, when the mentioned food items are blessed at church and then consumed). The meme uses word play (in Russian "*спас*" also means "*has rescued*") and presents Lukashenko as Prigoshin's savior.

Figure 9 is a Ukrainian meme depicting Prigoshin with a knife. He is peeling a potato and speaking in Belorussian (literally: "*Evening in the hut*" = "*How's it hanging?*"). This is prison jargon expressing the greetings of a newly arrived prisoner to his cellmates. This verbal element alludes to Prigoshin's criminal past and interacts with the nonverbal element, enhancing the satirical effect of this meme.

Cartoons have both similarities and differences in their humorous depictions of the mutiny. Prigoshin's past activity as Putin's cook and his rescue by Lukashenko have been reused in a new context. (Figures 10–11).



Figure 10. https://t.me/gonimems



Figure 11. https://www.facebook.com/groups/655806642139792

Figure 10 is a Russian meme showing Xi Jinping and Putin at a buffet table. The Chinese leader is complaining about the food (the speech bubble says "*it used to taste better*"). Putin's response is: "*I had to change the cook*". The satirical effect is provided by the verbal element alluding to Prigoshin's death.

Figure 11 is a Ukrainian meme consisting of two nonverbal elements. The first depicts the Belarussian president Lukashenko and the second shows some food on a plate and a tin with the inscription "*Prigozhino*" (a Russian brand of tinned meat). The verbal element in the top picture is the speech bubble which says "*didn't save him*". The interplay of both visual parts supported by the interaction of verbal elements shapes the multimodal narrative.

Prigoshin's constant complaints to Shoygu (Defence Minister) and Gerasimov (Chief of General Staff of the Russian army) that PMC Wagner lacked ammunition have been reinterpreted in a new context in Russian cartoons and memes depicting the plane crash (Figures 12–13).



Figure 12. https://t.me/caricaturaru



Figure 13. https://www.cartoonstock.com/

Figure 12 shows a missile heading in the direction of an airplane. The first speech bubble, "*Shoygu, Gerasimov, where's the ammo?*" addresses Prigoshin's rivals. The second verbal element "*Oh..., I see it now*" interacts with the first, as well as with the image of the plane and missile. This provides a satirical effect using punning as a joke technique.

Figure 13 is a Russian meme showing Shoygu and Gerasimov. The verbal element, "*Here is ammunition for you*", contrasts with the real context (Prigoshin died and does not need ammunition anymore) and enhances the satirical effect of the meme.

Another popular image for memes and cartoons illustrating Prigoshin's death is the so-called "Wagner sledgehammer". It began to be firmly associated with Wagner fighters in 2022, when a video of the execution of Yevgeny Nuzhin – a deserter who escaped from Wagner, surrendered to the Ukrainian military, and was later exchanged – went viral on social networks. After Nuzhin's execution, Yevgeny Prigozhin began to popularise the sledgehammer as a symbol of Wagner and the phrase „Wagner's sledgehammer" became a concept meaning the brutal punishment of an enemy. This concept has been reinterpreted in Ukrainian and Russian cartoons depicting the plane crash. (Figures 14–15).

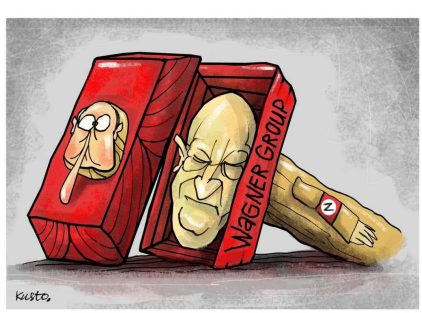


Figure 14. https://cartoonmovement.com/

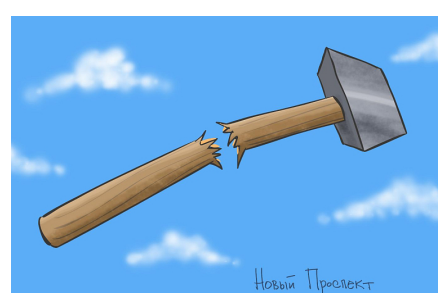


Figure 15. https://www.cartoonstock.com/

Figure 14 shows a sledgehammer with the inscription "*Wagner Group*". The hammer is slightly transformed and looks like an open coffin with Prigoshin's head inside. On the coffin lid is Putin's face. The interplay of verbal and nonverbal elements renders the message "*Prigoshin's sledgehammer became his coffin*" – Putin punished his enemy. Figure 15 is a Russian cartoon depicting a hammer. It contains no text and thus the semantic weight is carried entirely by the

nonverbal element. The hammer is flying in the sky, but it has a broken handle. This cartoon uses contradiction (contrast) and disguise (a broken sledgehammer as a symbol for the crashed plane) as joke techniques. Both cartoons interpret a plane crash as Prigoshin's punishment for his attempt to rebel against Putin: the sledgehammer as a punishment tool for enemies turned against Prigoshin, who himself became an enemy of Putin.

5 Conclusions

Political humor as a relevant part of modern culture has an impact on politics, especially in times of war. Accordingly, the real and discursive dimensions of each military conflict are interconnected. The full-scale Russian invasion in Ukraine on 24 February 2022 caused a "boom" of memes and cartoons in Ukraine and Russia, in which the two sides of the conflict attack each other using humor as weapon. The weaponization of humor significantly affects the image of the warring parties and is a relevant research topic. These implications of political humor, as well as humorists' intentions, can be underestimated or emphasized. Political satire, as a narrower category within political humor, represents an efficient channel for political criticism, offering the reinterpretation of political reality.

In spite of the significant differences between political cartoons and memes, these genres share common parameters by which they can be described: a) goals; b) frame of reference; c) means. These correspond with target, focus, social acceptability, and presentation of political satire. These interrelated criteria served as analytical tools for this study. Accordingly, the discursive reflection of these events in Humorous Media Political Discourse has been investigated using multimodal discourse analysis (MDA). For this paper, the research corpus of 15 political cartoons and memes from Ukraine and Russia was established. Two recent episodes in the Russo–Ukrainian war – 1) Yevgeny Prigoshin's rebellion on 23 June 2023 and 2) his death in an airplane crash on 23 August 2023 – served as the social context of the study. Analysis of the discursive reflection of these episodes in political humor was based on the MDA supported by the analytical framework of interrelated parameters: goal/target, frame of reference (focus), and means (paper) of political cartoons and memes.

The memes and cartoons targeting Prigoshin and focusing on his mutiny have four thematic cores: 1) his past as Putin's cook; 2) the internal struggle between Russian power structures; 3) the staged character of the mutiny; and 4) Prigoshin's relocation to Belarus. The setting of political satire is determined by these thematic scores. Sometimes the setting of cartoons and memes uses national stereotypes (for example, in the depiction of Prigoshin's move to Belarus). This is similar in both Ukrainian and Russian memes and cartoons. There are other characters in Ukrainian memes, which depict Prigoshin's rivalry with the Russian Defense Minister Shoygu and the Chief of General Staff Gerasimov. The Armed Forces of Ukraine are presented as spectators observing the showdown between Russian military officials.

Discursive reflections of Prigoshin's airplane crash in Ukrainian and Russian political satire have both similarities and differences with the humorous depictions of the mutiny. Two thematic scores (Prigoshin's past as Putin's cook and his relocation to Belarus) have been reused in a new context in both Ukrainian and Russian memes and cartoons.

Prigoshin's s rivalry with Shoygu and Gerasimov and his constant demands for more ammunition have been reinterpreted in Russian memes depicting his death on 23 August 2023. They portray both Russian generals (Shoygu and Gerasimov) but do not depict Putin, using symbols such as a broken sledgehammer instead. Ukrainian cartoons use this symbol too, but they also depict Putin next to Prigoshin, making him responsible for the airplane crash. Both Ukrainian and Russian cartoons use the sledgehammer as a symbol of Prigoshin's punishment for his mutiny, by the same tool he used to punish his enemies. The methodological tools suggested in this paper facilitated the thorough analysis of the research corpus and the identification of similarities and differences in humorous depictions of Prigoshin's mutiny and death in Ukrainian and Russian cartoons and memes.

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PI in the Research Project "Laughter during the war: Russian aggression in Ukraine in political cartoons and memes" (No. 2022/45/P/HS2/02536) co-funded by the National Science Centre and the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 945339.

The author declares that he has no competing interests.

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Publisher: Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw, Poland
Publishing history: Received 2023-09-18; Accepted 2024-03-15; Published 2024-11-21.