

Imagefare: How Political Satire Became a Weapon in the Russo-Ukrainian War

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Abstract

Political satire is a significant aspect of modern culture and has a profound impact on politics, especially during times of war. The relationship between the actual events of military conflicts and their representation shapes how the public perceives and understands them. The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, ignited a heightened interest in Ukrainian affairs and resulted in a surge of memes and cartoons from Ukraine, Russia, and around the world. These humorous genres serve as tools for both conflict parties to mock each other. The concepts “weaponization of humor” and “imagefare” deserve serious academic consideration, as they play a crucial role in shaping the public image of the belligerents. Political cartoons and memes influence the framing of the Russo-Ukrainian war and public perceptions and attitudes. Political satire can be analyzed considering its target, focus, and presentation, while political cartoons and memes – their goal, frame of reference, and means. The analytical framework developed for this paper combines these elements: goal with target, frame of reference with focus, and means with presentation. This framework utilizes multimodal discourse analysis to examine the role of humor in armed conflicts.

Keywords: political satire; political humor; armed conflict; Russo-Ukrainian war; visual testimony; imagefare

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Introduction

The ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war is fought not only on battlefields in the conventional sense of the term but also within a complex discursive context, where a concerted effort to shape public opinion is underway. This study argues that the Russo-Ukrainian war exemplifies, perhaps more than any other recent conflict, the rising significance of “imagefare” – the strategic deployment of photographs, videos, political cartoons, and memes to construct narratives, influence public opinion, and exert psychological pressure. Within this visually driven dimension of warfare, humor and satire have emerged as particularly potent tools.

Although humor has historically accompanied armed conflicts as both a coping mechanism and a form of dissent, the advent of social media and the rapid circulation of digital content have elevated political humor and satire to the position of key instruments of contemporary information warfare. In the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war, memes and cartoons have been strategically mobilized to sustain morale, ridicule and dehumanize adversaries, counter disinformation, rally international support, and foster collective identity and resilience.

Analyzing this material sheds light on the ways modern wars are mediated and perceived, and highlights the broader impact of visual culture and satire on conflict dynamics. Given the relative lack of scholarly interest, especially in Western research, further study of humor as a weapon in warfare is urgently needed. Thus, this paper examines how the portrayal of the conflict parties is constructed within both global and national humorous discourse, tracking the similarities and differences in the portrayal of Russia and Ukraine, as well as their presidents, in political humor.

Political Humor and Political Satire: Main Features

Over the last two decades, research on political humor has evolved into a dedicated academic field. Its growth is driven by its interdisciplinary approach and the proven ability of political humor to influence political processes and public perception in contemporary society. Political humor research draws insights from various disciplines, including political science, communication studies, sociology, psychology, cultural studies, and linguistics. This interdisciplinary approach provides a rich and nuanced understanding of how humor functions in political contexts.

First, political humor can serve as a persuasive tool (J. Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Innocenti & Miller, 2016; Kasmani, 2022), a means of social commentary (Basu, 2024; J. C. Baumgartner & Morris, 2008; Caufield, 2008), or even a coping mechanism for audiences during political and armed conflicts (J. C. Baumgartner, 2021; Henman, 2001; Khraban, 2023).

Second, it serves as a crucial vehicle for political communication, framing political issues and reinforcing or challenging prevailing narratives (Young, 2013). Third, political humor can shape political attitudes, enhance political knowledge, and encourage political participation, especially among younger demographics, who may be less engaged with traditional news media (Rill & Cardiel, 2013). Lastly, political humor serves as a mirror that reflects and interprets the social and political landscape. It highlights sensitive issues and expresses underlying cultural values and anxieties (J. C. Baumgartner & Morris, 2008; Takovski, 2020). These studies, along with many others, showcase the academic rigor and dynamic nature of political humor research as a legitimate and distinctive field of scholarly investigation.

Over the past decade, political humor scholarship has advanced significantly, reflecting broader political changes and changes in humor. The rise of social media in the twenty-first century has transformed communication from a one-to-many broadcasting model to a many-to-many social dialogue among active users (Kilian et al., 2012). Users have confidently transitioned from simply being consumers of content to performing producers. In today's digital era, the lines separating professional from amateur content and bottom-up from top-down communication have blurred significantly (Shifman, 2019).

Furthermore, the Internet has influenced our sense of humor in various ways. As Attardo notes, we need to consider "to what extent humor-on-the-internet is different from humor-before-the-internet" (Attardo, 2023, p. 18). The Internet has fundamentally altered the landscape of humor by democratizing the creation process and blurring the distinctions between amateur and professional content creators. Furthermore, it has expanded the boundaries of what is deemed socially acceptable in humor. The nature of humor has become increasingly transgressive, challenging, and subversive to societal norms and expectations (Gerlofs, 2022). Today, audiences are increasingly knowledgeable and diverse, thanks to the wealth of online content and the emergence of micro-communities. To effectively engage these varied audiences, content creators must continually innovate and customize their materials. Adapting to this dynamic landscape is not just an option – it is essential for success.

According to the most widely adopted definitions, political humor is "a humorous message, communicated via any medium that references some aspect of the political world" (J. C. Baumgartner, 2021, p. 24), or, likewise, "an umbrella term that encompasses any humorous text dealing with political issues, people, events, processes, or institutions" (Young, 2017, p. 872). These definitions rely on two key suppositions: (a) diverse creations of political humor can be a factor behind political change, and (b) exposure to political humor has the potential to shape our perceptions and comprehension of the political landscape.

Political humor is essentially contextual and subjective, and it is influenced significantly by the cultural frameworks within which it is situated. Additionally, individuals interpret and respond to political humor in diverse ways, leading to varying perceptions and reactions. Humor can frequently evoke laughter; however, it may also lead to negative consequences, such as feelings of nervousness or embarrassment, particularly if it offends or unsettles others. Therefore, it is essential to approach humor with sensitivity and an awareness of its

potential impact on diverse audiences. The interplay of a society's or ethnic group's culture, language, history, norms, values, and beliefs, along with a nation's political culture, is essential in shaping its political dynamics. These elements influence governance and the interactions among individuals and groups, contributing to the overall political landscape (Feldman, 2024). Political humor arises from the interactions between individuals and their environment, effectively addressing psychological and symbolic needs rather than merely political ones. It serves as a powerful tool of persuasion, influencing opinions and attitudes, often against perceived "others". Recognizing this connection is essential for a deeper understanding of humor and its significant impact in political and armed conflicts.

Political satire is a significant genre that effectively conveys political messages through humor. It employs a range of techniques, including exaggeration, contradiction, and parody, to engage and challenge audiences. We employ Baumgartner's typology to clearly distinguish between simple satire and complex satire. Simple satire conveys a clear message and is easy to interpret, particularly in the context of political comedy shows. In contrast, complex satire, often referred to as "ironic" satire, contains both explicit (direct) and implicit (indirect) messages (J. C. Baumgartner, 2021).

Hmielowski et al. (2011) argue that political knowledge is essential for viewers to appreciate the subversion found in satire. Consuming satire is a specific personality-driven preference for processing political information through a comedic lens. Its effectiveness hinges on four key elements: target, focus, social acceptability, and presentation (setting). These factors influence the range of satire directed at authority, from supportive to subversive. Generally, the higher the target, the more fundamental the critique, enhancing humor's subversive potential (Paletz, 1990). Focus refers to the specific element of a person's political actions or a political occurrence that is highlighted using humor. The more socially acceptable a piece of humor, the less subversive it is. Presentation refers to "the medium, the setting in which humor is presented, the humorist's delivery" (Paletz, 1990, p.487).

Political Cartoons and Memes: Main Approaches

Publications on political cartoons as traditional forms of political humor cover: (a) communicative functions (El Refaie, 2009; Ho et al., 2021) and (b) constructive functions (El-Falaky, 2019; Lennon & Kilby, 2020). Knieper (2002) identifies several transdisciplinary features that define political cartoons: topicality, criticism, partiality, alienation, and satirical stance. These characteristics underscore their complex nature, positioning them as a potent tool for political communication and commentary that transcends traditional disciplinary boundaries. *Topicality* highlights that the impact and relevance of political cartoons are closely tied to their ability to engage with the current political landscape. A core function of political cartoons is *criticism*, as they provide critical commentary on power, policies, and politicians. *Partiality* suggests that they are often biased, as they typically take a clear stance and aim to persuade

the audience to adopt a specific perspective. *Alienation* refers to how cartoons can create distance or offer a critical view of reality, often through exaggeration, distortion, or symbolic language. This form of “alienation” can help recipients perceive familiar political situations in a new light. The *satirical stance* of political cartoons enables them to communicate serious messages in an accessible and often subversive way. These features are interconnected through the cartoon’s dynamic interplay of verbal and nonverbal elements. Political knowledge, beliefs, and psychological traits influence the recipient’s cognitive contribution.

The term meme, originally coined by Dawkins (1976) to explain cultural transmission, has evolved to encompass specific definitions of Internet memes that highlight: (a) digital units with shared characteristics (content, form, stance, and memetic landscape) (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017; Shifman, 2013); (b) Internet artifacts that generate derivatives using imitation and remixing (Dynel & Messerli, 2020), and represent participatory digital culture (Wiggins & Bowers, 2014); (c) popular combinations of images and text shared by users (Laineste & Voolaid, 2017).

Internet memes can be classified as unconventional forms of political humor. They offer a vital platform for incisive social critique (Purwaningrum & Sudana, 2020). The relationship between humor and politics in Internet memes is characterized by playfulness, enabling a clear distinction between “us” and “them”. This dynamic can either foster integration or heighten polarization (Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021).

Current armed conflicts, including Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the war between Israel and Hamas, illustrate the growing importance of visual testimonies that are extensively disseminated through social media platforms (Góra & Moczoł, 2023; Rakityanskaya, 2023). Cartoons and memes that are created and circulated during armed conflicts serve as visual testimonies of these conflicts, conveying the emotions of participants. In addition to documenting the realities of war, these humorous genres can also be utilized strategically to attack an opponent. Moreover, they play a crucial role in asserting and defending both individual and collective identities, reflecting the values of the conflict parties (Semotiuk, 2025a). These three functions of political discourse, to attack, acclaim, and defend (Benoit et al., 2000), can be applied to the visual humorous discourse and defined as imagefare. This concept refers to the use of visual media (such as memes, photographs, cartoons, and videos) to construct public perceptions and influence the audience’s understanding and the image of political actors. This includes the manner in which these figures present themselves within the international context (Yarchi, 2025).

Recent publications suggest that Internet memes should be viewed as important documents that challenge common beliefs about how individuals engage with information and technical content collections (Rogers & Giorgi, 2024; Tulloch, 2023). Internet memes function as conceptual instruments that facilitate individuals in investigating different interpretations of reality and the cognitive frameworks that support them. They empower us to express and critically assess our values in relation to others, actively encouraging the exploration of diverse activities across different contexts. Consequently, memetic communication emerges as a crucial component of information literacy and data proficiency (Tulloch, 2023).

Corpus and Methodology

The data set analyzed in this paper consists of 20 political cartoons and memes representing global and national political humor. They were collected from the freely accessible Web gallery Cartoon Movement and online platforms, including Reddit, Wykop.pl, Memepedia.ru, and Politreactor. It is part of a larger corpus (over 6,600 political cartoons and memes from 65 countries worldwide) which has been used in the research project *Laughter During the War: Russian Aggression in Ukraine in Political Cartoons and Memes*.

Political cartoons and memes are viewed as a genre of complex political satire (Holbert, 2014; Wiggins & Bowers, 2014) that fulfills a range of functions, including ideological, epistemological, cognitive-emotional, identity shaping, and reality framing. These humorous genres emphasize the contrast between the shortcomings of political reality and the ideals of what could or should be (Semotiuk, 2025b).

This paper adapts the methodology applied in previous studies (Semotiuk, 2024, 2025b; Semotiuk & Hladyr, 2025; Semotiuk & Shevchenko, 2023) to provide a structured approach for analyzing the two forms of political humor. The analytical framework is not a novel invention but rather a refinement of the methodology, drawing on Paletz's (1990) work. Including target, focus, and presentation in the framework enables a systematic and comprehensive examination of how political cartoons and memes challenge the existing social and political order. Political cartoons and memes, though distinct, can be analyzed using a shared framework based on three key aspects: goal, frame of reference, and means. The analytical model connects each aspect with a specific parameter: goal with target, frame of reference with focus, and means with presentation. The goal (target) denotes a specific politician or institution being criticized, and the frame of reference (focus) – a particular political activity or reality that the cartoon or the meme addresses. Finally, the means (presentation) include(s) all the verbal and nonverbal elements (captions, speech bubbles, metaphors, and symbols) used to convey the message (Semotiuk, 2024).

The rationale for combining these corresponding categories lies in creating a structured framework for deconstructing and understanding the multi-layered nature of political cartoons. By combining target, focus, and presentation with goal, frame of reference, and means, researchers can move beyond a superficial reading – to a more holistic interpretation. The pairing target-goal enables the examination of who or what the cartoon is aimed at, and what it intends to achieve. For example, is the goal to satirize, criticize, or support a particular figure or institution (target)? The combination of focus and frame of reference in the analytical framework helps researchers identify which specific issue or aspect of political reality the cartoon addresses (focus) and the broader context in which that issue is presented (frame of reference). This could require understanding the historical, social, or ideological backdrop of the cartoon's message.

The distinction between presentation and means is problematic due to significant conceptual overlap. Since the category of means (e.g. symbols, verbal cues, metaphors) simply describes the function of presentation elements, this pairing is redundant and weakens the framework's integrity. In contrast, the pairs target-goal and focus-frame of reference are distinct and robust enough to serve as primary and secondary analytical categories.

Therefore, the target is not just about who or what is depicted, but also about the implicit goal of the depiction (e.g. "The target is President Putin, with the implicit goal of displaying his ideological affinity with Hitler"). Accordingly, focus encompasses the frame of reference by detailing the specific aspect of reality and its relevant broader context (e.g. "The focus is Russian war crimes, framed within the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war"). Presentation inherently covers the means by specifying how the verbal/nonverbal elements, metaphors, and symbols are used to create meaning and achieve the cartoon's intent (e.g. "The presentation uses the PUTIN = BABY metaphor to signify the ideological legacy of Putin, whose 'parents' were Stalin and Hitler").

To sum up, we will be using target, focus, and presentation as primary analytical categories, and goal, frame of reference, and means – as sub-categories. These secondary categories serve as guiding questions within those primary ones. For example, the question "What is the cartoon trying to achieve?" (i.e. its goal) implicitly addresses the target. This will provide a practical analytical framework that is both comprehensive and efficient, allowing researchers to capture the nuances of political humor without unnecessary redundancy.

Analysis

This section presents the results of a multimodal discourse analysis of the research corpus, conducted according to the analytical framework outlined above.



Fig. 1. Putin and Xi

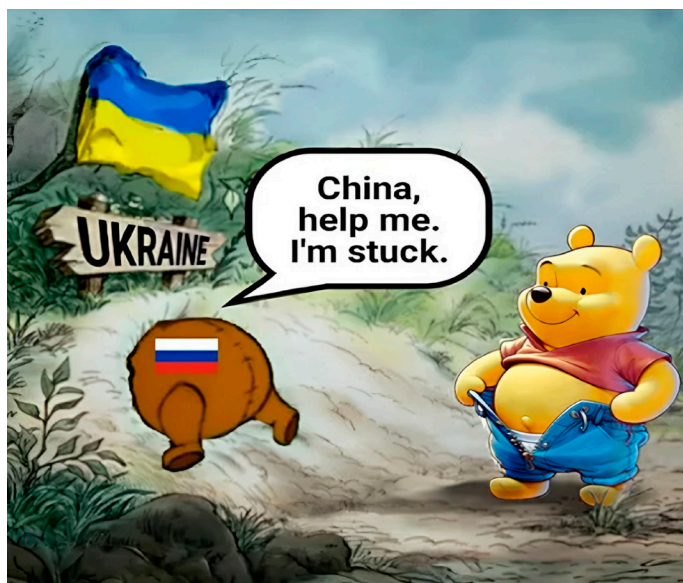


Fig. 2. *I'm stuck*

Figure 1 and Figure 2 have common targets: China and Russia (Putin); their common focus is Russia's dependence on China; they also have similar settings. It is worth noting that, following Internet memes comparing their appearance, Winnie the Pooh has become a symbol for Xi Jinping in political commentaries and consequently has been banned in China.

In Figure 1, Pooh symbolizes China's dominance over Russia, visually emphasized by his shirt, whose design resembles that of the Chinese flag. Piglet is depicted as smaller and holds a honey pot labeled "RUSSIA" (in Russian flag colors) for Pooh, which reflects Russia's subordinate position. The action of Pooh scooping from the pot suggests that China is extracting resources from Russia, which highlights an imbalance of power in their relationship, especially amid Russia's vulnerability due to the war in Ukraine.

The meme in Figure 2 depicts a different scenario, offering another satirical commentary on the relationship between Russia and China in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war. The brown bear stuck in a hole represents Russia. Its shape and color might loosely allude to the national animal symbol of Russia, and the Russian flag on its backside leaves no doubt about its identity. The "stuck" posture, stressed by the verbal element, "China, help me. I'm stuck", is the key to the cartoon's message. The fact that Russia is "stuck" near Ukraine signifies its military and political quagmire in the conflict. It highlights Russia's perceived dependence on China. An additional message is that such subordination may have negative consequences. Pooh's pants being down imply that, despite Russia's plea, China might not be willing to offer help, but rather might be ready to take advantage of Russia's situation. Both images (the Ukrainian cartoon and meme) use the metaphor CHINA = WINNIE THE POOH, combined with verbal elements and with symbols conveying the metaphors PUTIN = PIGLET and RUSSIA = BEAR.

The topic of vassalage is also present in Russian cartoons and memes depicting Ukraine and President Zelensky (Figures 3 and 4).



Fig. 3. America is with us!



Fig. 4. My pissant

Both images utilize verbal elements to amplify the nonverbal ones, clearly asserting the message "Biden is the master of Ukraine and Zelensky". Figure 3 powerfully critiques the U.S.-Ukraine

relationship: it portrays President Biden as a butcher preparing shish kebabs. The kneeling pig wearing an armband in Ukrainian colors symbolizes Ukraine's dehumanization. Its pleading posture, coupled with the image of two pigs in the background, reinforces the dehumanizing portrayal of Ukrainians as livestock. Biden's predatory grin amplifies the sinister undertone. The speech bubble "America is with us!!!" drips with irony, suggesting that the U.S. is not genuinely supporting Ukraine but rather using it as fodder. This cartoon compellingly argues that Ukraine is merely a pawn in a geopolitical game: it presents the U.S. as an exploitative force and highlights Ukraine's perilous naivety about its "master". The cartoon constructs a deeply cynical and hostile narrative, common in Russian state propaganda.

The meme in Figure 4 has the same focus (vassalage of Ukraine, represented by its president) and target. This meme conveys a pro-Russian political message by juxtaposing Joe Biden and Volodymyr Zelensky. It combines two separate photographs to create a persuasive narrative. Zelensky is shown leaning on Biden with a submissive expression, while Biden, with a grin, has his arm around Zelensky in a possessive manner. This posture suggests a power imbalance: Biden is portrayed as dominant and Zelensky – as dependent, which undermines Zelensky's image as an independent leader and implies that Ukraine relies entirely on the U.S. The Russian text, "*Moi pizdziuk*", is a vulgar term that translates as "my little prick" or "my little bastard", further emphasizing the narrative of American dominance and Ukrainian subservience. Overall, the meme illustrates how propaganda utilizes visual and linguistic elements to shape perceptions and promote hostility.

Further examples of imagefare are presented in Figures 5 and 6, political cartoons which are mock-ups of *Time* magazine covers. The first one features Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, highlighting his nomination as "Person of the Year" for 2022. Zelensky is depicted in armor, wielding a hammer – a Thor-like figure symbolizing a destructive force. His pose and the phrase "global economy" suggest that his actions and the ongoing conflict are adversely affecting the world economy. The cartoon conveys a dual message: while Zelensky is celebrated for his leadership, there is a subtle implication that his resistance is contributing to the global economic downturn, a message prioritizing economic stability over continued military support for Ukraine. The cartoon subtly places some degree of responsibility for the conflict on Ukraine, or even on Zelensky, rather than solely on the aggressor (Russia).

The mock-up a *Time* cover in Figure 6 is a satirical and highly critical depiction targeting Russian President Vladimir Putin. It makes use of the recognizable format of the prestigious magazine to deliver an insulting political statement. Putin is depicted in a straightforward portrait style, similar to how *Time* often features its "Person of the Year". Instead of the typical headline, the magazine's traditional descriptor is replaced with the highly vulgar, offensive phrase "Asshole of the Year". This direct insult serves as a powerful and unambiguous condemnation of Putin's actions. The meme is a biting piece of political humor that uses highly offensive and emotionally charged language, reflecting widespread international criticism of Putin, particularly in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The use of profanity provides a significant shock value, ensuring the image grabs attention and delivers its critical message.



Fig. 5. Person of the Year



Fig. 6. Asshole of the Year

The ideological confrontation between Russia and Ukraine is especially evident in the cartoons and memes using references to World War II, usually in the form of images or slogans of Nazi Germany or its allies, as can be seen in Figures 7 and 8.



Fig. 7. Russland über alles



Fig. 8. Ukraine über alles

Both cartoons use the modified Nazi slogan “*Russland/Ukraine über alles*” but the setting and consequently the framing are different. Figure 7 alludes to the Bronze Horseman (Rus. *Mednyi vsadnik*, lit. ‘copper horseman’) – the equestrian statue of Peter the Great in Petersburg. Putin’s raised hand resembles both the Nazi salute and the letter Z (symbol of Ruscism). The interaction of these elements with the inscription on the monument, “*RuZZland über alles*”, reveals the cartoon’s focus: Putin, Russia, and Ruscism are successors of fascism. This political cartoon highlights the country’s embrace of aggressive nationalism and expansionism. The fractured ground signifies the devastating consequences of Russia’s aggression. The exaggerated portrayal of the military figures depicts Russia as mindless, emphasizing its reliance on brute force rather than sophisticated strategy. The cartoon captures the dangerous ideology of “Russia above all”, a country seeking to dominate and expand its influence.

Figure 8 is a highly provocative political cartoon and employs strong imagery to convey a specific and distorted view of Ukraine from the Russian perspective. It uses historical parallels and symbols to explicitly accuse Ukraine of harboring Nazi ideology. The caption “*Ukraine über alles*” directly mirrors the slogan “*Deutschland über alles*”, suggesting that Ukraine considers itself superior. It is a recurring theme in Russian propaganda aiming to delegitimize Ukraine and justify aggression against it. The central figure, likely representing Ukraine, is depicted being impaled by shouting figures in black balaclavas, wearing armbands in Ukrainian colors. Importantly, the figure is impaled on a stylized version of the Ukrainian national emblem, the *tryzub* (trident). This is highly symbolic and perverse. It suggests that Ukraine is being “destroyed” by its aggressive nationalism. On the right, the figure is impaled on a black *Wolfsangel* symbol. Given the historical context and common Russian propaganda narratives, this symbol strongly implies Nazism. This image links Ukraine’s national identity directly to Nazi ideology.

Another example of imagefare is cartoons and memes depicting Russian war crimes (Figures 9–11). Such images draw a direct parallel between the destruction and atrocities of World War II (specifically associated with Nazism) and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. They are divided into two distinct panels, side by side, creating a direct visual comparison that is central to the message. The panels usually include the images of ruined civilian buildings and come with verbal elements. In Figures 9–11, the text “Never again” in the first panel is an anti-war and anti-genocide slogan, associated with the Holocaust and the horrors of World War II. The text in the second panel directly contrasts with “Never again”, asserting that similar horrors are now happening “Again”. By juxtaposing the symbols of fascism (the swastika) and Ruscism (the letter Z) in identical scenes of devastation, they implicitly equate Russia’s invasion of Ukraine with historical Nazism.

The example in Figure 11 is evidence of inferential relations between memes and cartoons: it was created by adding a new text (“Ah shit, here we go again”) and image to the original cartoon (Figure 9).



Fig. 9; Fig. 10. *Never again*



Fig. 11. *Here we go again*

Figures 12 and 13 are Ukrainian and Russian memes using the same symbol: the emblem of the German Reich from 1935–1945. As depicted in Figure 12, it features two heads, which is an allusion to the Russian coat of arms, derived from the earlier coat of arms of the Russian Empire. This image comes with the verbal element in Ukrainian indicating the transformation from fascism (*fashyzm*) to Ruscism (*rashyzm*). By directing its focus toward fascist tendencies in Russia such as expansionism and aggressive national supremacy, the meme pursues the goal of delegitimizing Russia's actions in Ukraine.

The Russian meme in Figure 13 features the same symbol with the Ukrainian flag in the background, thus conveying the message of “Ukrofascism”, which is a propaganda term used in the Russian media and political rhetoric to refer to the alleged fascist or nationalist tendencies in Ukraine.



Fig. 12. *Ruscism*



Fig. 13. “Ukrofascism”

The imagefare of Ruscism as ideology and Ukrofascism as a propaganda term is reflected in global, Ukrainian, and Russian political humor. Cartoons and memes employ personification, drawing parallels between both presidents and Hitler. This illustrates how historical context can influence contemporary political humorous discourse, highlighting the importance of understanding these connections in the analysis of current events, as can be seen in Figures 14 and 15.



Fig. 14. Adolf Putin



Fig. 15. Mirror, mirror on the wall...

The two political cartoons use a similar visual structure to make a point about the presidents of Ukraine and Russia. Both images utilize the motif of a mirror revealing one's "true identity" by showing one's reflection, and they draw a parallel between Zelensky/Putin and Hitler. Both cartoons are used as propaganda/counter-propaganda tools to delegitimize Putin and Zelensky by associating them with one of the most reviled figures in history. The nonverbal elements in the cartoons are amplified by verbal ones: the captions "Adolf Putin" (Fig. 14) and "Mirror, mirror on the wall..." (Fig. 15).

In political cartoons, the technique of personification involves using a specific person (often a politician or public figure) as a central focus to represent a political idea, issue, or event. This technique, combined with symbolism and analogy, is also used in Ukrainian and Russian memes portraying both presidents in German uniforms (Figures 16 and 17). The Russian meme has the caption “The chief Nazi-Judas of Ukraine”, mocking Zelensky as a fascist and traitor.



Fig. 16. *Putler*



ГЛАВНЫЙ ИУДА - НАЦИСТ УКРАИНЫ

Fig. 17. “Ukrofascist” Zelensky

In addition, Ukrainian and world cartoons depict the Russian president not only as Hitler: they also show him next to Stalin and sometimes picture him as a “child” of both dictators (Figures 18–20).



Fig. 18. Putin, Hitler, Stalin



Fig. 19. Family



Fig. 20. Family portrait

Figure 18 blends the faces of Hitler, Putin, and Stalin into one composite figure. This blending implies similarities in authoritarian ideology between the three leaders, despite their different historical periods and political systems. Figures 19 and 20 frame Putin as the ideological “son” of Hitler and Stalin, implying that his worldview and methods are “inherited” from both fascism and totalitarian communism, and that Ruscism is a product of both political ideologies. All three artifacts leverage one of the most universal human structures, namely family and parentage, to make a political claim: Putin is a political and ideological successor to both Hitler and Stalin. Family bonds are hard to sever, suggesting that Putin is ideologically locked into this heritage.

Conclusions

Three key functions of political discourse and humor, namely to attack, acclaim, and defend, can be categorized under the term “imagefare”. This concept refers to the strategic use of memes, cartoons, and videos to construct public perceptions and influence attitudes toward conflict parties. In today’s digital landscape, where visual content predominates,

political cartoons and memes play a crucial role in documenting armed conflicts, serving as their digital testimony. The Russo-Ukrainian war is fought not only on battlefields but also on the ideological and cultural fronts, characterized by the struggle between the ideologies of Ruscism and the quasi-ideology of “Ukrofascism”. This ideological battle is significantly amplified through social media and contextualized within the online environment.

In global and national political humor reflecting the ideological conflict between Ukraine and Russia, one common point of reference is World War II, but it is framed in different ways. Ukrainian and international cartoons and memes illustrating Russian war crimes employ slogans such as “Never again – Again”. Conversely, Russian cartoons and memes portraying “Ukrofascism” function as propaganda tools based on a fabricated worldview. In the discursive reflection of the ideological struggle between Russia and Ukraine, both countries are personified through the imagery of their presidents. Depictions of the Russian president alongside historical dictators like Hitler and Stalin effectively create an immediate association with war crimes, tyranny, and expansionism. This visual technique serves as a powerful means of communication, directly engaging with the collective memory of the atrocities of the twentieth century. When drawing such historical parallels, the aim is not only to label Putin as a war criminal but also to elicit an emotional response from the audience. Presenting the Russian president as a “child” or “protégé” of Hitler and Stalin implies that his actions are part of an ongoing history of malevolence. This framing seeks to dehumanize Putin by presenting the Russo-Ukrainian war as an apparent moral conflict between good and evil.

In contrast, Zelensky is depicted through imagery associated with Hitler or Nazi officers. When applied to Zelensky, this imagery is a form of disinformation, often employed by Russian state media to justify the aggression as a “de-Nazification” effort. By falsely linking the Ukrainian president to Hitler and Nazism, Russian memes and cartoons aim to delegitimize him. This imagery is often combined with verbal elements to create an emotionally charged narrative and to recast the conflict by portraying the aggressor as a liberator.

The weaponization of humor, which is a significant aspect of contemporary culture, profoundly affects the image of conflict parties and is an important avenue for research.

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Image credits: Cartoons

<https://www.cartoonmovement.com>

- Figure 1. Andriy Petrenko (Ukraine)
- Figure 3. Sergey Korsun (Russia)
- Figure 5. Sam Jansen (Netherlands)
- Figure 7. Oleh Smal (Ukraine)
- Figure 8. Igor Kolgarev (Russia)
- Figure 9. Dave Whamond (USA)
- Figure 14. Garry Warvel (USA)

Figure 15. Alexandr Troitsky (Russia)

Figure 18. Olexiy Kustovsky (Ukraine)

Figure 19. Marian Kamensky (Austria)

Image credits: Memes

Figure 2.

<https://wykop.pl/wpis/78944191/humorobrazkowy>

Figure 4.

<https://memepedia.ru/moi-pezduk-mem>

Figure 6.

<https://imgflip.com/i/69fcgq>

Figure 10.

https://www.reddit.com/r/YUROP/comments/1fk6zij/never_again_is_happening_again_credit_uglamdring

Figure 11.

<https://polit.reactor.cc/post/5170790>

Figure 12.

<https://ukranews.com/en/news/930625-rada-defines-rashism-as-current-political-regime-in-russia>

Figure 13.

<https://razboiulpentrutrecut.wordpress.com/2014/09/16/despre-fascismul-ucrainean>

Figure 16.

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1778330925697608&id=509157105948336&set=a.510481825815864>

Figure 17.

<https://dzen.ru/a/ZFzJRUTWdTGRnLU4>

Figure 20.

<https://gs24.pl/najlepsze-memy-z-putinem-to-najsmieszniesze-memy-o-rosji-w-rosji-sa-zakazane-ale-my-mozemy-je-publikowac-galeria/ga/c13-16082753/zd/55094947>

Imagefare. Jak satyra polityczna stała się bronią w wojnie rosyjsko-ukraińskiej

Abstrakt

Satyra polityczna jest istotnym aspektem współczesnej kultury i wywiera głęboki wpływ na politykę, zwłaszcza w czasie wojny. Związek między rzeczywistymi wydarzeniami konfliktów zbrojnych a ich przedstawieniem kształtuje sposób, w jaki społeczeństwo je postrzega i rozumie. Rosyjska inwazja na Ukrainę 24 lutego 2022 roku wywołała wzmożone zainteresowanie sprawami ukraińskimi i przyniosła falę memów i karykatur z Ukrainy, Rosji i całego świata. Te gatunki humoru służą obu stronom konfliktu jako narzędzie do wyśmiewania przeciwnika. Koncepcje „humoru jako broni” i *imagefare* zasługują na zainteresowanie ze strony badaczy, odgrywają bowiem kluczową rolę w kształtowaniu publicznego wizerunku stron konfliktu. Karykatury i memy polityczne wpływają na sposób przedstawiania wojny rosyjsko-ukraińskiej oraz na jej percepcję i postawy społeczne. Satyrę polityczną można analizować, biorąc pod uwagę jej obiekt, konkretny aspekt obiektu, którego dotyczy, oraz sposób prezentacji, natomiast karykatury i memy polityczne – pod kątem ich celów, ram odniesienia i środków. Ramy analityczne opracowane na potrzeby niniejszego artykułu łączą te elementy: cel i obiekt, ramy odniesienia i aspekt obiektu oraz środki i sposób prezentacji. Zastosowane ramy wykorzystują multimodalną analizę dyskursu do badania roli humoru w konfliktach zbrojnych.

Słowa kluczowe: satyra polityczna; humor polityczny; konflikt zbrojny; wojna rosyjsko-ukraińska; świadectwo wizualne; *imagefare*

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