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Agents of Humor?

Soyuz Postsocialist Studies Network
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Students in Russia and Ukraine address global politics through local comedy

Kostya, brow wrinkling, ended his call and told the team of rehearsing students, "Vova said he heard something about it, but nothing is for certain." Newspapers had reported that Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko planned to ban vKontakte (Russian: "in contact"), Ukraine's most popular social networking platform, out of concern that the Russian company might misuse data about Ukrainian citizens. Another student, Yana, immediately began downloading a Virtual Private Network (VPN) app on her iPhone. This would allow her to obtain a foreign IP address and bypass content restrictions in Ukraine. The next day, May 16, 2017, President Poroshenko did, in fact, order cell and internet providers to block access to vKontakte, as well as the Russian search engine Yandex (11 million Ukrainian users) and the mail.ru email domain (25 million Ukrainian users). Students demonstrated, holding signs that said, "No censorship." And they also responded with humor. Comedians in Club of the Merry and Clever competitions (***Klub Veselykh i Nakhodchivykh***, or KVN), like Kostya and Yana, used the stage to criticize the new policy and gently mock its ineffectiveness. One team in Odessa, Ukraine replaced the phrase that traditionally opens KVN seasons, "We are starting KVN" ("***My otkryvaem KVN***"), with "We are starting VPN" ("***My otkryvaem VPN***").

KVN is an improvisational and sketch comedy game that hundreds of thousands of primary, secondary, and university students across the former Soviet bloc play. They play in classrooms, in community leagues, at summer camps, and sometimes even at work, for "team-building." People from Ukraine to Kazakhstan compete in KVN leagues, much like people in the United States play in intramural, civic, and amateur sports organizations.

In March 2017, though, a NATO Strategic Communications publication, ***StratCom Laughs***, described KVN as a tool of Russian information warfare. The Latvian-directed study argued that KVN, on television, websites, and social media, funneled anti-Western rhetoric to Russian-speaking

Judges hold scorecards at a game in Odessa, Ukraine, May 2017. Amy Garey

audiences. While that case study was only one of five chapters in the larger report on the political functions of humor in Russia and Ukraine, the Russian press lampooned its conclusions about KVN, in particular. Talk show and late-night TV hosts took exception, above all, to the report's depiction of the game as Kremlin-controlled. This clashed with many Soviet-bloc citizens' understanding of KVN as a student recreational activity. The discord in perspectives came about because ***StratCom Laughs*** only analyzed televised KVN games (and just two of them, at that), not the more widespread amatuer student competitions. After seeing headlines like "NATO declared KVN a Threat to the Western World," student comedians in Russia, Central Asia, and Ukraine **responded** with—what else?—laughter, ridicule, and a bevy of jokes, memes, and online "confessions." A young man from St. Petersburg **posted** on Instagram, "Well, they have exposed us…we are agents. Yes, agents of humor. And we are going to destroy Western civilization with our sense of humor. It's always been like that, and it will always be like that." The hashtags #KVNagents and #theyvediscoveredus (#агентыКВН and #насраскрыли) circulated on social media for weeks.

Rather than a centralized program, KVN has been a grassroots community activity played by millions since the 1960s. The Soviets promoted the game through Communist youth networks because they deemed it a wholesome way for students to spend time. But KVN's popularity skyrocketed because its Aesopian language allowed young people to nonreferentially represent what could not be said directly. Participants made fun of local bureaucrats. They mocked socialist production standards. A daring young competitor in Irkutsk, Russia even included some jokes about religion in the late 1960s, implying that the Church might, in the end, triumph over the State. "They almost put us in prison for that," he recalled. KVNchiki (as KVN competitors are called) played on the edge of the ideologically acceptable, often tumbling over. For this reason, the government cancelled KVN television broadcasts in 1972. But the game continued in university and city leagues. Schoolchildren in the 1970s and 1980s played KVN at summer camps and end-of-year recitals, as well. The KVN

tradition never stopped, even though it did not return to TV screens until perestroika in 1986. This is why the ***StratCom Laughs*** pronouncement that, "Only in post-Soviet times has [KVN] developed into an entity existing separately and beyond the media system…" rings so false. KVN exists ***primarily*** separately and beyond the media system, and has for 50 years.

> ***"Well, they have exposed us…we are agents. Yes, agents of humor. And we are going to destroy Western civilization with our sense of humor."***

A typical competition in Irkutsk, Russia in December 2016 featured no television cameras. Nearly 2,000 people packed the auditorium of the Irkutsk National Research Technical University for the Baikal League Finals. Upbeat, bass-heavy music played as seven teams took the stage. Spectators clapped and cheered. After introducing the night's competitors, the emcee kicked things off with the Russian version of "break a leg": "Neither fluff nor feathers!" KVNchiki in Ukraine, on the other side of the border, say exactly the same thing before games, often to the same theme music, usually in front of a big banner emblazoned with the letters "KVN."

But if teams play KVN in much the same way in both Russia and Ukraine, they write skits for local audiences. To be funny, one competitor told me, a joke must be relevant and unexpected. For instance, shortly after a Communist Party candidate beat the favored United Russia Party contender in gubernatorial elections, Irkutsk State University students highlighted the event with a skit. During a T-shirt fashion show, a young man walked out in a United Russia T-shirt. "This is the T-shirt of United Russia," the emcee said. "It's already been in style for thirteen years. But in Irkutsk, trends have changed." The young model then lifted up his United Russia shirt to reveal the hammer and sickle on a dramatic red background.

Local themes draw the most laughs in Odessa, too. Shortly after the vKontakte ban, a KVN team in the Odessa Mayor's Cup mimed stealthily sneaking up to the Russian border, placing first a toe, then an entire foot on the other side. As he leaned over the invisible boundary, a volley of vKontakte's familiar "new message" pings filled the auditorium. It was a raw subject that day, when thousands of young people had signed a petition asking the president to unblock vKontakte (by mid-June over 25,000 Ukrainians had signed). It was also topical, though. And because the joke mocked President Poroshenko's official policy during a time of war, the edgy punchline caught the audience a little off-guard.

There are hundreds of KVN leagues and thousands of KVN competitors in Ukraine, as well as in other post-Soviet states and Israel. So casting the game as Kremlin-centered both misses the mark

A KVN game in Irkutsk, Russia, November 2016. Amy Garey

and dismisses the efforts of student comedians who owe nothing to Putin. One former competitor and KVN coach in Odessa told me, "I didn't even read anything but the headline [about the NATO report]. It's silliness. What, am I also a weapon of the Kremlin?" When Ukrainian competitors joke about regaining Crimea, economic hardship, and war orphans, they are using humor to discuss politics, everyday life, and the ways those spheres intersect in broadly unpleasant ways. Russians do the same, though they satirize different daily struggles. For instance, a Russian team joked, "Usually a girl won't sleep with you because she doesn't know you well enough. That works great for an FSB agent. He'd refuse anyway—he knows you too well."

Brokering local realities, comic and tragic, explicit and unstated, is the anthropologist's trade. Anthropology matters, if for no other reason, because our work demonstrates how local actors build—day by day, utterance by utterance—global institutions.

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