

Strategic Humor and Post-Truth Public Diplomacy

By Dmitry Chernobrov



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Abstract

This paper explores how states and proxy actors use humor as part of their public diplomacy. I make two principal arguments. First, I formulate the concept of *strategic humor*—the use of humor by state and proxy actors to promote narratives that advance state interests through wider outreach and/or persuasion. This study focuses on contested events, which involve competing narratives from various actors, uncertainty around responsibility or outcomes, and controversy around an actor's image or international reputation. Strategic humor frames contested events to the advantage of a particular actor, maximizes the appeal and outreach of the message, and makes use of digital media environments. Second, I argue that the rapid increase in the use of humorous content to explain foreign policy issues to publics stimulates the emergence of a *post-truth public diplomacy*, reliant on outreach and popularity mechanisms, fictitious representations, emotive messaging, and exploitation of uncertainty. This paper will review several cases of how Russia uses humor strategically in public diplomacy and external broadcasting to reject accusations of propaganda and interference and mock western sanctions. Additionally, I will question the persuasive potential and limitations of strategic humor. The paper offers insight into how strategic humor is used as a public diplomacy tool to advance state interests, deflect criticism, legitimate policy, and challenge the narratives of others.

Introduction

In 2015, the U.S. embassy in Moscow caused furor on social media: A major Russian newspaper had published an apparently fake Department of State letter, claiming that it presented evidence of U.S. interference into Russian affairs. The U.S. embassy responded with a Facebook post,¹ showing the letter heavily corrected in red ink, with a sarcastic invitation in perfect Russian to send any future fake letters for proofreading in advance. The post gained 27,000 likes, 11,000 reposts, and 1,300 comments. These were unprecedented statistics for an embassy social media post back in 2015. Russian embassies, too, regularly and effectively employ humor. For example, the embassy in London used tweets and memes to undermine the credibility of British accusations in the 2018 Salisbury poisoning and to ridicule opponents on various other occasions (Chernobrov, 2022; Kopper, 2021). From embassy tweets to online memes, widely shared by ordinary publics, and from humorous video clips broadcast by state news networks to pranks against foreign politicians, humor is increasingly used by states and affiliated actors to present foreign policy events to publics in a particular light.

The advantage of humor in politics is simple: It spreads better but is questioned less. This logic largely explains the frequent use of humor in electoral campaigns, when candidates seek to reach a wider audience, ridicule the opponent, or promote a claim that may not withstand a rational critical debate. Political campaigns widely use humor because it can draw media coverage (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014), attract disproportionate audience attention, and maximize outreach (Davis et al., 2018). Humor engages even with audiences not usually interested in politics because it can present serious messages as entertainment (Heiss, 2021). It particularly engages younger audiences who rely

on digital platforms as a source of news. Yet, publics do not treat humor as critically as the more serious political content, as humor reduces argument scrutiny, is often discounted as irrelevant to attitude judgments, or is easily written off as just fun (Young, 2008; Nabi et al., 2007). As a result, political actors can use humor to communicate risky, inaccurate, or controversial messages to wide audiences with limited adverse consequences.

Such calculated, intentional uses of humor in politics have traditionally been studied in the context of electoral campaigns and voting behavior (Shifman et al., 2007; Young, 2004); political comedy shows and public opinion (Farnsworth and Lichter, 2020; Morris, 2009); or authoritarianism and humor as a tool of resistance (Davies, 2015; Ding, 2013; Kraidy, 2016). The overwhelming majority of these studies focus on humor in relation to domestic politics, elections, and power hierarchies. However, there is a vast and rapidly growing presence of humor in international relations and digital public diplomacy, where narrative choices, outreach strategies, and storytelling techniques can decide “whose story wins” (Ronfeldt and Arquila, 2020).

This study explores applications of what I call *strategic humor* (Chernobrov, 2022a)—the deliberate use of humor by state and proxy actors to promote instrumental interpretations of events, deflect external criticism, undermine competing narratives, and legitimate policy. Multiple states, as discussed in this article, have reverted to humor in the narrative competition over international policies and events. In this paper, I take a more detailed look at Russia’s use of humor in public diplomacy and external broadcasting to reject accusations of propaganda and interference in the U.S. presidential elections and mock western sanctions during the war in Ukraine. I argue that the use of humor by states is not only strategic—intended

to maximize outreach, engagement, and persuasion among target audiences in line with broader foreign policy goals—but signals the rise of a *post-truth public diplomacy* that draws on emotive messaging, challenges others' credibility, and (re)produces uncertainty.

Public diplomacy, humorous storytelling, and the legitimization of foreign policy

Humor presents one of many ways to tell a story. In today's oversaturated media environments, where the abundance and speed of information far outstrip the audience's ability to make sense of it, *attention* rather than information becomes the more valuable resource (Nye, 2008). As a result, actors that seek or depend on public engagement (be it governments and elections; media and subscriptions; or public diplomacy and target audiences) compete for audience attention and prioritize storytelling techniques that give them an advantage in capturing it. This media logic, according to Strömbäck, can "shape the means by which political communication is played out by political actors, is covered by the media, and is understood by the people" (2008: 234). For example, driven by media logic, actors can compete for the media spotlight and package information in conformity with the media predilections and considerations of newsworthiness, even at the sake of accuracy and operational effectiveness (see Cottle and Nolan, 2007).

Digital media logic has increasingly been internalized into public diplomacy practices, particularly in relation to narrative content, production, and impact on the information environment (Pamment et al., 2023). Public diplomacy actors have adopted new communicative strategies that prioritize engagement and adapt to the formats, time frames, and conventions of digital platforms. This includes storytelling

formats such as memes, satire, irony, and sarcasm that trigger audience reactions and offer opportunities for interactive engagement. Humor is well suited to this adaptation of public diplomacy to the digital media logic, as it can provide an advantage in the competition for audience attention. Humor can present a newsworthy, memorable, and entertaining version of events that successfully engages audiences at an emotive level and can spread virally.

Humor can perform multiple political functions, from political critique, resistance, and contestation (Brassett, 2016) to polarization, identity politics and the construction of hierarchies (Berland and Ngai, 2017; Hall, 2014). Funny content can convey opposition, political identification, and civic support (Davis et al., 2018). Not all applications of humor are therefore intended to persuade. However, in an entertaining way, humor can deliver serious messages for and about actors of political communication (Shilikhina, 2013). In public diplomacy, humor can serve as a storytelling technique to popularize and legitimate a state's foreign policy. Hedling (2020: 147) defines storytelling in public diplomacy as "representation through the power of dramaturgy" that offers a compelling storyline and gives abstract notions (such as policy) a concrete and relatable form. Publics relate to events and others through emotions, and stories present political information in a way that makes us feel. It is through this process that we come to distinguish between the legitimate and illegitimate (Ahmed, 2004). In public diplomacy, storytelling could be regarded as "marketing a foreign policy so that it is recognized as legitimate and ascribes legitimacy to the brand" (Hedling, 2020: 146). Through humor as a storytelling strategy, state and non-state actors can narrate and legitimate foreign policy to publics, contest event interpretations, emotively engage audiences, and influence public opinion.

Humor reinterprets political events through cultural symbols and tropes, historical analogies, and societal values—and in doing so, can present inaccurate, distorted, or exaggerated representations of reality. In fact, it is often this very clash between the real and the unreal, the conventional and the absurd, that makes up the decisive point of humor (Morreall, 2011). In exposing incongruity, humor draws attention to a specific aspect of the story, dismisses unnecessary context, or forces simplified identities on event participants to provoke audiences into value judgements. While humor can help expose the truth, resist ideology, or raise taboo topics (as amply evidenced in literature on release humor and humor as a tool of resistance), humor about foreign policy can also produce fictitious impressions of world events that displace facts. As Furman and Musgrave (2017) argue, cultural scripts have significant power in shaping audience imagination of politics. This can be particularly aggravated when state actors promote rather than challenge fictitious readings of world politics such as in strategic applications of humor to advance their interests.

How states use humor to promote foreign policy narratives

States increasingly use humor to promote narratives about international events that advance their interests, deflect criticism, legitimate policy, and undermine the credibility of competing actors. Most of these efforts take place in the domain of digital public diplomacy, which involves the use of social media and digital platforms for diplomatic and persuasive purposes (see Bjola, 2015). Digital formats enable interactive engagement with publics, reducing governments' ability to control the message, but at the same time widening creative opportunities for nation branding and mobilizing publics (Brassett et.al., 2021).

Humor has been used by multiple states, particularly in situations of conflict or contestation. Such instances often take form of social media trolling—the deliberately provocative, short, and attention-catching posts that mock external actors and exchange humorous insults. In 2014, when Russian troops were captured in Ukraine and the Russian government claimed they had gotten “lost” and crossed the border by accident, the Joint Delegation of Canada to NATO famously tweeted a map² of the region to help soldiers distinguish between Russia and “not Russia.” Canadian diplomats used humor to undermine the credibility of Russia’s explanations and achieved unprecedented popularity because of the tweet (Manor, 2018).

In 2017, Russia’s Foreign Ministry mocked accusations of its interference in the U.S. election by posting voicemail instructions for its diplomatic missions on April Fool’s Day: “To use the services of Russian hackers, press 2; to request election interference, press 3” (Hemment, 2022). These uses of humor are deliberate: realizing the persuasive and mobilizing potential of humor in 2011–2012 protests, Russian state actors commissioned the production of viral videos and humorous content as a political technology to serve state ends (Fedor and Fredheim, 2017).

State efforts to ridicule opponents in public diplomacy seek to secure high audience uptake, which is the willingness of online users to participate in spreading and creatively responding to the message. In 2010, the Israeli Ministry of Public Diplomacy and Diaspora Affairs used satirical video clips as part of its campaign “Presenting Israel,” to counter external criticism and mobilize ordinary Israelis to become citizen-diplomats (Adler-Nissen and Tsinovoi, 2019). The campaign sarcastically challenged global stereotypes and criticisms about Israel and, despite becoming highly contested, succeeded in mobilizing publics (Attias, 2012).

In 2018, Iran produced memes to mock the White House decision to withdraw from the nuclear deal and presented the US as a fragile and collapsing superpower, to which the US responded in a similar fashion (Malmvig, 2023). The resulting “meme war” between Iranian and American top officials heavily drew on popular culture tropes, utilizing altered Hollywood movie posters and dark humor, and provoked a multitude of funny memes from the public.

The use of humor, therefore, is not limited to diplomats and social media practices of state officials. It can be produced and disseminated by state, proxy, and non-state actors such as external broadcasters, state-affiliated groups and organizations acting in the state’s interest or with semi-official links to the state, or even grassroots online activist groups. Memetic warfare, for example, is utilized by various online actors, from those directly linked to government influence campaigns (Zakem et al, 2018) to citizen participation (Peacock, 2023). The Ukraine war has seen various activist and diaspora groups (some with government involvement) use humor to revive international public and media attention and mobilize support. These “unofficial” actors can still contribute to the proliferation of state-led narratives about contested international events.

Strategic humor

I define strategic humor as the deliberate application of humor by state and proxy actors, to promote narratives that advance state interests through wider outreach and/or persuasion. The aims of strategic humor can be varied: to ensure that wider audiences are exposed to a specific narrative, to frame controversial events to one’s advantage; to present narratives and ideas too controversial for conventional political communication; to challenge the competing narratives of other political and media actors;

to embarrass, discredit or pressure foreign governments and media; to expose and exploit policy inconsistencies; to deflect and ridicule external criticism; to influence political and media agendas; and to portray in a favorable light, support, and legitimate foreign policy.

The application of strategic humor has several key characteristics.

Strategic humor enables framing of contested events to the advantage of a political actor. It can act both as a communicative frame that political actors use to structure and deliver a particular reading of an event and a cognitive frame that helps publics organize perception and memory (see Sullivan, 2023 for a comparison of frame types). Humorous political messages present events by selectively emphasizing some of their elements over others and providing meaning, moral evaluation, or causal interpretation; in other words, performing the task of a communicative frame (see Entman, 1993). At the same time, frames organize audience's perception of events, and audiences tend to remember humorous presentation better than traditional political news (Becker, 2013). The ability to frame events makes humor an appealing storytelling tool for political actors.

Strategic humor maximizes outreach. It is accessible, memorable, suited to digital media ecologies, shareable, and competitive in capturing news media and public attention. As examples above demonstrate, humor almost always achieves unprecedented audience engagement in comparison to traditional messaging. It becomes disseminated and reworked by online users, making its spread less controllable but also less dependent on the political actors' own resources. This engagement may not all be favorable, and outreach rather than persuasion may be its key outcome. At the very least, however, humor enables

political actors to reach wider and new audiences, many of whom would not be their usual followers and would not be routinely exposed to their messages.

Strategic humor drives emotive messaging, exploits uncertainty, and pursues popularity as a way of asserting truth claims. It does not usually put forward a detailed, consistent factual narrative that would fully explain events. Rather, it claims to expose inconsistencies, weaknesses and “hidden truths” behind existing narratives promoted by competing actors. Yet, strategic humor does not necessarily construct falsehoods; it mocks opponents and invites the audience to doubt *their* truthfulness. It blurs the boundary between the real and the imagined, opening opportunities for the use of strategic humor for mis/disinformation purposes.

The spread and reproduction patterns of strategic humor highlight the blurring of the domestic/foreign audience boundaries in public diplomacy and the shift of the boundary towards online/offline. The crossover between domestic and foreign audiences has already been noted as typical of public diplomacy in a digital media environment (Duncombe, 2019). Strategic humor can therefore simultaneously serve the purpose of mobilizing and uniting the domestic audience with a sense of superiority or righteousness through laughter, and sow confusion and discord among foreign audiences by offering an alternative narrative and undermining credibility of their government or media institutions.

Strategic humor is an asymmetrical tool of influence. It is less dependent on the state’s broader power resources and is often used to challenge hegemonic narratives such as popular stereotypes, dominant international public opinion, or narratives of powerful international actors. It can be used even when traditional power resources have been limited or constrained (by sanctions, war, hierarchical inequalities, or

widespread mistrust). In such cases, states may use humor to claim the position of resistance against hegemony, which, historically, has been a common and powerful application of humor in politics.

Strategic humor can be delivered through proxy as well as state actors. This obscures the humor's origin and enables claims of greater credibility, particularly if audiences mistrust official state messages as propaganda. An example would be Russia's use of pranks against foreign politicians to promote Russian state narratives, in which pranksters clearly act in the interests of the state and are supported by it but are not official state employees and claim to be "ordinary guys" unmasking lies in high politics (Chernobrov, 2024).

Strategic humor is not simply a tactic to tell a story in a *better* way; it is a strategy to tell a *wider* story than that of a single event, promote broader strategic narratives, and aim for influence along multiple vectors. States use strategic narratives to convince target audiences of the desirability of particular action, shape their understanding of themselves and the international system, and get them to share the narrator's vision of the present and future (Miskimmon et al., 2013). Strategic narratives become a power resource, key to understanding influence and contestation (Roselle et al., 2014). Besides framing a specific event to one's advantage, strategic humor can also build up uncertainty, manipulate trust in other actors and institutions, shape opinions and diffuse ideas, pursue different outcomes for international and domestic audiences, therefore supporting wider public diplomacy and foreign policy goals. For example, Russia's use of humor to mock Britain's narrative of the 2018 Salisbury poisoning did not just dispute a single event or accusation. To the domestic audience, it affirmed the wider strategic narratives about Russia's return as a global power, the revival of the Russia-West confrontation, and the use of propaganda

by western democracies. To European and British audiences, it presented an alternative explanation, increased mistrust of the government, targeted the reputation of the British PM, and exposed her as unable to provide security to British citizens.

A closer look: RT and the use of humor to counter external accusations

International broadcasting is considered one of the core areas of public diplomacy (Cull, 2019), as it involves “the use of electronic media by one society to shape the opinion of the people and leaders of another” (Price, 2003: 53). RT (formerly *Russia Today*) is Russia’s main state-funded external broadcaster and a key tool for Russia’s public diplomacy. Broadcasting in nine languages to over 800 million international viewers, RT sees its mission as “cover[ing] stories overlooked by the mainstream media, provid[ing] alternative perspectives on current affairs, and acquaint[ing] international audiences with a Russian viewpoint on major global events” (RT, n.d.). It also claims to be the top non-Western news network on digital platforms. Pomerantsev (2014: 46), a prominent critic of RT, has described it as “Russia’s answer to BBC World and Al Jazeera.” RT positions itself as a provider of counter-hegemonic news, challenging the dominance of Western political and media agendas (Rawnsley, 2015). The success of a public diplomacy media, as Rawnsley argues, is in achieving the reputation of credible and professional journalism on the one hand and advancing the interests of the state on the other.

The network has repeatedly been accused of propaganda and misinformation. In 2014, following Russia’s annexation of Crimea, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry famously labeled RT a “propaganda bullhorn,” while the 2017 U.S. Intelligence Committee Assessment linked the channel to Russia’s

interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. In 2018, the UK media regulator Ofcom ruled that RT had failed to preserve impartiality in its news coverage and later fined the channel. In 2022, shortly after the start of the war in Ukraine, RT was banned in the EU countries and the UK, blocked on YouTube, and RT America was closed. However, RT remains a powerful tool of influence in other parts of the world, particularly in the Global South and in regions with strong anti-American sentiment (see Kahn, 2023). Russia's public diplomacy messaging also retains an audience in the West, exploiting local conspiracy theories, social polarization, and mistrust towards political elites and institutions (Yablokov, 2022).

RT often employs humor to ridicule accusations of propaganda and interference, made both against the news network and Russia's government. Sarcastic and mocking video clips, promoted via RT's digital platforms, gain a considerable audience and are widely shared further because of the humorous format of the otherwise serious political messages. Usually filmed in English or in Russian with foreign language subtitles to make them accessible to global audiences, they are aired on RT, posted on digital platforms, and have also appeared on foreign TV channels. In this paper, I review four cases of strategic humor in RT coverage.

RT and "how Kremlin propaganda bullhorn really works"

In December 2015, celebrating its 10th anniversary, RT published a humorous video showing "how Kremlin propaganda bullhorn really works" (RT, 2015). The title was a clear allusion to John Kerry's earlier accusation of RT and concluded with a promise to "keep getting them [Western government officials] angry." Ridiculing claims of Russian government's editorial control over RT and state-funded

propaganda, the four-minute video promoted a wider strategic narrative that Western accusations and criticism of Russia's policies were largely based on Cold War stereotypes, clichés, and Russophobia. The video begins with RT Editor-in-Chief Margarita Simonyan, dressed in grotesque Soviet winter military uniform and with Soviet music playing in the background, supervising the delivery of trucks full of U.S. dollars from the state budget. Simonyan takes bundles of money for bribes and personal expenses and feeds the rest to RT's creative director—a brown bear. RT headquarters has strict discipline, blood-stained floors, and even the janitors of its "clean-up department" report directly to the Kremlin. News anchors are handcuffed to desks; news broadcasts from Syria and Ukraine are filmed on a stage set; and RT's foreign staff are imprisoned in KGB-style dungeons. Piling up the myths and stereotypes about Russia, the clip asks "Is this how you imagined [our work]?" and proceeds to list accusations against RT from Western officials. It concludes with "secret footage" of Vladimir Putin personally approving the release of the clip, further ridiculing accusations of direct editorial control from the government. Before being removed from YouTube, the video received over 267,000 views, 8,000 likes (with 500 dislikes) and 1,600 comments on the platform and was reposted on multiple news websites and digital platforms.

Using humor, RT put forward a dual message in this video. On the one hand, accusations of propaganda were ridiculed to the point where they became laughable, unreal, and therefore easily dismissible. RT positioned itself as a network asking the West uncomfortable questions and therefore predictably attracting criticism, to the point where propaganda accusations were portrayed as a compliment to journalistic professionalism that holds government to account (see Chernobrov and Briant, 2022). On the other hand, RT ridiculed propaganda accusations as a wider

political attack on Russia, driven not by RT's journalistic practices, but by a revived Cold War rivalry, geopolitical interests, and wider misconceptions. Suggesting that anyone who disagrees with the West could face similar accusations, strategic humor deflected criticism into a question of global resistance to hegemony. Humor invited global audiences not simply to share a laugh but to view the issue as part of a global counter-hegemonic struggle, all too familiar to both Russian and other non-Western audiences.

RT offering a job to Donald Trump

In September 2020—a few weeks before the U.S. presidential election where incumbent President Donald Trump faced Democrat candidate Joe Biden—RT “invited” Donald Trump to work for the news network. The deepfake video (RT, 2020) ridiculed suggestions of Trump's links to Russia and Russia's interest in his re-election, which were a major controversy during Trump's four years of presidency.

The video starts with Trump arriving at RT headquarters in a limo, deliberately walking through the wrong entrance, and then proudly displaying his signed one billion dollar contract with RT: “It was a very nice offer from President Putin, and I could have said, ‘No, thank you,’ or I could have said, ‘Thank you,’ and I said, ‘I’ll take it.’” He mixes up the name of his female co-host, dismissing her correction as “Name, whatever you wanna name,” and complains about the teleprompter: “I can’t read this, [it] changes so fast.” Seeing a draft news poster of himself and Putin together, reading, “Putin’s Apprentice,” Trump exclaims, “I love that idea! I think I can do that!” He wonders aloud, “How would I combat a reporter or a network that’s totally dishonest?” and then corrects his own tweet from “fake news” to “make news.” Standing next to the Kremlin, Trump boasts, “I make a lot of money with them. They pay me hundreds of millions.”

He is interrupted by the Kremlin-bells ringtone on his phone, picks up the call, and stands to attention facing the Kremlin. Walking along the high Kremlin wall, he approvingly chuckles, "Here's a nice one—a great wall, and nobody builds walls better than me, and I build them very inexpensively." In the RT's self-service canteen, Trump selects his food and walks past the cash counter, remarking "And just in case you are worried about who is going to pay for it—Mexico will pay for it." The video concludes with the message: "Mr. Trump, if you don't win the White House, consider this an official job offer. Until then, follow the U.S. presidential election on RT."

Interestingly, the video ridicules both the accusations of Trump's connections with Russia (presenting them as fake news and an electoral trick) and Trump himself. RT laughs at his well-known self-aggrandizing manner, arrogance, attacks on news media, misbehavior towards women, anti-migration stance, typos in social media messages, and even his campaign slogan. This parody captures many of the criticisms made by Trump's opponents within the US itself, including jokes about Trump in American late-night comedy shows (Farnsworth and Lichter, 2020). But once again, RT's humor combines several narratives into one: Its ridicule of Trump, which appeals to his opponents and can help it spread, is packaged together with ridicule of accusations against Trump. This supports the Russian government's narrative about the issue. The video attracted multiple YouTube and social media reposts, thousands of likes and comments.

RT's 'Anti-Russian Christmas' commercial

In December 2022, ten months after the start of the war in Ukraine, RT launched an "anti-Russian Christmas" ad targeting European audiences (RT, 2022). The ad drew attention to the rising energy costs in Europe, implicitly

blaming them on the EU's support for Ukraine and Western sanctions against Russia. The video shows a European family celebrating Christmas three years in a row, in rapidly deteriorating economic conditions. It starts with a scene from the Christmas of 2021, when a delighted young girl receives a pet hamster with a red bow as a present. Festive music is playing in the background, and the house is warm and alight with Christmas decorations. The Christmas of 2022 takes place in darkness, and the family members are dressed in warm coats and earmuffs as they are forced to save energy. The hamster, running on a handmade wheel, generates electricity for the Christmas tree. The video then fast-forwards to the Christmas of 2023, which sees the family bundled up in coats and scarves and living in poverty, as wind blows through holes in the windows. They are eating watery soup for dinner, when the horrified father pulls the hamster's red bow out of its mouth. The mother quickly shushes him, not wishing the girl to discover that they have to cook their pet. The commercial concludes with the message: "Merry 'Anti-Russian' Christmas! If your media doesn't tell you where this is all going, RT is available via VPN."

The video does not directly mention Ukraine, the war, or sanctions, leaving it to the audience to draw the obvious connection. This is another characteristic of RT's humorous content: it does not put forward a narrative directly about the events (for example, justify Russia's actions in Ukraine). Instead, it stimulates mistrust and builds on European domestic discontent with the energy crisis by challenging the narratives of other actors—in this case, EU authorities. The closing message implies that European governments and media are hiding the truth and burdening their own citizens with the cost of pro-Ukraine policies and anti-Russian sanctions. The ad appeared on various platforms, was reported and reposted by many international media

outlets,³ and shared widely on social media by journalists (for example, BBC's Francis Scarr) and users. And although some of those sharing the video were critical and indignant (even comparing it to a "new level of fascism"), some of the most popular online comments signaled appreciation: "Actually watched this commercial on our news with the family at Christmas in Europe. And we all had a good laugh! Thank you, RT."⁴

RT and the 11th package of sanctions against Russia

This deepfake clip (RT, 2023) was released in June 2023, as the EU was preparing new restrictions against Russia amid the war in Ukraine. It ridiculed top western politicians such as Joe Biden, Rishi Sunak, Ursula von der Leyen, Olaf Scholz, and Emmanuel Macron as struggling to conjure up the 11th package of sanctions. The video begins with President Biden at the Oval Office, discarding memos with one suggestion after another and banging his head on the wall in desperation, declaring "No, no, no, that's bull ... We need some fresh ideas —better, stronger, and effective." Later in the video, Biden lies down with the words "God, I am so tired," as RT shows him as old and unfit for office. The UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak is agonizing at No.10 Downing Street over a blank sheet of paper titled "11th package ideas" and resorting to a roulette-like "Wheel of personal sanctions." The pointer falls on the character from the Soviet cartoon *Hedgehog in the Fog* who gives a muffled gasp, realizing that he will now be banned. A severe-looking Ursula von der Leyen, surround by empty coffee cups and cigarette butts, composes bans on all things Russian (salad, dolls, wolfhounds) on a flipchart, while Olaf Scholz cheats by entering "Ideas for sanctions against Russia" into ChatGPT; A distressed Emmanuel Macron storms out of an EU Sanctions Committee "brainstorming session," gesticulating rudely. Finally, Ursula von der Leyen is shown throwing darts at a world map of "Countries to ban RT in"

and hits Antarctica, where penguins shudder in protest as RT live coverage is switched off.

The deepfake clip, in a humorous form, promoted Russia's official narrative of Western sanctions as failing and pointless, indiscriminate in targeting Russians, and lacking logic and justification. From canceling Russian cultural heritage to the randomness of personal sanctions, the video built an image of Russia's resilience in the face of injustice, with Western leaders powerless to restrict and sanction anything else. The video was widely shared by Russia's foreign embassies on social media and was picked up by multiple international news outlets. It went viral with hundreds of thousands of views, comments, and reposts.

Like in other examples, humor in this case goes beyond a singular event or accusation. Its portrayal of Western sanctions is interwoven with other narratives and issues, from Biden's age and electoral prospects to the recent debates on artificial intelligence. It does not put forward a single clear explanation of the war in Ukraine or the Western response to it, which could be questioned in its accuracy or logic. The video is *a priori* inaccurate—a parody that does not insist on audiences agreeing with Russia's perspective of the war but invites them to laugh at Western leaders in difficulty, challenged in their power and unable to have their way.

Outreach vs. persuasion: considerations of impact on audiences

Does humor have persuasive power as a tool of public diplomacy? Does it inform and alter opinion or simply attract and entertain? In some ways, these two opposites are linked. As Nye (2008: 95) suggested, soft power is not only the ability to persuade and move people by argument,

but also the ability to entice and attract. Despite the recent proliferation of studies about humor and international relations, the persuasive power and limitations of humor as a tool of public diplomacy remain largely ambiguous. Humor can certainly help a message spread more widely by involving audiences in the sharing and reproduction of humorous content (even when disagreeing with it), attracting media attention, and reaching apolitical audiences. However, does strategic humor have persuasive power?

Miller (2013) identifies three key types of persuasion: *response shaping* (where an individual has no clear prior attitude to the issue), *response reinforcement* (where an individual confirms already held views and becomes even more committed to them), and *response change* (where an individual alters views or behavior). The persuasive power of political humor is difficult to achieve, not least because both sources and receivers can plausibly deny serious intent or dismiss the message as just a joke, or listeners can feel manipulated and see through the persuasive intent behind the message (Innocenti & Miller, 2016). However, audiences tend to think of persuasion more narrowly, only as attitude change, so that a message can shape or reinforce existing views without being seen as overtly persuasive or irritating (Tchernev et al., 2021). When it comes to humor, people focus on other things (such as enjoyment, getting the joke, signaling a shared identity to others in the audience) and can overlook broader persuasive intent (Ibid: 746).

There are indications that political humor can *shape* opinion, especially among audiences with lower factual knowledge of the issue in question (Young, 2004). A focus-group study of the persuasive effect of Russia's strategic humor on its domestic audience, conducted as part of this CPD project and based on the examples of Russia's foreign policy pranks, concludes that humor works best to *reinforce*

views and already popular narratives, but is less successful in reversing attitudes (Chernobrov, 2024). The study involved six focus groups, exploring Russia's use of humor to deflect accusations of propaganda and interference and make similar accusations against the West. Importantly, as the study revealed, reinforced views are often wider than about a specific event. For example, strategic humor was more successful in reaffirming belief in the inevitability of the Russia-West struggle (wider strategic narrative) than views about the specific incident mocked in the humorous message. Additionally, audience reception (including the appeal and enjoyment of humor) did not necessarily involve persuasive outcomes on political views. For foreign audiences, strategic humor can serve as a rallying call for those already dissatisfied or mistrustful of their government and media and can disguise itself as satire and political critique that is familiar to Western audiences from popular comedy shows. The primary persuasive potential of strategic humor in public diplomacy, therefore, is to reinforce views and mobilize publics around particular narratives.

The appeal of humor, however, is not undermined by its limited ability to persuade. Humor can still appeal to audiences regardless of whether they agree with its message. Audiences may be attracted to the humorous style rather than the particular reading of foreign policy issues (Crisley and Chatterje-Doody, 2020). In other words, humor's wide outreach may be due to the enjoyment of the joke and its shared symbolic language rather than readiness to accept its conclusions, or audiences may remain unaware of persuasive intent if the joke only reinforces their views. The impact of strategic humor, therefore, is outreach first and persuasion second. However, on both counts, it can help states increase the appeal of their messaging and pursue foreign policy goals.

Post-truth public diplomacy

Post-truth is typically described as the declining value of facts and the growing role of emotions (Crilly, 2018), with increasing disregard for evidence in political discourse (Lockie, 2017). The phenomenon is not entirely new: spin, manipulation, and propaganda have always been part of political communication (Collins, 2019). Post-truth politics is not so much about the sudden disappearance of truth, but the shifting priorities, perceptions and practices of truth and untruth in political discourse. In the current media environment, it represents “the transition from relatively centralized systems of falsification to the multiplication and fragmentation of the ways lies are spread and perpetuated in the contemporary communication chaos” (Waisbord, 2018: 21). Political speech in post-truth politics is “increasingly detached from a register in which factual truths are ‘plain’” (Hyvönen, 2018: 38). “Post-truth” communication creates and exploits confusion, uncertainty, and emotions, and claims credibility through popularity rather than evidence.

I argue that strategic humor signals the rise of a *post-truth public diplomacy* (Chernobrov, 2022a), reliant on outreach and popularity mechanisms, fictitious representations, emotive and viral messaging, and the creation and exploitation of uncertainty and doubt. Manipulation is central to humor. What makes it funny is the relationship between surface content and implied meanings, shared by the speaker and the audience (Flamson and Bryant, 2013). Strategic humor suggests there is another layer of truth behind the surface, as it claims to expose international actors’ hidden motives and agendas. It invites audiences to doubt familiar or even dominant narratives or mistrust established and usual sources of information (government, media, elites). These messages are facilitated by the rising popular dissatisfaction and mistrust of politicians, and by widespread expectations

of fakes in a digital media environment. Strategic humor can be both critical and conspiratorial, merging the traditional functions of humor as resistance and critique with persuasion and deception.

Post-truth public diplomacy employs strategic humor to offer an emotional rather than factual narrative. It reinforces and sharpens beliefs, offers enjoyment, creates a sense of community of those who share the joke, and builds appealing hierarchies where the opponent is humiliated or dismissed through laughter. Emotions are central to how audiences receive and make judgements about public diplomacy messages and are therefore key to their persuasive effect (Graham, 2014). Post-truth public diplomacy is even more reliant on the emotional appeal to make truth claims. Its credibility is no longer based on the "careful presentation of fact and thoughtful argumentation" (as Brown, 2008, describes the best public diplomacy), but on emotional identification and mobilization, popularity mechanisms, and self-affirming (even if inaccurate) narratives (Chernobrov, 2019).

Strategic humor's reliance on outreach, emotional appeal, and audience mobilization is the distinctive characteristic of post-truth public diplomacy. It also reflects the wider *participatory* "turn" in public diplomacy, propaganda, and conflict. Participatory propaganda enables anyone with an internet connection to disseminate, amplify, or contest narratives through online acts such as liking and sharing information. It obscures the origin of the message and exploits the advantage of regular, citizen voices as seemingly more "authentic" and credible than those of known propagandistic actors such as governments. Participatory propaganda enters everyday life, where citizens can engage in conflict and contestation online, from the safety of their living rooms (Asmolov, 2019). It prioritizes emotional posts,

visual narratives, and attempts to increase one side's visibility and drown the voice of the opponent, often by adapting to social media algorithms (Chernobrov, 2022b). In other words, both public diplomacy and propaganda increasingly rely on digital participation and on visibility and popularity mechanisms. Post-truth public diplomacy makes use of strategies that achieve these goals. Strategic humor is therefore an appealing tool of post-truth public diplomacy, albeit not the only one.

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Endnotes

1. <https://www.facebook.com/russia.usembassy/photos/a.109928132395558/940481849340178/?type=3&theater>
2. <https://twitter.com/CanadaNATO/status/504651534198927361>
3. For example, major British tabloid Daily Mail reposted the full video (<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/embed/video/2842989.html>); and the ad was reported or reposted by Newsweek, New York Post, Independent, Ukraine's UNIAN, and many others.
4. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cM-hvzHTtiA>

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