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SATIRE IN PUTIN'S RUSSIA

CYNICAL DISTANCE AS A TOOL OF STATE POWER

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Abstract: For a brief period following the collapse of the Soviet Union, a degree of political freedom existed in Russia that allowed political satire to appear on television. Different oligarchs purchased important television channels and used them to push the Boris Yeltsin government to approve policies favorable to their business interests by polarizing public opinion against the government. The fractious nature of Russian media in the 1990s and the battles for influence between different oligarchs created an environment in which political satire existed openly in Russian culture, which had not been permitted during the nearly seventy years of communist rule. A particularly significant example of this was NTV's program *Kukly* (Puppets) (1994-2002) based on the UK program *Spitting Image*, which featured puppet versions of prominent Russian politicians, and aired three-hundred-sixty-three episodes. Yeltsin unexpectedly resigned as president of Russia on December 31, 1999, and was succeeded by Vladimir Putin, who has remained the central political figure in Russia since then. Putin's government almost immediately began to reign in media freedoms. By the end of 2002, all of Russia's major media properties were under the control of either a state-owned company or close allies of the Russian government. Unsurprisingly *Kukly* was taken off the air that year, and political satire disappeared from Russian mass culture. This paper will map out the development of Russian satire on television since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Using prominent examples from unscripted standup comedy, evening variety shows and scripted dramas that are openly political and apparently apolitical, this paper argues the Russian television industry engages with and subverts the potential of various satirical genres resulting in the creation of cynical distance that potentially impedes the ability of satire to speak truth to power.

Keywords: Russia, television, satire

1 Introduction

Looking at Russian television today, one might get the impression that satire makes up a significant portion of the programming on offer. This observation would not be entirely unjustified; since the late 1990s, there has been a proliferation of program types on Russian television. There is now an abundance of programs where jokes lampoon politicians or the state. One might easily count the numerous sketch and standup comedy programs on the Russian networks TNT and STS, as well as the continued presence of the improvisational program *KVN* on Channel One, which played a significant role as satire in the waning days of the USSR, as signs of a vital sphere of satire in Vladimir Putin's Russia. The fact that, as will be discussed in the paper, satirical programs regularly joke about Putin himself,

often with the Russian president in the audience, might be seen as a positive development. This paper argues that despite the presence of an abundance of satirical programs in Russia today, their principal role is to sublimate the difficulties that people have with life in Russia today, allowing them through laughter to dissociate from it, and frame themselves as not being active participants in the system itself. This distancing is accomplished by creating what Slavoj Žižek calls cynical distancing.

2 Satire and Cynical Distance

As Semenenko notes, there are numerous types of satire discussed by scholars. One such form is “militant irony”, which offers a form of resistance, subversion, and protest that turns hegemonic discourses on themselves. He notes that: “satire often has no real political effect and serves primarily as a safety valve to alleviate frustration.” He also suggests that “in that sense, satire can work not only as a destructive force associated with critique, subversion, and transgression but also as a mechanism of coping with the perceived social, political, and/or cultural imbalance.” He concludes that in such instances “its main function is thus sublimation; it may recycle and reinforce the existing social and political status quo and thus... [transmutes] the protest against authority.”¹ This stance is similar to the one taken by Slavoj Žižek, who sees types of irony as indicating a posture of ‘cynical distance’, which he states is a part of the mechanism that allows oppressive forces in democratic and totalitarian societies to maintain control. By taking a stance of distanced laughter and non-participation in ideological projects seen as false, Žižek concludes that citizens actually participate in perpetuating these systems.² What is evident from the various instances of satire on Russian television since Putin came to office is that they are principally a way for people to see the humour in their circumstances and laugh at them, but never to challenge the system that gives rise to them.

This apparent passivity is rooted in a long-standing Russian cynicism that, according to Roudakova, has played a role in consolidating authoritarian governance under Putin.³ The cynical distance with which many Russians treat the Russian State is helped by the relative homogeneity of representations available on television, which is still Russia's most important medium. Except for a brief period in the Yeltsin era, Russian television has had an almost complete absence of discourses that would contest the official narrative. Unlike the Soviet period, this system is managed not by censors but rather by market-based incentives. Those who want access to television infrastructure, including studio space, network airtime and access to industry executives and the wealth and prestige that access brings are forced into conformity.⁴ The result of the authoritarian capitalist system assembled under Putin is that most discourses, including satire and other forms of humour, are limited to showing the absurdity of the situations of Russian life, thereby allowing Russians to laugh at them, dismiss their non-participation in the system and then simply continue with their lives. The most prevalent type of satire on Russian television is social satire. This type of satire may point to structural and political problems in society. Still, it always does so obliquely, often using characters' personal problems to show the flaws in the system. Explicit political satire, the type that mocks politicians and political systems directly, is present, albeit in a neutral form. The consequence of the dominance of the former creates a tendency for Russians to laugh at the absurdity of their lives and the system they live under but seems ineffective at bringing about any popular movements or social change. In short, it allows them to create a cynical distance between themselves and the political and economic system in Putin's Russia.

It is perhaps not surprising then that much like the humour of the late Soviet period, political satire on Russian television has turned away from attempting to resolve the problems of systemic oppression in the Russian system to highlighting the absurd elements of the country under Putin. This shift parallels Sergei Oushakine's observation that late Soviet humour did not offer a resolution to the oppression faced by Soviet citizens, but rather, it “provided an impromptu manual, a curious cultural guidebook to pitfalls and idiosyncrasies of socialism.”⁵ As Davies notes, jokes in Russia “are social thermometers that measure, record and indicate what is going on.”⁶ This paper adopts the framework of Critical Industry Studies outlined by Havens, Lotz and Tinic, which seeks to examine the economic and social conditions that result in media text production.⁷ As such, there is a focus on the context of production as well as

the content itself. This paper will map out the development of Russian satire on television since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Using prominent examples from unscripted standup comedy, evening variety shows and scripted dramas that are openly political and apparently apolitical, this paper argues the Russian television industry engages with and subverts the potential of various satirical genres resulting in the creation of cynical distance that potentially impedes the ability of satire to speak truth to power.

3 Post-Soviet Satire

A complete history of Russian and Soviet satire would be impossible to do in a journal article and requires more extended treatment. It is perhaps enough to note in this work that Soviet satire has a complex history. During the Soviet period, satire existed in two forms: official and unofficial. According to Olga Mesropova, in the eras of Stalin and Khrushchev, satire was seen as a tool the communist party could use to advance communism.⁸ Russian satirical expression aimed at the Soviet State saw a strong revival during the Gorbachev years. With the policy of *glasnost* in 1985, open criticism of the Soviet regime was not only allowed but encouraged at the highest levels of the Communist Party. According to Mesropova, “bold political and social satirical themes, which previously had found venues strictly in private joke-telling now became public: on the standup comedy stage, in state-supported publications, in mainstream cinema and on radio and television.”⁹ Formerly clandestine forms of satire found a broad audience in printed collections, book series, and the burgeoning internet.

The collapse of the Soviet regime in 1991 brought changes to satirical expression. The 1990s saw a decentralisation of media ownership as the newly wealthy oligarch class purchased state-owned media properties. These oligarchs frequently used these properties to turn public opinion against the Yeltsin administration.¹⁰ Much of this was done with formats like news and current events programming. The existence of multiple competing power centers in Russian society, in this case the oligarchs and the state and their competition for influence, allowed satire to be aimed at the state. Oligarchs like Vladimir Gussinsky and Boris Berezovsky had the resource and influence to promote anti-state discourses. Gussinsky was particularly brazen, turning the full force of his station, NTV, against both Yeltsin and Putin. One example of political satire that stands out in the post-Soviet period is *Kukly (Puppets)* (1994-2002). The program was based on the French program *Les guignols de l'info* (1998-2018) and the British program *Spitting Image* (1984-1996), which featured puppets styled to look like prominent members of the Russian elite.¹¹ The program aired starting in 1994 on NTV. While the program's leading writer Victor Shenderovich described his initial stance toward the government of Boris Yeltsin as one of embarrassed acceptance, this changed in December of 1994 with the beginning of the First Chechen War.¹² The program viciously mocked Yeltsin, mainly focusing on his well-known alcoholism. Yeltsin was displeased with the portrayal and had the Prosecutor General launch an investigation against the program for insulting the president's honour and dignity.¹³ The case was eventually dismissed, but it was apparent from *Kukly's* earliest days that it was on a collision course with the state.

Tensions reignited in the early 2000s. Yeltsin had resigned from the presidency of the Russian Federation, and his hand-picked successor Vladimir Putin had become interim president. There was already tension between the Russian government and NTV since the station's owner Vladimir Gussinsky was one of Putin's chief rivals and was backing other candidates in the 2000 presidential election. In the run-up to election day, *Kukly* aired skits that “featured Putin variously as a wimpy czar reluctant to perform his bedroom duties for his bride, Russia;... a judo master defeated by Bill Clinton;... a vicious monkey-like dwarf who bewitched a city into regarding him as a handsome and wise minister.”¹⁴ An example of the program can still be found on Youtube today.

After Putin's victory in the 2000 elections, crackdowns against NTV followed swiftly. After police raids and legal actions, one of the conditions imposed on the station was that Putin could no longer be the antagonist of *Kukly*. The program from then on only featured him offstage as a godlike figure whose acolytes acted as messengers to the Russian people in the style of Moses. Putin's inner circle orchestrated a takeover of NTV in 2001 that saw the station



Video 1. An episode of Kukly titled Cataracs where Putin is depicted as a myopic ruler incapable of seeing what is happening in his kingdom.

become part of the media arm of the state-run oil and gas company Gazprom. *Kukly* remained on the air for three years after the takeover, but the satire was noticeably less biting. With *Kukly* effectively neutered, Russian humorists became very cautious in their treatment of high-ranking officials, particularly Putin and his successor in the president's office, Dimitri Medvedev.

Another example of the institutional capture of satire and its contribution to the development of cynical distance in Russia can be found in one of the country's most unique and iconic programs, the sketch comedy competition *KVN* (1961-), a Russian acronym for *Club of the Merry and Quick Witted*. The program has had several iterations, but since its 1986 revival has been known for its political comedy.¹⁵ The first version of *KVN* aired from 1961 to 1972. As Semenenko notes, its Soviet incarnations often drew the ire of political officials by mocking the poor quality of Soviet products in the Khrushchev era and other quotidian gripes common to Soviet citizens. Discomfort with the program's live format led to it being pre-recorded before finally being cancelled in 1972.¹⁶ During *glasnost*, the program was revived and no longer limited to smuggling in political topics. This version of the series openly mocked the disjunct between the policies of *perestroika* and *glasnost* and much of the late communist political establishment.¹⁷

Today, according to Semenenko, the program is "more than a TV program, it is a movement consisting of several leagues and thousands of teams in different control", adding that "it is an exemplary case of the 'officially approved' and tightly controlled satire and humour, which occasionally is used by the state for its political purposes."¹⁸ Two current judges on *KVN* are Konstantin Ernst and Vyacheslav Murugov, who are part of Putin's entourage. The two men are the General Producers (roughly equivalent to CEOs) of Channel One and National Media Group, respectively. Together they represent the bulk of television production in Russia today.¹⁹ Their presence is both a means of scouting talent and keeping tight control over *KVN*. A significant percentage of the most famous and successful individuals in the Russian television industry began performing on *KVN*. Because people like Ernst and Murugov use the program to identify talent, they can also filter out anti-Putin elements that might enter the television industry.

Putin himself is also a frequent guest of the program. He regularly attends the competitions, and often actors interact directly with him. As Semenenko notes:

Such close patronage of the head of state has its consequences, among them the fact that practically all political jokes are now filtered and are subject to a multilayered system of editing or, in other words,

ensorship. Political criticism as such is not banned, and there are plenty of impersonal jokes about corruption... but criticism of Putin simply does not exist...All parodies of Putin (and, to a lesser degree Dmitri Medvedev when he was the president) are flattering or neutral at best.²⁰

Maria Tagangaeva, for her part, notes that “joking about [Putin] and [Medvedev] requires a specific style... Putin is usually portrayed as a serious leader who has invincible authority, commanding respect, and fear.”²¹ Consequently, while *KVN* was once a satirical force in Russian life, the program has been effectively neutered. It now actually serves as a part of Putin’s cult of personality. Given the people who control it, it no longer has the potential to mock anything other than routine corruption in Russia.

Other famous programs have offered some political satire but similarly have been deferential in their treatment of Putin. In 2008 four comedians (Ivan Urgant, Sergei Svetlakov, Garik Martirocyan and Aleksandr Tsekalo) left *KVN* to found another program *ProjektorPerisHilton* (henceforth *PPH*) (2008-2012). The program’s title is a blend of the name of a glasnost era program (*Prozhektor Perestroika*) but with the second part replaced with Paris Hilton, to distinguish it as coming from the age of globalised glamour.²² The program mainly featured the four leads sitting at a table, drinking tea, and discussing current events humorously. The program aired on Channel One under Ernst’s supervision. As Tagangaeva notes, “Many Russian journalists criticised *PPH* as offering only biased and one-sided criticism of Russia’s “officially declared” enemies—America, Ukraine, Georgia, and Belarus—when the leaders of Russia’s allies were not the subject of a single cutting joke.”²³ She adds that jokes about Putin and Medvedev were limited to three particular types: jokes about Putin’s promotion of Russian cars, Putin’s famous displays of masculinity and athletic prowess, and the efforts to monitor the run-up to the Sochi Olympics. The program ended in 2012 when two hosts (Svetlakov and Martirocyan) signed an exclusive deal with rival network TNT that forbade them from working on Channel One. There were rumours that the cancellation was political since it roughly coincided with the return of Putin to the presidency, though these were never proven.

While it is unlikely that Russians are aware of the political and economic background that has led to the neutering of *KVN* or *PPH*, their treatment of Putin, Medvedev and other politicians in Putin’s orbit can contribute to further cynical distancing in the Russian population. Since Putin is treated with such deference and has been present at many competitions, the natural assumption is that the laughter it elicits should be tainted with a certain cynicism. These programs are part of the official discourse of the Russian state, and any satire they offer can be laughed at with the knowledge that it, too, is deeply controlled. Again, the structure of these discourses and the presence of prominent members of the Russian political and economic ruling classes leads to a cynical detachment. The presence of the conspiracy theory surrounding the departing members of *PPH* is an example of cynical distancing. Those who propagated such rumours were noting their non-participation with the Russian system while still laughing at how Russian society was presented on *PPH*.

Both hosts who had departed *PPH* became resident comedians at TNT’s *Comedy Club* (2005 -), a program that hosted thirty to forty resident comedians who performed standup comedy. TNT is known for its edgy, crude brand of comedy. Their intention is to be “cocky, offensive, dirty, stupid, but most importantly, actually funny.” Despite this stated goal, the program still appears to be carefully managed. Jokes about Putin are primarily safe and sanitised. This fact is not surprising given that the majority of the comedians in residence have publicly stated their support for Putin.²⁴

That is not to say that *Comedy Club* and its various spinoffs, such as *Stand Up*, *Stand Up Women*, and *Nasha Russia*, do not lampoon aspects of Russian society. Rather they tend to speak mainly about the general absurdity of the system. Consequently, rather than political satire, most of what is presented on standup comedy programs amounts to social satire. This form of satire is much safer for the practitioners since it allows them to make fun of Russian society and its various absurdities but never to directly transgress the dangerous realm of politics. For example, in a March 2021 segment called “Russian Technology”, comedian Pavel Volya (another *KVN* alumni) lampooned a news story that declared 2021 as the “year of Russian science and technology” by looking at the technologies that could be used to make Russia technologically independent from the West.



Video 2. Pavel Volya mocks the Russian initiative declaring 2021 the year of Russian Science and Technology.

He begins the monologue by noting, “I read about [the year of Russian science and technology] on my Korean phone, while making coffee in my Italian coffee maker, then sat in my German car to drive to my office, I sat at my Swedish desk where I opened my American laptop and declared ‘I am ready for the year of Russian science and technology.’”²⁵ The sketch shows proposed Russian technologies, which are inferior to those they would be replacing, pointing out the silliness of the plan to decouple Russia from the West. The entire sketch goes on to mock many Russian technologies, such as a Russian laptop that weighs eighteen and a half kilograms, flash storage that can store only eight photographs, an autonomous tram guided by Russia’s unreliable GPS alternative Glonass, and delivery robots being developed by Russian search engine Yandex which closely resemble coolers with wheels. The comedy never mentions Putin by name, though his picture is shown when Volya displays the news story he is mocking. Evidently, there was some latitude to point out the absurdity of life in Russia, as long as efforts were made not to name Putin directly.

The cynical distancing from such discourses is reasonably apparent. The audience is invited to laugh at the absurdity of Russia attempting to compete technologically on the world stage. Volya’s highlighting of the unwieldy Russian technologies that could ‘replace’ their western counterparts is funny. These humorous discourses ultimately place those who laugh at them in a position of recognising how absurd the Russian state’s official plans for the country are and how unworkable it would be for Russia to divorce itself from the technology it purchases from abroad. It does not invite the viewers to do anything other than to view the system cynically, which Žižek predicts.

4 Scripted Comedies and Satire

Unscripted Russian satire contributes to the type of cynical distance suggested by Žižek. The fact that they are carefully managed by the market-based forces inherent in authoritarian capitalist states like Russia means that they are always suspect, allowing laughter only at elements of Russian society that are approved. However, scripted satire and comedy also play an essential role in the media ecosphere. Satirical scripted dramas fall into two distinct categories: those that express political satire and those that satirise Russian life and consequently make oblique critiques of Russia. In terms of expressly political satire, only two series fit this category: 2018’s *Domashny Arrest* (*House Arrest*) and 2020’s *Posledny Minister* (*The Last Minister*). The first series aired only a single twelve-episode season, which is relatively short by Russian standards. The series follows the misadventures of Arkady Anikeev, the

mayor of the fictional town of Sineozyorska. Following corruption charges, he is placed under house arrest and confined to the communal apartment where he grew up. The series is an absurdist comedy that shows the corruption of Russian life and politics. The series gently mocks Putin, albeit indirectly, when the characters expose the regional Governor's fake Instagram post of him practising Judo or playing hockey, suggesting that these actions are merely staged to play to the machismo expected of Russian leaders. Putin famously has a black belt in Judo and frequently plays hockey against professional athletes.²⁶ As Irina Efimova notes, "In many respects, the series continues traditions of the 19th-century Russian novel, which critiqued and mocked the life of its contemporaries. The stories of civil servants' greed and stupidity, as well as pictures of crushing poverty of the Russian people, continue to remain topical in the 21st century."²⁷

However, the most pointed political commentary in the series comes in the last episode. Ivan Samsonov, an alcoholic excavator operator who has been running to fill the mayor's vacant seat, decides to stop the demolition of an ancient monastery's walls by using an excavator to drive away the demolition crew and the police. However, owing to his incompetence and alcoholism, he accidentally demolishes the very wall he was trying to save. By luck, the destruction of the wall reveals a long-lost original manuscript of the *Primary Chronicle*, the text that recounts the mythical origins of the Russian people. In their exuberance at the rediscovery of the text, the town's people elect Ivan as mayor of the town. As Efimova notes, this seems an optimistic ending. While uneducated, Ivan is honest and earnestly wants to improve the town.²⁸ However, this optimism is quickly tempered by corruption, almost immediately seeping back into the mayor's office. Anikeev is appointed financial advisor, allowing him to return to being a corrupt official. His love interest Lola, a sex worker, is appointed the head of the public relations department.

There are a few notable aspects of *House Arrest*. First, it is a satire of the corruption of Russian society and especially of officials who merely take public office to line their own pockets. The fact that it is set in a small provincial city allows it enough distance from the Moscow elite and from Putin himself to let it be produced and go to air. As seen with the examples of *KVN*, *Comedy Club* and *PPH*, satire is permitted if it remains at the level of minor officials in the government. It also suggests the impossibility of changing the system. Even though Anikeev is removed from office by an investigation conducted by the FSB, he quickly finds his way back into the halls of power and is destined to return to his corrupt practices. Even a good-hearted reformer like Ivan, who in many ways resembles Boris Yeltsin, is doomed by institutional momentum and Russian political culture to fail at efforts to reform.

Another series in a similar mould is the 2020 series *Posledny Minister*. The series was produced by Alexandr Tseklo, another *KVN* alumnus well-known for producing some of Russia's most innovative content. Tsekalo's production company, Sreda, has produced series almost exclusively for Channel One, Russia's largest and most important television network, for several years. This series, however, aired on one of Russia's nascent streaming networks KinoPoisk HD. Given the overtly political overtones of the series, it is likely that the only reason the series aired at all was that KinoPoisk, which had a paltry three per cent share of the tiny Russian streaming market, hoped to make a splash.²⁹

The series begins when the minister in charge of the Department of Long-term Planning, an obscure section of the Russian government that the series takes pains to illustrate as superfluous, dies. His successor is Evgeni Tikhomirov, an earnest but incompetent official whose qualification for the job as the minister of the Department of Long-term Planning was that he was mayor of the town of Maloy Pyshmy for a week before accidentally flooding and destroying the city. The department he is tasked to lead is widely recognised as useless. The presidential administration appoints him because the government views the department as useless and wants it to self-destruct. They assume that since Tikhomirov destroyed a town in a single week as mayor, his presence will lead to the destruction of the department. Problems in the department arise almost immediately after the new minister's arrival. Tikhomirov, it seems, actually wants to do his job. Most of his subordinates, realising that their department and jobs are on the chopping block, attempt to reign in his initiative and stop them from being too visible. The goal of most of the civil servants presented in the series is not to do their job but rather to keep their jobs. The series shows the bureaucracy in Russia as ultimately parasitic on Russian society. Tikhomirov is a fool and does not know the rules of the bureaucracy. He does not realise that he is not supposed to do anything. His earnestness is contrasted with virtually every other character who cynically exploits their positions for personal gain.

These problems emerge early in the program's second season when Tikhomirov begins an initiative to tackle corruption. Such initiatives are common in Russia, being announced by the government every few years. However, the typical anti-corruption initiative never seems to accomplish much. In this case, however, as soon as Tikhomirov begins cracking down on corruption, the entire Russian system starts grinding to a halt. Unlike past anti-corruption efforts, his is actually in earnest. The series strongly implies that the Russian system functions only through corruption since, as Tikhomirov begins his anti-corruption initiative, Russian business and government work rapidly grinds to a halt. Realising that the minister of Long-Term Planning is causing an economic and social disaster, the prime minister tries to find a way to fire and replace him. Unfortunately, in an earlier press conference, the Russian head of government praised Tikhomirov and his initiative, making it impossible to get rid of him without suffering significant backlash.

The series is as biting a political satire as is possible on Russian television. It makes fun of the way the Russian government is run. Though the series takes place in a parallel world where no Vladimir Putin might become the target of humour, it is notable that the series does principally take place in Moscow and, at times, features jabs at the corrupt operation of the capital. The parallels with unscripted satire in Russia in these series, especially regarding the creation of cynical distancing, is evident. *House Arrest* and *The Last Minister* offer the ability to laugh at the Russian political system, particularly the fecklessness and corruption of the bureaucracy. In so doing, the series creates that space for viewers to distance themselves from the system their passivity supports. In essence, these series are allowed to mock the Russian state because nothing will come of it. Viewers may see the absurdity of their national circumstances, but they laugh it off.

While exceptional in Russian terms, *The Last Minister* was limited to the tiny KinoPoisk HD streaming service. In addition, the writer and producer of the series, Roman Volobuev, requested that the series be permanently cancelled in protest over the Russian invasion of Ukraine. With its cancellation and given the post-invasion political climate, it is highly likely that overt satire on Russian television will disappear for a time. This change makes one wonder whether the only viable satire on Russian television will be that which mocks Russian society in the Putin years. There are several series that fall into this category. While it would be impossible to look at every series that satirises daily life in Russia, the selection of two series will illustrate how Russian producers have created programming to mock life in Russia.

An increasing number of series, particularly on the comedy network TNT, focus on the absurdity of everyday life in Putin's Russia. *Olga* (2016-), which follows its eponymous character Olga Terentyova as she tries to navigate life in Putin's Russia, is one of the best for demonstrating the absurdity of life in Russia and how it leads to the cynical distancing of viewers.

One of the first things one notices about the series is that the Russia these characters inhabit is the grimy, decaying edges of Russian society that most Russians live in, which is rarely portrayed in Russian media. Olga works a dead-end job as a hairdresser and beautician, making just enough to pay the bills. Her children, a nineteen-year-old daughter Anya and an eleven-year-old son Timofei, are from different fathers, neither of whom are present. Each of her children is dysfunctional in different ways. For example, the first several episodes of the series frequently depict Anya having sex with her boyfriend, Andrei, in different parts of their small apartment, including the kitchen table and bathtub. By the end of the second episode, Anya learns that she is pregnant, throwing her life and family into chaos. Timofei, for his part, desperately tries to connect with his Azerbaijani heritage. Convinced that Azeri men are so hairy, he must also be, he starts shaving at eleven years old. Lacking accurate models of Azeri culture, he begins to emulate stereotypical aspects of Azeri culture. As such, the series comments indirectly on Russian cultural chauvinism by depicting only general Russian notions of what Azeri culture is. For example, he practices cutting the throats of stuffed animals around the apartment to be ready for the day when his father returns so that he can participate in Azeri cultural practices. There could scarcely be a more culturally reductionist depiction of Azeri culture.

The family dysfunction goes beyond Olga's children. In the first episode, Olga takes in her alcoholic father, Yuri. A former Soviet footballer, Yuri now makes a meagre living as a youth team soccer coach but drinks away most of



Video 3. A trailer for Olga with English subtitles.

what he makes. He attempts to stop drinking and reform himself on several occasions but is thwarted by the omnipresence of alcohol in Russian society. For example, in one episode where Yuri has tried to stop drinking, he needs to go to the bathroom. He discovers that his pregnant granddaughter is already occupying the water closet. He moves towards the kitchen to relieve himself in the kitchen sink but is sternly warned not to do so by his daughter. As a result, he leaves the apartment and decides to relieve himself in a secluded area of a nearby public park. A police vehicle pulls up behind him as he does, and the police apprehend him. He is given a choice; he can pay a fine for public urination or help the police dispose of several crates of counterfeit alcohol by pouring them into the sewer.

Initially, Yuri pours the alcohol down the drain with the other men the officers rounded up. However, as soon as the disinterested police start chatting amongst themselves, he absconds with two bottles and goes on a bender, invalidating his prior promise to himself and Olga to address his drinking problem. None of Yuri's other attempts to stop drinking have much impact either. The moment he has any money, he is immediately presented with somewhere or someone to purchase alcohol. There is an element of tragic-comedy to Yuri's failings. According to a study in *The Lancet*, nearly a quarter of Russian men die before age fifty-five, mainly due to high alcohol consumption.³⁰ Yet, as presented in the series, liquor is so omnipresent in Russian society that even those who might like to quit find it quite impossible.

Olga's sister Lena fares little better. Her romantic life is a comedy of all the problems Russian women frequently complain about.³¹ For one, Russian women far outnumber Russian men. Today there are about ten million more women in Russia than men. Women frequently complain that Russian men drink too much and are inattentive to their needs. Divorce rates are high, and a trope of Russian life is the droves of lonely Russian women looking for someone worth marrying. This stereotype is evident in Lena's relationships. She carries on numerous liaisons with men, but they always end rapidly. In one case, her boyfriend merely wanted to use Lena's apartment as a staging ground for a parallel relationship with another woman. Lena takes up with a man in another occurrence only to find that his kinks are overwhelming. She cannot continue after he arrives dressed in a sadomasochistic leather bodysuit. The conclusion is that even the relationship between the sexes is absurd in Russia.

These examples offer only a glimpse of the themes in *Olga*. While the series is a comedy, the absence of a laugh track makes the viewer aware that while what they are seeing should make them laugh, it is also part of the tragedy of modern Russia. Much of the aspirational life on offer in central Moscow is out of reach to Russians like Olga, who lives in a dilapidated suburb of the Russian capital. In her Russia, everything is broken. Her relationship with her father and

her children is broken. She has two failed relationships that left her with children to support. Her son is desperately seeking to connect with that absent father's culture. Her teenage daughter, who is studying to be a lawyer, is suddenly pregnant and faces the choice of having an abortion or putting her future in jeopardy and placing even more strain on her struggling mother. The comic aspects of the series all seem to point to the incredible difficulty of living a decent life in modern Russia for those who do not have the good fortune of being born into the middle and upper classes.

Another aspect of the series evident from the description above is that it clearly draws much of its humour from portraying the breakdown of the Russian nuclear family and its effects on average Russians. As Johnson et al. have illustrated, an important aspect of Putin's regime has rested on reaffirming gender norms and carefully navigating traditionalist discourses about family values in modern Russia.³² As Vlad Strukov notes, the series scrambles gender norms and roles, stating that:

Olga's family is typical of contemporary Russia but is anything but traditional. Indeed, children are brought up by single parents, women have multiple sexual partners and get pregnant outside marriage, and the family patriarch is shown to be a completely dysfunctional figure (lury's alcoholism) and has to be replaced with a matriarch (Olga), struggling to maintain her authority in the face of multiple challenges. Family life is not organised around a particular space (it is never clear who is living in Olga's apartment and who is visiting or in the process of moving in and out) or a ritual or ceremony (they never have meals together or celebrate family occasions)... Thus, Olga presents Russians in a new social setting, which queries the discourse about the traditional nuclear family advocated by Russian authorities and propagated at film festivals such as Russia's Family (Sem'ia Rossii), supported by the Russian Orthodox Church.³³

Consequently, in the way the series satirises the Russian family, it offers a critique of the official project of the Russian state grounded in traditional family values. As with its depiction of the socio-economic conditions in Putin's Russia, the series mocks the notion of a stable order that allows people to flourish. The family in the series is in a continual state of crisis and certainly not a fount of strength for the Russian State.

Again, the cynical distancing that the series allows is reasonably evident. The viewer is allowed to laugh at the strange condition the Russian family finds itself in and how much that image differs from the official Russian state discourse about the role of the family. The viewer can understand that the life promised in Russia, or the ideal that the official institutions like the government and Orthodox Church promote, is so different from the lives that the characters on Olga ultimately live. Again, laughter at the social condition and the recognition of the absurd puts the viewer at an ironic distance, knowing that what the state presents is primarily performative. This knowledge sets the viewer outside that discourse by creating the sense that they are an outsider since what is portrayed is so false that it does not even need to be responded to except with laughter. Ultimately as Žižek suggests, this leads them to political passivity and finally supports the system.

5 Conclusion

This article has identified cynical distancing as a mode of cultural consumption in Putin's Russia. This mode of consumption was present in prior eras as well. Still, in the post-Soviet environment, where lack of trust in institutions is as palpable as it was during the late-Soviet period, it has contributed to the mode of satire that mainly allows viewers to dissociate themselves from the system under which they live. Fundamentally, such a dissociation through cynicism and irony, along with the multiple socio-economic crises that have gripped Russia since the collapse of communism, have led the Russian public to laugh off the troubling and absurd aspects of their country. While it is clear that much of Russian satire today is fueled by disenchantment with the Russian political and economic system that offers performances while in reality leaving many Russians with little hope for the future, it is equally clear that while they might laugh at their system, they have little interest in overturning it.

As Žižek suggests, the Russian state ultimately fosters this type of cynicism to control the population, functioning to enforce learned helplessness. What is evident from the Russian case is that the authoritarian capitalist system set up by Putin and his inner circle ultimately selects who makes satire and consequently forecloses any possibility of satire that might provoke social change. The Russian government, through various means, controls not only the television networks, it also has close allies (Ernst and Murugov) acting as gatekeepers to television production. Since they hold the means to become wealthy and influential members of Russia's media industry, they fundamentally close any risk that satire might ultimately challenge the system. All that is left then is a somewhat dissociative state of cynical distance, of viewing the system as absurd but continuing to tolerate it.

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Biography

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