

Dr. Oleg G. Pocheptsov

POLITICAL JOKES IN POST-COMMUNIST RUSSIA

Political jokes were extremely popular in the Soviet Union. At the same time telling/listening to political jokes was a rather dangerous activity (the Soviet government outlawed the telling of political jokes as anti-Soviet agitation)¹.

There are three major reasons why political jokes were so popular in the Soviet Union. First, for their humor value. Second, they were safer than other forms of dissent. For example, after telling a political joke the speaker could say: "One agent of imperialism told me that," or use similar disclaimers. At the same time one cannot utter an evaluative statement and then add a similar disclaimer. For example, one would not say "Brezhnev is a fool, but I don't think so". Third, political jokes enabled people to say what they really thought (as compared to what they said while talking to colleagues, in public and so on).

Political jokes were vox populi (for authorities they were "unsolicited" vox populi). Political jokes were a part of the parallel world reflected in parallel political discourse. Analyzing political jokes one can reconstruct the real world

¹Interestingly, KGB was not involved (at least on a massive scale) in producing pro-Soviet political jokes, otherwise we would have seen interesting pro-Soviet political jokes. It may also be the case that political jokes were kept to let the steam off in a controlled way.

more accurately than by only investigating, say, corresponding party documents.

The situation today is so different that major newspapers now publish caricatures of Yeltsin. Moreover, some of these newspapers receive financial aid from the government.

The aim of this study is to analyze the functioning of political jokes in modern Russia; in other words, to investigate functions of political jokes, peculiarities of their usage and, finally, the way political jokes reflect the world.

Political jokes in Russia are now less popular than before the collapse of the Soviet Union. This situation poses several questions: which of the functions of political jokes disappeared; which of the functions remained intact; which of the functions took on a different form (open critique of the government, actions of protest and so on); to what extent old political jokes are recycled and used again (in other words, how often are old political jokes used in a new historical context)?...

The results of the study can be published as a book, consisting of two parts: the results of the study, and examples of different forms of political humor (jokes, caricatures, stories and so on).

The schedule for realization of the project is as follows: spring and summer 1994 - preparatory stage of the project (collecting Russian political jokes available in American libraries (for example, Library of Congress has a good collection of unofficial Russian press; part of it was collected by Dr. James H. Billington during 1991 coup in Moscow); a trip to Russia to collect political jokes and other forms of political humor). Academic year 1994/1995 - investigation itself, preparation of the manuscript of the book.