Article:
Chernobrov, D. orcid.org/0000-0002-6598-0412 (2024) Humor and foreign policy narration: the persuasive power and limitations of Russia's foreign policy pranks. Global Studies Quarterly, 4 (1). ISSN 2634-3797

https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksae007

Humor and Foreign Policy Narration: The Persuasive Power and Limitations of Russia's Foreign Policy Pranks

Dmitry Chernobrov
University of Sheffield, UK

This article explores the persuasive power and limitations of humor in narrating foreign policy issues to publics. I focus on audience reception of humor produced by state and state-affiliated actors to advance foreign policy narratives, deflect external criticism, and ridicule opponents. This article examines Russia's foreign policy pranks, widely assumed to be a tool of influence and persuasion, and their reception by their primary, domestic audience. Using focus groups to discuss pranks on the theme of mutual interference between Russia and the United States, this study relates participants' reactions to wider foreign policy narratives and questions links between reception and political views. I argue that while humor drives the popularity of the pranks, their power to convince remains ambiguous. Their persuasive power is mostly limited to reinforcing existing views and already popular narratives, while both pro-government and oppositional publics expressed strong suspicions of their fake or propagandistic nature. Even when doubting the pranks' politics, however, participants were entertained by their humor—suggesting that humorous narration of foreign policy presents means for increased outreach first and persuasion second. Any adverse reactions were mostly directed at the pranksters rather than government officials—highlighting how humor can be a politically expedient way of narrating contentious foreign policy issues to publics through proxies.

Cet article s'intéresse au pouvoir de persuasion et aux limites de l'humour quand il s'agit de raconter les problèmes de politique étrangère au public. Je me concentre sur la réception publique de l'humour des acteurs étatiques et affiliés à l'État pour faire avancer des récits de politique étrangère, détourner les critiques externes et tourner en ridicule les opposants. Cet article analyse les farces de politique étrangère russes, largement considérées comme un outil d'influence et de persuasion, et leur réception par leur public principal et national. En s'appuyant sur des panels de discussion sur les farces relatives au thème d'interférences mutuelles entre la Russie et les États-Unis, cette étude relie les réactions des participants aux récits de politique étrangère plus généraux et remet en question les liens entre l'accueil et les points de vue politiques. J'affirme que bien que l'humour rende les farces plus populaires, il ne convainc pas forcément. Leur pouvoir de persuasion se limite surtout au renforcement des points de vue existants et des récits déjà populaires, alors que les publics pro-gouvernement ou d'opposition ont exprimé de fortes suspicions de fausseté ou de propagande. Néanmoins, même lorsqu'ils doutaient des opinions politiques de certaines farces, les participants se disaient divertis par leur humour. Aussi, le récit humoristique de la politique étrangère serait d'abord un moyen d'informer, et ensuite de persuader. Les réactions négatives concernaient majoritairement l'auteur de la farce, et non les représentants du gouvernement; l'humour serait donc un moyen utile sur le plan politique d'aborder par procuration les problématiques de politique étrangère qui suscitent la polémique avec la population.

Este artículo explora el poder persuasivo, así como las limitaciones, del humor a la hora de narrar temas de política exterior al público. Nos centramos en la recepción, por parte del público, del humor producido por el Estado y por los agentes afiliados al Estado con el fin de promover las narrativas de la política exterior, desviar las críticas externas y ridiculizar a los oponentes. Este artículo examina las bromas con respecto a la política exterior de Rusia, las cuales han sido ampliamente asumidas como una herramienta de influencia y persuasión, así como su recepción por parte de su público nacional principal. Utilizamos grupos focales con el fin de comentar las bromas relativas al tema de la interferencia mutua entre Rusia y Estados Unidos. El estudio, de esta manera, relaciona las reacciones de los participantes con narrativas más amplias en materia de política exterior y cuestiona los vínculos existentes entre la recepción y las opiniones políticas. Argumentamos que, si bien el humor ayuda a impulsar la popularidad de las bromas, su poder para convencer sigue resultando ambiguo. Su poder de persuasión se limita principalmente a reforzar los puntos de vista existentes y las narrativas ya populares, mientras que tanto el público progubernamental como el público opositor expresaron fuertes sospechas de su naturaleza falsa o propagandística. Sin embargo, incluso cuando dudaban de la naturaleza política de las bromas, los participantes se entretenían con su humor, lo que sugiere que la narración humorística de la política exterior presenta medios suficientes como para aumentar el alcance, en primer lugar, y el poder de persuasión, en segundo lugar. Las reacciones adversas que pudieron existir se dirigieron, principalmente, a los bromistas en lugar de a los funcionarios del Gobierno. Esto pone de relieve cómo el humor puede ser una forma políticamente conveniente de narrar temas polémicos de política exterior al público a través usando representantes.

Dr Dmitry Chernobrov is a Senior Lecturer (Associate Professor) in media and international politics at the University of Sheffield, United Kingdom. He is the author of an award-winning book *Public Perception of International Crises* (2019, Furniss Book Award). In 2022–2024, he was also a research fellow at the University of Southern California Center on Public Diplomacy. His research interests include media and international politics; public opinion; humor and IR; and diasporas and participatory warfare. He has published in journals including *International Affairs*, *Political Psychology*, *Digital Journalism*, *BJPIR*, and *Politics*, among others.

If Vovan and Lexus have not called you yet, then you are not much of a politician.
—popular Russian joke

Introduction

When Emmanuel Macron spoke on the phone to the newly elected Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in 2019, he

Chernobrov, Dmitry (2024) Humor and Foreign Policy Narration: The Persuasive Power and Limitations of Russia's Foreign Policy Pranks. *Global Studies Quarterly*, https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksae007

did not realize he was talking to Russia's pro-government pranksters who specialize in political hoax calls. Subsequent Russian news headlines screamed of sensitive revelations, highlighting quotes convenient to Russia's foreign policy interests and ridiculing fake Zelensky's celebratory promise "not to get as drunk as his predecessor." Combining serious political issues with mockery and pretense, the pranks presented events in Ukraine in a particular light to wider publics. For over a decade, Russia has been using pranks about some of the most contentious issues in its foreign policy to deflect criticism, ridicule opponents, and convince domestic—and to some extent foreign—audiences of the Kremlin's interpretation of events. By 2022, the pranks were investigated as part of "coordinated influence operations linked to Russia" (Independent 2022a).

From activism and resistance to diplomacy and propaganda, humor has long been employed to frame and narrate political events. State and non-state actors have used humor to contest global orders and enact or challenge hierarchies (Brassett 2016), mediate conflict (Kopper 2021), engage those less interested in politics (Heiss 2021), and maximize outreach as humorous content spreads better (Davis et al. 2018). And yet, the focus of research into humor in international relations has predominantly centered on the narrative itself—its production, content, delivery, and actors—but far less often, on its reception. This is not unique to the study of humor—audiences are too often taken for granted in the analysis of narratives (Livingstone 2015). Yet, audience reactions are shaped by lived experiences, views, and anxieties, as well as by narrative content, and often diverge from the intended meaning.

This is one of the first studies to focus on audience reception of humor in international relations—specifically, its use by state and proxy actors to narrate contentious foreign policy issues to publics. What is the real impact of Russia's foreign policy pranks on audiences? And what are the persuasive potential and limitations of humor in foreign policy narration more generally? I define persuasive potential as the ability to shape and influence opinions, reinforce or change views, and shape memories in line with the intended meaning of the message. Using focus groups, I question the power of Russia's foreign policy pranks to influence domestic public opinion and explore the possible link between reception and political views. This study offers insight into how ordinary Russians interpreted some of the Kremlin's key foreign policy narratives just before the war in Ukraine.

The article argues that while humor undoubtedly helps reach a wider audience, its power to persuade remains more ambiguous. Instead of unquestioningly adopting the pranks' message, study participants expressed significant skepticism, often deeming pranks fake and suspecting government involvement. When this happened, it was the pranksters who attracted much of the blame, or the pranks were dismissed as silly—making pranks an expedient tool to promote controversial messages, with limited risk for political actors. When successful, the pranks tended to reinforce prior views rather than change them, but they also came into conflict with the popular imagination of politics as the domain of serious and wise men. Ultimately, the pranks' humorous appeal remained strong despite limited political persuasiveness, highlighting both the power and the limitations of humor as a tool of narrating foreign policy.

Humor and Foreign Policy Narration

Narratives play a central role in communicating international events to publics, mobilizing popular support, legitimating foreign policy, and influencing outcomes. Through narratives—which are stories with a plot that explain political realities, causation, and purpose and are shaped by the interests of those who tell them (Patterson and Monroe 1998; Subotić 2016)—political actors construct shared meanings, shape perceptions and behavior, and compete for credibility. In competitive information environments, politics is ultimately about "whose story wins" (Ronfeldt and Arquila 2020), and international actors seek to maximize the appeal and outreach of their narratives over others. I focus on foreign policy narration—the way that states and non-state actors communicate foreign policy issues to publics, contest their interpretation, and seek to influence public opinion in ways that advance their interests.

In today's oversaturated and increasingly digital media environment, attention rather than information becomes the scarcer and more valuable commodity (Nye 2008). The resulting media logic prioritizes storytelling techniques that are more competitive in capturing attention (Strömbäck 2008), including simplified, sensationalist, and emotive news. Strömbäck argues that political actors do not simply adapt to the media logic, but internalize it: Newsworthiness shapes campaigns, governance, and policy planning. The pursuit of attention and popularity over accuracy and depth has driven the rise of "entertainment politics," where political leaders and publics communicate through memes and jokes even in times of war (Malmvig 2023). Besides higher newsworthiness, politics performed through humor can appear more authentic and credible to publics, presenting politicians as "normal" and "just like us" (Wood et al. 2016).

Humorous political communication offers several advantages within this media logic. In an entertaining form, it can convey serious messages that attract disproportionate audience attention and lower barriers to political participation (Davis et al. 2018). Humor is widely used in campaigning due to its ability to draw media coverage (Kutz-Flamenbaum 2014). It also helps engage younger audiences, who increasingly learn about politics through soft news, comedy shows, and other humorous content (Baym 2005; Feldman and Young 2008). Such content tends to be more easily recalled than traditional news (Becker 2013), suggesting that humorous political messages are not only wider disseminated but more memorable. Using humor, however, can also pose some risks: for example, increase the perception of political figures as "clowns" (Wedderburn 2021) or encourage only superficial political engagement (Malmvig 2023).

Using humor to narrate contentious foreign policy issues can be attractive to political actors aiming to reach a wider audience while minimizing adverse consequences. I suggest that humor can further expand the "elasticity of reality"—which Baum and Potter (2019, 751) define as "the extent to which elites are able to successfully frame foreign policy events independently from the actual content of those events." Humorous representations can depart from reality by reinterpreting events through popular culture, drawing false comparisons, encouraging mistrust to alternative narratives and actors, or misrepresenting them in multiple other ways. The accuracy of humorous messages is not scrutinized as closely, since humor tends to be positioned outside the field of rational argument (Petty and Cacioppo 1986). Humorous messages are processed carefully but not critically and can be easily discounted as irrelevant to attitudinal judgments (Nabi et al. 2007). If humor backfires, political actors can deny serious intent to dodge accountability, while audiences can discount the message as just a joke (Innocenti and Miller 2016). As a result, humor can be used by political actors to deliver controversial and

inaccurate messages with limited negative consequences for themselves.

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 through wider outreach and persuasion has been theorized as "strategic humor" (Chernobrov 2022). Strategic humor is not simply a tactic to tell a story in a *better* and more engaging way, but also means to tell a *wider* story, that delivers complex political messages, intertwines them with wider narratives, and pursues multiple aims (Chernobrov 2023). Humor has been used strategically by various states in recent years, particularly in situations of conflict or contestation. Russia and Ukraine heavily rely on humor to mobilize domestic and foreign support for war efforts, humiliate and demoralize opponents, and attract media coverage (Budnitsky 2023). Israel conducted humorous public diplomacy campaigns to defend against foreign criticism and mobilize ordinary Israelis to become citizen diplomats (Adler-Nissen and Tsinovoi 2019). Iran produced memes to mock US foreign policy, encourage global public criticism of Trump's decision to withdraw from the nuclear deal, and even make implicit threats without the diplomatic risk of openly stating them (Malmvig 2023). Van Rythoven (2022) proposes to regard such deployments of humor in the context of power asymmetries in global politics, where mockery becomes a way to voice concerns and build solidarity against more powerful actors. However, we should also regard strategic humor beyond the context of states and relative power, as it is less reliant on traditional power resources and more dependent on audience response. Successful foreign policy narration through humor is not one-directional, but participatory—involving publics not merely as audiences, but as participants through the acts of liking, commenting, sharing, and reproducing humorous content online and offline.

This brings to the forefront the questions of audience reception (how audiences react to the message and whether they reproduce it) and persuasion (whether the message has impact on their political views), which are key to this study. I adopt Miller's (2013) typology of persuasion, in which he identifies three main outcomes: *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). There are indications that political humor can shape public opinion, especially among people with lower factual knowledge of the issue in question (Young 2004). The persuasive power of political humor, however, is not without limitations: humor can both unite and divide audiences, by further enlarging the narrative playing field (Goodall et al. 2012) or irritating audiences if they see through the persuasive intent (Innocenti and Miller 2016). These insights, however, are largely limited to humor in electoral politics, and there is a clear lack of research about audience reception of humor in and about international relations. Humorous foreign policy narratives can certainly spread more easily, facilitated by digital media environments, but what are their persuasive power and limitations? The key dilemma that this study reveals is that the reception of humor (such as the audience's willingness to engage with and spread it) does not always equal persuasion (shaping, reinforcement, or change of the audience's political views). For example, humor can still appeal to audiences if they find it funny, even when unconvinced by its message. I address the questions of audience reception and persuasion by taking a case-led, focus-group-based approach that explores how a specific state (Russia) narrates contentious foreign policy issues through humor and how this content is received and (re)interpreted by its domestic audience.

The Rise of the Prank as Russia's Foreign Policy Tool

Vovan and Lexus (real names Vladimir Kuznetsov and Alexey Stolyarov) are Russia's most prominent political pranksters with regular media presence. Their rise began in 2011 with pranks about domestic politics and sport, tricking government officials into discussing Russia's parliamentary election scandal and the setbacks of the national football team. When asked in 2012 about the purpose of their pranks, Vovan claimed to expose the officials' true face: "On TV, we only get to see their mask, which has little resemblance to the person behind it. I give that person a chance to show their real self" (Komsomolskaya Pravda 2012).

However, following the 2014 Crimea annexation and sanctions against Russia, Vovan and Lexus focused predominantly on foreign policy issues and Ukraine. Their pranks increasingly targeted Western politicians and celebrities, aligning with Russia's foreign policy narratives. By calling their victims and impersonating public figures they would find credible, Vovan and Lexus engage in candid conversations on political and social topics and extract unguarded statements, informal opinions, or even sensitive information. Subsequently, these conversations or their excerpts are published online or in news media. Russian authorities and media then present these revelations as proof of Western hypocrisy, prejudice, and double standards toward Russia. A key feature of these pranks is that they exploit, in Goffman's (1959) terms, the "backstage" of politics and diplomacy—a discreet place of interaction normally closed off from public view, where political actors can temporarily drop their guard and exchange views frankly, without the need to maintain public image or the threat of public exposure (Van Rythoven 2022, 7). A prank tricks its target into believing they are "backstage" when they are not, enabling pranksters to later claim exposure of concealed "truths" about politics. Distinguishing pranks from most other forms of humor, "backstage" also links audience reception and prank credibility not only to the content and wittiness of a specific prank, but also to wider public (mis)trust of political actors and systems.

In an entertaining and viral form, the pranks by Vovan and Lexus deliver and reinforce the Kremlin's version of events, build up the external threat, deflect accusations of interference and propaganda, and ridicule foreign leaders. For example, in a half-hour conversation with unsuspecting US Major General Kevin McNeely in 2014, the pranksters posed as the Ukrainian interior minister, getting the General to confirm the vast extent of US military aid to Ukraine and presenting the minister as begging for financial assistance (Lenta.Ru 2014). This reinforced Russia's official narratives of the West secretly arming Ukraine and enticing Ukrainian elites with financial rewards. In 2018, Vovan and Lexus pranked the head of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, who purportedly admitted the capability of many nations, including the United States, to produce the nerve agent behind the Salisbury attack (Komsomolskaya Pravda 2018). This prank and its intensive news coverage significantly bolstered Kremlin's denial of involvement and its claim about the West staging the attack. Other prominent targets of the pranks included Jens Stoltenberg, Emmanuel Macron, Boris Johnson, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, George W. Bush, Andrzej Duda,

Nikki Haley, John McCain, Priti Patel, David Cameron, and Petro Poroshenko, among many others. During the war in Ukraine, the pranksters impersonated the Ukrainian Prime Minister in a call to UK Secretary for Defence Ben Wallace, discussing Ukraine's nuclear ambitions. Impersonating the US Ambassador to Russia, they spoke to Ukraine's Minister of Foreign Affairs and released his admission of Ukraine's responsibility for strikes on Kerch Bridge and Russia's city of Belgorod, while official Kyiv denied involvement (Lenta.Ru 2022). Quoting the prank, Russia's Foreign Ministry called it "an open confession of [Ukraine] committing terrorist acts" (RBC 2022). The pranksters even called JK Rowling, posing as President Zelensky and asking her to change Harry Potter's scar from Z-like lighting, which resembles Russia's military symbol, to Ukraine's trident. Prank outcomes vary: Some targets admit being tricked, while others promptly end the calls or warn of fake recordings.

The pranksters' ability to contact and credibly impersonate top politicians, their knowledge of context and political agendas, timing, and choice of targets suggest links to Russia's intelligence services and government. The pranks receive ample news coverage in Russia, which in itself signals at least indirect support from authorities: For example, in 2017 alone, there were over 400 reports about Vovan and Lexus on Russian state TV (Shevchenko 2018). In 2022, they were symbolically presented with a secure desktop phone by Russia's Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman, who asked them to "call, delight us and the world with new revelations" (TASS 2022). The pranksters never admitted government links but acknowledged their aim of advancing Russian state interests (Kuznetsov and Stolyarov 2018, 380). While Russia's domestic audiences hear about the pranks predominantly from state TV and major news websites, international audiences learn about them from Russia's external broadcasters RT or Sputnik, online platforms such as YouTube, and ample (although more critical) coverage of the pranks in international media. For Russia's domestic audience, the pranks expose the hypocrisy of the West and serve as a mobilizing tool. For Western audiences, they highlight the shortcomings of Western policy, discredit politicians, utilize the familiar practice of satire and irony as political critique (not unlike Western comedians), and capitalize on local polarization and discontent with authorities. As a result, foreign governments have expressed concern about the pranks: In 2022, following UK government request, the pranksters' YouTube account was blocked as part of the investigation into "Russian influence operations" (Budnitsky 2023). But even if state involvement in the production of pranks is debated, Russian officials and media have been undoubtedly exploiting them to narrate foreign policy issues to domestic and to some extent, international publics.

Russia has consistently used humor to narrate foreign policy as part of its political communication strategy in recent years. Observing the success of humor in mobilizing Russian protesters in 2011–2012, Russian authorities widely commissioned the production of humorous content and videos to serve state aims (Fedor and Fredheim 2017). Russian embassies and external broadcaster RT frequently use humor to mock foreign governments, create uncertainty, and deflect accusations, targeting both domestic and foreign audiences (see Crilley and Chatterje-Doody 2020; Kopper 2021; Chernobrov 2022). Russia's strategic use of humor has been characterized by "prevarication and ambiguity about the truth," where international legal and moral norms are seemingly endorsed but at the same time derided in a theatrical spectacle (Kurowska and Reshetnikov 2021). This practice has been described as "trickstery"—which is both a cultural archetype of a "conformist and deviant" challenging hierarchies and exposing double standards and a situational script of an actor with liminal positionality and a "hijacked strategy of dissidence which proliferates normative confusion and anguish" (Kurowska and Reshetnikov 2021, 243). Despite that, Russia's use of humor is not entirely antagonizing—often, its humorous content does not explicitly deny external accusations but ridicules the very idea of making them, and in this way, creates "constructive ambiguity" that both has a threatening undertone and invites others to move on and forget about the accusations (Kopper 2021).

Russia's use of pranks against foreign politicians heavily draws on *ridicule* as a particular category of humor. Ridicule tends to be aggressive, contemptuous, and aiming to humiliate or offend, often through exaggeration or implying opposite meanings, but always in front of an audience to witness embarrassment (Kopper 2021). Ridicule undermines an actor's public image and is closely linked to status hierarchies: It is both the weapon of the strong (disciplining lower-status actors or out-groups to reaffirm hierarchies) and of the weak (challenging power) (Van Rythoven 2022, 5). Vovan and Lexus' pranks create the illusion of "backstage" when engaging their targets, but their subsequent presentation in the media seeks maximum public embarrassment and discreditation while limiting the target's ability to reply. These pranks can best be understood through the "superiority" theory of humor, which suggests that jokes can be purposefully aggressive, seek to undermine the target's social standing, redraw hierarchies, and present a symbolic victory over the victim (Adler-Nissen and Tsinovoi 2019). Russia's wider use of humor in foreign policy too, often claims the position of resilience (laughing at the opponents in their face) and counter-hegemonic struggle.

This challenge to hierarchies, a position of resistance to power abuse and domination is what enables even aggressive humor and ridicule to claim aesthetic appeal (Kopper 2021, 316). Vovan and Lexus' pranks are presented to both domestic and foreign audiences as justifiable interventions, an acceptable trick to claw the truth from Western powers, whose global hegemony itself is claimed to be built on deceit, arrogance, and coercion. Russian media has glorified the pranks as the only way to expose the West's true motives and intentions. Vovan and Lexus have been praised domestically as "the founders of prank journalism – a symbiosis of prank calls and socially significant investigations" (Kornilova and Kuznetsov 2021). In Western news outlets, these pranks are portrayed more negatively, as laying bare security lapses, offensive, or revealing about some political figures and celebrities. Pranks more generally often attract controversy, as they have been described as a "brand of performed criticism" (McLeod 2011) in-between information terrorism and fact journalism (Sukhodolov et al. 2018).

Russia's use of pranks for persuasive, strategic purposes in foreign policy narration both reflects and contradicts the wider traditions of political pranking. Pranks generally "stage an event that makes a social or political point, circulating it in the public sphere" and making audiences more thoughtful, reflective, and humane (McLeod 2011, 97). The power of pranks is in strategically utilizing media resources to provoke, exaggerate, and fold political rhetoric over on itself, interrupting conventional patterns (Harold 2004). Pranks present a "tactical performance"—a creative response to restrictions on other forms of protest or activism—and a convincing simulacrum of reality that is strategically timed for when the target is at their most vulnerable (Bogad 2016). Pranking is both an art of provocation and the mastery of causing further media

spectacle—although, as the example of the famous satirical activist group Yes Men suggests, journalists all too often focus on the funny impersonation itself rather than the serious political message behind it (Malmvig 2023). Political pranking advocates change, disrupts routines, delivers criticism through performance, maintains public interest to specific issues in mediatized political communication, as well as uncovers truth—but usually depends on the follow-up translation to be turned into an effective argument and become persuasive (Harold 2004, 207). For that, pranksters depend on media and audience engagement beyond the surface of the hoax.

Vovan and Lexus' pranks follow some of these wider pranking traditions, such as the strategic use of media resources, the need for translation for persuasive effect, the ability to direct public attention to certain issues, and the folding of political rhetoric (such as Western accusations) on itself—but are clearly distinct in other respects. Their choice of targets appears driven by foreign policy agendas and state interests rather than creative activism; their actions appear supported if not authorized by government; they do not challenge Russian foreign policy but support it by challenging the policies of other states; they focus exclusively on exposing and humiliating external political actors rather than driving change; and the massive attention to their pranks from Russian state media and government officials suggests intention to persuade. Yet, although pranks by Vovan and Lexus receive wide coverage and public attention in Russia and abroad, insight into their persuasive power is very limited. Whether publics treat them as simply funny and entertaining or as informative and instructive in relation to international politics remains unclear. Yet, this question has considerable significance for conceptualizing pranks as a tool of influence or misinformation. This is the first qualitative study to explore the reception of Russia's foreign policy pranks by focusing on their primary, domestic audience.

Method

This study used focus groups, which are a particularly helpful method for examining everyday narratives, social construction, and public justification or contestation of political actions and actors (Stanley 2016). Their advantage is in the ability to observe group interaction (Acocella 2012), including how participants formulate, express, and defend or adjust opinions in a social setting. A moderated group discussion enables participants to react to each other's views, trigger memories, and provide context for their opinions (see Warr 2005). Focus groups have limited generalizability and can gravitate toward socially acceptable opinions (Smithson 2000); yet they trade quantity for quality in gathering rich, in-depth accounts of people's thinking, experiences, and attitudes. In contrast to reception studies that analyze online comments to humorous content, which capture a particular digital audience of followers (such as Duskaeva and Shcheglova 2020), focus groups provide an extra layer of understanding. They allow for more comprehensive exploration of backgrounds and reasons for opinions, reflect views of a broader public and situate them within the wider political and narrative context.

This study involved six focus groups of seven to ten participants each, conducted in Moscow in May–September 2021. Levada Center—Russia's leading independent nongovernmental polling organization—provided reliable participant recruitment to pre-agreed parameters (age and gender balance, mixed educational and work backgrounds, and spread of political views). The study did not seek to build a fully representative sample, but to provide exploratory insight into the domestic reception of foreign policy pranks at a time of quickly deteriorating relations between Russia and the West.

The study focused on four dimensions: (1) participants' prior awareness of Vovan and Lexus pranks, attitudes to them and their perceived intention; (2) interpretation of specific examples of recent pranks and reactions to them; (3) the persuasive potential of these pranks to shape, reinforce, or change opinions about the event or figure in question; and (4) potential links between prior political views (pro-government or pro-opposition) and the positive or critical reception of the pranks. The latter was shaped by an expectation that pranks, which promote Kremlin's foreign policy narratives, were more likely to appeal to government supporters than participants with oppositional views. To explore potential links between political views and prank reception, two focus groups included participants with oppositional views only, while others were pro-government or mixed. A screening questionnaire was used to determine participants' political views.[1] All participants were aged between 18 and 65.

During focus group discussions, participants were first asked about their attitudes to political pranks in general and any examples they could recall. Prior knowledge of pranks by Vovan and Lexus was explored, together with the perceived aims of their pranks. Participants were then shown TV reports of two pranks[2] about the most recent and acute issues in Russia–West relations—the "Limpopo" prank that ridiculed accusations of Russia's interference in foreign elections and, following discussion, the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) prank that substantiated Kremlin's claims of Western interference in Russia.[3] Attitudes to the pranks' key theme—mutual interference accusations—were discussed both before and after watching the pranks, to observe any change. Focus groups were conducted in Russian, transcribed, and analyzed thematically. All quotes have been anonymized and translated into English by the researcher.

Prior Awareness and Attitudes to Pranks

Focus groups demonstrated strong prior awareness of pranks by Vovan and Lexus, wide consensus about their links to Russia's government or intelligence services, but mixed explanations of their intentions and no precise memories of pranks. There were minimal differences between pro-opposition and pro-government groups.

[1]The questionnaire asked about attitudes to current government (approval/disapproval) and the country's trajectory (right/wrong), and asked participants to name politicians they supported or found promising.

[2]Most Russians learn about the pranks from mainstream news media, which summarize key takeaways and revelations, include brief excerpts, explain the context, and are considerably shorter than the original pranks. Full recordings, made available by Vovan and Lexus through online platforms such as YouTube, could last 20–40 min and have a relatively smaller audience. The persuasive potential of the pranks on the wider public, therefore, depends on the media version and the intensity of news coverage—which is why two news versions from major media (Russia24 2017a, 2021) were chosen for focus group discussions.

[3]The NED prank took place shortly before the study, while the Limpopo prank was older. Time is important for humor reception; however, the theme of both pranks was widely debated in Russian public discourse at the time of the study, and the political context between Russia and the West continued to include intensive accusations of propaganda and interference, making both pranks highly relevant. The Limpopo prank was regularly invoked by Russian politicians and media well after its release and is widely seen as one of the most striking exposures by Vovan and Lexus, which is the reason for its inclusion in this study.

Awareness. Across all groups, political pranks were largely synonymous with Vovan and Lexus. If participants had heard of pranks at all (two-thirds had), Vovan and Lexus were either named straight away or described in more general terms, with participants struggling to name anyone else.[4] Participants familiar with the duo were accurate in describing their method (impersonation in a telephone call) and believed them to be actively targeting Ukrainian and Western politicians about Ukraine. However, none of the participants could remember specific revelations or prank details, even when describing pranks altogether as "funny," "witty," or "good work." This suggests that the potential of individual pranks to shape event-specific memories may be limited, although pranks could contribute to wider narratives (such as Russia's struggle against the West) through an overall impression of "exposing Western politicians" and "revealing the truth."

Perceived Intention. Several key aims for producing the pranks were suggested. Some attributed positive intentions to the pranksters (expose hidden truths, show politicians as ordinary people, and entertain the public) and some negative (humiliate specific targets in the interest of political groups, do it for money, distract the public from real problems, and generate hype and self-promotion).

Justification of Pranks. Linked to perceived intentions, participants expressed mixed feelings about whether the pranks were justified or ethical. As one participant put it, "A prank is acceptable when it does not simply humiliate but exposes hidden motives or is just harmless fun." There was widespread consensus that belittling or insulting someone without cause was morally unacceptable, though pranks could be justified when concerning socially significant issues and serving public interest. One participant even admitted having used pranks himself to get a utilities company to disclose information concealed from the public. Pranks by Vovan and Lexus were mostly described as exposing the truth and therefore justified, compared to the more abstract idea of pranking.

Pranksters' Links to Government. There was a clearly dominant view across all focus groups that Vovan and Lexus must be linked to Russia's government or intelligence services. The reasons, however, were different from those mentioned earlier in this article. As participants argued, "If they were not [linked to government], they would have been in jail by now"; "They are at ease, not afraid – means someone important must be behind them"; "If their actions caused any real harm in politics, they would have been shut down." This suggests that regardless of political views, participants were skeptical of the possibility of independent political action or speech without at least silent approval from above. This reflects Russia's wider culture of suspicion that all political narratives or media depictions (positive or negative) are influenced or contracted by powerful actors.

Prank 1. Limpopo Interference Prank with Maxine Waters

Prank Summary and Media Representation

In February 2017, Vovan and Lexus impersonated Ukraine's Prime Minister in a call to US Congresswoman Maxine Waters. The fake PM accused Russia of invading Gabon and hacking elections in another country, Limpopo, to install a puppet president, Aybolit. The ousted president, Barmaley, feared for his life and was planning to escape to Ukraine. In light of these developments, Ukraine's PM called on Maxine Waters to expand sanctions against Russia. The US Congresswoman appeared surprised but welcomed the call. Taking these accusations seriously, she assured Ukraine's PM that "the US is going to stand with you guys" and "will keep those sanctions on Russia." Maxine Waters expressed readiness to speak to other US officials and asked if the Ukrainian PM would be happy with her summary of the situation as "Russia's continued aggression" and "increased invasions of these areas."

Russian news reports called this a spectacular prank against "Trump's opponent," promising that "when Maxine Waters' name is ever mentioned again, the whole world will roll on the floor laughing" (Russia24 2017a). Limpopo is a fictitious country, known to all Russians from the iconic children's book and animated film Aybolit. Aybolit (translating as "*ouch, it hurts*") is a kind doctor who travels to river Limpopo in Africa to save animals, while Barmaley is the main villain. Presenting accusations of election interference as a fairy tale only children would believe, Russian TV presenters mocked Maxine Waters as "a grown-up [who] does not know that Limpopo does not exist" (Russia24 2017b). Commenting on the prank, Russia's presidential spokesman remarked sarcastically: "We highly value the fact that it has not crossed anyone's mind to accuse the Kremlin of this until now. This testifies to some fleeting enlightenment" (TASS 2017). In a humorous form, the prank promoted Russia's official narrative that accusations of interference in the US elections were based on Western politicians' eagerness to invent and accept anti-Russian falsehoods. This narrative appealed widely to the Russian public: 71 percent did not believe in Russia's interference in the 2016 US presidential election (Pew Research Center 2018). The prank also ridiculed Western politicians as incompetent, ignorant, and contemptuous toward other nations. This too is a long-established Russian narrative built on a series of well-publicized gaffes, from George W. Bush's frequent slips of tongue to Joe Biden's mix-up of Syria and Libya.

Attitudes to Interference Accusations Prior to Watching the Prank

Prior to watching the prank, the majority of participants denied Russia's interference in US elections, although this view was more dominant in pro-government groups (80 percent of participants) than oppositional (50–60 percent). Crimea, Navalny, Nordstream gas pipeline, and Russia's COVID vaccine were commonly named as triggers for Western sanctions—although some participants were unaware of sanctions at all. Participants who believed in Russia's interference in US elections attributed this to Russia's vast IT capabilities or held the view that all major powers try to influence foreign elections. However, they were more skeptical about the outcomes of these attempts: Sanctions against Russia were intensified under Trump or Biden all the same.

Regardless of views about interference, there was strong consensus that specific events and actions (true or not) were only a pretext, and the real reason for accusations and sanctions lay in the return of geopolitical competition and America's internal problems:

> *If Russia puts a toe out of line, Americans start yelling that we are violating their rules.*
>
> *The reason is that Russia is posing at least some competition to the US internationally once again.*

[4]The only exception was a pro-opposition participant aware of how Alexey Navalny pranked a Russian FSB agent, allegedly involved in an attempt to kill him and tricked him to reveal details of the attack.

Americans are simply distracting their publics from their own problems by blaming Russia.

This suggests that opposite attitudes to a specific political event may not necessarily alter the shared wider outlook on the United States–Russia relationship, which has been shaped by multiple narratives over time. The prank—which interprets a specific event but connects it to a wider context—should be reviewed for its potential to support both immediate and long-term foreign policy narratives.

Reactions to the Prank

Focus group discussions exhibited some limited reproduction of the media framing of the prank (presenting it as evidence of Western ignorance and prejudice against Russia). However, all groups exhibited surprisingly strong backlash against this reading. Prank reception depended primarily on whether participants believed it to be genuine. Most described the prank as staged and fake—resulting in opposite conclusions (criticism toward pranksters, the TV channel, and state propaganda and sympathy toward Maxine Waters) in both oppositional and pro-government groups. The prank was described as funny but silly, and certainly not informative as only simpletons could take it at face value.

The prank's persuasive power was limited to *reinforcing* existing opinions and narratives rather than producing new arguments or shifting views. Participants who saw the prank as genuine drew two key conclusions that they claimed to be common knowledge (and which coincide with Russia's wider foreign policy narratives): (1) that the United States was simply looking for pretext for more sanctions, introduced because of hatred toward Russia rather than specific Russia's actions and (2) that US leaders and publics are ignorant and easily misled:

> *The prank exposes the absurdity of US sanctions. Americans believe any nonsense you tell them. Tell them that Putin is about to blow up the Statue of Liberty, and they'll believe that.*
>
> *Whatever you say, it will be interpreted against Russia. It suits [the Americans], and animosity grows from this.*
>
> *Just as I thought, Americans believe in stereotypes, blame Russia for anything.*
>
> *Let's be frank: we all know that Americans are stupid and have very limited geographical knowledge beyond the US. That's what the pranksters aimed at and that's what they confirmed.*

However, mistrust of the prank as fake quickly emerged as a prominent theme. This view was dominant, with mixed and pro-government groups expressing even stronger belief in the staged nature of the prank than oppositional groups. Three different levels of "fake" were suggested: (1) The whole prank was staged by actors—it could not possibly be true, as politicians of such caliber would never fall for such an obvious lie as Limpopo or Russia's invasion of Gabon, or would never discuss policy detail in a phone call with an unseen and unverified counterpart; (2) the call was real, but its voice-over translation into Russian in the news report was made up; and (3) the call was real, but the pranksters somehow struck a deal with Waters to say what she said.

Wide belief in the fake nature of the prank resulted in strong pushback against its perceived intended meaning, although along slightly diverging lines. Oppositional groups more commonly expressed negative attitudes toward the pranksters (silly, dishonest, unpleasant, even cowardly[5]) and the TV news channel (shows cheap comedy instead of real problems) and sympathy toward Maxine Waters (sincere woman, genuinely concerned, wants to help other countries). Mixed and pro-government focus groups were more critical of what they saw as "clumsy propaganda." This is not necessarily surprising: oppositional groups too recognized propaganda in a matter-of-fact way ("this is propagandistic rubbish"), but pro-government participants seemed more offended at how crudely or self-depreciatingly it was done ("Why does our government think we are stupid enough to buy this? This is unpleasant"). Patriotic publics in Russia rarely deny the presence of propaganda, but often complain of Russia losing the "information war" against the West because of waging it too "clumsily."

There were other reasons for pushback too. A news report—which packages a 20–40 min prank into a 2–3 min news story—can be too fast-paced for an audience unfamiliar with the original or not following politics closely. This resulted in confusion and led some participants to miss the humorous point, only seeing the pranksters demonizing Russia to foreign politicians. Others were not sure how Ukraine factored into the prank at all, strengthening suspicions of an "artificial set-up" and propagandistic fake. In cases when the meaning was not clear, participants tended to dismiss the prank as "raving nonsense."

While commonly dismissing the impact of the prank on their own views, participants shared an expectation that it could influence wider, less educated publics—especially "those outside of Moscow" and "who watch too much TV." This is a clear manifestation of the third-person effect, when people tend to consider distant others as more influenced by media news and false messages than themselves (Ştefăniţă et al. 2018). Confusing and manipulating the audience was also seen as the main reason for why Maxine Waters had been targeted (a relatively unknown US politician in Russia), although some participants suspected it was due to her gender ("some in the audience might think that women in politics are not too smart to begin with"), race, and opposition to Trump.

Importantly, there seemed to be no contradiction between believing the prank to be fake and finding it funny. Participants widely appreciated its humorous nature—the references to Limpopo that reminisced about childish tomfoolery, the laughable and inconceivable claim of Russia's invasion in Gabon, the simple-hearted reaction of the Congresswoman—even if dismissing the prank as staged, propagandistic, or dishonest. Two-thirds found the prank funny, one-third silly and simplistic, but none found it informative about politics, as it either confirmed what they already knew (Americans as ignorant or sanctions as inevitable) or failed to add new convincing information. Had the prank been confirmed as genuine, many participants said it would be hilarious—even talented—although the message they would infer from it would still not be new. If confirmed, it would show that Maxine Waters was not fit for office, and further corroborate prior opinions that sanctions would have been introduced regardless of Russia's specific actions. The prank failed to change participants' views on whether Russia interfered in the US elections—and as one of them noted, "does that make any difference?" This illustrates both the potential and the limits of humor in foreign policy narration—its power to make people laugh (which helps it spread or makes it newsworthy) does not

[5]As one participant remarked, "I feel contempt - I'd like them to try such a trick against our politicians and see what happens."

necessarily imply its ability to change opinion. However, it can reinforce wider popular narratives and stereotypes regardless of the perceived accuracy or authenticity of the humorous revelation.

Prank 2. Western Interference in Russia and the Prank of NED

Prank Summary and Media Representation

In May 2021, following the 2020–2021 major protests in Belarus, Vovan and Lexus impersonated the exiled Belarusian opposition leader, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, and her aide in a Zoom conference call with an American non-profit organization, NED. With her video turned off, Tsikhanouskaya speaks to NED top management, who are presented in the news report (Russia24 2021) as her "overseas handlers." After sharing a laugh at Russia's ban of NED, Carl Gershman, the president of NED, is heard saying, "It doesn't matter… We support a lot of groups, and we have a very active program all over the country" (Russia24 2021). Deputy President Barbara Haig then adds, "We have an extensive program in Russia, it even affects grassroots initiatives in the provinces, regions, outside of Moscow. The program is very deep and broad." She then admits "wonderful, direct relationships" with various Russian media outlets and journalists and efforts to "track [Russia's] government officials, their resources." This, as the news anchor sums up, speaks volumes about the United States "undisguised interference in Russia's internal affairs." Toward the end of the call, fake Tsikhanouskaya complains of "looking very poor" at high-profile meetings and requests money for clothes from expensive brands—which NED politely refuses. After that, Belarus President Lukashenko's voice unexpectedly sounds on the Zoom call, saying, "They should be thankful we have not snapped their necks yet." To participants' consternation, the call is then joined by a man who presents himself as a Major of Belarus KGB and starts reading them their rights ("You have the right to remain silent…"). NED leadership then ends the call.

This prank, like the Limpopo example, leans support to at least two of the Kremlin's narratives. First, it claims to expose illegal and covert Western sponsorship for opposition movements in Russia and beyond. It is this interference and not genuine protest, as Russian officials repeatedly assert, that stands behind color revolutions in post-Soviet states and anti-government protests at home. Russian media devoted ample attention to this revelation, presenting it as "new facts about how the West tries to influence events in Russia and Belarus," which are more credible as they are NED's "own confession" (Channel 1 2021a). The prank's revelations were widely quoted in Western media too (e.g., see Times 2021)—demonstrating the pranks' ability to attract international publicity from a particular angle.

Second, the prank reinforces Russia's long-standing portrayal of its opposition as corrupt and willing to sell out their country for personal gain. This wider narrative is gaining momentum in polls: The proportion of Russians who regard protests as the result of "payment made to protesters" more than doubled, from 12 to 28 percent between 2017 and 2021 (Levada Center 2021). The prank reinforces it, together with misogynist representations of Tsikhanouskaya as dependent and an avid clothes shopper. After the prank, Russia's Foreign Ministry continued to mock Tsikhanouskaya as betraying her country for free food, when commenting on her meeting with President Biden (Channel 1 2021b).

Attitudes to Interference Accusations Prior to Watching the Prank

Pro-government and pro-opposition focus groups could be expected to diverge significantly in their attitudes toward the Russian government's narrative of the West funding Russia's opposition to provoke instability. Yet, the majority in all groups believed in at least some validity to these claims. This view was only marginally more popular in pro-government and mixed than in oppositional focus groups. However, the conclusions about Russia's government that the two camps drew from the shared conviction about interference were different. Pro-government focus groups saw Western interference as largely resolved or successfully controlled through tougher legislation against "foreign agents"[6] and recent crackdowns. Oppositional participants pointed to the government's hypocrisy in accusing the West and pedalling "foreign agent madness" while hiding money offshore or sending kids of high-ranking officials to Western schools. It was not interference itself that seemed problematic—in fact, it was normalized through a shared view that "all countries try to influence each other" and interference is "mutual cold war-style competition." Disagreement focused on whether the response to interference was appropriate or exaggerated.

Both oppositional and pro-government focus groups strongly believed that the United States stood behind Ukraine's Orange Revolution and invested heavily in regime change programs around the world. Pro-government focus groups spoke at length about the West financing Navalny and organizing paid protests to destabilize Russia, and even pro-opposition participants noted that "it is silly to think that nobody is trying to interfere in our affairs." Yet while pro-government groups tended to tell a story of success in resisting interference and of the West constantly "dreaming up" new ways to meddle, oppositional focus groups emphasized Russia's exaggeration of the threat and its abuse for political purposes:

> *Everyone interferes to some extent, but our propaganda that the West is always behind it, is just a catchphrase our authorities turn to when they have no other justification [for our own problems]. This has worked for decades. 95% of such claims are just that.*

This suggests that prior to watching the prank, both oppositional and pro-government focus groups accepted and reproduced at least some of the wider narratives about Russia-West struggle, competition over Ukraine and post-Soviet space, and the omnipresence of propaganda and interference.

Reactions to the Prank

Like the Limpopo case, the question of prank authenticity was central to reception. Participants were more equally split on the issue this time. Doubts led participants to voice more negative attitudes to the pranksters and the news channel and complain of "clumsy propaganda." Those already convinced of Western interference as a real threat tended to see the prank as genuine and proof of their views. Regardless of the perceived validity of prank revelations, a clear majority found it funny and some informative, although its impact

[6] Russia's foreign agent law, introduced in 2012 and expanded since, requires anyone who receives funding or support from abroad to register and declare themselves as "foreign agents." This leads to additional checks and restrictions, as well as public mistrust. The law has applied to multiple NGOs, media, and individuals.

was again largely limited to reinforcing rather than shifting opinions.

Explanations for why they considered the prank to be fake varied between oppositional and pro-government participants. Pro-government and mixed focus groups found it unlikely that real NED leaders would be naïve or unprofessional enough to make such dramatic admissions or even talk to someone without seeing them (Tsikhanouskaya's Zoom video was switched off). The prank contradicted participants' imagining of politicians and interference specialists as cunning and astute, and the possibility of a substituted translation was brought up again. Oppositional focus groups tended to interpret fake as either staged by actors or created artificially with computer graphics—in other words, produced by Russia's propaganda structures without NED involvement. Confusion over the prank's rushed presentation in the news added to suspicions of fake for all groups: Not everyone understood the role of Vovan and Lexus in the prank or how Lukashenko and KGB ended up on the call (pranksters switched on Lukashenko's recording and impersonated the officer). The latter seemed to many "to go a step too far to be taken seriously."

A new theme emerged in the discussion of authenticity—a common suspicion that NED leaders were bluffing to impress Tsikhanouskaya and get her to work with NED:

> *They boast [of an extensive programme in Belarus and Russia], but that does not mean it's true.*
>
> *They just want to claim more influence than they really have. I have never heard of them, and I follow and participate in many [opposition] events.*

This suspicion of bluffing clearly challenged the news presentation of the prank as NED's "own confession" and further intensified mistrust to the message. Like with Maxine Waters, participants supposed that NED was targeted as it was largely unknown to the Russian publics, making it hard to check the accuracy of prank revelations.

The view that the prank was fake triggered different reactions between oppositional and pro-government focus groups. Opposition supporters expressed sadness that the prank was creating artificial hostility, discrediting democracy, and ridiculing wrong targets:

> *It makes fools of the US, whose people can afford a good living, while half of our population are at poverty line. This is stupid and upsetting.*
>
> *We need western values, what are we without them? To reject civilized values, to create this conflict is like sailing against the wind.*
>
> *Democracy is not an empty word, and [in this prank] the fight for democracy is denigrated and turned into a joke.*

At the same time, pro-government participants complained that the pranksters were producing "low-quality fakes" and doing a "poor job not worth their pay" or described the prank as "primitive" and "idiotic," condemning the news channel for showing it. These attitudes, however, reversed completely if the prank was believed to be genuine. In this case, the pranksters were described by all groups as "excellent communicators" and "bold professionals" who "outsmart" their targets.

Interestingly, whether fake or not, there was wide consensus that the pranksters were "paid agents." Depending on the prank's perceived authenticity, this was interpreted negatively ("paid pawns" who sold themselves to government, in case of fake) or positively (experts in their niche who make good money by serving government). This unwavering confidence in the contracted nature of the prank is illustrative of how strongly the culture of mistrust has penetrated Russia's social fabric, where almost any opinion expressed publicly is suspected of being "paid" by interest groups.

All focus groups agreed about what the prank meant to show: "It tries to scare the public that foreign agents are everywhere, all opposition is corrupt and works for the US." Nobody mentioned discreditation of Tsikhanouskaya—she was seen as a means to reach NED (someone they would talk to), but as a political figure in Belarus, her image was less relevant to the Russian audience.

Participants who saw the prank as genuine were most likely to reproduce its intended message, particularly as it coincided with their prior views about external interference as a real threat. This held true across all groups:

> *If it's real, we just cannot ignore people who try to interfere. They should be watched; our country's security depends on that.*
>
> *I find it convincing because I am already of the same opinion. They are interfering 100%, like spies.*
>
> *Things are even worse than I thought. These could be people close to you, with such [bad] intentions. They could be talking to your kids at school, even giving drugs.*
>
> *Interference is so evident – [the prank] makes it clear as day.*

Those who believed the prank genuine but saw interference as routine in international politics tended to dismiss the revelation—claiming the quotes were out of context or exaggerated to distract publics from Russia's own election rigging.

Political opinions about the prank were also linked to how participants estimated its impact on the wider audience. While "simpletons" and "less informed" publics were mentioned again, there was a clear generational dimension this time—partly, due to the greater popularity of the opposition among Russia's youth. Among those skeptical about the prank, older participants thought it was meant to deceive the youth, "who do not give much critical thought to politics." Younger participants supposed "older people who watch TV" and those not following politics to be most vulnerable to the prank's message. Those who believed the prank expressed a wish for it to target the youth more: "Those who are silly enough to attend protests should watch this."

Finally, once again, the vast majority found the prank funny, regardless of authenticity or political views. They saw the funniest aspect of the otherwise serious prank in NED staff's consternation at the appearance of Lukashenko and KGB—the moment that presented symbolic victory over the opponent (as viewed through the "superiority" theory of humor). Nevertheless, none of the participants expressed the intention to investigate further—either look for the full prank version or try to verify the claims. Whether reinforcing existing opinions or being dismissed as fake, the prank's humorous ending seemed to leave a satisfying, even if fleeting, note to the interference threat—he laughs best who laughs last.

Conclusion

This article has explored the reception and persuasive potential of Russia's foreign policy pranks in narrating contentious international issues to domestic publics. Results indicate that audience reactions can be much more complex and nuanced than one might expect. Far from unquestioningly replicating the news framing of the pranks,

participants expressed multiple reservations. The majority mistrusted the pranks as fake—either staged, manipulated, or arranged—together with a strong consensus that the pranksters were in the government' pay and not acting independently. Across all groups, only a minority reproduced the intended message, while others accepted those elements agreeing with their prior views or rejected the message altogether. Nevertheless, a clear majority found the pranks funny and entertaining, even if disagreeing with the pranks' political message or questioning their authenticity. This raises several important considerations for understanding the power and limitations of humor in narrating foreign policy issues to publics.

First, there are clear indications that audiences actively shape and renegotiate meanings—accepting, resisting, or completely reinterpreting the intended highlights of the pranks. This exposes the limitations of evaluating persuasive impact solely through the intensity of exposure or the dynamics of audience size—the two common approaches that underlie policy responses to propaganda (Chernobrov and Briant 2022). The pranks receive ample news coverage, and undoubtedly, humor helps their audience grow. However, a straightforward conclusion that pranks are effective in shaping political opinions would be wrong—as this study shows, audiences can be entertained without being convinced.

Second, I attribute some of the reverse reactions to the pranks to a combination of multiple wider narratives coming into play. Russia's culture of mistrust has produced popular expectations that all political information is propagandic, contracted, and corrupt. At the same time, the traditional news framing of Russia's politicians—as serious, well-informed, and unfaltering men and women, steering the country in formal meetings and dressed in suits—make Maxine Waters' sincere and humane astonishment, NED's informal Zoom conference, or even the possibility of politics over the phone seem unrealistic and therefore fake. These deeply ingrained popular narratives have long been promoted by the Kremlin—the first, to undermine the opposition and eliminate dissent; the second, to build the government's positive image. However, the pranks expose a curious situation where various propagandistic narratives collide—creating a trap for propaganda that starts to compete with itself.

Third, the pranks reinforced and, in some instances, shaped rather than changed views. Prior opinions and stereotypes—like "all states interfere into each other's affairs," "all Americans are ignorant," or "western sanctions would have been imposed anyway"—were only confirmed by the pranks but originated elsewhere. This was not always accompanied by endorsing depictions of a specific event, actor, or threat in the prank (Russia's denial of interference in the US election or the severity of US involvement with the Russian opposition). In other words, the persuasive power of the pranks was mostly limited to an already loyal audience or to reinforcing wider, already popular narratives. This, however, is also a persuasive strength of humor in narrating foreign policy: While audiences tend to be irritated by undisguised attempts to manipulate opinion, leading them to reject the message, they rarely recognize reinforcement of views as persuasion (see Tchernev et al. 2021).

Fourth, the pranks failed to shape memories of specific events. Participants could not recall past pranks and outcomes (although many were aware of Vovan and Lexus), and none were motivated enough to investigate events in the two sample pranks further. Forgetting the details, participants recited the overall impression in line with the long-standing narratives that the Kremlin frequently utilizes as building blocks for deflecting criticism and mobilizing domestic publics. These include the inevitable geopolitical struggle between Russia and the United States, widespread Western Russophobia, and the hypocrisy of Western elites.

Fifth, both oppositional and pro-government participants demonstrated a critical, multilayered reception. Both recognized the propaganda dimension of the pranks, doubted their authenticity, believed in some degree of mutual US–Russia interference, and criticized as well as praised the pranksters—but with multiple differences in the conclusions they drew from this. The pranks had a certain favorable audience in both camps and, at the same time, were rejected by both camps. Promoted intensively by state media and online, as news and as entertainment, Russia's foreign policy pranks capture a wide and diverse audience, with varying views and levels of interest in politics, and with blurred boundaries between online/offline and domestic/foreign. In a decentralized propaganda environment, characterized by governments' reduced ability to control the message and greater reliance on audience participation, humor presents a means for increased *outreach* first and *persuasion* second.

Finally, the humorous appeal of the pranks was not undermined by their limited ability to persuade. Russia's foreign policy pranks use humor to promote a serious message, but many in the audience laugh at the former and dismiss the latter. On the one hand, such pranks capitalize on mistrust to elites—prank revelations do not come from dull state officials, but from "ordinary guys" unmasking lies in high politics. On the other hand, even if the prank is mistrusted or rejected, audiences easily dismiss it as silly and uninformative or react with indifference. If criticism arises, as this study shows, much of it is directed at the pranksters rather than at Russia's official narratives or government, as it is the source rather than the beneficiary that attracts most blame. This ability to promote the message while dodging adverse consequences makes humor a politically convenient, even if not entirely convincing, tool in narrating foreign policy. It also highlights how the clear-cut distinction between state versus non-state actors in international relations literature on humor can be deficient: Vovan and Lexus are supported by the state but do not officially represent it. It is exactly these blurred boundaries of a proxy that enable pranksters to claim credibility as "ordinary guys" exposing elites and the state to conceal persuasion and deny responsibility.

This study focused on the reception and persuasive power of Russia's foreign policy pranks among its *domestic* audience. I have highlighted both the strengths and limitations of using humor to narrate foreign policy, and stressed the need to resist misleading assumptions that appeal and popularity of humor equal persuasion. This poses several important questions for further research into the role of humor in IR. What is the persuasive power of pranks and strategic humor on foreign (and not just domestic) audiences? Are foreign policy communication strategies reorienting toward outreach rather than persuasion in a participatory media ecology? Do other categories and formats of humor—particularly those not involving "backstage" that brings credibility to the forefront—have similar persuasive power and limitations? It is through addressing these questions that we can return audiences to the center of humor discussions in international relations literature, which so far has heavily focused on content, performance, and actors.

Funder Information

This research has been funded by a grant from the British Academy, grant number SRG2021\210996.

References

Acocella, I. 2012. "The Focus Groups in Social Research: Advantages and Disadvantages." *Quality & Quantity* 46 (4): 1125–36. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-011-9600-4.

Adler-Nissen, R., and A. Tsinovoi. 2019. "International Misrecognition: The Politics of Humour and National Identity in Israel's Public Diplomacy." *European Journal of International Relations* 25 (1): 3–29. https://doi.org/10.1177/13540661177453.

Baum, M.A., and P. Potter. 2019. "Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy in the Age of Social Media." *The Journal of Politics* 81 (2): 747–56. https://doi.org/10.1086/702233.

Baym, G. 2005. "The Daily Show: Discursive Integration and the Reinvention of Political Journalism." *Political Communication* 22 (3): 259–76. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584600591006492.

Becker, A.B. 2013. "What about Those Interviews? The Impact of Exposure to Political Comedy and Cable News on Factual Recall and Anticipated Political Expression." *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 25 (3): 344–56. https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/edt014.

Bogad, L.M. 2016. *Tactical Performance*. New York: Routledge.

Brassett, J. 2016. "British Comedy, Global Resistance: Russel Brand, Charlie Brooker and Stewart Lee." *European Journal of International Relations* 22 (1): 168–91. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066115586816.

Budnitsky, S. 2023. "Global Disengagement: Public Diplomacy Humor in the Russian–Ukrainian War." *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 19: 211–7. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41254-022-00291-1.

Channel 1. 2021a. "American Managers of 'Colour Revolutions' Blab out Their Operations in Russia and Belarus to Pranksters." May 17. https://www.1tv.ru/news/2021-05-17/406637-amerikanskie_menedzhery_tsvetnyh_revolyutsiy_vyboltali_prankeram_rasklad_po_belorussii_i_rossii?ysclid=lluty1skti586372474.

———. 2021b. "Maria Zakharova Comments on Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's Account of Cookies From Biden." July 29. https://www.1tv.ru/news/2021-07-29/410600-mariya_zaharova_prokommentirovala_rasskaz_svetlany_tihanovskoy_o_pechenkah_ot_baydena.

Chernobrov, D. 2022. "Strategic Humour: Public Diplomacy and Comic Framing of Foreign Policy Issues." *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 24 (2): 277–96. https://doi.org/10.1177/13691481211023958.

———. 2023. "Strategic Humor and Post-Truth Public Diplomacy." *CPD Perspectives on Public Diplomacy* 3: 1–48.

Chernobrov, D., and E.L. Briant. 2022. "Competing Propagandas: How the United States and Russia Represent Mutual Propaganda Activities." *Politics* 42 (3): 393–409. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395720966171.

Crilley, R., and P. Chatterje-Doody. 2020. "From Russia With Lols: Humour, RT, and the Legitimation of Russian Foreign Policy." *Global Society* 35 (2): 269–88. https://doi.org/10.1080/13600826.2020.1839387.

Davis, J.L., T.P. Love, and G. Killen. 2018. "Seriously Funny: The Political Work of Humor on Social Media." *New Media & Society* 20 (10): 3898–916. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818762602.

Duskaeva, L., and E. Shcheglova. 2020. "Perception of a Comic Text-Prank in the Dialogue of Network Communication." *Media Linguistics* 7 (2): 238–49. https://doi.org/10.21638/spbu22.2020.207.

Fedor, J., and R. Fredheim 2017. "'We need more clips about Putin, and lots of them': Russia's state-commissioned online visual culture." *Nationalities Papers* 45 (2): 161–181.

Feldman, L., and D.G. Young. 2008. "Late-Night Comedy as a Gateway to Traditional News." *Political Communication* 25 (4): 401–22. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584600802427013.

Goffman, E. 1959. The Presentation of Everyday Self. New York: Doubleday Anchor Books.

Goodall, H.L., Jr, P.H. Cheong, K. Fleischer, and S.R. Corman. 2012. "Rhetorical Charms the Promise and Pitfalls of Humor and Ridicule as Strategies to Counter Extremist Narratives." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 6 (1): 70–9.

Harold, C. 2004. "Pranking Rhetoric: 'Culture Jamming' as Media Activism." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 21 (3): 189–211. https://doi.org/10.1080/0739318042000212693.

Heiss, R. 2021. "How Humorous Posts Influence Engagement With Political Posts on Social Media." *Journal of Media Psychology* 34 (1): 16–29. https://doi.org/10.1027/1864-1105/a000297.

Independent. 2022a. "YouTube Removes Russian Hoax Call Videos With Priti Patel and Ben Wallace." March 26. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/youtube-russia-hoax-calls-patel-wallace-b2044569.html.

Innocenti, B., and E. Miller. 2016. "The Persuasive Force of Political Humor." *Journal of Communication* 66 (3): 366–85. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12231.

Komsomolskaya Pravda. 2012. "Vovan, Firing Churov and Jabbing at Mutko." November 16. https://www.kp.ru/daily/25986/2917877/.

———. 2018. "OPCB Director General to Pranksters: US Could Have Made Poison Used Against Skripal." April 23. https://www.kp.ru/daily/26822.5/3859863/.

Kopper, A. 2021. "The use of Humour in Diplomatic Tweets: The Affiliative Potential of Ridicule." *Cooperation and Conflict* 56 (3): 309–27. https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836720975458.

Kornilova, E.N., and A.S. Kuznetsov. 2021. "The Trickster as an Archetype in the Digital Media Space." In *Perishable And Eternal: Mythologies and Social Technologies of Digital Civilization. European Proceedings of Social and Behavioural Sciences*, edited by D.Y. Krapchunov, S.A. Malenko, V.O. Shipulin, E.F. Zhukova, A.G. Nekita and O.A. Fikhtner, 94–102. Novgorod State University, Russia.

Kurowska, X., and A. Reshetnikov. 2021. "Trickstery: Pluralising Stigma in International Society." *European Journal of International Relations* 27 (1): 232–57. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066120946467.

Kuznetsov, V., and A. Stolyarov. 2018. *Vovan i Lexus: Po kom zvonit telefon [Vovan & Lexus: For Whom the Phone Rings]*. Saint Petersburg: Peter.

Lenta.Ru. 2014. "Prankster Vovan Tricks US General, Posing as Avakov." October 10. https://lenta.ru/news/2014/10/10/vovanvsusa/.

———. 2022. "Ukraine's Minister of Foreign Affairs Admits Kyiv's Involvement in Crimea and Belgorod Explosions." https://lenta.ru/news/2022/10/13/eto_mi/.

Levada Center. 2021. "January Protests." February 10. https://www.levada.ru/2021/02/10/yanvarskie-protesty/.

Livingstone, S. 2015. "Active Audiences? The Debate Progresses But Is Far from Resolved." *Communication Theory* 25 (4): 439–46. https://doi.org/10.1111/comt.12078.

McLeod, K. 2011. "On Pranks." *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 8 (1): 97–102. https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2011.544118.

Malmvig, H. 2023. "Jesting International Politics: The Productive Power and Limitations of Humorous Practices in an Age of Entertainment Politics." *Review of International Studies* 49 (3): 513–34. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210522000341.

Miller, G.R. 2013. "On Being Persuaded: Some Basic Distinctions." In *The SAGE Handbook of Persuasion: Developments in Theory and Practice*, edited by JP Dillard and L Shen, 70–82. Sage, London.

Nabi, R., E. Moyer-Gusé, and S. Byrne. 2007. "All Joking Aside: A Serious Investigation Into the Persuasive Effect of Funny Social Issue Messages." *Communication Monographs* 74 (1): 29–54. https://doi.org/10.1080/03637750701196896.

Nye, J.S. 2008. "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616 (1): 94–109. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716207311699.

Patterson, M., and K.R Monroe. 1998. "Narrative in Political Science." *Annual Review of Political Science* 1 (1): 315–31. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.1.1.315.

Petty, R.E., and J.T. Cacioppo. 1986. *Communication and Persuasion: Central and Peripheral Routes to Attitude Change*. Berlin: Springer.

Pew Research Center. 2018. "Russians Say Their Government Did Not Try to Influence U.S. Presidential Election." August 21. http://www.pewglobal.org/2018/08/21/russians-say-theirgovernment-did-not-try-to-influence-u-s-presidential-election.

RBC. 2022. "Kuleba Tells Pranksters How the Conflict With Russia Will End." October 14. https://www.rbc.ru/politics/14/10/2022/6348d7009a794725dbff8e9b.

Ronfeldt, D., and J. Arquila. 2020. *Whose Story Wins*. Rand, Santa Monica, CA.

Russia24. 2017a. "US Senator Condemns the Kremlin for Appointing Aybolit as Limpopo's President." February 17. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eqNjvvhjLE8.

———. 2017b. "Pranksters Vovan and Lexus Trick US Congresswoman." February 13. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aNCBGHvB63Q.

———. 2021. "The Adventures of NED in Russia and Belarus." May 17. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cEPUfNUcZH0.

Shevchenko, V. 2018. "Analysis: Telephone pranksters as a Kremlin media tool." *BBC Monitoring*, January 2. 2. https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c1dofhaw.

Smithson, J. 2000. "Using and Analysing Focus Groups: Limitations and Possibilities." *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 3 (2): 103–19. https://doi.org/10.1080/136455700405172.

Stanley, L. 2016. "Using Focus Groups in Political Science and International Relations." *Politics* 36 (3): 236–49. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395715624120.

Ştefăniţă, O., N. Corbu, and R. Buturoiu. 2018. "Fake News and the Third-Person Effect: They Are More Influenced Than Me and You." *Journal of Media Research* 11 (3): 5–23. https://doi.org/10.24193/jmr.32.1.

Strömbäck, J. 2008. "Four Phases of Mediatization: An Analysis of the Mediatization of Politics." *International Journal of Press/Politics* 13 (3): 228–46. https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161208319097.

Subotić, J. 2016. "Narrative, Ontological Security, and Foreign Policy Change." *Foreign Policy Analysis* 12 (4): 610–27. https://doi.org/10.1111/fpa.12089.

Sukhodolov, A.P., E.S. Kudlik, and A.B. Antonova. 2018. "Prank Journalism as a New Genre in Russian Media Landscape." *Theoretical and Practical Issues of Journalism* 7 (3): 361–70. https://doi.org/10.17150/2308-6203.2018.7(3).361-370.

TASS. 2017. "Kremlin Spokesman Pokes fun at Prank Call Gag on US Congresswoman." February 14. https://tass.com/politics/930795.

———. 2022. "MFA Spokeswoman Gives Pranksters Vovan, Lexus Secure Desktop Phone as Award." June 2. https://tass.com/society/1459879.

Tchernev, J.M., C. Brown, W. Walther-Martin, and M. Moyer-Gusé. 2021. "Forceful or Funny? Audience Interpretations of Narrative Persuasion in Satirical Entertainment Media." *Communication Studies* 72 (4): 734–51.

Times. 2021. "We Fund Russian Democracy Protests, Boasts US Group." May 19. https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/russian-pranksters-trick-us-officials-into-boasting-about-funding-protests-hbtwtvg6n.

van Rythoven, E. 2022. "Backstage Mockery: Impoliteness and Asymmetry on the World Stage." *Global Studies Quarterly* 2 (4): 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksac064.

Warr, D.J. 2005. "'It was Fun… but we don't Usually Talk About These Things': Analyzing Sociable Interaction in Focus Groups." *Qualitative Inquiry* 11 (2): 200–25. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800404273412.

Wedderburn, A. 2021. *Humour, Subjectivity and World Politics*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Wood, M., J. Corbett, and M. Flinders. 2016. "Just Like Us: Everyday Celebrity Politicians and the Pursuit of Popularity in an Age of Anti-Politics." *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 18 (3): 581–98. https://doi.org/10.1177/1369148116632182.

Young, D. 2004. "Late-Night Comedy in Election 2000." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 48 (1): 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15506878jobem4801_1.

Chernobrov, Dmitry (2024) Humor and Foreign Policy Narration: The Persuasive Power and Limitations of Russia's Foreign Policy Pranks. *Global Studies Quarterly*, https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksae007