

ESTONIA

POLITICAL JOKES IN POST-SOCIALIST ESTONIA (2000–2007)

Liisi Laineste

Abstract

Estonian contemporary political jokes offer insight into several issues discussed in humour studies, including the interdependence of jokes and social reality, and on a broader scale also the dependence of jokes on the political regime into which they are born. The article surveys Estonian political jokes on the Estonian Internet (www.delfi.ee/jokes) in the period 2000 – 2007. The material covers both “old” and “new” jokes, as they exist side by side. The analysis concerns the nearly 800-strong collection of political jokes accessible on the humour site. The jokes are analysed from three points of view: first, how actual political events may have influenced the number and contents of the jokes, second, the inner structure of the category of political jokes, to reveal whether this could indicate a shift towards the depoliticisation of certain (e.g. animal or vocational) jokes; and third, whether the recent transition from totalitarianism to democracy may have caused some change in the target choice of jokelore. Thus, against a pervasive background of old Soviet jokes, the article will put the contemporary joke traditions into context, in order to discuss the main targets, popularity and directions of the contemporary political joke.

Key words: humour, political jokes, ethnic jokes, post-socialist, Internet

INTRODUCTION

The article will give an account of contemporary Estonian political jokes, most of all their general characteristics, possible subcategories and popularity in recent years, focusing on Internet jokes. We will see how political jokes react to local and global events, acting as cognitive tools that help to comment on daily politics in a playful way, performing the role of a more or less subtle parody. So far Estonian ethnic jokes have already been studied to some extent (see Laineste 2005a; Krikmann, this volume). This article focuses on political jokes. Distinguishing ethnic from politic jokes is not an easy task: on many occasions the categories of political and ethnic jokes tend to fuse and form a distinct category so typical to Eastern Europe, the ethno-political

joke. The targets of these jokes are ludicrously behaving ethnic neighbours, but also the much-loathed political oppressors, and these two may end up in being just one target. The recent development of more distinct categories will be traced. Another characteristic feature of post-socialist jokes is the coexistence and interaction of old Soviet and new or modified / adapted / recycled political jokes. The changes in their popularity inevitably lead towards the discussion of national identity and its construction. Getting to terms with and – in a way – opposing past heritage in contemporary traditions is an important part of a nation's self-identification. The intertextuality of contemporary jokes is examined, to reveal the presence of these complex identity issues. The rejection of old jokes reflects only a section of a nation's struggle to define itself: the choice of new targets, and in some cases the switching of old targets for new ones, is also an identification of new perspectives based on inclusion ("us") and exclusion ("others"), indicating our opinions and fears. The results will, all in all, demonstrate how the political reality of a post-socialist society is reflected in jokes.

In post-socialist societies, complex changes are taking place in jokelore, and in the performing and telling of jokes. There are several reasons for this change: first, the regained independence in Estonia and the consequent transition from being a periphery of a huge totalitarian society into a free democratic nation state, secondly, globalisation, which is altering jokes in the same way it is affecting all kinds of traditions worldwide, and thirdly, the dawn of the Internet era and the high level of computerisation that has transformed joke-telling practices. Political jokes were among the first to undergo these changes.

In describing the present situation, we can give a full account only when considering both the specific, contemporary background and the historic perspective, and in addition to this, the media where the material appears. It is thus necessary, alongside the newer jokes that characterise most of the contemporary active joke tradition, to describe old Soviet (political) jokes. Their tradition was very vital, and had a great effect on thinking about political jokes in general (at least in the former Soviet bloc), besides it is still a distinct though diminishing category among contemporary political jokes.

JOKES AND THEIR RELATIONS TO SOCIAL REALITY

Most jokes (in Freud's terms *tendentious jokes* (Freud 1905/1989) are, according to some humour scholars, a (distorting) mirror of the society they are born or adapted into (Douglas 1968; Linke & Dundes 1988). There are some, who, after stating the relationship of the joke and its object, also advocate the aggressive effect or consequences of these "ugly" jokes and try to refrain from citing them to avoid further "pollution" (Billig 2001) thus outlining the relationship between the joke and its target as possibly harmful to the subject (in the same vein, several psychological studies have supported the hypotheses that aggressive / sexist jokes predispose subjects to hostile sexism, e.g. Ryan & Kanjorski (1998); or diminish self-directed negative affect for enjoying the jokes as maintained by Ford, Wentzel & Lorion (2001)). On the other hand, many relevant studies (e.g. Dundes & Hauschild 1983) have refrained from becoming involved in the problems of reception, and for them the essence can be revealed without examining the effect of jokes. It is enough to describe the joke text and its broader social context. They (e.g. Dundes & Hauschild 1983) believe that even if the picture we see there is unsettling or even downright disgusting, it is in part still the ugly essence of the actual feelings and thus needs to be studied, described, and perhaps brought forward as a question worth discussing in public, in order to raise awareness of our prejudices. These studies support the safety valve theory, claiming that jokes express the aggressive impulses that would otherwise be painfully inhibited. Yet others maintain (Davies 1998) that jokes have little to do with actual stereotypes or real feelings of distress. Jokes express emotions, but not only (or rather: primarily) at times of greater oppression or perceived threats. In the times of conflict, there tend to be more apt measures than jokes to deal with the problems. Jokes are elicited by other factors. Peaks in creating jokes and telling them coincide with periods of decay of political regimes, diminishing tensions etc. According to this theory, political jokes are the result of uneven or unjustified exercises of power. In addition to this, there is the question of whether jokes are "true" in an emotional, or on a higher level, a societal sense – or are they merely a play with stereotypes we might know but do not really believe in. We play with an inspiring detail of a real-life event not because of the event itself, but mostly because of the allusions evoked by the event, the possibilities of interpretation it allows, the ambiguities it involves, etc. The choice relies not on the importance of the event, but on more irrelevant factors such as playfulness and the

search for ambiguity that are decisive in joking. Besides, maintaining that jokes are in accordance to social reality is complicated because the multiplicity of realities, opinions and emotions that surround and inhabit the contemporary man. All of these standpoints and approaches challenge the researcher with questions that are empirically difficult to tackle.

The most basic and auspiciously also the most easily accessible of the issues is the interaction between jokes and their social reality – if jokes do mirror reality, how does this mirror work? If they are a thermometer for registered emotions, are they indicative of opinions only at a meta-level? The latter would mean that there is no straightforward relationship between the jokes and the society with its stereotypes, instead the connection is evident on a generalised level (e.g. there are more jokes on stinginess if the mocked nation is believed to be an economically successful former outsider). As we often have to admit, there are not many examples to point at when we want to maintain that a joke reinforces some certain attitudes, and there are attitudes that will induce certain jokes. Internet jokes with their meta-text of time, place and sender, provide the interested researcher with the necessary material to answer the questions: e.g. when and related to what event the jokes became popular.

W. Bascom and R. Abrahams have discussed the functions of folklore genres, including jokes. For them, jokes are either disruptive / destructive texts in folklore that target taboo areas, in order to point out the forbidden (Bascom 1965: 10), or conflict-focused texts that raise problems instead of solving them (Abrahams 1976: 206–207). That is, in folkloristic research, the aggressive side of jokes is emphasised over its coping, bonding or other positive functions mostly mentioned in psychological studies (visible in psychologists' rising interest in positive psychology). Jokes do not, however, exist only at the times of conflict: the USA is famous for its black and Pole jokes, but these do not stem from an actual hatred towards the group or any actual threat from them (Davies 1990). Instead, the threat is more often economic in nature, and the jokes are thus rooted in economic inequality, unevenly distributed assets etc., from which stupidity and canniness jokes arise. There may be an event that triggers them, but it may not be that evident. In the case of political jokes, the relation to a conflict (a daily political issue) is more visible, but here too the actuality of the stereotypes exhibited therein is questionable. What the choices displayed in political jokes represent is a relevant issue to this article. Joke cycles are a good example of how real events are reflected in jokes, but even

if the events are there, the outspokenly aggressive context of these joke cycles (e.g. Challenger, WTC etc.) hold very similar reactions to different events and people, which leads us to think that it may not be the stereotypes we have about these joke objects but rather some other drive pushing us to express the overwhelming emotions in a particular way. Other motives are involved in creating and circulating these “sick” jokes – possibly emotional coping with the event as well as with its representation in the media.

Jokes in which the relations with social reality are self-evident include topical jokes and news parodies (e.g. Kuipers 2005; Kürti 1988). Political jokes do not, however, clearly and univocally refer to their source. This research shows that there are many aspects involved in how social reality becomes distilled into jokes: it depends on the social and political context, and the qualities of the stimulus (the textual, contextual and intertextual characteristics of the news text, political or other events as social text etc.), which will be discussed in greater detail below.

CATEGORIES AND TARGETS IN POLITICAL AND ETHNIC JOKES

Another issue is that of the direction of joking, both in socialist and post-socialist society, and the closely related problem of distinguishing between ethnic and political jokes. Broadly speaking, these two categories of jokes work by different means: the ethnic joke (as Christie Davies has argued on a huge amount of comparative data, 1990) is directed towards the inferior, while political jokes target the superior. Davies has firmly stated that most numbskull-jokes are directed downwards, that is from the centre and better-off towards the periphery and worse-off (the few exceptions being British jokes about the aristocrats and in cases where the political power has been unjustifiably attained, see Davies 1998: 93–95). In most multiethnic societies, however, jokes are often told both about the majority and the minority (Estonians and Russians in Estonia, Jews and Russians in Soviet Russia, Polish/Black and WASPs in the USA etc.). Minorities can tell jokes about their own group (in self-deprecating jokes), but they can also mock the majority. The question is more about the power and recognition of the multiplicity of jokes and the intensity of these jokes: some cycle or target may be less spread, limited only to a few groups. Sometimes the derogatory jokes are spread by the targets themselves (as shows the classical example of Jews (Davies 1993), but also visible

in Estonian (Laineste 2005a), Serbian (Hicks 2002; Vucetic 2004) and other jokelore, to offer but a choice of very different examples). Thus there are societies in which the universals of the direction of target choice do not apply. In the segmented topological division, it is the centre or the “golden mean” that qualifies as normality. Normality is the ideal that the in-group is eager to identify itself with – “they” are strange, marginal; “we” are normal. It is also the nature of folklore by definition – folk traditions are created, maintained and passed on by the “average folk”, with no particularly great power or powerlessness. The socially marginal groups at either extreme of economical, territorial or other spectra do not belong to this in-group. The old folk jokes seem to follow precisely this argumentation in their choice of targets (see also Remmel 2003: 174). In some other historic examples, top-down and bottom-up joking forms an undistinguishable set of joke tradition, which has the main aim of mocking a regime in general (e.g. jokes from the Soviet bloc). There the centrifugal forces are overplayed by a common, both political and ethnic target, that dictates the direction of jokes. In Soviet jokes, it was the Russians bringing about and impersonating the Soviet way of life (though there was also the Chukchi, more a miserable victim of the system than the reason for the country’s misery). In many cases, the nationality of the target was not mentioned, but it was instead supplemented with a “code-name” from the animal world, for instance. Different groups inside the totalitarian society were represented by animals (wolf as the “power”, fox its lip-servicing two-faced disciple, hare as the innocent victim – and sometimes the trickster, etc.). The Soviet joke tradition can also be seen as adding a general political overtone in every joke. It mocked all aspects of the absurd everyday life, turning almost every humorous text, be it situated in the bedroom, school, workplace or public space, into a political joke. The omnipresent skepticism and nihilism in Soviet jokes made a point of discrediting the regime by using every walk of Soviet life as an inspiration (see also Graham 2003: 99). Thus in Soviet jokelore (but not only there) we encounter confusion between the direction of joking and also in joke categories. Belonging to the category of political jokes did not mean that a joke could not belong to other relevant categories, as was often the case with Soviet jokes. A joke could be political and ethnic, sometimes also harbour an additional sexual allusion etc. Ethnic jokes about Jews carry a strong political connotation, especially those that date from the 1950s (see Benton 1988). We can assume that certain political, economic, etc. repressions or organised persecutions load different types of jokes with political

meaning, and the jokes will then represent more than one category: they are political and also ethnic, sexual, animal etc. jokes. The transition from a totalitarian to democratic society should then produce a set of de-politicised jokes – the categories do not mingle, but instead display relatively fixed and objectively identifiable characteristics and boundaries. In addition, the old Soviet jokes that had a political undertone are now being circulated because of some other amusing detail – absurdity, sexual abnormality etc. It is debatable whether a formerly political joke will now be perceived as apolitical (if the wording remains largely the same), but the tellers of the joke distance themselves from it. The problems it depicted are now bygone. Even if the joke is remembered to be political, it probably does not actually carry the significance of a political joke. As in this following joke, where in contemporary presentation the political power relations give way to a much stronger sexual undertone:

A Russian and Chukchi are fighting on the street. A policeman approaches them: “What is going on here?” – “We are arguing about who is the master of Chukotka [the Chukchi Peninsula].” – “You will continue the argument in jail,” answers the police officer. Next morning the policeman asks them: “Did you solve you issue?” – “Yes,” answers the Chukchi. “The Russian is the master, and I’m the mistress...”
(Delfi, Dr Huibolit, May 28, 2004)

JOKES IN SOCIALISM AND POST-SOCIALISM

These jokes, like the one about the Chukchi and the Russian, could be regime- and society-specific. Political jokes still do travel from society to society, as tradition is an active flow of texts that do not simply cease to exist. Jokes change, merge and diffuse. Jokes from Soviet Russia or Communist Cuba live a parallel life in democratic Finland or Great Britain, only with different targets (although the popularity of those jokes can be different in the country of their origin and among “secondary” joke-tellers). Raskin (1985: 222) admits that there are two types of political jokes: some context-specific political jokes are only possible in a certain country (or a certain regime), as the knowledge needed to understand the joke is not available to the listeners, whereas others can exist successfully under all regimes and circumstances. Politics has been the object of jokes since Roman times, and some of these are still known today, even if they have been modified somewhat to fit into contemporary society (Larsen 1980: 5). Abraham Lincoln, who was a skilful orator, has said that he could at best call

himself a restorer of jokes, as he did not create new ones but recycled old ones (Parker 1978: 4). The totalitarian Soviet Union, especially in the last decades of its existence, has often been said to be the most fertile environment for joking about politics and politicians (Davies 2007; Krikmann 2006).

Political jokes are said to owe their popularity to the feeling of superiority which is achieved by ridiculing those in power. Jokes that poke fun at the incompetence of our leaders or reduce them to the level of the average citizen (or, for that matter, below that; the lower the better) have always been favoured in all societies. Tony Veale claims that mocking those of higher status, reputation, social and economical level provides emotional satisfaction for the “average citizen”, i.e. those not in power (Veale 2004). As old jokes keep reappearing in different contexts, with stupidity and vanity as the main concerns, there seem to be no specific contextual parameters that dictate certain types or themes of jokes. Some limits are nevertheless set by the relevance of texts. The main setting and oppositions involved should be culturally understandable and relevant to the new context they are told in. Some jokes seem to have quite limited potential: even if they are not complicated to understand (which might also be the case, as older joke tales are longer, more elaborate and often do not have a punch-line), they may involve certain rigid moral norms that are not today regarded as important. In the contemporary world of gender equality, for example, there is no significant emotional difference between the male and female adultery that forms the core of this joke:

Franz Joseph notices a man who resembles him strikingly. “Was your mother at some time in service at the palace?” the emperor asks. “No, Sire,” is the answer, “but my father was!”
(Central European, 1900s, cited in Raskin 1985: 225)

The joke retains its archaic setting, and it is not possible to transform the joke into a contemporary setting by merely changing the targets. In Estonia, the joke was told during the first republic in the 1930s, with the Estonian peasant talking to a Baltic-German estate owner (Hindrey 1931: 209), but the text has not appeared in post-socialist jokelore. There are, however, jokes with less specific contextual parameters. These cross temporal and geographic borders with remarkable ease. Consider the following joke:

Hitler takes a walk in the woods and falls into a lake. A young boy pulls him out. Hitler tells him to ask anything he wants in return for having saved his life. “Oh yes,” said the boy. “May I ask you not to breathe a word

about this to anybody?” – “But why?” asks Hitler. “You could be made famous for this heroic exploit.” – “This is what I am afraid of, sir,” says the boy. “If I become famous, my father will hear about it also, and he will wring my neck right away!”
(Cited in Raskin 1985: 226)

There are several records of this joke, with different targets: Nixon, Clinton and other higher officials, to name but a few. In Estonian material, the target was well-known and despised contemporary politician Edgar Savisaar:

Edgar falls into the river and starts crying for help. A farmer comes running and pulls him out of the water. Savisaar says: “I will grant you everything you wish for. Do you want to become a member of my party?” – “No.” – “Do you want a place in the top ten of our election list?” – “No.” – “What then?” – “Just don’t tell anyone I saved you...”
(Delfi Naljaleht: She, Feb. 24, 2003)

The recyclability of political jokes seems to rest in the setting of the events and norms involved. More universal jokes with a less region-, culture- or era-specific context do travel well and may appear under different regimes. Consequently, we could claim that this cultural context or build-up of the joke is one of the main factors that determine the popularity of a text in different times and countries. Another competing theory maintains that cultural values inherent in jokes are important, but they cannot be adapted from one country to another merely as a result of this – instead, different jokes apply to different political systems and are not transferable. It is the target that differs in totalitarian and democratic political jokes (Rose 2002). Totalitarian jokes tend to mock the system in general, while jokes from democratic regimes mock leaders in person, reminding us that they are people from among “us”, their voters. This supposition does not prove entirely correct from the standpoint of Soviet political humour. Soviet Estonian political jokes can be divided into three categories: (1) jokes and conundrums about politicians, with the main focus on gaining the upper hand over the opposing character (in many cases Russian vs. American politicians); (2) those that mock the socialist regime without naming any particular political leaders who were responsible for the miserable living standards; and (3) jokes and conundrums on daily life referring to the inefficiency of the system (Sarv 1995: 106). While the last two categories correspond to what Rose said about the targets of totalitarian political jokes (i.e. jokes are about the system in general), the first type of jokes on international relationships prove that politi-

cal leaders were not an unknown joke target during socialism. Nevertheless, there is some evidence that political jokes in Estonia are now more leader-oriented, focusing on politicians' (sometimes imaginary) vices (Laineste 2005b), and the issue will also be addressed in the empirical part of this research. Contemporary jokes lack a pervading, central theme, and there are not many jokes about the political system or the hardships of daily life created by politicians; there seem to be more effective means of discussing these issues (the most active of which being discussion boards on the Internet, see Imfeld & Scott 2004: 206). Jokes become political mainly by using the names of politicians. Inspiration comes from daily news – those who find themselves in the limelight will soon figure in personalised jokes:

Minister of Agriculture Ivari Padar orders farmers to plant potatoes at night.

“Why?” ask the puzzled farmers.

“Then the potato bug will not see where the seeds are planted.”

(Delfi Naljaleht: Urmas, Oct. 12, 2004)

Polemics on how well jokes mirror social reality, what forces are behind the choice of joke targets in different societies, and how this is expressed in political / ethnic jokes will be viewed, using the jokelore of post-socialist Estonia as an example. Analysing the material on a wider temporal scale from the 1950s to the present day, one can put the jokes in a proper context. Briefly put, the following research hypotheses / assumptions will be tested in this article:

- (1) Political jokes stem from a real social-political context. The creation of new jokes thus depends on everyday life: the more political conflicts or intriguing events, the more jokes in circulation. Active periods (elections, scandals and other local / global events that reinforce each other and are incorporated into jokes) result in a heightened interest in jokes.
- (2) Contemporary Estonian political jokes form a distinct category that excludes ethnic and other thematic topics, whereas in Soviet jokes all categories are intertwined.
- (3) Contemporary Estonian political jokes concentrate more on the leaders than on the shortcomings of the current political system or difficulties of daily life, while Soviet humour focused on the latter.

METHODOLOGY

We assume that the situation in Estonia is not an isolated exception but mirrors the underlying mechanisms of how jokes change in all transitional societies in Eastern Europe. For this research, political jokes from Estonia's major joke source at www.delfi.ee/jokes (Delfi Joke Page) were analysed. The Delfi Joke Page is a popular site where users post about 20 new jokes a day in different categories that have been assigned to the received jokes by the portal's editors.

A total of 854 jokes from the category of political humour, from the years 2000 to 2006, were included in the analysis. In describing political jokes, we will compare the category to other major thematic sections (jokes about animals, ethnic groups, sex) which were also analysed for the study.

Simple quantitative analysis was performed on the material, counting the frequency of jokes during the period.

ANALYSIS

First we will describe the medium in which the jokes are published. The Delfi portal is an extremely popular pan-Baltic news and entertainment site, a common example in public discussions on several issues concerning Internet ethics, culture etc. It is evident that its popularity is still growing, as it surpasses all of the now emerging and developing online newspapers or other infotainment portals. The most essential feature of the Delfi portal is online news and commentaries. In the years 2000–2005, the number of commentaries rose alongside – and as evidence of – the popularity of the portal, as shown in Figure 1. By 2004, the number of daily news texts had stabilized at around 40 a day (and subsequently fallen), although their quantity rose until then. There is an optimal amount of news that people need and want to read, and an overload of information is not attractive to potential readers, which might be the reason for subsequent standstill. Further analysis reveals that while the number of daily news has remained stable, the number of commentaries is still on the rise (with the average in 2007 being around 150 comments per news item), indicating a deep interest in engaging oneself in online interaction.

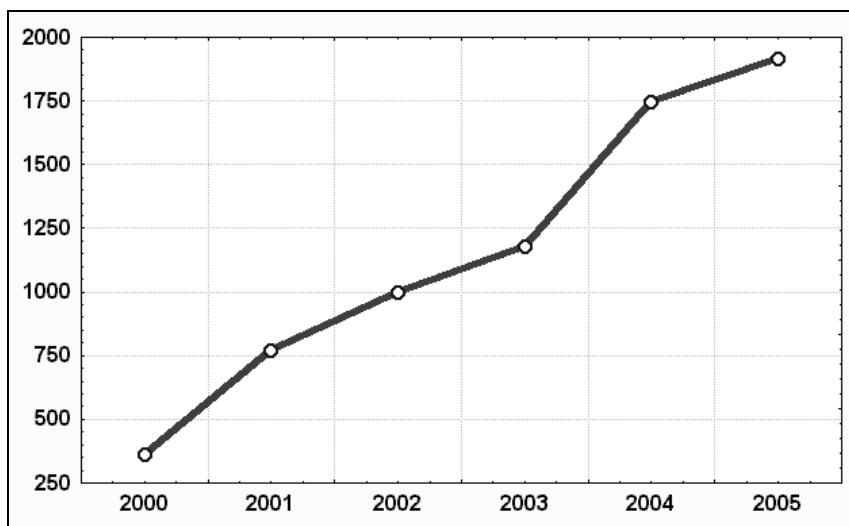


Figure 1. Amount of daily online commentaries in Delfi (2000–2005)

Commentaries are the soul of this media – their great number shows that people are willing not only to read the news but also to form an active community, discussing the events and their significance. They express opinions, take sides, argue (and of course insult each other when discussion becomes heated), and occasionally also share jokes. Regarding the growing popularity of the medium, it might be surprising that the overall number of jokes follows a falling trend (Figure 2).

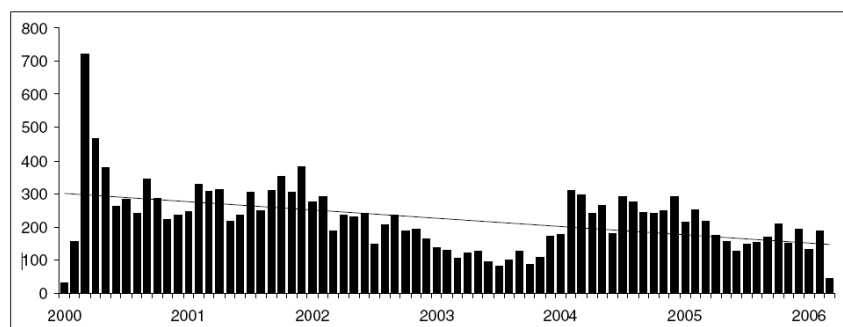


Figure 2. Overall amount of jokes in Delfi (2000–2006)

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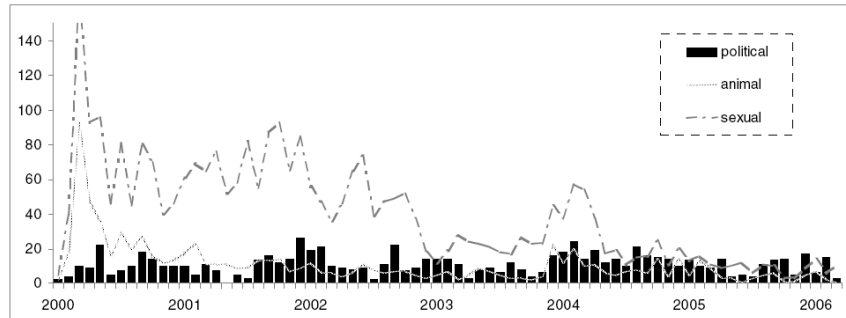


Figure 3. Amount of political, sexual and animal jokes in Delfi (200 –2006)

Since the launch of the joke page www.delfi.ee/jokes in February 2000 and the first peak of fascination therein, there has only been one slight revival in 2004/2005, but it does not compare to the average of 430 jokes during the site’s first months, in winter and spring 2000. Some reorganisations of the joke site took place, raising interest among Internet users in 2004 (new features for evaluating jokes, new categories of visual material, such as cartoons and film strips, were added, etc.).¹ The trendline on Figure 2, however, shows a falling tendency. There is a negative relation between the daily amount of both news and commentaries on the one hand and the number of jokes on the other. Considering that identical jokes will not be posted on the joke site (there is editorial control over duplicates), this is to be expected. At first, all jokes that were circulating were sent to the Delfi joke page, and later the sources ran dry. When we look at each of the joke categories separately, however, summing up the amount of jokes in these over the years, we see an interesting pattern. There are great differences in how political and topical jokes are created / sent on the one hand, and the rest of the categories on the other. All other categories (e.g. jokes about vocations, absurdity, computers, blondes, etc.) other than political jokes fit the mentioned trend: the first months see a huge number of jokes, and then a decline follows. In Figure 3, the latter category is shown together with jokes about animals (this contained roughly the same number of jokes, ca. 800). The popularity of ethnic and sexual jokes from the same period was also added to the comparison.

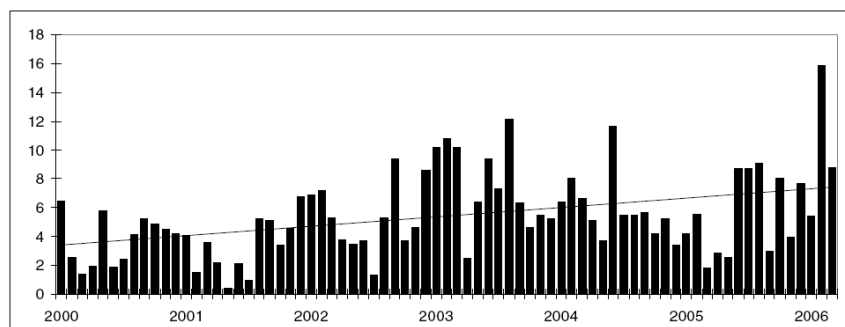


Figure 4. Share (%) of political jokes (200–2006)

Though interest in sexual jokes remained high for a longer period of time, it has recently lost popularity and remained roughly stable at around 6 jokes a month sent to the Delfi joke site. Correspondingly, animal and ethnic jokes have remained at around 8–15 jokes a month since 2001. Such jokes are not inspired by real-life events. Even if their total number is the same as that of political jokes, it is only the latter that systematically appears only when there is a certain triggering event. Political jokes do not cease or decrease in frequency because the joke-tellers may run out of jokes; instead they rely on the joke-tellers urge to react to social reality, appearing only if there is something to joke about. The greatest difference with other joke categories is the shallow / unenthusiastic start in 2000, which gradually changed into a greater interest in sharing political jokes online (see also Figure 4). As the overall number of sending jokes decreases (Figure 2), political jokes remain at the same level of popularity, leading to the increase shown in Figure 4. This indicates that the mechanisms behind the creation and sending of political jokes differ from those in the rest of the categories – other factors are at work here that influence rises and falls in their popularity. We could suggest that political jokes help to process and give meaning to daily experience and their functions differ from other jokes primarily meant to amuse.

The typological reserve of political jokes may not be greater, but their potential use is, as is their flexibility. In general, the popularity of political jokes seems to be rising. It is possible to argue that the commenting of daily politics through humour is an Internet-specific trend and has nothing to do with the situational joke-telling in real interaction, but even if that were the case, it is significant that Internet users in Estonia have a heightened interest in sending (and reading) political jokes. The Internet as a medium is, after all, a very popular and

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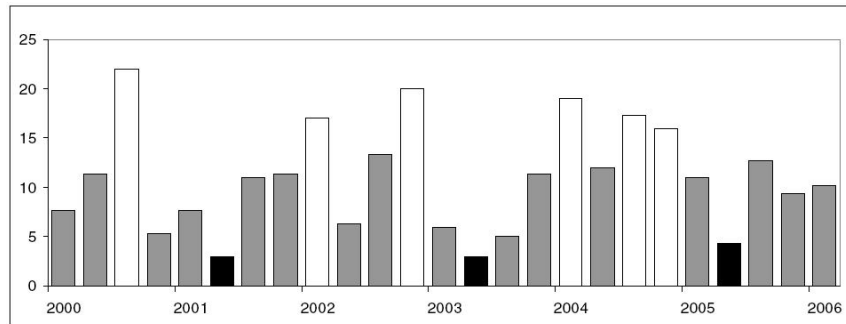


Figure 5. Intensity of joke-sending in Delfi joke page (2000–2006). More intensive joke-sending is marked in white (autumn 2000, spring, late autumn and winter 2002, spring, autumn and winter 2004), less intensive joke-sending in black (summer 2000, summer 2003, summer 2005). These periods will be analysed in detail below; the quarters marked in light blue will not be given attention to in this article

increasingly influential medium that to some extent involves the majority of Estonians. In addition, ironic humour and humour mixed with insults (e.g. in naming, ethnic slurs, etc.) is very common in Internet commentaries.

Next we could ask if the fluctuations seen in Figure 3 are straightforwardly influenced by events that take place in daily politics or whether there is no link between the frequency of the sending of jokes and the intensity of political issues. The social and political background of each period, which had an average of more than 15–20 jokes per quarter was analysed. At the same time, the periods in which jokes showed a considerable decrease (averaging less than 5 jokes per quarter) were analysed as a control group. To this end, the front-page topics of daily newspapers were examined. The news texts were taken from the period of heightened interest in joke-sending, but also two months previous to that, in order to account for the possible delay in creating relevant jokes. The high and low periods of joke-sending can be seen in Figure 5.

In autumn 2000, the background events include a court trial over Siim Kallas, who according to the overruled accusations, set aside money from successful deals with the state's finances (the so-called "million dollar deal trial"), and no confidence vote for Jüri Mõis, mayor of Tallinn. In the area of other countries' politics, the re-election of George W. Bush as the president of the US is the main issue. The jokes are, however, more often about domestic politics:

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*Once upon a time there was a man who had three sons.
Two of them were normal, the third was Jüri Mõis.
(Delfi, Jaanuspoiss, Nov. 8, 2000)*

The joke parodies a fairy-tale format, alluding to the meager mental abilities of the mayor of Tallinn. This makes it a simple stupidity-joke that requires no specific context to understand it – fairy-tales with a simple-minded third son are known worldwide. This is a type of political joke that uses front-page news quite arbitrarily. It reacts quickly, though without any insight or significant allusions, picking characters that happen to stand out in the crowd. Nevertheless, it is a political and context-specific joke.

There are also jokes that try to penetrate issues more deeply. They display associations that are of ontological quality (i.e. are meaningful with regard to the event or the persons involved). Though the following joke did not appear in the first period of joke increase on the Delfi joke site, it depicts issues relevant to autumn 2000 with a delay of some months:

*Kraft, Kallas and Kaju are sitting in a pub drinking cognac. “Damn it!” Kraft suddenly exclaims. “I must head back to the office. I think I left the safe open!” – “So what,” the others try to calm him. “What if someone steals the money?” Kraft worries. “Who could do that, we’re all here, aren’t we?”
(Delfi, PAX, Feb. 7, 2001)²*

The majority of jokes from that period deal with specific issues from current affairs, and not all of them use such universal scripts as in the first example. In addition to these, however, we also find a number of old, non-topical, Soviet jokes, even though the events these depict are no longer relevant. Another line of jokes are those with general topics (“Democracy – it’s like bureaucracy, only a demo version”), the politics of foreign countries are not reflected in jokes from that period.

Spring 2002 was a very active period in terms of domestic politics. Background information includes Mart Laar resigning from the post of prime minister, re-electing new government members (a new and exceptionally young members being Mailis Rand (Reps), Minister of Education and Sven Mikser, Minister of Defence), as well as the building of an expensive (1 million EEK) public toilet opposite the parliament building in Tallinn. The latter event has offered material for many jokes, for example:

Kallas tells Savisaar: “Listen, you should tear down the outhouse you built here.” Savisaar: “Which one?” [literally: the million (kroon, Estonian currency) one?] Kallas: “No, the two million one.”
(Delfi, March 21, 2002)

Autumn 2002 witnessed the election of local governments with Res Publica as the surprise winner. Many jokes from that period depict different parties, but also the elections themselves:

October 21. Candidate No. xxx won three votes. At home, his wife is outraged: “You have a lover!”
(Delfi, I, Oct. 18, 2002)

Spring – autumn 2004: The period between spring and autumn 2004 is made up of several months of heightened interest in joke-sending, not only of political jokes but also of other categories of jokes (see Figures 2 and 3). The portal in general and the joke page in particular has improved, and in our research material this interacts with an active period in politics: Estonia enters the European Union and NATO, a theft from Estonia’s grain surplus is discovered, local elections for the European Parliament are held, the first “statue scandal” took place (a monument depicting an Estonian soldier in an outfit resembling a German military uniform was erected in Lihula, but taken down by the government soon afterwards, accompanied by protests), Mayor of Tallinn Edgar Savisaar is under attack. The jokes depict all of these issues, e.g. the Lihula events:

(Prime minister) Parts goes to meet the people in Lihula. “Why are there only women in the audience?” he asks. “Those that came with eggs were not admitted for security reasons.”
(Delfi, Mo Nu Ment, Oct. 31, 2004)

The joke-scarce periods are of course not event-free, but the events are obviously less inspiring: the Ministry of Education moves from Tallinn to Tartu, problems with the privatisation of Estonian Rail (summer 2001); the referendum on joining the EU, speeding tickets received by some important politicians, President Rüütel meets President Putin (spring-summer-autumn 2003); the EU sets fines for exceeding the amount of sugar that may be stored, corruption accusations against Edgar Savisaar, terrorist explosions in London (summer 2005).

What then is the comic potential that turns some news into great jokes, while others are left out? An examination of these joke-scarce periods indicates that above all, the event or news item has to be essentially attractive, prominent, short and simple, yet striking, point-

ing at typical shortcomings, “greater” than just one event (being exemplary of some general tendency in politics, e.g. corruption). For example, the long and profound polemics on the privatisation of Estonian Rail did not result in jokes, because the topic violated the rule of brevity and simplicity – events that are too complicated or multifaceted are unsuitable for joking. Another feature of good material for joke-telling is that it should be fresh and up-to-date but not overexploited. If the media fulfils the need to comment on issues in serious mode, jokes cease to be appreciated because the problems have been discussed too much – this is what happened to government officials who received speeding tickets (although there were jokes, especially because of the fact that it was Minister of Justice who was caught speeding). The fact that the media influences folklore in several ways, in some cases supporting and in others hindering it, has also been noted in other genres than jokes (see Donovan 2004).

There is also the question of how many of the jokes are actually on topical issues – if many of them are irrelevant to ongoing events, we have failed to prove that there is indeed a connection between social reality and emergent jokes. It is expedient to differentiate between four types of jokes (see Figure 6) and count their relative frequency during the four more intense periods of joke-sending.

Not all of the political jokes sent to the Delfi joke page are topical (old Soviet jokes, politics as a general subject vs. local politics and foreign affairs, which largely depict recent topical issues), but there are significant changes in all of these four categories during the period under observation. The relative incidence of jokes shows that topicality is more valued than before, while non-topical political jokes, especially those on general politics, but also old Soviet jokes, are decreasing. Largely context-free general political issues have fallen from an average of 32% in 2000 to 13% in 2006 (jokes on politician as a vocation, or problems of democracy, e.g.: “*What is democracy Russian-style?*” – “*It’s when everything is done as the head democrat says.*”).

The reduction in the number of Soviet jokes has been even more significant (from 45% to 24%). It seems that these jokes neither respond to any specific event, nor do they receive an outward impulse to be sent, or even created. Especially the old Soviet jokes that no longer belong to the active, self-renewing tradition are running out of versions. We can say that their decrease resembles the patterns visible in other joke categories (that of animal jokes, for example (see Figure 3)).

Political Jokes in Post-Socialist Estonia (2000–2007)

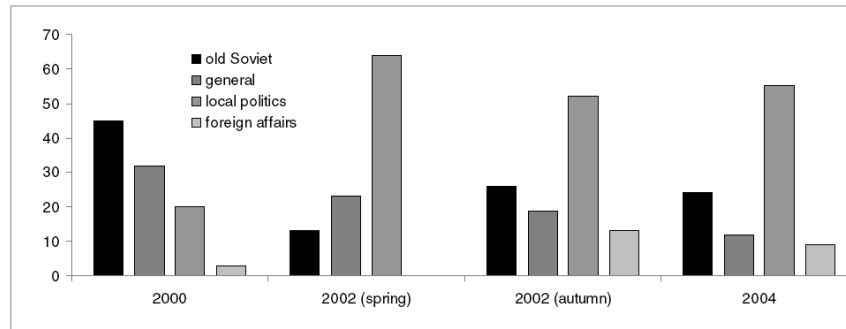


Figure 6. Share of old Soviet jokes, and jokes on general / local politics and foreign affairs, the last two being topical

The politics of foreign countries have not been a very active joke theme, but with the emergence of Western influences on Eastern European jokes, translated jokes featuring foreign politicians are making an entrance. Most of all, these jokes mock the Presidents of the USA (Clinton for sex affairs, Bush for the anti-terrorist war), but there are also jokes about relationships with other countries (in the vein of jokes from Soviet times, when, for example, the leader of the Soviet Union met – and competed with – the leader of the United States: *Americans have landed on the Moon. Brezhnev orders the Soviet astronauts to land on the Sun. “We will burn up,” the astronauts object. “I have thought of that: you will fly at night...”* Viikberg 1997). The main tendency evident in Figure 6 is the rise of topical jokes about Estonian politics and politicians.

As demonstrated, political jokes make up a considerable proportion of all of the jokes sent to the Delfi joke page. Nevertheless, we should keep in mind that their overall intensity is not extremely high, and it may affect the differentiation between accidental and regular trends in the material. In the first years of the Delfi joke site, old Soviet jokes were quite numerous. Figure 5 with “joke reactions” to daily politics contains both old and new jokes, and the share of old Soviet political jokes can be seen in Figure 6 – in 2000, nearly half of the texts were actually not on political topics, but were instead remembered as having been political. Other periods with increased joke-sending become more and more topical, more focused on daily politics and less on Soviet times. Another problem is that there were also periods that produced new and topical, creative political jokes, but counting all the jokes together were not numerous enough to be included in the analysis.

Leaving aside old Soviet political jokes and looking at the “new” jokes that are left, we see that some of them are influenced by Soviet times, displaying a considerable intertextuality between the two joke traditions: these are old modified or recycled jokes that use a fragment and/or recognisable opposition and/or resolution of incongruity. As a former part of the Soviet Union, Estonia has a distinct and versatile background of jokelore that still lives on in our collective mind. In the subcategorisation of new jokes, we also find some that are translated from other languages, primarily English. The latter are very often simple stupidity jokes, which are quite universal in their construction. It suffices to change the name of the target to make the joke relevant to local daily politics (as also mentioned in the initial discussion of “travelling” jokes, see the example in which Hitler → Savisaar is saved from drowning). Jokes that mock general stupidity do not need a direct influence, or much less a proof of real stupidity – the only necessary factor is public interest in the person. The interest may be the result of political actions, but also general attitudes towards certain political parties, politicians’ physical features, or even a funny / allusionary name. There are also more specific jokes that rely on social reality to a greater extent, commenting on real issues (e.g. the million dollar deal joke). All in all, however, we can say that most new jokes are topical political jokes, because they display an array of current political emotions and map focal issues (e.g. the vast amount of jokes on Edgar Savisaar denote a general dissatisfaction with the Centre Party, etc.).

On the basis of the analysed material, there is insufficient evidence that jokes are a truthful / complete mirror of reality: old Soviet jokes and joke-scarce periods overrule the suggestion. Traditions are dependent on the historic context of the jokelore (Estonia’s political past dictates the lingering of old Soviet jokes and their recycled new versions), the attractiveness and ambivalence of the news text, the medium itself (its popularity, sometimes due to purely arbitrary improvements), and even on the season (see Aikat 1998; Laineste 2003). As evidence of the last point, in this study all of the setbacks took place in the summer, while spring was the most intensive joke-sending period. We can, however, still say that the topicality of political jokes is more the rule than the exception. It may at times be more operative or other times more tardy, and is always dependent on the comic potential of running news; nevertheless, there is increasing interest in political jokes.

Political Jokes in Post-Socialist Estonia (2000–2007)

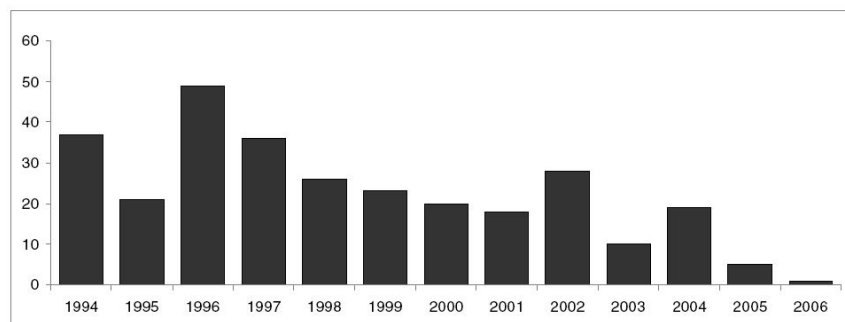


Figure 7. Share of old Soviet jokes in contemporary Estonian jokes about Americans (1994 – 2006)

Looking at the Estonian contemporary political jokes on the Delfi joke page, and also at other categories listed there, we can see if distinctions between categories have become more obvious. Old Soviet jokes (as described above) selected joke targets from many groups of people, aiming both upwards and downwards, and being also inevitably infused with political issues. It would be a challenge to test the rules of ethnic joking on pre-1991 Eastern European jokelore (see also Laineste 2005). The globalisation of joke scripts influences the obvious change in Estonian political jokes, which was also visible in the thematic subdivision of jokes on the politics of foreign countries: these are becoming more popular, not because we are more interested in these matters, but also because the matters present themselves more readily (in the form of Internet jokes). Ethnic jokes that are about to lose their political dimension have already been discussed above, and examples of the tendency are numerous. The tension between Estonians and Russians is no longer a political issue, and animosities are exchanged on a more basic ethnic level:

Why do the Estonian, Filipino and Russian go to a brothel?

The Estonian goes to spend some time with the prostitute, the Filipino goes to clean the girls' rooms, and the Russian goes to pick up his girlfriend after she has finished working.

(Delfi, Dr Huibolit, May 26, 2005)

At the same time, Russians have also begun to interest themselves in Estonians: their stupidity and most of all their proverbial slowness, creating increasingly popular (Internet) jokes about the nation (Krikmann, this volume). One interesting tendency is that three-nation jokes (classically about a German, a Russian and an Estonian), which

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are still told among schoolchildren (see Tuisk 2008), target the Estonians instead the previously popular Russians. Political jokes no longer interact with ethnic jokes, and there is even some evidence that Estonians are in a way searching for the most fitting ethnic group as a new joke-target (Laineste 2007).

It is notable that there are quite a lot of old Soviet jokes still circulating (this can, for instance, be seen in contemporary Estonian jokes about Americans, Figure 7).

The jokes that have survived the society's transformation from a totalitarian to a democratic system must have some common asset that helped them survive. They usually have a strong sexual undertone or rely on acute absurdness. Thus we are more likely to find these jokes under the latter categories. The following joke about policemen already circulated before the 1990s, but then it was more about the stupidity of the officials who maintained the system, would have been classified under political jokes:

A piece of shit was floating in the gutter. Suddenly it noticed a police officer passing by and yelled: "Hi, comrade!" – "I am not your comrade," said the officer, who increased his pace. The feces won't drop behind: "Hi, comrade!" The officer is offended: "How am I your comrade?" he asks. "Well, we're both from the internal organs,"³ the answer comes.
(Anekdoosiraamat, joke from 1979)

This cited joke is now under absurd jokes, as well as the next one:

*What is the difference between oral sex and the KGB?
A mere slip of the tongue can land you in deep shit.*
(Delfi, Kiizu, April 20, 2007)

These are jokes that were clearly about political issues, but have turned into absurd jokes with respectively a strong scatological and sexual undertone. At the same time, exemplifying the overall trends of changing categories, a version of the scatological joke can also be found under political jokes:

Kalle Laanet gloomily drives his dear new Audi to the police station to pass it on to his successor, when he suddenly hears someone yelling: "Hi, colleague!" He stops the vehicle, looks around, but sees no-one. He hears again: "Hi, dear colleague!", steps out of the car, but still sees no-one. After searching around for a while, he notices a piece of shit lying on the ground, ogling at him. "I'm not your damned colleague!" Laanet shouts angrily. But the feces reply: "How so, we're both from internal organs!"
(Delfi, klassik, March 4, 2003)

This shows how jokes are considered political when they depict actual characters or issues, as in the joke about Kalle Laanet at the time he was the head of Tallinn police precinct, which appeared shortly after polemics about his acquiring a luxurious Audi as his official vehicle. The Delfi joke page contains jokes that mainly perform the function of political commentary, excluding jokes that do not name any particular political clues. The only exception is old Soviet jokes that are remembered as political – they are categorised under political jokes, like the following example:

A wolf and a fox caught a hare and want to stew it. The wolf sends the fox to the shop to bring some fat for frying, as the hare is very bony. The fox returns without any fat: "There was no fat at the shop!" – "Well, bring some butter then," the wolf says. The fox soon returns, and says there was no butter in the shop. "Go get some margarine!" the wolf demands. The fox returns: "There was no margarine either!" he cries. The hare cheers: "Long live the Soviet Union, the home of the poor and the repressed!"
(Delfi, Tshuks, March 24, 2006)

This joke survived over the fall of communism and has become almost apolitical, acquiring a nostalgic / mythological meaning, and calling to life the retro and strange Soviet world when everything was deficit. The old Soviet jokes told today need more explaining and cannot be understood without some additional clues. In many cases, joke-senders add to old Soviet jokes the introductory sentence "That happened way back in Soviet times..." This brings the joke text closer to the genre of myth or fairy tale. At the same time, a number of old jokes gain new value when they are recycled, by changing the targets into contemporary politicians. This is, in a way, also an act of "domesticating" the largely foreign and borrowed tradition, as is the case with many translated jokes. The dialogue is performed on different levels, from profound alterations to mere borrowings of some formulas (e.g. "Armenian radio was asked...").

Political jokes here mostly include those that mention the names of active politicians or political parties, dwell on some topical issue in politics (elections etc.), and the old Soviet political jokes listed there also largely follow the same principles. Political jokes in contemporary Estonia mock certain political figures or events, addressing them quite directly.

We now reach the question of the target of the contemporary Estonian political joke, compared to the socialist ones. Estonia offers a good research site to discuss jokes under different regimes. Assuming that

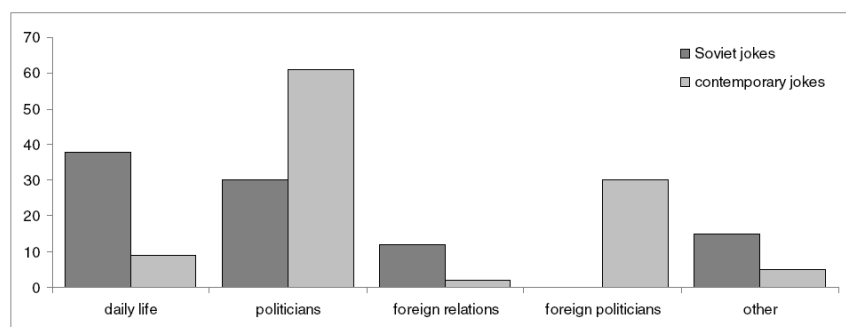


Figure 8. Main subcategories of political jokes (1950s–1990 and 1991–2007)

society’s transition is mirrored in its active joke tradition, this change should be visible in our material. According to Rose’s (2002) thesis, the direction is from more general jokes on the political system in a totalitarian society towards more targeted jokes on politicians in a democratic society. A comparison of the targets of contemporary political jokes to the characters in old Soviet jokes reveals interesting developments – not only have the targets become local (Estonian politicians), they have also become more directed at certain persons, more universal (e.g. stupidity jokes instead of more specific scripts), and at times also more aggressive.

To account for the change from one political system to another, 300 randomly selected political jokes from the Delfi joke site were analysed on the basis of their content, and for comparison, the same amount of old Soviet political jokes were chosen from Jüri Viikberg’s joke collection.

As we can see from Figure 8, jokes about politicians are more numerous than before, as are jokes about the politics of foreign countries (before the 1990s this was an almost completely unexamined topic). Still, during Soviet times, jokes about politicians were as numerous as jokes about the system (32% versus 38% respectively) are now. Jokes about daily life also exist today, although these are not as popular as they were before. The most significant change is that of political jokes about foreign politicians and political events that did not concern Estonians in the pre-1990s. They spread through the Internet, being translated from English, but their focus is on more influential countries and closer neighbours. The European Union also features in jokes:

Q: What will happen when the Sahara desert is accepted into the European Union?

A: Nothing at first, but in about 4 or 5 years the price of sand will rise severalfold.

An Estonian sends his son abroad to study at a European university. One day he gets a telegramme: "Send 50 EUR, must go shoot some chicks." The father sends 20 EUR: "Go shoot some cheaper ones!" Two weeks go by, and the boy sends another telegramme: "Send 5000 EUR! Must fix the gun!" (Delfi, sass, Nov. 22, 2003)

Also from the same category (jokes on foreign politics) and by far one of the most numerous subtopics there are jokes about the USA and its leaders:

News: In a recent fire, US President George W. Bush's library burned down. Both of his books were lost. As Ari Fleischer, his public relations officer said, Bush was particularly upset about the second one – he hadn't even finished colouring it. (Delfi, Justus, Feb. 26, 2008)

Foreign countries are no longer seen as competitors (which was the main issue concerning foreign politics in Soviet jokes) but equals that are allowed to laugh at.

We will now focus on the main topics in post-socialist political jokes, the most popular of which are jokes about contemporary politicians. The choice of more exploited targets (Edgar Savisaar (former Prime Minister of Estonia, currently a government minister; 169 jokes), Arnold Rüütel (President of Estonia 2001–2006; 120 jokes), Jühan Parts (former Prime Minister of Estonia; 65 jokes)) is based on both their actions as politicians and the comic potential of their characters. Even if there are hordes of mockable politicians, certain characters are preferred. Important factors that can turn a politician into a laughing-stock include the actuality of real events relevant to the politician, political views of the wider public (in this case of Internet users), the character and external features of the target, etc. This all makes up the comic potential of a person. In this case, Savisaar gets extra attention because of his weight problem, Rüütel is mocked because of his slow (and at times unintelligible) speech, and Parts is laughed at for his muddled diction and crooked posture. These special features allow the use of recycled jokes that were known from different persons. We could even suggest that jokes are not told about politicians who are unpopular or even hated, but rather about those who are perceived as (present themselves as) good targets.

Jokes about Estonian politics are largely dependent on topical issues, and characters are chosen according to their actuality in the political arena. A person who does not stick out will not be encountered in jokes any more (Lennart Meri, Estonian President from 1992–2001, was only popular in jokes at the time of his presidency). Many of the contemporary jokes involve general stupidity or other features alluding to it (slow or muddled speech, unintelligent reasoning or decisions, bad foreign language skills, etc.), but those about physical characteristics are also quite numerous. Many jokes refer to the understanding that the target is unqualified for his/her office (a very short joke: “*Stupid as the Minister of Education*”, Delfi, J, Sept. 12, 2005). A funny or allusion-loaded name present good options for joking (the jokes about Edgar Savisaar’s wife and fellow politician Vilja (literally: ‘grain’, ‘corn’) are based on this pattern).

Another common sub-topic is jokes about foreign countries. The most popular joke targets here are countries from the former Eastern bloc (Ukraine, Belorussia, Chechnya, Latvia), but also the USA, Finland and other Western countries. Estonian daily life is only rarely depicted:

Estonian old age pensioners are so poor that even the bags under their eyes seem empty.
(Delfi, Cobra, April 29, 2005)

The contemporary material shows a clear inclination towards choosing targets from among domestic and foreign politicians, though jokes about daily life do exist too. Old Soviet jokes, however, even if focused largely on daily absurdities, were also interested in politicians. Thus the difference between totalitarian and democratic jokelore lies in something more than just mere choice of target: while totalitarian jokes poked fun at almost everything, and much of the laughter was simultaneously politically motivated, then the democratic system has brought about a de-politicisation of jokes. Only those that mention politicians’ names or topical issues are labelled as “political”. Democracy gives plenty of reasons to criticise the system, but the means for doing it are more numerous (due to free speech) – in addition, people feel more in control of their lives.

Contemporary political jokes in Delfi include many old Soviet jokes, their proportion being around 1:4. In discussing this topic, we should keep in mind that the categories of “old” and “new” are quite arbitrary, as old jokes get recycled, and the decision of whether a joke is “new” enough is quite subjective. Those Soviet jokes that are still told with-

out any modification of content (incl. target) are numerous, and this points to the fact that traditions are slow to change, even in the case of an operational genre that deals only with surface issues instead of ontological and existential questions (see Abrahams 1976). The folkloric process is more inert. Even if new jokes appear (are created, modified, translated), the old jokes stay in the nation's memory. Again, this is partly due to the medium itself: the memory space produced by the Internet is illimitable and allows all texts to co-exist simultaneously and for an unrestricted period of time. The Internet serves as external memory that documents all that is inserted, including those that are already inactive in everyday interaction. There may be two contradictory reasons for old Soviet jokes still being sent to the Delfi joke site (even if their number is diminishing, as can be seen in Figure 7): either they circulate because the inertia of collective memory as jokes "remembered as political", or they are actively taking part in an identity struggle. By telling them we remember our difficult past and also construct a more dramatic contrast between "then" and "now", "totalitarian" and "democratic", "repressed" and "independent". Even if the joke-tellers themselves have not experienced the repressions of the totalitarian regime (being too young to remember the consequences that gave rise to Soviet political jokes), the memories still exist in a collective space which takes part in forming a specific post-socialist jokelore. It is untenable to state that the collapse of the totalitarian Soviet Union ended in a lack of jokes altogether (e.g. Adams 2004: 159). On the contrary, post-socialist jokelore freely uses both old and new material, producing creative blends, showing its distinctive character. But it is still an open issue whether the jokes are still told, or exist at Internet joke sites.

The researching of contemporary Estonian jokelore and its comparison with Western and Soviet traditions makes it possible to see differences, analyse changes and point at specific patterns of how political systems influence jokes.

CONCLUSION

Political jokes are quite popular in the studied media, the Internet. The reasons (also discussed above) may be that Internet is an appropriate media of expressing all kinds of opinions, including political opinions, often in an informal and humorous manner. Also, Internet users' demographic profile could contain reasons for this interest in political jokes (the choice of characters, for example, is dependent on

the political preferences of the joke-senders, who are mostly well-paid, right-wing government officials). At least political jokes are alive and well, which could be because their cognitive functions differ from those of jokes from other joke categories.

Post-socialist jokelore is herein viewed as a completely different, transitional stadium with specific characteristics. “New” jokes (modified, translated, created) more or less fit the description of jokes typical to democratic regimes (after Rose 2002). Unmodified old Soviet jokes are, however, also still being told (or rather sent to joke sites), even if the joke-tellers have little or no knowledge and experience of the circumstances that gave rise to those jokes. They are disappearing, but the old jokes still circulate as an important part of our social memory. But Soviet political jokes that still circulate lack acute emotion – fear, anger, distress. In contemporary new jokes, the popular themes come and go, arousing discussion in both serious and jocular conversation (themes like elections, incompetent decisions, corruption, etc.), but one single foolproof joke incentive like the one offered in Soviet times is missing. That is why the old Soviet political jokes can even acquire the status of “real” political humour for those who consider contemporary jokes to be too universal, shallow and lame. Another reason for remembering old political jokes could be because of an affiliation with 1980s style. The younger generation uses them to reconstruct a retro world of their parents with the help of symbols like Mischka the Olympic bear or the personalities of Gorbachev or the gerontocrats, etc. It is clearly an oversimplification just to state that democracy makes fun of leaders, and totalitarian jokes mock the system. The difference between totalitarian and democratic jokes seems to lie elsewhere, most of all in the politicisation of all jokes in the Soviet bloc. Our research proved that in a Western, democratic society, jokes tend to be more focused on current affairs and certain politicians that represent them. It also causes them to turn away from many unfitting themes, considering them to be too complicated, overexploited or uninteresting. In a society with free speech, politicians’ human weaknesses, errors, their alleged stupidity and other vices pique the audience’s interest. Subcategories of old Soviet and new / modified / translated etc. jokes show interesting tendencies over the years 2000 to 2006. The number of old unmodified jokes sent is falling in favour of topical political jokes that depict everyday domestic affairs in Estonia. Some rising interest in foreign affairs can be noticed. This all points to the fact that political jokelore is (slowly, but still) transforming to be about the issues we have to face today, and not past problems. Con-

cerning the relationship between social reality in a narrower sense (not the system and its jokes, but rather real political events and consequent jokes), we found that political jokes are embedded in the surrounding reality in contemporary Estonian material, though with some reservations. We could suggest that the topicality of jokes may be dependent on the political system. In a totalitarian society, events and jokes are more loosely linked, as every joke could have a potential political dimension. Political humour did not need an incentive (though it did reflect on reforms, speeches, the death or inauguration of new leaders), and fed itself on “normal” everyday life, and was actually part of everyday life itself. Subsequently, politics evaded into different subtopics of jokes, causing fuzzy categories. In democratic society, all media channels are full of news texts that provide the necessary inspiration. Jokes refer back to the news in a more straightforward way. In the studied material, news with the necessary comic potential produced a wave of thematically linked jokes. If many remarkably strange, catastrophic etc. events happen simultaneously, the topics may blend in jokes.

This research shows that political jokes are not losing their edge and have a constant appeal to Internet users. Even if people do tell fewer jokes, they are sending more political jokes than was the case a few years ago. Political humour is a functional and popular way of discussing the rapid changes that are taking place in our society, the decisions that affect them, and the personal characteristics of the people who are responsible for it all. A more comprehensive pan-Eastern European study analysing regional old Soviet jokes (also those that have now been forgotten) could help shed light on the topic. This would not only give an overview of the present situation of jokes in the former Soviet bloc, but allow insight into more basic questions such as the characteristics and status of political jokes under different regimes and in societies in transformation.

Notes

1. Personal communication with Delfi Jokebook editor Ingvar Kupinski in April 2002.
2. Kraft, Kallas and Kaju – the (now former) president of the Bank of Estonia, and two main figures involved in the “ten million dollar deal” (ex-president of the Bank of Estonia and his advisor).
3. “Internal organs” is a Soviet term meaning institutions of interior defence (police, both public and secret, etc.), i.e. the offices created for keeping interior affairs under control.

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FINNIC AND BALTIC NATIONALITIES AS ETHNIC TARGETS IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN JOKES

Arvo Krikmann

Lithuanians tell jokes about how stupid and slow Latvians are, Latvians tell jokes about how stupid and slow Estonians are, Estonians (who happen to be the real laughing stock of the Baltic States) tell jokes about how stupid and slow Finns are. Finns, as far as I know, just don't care.

<http://www.literaturejunction.com/showthread.php?t=4328>

Abstract

The paper aims to corroborate / illustrate the following assertions:

1. After the collapse of the USSR and the decay of the socialist camp, the number of ethnic butts in the countries of Eastern Europe has considerably increased. Russian jokelore has started to mock the representatives of the former Baltic Soviet republics. Of these, the Estonians have evidently become the most popular.
2. From the middle-nineties, jokes have largely moved from oral tradition to the Internet. Joke sources on the Internet can be divided into four basic types: static context-free, static context-bound, dynamic context-free, and dynamic context-bound, the last type being of the most folkloristic value.
3. Internet jokes (in Russia and elsewhere) have developed a large synonymy of ethnic butts. Russian jokes do not make a clear-cut distinction between Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians, and the elements of their languages, their proper names, geographic places etc. are often confused.
4. As to similarity of plots and motifs connected with them, the four target characters of Russian jokes divide to two clear-cut clusters – The Finnic (i.e. Estonians and Finns), and Baltic (i.e. Latvians and Lithuanians).
5. A dominant ethnic characteristic assigned to both Finns and Estonians is slowness, the feature that has originally been ascribed to several Scandinavian nations like the Finns, Norwegians and Swedes. So there is a good reason to think that the image of the Finn has initiated and mediated the process of the further southward expansion of the slowness stereotype in Russian jokelore, but later, in the 1990s, this feature was transferred to the more relevant Estonian.
6. Slowness is not very salient among the universal features of the objects of ethnic mockery. Finns' and Estonians' slowness is, however, evidently closely associated with the mainstream ethnic topics such as ASEXUALITY, DUMBNESS, and LANGUAGE DISTORTION.

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7. Surprisingly enough, the strained political relations between Russia and the Baltic states are only quite modestly represented, mainly through Estonians' and Latvians' painful attitude to Russians' poor knowledge of Estonian.

Key words: humour, ethnic jokes, post-socialism, Internet jokes, Russian, Finnish, Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian, slowness, dumbness, asexuality, language distortion

ETHNIC BUTTS IN RUSSIAN JOKELORE

My colleague Liisi Laineste (2004; 2005) has found three significant trends that characterise the temporal development of Estonian ethnic jokes from the 1880s to the 2000s:

- 1) a noticeable decrease in the relative share of ethnic jokes in the total of national folkloric jokes;
- 2) a clear increase in the number of ethnic butts and the scope of their geographic origin;
- 3) a close interconnection between ethnic and social-political aspects in the jokes of the Soviet period.

The same tendencies very probably also hold true for jokes of numerous other nations with similar recent historical faith.

In the Soviet period the list of principal ethnic targets in Russian jokes was quite short: the Jews, Chukchis, Georgians and Ukrainians. Of course Soviet Russian jokes involved other ethnic characters as well, but the available sources do not allow one to estimate how frequent / popular / productive this or that of them actually was.

After the collapse of the USSR and the decay of the Eastern European socialist camp as a whole, the former ethnic butts have continued their existence in Russian jokelore – some with the former intensity, and others with decreasing intensity. Alongside and in addition to these, however, a number of new ethnic characters have emerged – first of all the representatives of the former Baltic Soviet republics that regained their national independence in 1991, i.e. the Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians. Of these, the Estonians, who were almost non-existent characters in Soviet jokelore, have evidently become the most popular (cf. also Shmeleva & Shmelev 2002: 47 ff., 75 ff.).

In Russia as elsewhere, jokes have largely moved from oral tradition to the Internet in the last decade, and there is good reason to believe that Russian joke sources on the Internet are perhaps the greatest of all national sources of e-jokes (including ethnic ones). The contemporary wave of political correctness and shying away from and

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avoiding ethnic jokes has left Russia almost untouched. As my former experience has shown, however, Russian e-sources have also canned, alongside recent layers of post-Socialist jokes, a huge number of older jokes from the Soviet period. Obsolete jokes certainly vanish from human memory faster than from the Internet, and therefore it is often difficult to decide what exactly in these immense strata belongs to Socialism and what to post-Socialism.

In awareness of these these overlappings and other possible noises, I performed a number of searches in the Russian search engine ‘Rambler’ (October 2008), to find responses to the search string ‘X-ian’ + ‘joke’ (*X-ey + анекдот*) where *X-ian* was Russian, Chukchi, Jew, American, Georgian, etc., following the list of ethnic favourites in the Russian biggest joke portal *anekdot.ru* compiled earlier by Dima Likhachev in September 2002 – see <http://dm-lihachev.livejournal.com/570686.html>

Table 1 indicates the top 40 most frequent nationalities.

Table 1. The top 40 most frequent nationalities found in Russian jokes

1.	Russian	53840	21.	Greek	1187
2.	Chukchi	17522	22.	Turk	1176
3.	Jewish	16674	23.	Moldavian	1146
4.	American	10006	24.	Spanish	901
5.	Georgian	8240	25.	Uzbek	777
6.	German	6481	26.	Byelorussian	775
7.	English	5454	27.	Kazakh	761
8.	Chinese	4500	28.	Dutchman	719
9.	French	4309	29.	LATVIAN	669
10.	Ukrainian	3946	30.	Chechen	666
11.	ESTONIAN	3847	31.	Azeri	619
12.	Armenian	3483	32.	“PRIBALT”	600
13.	Japanese	2901	33.	Korean	565
14.	Pole	2393	34.	Khant	477
15.	Arabian	1818	35.	LITHUANIAN	456
16.	Italian	1522	36.	Persian	389
17.	Gypsy	1429	37.	Vietnamese	386
18.	FINNISH	1377	38.	Bulgarian	358
19.	Tatar	1245	39.	Eskimo	330
20.	Czech	1226	40.	Komi	277

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The thirteen best positions are held by

- 1) Russians themselves (presumably including ‘Russians in anecdotes’, as well as ‘Russian anecdotes’);
- 2) old favourites from the Soviet times (Chukchi, Jew, Georgian, Ukrainian, Armenian);
- 3) representatives of the biggest Western and Eastern nationalities (American, English, French; Chinese, Japanese), perhaps at the expense of a certain amount of translated texts of these nationalities again;
- 4) Estonian, the successful newcomer.

Perhaps the multitude and rank order of Russian contemporary ethnic butts as a whole reflects nearly the same process of widening as we saw in Laineste’s “Estonian case”. Anyhow, the rise of Estonians to the top ten has been notably sudden and sharp.

OUR “PRIBALTIC”-FINNIC SAMPLE AND SOME SPECIFIC FEATURES OF INTERNET JOKES

In creating my sample of Russian Internet jokes, I tried to be painfully objective towards the four target nationalities – Finns, Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians (and “Pribalts”, which is a fuzzy common denominator for native inhabitants of the three former Baltic Soviet republics in Russian language and jokelore). I started from the above-mentioned searches in Rambler, got a preliminary draft of texts and addresses, compiled a preliminary list of “plot units” (technically: tables) where the texts belonging to one and the same narrative or formulaic plot were brought together (technically: as rows of one and the same table), and made a number of additional spontaneous searches based on various criteria, in order to find representatives of possible new, hitherto unregistered plot units. When the searches seemed to become practically inconclusive, the resulting list of **582 plots** was considered final.

The next logical step was then to try to estimate the “total power” (familiarity / productivity / frequency) of each joke as a plot unit. The only available parameter for that was, in my case, the sum of frequencies / occurrences of any textual variant throughout all plot units. I found the sums (including those of texts occurring in so-called “very similar sites”, but registering the numbers of sites, not separate documents), but the results turned out to be devastatingly uninterpretable.

Internet joke sources may be divided into four main categories based on their context-free / context-bound and/or static / dynamic nature:

1. **Static context-free** sources, i.e. sites containing lists of contextless joke texts created by private individuals or organisations, mainly through the copying of texts from other previously created joke sites, digitalised publications or other sources. Once created, such static joke collections change little or not at all.

2. **Static context-bound** sources, i.e. jokes “told” in the context of various larger texts, like newspaper articles, stories, tales, novels etc. published on the Internet.

3. **Dynamic context-free** sources, i.e. various “joke departments”, “joke books”, etc. hosted by various portals, digital newspapers and magazines, that encourage users to add their jokes to their collection, permit one to read them and request that one rate the latest jokes that have been submitted. Such sites also often create and manage their own joke archives, the chronology of which occasionally spans several years. The expansion of these sites depends on texts copied from elsewhere and on those reproduced from memory.

4. **Dynamic context-bound** sources, i.e. various chat rooms and mailing lists where live communication takes place, during which jokes are also told, and witticisms are recounted or referred to. In contextual e-humour sources, jokes copied from elsewhere are logically ruled out, and are also actually very rare.

This categorisation also broadly reflects the folkloric value of Internet jokes as texts and “types” (i.e. plot-level units). Copies are certainly of lower value than texts reproduced from memory, although on the whole and in a statistical sense, the intensity of the copying of texts (frequency, the number of copies that have been made) is certainly one parameter of the value attached to a joke, and should not be ignored. Furthermore, the value of copies depends on whether someone has selected and copied from a broader collection individual joke texts that in his/her opinion are “good”, or copied whole lists of texts that belonged to the topic he/she was interested in, or copied practically everything he/she found with the purpose of cumulating some “integrative” personal archive or an institutional database of jokes. Very frequently joke duplicates emerge simply due to “extra-humorous” reasons, for instance creating mirror pages or other permanent connections between different sites and portals.

By and large, though, Russian, Estonian and other joke sources on the Internet leave the impression of a huge pile of lifeless, mechanical copies.

Table 2. General parameters of the discussed joke sample at the plot and text level

(Abbreviations here and henceforth:
EST = Estonian; FIN = Finn; LAT = Latvian; LIT = Lithuanian, BAL = “Pribalt”))

	<i>P</i> (lots)	<i>T</i> (exts)	<i>T/P</i>
EST	356	34,757	97.5
FIN	265	8577	32.4
LAT	87	5269	60.6
LIT	32	1595	43.8
BAL	28	1444	51.6
Σ		51,642	

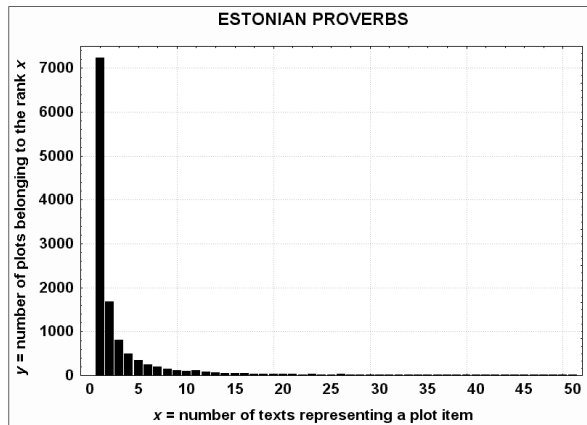
Table 2 provides some general parameters of my joke sample at the plot and text level. The only significant information that I can read out of these statistics is the somewhat reduced status of FIN on the textual level. On the synchronic level it is quite difficult to find a good reason why the Finn as an ethnic target should produce less repetitions than plots. The reason most likely lies in diachrony, i.e. the fact that the Finn began his career in Russian jokelore much earlier than the other three nations, but has in recent decades surrendered much of his former relevance to the new “Pribaltic” competitors.

The distribution of the “power ranks” of the specimens of many natural populations tends to follow Zipf’s law: a great deal of small (rare, weak, poor, ...) items, a very small number of big (frequent, strong, rich, ...) items, and a medium amount of middle-sized ones. The distribution of the ranks of textual productivity of plot items in our Russian joke sample remains nearly Zipfian too, but is remarkably flat (see Graph 1c) – the speed of decay of *y*-frequencies through the 50 lowest *x*-ranks is, for example, more than ten times slower than in the source material of Estonian riddles (Graph 1b), and about a hundred times slower than in Estonian proverbs (Graph 1a). The presence of a cloud of unique, improvisatory, challenging “trial” plots is a reliable indicator of the vitality of a folklore genre, like any other natural population. Data concerning minor Estonian genres are based on corpuses of authentic records, from which duplicates and other falsified texts were preliminarily filtered. Seen from this perspective, Internet joke sources begin to look paradoxical: very extensive in their overall physical extent, but with quite a limited “actual core”, and, despite the above-mentioned concessions, it continues to seem necessary to separate cases of real “retelling” (why not via keyboard) from cases of “simply distributed” jokes. Considering the specificity of web sources, however, the task is difficult to perform.

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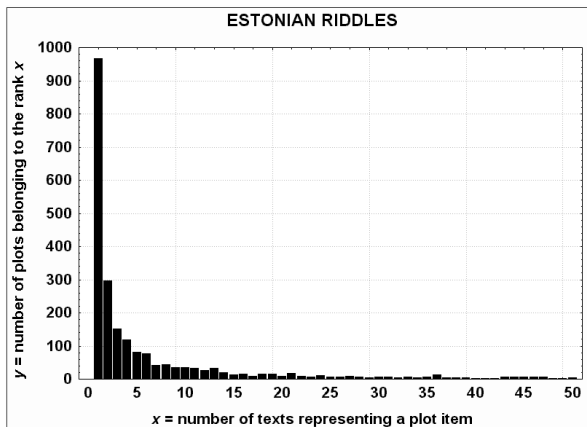
Graph 1a. The distribution of the ranks of textual productivity of plot items.

The decay of y-frequencies through the 50 lowest x-ranks in the source material of Estonian proverbs



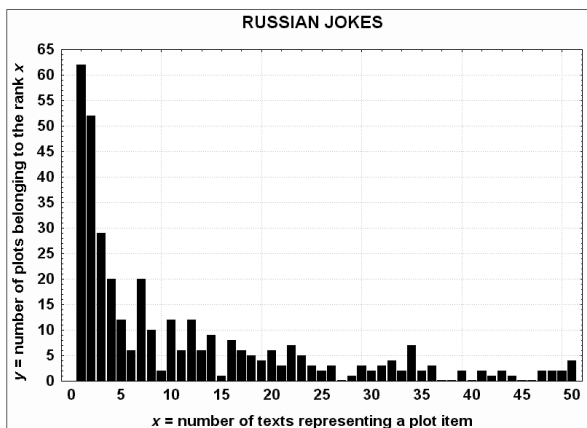
Graph 1b. The distribution of the ranks of textual productivity of plot items.

The decay of y-frequencies through the 50 lowest x-ranks in the source material of Estonian riddles



Graph 1c. The distribution of the ranks of textual productivity of plot items.

The decay of y-frequencies through the 50 lowest x-ranks in our Russian joke sample. The distribution remains nearly Zipfian too, but is remarkably flat



SYNONYMY OF TARGET NATIONALITIES

Victor Raskin (1985) has claimed that it is impossible to transform a non-ethnic joke into an ethnic one by simply changing the “name labels” of some characters and adding some linguistic or other ethnic colouring. On the other hand, folk narrative plots reveal a great variability in terms of characters, including the TARGET level constituents of jokes (cf. Attardo & Raskin 1991).

For example, there is the following item in our Russian Internet material:

A Latvian is blowing bubble gum bubbles in a café, and trying to mock an Estonian: Do you eat the entire loaf of bread? – Yes, of course. – Well, we gather the crust in a container, make muslix out of it and sell it to Estonia. The Latvian continues: Do you eat your bread with jam? – Yes, of course. – Well, we in Latvia use only fresh fruit, but we gather the seeds, skins and other rejects in a container, make jam out of it and sell it to Estonia. The Estonian loses his patience: What do you do with your condoms after you’ve used them? – We throw them away, of course. – Well, we gather them in containers, make bubble gum out of them and then sell it to Latvia.

An alternative pair of characters in Russian jokes can be the Finn (+) and the Swede (–). In Russia the joke is evidently a recent loan. In any case, Google indicates occurrences of the same plot with dozens of other combinations of peoples, e.g. the Canadian and the American, the American and the Canadian, the Filipino and the American, the Irishman and the American, the Frenchman and the American, the American and the Frenchman, the Greek and the American, the Indian and the American, the Thai and the American, the Asian and the American, the Kenyan and the American, the Mauritian and the American, the South African and the American, Nelson Mandela and George Bush, the Australian and the American, the Irishman and the Englishman, the Frenchman and the German, the Croatian and the Serb, the Lebanese and the Syrian, the Indian and the Pakistani, the Singaporean and Malaysian, the Thai King and the Singaporean, the New Zealander and the Australian, the Jamaican and the Trinidadian, the Guyanese and the Trinidadian, etc.

A similar synonymy holds between the Finnic and Baltic butts in Russian jokes. 143 (i.e. about ¼) of our 582 plots turned out to have two or more and 31 plots three or more different ethnic targets.

The list of plot items with three or more alternative ethnic butts (which in a few cases co-occurred in one and the same joke) is provided

in the appendix at the end of the paper. More detailed data on the frequencies of target nations can be found in Table 3.

<i>n</i>	1	2	3	4	5	Σ
<i>p(n)</i>	439	109	26	7	1	582

Table 3. The frequencies of target nations

(*n* marks the number of different nations in a plot item and *p(n)* the number of plots of the given *n*-rank; the rank *n* = 5 includes BAL as a separate “nation”)

Further, an attempt was made to evaluate the degree of similarity of the four target nationalities. In order to do that, the cases of alternative or simultaneous co-occurrences of different butts were summed in pairs for all 143 plot items involving more than one single butt, and thus a two-dimensional array of intersections generated. The values of the diagonal cells of the matrix were reduced to zero and the “coefficients of similarity” were calculated for all pairs of target nationalities using the formula

$$\lambda_{AB} = \frac{A \cap B \times \Sigma_{tab}}{\Sigma A \times \Sigma B}$$

(Here $A \cap B$ means the size of the common part (number of intersections) of events *A* and *B*, Σ_{tab} – the sum total of values in all cells of the matrix, ΣA – the sum total of occurrences of event *A* and ΣB – the sum total of occurrences of event *B*. If $\lambda = 1$, events *A* and *B* are independent; if $\lambda > 1$, then *A* and *B* are positively correlated, if $\lambda < 1$, then their correlation is negative)

The initial matrix of pairwise co-occurrences is shown in Table 4a, the field of λ -coefficients in Table 4b. Thus, λ -calculation successfully divides the field of our target nations into two clearcut clusters – Finnic (EST + FIN) and Baltic (LAT + LIT).

Table 4a. The initial matrix of pairwise co-occurrences

	EST	FIN	LAT	LIT	Σ
EST	135	234	80	26	475
FIN	234	121	54	16	425
LAT	80	54	45	22	201
LIT	26	16	22	18	82
Σ	475	425	201	82	1183

Table 4b. The field of λ -coefficients

	EST	FIN	LAT	LIT
EST	0.00	1.96	1.30	1.03
FIN	1.96	0.00	0.98	0.71
LAT	1.30	0.98	0.00	1.90
LIT	1.03	0.71	1.90	0.00

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The large relative proportion of plots shared between the figures of Estonians and Finns, as well as between the three “pribalts”, is not the only characteristic of their synonymity. Russian jokelore in general does not make a clear-cut distinction between Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians, and the elements of their languages, their proper names, geographic places etc. are often confused. For example:

The ESTONIAN (sic!) dog does not react to its master’s call “Sharik!”, but reacts to the call “Sharikas” with merry barking “Gavs, gavs!”

I am sure that Estonians have never had dogs bearing the name Sharik, let alone Sharikas.

ESTONIANS (sic!) finally translated the fairy tale “Peter Pan” – in it they have named him “Иударас Пенис” (“Pitaras Penis”).

[“Pitaras” is apparently also an allusion to the vulgar slang word *nuðapac* (= homo)]

In the texts above the Estonian is confused with the Lithuanian and Latvian. Besides, there are a lot of jokes in Estonia (and certainly elsewhere) proceeding from the fact that the masculine substantives in Latvian have the ending -s and in Lithuanian the ending -as:

‘Cat’ in Lithuanian is “Kurnäuskas”

(*kurnäu* is one of Estonian counterparts for *miaow*).

The hare (jänes in Estonian) and peni (i.e. ‘dog’ in the Southern Estonian dialect) discuss moving to Latvia. The hare says: “In Latvia I will be called “Janis”. The peni (dog): “Oh? Mmm... I see... I guess I will give up moving to Latvia...”

Likewise, Estonian schoolboys can have Latvian or Lithuanian names, such as Janis, Mihalis, Peters, Vitas, Estonian farmers can have Finnish family names, like Kaakinen or Toivanen, etc.

The indistinguishability of the “pribalts” is well expressed in a Russian (self-ironic, I guess) joke:

A Russian says about Lithuanians: “Well, they are those who live in Riga and speak Estonian...”

THE DOMINANT OF SLOWNESS

Accordingly to Raskin (1985), Davies (1990; 2002) and others, slowness is not among the most widespread features of ethnic characters in jokes. It has originally been ascribed to several Scandinavian peoples like the Finns, Norwegians and Swedes. Under Urho Kaleva Kekkonen’s long rule, Finland had friendly political relations with the Soviet Union. Finns were often tourists in Russian cities, especially Len-

ingrad, and also in Estonia since 1965, when regular ferry traffic began between Helsinki and Tallinn. For Finns who were sober at home, Russia and Estonia became traditional places for relaxed drinking, and Finland was one of the few foreign lands that were easily accessible to Russian shopping tourists. Perhaps in the seventies, the traditional proverb formula ‘A is not a B’ found a new Russian modification *Курица – не птица, Финляндия – не заграница* (Chickens aren’t birds, Finland is not a foreign land).

It is difficult to retrospectively determine how outstanding an ethnic figure the Finn was in the Russian jokelore of the Soviet period. There is, however, a good reason to think that it is probably the image of the Finn that has initiated and mediated the process of the further southward expansion of the slowness stereotype in Russian jokelore, but later, in the 1990s, a great deal of slowness motifs were transferred to the now more current Estonian, who thus took over the role of the emblem of slowness.

I extracted the feature of slowness from a total of 244 plots from our Russian sample (i.e. 41.3% of the total plot supply). The division of absolute and relative frequencies of slowness between the four target peoples is shown in Table 5.

	total	slow	%
EST	357	210	58.3
FIN	264	105	39.8
LAT	87	19	21.8
LIT	32	3	9.4

Table 5. The division of absolute and relative frequencies of slowness between the four target peoples in 244 plots from our Russian sample

(the column *total* marks the total number of plots including the given nationality, the column *slow* the number of plots referring to slowness, and the last column indicates the relative share of slowness jokes for each target nation)

From this it also becomes evident that shared slowness is the main factor to which the Estonian and Finn owe a great deal of their strong similarity.

Here I provide some further examples of Finnic slowness in Russian Internet jokes.¹

★ In contemporary Russian slang, the mocking name for Estonians (sometimes also for Finns, and slow people in general) is “stick-in-the-mud” (*тормоз*) [literally ‘brake’], the symbol of Tallinn is “Старый Тоормоз” [“Old Toomas” → “Old Brake”], an EFian behind the wheel is an emergency brake, EF vodka is brake oil and EF brake pads are the most effective in the world.

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★ All EFians' reactions are extremely slow. They only beat up people who tell unpleasant jokes the next day. Their hangovers begin three days after drinking alcohol, their erections begin three days after looking at a pornographic magazine, and ejaculation comes three days after having sex.

★ An introverted EF looks at the tips of his own shoes while talking with others, and an extroverted EF looks at those of his conversation partner. An EF boss asks his Russian secretary to type a little slower, because he can't dictate that fast. EFians are the wealthiest nation in the world, because they are unable to spend their salary fast enough, and EF rally drivers are successful because they are unable to raise their foot from the gas pedal while in curves. EF ambulances bear the text 'Time heals all wounds' (*Время лечит*), and EF buses the sign 'Please speak to the driver to wake him up'. Physics has been removed from EF school programmes, so as not to traumatise children with the concept 'speed'. In EF casinos, stakes can be placed for the next day. In the EF version of the game show 'Who Wants to be a Millionaire' there is an additional lifeline – 'Write to a friend', and a new class of service has been created in EF-land – 'postal Internet'. An EF cyclist comes third in a running marathon, the EF ski team freezes at the start of the competition so as to wait for the first snows, and an EF Olympic winner only realises by evening that he has won first place. In EF hunting shoots, the figure of the 'running wild boar' has been replaced with the 'sleeping sloth', and EFians' favourite pastime is to watch frolicking sloths in the zoo. The slow waltz is EFians' rap music.

★ In EF-land slowly dissolving coffee has been invented, the EF hound is a breed specially designed to hunt wounded snails and tortoises, and the army of EF-land has slow reaction forces that kill their enemies with boredom.

★ In EF-land, natural processes in general take place much more slowly, time passes more slowly, and gravity is not as strong. NATO sends a dirigible to protect Estonian airspace. In EF-land, a new and harmless strain of the AIDS virus has been discovered – its incubation period is longer than a human lifetime. The EF Internet is so fast because seconds are longer there. Even in St. Petersburg, the tempo of life is slower than in Moscow, because the proximity of EF-land influences the city.

★ Also, there is a parody of proverb: *If you chase two Estonians, you could end up catching a third.* (Original: *If you chase two rabbits, you won't catch either*).

Finnic and Baltic Nationalities as Ethnic Targets in Russian Jokes

As on many previous occasions, I must once again complain about the absence of an ATU-like register of contemporary jokes. While working on this topic I repeatedly found myself in a constant helpless need to know how broad was the actual area of distribution of this or that joke plot in other languages and cultures outside the given Baltic-Finnic-Russian region, which other ethnic butts could be in use there, etc.

Using search engines Rambler and Google, I made, just for fun, an attempt to observe which ethnic constants can substitute the variable *X* in the globally known expression “**hot X(-ian,-ish) guys ~ boys**”, and how frequent those constants were in the Russian and Western web world. The numbers of responses for the first 17 positions are listed in Table 6.

Table 6. An attempt to observe which ethnic constants can substitute the variable *X* in the globally known expression “**hot X(-ian,-ish) guys ~ boys**”

Rambler: горячие X-ские парни			Google: hot X(-ian,-ish) guys ~ boys		
1.	FINNISH	8524	1.	Indian	2895
2.	ESTONIAN	3206	2.	Russian	1647
3.	German	1288	3.	French	1538
4.	American	444	4.	Mexican	1174
5.	Russian	372	5.	English + British	2733
6.	Swedish	309	6.	American	1593
7.	Georgian	288	7.	FINNISH	1166
8.	LITHUANIAN	239	8.	Spanish	1383
9.	LATVIAN	231	9.	German	1475
10.	Norwegian	168	10.	Chinese	1249
11.	Mexican	96	11.	Jewish	384
12.	English + British	70	12.	Swedish	264
13.	Armenian	44	13.	ESTONIAN	274
14.	French	34	14.	Norwegian	51
15.	Jewish	33	15.	LATVIAN	15
16.	Chinese	28	16.	Georgian	13
17.	Cuban	25	17.	LITHUANIAN	9

Arvo Krikmann

The obtained rank sequences seem to be the result of several different factors:

a) perhaps some guys are hot simply because they are members of big, well-known and authoritative nations (Americans, Russians, Englishmen, Germans);

b) some other guys, especially southern ones, appear to be regarded as hot in earnest and literally (Indians, Georgians, Mexicans, Spaniards);

c) yet other guys, especially Scandinavian ones, are ironically referred to as “hot” (Finns, Estonians, Swedes, Norwegians).

The positions of the Baltic and Finnic nations differ considerably in Rambler and (English) Google, although their mutual arrangement is the same in both. The Finn holds the highest position (and is immediately followed by the Estonian) in the Russian ranking, but is only the seventh in Google. Other “pribalts” are also located much higher in Rambler than in Google.

The strong shift upwards of the former Baltic republics of the Soviet Union hardly needs any further explanation.

RESIDUAL ASPECTS: ASEXUALITY, STUPIDITY, LANGUAGE, POLITICAL MATTERS

As mentioned above, slowness in and of itself is not very salient among the universal features of the objects of ethnic mockery. Finns’ and Estonians’ slowness is, however, evidently associated with dull-wittedness, linguistic incapability and sexual inertia, i.e. with the mainstream ethnic topics described by Raskin (1985: Ch. VI) such as ASEXUALITY, DUMBNESS, and LANGUAGE DISTORTION.

These and other content constituents often coincide in one and the same joke. The motoric, physiological, mental, emotional and intellectual expressions of slowness are densely connected and overlap.

Asexuality

★ As already noted above, an Estonian or a Finn gets angry three days after being told an insulting joke, has an hangover three days after drinking, gets an erection three days after looking at a pornographic magazine, and ejaculates three days after having sex.

★ On his wedding night, an EFian is only able to take so much initiative as to say good night to his bride. Sex seems to him to be more pleasant than Christmas, but then again, Christmas happens more of-

ten. An EFian girl prefers sex to be ‘either back or forth’, not ‘back and forth, back and forth’. An EF woman asks her husband to kiss her after having just returned from a long business trip; he is surprised: ‘what is the need for such orgies!’

Dullness

EFians in Russian jokes are not only physically slow, but their cognitive processes are sluggish and dull as well.

★ They think that their parents or grandparents never had children; look for dead crows in the sky and flies from the inside of their cheek; finding a friend’s dismembered body parts by the road, an EFian worries that something bad may have happened to him; beats his car down because it won’t fit in the garage with fully inflated tyres; an Estonian border guard thinks that the Audi Quattro is so named because it can only accommodate four passengers, etc.

★ An old Hant ~ Chukchi says on his deathbed: “Respect the forest – it gives us warmth. Respect the moose – they provide us with food. Respect the Estonians – otherwise we would be the only stupid people on earth.”

★ As in the case of slowness, stupidity seems to extend to Estonian animals too: an Estonian wolf chewed off three of his paws and was still unable to get out of the trap he was caught in.

Unlike slowness, stupidity is the most central feature of ethnic targets in contemporary jokes, preceded by the long lineage of ancestors in the multitude of older folk jokes with a large variety of target characters that can be specified not only ethnically, but also by their social status, wealth, profession, gender, age, etc. Therefore, wherever stupidity is involved in jokes, one should expect an especially wide range of name labels of characters, especially long historical pedigrees behind certain plots, etc.

For example, the two following plots were, among others, formerly connected with the Soviet militia:

Estonian policemen. One of them asks the other to check whether the strobe lights on the roof of their car are working. The other policeman gets out, looks up and says: “It’s working... it’s not working... it’s working... it’s not working...”

An Estonian suffering from heat or a hangover asks a friend to bring him some lemonade. The friend returns and says: “There wasn’t any lemonade, but I brought you some cookies.”

Arvo Krikmann

The Estonian (or Finn) in Russian jokes is tardy and dull-witted, though not lazy, but orderly and sparing.

Two Estonians ~ Finns go to a brothel and ask the madam what they could get for \$5. The madam says that for \$5 they could fuck each other outside in the bushes. They do so, return and ask: “Who should we pay the \$5?”

An Estonian ~ Finn picks up a dead crow “just in case”; a year later he takes it back to the same place, because he has discovered that he does not need it.

Language: stretched speech and accent

Telling jokes to a native Russian audience generally only takes place in Russian. In that sense it differs diametrically from telling jokes to Estonians in Soviet Estonia (and presumably also elsewhere in the USSR), where jokes of Russian origin were typically told in macaronic language, maintaining the necessary untranslatable fragments of text in Russian – first of all elements of direct speech, such as puns, punch-lining formulae, etc. (cf. Krikmann 2006).

Shmeleva & Shmelev (2002: 47 ff., 75 ff.) draw a distinction between the two main types of ethnic objects in contemporary Russian jokes – “aliens” (*иностранцы*) and “foreigners” (*иностранцы*), and claim that Estonians are only “foreigners” who have evolved a linguistic specificity that is more characteristic of the “aliens” like Jews, Georgians, Chukchis, etc.

Take, for example, the joke which in English translation is roughly as follows:

A Russian customer attempts to speak to an Estonian salesperson in broken Estonian. The salesperson: “You can speak Russian, I understand your language!” The customer: “We listened to your Russian for 50 years – now you listen to our Estonian!”

One of the Internet variants of this in the original Russian looks like this:

*Заходит русский покупатель в эстонский магазин. За прилавком стоит продащица, эстонка. Покупатель начинает на ломаном эстонском объяснять чего он хочет. Эстонка: **Посалуйста, коворитте по-русски, я все поннимаю.** – Мы пятьдесят лет слушали ваш русский, теперь вы послушайте наш эстонский.*

Arvo Krikmann

Language: misunderstandings and puns

Estonians' or Balts' linguistic incapacity can result in a number of puns or other linguistic jokes. For some reason, dialogues between Russian travellers and Estonian customs officers have been especially prone to inspire such confusions. Sometimes the outcome is obscene.

Some examples:

*An Estonian says: Russians are odd people, everything is 'sapor' for them, church is sapor, fence is sapor and when they're constipated, that's also sapor [this refers to the Russian words *собор*, *забор* and *занор* respectively].*

*A Russian customs official asks an Estonian truck driver: What are you hauling? – “Трунны!” (i.e. he means to say *truby* = pipes, but the Russian hears *trupy* = corpses, and asks:) “Are they in coffins?” – “No, in piles.”*

*A female Russian taxi driver asks an Estonian customs official to do the paperwork for her cargo as fast as possible. The customs official says that things don't go that quickly, and adds in broken Russian: “Ну-у, если хот-туте, мо-ожете взя-ать у меня-я ра-ас-ни-иску.” The woman says she is not satisfied with that. The Estonian answers: “Ну-у, возмим-те два-а-ра-аса!” [the woman understands: *можете взять у меня расписку* = you can get a receipt; the Estonian apparently thought: *можете взять у меня раз письку* = you can suck my dick].*

*Kalev complains to Ilya Muromets that his horse does not want to walk. Muromets recommends shoeing it (*подкюй*) [sounds a little like *pod hui*, which would mean ‘under the dick’]. The Estonian does not understand what Ilya said and answers: I've already hit it “*под кюй и под яйца*” [very literally: ‘under its dick and under its balls’], but it still won't move.*

*A Latvian tells a Russian that his name is Vilis Skuja [sounds a little like *vylez s huja*, which would mean ‘climbed out from the dick’]. The Russian answers: “Я не спрашиваю, откуда ты вылез, фамилия твоя как?” [“I am not asking what hole you climbed out of, I asked you your name!”].*

The Latvian asks Russian about someone: “Kur viņš?” (Where is he/she?). The Russian answers: “But we do not have anyone called Kurvinsh on our staff!”

The mail address of the Estonian Institute of Experimental Biology is really and truly **ebi@ebi.ee** – which, spelled in Russian computer slang, sounds like “**fuck, doggie, fuck, point, ye-ye**”.

Political matters

Surprisingly enough, the strained political relations between Russia and the Baltic states are only quite modestly represented, mainly through Estonians' and Latvians' painful attitude to Russians' poor knowledge of Estonian and Latvian.

The restoration of Estonian independence, as mentioned by Shmeleva & Shmelev (2002: 78), the dissatisfied Russian diaspora, the entry of Estonia and the other Baltic states into the European Union and NATO, problems with the implementation of the language law, border treaties and the 'Bronze Man', the Russian media, politicians, state institutions' reactions to them – all of this has definitely created a favourable background for political-ethnic humour towards Estonia. Yet all of these circumstances have, nevertheless, yielded relatively few direct anecdote motifs.

There are only a few jokes on the Russian Internet that refer to Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania gaining national independence. For instance:

★ An Estonian child asks his mother to buy a tin of Baltic sprats, and his mother agrees to buy even two tins, because we are now sovereign and can afford it. Or, for instance, 'pribalts' ask a Russian who has hoarded toilet paper when Russians began using toilet paper, and the Russian answers 'ever since pribalts stopped licking our asses'.

There are more jokes that criticise 'pribalts' for being painfully sensitive about language matters, and demanding that Russians living in their countries speak in their languages.

★ The joke in which the stubborn 'pribalt' refuses to communicate his three wishes to a Russian-speaking goldfish seems to be one of the most widespread of all jokes involving Estonians.

One can also find some genuinely evil nostalgia for earlier times, clear references to deportation, imprisonment and invasion.

★ In response to Estonians' request to spell the name "Таллин" (*Tal-lin*) with two *n*-s, Russians recommend spelling "Колыма" (*Kolyma*) with two *a*-s. In answer to an Estonian's question how long it takes a Russian to pack up his things, the Russian answers that he doesn't know, but it takes him about 45 seconds to assemble a Kalashnikov machine gun.

Arvo Krikmann

The joke about the colours of the Estonian flag is particularly cruel, but “objectively” witty and well-structured. Here Vovochka is obviously a positive character.

Teacher: What does the blue on the Estonian flag symbolise? – An Estonian student (Peeter): ... the blue Estonian sky that before was polluted by Russian fighter planes, but is now clean once again. – And what does the black symbolise? – An Estonian student (Aino): the sacred soil of Estonia, which was once trampled by the boots of Russian soldiers, but is now clean once again. – And what does the white in the Estonian flag symbolise? – A Russian student (Vovochka): It symbolises the white snow of the steppes of Siberia, which for decades was trampled by the feet of the ancestors of the present Estonians ... and they'll trample it again, just as soon we return here!

In the next two examples the ‘pribalt’ is an obviously negative (cruel, unjust) character:

A Russian asks an Estonian or Lithuanian for directions to get to a particular street. The response: left, right, straight, left again and you'll be at the railway station.

A young man saves an Estonian child from a pool of crocodiles. The journalist writing about the event considers this to be a genuine Estonian heroic deed, but hears that the young man is Russian, and writes a news item entitled “Russian steals crocodile’s breakfast”.



I have not yet found any reflection in Russian ethnic humour of the events that took place in April and May, 2007 in Tallinn in connection with the so-called Bronze Man, at the Estonian Consulate in Moscow, and elsewhere, unless the sign NO ESTONIANS AND DOGS that truly hung on the door of a restaurant in Yaroslavl for a while can be considered humour.

★

Only very rarely are Estonians, Latvians or other inhabitants of the former Soviet camp allowed to be positive (clever, witty, victorious) characters in Russian jokes, but almost never against a Russian antagonist. The examples below actually represent the Soviet and not the contemporary stratum of jokes.

Finnic and Baltic Nationalities as Ethnic Targets in Russian Jokes

As an experiment, the Soviet Union decides to grant Estonia national sovereignty from 6 o'clock in the evening to 6 o'clock in the morning. At 7:00, Estonia declares war on Finland. At 8:00 the Finns capture Tallinn. At 9:00 Estonia signs an act of complete and unconditional surrender.

Members of three nationalities throw out of an airplane everything they have enough of. The Frenchman throws a bottle of wine, the Russian a case of vodka, but the Estonian throws the Russian out of the plane – we truly have enough of them.

(See also the quoted above joke above about making condoms out of chewing cum)

Note

1. Since slowness is characteristic of both Estonians and Finns in Russian jokes, and I have not wanted to use the collective name “Smogarians” or distinguish which motifs are connected with both, and which with only one or another, in the following review of examples the characters are identified by the abbreviation EFian and the corresponding countries by the abbreviation EF-land, and also, where necessary, EF-language, etc. These motifs are, however, more often associated with Estonians than with Finns.

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Appendix

EST	FIN	LAT	LIT	Σ	PLOT
1	1	1	1	4	Quarrelling about unimportant trifles (the possible “prototype narrative” of the now globally known expression [<i>Don't fight,</i>] <i>hot Xian guys</i> ~ ... <i>горячие Хские парни</i>)
1	1	1	1	4	At first, a hitch-hiker is told that Tallinn ~ Helsinki ~ ... is not too far, and, after several hours of driving, that it is now far indeed
1	1	1	1	4	<i>Пустатый паспорт</i> (obscene-sounding dialog between Xian and Russian customs officials)
1	1	1	1	4	Xian parachutists hovered above the town for three days
1	1	1	1	4	Russians went into space? – Really, all of them?
1	1	1	0	3	Sex is better than Christmas, but Christmas happens more often
1	1	1	0	3	An Xian suffering from heat or a hangover asks a friend to bring him some beer or lemonade. The friend returns and says: “There wasn’t any lemonade, but I brought you some cookies.”
1	1	1	0	3	Two Xian guys in a brothel are told that for \$5 they can fuck each other – they do so and ask whom they should give the \$5
1	0	1	1	3	An Xian refuses a goldfish’s offer to fulfil three of his wishes, because the offer was made in Russian
1	1	1	0	3	On the day after telling jokes about Xian’s slowness, the Russian who told them is beaten up by two Xians
1	1	1	0	3	A whole village has come to observe how silently and invisibly a group of Xian scouts is crawling towards enemy positions
1	1	1	0	3	Enjoying the romping sloths in Tallinn Zoo is the favourite pastime of Xians
1	1	1	0	3	An Xian picks up a dead crow “just in case”; a year later he takes it back to the same place, because he has discovered that he does not need it
1	1	1	0	3	The secret of the Matrix’s bullets disclosed: the bullets were Xian
1	1	1	0	3	In an Xian casino, roulette stakes are taken for tomorrow
1	1	1	0	3	Xians have invented slowly soluble coffee
1	1	1	0	3	Xian policemen. One of them asks the other to check whether the strobe lights of their car are working. The other looks up and says: “It’s working... it’s not working...”

Finnic and Baltic Nationalities as Ethnic Targets in Russian Jokes

1	1	1	0	3	The Xian border guard thinks that the names Audi Quattro and Fiat Uno refer to the number of seats in the respective cars
1	1	1	0	3	Verbal contest between Xian and Yian: the first round – about eating an entire loaf of bread vs. making muslix of it; the second – about eating jam vs. making it from fruit rejects; the third – about throwing used condoms away vs. making bubble gum out of them and then selling them to Y-land
1	1	0	1	3	A pale untanned Xian explains: I just had to be at work on the Wednesday when summer happened
1	1	1	0	3	One of the oldest barber's shops was discovered in Xland. Instruments, mirrors and a queue of three people were well preserved
1	1	1	0	3	If in Latvia you are overtaken by an Estonian, you must be a Finn
1	1	1	0	3	Mom, do we have Finnish ancestors? – No. – How about Estonians? – No, sonny. – But why the hell then am I such a stick-in-the-mud?
1	1	1	0	3	Text on Xian ambulance: 'Time heals all wounds'
1	1	1	0	3	The Xian Urmas ~ Kaarlis ~ Hekka stands in a queue, repeatedly reacts when the names "Toomas!" ~ "Valdis!" ~ "Mikka!" are shouted, repeatedly abandons the queue and finally shouts desperately: "I am not Toomas, I'm Urmas! ~ ... ~ ..."
1	1	1	0	3	Eczema does not stop an Xian kissing the Queen's hand: Clinton ~ Bush even had haemorrhoids
1	0	1	1	3	The devil caught representatives of different nationalities and put them in a sack. When they escaped, they behaved differently: e.g. the Estonian did not understand what was going on, the Latvian held a political protest, etc.
1	1	1	0	3	How can one make a Xian laugh on Monday ~ ... - Tell him a joke on Friday ~ ...
1	0	1	1	3	Gorbachev orders that his stolen wife be returned immediately, or else the whole of Siberia will soon speak Xian
1	1	0	1	3	Пень 4 (i.e. Pentium 4, literally: Stump 4): assembled in Estonia, with Finnish video card, for viewing Lithuanian DVDs