

# Semiotic resources in multimodal sociopolitical irony

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## ABSTRACT

The paper discusses multiple instances of sociopolitical irony conveyed by memes which reflect people's reactions to Russia's current internal and external policy. Despite the danger of legal prosecution, several Telegram channels, whose owners reside outside Russia, specialize in creating and spreading online memes that comment on current events and official political statements produced by Russian officials. The study is based on a collection of 124 memes posted by several oppositional Russian-language Telegram channels in 2022-2024. The complex image-language relationship in memes allows them to convey various explicit and implicit social meanings. In this research, the analysis centers around the semiotic status of verbal and non-verbal components used in satirical memes. The visual part of memes is usually an original photo, which sometimes can be edited or altered, often to make it look funny. The main function of the visual component is to create an intertextual connection with the specific person or political event. The verbal part is a concise comment that places the image in a new context. In memes, the visual part can function as a full-fledged component of the message which contributes to the creation of the ironic meaning: it triggers an intertextual connection with a well-known visual object and functions as a source of a mismatch with the verbal part of the meme.

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## 1. Introduction

Although the term *meme* was coined around 50 years ago (Dawkins 1976), memes have become a popular research object since their appearance in the digital space (Aunger 2000; Cannizzaro 2016; Hakoköngas, Halmesvaara and Saki 2020; Kilpinen 2008; Shifman 2014). Milner (2016:2) notes that “our cultural tapestry is more vibrant because of the wide spectrum of hashtagged status updates, remixed photos, and mashed-up videos that dominate participatory media. Our public conversations are bigger and louder than they’ve ever been.” Memes have been viewed as units of cultural evolution (Holdcroft and Lewis 2000; Situngkir 2004), as artifacts of digital culture (Wiggins and Bowers 2014), or as a cognitive mechanism which people use to transmit ideas (Aunger 2002; Dennett 1990; 1995; Miranker 2010). Because memes can take various kinds of forms and guises – from catchphrases to viral videos – scholars are primarily interested in setting the boundaries of the concept of a meme itself and in the role these units of information play in what is termed as a “participatory culture” (Gal, Shifman and Kampf 2015; Massanari 2015; Silvestri 2015; Wiggins and Bowers 2014).

The Internet has become a significant medium for the production and distribution as well as a limitless repository of memes (Shifman 2007; Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong 2015). Memes in public discourse have attracted researchers’ attention due to their ability to convey explicit and implicit social meanings (Piata 2016; Silvestri 2015). Every significant event, whether a presidential election, the spread of a disease, or a military conflict, becomes a source of yet another wave of memes.

This paper presents a semiotic analysis of sociopolitical memes about Putin’s external and internal policy in 2022–2024, including the war in Ukraine. The memes included in the collection circulate primarily in oppositional channels in Telegram, which are a good example of contemporary participatory culture, and demonstrate critical public reaction to the events of 2022-2024.

Memes can be analyzed from a variety of research perspectives, e.g., evolutionary (Miranker 2010), anthropological (Nahon and Hemsley 2013), or cultural (Nissenbaum and Shifman 2015). As complex signs, they also deserve to be analyzed from a semiotic point of view: the semiotic deconstruction of memes involves the analysis of visual and verbal signs and their relations, as well as the technique used to create humor. This paper looks at memes from precisely this kind of perspective and addresses two questions: first, how do the verbal and visual components of memes interact to create new meanings, and, second, what possible social and cultural implications can be conveyed by memes through irony.

The paper is structured as follows: first, I will discuss the controversial status of memes as a genre of popular digital culture, focusing on their multimodal nature and the types of interaction of the verbal and visual components. Next, I will analyze several examples of sociopolitical memes about Russia’s external and internal policies

in 2022-2024 and their economic and political consequences for Russian citizens from a semiotic perspective. Finally, I will show how the verbal and visual components of memes interact to create ironic meanings.

## 2. Memes as a genre of participatory digital culture

It has been about four decades since scholars began their attempts to define a meme (for a review of different approaches to the definitions of a meme, see, for instance, Cannizzaro 2016). Since the boundaries of what can be called a *meme* vary from catchphrases to tunes, images, and films, researchers use a range of metaphors to define memes. Perhaps, the most popular metaphors are those of “cultural genes” and “viruses of the mind,” which have been widely applied to memes since the publication of Dawkins’ book *The Selfish Gene* (Dawkins 1976). One can estimate the popularity of these metaphors by looking at how the titles of numerous publications echo Dawkins’ work: *On Selfish Memes* (Situngkir 2004), *The Selfish Meme* (Distin 2005), etc. Just like genes are described as vehicles for transmitting biological information, memes are metaphorically categorized as vehicles that spread cultural ideas across a population (Aunger 2002; Brodie 2009; Distin 2005; Milner 2016). Following Dawkins’ ideas, Brodie (2009:11) broadly defines a meme as “a unit of information in a mind whose existence influences events such that more copies of itself get created in other minds.” The definition explains the role of memes in cultural evolution, but, unlike genes, memes cannot be considered a handy unit for measuring the amount of transmitted information. Within such an approach, practically anything can be categorized as a meme. A narrower definition of internet memes is offered by Milner (2016:1), who describes them as “the linguistic, image, audio, and video texts created, circulated, and transformed by countless cultural participants across vast networks and collectives.” In this view, memes are characterized as something that has a specific form and a particular function: memes are messages that spread ideas in the digital environment.

However convenient the idea of memes as replicators of culture is, some scholars question its metaphoric nature (Clark 2008). For them, the metaphor of a meme as a culture gene obscures rather than clarifies the matter. Segmenting cultural information into memes results in an atomistic view of culture (Cannizzaro 2016).

Another reason to criticize Dawkins’ metaphorical treatment of memes is that “it favors a biological or cultural determinism instead of valuing the agency of social actors” (Milner 2016:20). According to Shifman (2014:11), the metaphor “has been used in a problematic way, conceptualizing people as helpless and passive creatures, susceptible to the domination of meaningless media ‘snacks’ that infect their minds.” Felixmüller (2017) points out that transmitting information with memes requires free will and the ability to make decisions.

Treating memes as “viruses of the mind” is also problematic: comparing the role of memes and genes, Clark (2008:12) argues that “[c]ells are not constructed out of genes, but by earlier cells, partly in accordance with the genetic ‘instructions.’ Minds, by analogy, are not made up of memes, even if they are often influenced or infected by them.”

While scholars cannot agree on what exactly a meme is, they do agree that memes can utilize various modes of communication (or semiotic systems; Beskow, Kumar, and Carley 2020; Dancygier and Vandelanotte 2017). As multimodal digital messages, memes integrate visual and verbal components, and each component contributes to meaning creation in a particular social and cultural context. The semiotic effect of their interaction and the role of visual and verbal statements in creating meaning in multimodal texts have been debated.

Researchers propose a variety of approaches to the analysis of multimodal texts. Kress and van Leeuwen (2020:2-3) suggest that “[v]isual structures [...] much like linguistic structure, point to particular interpretations of experience and particular forms of social interaction.” This explains why different approaches to visual component analysis rely on linguistic analysis methods. For instance, semiotic analysis of both verbal and visual components can be performed with Halliday’s framework of systemic-functional linguistics to explain how these semiotic systems complement each other in meaning construction. Using the concept of grammar to analyze the visual components of the message, Halliday (1985:101) views grammar as something that “enables human beings to build a mental picture of reality, to make sense of their experience of what goes on around them and inside them.” Just like verbal means, visual choices reflect the three metafunctions – the *ideational*, the *interpersonal*, and the *textual* – proposed by Halliday (Halliday 1978; Halliday and Matthiessen 2004).

Dancygier and Vandelanotte (2017) suggest using ideas of cognitive linguistics and construction grammar to analyze memes as multimodal texts. In their approach, both visual and verbal components are analyzed as constructions in which “constructional meaning can be signaled even when some of the formal features of the full construction are missing” (Dancygier and Vandelanotte 2017:567). Their analysis of memes shows that “selected, characteristic construal features may be salient enough to prompt broader frames of constructional meaning” (Dancygier and Vandelanotte 2017:567).

In the sign-making process, the relations between verbal and visual parts of a message can be balanced in various ways. Barthes (1977) distinguished two types of relations between texts and images: in the first type, which he called *relay*, the verbal component complements the image; and in the second type, the meanings of the visual and verbal components are the same, and they restate or elaborate on each other.

Dancygier and Vandelanotte view the relations between the visual and the verbal components as a spectrum on the one end of which

the image – whole relevant and tightly integrated in the meme’s setting up of mental spaces – is less in focus. At the other end of the spectrum [...] there would simply be no meme (and no meaning) without the image, the mere text of the meme being incomplete or even ungrammatical on its own. (Dancygier and Vandelanotte 2017:566-567)

A more elaborate classification (Chan 2011; McCloud 1994) of verbal-visual components relations includes the following options:

- visual images illustrate the text but do not add significant information to the text itself;
- visual image dominates, and the words do not add substantial information to the image;
- words and images work together to deliver the same content;
- words elaborate on the image or vice versa;
- words and images are parallel and do not intersect semantically;
- words are an integral part of the image;
- words and the image convey an idea that could not be conveyed by either element alone.

In my further discussion, I will apply this taxonomy to analyze the interaction between words and images and their effect on the emergence of social implications, irony in particular.

### 3. Data

As mentioned above, this study aims to analyze memes with the common theme of the external and internal policy of the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, in 2022-2024. The memes included in the corpus were shared by the oppositional Telegram channels after February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2022, as a reaction to the invasion of Ukraine. The memes included in the corpus were chosen on a thematic basis: all of them refer to the political events or statements made by official propaganda in 2022-2024. A total of 124 memes were included in the corpus during this period.

The memes demonstrate a counter-reaction to the official propaganda, which persuaded people that the war on the so-called “Ukrainian nationalism” was a necessity, justified the presence of Russian military forces in Syria and giving asylum to Bashar Asad and the former Ukrainian president Vladimir Yanukovich, and the tightening of the internal political regime which included harsher punishment for public critique of Putin’s internal and external policy. While the memes devoted to external affairs are



mostly connected with the Ukrainian war and the ongoing conflict in Syria, the memes that cover various aspects of internal policy reflect the results propaganda has on people's minds and their perception of events. Even though Wiggins (2019) suggests that by creating and spreading memes "people are overwhelmed with the challenges of the modern world, and they seek comfort away from political and socio-cultural alienation in online spaces," that is, they find a quick and easy way to escape from reality, the spread and popularity of these memes demonstrates the opposite: people inside and outside Russia express their concern about the real state of affairs despite official propaganda. They employ visual and verbal means to create ironic messages that go against the official point of view. Irony as a mode of expression emerges due to incongruity between appearance and reality, expectation and outcome, or what is said and what is meant (Hutcheon 2003, Pattison 2023). The verbal and visual components of memes interact to create this incongruity, that is, a lack of consistency or appropriateness between the elements that are expected to fit together.

In the next section, a semiotic analysis of memes will be presented to demonstrate incongruity, that is, the state of being out of place, inconsistent, or not fitting with expectations, context, or logical patterns, as the source of irony.

#### 4. Semiotic analysis of memes about Russia's external and internal policy in 2022-2024

In this part of the paper, I will analyze several examples of memes that employ only visual modality and memes in which verbal and visual components interact to convey an ironic evaluation of various political events that happened in Russia in 2022-2024. Irony is understood as a meaningful mismatch between words, actions, or situations and the reality behind them (see section above). This mismatch is purposefully created to ridicule social and political shortcomings and flaws and provoke critical reflection.

I will start my analysis by looking at the meme that is not multimodal and does not include a verbal caption. However, it serves as a good illustration of how the characters' setting, positions, and body language can convey meaning. The *mise en scène* of purely visual memes includes the choice of characters, their positions and body language, and also the framing (or setting) of the image, i.e., other objects used in the picture and the location of the image. These elements can also influence the interpretation of the image.

In Figure 1, Putin is sitting in a spherical capsule which resembles a spacecraft in the company of Stoned Fox and Homunculus Loxodontus (or, in Russian, *Zhdun* – 'the Awaiter') – the two characters hugely popular in RuNet (i.e., the Russian segment of the internet). Originally, these two creatures appeared as photos of an anthropomorphic taxidermied fox produced by Adele Morse, and a statue that symbolized



**Figure 1.** Putin with the Stoned Fox and Homunculus Loxodontus

a patient waiting for their diagnosis created by Mardriet van Breevoort. However, since their photos were published online, both the Stoned Fox and Homunculus Loxodontus have been edited into various visual images and widely used in memes. Both creatures express a state of being deeply relaxed and blissfully detached and are perfect examples of the absurdist acceptance of a chaotic situation. Their frequent appearance in memes reflects Russian culture's appreciation for absurd and dark humor.

The irony of the image comes from the contrast of the three figures: the Stoned Fox is ironic because it is a profound failure of its original purpose – to present a wild animal realistically. The Stoned Fox's face demonstrates the expression of confusion and, possibly, inebriation. This bizarre, inanimate creature is placed between Vladimir Putin and yet another strange-looking character, Zhdun ('the Awaiter'), whose face expresses endless waiting with a sense of hopefulness. The juxtaposition of a serious political leader with these surreal, nonsensical objects creates a deeply ironic and absurd situation.

The visual setting of a meme demonstrates a closed space in which Putin and his companions are waiting for something to happen. Dressed in a grey jacket, Putin mirrors the figure of Zhdun. His low shoulders and the head held low indicate Putin's disappointment. The irony emerges from the mismatch between Putin's status as a political leader and the company he keeps: the meme puts Putin on a par with the two surreal, nonsensical creatures. Although the meme does not contain a verbal caption, this social meaning can be easily understood without further comments.

However, memes that contain only a visual component are infrequent. In most cases, visual images are accompanied by verbal comments, and to understand irony, one needs to find incongruities between the meme's two "ingredients." Let us now move on and look at the distribution of meaning across the verbal and the visual modes, which leads to the emergence of irony.

The meme in Figure 2 is divided into three parts: two portraits with smaller captions juxtaposed against the central vertical line and a larger caption below, which visually unites the meme. The portraits oppose each other and, obviously, invite the comparison of the two leaders. The caption under the image of Peter the Great says "[He] opened the window to Europe." The phrase itself is an intertextual reference to Pushkin's poem "The Bronze Horseman" about the history of the establishment of Saint Petersburg by Peter the Great in 1703: the city was constructed on the territory regained from the Swedes and provided the Russian Empire with access to the Baltic Sea and further to the Atlantic and Europe. Traditionally, Peter the Great is portrayed as a political leader who changed the political landscape, but also brought overall progress to patriarchal Russia by importing technologies from European countries,



**Figure 2.** "[He] opened the window to Europe. [He] closed the window to Europe. Got some fresh air, now, that's enough."



hence the metaphor “[he] opened the window to Europe.” Modern propaganda presents Putin as the political leader whose ambitions and impact on Russian history are comparable to Peter I. The caption below Putin’s portrait says: “[He] closed the window to Europe,” hinting at the political and economic sanctions imposed on Russia in the past ten years after the annexation of the Crimean peninsula and the war against Ukraine. The two captions contrast the two leaders, making it clear that Putin’s ambitions, in fact, cut the country off from modern technologies and progress, and destroyed the political interaction between Russia and Europe. The visual juxtaposition of the two leaders is accompanied by the larger caption “Got some fresh air, now, that’s enough!” which is an ironic metaphor – now, due to sanctions, European technologies and goods will not be available in Russia. The layout of the meme certainly plays a role in the creation of irony. While the juxtaposing images present the two leaders as equally important for the history of Russia (and this reference to Peter the Great is common in official propaganda), the verbal messages contrast them, and this ‘compare and contrast’ mode of interaction of the verbal and visual components creates the ironic effect. In this meme, the visual and the verbal components work together to create ironic content that cannot be understood if any of the components is missing.

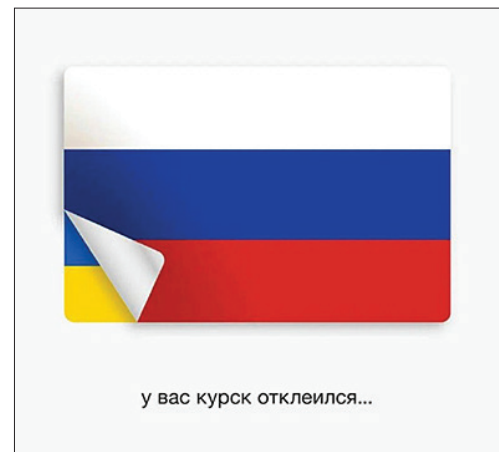
The visual part of the meme portrays profiles of Putin and the former Minister of Defense of Russia, Sergei Shoigu, both looking in the same direction, as if they are at a military parade. Their solemn, straightforward gaze supports their leadership status. However, the background – a destroyed block of flats – and the caption, a dialogue between Putin and Shoigu, disrupt the solemnity of the images. The photo of the destroyed building symbolizes the ruined city of Kherson. The verbal component is based on the word play: the first syllable of the city name (Kherson) sounds the same as the euphemism for male genitals. This wordplay brings in the tabooed sexual reference, as the answer to Putin’s question literally means “We have only gained control over a penis,” which in colloquial Russian is equal to “We have not achieved anything.” This goes contrary to official propaganda which convinces people of the military success of the Russian army. The incongruity between the high expectations and promises made by the politicians at the beginning of the war and the real outcomes creates an ironic effect.



Figure 3. “Have we gained total control over Kherson? No, just over kher.”

Figure 4 was posted by several oppositional Telegram channels a few days after Ukrainian troops crossed the Russian-Ukrainian border and occupied a significant part of the Kursk region in August 2024. The Russian authorities gave very brief accounts of what they preferred to euphemistically call “a situation.” Still, since the introduction of the law against the “discrimination of the Russian Army,”<sup>1</sup> neither journalists nor politicians dared to criticize Putin and the government or to openly talk about military failures, as such talks could be subject to fines or imprisonment.

The meme shows the Ukrainian flag sticking from under the Russian flag, and the caption says, “Your Kursk has come unstuck.” The meme appeared and started circulating online after the Ukrainian troops had unexpectedly gained control over a part of the Russian territory in the Kursk region. Here, the visual and the verbal components work together, conveying a complex of ideas. Firstly, the visual part – the Ukrainian flag sticking from under the Russian flag – is an ironic reference to the presence of the Ukrainian troops on the Russian territory. The irony comes from the contrast between claims made by the official propaganda and the reality in which the Russian forces could not protect the state border. Secondly, the caption is an easily recognized intertextual reference to a catchphrase from the classic Soviet comedy “The Diamond Arm,”<sup>2</sup> in which a group of criminals tries to smuggle jewelry and, as the plot unfolds, one of the criminals chases a gullible character who got the precious stones by mistake. The man realizes he has been chased by the criminal when he sees the criminal’s false mustache come unstuck (see a screenshot from the movie in Figure 5) and comments, “Your mustache has come unstuck!”



**Figure 4.** “Your Kursk has come unstuck...”



**Figure 5.** “Your mustache has come unstuck.”

<sup>1</sup> In March 2022, several Amendments to the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation were made, and a number of federal laws were backed by the Russian Parliament. These laws established administrative and criminal punishments for “discrediting” the Russian Army by spreading false or “unreliable” information about it. In March 2023, the laws became even harsher: “discrediting” the army can currently be punished by up to five years in prison.

<sup>2</sup> The *Diamond Arm* is a 1968 Soviet comedy directed by Leonid Gaidai. In the movie, an ordinary Soviet citizen accidentally becomes involved in a large operation to smuggle jewelry. During a cruise abroad, he slips and breaks his arm, so it gets bandaged with gold and diamonds. After he returns home, the gangsters want the jewelry back, while the police go after the criminals, using the honest but gullible main character as bait.

This kind of intertextual reference to both the visual image and the easily recognized phrase creates irony: the truth is suddenly revealed in both situations. In the movie, the unstuck mustache reveals a criminal. In the meme, the “unstuck Kursk” reveals the lies about the successful military actions of the Russian troops. The meme implicitly parallels Russian propaganda with the gang of criminals who disclosed themselves while trying to illegally get hold of what did not belong to them.

Official propaganda is a frequent target of ironic memes. The following three examples show how propaganda is satirized in memes – the verbal parts echo statements repeatedly made by journalists and politicians on TV and online. In Figure 6, the meme refers to TV propaganda’s impact on people’s perception of the world. One of the main topics of political talk shows is the so-called desire of Western countries to slow down the development of Russia and prevent it from becoming the world’s economic and political leader. Failures in internal and external affairs of Russia have been ascribed to the nefarious practices of dishonest Western politicians, whose sole desire is to turn Russia into a third-world country. The ironic interpretation of the meme relies on the incongruity between the photo of two typical jobless drunkards dressed in cast-off clothing and the verbal message “The West wants to limit our development.”

The phrase echoes one of the headline topics discussed by politicians and journalists in everyday TV talk shows – the animosity of Western countries and their desire to prolong the war and provoke Putin to increase military expenses. In the meme, the caption contrasts the visual image of people at the social bottom with the topic of their discussion. Such people cannot control their own lives, let alone change them for the better, but they are deeply concerned with the politics of other countries. It is the contrast between the caption and the visual image that creates irony.

Figure 7 is yet another example of an ironic evaluation of lay people’s reactions to ongoing political events. The meme uses a screenshot from the popular 1969 Soviet comedy film *The Diamond Arm*, but the words refer to the current political situation. The meme shows two women talking, with one telling the other, “You know, I wouldn’t be surprised if Biden grants his permission to strike Moscow tomorrow...”



Figure 6. “The West wants to limit our development.”



Figure 7. “You know, I wouldn’t be surprised if Biden grants his permission to strike Moscow tomorrow...”



In the meme, no changes are made to the image, and the caption modifies the original words from the movie in which the speaker accuses the husband of the second woman of a potential love affair by saying: “You know, I won’t be surprised if tomorrow it turns out that your husband is secretly visiting his mistress.” In the movie, the woman plays the role of a Soviet official whose duties should be limited to organizing technical maintenance of the apartment block. Still, her official status allows her to unceremoniously ignore people’s privacy and control her neighbors’ private lives as well. In the meme, the woman’s words echo the phrase from the movie. The echoic reference of the “mock quotation” to the Soviet comedy uses analogy as the constitutive principle: the implication here is that lay people are more concerned with global problems instead of their own lives.

The meme in Figure 8 is an example of irony targeting the ignorance of laypeople who cannot evaluate Putin’s regime critically. The visual component of the meme demonstrates a young woman, Sveta Kuritsyna, from the city of Ivanovo, an average “Russian citizen” who became famous after giving an interview in support of the political party *Edinaya Rossiya* (‘United Russia’), infamous for the involvement of many of its members in various corruption scandals. In the interview, she made several grammatical mistakes (her words “we started to dress better” became a catchphrase). In the meme, Sveta proudly boasts that under Putin, a dollar costs more rubles. The phrase in Russian echoes her words from the interview (the caption actually says “Under Putin they are giving a lot more rubles for a dollar”). In Sveta’s twisted worldview, economic failures of the Russian government are perceived as achievements in which lay people, who tend to believe the official propaganda and care more about global economic and political processes, take great pride. Stereotypes are used in memes because they “are metonymic and, more precisely, based on synecdoche, in which a part is used to stand for the whole” (Berger 2020:92). The aim of such stereotypical representation is, on the one hand, to criticize the ignorance of lay people who unquestioningly support Putin, and, on the other hand, to target the official propaganda which presents this ignorance as a norm.

In Figure 8, the verbal component dominates over the visual image – any other image of a stereotypical “average supporter of Putin” could be used as an illustration, and the irony is created chiefly by the meme’s verbal component.

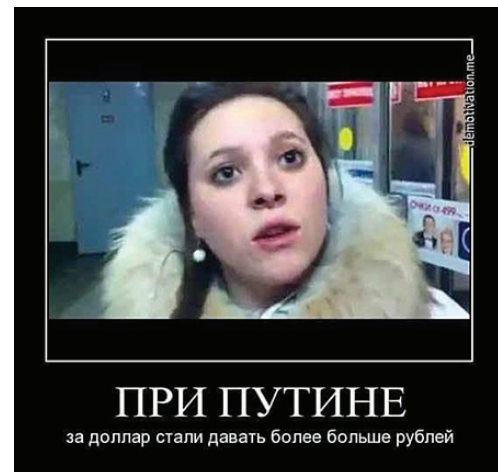


Figure 8. “Under Putin, they are giving a lot more rubles for a dollar.”



**Figure 9.** “The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has made an official statement that if a single NATO rocket reaches the territory of Russia, we will have to move the red lines to the Moscow Ring Road!”

The meme in Figure 9 aims at one of the officials whose words are often cited in political talk shows and newsreels – Maria Zakharova, press secretary of the Russian Ministry of External Affairs. Zakharova is infamously known as a public figure whose aggressive rhetoric, despite her official position, can hardly be considered diplomatic. The threats she has been making after the annexation of Crimea have become the targets of many jokes.

The visual component of the meme contains two images: the photo of Maria Zakharova in the foreground. In the background, there is a schematic plan of the Moscow Ring Road. At first sight, the images have little in common. However, the verbal component establishes a connection between the two images: in the meme, the caption parodies official statements of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, saying “The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has made an official statement that if a single NATO rocket reaches the territory of Russia, we will have to move the red lines to the Moscow Ring Road!” The road mentioned in the mock statement is a highway that loops around Moscow, so the borders of Russia worth defending are limited to the borders of Moscow. The reference to the “red line” is a signal of irony since it is one of the phrases regularly used by Zakharova as the reason for Russia to threaten the world with another round of escalation of the conflict. The caption clarifies the connection between the press secretary and the visual content. Put together, the visual images and the verbal caption create an ironic effect, with irony targeting the poor rhetoric of the diplomats.





Figure 10. "Putin helped us so much indeed! A geostrategist!"

The meme in Figure 10 is a photoshopped screenshot from the Oscar-winning film *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears*.<sup>3</sup> The meme appeared in Telegram after the ousted ex-president of Syria, Bashar al-Assad, fled from the country in December 2024. The meme shows Assad in the company of another ex-president, Viktor Yanukovich, who fled from Ukraine in 2014. Putin supported the two ex-presidents while in power; after the fall of their political regimes, they got political asylum in Russia. In the meme, the faces of the two characters from the film are substituted with the faces of the two former presidents: Viktor Yanukovich and Bashar al-Assad are sitting in a communal apartment (that is, the apartment shared by several people or families with a shared kitchen and toilet), drinking vodka. In the foreground, one can see several bottles which, apparently, contain alcohol; in the background, the curtains on the window are missing, and the whole scene contrasts with our knowledge of how luxurious the life of the two ex-presidents used to be. The film *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* is repeatedly shown on TV, so it is easy for people to recognize the intertextual reference to the scene where the two characters meet for the first time and discuss the issue that is going to influence their further relationship. Pouring vodka, Assad says, "Putin helped us so much indeed!" and Yanukovich replies, "A geostrategist!" The remark echoes official Russian propaganda, which keeps telling people of Putin's visionary external policy. The irony emerges from the incongruity between the former and the present status of the two ex-presidents, on the one hand, and the incongruity between the words about Putin's help and their current state as two typical drunkards who spend time in excessive drinking and discussing world affairs.

<sup>3</sup> *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* is a 1980 Soviet romantic drama film directed by Vladimir Menshov. It won the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film in 1981. The film tells the life story of a young Russian provincial girl who came to Moscow to study at a university. After many failures, she becomes the CEO of a large factory and finds happiness in her private life.

Memes can also come in cycles. The following examples (Figures 11-13) demonstrate how the same visual component can be used in a variety of contexts and adapted to new events. In the example, the visual component consists of a digitally manipulated photo of Putin working with documents. Melisandre – a fictional character from a series of fantasy novels and its screen adaptation *Game of Thrones* – stands behind Putin's shoulder. The duet of a magician who can predict the future and influence people, and the Russian president, creates a comic effect, and the caption connects the meme to a particular event. Just like Melisandre's prophecies guide the narrative in the books, her words whispered in Putin's ear can supposedly influence the course of world history.

In the meme's caption in Figure 11, Melisandre tells Putin to take radical steps in managing the state: "Burn everything! Burn cheese and sausages, cut off the Internet, as it is dark and full of blackmail. Raise taxes and retirement age. They do not respect you, pass the law on showing respect for you." All these pieces of advice refer to the internal policy of the regime: for instance, in 2014, Russia imposed sanctions on the import of European food, including cheese and meat. However, people continued to smuggle and sell European produce. The owners were heavily fined, and the food was publicly liquidated whenever banned cheese or meat was found in stores. The videos showing tractors destroying fresh food were broadcast on national TV. The advice to raise taxes and the retirement age refers to Putin's promises, which he never kept.

The image suggests that Putin does not make his decisions independently but acts under the influence of supreme forces. The implication behind the image is that a normal person who is not influenced by dark magic will never make such decisions.

The same image of Melisandre as Putin's advisor in Figure 12 is, once again, a reference to Putin's words and actions. The phrase that she is whispering in Putin's ear is an intertextual reference to one of Putin's comments on the origins of Ukraine. In December 2021, during his press conference, Putin was asked a question by an American journalist about Russia's demands for its safety. In his reply, *inter alia*, Putin mentioned that Lenin created Ukraine when the Soviet Union was formed. It follows that if a Soviet leader artificially created this country, it has no historical right to exist.



Figure 11. "Burn everything! Burn cheese and sausages, cut off the Internet, as it is dark and full of blackmail. Raise taxes and retirement age. They do not respect you, pass the law on showing respect for you."

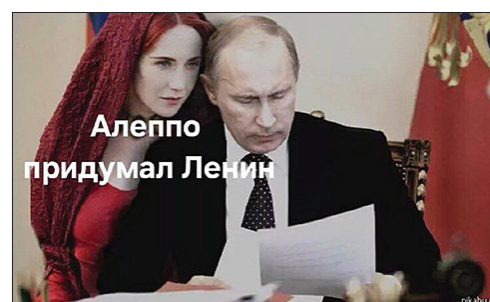


Figure 12. "Lenin contrived Aleppo."

In Figure 13, Melisandre is talking Putin into buying a pager. The meme was posted by several oppositional Telegram channels a few days after Israel started its war on Hezbollah in September 2024 by attacking its members in simultaneous explosions of pagers. The idea of getting a pager contains at least two implications: first, it refers to Putin's reported reluctance to use smartphones or the Internet for security reasons, and second, the intertextual reference to Israel's war against Hezbollah equates Putin to members of Hezbollah who were punished for their actions against Israel.

The memes of Putin being advised by Melisandre form a memetic cluster in which the image and its implications remain constant. The verbal part connects the new variations of the meme to the current situation. In all three examples, the visual component with its implications plays a very important role, and the verbal part elaborates on the message.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have combined some ideas and observations about memes as a genre that allows Internet users to freely combine elements from visual and verbal semiotic systems. The verbal and visual components are relatively independent until, when combined, they create new joint messages. Moreover, these meaningful combinations of the verbal and the visual make memes complex signs that are both motivated and conventional from a semiotic point of view.

Memes, as an instant public reaction to unfolding events, have become an ideological practice. In Milner's (2016:14) words, "[t]hey're small expressions with big implications." By addressing important events, memes construct their own narrative, which consists of semiotic and intertextual references to the current agenda. Political actions bring to life new memes that suggest an alternative interpretation, opposing the official propaganda. In the case of anti-Putin memes, they often demonstrate intertextual awareness of other forms of media, including Soviet films and books: by using screenshots from the movies, the visual components place modern political events in broader historical and cultural contexts, and modified but easily recognized catchphrases create intertextual parallels between the current situation in Russia and narratives of the past.

Memes are an essential constituent of the modern participatory digital culture as they disseminate ideas and images, especially those that cannot be expressed freely.

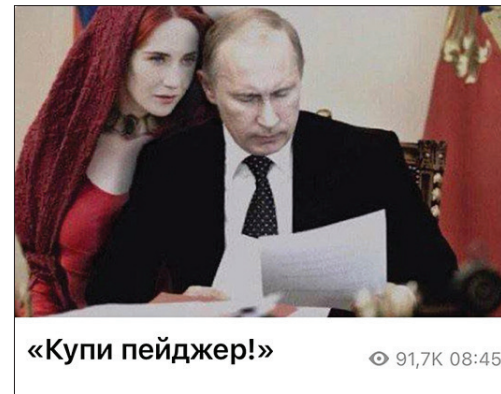


Figure 13. "Buy a pager!"

The only allowed reaction to Putin's political regime is praise, and the propaganda aims at convincing people that the support of external and internal policy is the only normal behavior. In this context, anti-Putin memes and memes that laugh about lay people's bigger concern about foreign countries than about their own life constitute an alternative reaction to the official propaganda. By creating and disseminating oppositional memes, people get a chance to participate in political processes even when there seems to be no opportunity to express critical ideas.

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