

# SOCIAL SCIENCES

## POLITICAL HUMOR IN MEDIA AS A PROPAGANDA TOOL IN POST-SOVIET REALITY

**Chalaganidze N.**

*Ph.D in Journalism, Professor*

*Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University*

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4739-1876>

**Mkhitarov M.**

*Ph.D. Candidate in Mass Communication*

*Caucasus International University*

<https://orcid.org/0009-0005-7241-8953>

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### Abstract

Nowadays, entertainment and humor have become an integral part of the media in many countries worldwide. Namely, comedy talk shows have popularized more and more and has already become a tool of political communication and manipulation.

It is essential to consider how the media develops and functions in the political system. In the Soviet Union, media was considered an integral part of it. In the post-Soviet reality, it had to acquire a different function, which meant absorbing the concepts of democracy and freedom and freeing it from propaganda.

Purpose of the article to reveal how informing the public and entertainment merge in comedy talk shows; and what kind of political content can media recreational function bear.

For the article we used the qualitative research, which means analyzing the materials obtained as a result of media monitoring, by the method of qualitative content analysis. Based on the scientific literature and analyzing the empirical data, we identified the trends, themes and main aspects in modern comedy talk shows.

Accordingly, the present article focuses on the means of impersonating politicians and their visits to entertainment talk shows. Therefore, it should be pointed out how the media serves political goals with entertainment and humor.

**Keywords:** political humor; political communication; impersonating politicians; comedy talk shows; manipulation with entertainment.

### Introduction

At present, the power and ability of the media to quickly inform the public is undeniable, but at the same time, their responsibility and possible degree of influence have become the subject of debate. Once the governance system emerged, it became clear that the political structure in which it developed was important to the functioning of the media and it often becomes a major player in political communications. Accordingly, at such moments, the media are at a crossroads of their basic principles and their responsibility arises - to become a promoter of democracy or a propagandist conductor of political narratives.

It is necessary to consider the political and economic systems within which the media operates, since during the Soviet Union they were considered part of the government and we could not even imagine their free functioning until democratic rule and the concepts of the fourth government appeared. Therefore, taking into account past experience, there was a need to rethink the role of journalism in the Soviet Union and Europe, which was followed by the creation of new press laws and work on guarantees of media independence.

Considering the aforementioned, it can be said that the relationship between the media and politics has changed significantly over the past decade. Among other changes, appearance of politicians in popular entertainment and comedy talk shows has become acceptable and widespread, acquiring strategic importance in the representation of political processes.

Entertainment and humor have become an integral part of the media. In addition to caring about the public mood, political humor also took the burden of influencing public opinion through propaganda methods. Consequently, political discourse has become an important component of entertainment talk shows.

Political humor shows an attitude towards the political system as a whole and towards specific politicians. In a positive light, it is demonstrated by showing political sympathy, expressing trust and hope in politicians; pride and respect for them. Instead, it is used to denote political cynicism, anger towards politicians, irritability and resentment.

### Literature Review

One of the basic functions of mass media is to inform the public. It can be said about especially acute media topic that it is an echo of the influence of the mass media, as it has already woven its own meaning into the content (Gamson, 1992). At this time, it is made clear which angle of the topic is more favorable for this or that media outlet or talk show - what are their attitudes.

As for the popular political topics in entertainment comedy talk shows, according to American sociologists Hoffman and Young (Hoffman & Young, 2011, p.161), it can influence our political views, sympathy or antipathy. In comedy talk shows, the political focus shifts from the major issue to the minor one, focusing on a

chosen politician while the real issues are overlooked as new concerns are created. (Street, 2004)

Nowadays, in many countries worldwide, entertainment and humor have become an integral part of the media. Comedy talk shows are more popular and have become a tool of political communication and manipulation (Postman, 2005). Political humor aims to achieve solidarity and build team identity. With the help of humor it has become possible to build social boundaries, criticize politicians and political parties, mock them and at the same time praise them (Chmielowski, Holbert and Lee, p. 100).

One of the ways to personify politicians is to visit entertainment talk shows, where it is possible to present their personal advantages at an emotional level, which explains why singing, dancing and joking politicians appear in programs of this genre and why show hosts themselves sing or joke about political processes.

There are several means to intensify the emotional background and thus get closer to the community. By using those means and through humor, political processes and politicians themselves are represented (Danielson, 2020):

- Representing the "ordinary" as extraordinary
- The pursuit of belonging and sympathy
- Raising awareness
- Avoiding mocking in a humorous way

The phenomenon of a host is also noteworthy when speaking about entertainment talk shows, as it is them who is responsible for showing a politician to viewers from a new angle. Talk show hosts try to entertain the audience, so the tone of the conversation is lighter, positive, non-critical, friendly, which overall creates a spontaneous atmosphere (Lauerbach, 2007).

If politicians usually tell us incomprehensible news from a tribune, then in an entertainment talk show they have the opportunity to talk about topics that at first glance have no political content, however, at the same time, express to a host their own taste and opinion, which goes beyond politics, but in way they can identify with voters on a personal level, thereby gaining approval even from audiences who do not share their political views.

In fact, everything that serves the purpose of changing human perceptions, evaluations and behaviors is manipulation. In its essence, the aforementioned process aims to have an impact on the audience, which does not yet have its position or does, but it is desirable to strengthen and back it up. Back in the 1980s and 1990s, a view was formed on how communication can be manipulated. The process of persuasion is divided into five stages:

1. Attention drawing stage - the audience must notice the information provided
2. Perception stage - the audience perceives what is being talked about in the provided information
3. Agree - the audience agrees with the author
4. Remembering – keeping in mind the received information
5. Behavior - performing appropriate behavior (Chaiken & Ledgerwood, 2012)

Humorous information first goes through the stages of attention and perception. Because a person

needs more analysis to perceive humorous information, at that time he is not in the mood to understand serious political information, so his mind is relaxed. At the same time, he gets involved in watching comedy programs more easily than news broadcasts; and attention and perception in turn influence the detail of how legal notices are analyzed (Boukes, 2015.) Accordingly, the means mass communication means have turned from a source of information into an instrument of ideology, the purpose of which is to empower and implement the voiced opinion in the mind of the audience (Kara-Murza, 2005).

Different methods are used for persuasion, which are aimed at the values and beliefs of the audience; for example:

1. Labelling - promoting a negative image and assigning a negative burden to a person or an event;
2. Moving around - creating positive attitude through positive associations;
3. Stacking the cards - using the arguments and narration in such a way that it is possible to draw a specific conclusion; (Matsaberidze, 2003)

Aside from the aforementioned there are several forms of propaganda, actively used in political humor and television talk shows. One of such is "emotional resonance," which involves influencing the audience's feelings, emotions, and brain. At such times, most often we hear emotional texts, which depress the audience and make them feel negatively about events or subjects. This way, it is easier to manage the audience and to provide any kind of information. It is also common to confuse emotional news, for example, to provide the audience with positive information first and then the content with a negative narrative; this is when audience gets confused and believes everything. Another propaganda technique - the "Mediator" - involves "behind-the-scenes" information and rumors, when they use political anecdotes, jokes that spread at a lightning speed. In anecdotes, a persona becomes the epicenter of the gossip and arouses people's interest. Another method of manipulation is a comment. Its purpose is to create such a context that the opinion of the public will go in the direction it wants. There may not be anything positive or negative in the presenter's communication, but his meaningful pauses and voice intonation speak for the purpose. "Comment" at this time includes the so-called two-way information - that is, positive and negative opinions about an event, at the same time. In this case, presenter is seemingly neutral, but it is precisely with the nuances mentioned above that his views are clear. "Principle of contrast" is one of the techniques of manipulation, which is based on the perception ability. At this time, the contrasting background is crucial, implying a comparison with the background. As for the method - "Create Problem", when any problematic issue also conveyed with jokes and humor makes people think more and makes them believe that this or that issue is really solvable (Altheide, 2006).

## Methods

In the article is used the qualitative research, where the material obtained as a result of media monitoring is analyzed by the method of qualitative content

analysis. Media monitoring includes observation of *Nika Arabidze's Show* of TV Company Formula and *Evening Urgant Show* of Russia's First Channel. This has allowed us to identify significant examples based on the literature review and the content analysis method, as the selected research method made it possible to reveal specific content, topics or trends. In the article, the choice was made on the research of structural analysis, because at this time it is also important not only how the story is represented, but also what narrative strategies the narrator tries to convince the listener by using, as the analysis of the use of language gains the key importance (Tsuladze, 2020).

### Discussion

In the *Nika Arabidze's Show*, the presentation of the person of Prime Minister of Georgia, Irakli Garibashvili is extensive. One of the topics was the country's ten-year development plan introduced by Garibashvili; the show host is very ironic to the topic, as he believes that the government has "straightened up" the people who have been "crooked" from poverty even without a plan and when they have a plan, what can they do. He fears that "with such care people may break their spine." It is also noteworthy that, in his opinion, the plan was presented against the background of the "chants" by the Georgian Dream Party MPs. They applauded and thanked the Prime Minister, because they believed that the citizens would feel a sense of stability while seeing the mentioned plan.

But, at the same time, Arabidze shows a photo of the MP falling asleep during the Parliament session and concludes that it didn't take him 10 years to experience stability and he fell asleep so sweetly at the fourteenth minute of the session. But, in his own opinion, "the Prime Minister is rushing the country towards development in such a fast way that the MP got upset, drank Dramina and fell asleep." While mocking Garibashvili, the host showed interest to his collection of expensive watches, where he emphatically mocks his intelligence and mental abilities, as he believes that "his watches have so many functions that if the owner had the same abilities, our country would be flourishing already." Accordingly, we can say that the propaganda method called "Labelling" is used in the talk show against Irakli Garibashvili, which means presenting him in a particularly negative context and deliberately creating a negative emotion towards some person or event, which we clearly hear from Nika Arabidze.

Mocking and derisive rhetoric directed at members of the government follows the whole talk show; in it we often find various apolitical news. As we already know, one of the methods chosen by Magnus Danielson, Ph.D., to depict political processes is to present the "ordinary" as extraordinary, but in the *Nika Arabidze's Show* the above gains the opposite meaning. For example, a video of Parliament Speaker Archil Talakvadze playing the piano is spreading virally on social networks. The positive content of the video did not arouse positive public attitude towards the politician when shown in the *Nika Arabidze's Show*. However, it had positive reviews on social media. Arabidze showed

the video from the very beginning and added: "If we put Garibashvili with a flute on his side, it will all be good; what can I say my dear Achiko; my talented one; you play well, write poems, so why did you choose the job that you are not so good at? But go on playing, we are in the situation now that even Saint Nino will not be able to save us."

Local self-government elections were held in Georgia in 2021, during the period of which the talk show was visited only by opposition candidates, discussing several main issues during the dialogue: unfinished tenders, nepotism, Election fraud, damaged infrastructure, talk show guests, the only non-alternative candidates, mockery of the Georgian Dream candidates and so on. We also highlight the visit of one of the opposition leaders, Mamuka Khazaradze, during the interview with whom the mentioned issues are repeated and attention is given to his creative talent. He ran a different election campaign - urging parents to leave their children with him, while they go to vote and then he sang in the street. At the end of the talk show, he also sang with Nika Arabidze, based on which the show host confirmed his uniqueness compared to other candidates. Therefore, if Archil Talakvadze was criticized for the same talent in the talk show, Mamuka Khazaradze, on the contrary, was presented as a positive, distinguished and progressive politician.

Since the arrest of the former president of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili, the show host keeps on comparing him with the current Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili. The main rhetoric is that when Saakashvili was actually in Georgia, the Prime Minister claimed that he was in Ukraine. Therefore, according to the host, Garibashvili may be lying even now: "Will 'Gariba' ever be able to understand Misha?!" "If 'Gariba' is sly, Misha is even better." The same rhetoric applies to the National Movement. In the same show hear a comparative discourse in relation to several events - "The government listens to and taps even the highest hierarchs of the Patriarchate, but again the National Movement is accused of it; well, it takes talent and education to secretly listen to so many Bishops, so, how could the Dream do it?!" So we can say that the host is trying to degrade the current government and the head of the government and to glorify the past.

In addition, any news, or any project that is implemented or introduced in the country, is presented negatively in *Nika Arabidze's Show*, creating the negative attitude. For example, recently a new bridge was built in town Khulo, which the host informed about this way: "A wonderful thing happened in Khulo! The local government built a 4 and a half meter long, grand bridge." The bridge is compared to the bridges of San Francisco and Brooklyn. Nika Arabidze adds here that it seems like 4 meters is nothing, but in reality it is 460 centimeters and four thousand six hundred millimeters. Here, the host focuses on units of measurement. And according to his own interpretation, during the opening, a local told the Mayor that they could jump over the river at that point, even without having a bridge. Considering the aforementioned, we can conclude that the show uses the so-called Principle of Contrast, which is based on the ability to perceive. At this time, the contrasting

background is of crucial importance, this or that issue is perceived better against the background of others. It is on the basis of this contrast that Nika Arabidze compares the current and past government in order to show the superiority of the past one.

The animated series "Kuris Dziri" (base of the ear), created for the previous elections, deserves special attention; as the prototype of Tbilisi, the animation stars Nika Arabidze as a cartoon character. Following the development of the storyline, he walks around the city, where there are two neighborhoods – of the rich and of the poor - they are connected to each other by one bridge. What makes the place unique is that poor people, rich government, corruption, Nika himself and his dog Kupata live together here. The animation is based on politics, politicians and current events. For example, when Kupata calls president's dog for a walk, who is presented as absolutely dysfunctional, the protagonist's reaction is: "You think he has nothing to do and walk around, like his owner? It's a president's dog!" The mayoral candidates are also in the animation; for example, Giorgi Gakharia, a self-proclaimed crisis manager and Kakha Kaladze, a protectionist who gives jobs only to his acquaintances. Mamuka Khazaradze is a pawnbroker and Garibashvili is deceiving himself even again, that everything is fine.

The animation addresses and repeats all the topics discussed during the talk show in relation to the politicians. The only mayoral candidate we do not see the animation is Nika Melia. In the election campaign whirlpool, the main message of the animation is hunting for votes. Every candidate (except for Melia's prototype) pursues a simple goal and considers each of them just as a necessary vote for the elections. With these indirect hints and seemingly simple animation, the mood of the country's politicians towards the public is shown amusingly.

In one of the episodes of the same animation, Mikheil Saakashvili gets arrested and everyone gathers to see the convict, but when the government leaders removed the curtain from the cell, Misha is gone. During the whole episode, they are just looking for the escaped convict. It seems unambiguously that the main character of the animation allegorically points to the "invincibility" of the government, as they cannot find an escaped convict, who has mocked them so badly. Meanwhile, Nika Melia appears for the first time in the series when the opposition politicians go hunting. In this case, he is presented neither negatively nor positively; in the animation, Bidzina Ivanishvili is described as "the Greater of the Great", who rules the country from backstage.

It can be claimed that in the animation created by the talk show they use another method of propaganda – Mediator. Using it, in a simple entertaining and humorous animation, all the key issues are conveyed, with the help of which the talk show creators want to present the current political situation in the country.

Among Russian entertainment and humorous talk shows, must be noted the *Evening Urgant Show*, hosted by Ivan Urgant himself. In the show Urgant spoke about current processes in the country or abroad, be it politics, economics, music or cinema.

We can say that when presenting political processes and political stories in the talk show, there is a one-sided presentation and in humorous storytelling we do not see an equal manifestation of different forces and their proper representation. It is clear that the host is trying to create so-called "objects of bullying" which he presents in a negative light and at the same time another specific force is presented positively. For example, it may be a governor or mayor of some district. The show host says that the citizens made the right choice when they elected the current Mayor of Lipetsk city; he explains his claim as follows: the Mayor (Gulevsky) promised the voter that he would open a new road, while the date of which is constantly postponed; and when journalists finally show interest to Gulevsky was doing in this direction, he clarified: "Who promised you this? I did? Why are you poking me with this road issue? I said it; someone else said it; what difference does it make... You will be notified as soon as it is done." Of course, Urgant responded to the given statement too: "Mikhail Gulevsky is actually right; he never named the specific year. He is preparing a surprise for the population in connection with the city's four hundredth anniversary. But Lipetsk is now only 310 years old, so he still has a lot of time to fulfill his promise." In most cases, politicians are mocked not because of their political activities or views, but, for example, because of their completed declarations, statements made, or families. By doing so, the host tries to humiliate them and once they are repeatedly mentioned with the same rhetoric, they naturally acquire negative labels. It can be concluded that in many cases Urgant tries to confuse the audience and divert attention from an important political issue to a more insignificant one.

But at the same time, on the contrary, noteworthy is the presentation of specific persons positively and with emphasizing their power. In this case, for example, such is the Russian President Vladimir Putin. The show host informs the audience that the latter held important meetings in Italy, including with the Pope in the Vatican. Although at first glance, the story is neutral news, but the host's comment adds content and intensity to it: "It turns out that the most influential person in the world, as named by Forbes, met another most influential person, but according to the newspaper Vatican Truth". For me, this is an example of how, by means of a joke, a particular character can be presented as more powerful, which helps in creating his image as of a positive figure.

However, it is noteworthy that on February 16, 2022, Russia intruded the territory of Ukraine with military force. Ivan Urgant responded to the news in his talk show and noted: "Should we have postponed the war so that it did not coincide with the performance of the Russian figure skater at the Olympics? When is the war happening? February 16? Not good. We can change the date; it is not Olympic Games, right?" Then he paused and added: "It won't be good in the spring either; the Great Fast is starting; and it's International Women's Day. There is a music festival planned in June also." After contemplation and discussion, the host came to the conclusion: "It would be better if we postpone the military actions for 700 years; not cancel it,

just to postpone it. Let's wait until the Martians attack us and then we'll all attack the NATO countries together."

It was the last time the talk show was broadcasted.

### Conclusion

When summarizing, it becomes clear that political humor in the media is laced with propaganda narratives and methods of manipulation, which is reflected in the rhetoric of show hosts both in the representation of political processes and in the revealing of specific political topics.

It is clear that a talk show declares a certain position through its forms of expression, be it sympathy, antipathy, positive or negative attitude. Based on the aforementioned, the attempt is to influence viewers, which is confirmed by the use of the described methods. The revealed themes and techniques suggest that in post-Soviet reality humor is used by the media as a mechanism of political communication; and if in Soviet reality we could not even dare to discuss the independence of the media, today, on the path to democracy, we focus on free media means, but right in this case we are challenged by hidden, well-presented methods of propaganda.

Media serves political purposes through entertainment and humor. This is evidenced by the political discourse that intensifies in comedy talk shows during Election periods. In both cases, during elections there is a rise in political temperature, which is reflected both in the communication of show hosts and in the selection of guests and topics discussed with them. We clearly see political cynicism, manifestations of anger, irritation and indignation towards politicians.

Under such circumstances the issue of media responsibility is lost and ultimately we get a mixture of public information and recreational functions, led by specific political sympathies/antipathies. Ultimately, the media is formed not as one of the most important institutions promoting democracy, but as a propaganda conductor for political narratives.

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