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Humor as a Communicative Strategy in Protest

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Abstract: The aim of the paper is to study how humor as a communicative strategy framed politically motivated protests in Sofia in the summer and autumn of 2013. The analysis shows that humor has more than one function for each participant in the threefold relation in which it is situated: initiator or protesters, target (politicians and institutions) and onlookers. Humor is most efficient in the contexts in which protesters attain their social and political goals. In the contexts in which they do not, humor is efficient in the construction of community among the protesters and gaining support from onlookers. Other linguistic aspects of humor in the protests are also discussed.

Key words: verbal humor, humorous performances, communicative strategy, protest

Introduction

The object of analysis in the paper is the role of humor as a communicative strategy in the politically motivated protests in Sofia after the general elections in the country held on May 12 2013 and after the National Assembly named Plamen Oresharski prime minister. Protests went on in the summer and lost their momentum in autumn. Then on October 23, students' anti-government actions began that had a rejuvenating effect on the protests. The analysis focuses only on the first three months of the protests when humor paralleled protesters' optimism and confidence. In the paper, photos of slogans and placards are used as empirical data from internet sites mostly of the print media.

The sociopolitical situation in the country before the protests

After the general elections, no political party received electoral majority to form a one-party government: GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria, a rightist party) won 97 MP seats, the BSP (Bulgarian Socialist Party) 84 MP seats, the MRF (Movement for Rights and Freedoms, a centrist ethnic-based political party) 36 MP seats and Attack (Ataka, a radical nationalist party) won 23 MP seats. In spite of the fact that GERB lead parliamentary poll, the party did not want to form a coalition government, so the President authorized the Socialist Party to form a coalition. The BSP formed a coalition with the MRF (which has happened before), but for minimum majority in the National Assembly – 120 plus one – the two parties are dependent on Ataka for the plus-one vote. In reality, it is an impossible coalition between socialists, liberals and extreme nationalists. GERB, the opposition, did not attend the sessions of the National Assembly for seven weeks because they claimed they were repeatedly humiliated in the first sessions. GERB wants the present government to resign and new general elections. They returned to sittings on July 25, still wanting amendments in the General Elections Act and new general elections.

The protests began on June 14 (National Assembly convened on May 31) when over ten thousand people gathered before the Council of Ministers building in Sofia to manifest their disapproval of the National Assembly's resolution to appoint Delyan Peevski, an MP from the MRF, head of the State Agency for National Security. Peevski, 32 years old, is not only a politician and a

media magnate, but he is also a member of the economic group around Corporate Commercial Bank, whose assets are valued at about 5 billion euros.

The protests have been going on for about three months now. The protesters, who organize spontaneously through social media, claim they are against corruption, rigging of elections, behind-the-curtain government appointments and policies, abuse of power and the fact that wealth and media ownership are concentrated into a small group of people, a mafia that runs the country. Most importantly, the protesters demand the resignation of the government, amendments in the General Elections Act before new general elections are held and reforms for efficient judicial institutions. The amendments in the General Elections Act are expected to guarantee an open party list system and a lower electoral threshold (4 percent at the moment) to allow smaller political parties access to the National Assembly. The protests do not want to be and are not backed by any opposition party, at least not openly. They are peaceful and peaceful protests, no doubt, are more powerful than violence. Most of the protesters are young people, in their twenties and thirties, bringing their little children along. The protests are leaderless.

Contrary to expectations, institutions and political parties in the National Assembly ignore the protests and have not started an open dialogue with them yet and, what is worse, seem to have no intention of doing so. The Deputy Chair of the National Assembly has talks only with representatives of non-governmental organizations that are pro-BSP oriented. There is also a great discrepancy between the official figures of protesters according to the Ministry of Interior, repeated by the media, and real figures: for example, according to the Ministry, 3 000 took to the streets on July 7, while Fox News said they were over 70 000. Attempts have been made by politicians to belittle and marginalize the protests. They pretend the protests do not exist and claim protesters are paid. For example, a BSP MP, Christo Monov, called protesters in a TV dispute “internet riffraff” (интернет лумпени). At the same time, one has to admit that protesters themselves are not spotless. Along with the ever-present slogan “Oresharski, resign!” and “Mafia” in the protests, one often reads “Red trash!” and other insults, directed at the BSP and its supporters and that is unacceptable. The protests and the protesters have been legitimized so far only by the media. There are counter-protests in support of Oresharski’s government, but they are not characterized by humor – the object of analysis in the paper.

There is general consent among political and social scientists (and many citizens as well) that we are having a façade democracy (фасадна демокрация) and not a real one: one electricity company, one health insurance company, one bank in which most public money is kept, etc. Political parties are identified by many Bulgarian citizens as part of the economic problems we are facing and not as the instrument for their eradication. Most citizens do not trust institutions because of corruption; neither do they trust politicians who are perceived as dependent on powerful economic circles, thus passing acts in the National Assembly that suit corporate interests. And this is what protesters want most: real democracy and the first step is resignation of the present government. The protests are about the failure of the political parties for the last 24 years to implement working democratic principles and curb corruption. They are about values.

Humor as communicative strategy in social and political protest

Humor has both a cognitive and an emotional component. Cognitively, humor is explained through incongruity¹ – generally perceived as a clash of two perspectives on an object, situation or idea, a violation or divergence from expectation, or two alternative meanings that are forced together [1]. As far as emotions are concerned, a lot is known in psychology about fear, anger, anxiety, depression and joy, but there is no agreement among psychologists on what to call the emotion we associate with humor. The reason is because humor is associated with laughter. The

1 The Incongruity Theory of Humor is capable of handling more instances of humor, compared to the Superiority and Release Theories. The three types of theories are compatible and not mutually exclusive.

everyday words for the emotion we associate with humor are *mirth*, *hilarity*, *amusement*, *cheerfulness* and *merriment*. Psychologist Rod Martin [2] claims that *mirth* is the appropriate word in relation to humor². The emotions associated with social and political protests are frustration, fear, anger, anxiety, alienation and joy.

The role of humor in social and political protests has recently received more attention and interest mainly in the fields of social history [3]. Findings, although tentative and inconclusive, show that:

- Humor serves as a powerful communication tool
- Humor and laughter bond protesters together
- Humor contributes to the construction of the collective identity of the protesters
- Humor strengthens an existing collective identity
- Humor serves as a means of reinforcing public control
- Humor confuses and disarms authorities

The researchers cited above agree that humor does not directly effect social and political change; it rather frames protests and framing is different from ideology. More specifically, humor frames protests as a communicative tool: it is used to define and articulate protesters' position, to turn their ideological beliefs into practice and assist in solving a problem. A distinction has to be made between the communicative and social functions of humor. Martineau's sociological model of humor [4] focuses on its uniting effect within a social group and its divisive effect between groups and not on humor as a mode of communication. Humorous messages, in addition to their goal to amuse or insult, inform, persuade and motivate the listener/s in the contexts in which they are used and, through incongruity, they present new perspectives on events.

In the present analysis, no comparison is made between humor in the protests in Sofia and the carnivalesque: the latter is about "the intentional inversion of normal order" in which "the wolf watches the sheep" or "commoners become kings" [5]. The only similarity between carnivals and humorous performances in the protests is the element of play or pretending, but there is no social role reversal, a defining feature of carnivals.

Use of humor in protests is new for the protests in Sofia, but has become common in other countries. For example, humor framed the World Trade Organization protest in Seattle in 1999 [6], the civic youth movement Otpor in Serbia (1998-2003) [7], the anti-war rallies in New York in 2002 [8], the Occupy Wall Street protests in 2011 and 2012, the May 15th movement in Spain in 2011, the students' riots in London in 2011 and protests in Istanbul earlier this year. In the countries in Central and Eastern Europe, humor was used to serve social and political goals (indirectly) for the first time in Poland in youth activities back in the 1980s. In the Polish town of Wroclaw Waldemar Fydrych started the Orange Alternative – an anti-regime movement of young people that used street performances to oppose Jaruzelski's Martial Law first and later to challenge "on the streets the State's monopoly on Truth". The movement started by drawing dwarfs on city walls in places where the militia had painted over anti-regime slogans and Solidarity symbols. With time, the dwarf became a recognized symbol of the movement. Among the activities of Orange Alternative were handing free sanitary pads and rolls of toilet paper in the market square (to mock, obviously, the constant shortages of commodities of necessity in the centrally planned socialist economy), another performance was singing communist songs in the zoo before the bears' cage chanting "Freedom for the bears!" (the bear was the symbol of the former Soviet Union in the World Olympic Games in 1980); yet another was appearing in public in red underwear when celebrating the anniversary of the Great October Revolution of 1917. The most important happening, known as the "Revolution of Dwarfs", occurred on June 1st 1988, Children's Day, when almost a thousand high schoolers and

2 For reference, the Oxford English Dictionary (1989) defines *mirth* as "pleasurable feeling...joy, happiness; gaiety of mind, as manifested in jest and laughter, merriment, hilarity."

students donned orange hats and marched through the streets of Wrocław, pretending they were dwarfs. They sang dwarf songs, danced and handed out candies. For each happening, the Orange Alternative printed leaflets and slogans, some of them reading: "Citizen, help the militia, beat up yourself!", "Dwarfs of all countries, be united!", "Who is afraid of the toilet paper?", etc. The idea was to make the militia look ridiculous for arresting people (and people were in some of the events) for such innocent collective behavior (<<http://pomaranczowa-alternatywa.org/index-eng.html>>, accessed 25 July 2013).

Orange Alternative never voiced any direct disapproval of the repressiveness of the totalitarian state; it was rather a cultural alternative that encouraged criticism through absurd performances (called "surrealist" by its founder); it was "a swaying element on the continuum of public behavior that ranges from politicization to theatricalization" [9]. Yet, the contexts in which the happenings took place assigned to them a political significance that goes beyond politicization: events that seemed foolish, in fact ridiculed the communist authorities.

Usually social and political protests are accompanied with fear and anger. The politically motivated protests in Sofia, on the contrary, pass in a gleeful mood (except on July 23 when there were provocateurs protesters could not isolate and clashes with the riot police) which, by no means, diminishes their commitment, perseverance and determination. They are very creative in drawing the attention of political parties and institutions: a pop concert, folk groups singing folk songs, musicians playing the piano in the National Assembly square, mocking theatrical performances, releasing lighted lanterns in the evening sky, a wall of cardboard boxes with "Mafia" written on it that protesters "demolish", a running competition, yoga exercises, wearing masks of disliked politicians, burying the BSP in a black coffin, drums, whistles, and vuvuzelas among others. Emotions and collective experience, it seems, are as important for protesters as their main objective - the resignation of the government.

Some Bulgarian political commentators say social and political goals cannot be attained through street performances, happenings and humorous messages and there is no disagreement on that between them and humorologists. As stated earlier, humor does not initiate social and political change; it only frames protests. What the commentators also had in mind was that serious social and political messages cannot be communicated through the humorous mode and here they are wrong: the humorous mode of communication is grounded in the serious, constantly making references to the latter and in this respect the humorous mode is relatively less autonomous compared to the serious mode. In other words, the humorous mode of communication, explicitly and implicitly, is capable of conveying serious information. In the totalitarian state, in which there is no freedom of expression, the humorous mode is more often used to convey serious information against the state than the serious. Orange Alternative is a good example of how humor can be used for purposes other than fun and amusement. It served to overcome fear and learn what opposition is about (<<http://pomaranczowa-alternatywa.org/index-eng.html>>, accessed 25 July 2013). The protests in Sofia are about the formation of intolerance towards the immorality and misdeeds of those in power and, minimally, humor assists protesters in drawing attention and making messages memorable. Three participants are involved in humor as a communicative strategy in the present context: the initiator (protesters), the target (politicians and institutions) and other recipients (more about humor from a linguistic, cognitive and social point of view in Genova [10]). In addition to the minimal goals mentioned above the protesters use humor to emphasize the distance between them and the target, to increase public awareness of their goals, to provoke thinking in potential supporters and last, but not least, they use humor for their own amusement and gleeful mood. Humor in the protests is authentic and in fact funnier than humor in some quasi-humorous TV shows, for example, A la Minute.

Slogans and placards are one of the most obvious humorous and amusing elements in the protests. Since they are not dictated by political parties, they are not conventional and clichéd and

this contributes to their funniness. They are individually created, printed or handwritten. Along with the direct “Oresharski, resign!” the onlooker sees Oresharski’s face in an obituary (obituaries in Bulgarian culture appear not only in newspapers’ columns, but are glued onto walls, fences, electric posts, practically anywhere and are big enough to attract attention (usually an A4 format)); above a photograph of him the caption reads: “Reported missing” or his photograph is on a drum a young man is beating.

Few slogans and placards belong to formal discourse, most belong to spoken language; personal pronouns are often used creating an effect of immediacy. *I* and *we* versus *you* emphasize the divide between protesters and those in power, as in:

We – stay! You – leave!

You’re not smart enough to govern us!

We haven’t come here for a walk. We have come to see you off. Bye-bye!

Humorous cartoons and quasi-cartoons are also used in the protests. The latter consist in modifying a poster, e.g. the poster of a dancing couple in which Stanishev’s (chairman of the BSP) and Siderov’s (chairman of Ataka) faces replace the woman’s and the man’s in the poster and the caption reads: “Last waltz! Farewell, love!” (referring to a song about the BSP losing general elections in 1991). In such cartoons the humorous effect is lower than in jokes, but the cartoons are, nevertheless, funny. This is because in jokes the humorous effect is sequential: the set-up part of the joke is followed by an incongruity and its resolution in the punchline and the incongruity and its resolution are unexpected. In the quasi-cartoons the humorous effect is triggered by the simultaneous perception of a pre-existing image and its modification and the simultaneity diminishes funniness. In cartoons the interdependence between image and text is indispensable. There are similarities and differences between verbal humor and visual humor in cartoons which will not be discussed here because of the limited length of the paper³.

Humor was an ingredient of the protests in Istanbul earlier this year, too, in the form of graffiti, posters, chants and songs. Humor framed protests in which the police used excessive force, water cannons (with harmful chemicals in the water) and tear gas to disperse protesters which is not the case with the protests in Sofia. How was that possible? Perhaps because in Istanbul protesters felt instinctively that humor is antithetical to fear. Some of the humorous incongruous messages read:

Dear police, you are literally bringing tears to our eyes.

Do you have pepper gas that tastes like watermelon? It goes well with the raki.

Tear gas does wonders to your complexion. (<<http://ardaibikoglu.blogspot.com>>, accessed 1 August 2013).

Ambiguity is another inherent feature of verbal humor: linguistic ambiguity – semantic, syntactic and pragmatic - and extra linguistic, in the sense of two different perspectives on a given situation. By using the literal “to bring tears to one’s eyes”, the protesters implicitly deny the figurative meaning of the expression “to move somebody to tears”, that is, they are not moved at all. In the second message humor is on more than one level. In addition to the incongruous use of tear gas as appetizer for raki – the cognitive level – a jocular reference is made to the ever-tighter restrictions on alcohol since May 2013: in Turkey severe ban on alcohol is a sensitive issue for secularists and here humor is anchored in the social context.

Erdogan called protesters “capulcular”, “looters”, “marauders” or “bums” and protesters inverted the insult and assigned to it a positive meaning so that “chapulist” (the anglicized word) began to mean everything protesters stood for: “someone who resists force, demands justice and

3 For a good overview of the literature on humor in cartoons refer to Hempelmann and Samson (2008).

seeks his/her rights" (<<http://urbandictionary.com>>). Protesters in Sofia, similarly, joked with the insult a BSP MP directed at them mentioned above something that never happened with the prospective referents of "Red trash" - supporters of the BSP. On the contrary, old people phoned radio programs to say how unacceptable and offending it was. The insult "Internet riffraff" was subverted and reverted, as in:

We are all riffraff here. Please, excuse us!

What are we - internet riffraff.

What do we want – the resignation of the government.

When do we want it – now!

A good-for-nothing never gets tired (a participant in the running competition).

For its interpretation and appreciation humor is very sensitive to context and to who uses it and to what purpose. In the media, one can come across "gallows humor" for the one in the protests in Istanbul, but the label is hardly adequate. Gallows humor usually occurs in contexts of extreme repression, as in concentration and POW camps as a coping strategy in the face of imminent death. Both in Sofia and Istanbul humor is communal. It is communal because of shared goals and community spirit, communal in its liberating effect from the status quo. It also has an energizing effect on protesters when protests go on for months. In relation to the politicians and institutions the humor in the protests is intended as irony and satire – disapproving, challenging, criticizing and condemning the status quo.

In both protests irony and satire were displayed in humorous acts as well. In Istanbul protesters put on penguin outfits to remind authorities that no Turkish TV channel covered any of the protests in the first few days: when CNN International was broadcasting about riots on the spot, CNN Turk was airing documentaries about penguins. Also, protesters phoned police stations to ask about their daily dose of tear gas [11]. In Sofia teenagers wore red headscarves with the caption "counter-protest" mocking old ladies in retirement supporting Oresharski's government in the counter-protests. Also, BSP MPs received text messages sent by a would-be BSP MP during a session of the National Assembly of the kind:

Comrades, Oresharski has resigned! We should have taken more effective measures, didn't I tell you?

Comrades, I was wrong. Oresharski is resigning tomorrow. We are still in power. Down with fascism!

Comrades, they are seizing the barracks, the central train station and the national radio station. Get on the buses immediately!

In the protests in Sofia and Istanbul there is a limit to the situations in which humor is manifested. It is an efficient tool in rethinking and reevaluating daily events and activities usually before or after they occur. When humor is concurrent with ongoing events and activities, there is distance between the police forces and the protesters, including firing tear gas and using water cannon by the police in Istanbul. There is no evidence of protesters' humor during clashes and scuffles with the police in which protesters were severely beaten. It does not mean that the protesters do not mock violence, though. After the scuffle with the police in Sofia on July 23, a boy, three or four years old, on his father's shoulders, was holding the following message, addressing the minister of the Interior:

Mr. Yovchev, do you beat little children, too?

Individuals and social and ethnic groups have a sense of humor, but can the state have a sense of humor, too? Opinions here fluctuate between "yes" and "no". According to Debord [12], the state

never has a sense of humor, since its role is to implement law and order. According to Bruner [13], a state's sense of humor is commensurate to the rights and freedoms of its citizens, to the transparency of institutions' policies and decisions, to their openness for political dialogue and to the legally guaranteed public criticism against state officials.

The totalitarian state, undoubtedly, is a good example of a humorless state. It is a state in which a single party defines and executes goals by controlling economic, political, social and even private life. There is no freedom of expression, no free associations and a total surveillance of its citizens. In Bulgaria, before the democratic changes in 1989, there were two types of humorous discourse – official and apocryphal. Стършел (The Hornet), the officially approved humorous weekly newspaper in Bulgaria, reproduced the authoritative discourse of certain communist ideals like collectivism, proletarianism and productive labor. It also aimed at imperfections: bureaucracy, poor product quality, absence from work and poor public services, but the imperfections were never seen as features of the one-party state. The unofficial humorous discourse in the form of underground political jokes, to the contrary, ridiculed the most intrinsic features of communism: the gap between ideology and practice, the repressiveness of the state, the inefficiency of the economy, the shortages of goods of necessity, the privileges of the nomenclature and the stupidity and incompetence of the party leadership and because of this it never appeared in print.

Bruner [14] is right in arguing that humor can not assist public protest in all contexts, only in specific ones. These are usually the contexts in which protesters achieve their goals. On the other hand, he argues that if public protest is direct and confrontational, that is, humorless, it's very likely it might be utterly crushed, like protests in Tiananmen Square in 1989. One can equally argue that if protests in Sofia fail (and they did in Istanbul), it is not because they are not serious enough in stating their goals and taking befitting action but, perhaps, because the state does not have enough sense of humor, that is, it does not recognize in good measure the "citizens' rights and freedoms *against*" itself.

Conclusion

In protests in Sofia and Istanbul, in the threefold relation in which humor is situated – initiator, target and onlookers – the target, politicians and institutions, are least impressed with the protesters' humor, in fact they are immune to it. Humor, to the contrary, is of greatest significance for the protesters. For them, humor is not an individual phenomenon, it is a communal one. If nothing else, it parallels their optimism and confidence. It also points out, exposes and challenges scandalous incongruities and absurdities of the status quo. As far as onlookers are concerned, humorous messages can not only grab their attention, but can also have a persuasive effect on some of them; in other words, humor might change their beliefs and assumptions about protests that in their turn might lead to action. At the same time, humor can serve as a double-edged sword leading to increase in other onlookers' cynicism in their support for politicians and institutions.

Nonviolent protests, including those in which humor is used as a communicative strategy, take time, depend on the media for publicity and achieve their goals if protesters have a good strategist and if the state feels threatened. Paradoxically, if you support and approve of those in power, you are a citizen; if you condemn and protest, you are a "looter", a "bum" and a "good-for-nothing". In the contexts in which humor was analyzed, it has an expressive and instrumental function. It does not initiate social and political change, but it can, in certain sociopolitical contexts, enable the possibility for change.

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