

HUMOROUS REACTIONS TO CONTROVERSIES IN THE ESTONIAN PUBLIC SPHERE: FORM, CONTENT, MECHANISMS AND COMMENTS

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Abstract: The article investigates the humorous reactions to two important controversies that received a great deal of attention in the Estonian public sphere during the summer of the year 2023. These are the Wagner group rebellion and the scandal involving Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas. Building on theories of the public sphere and observations on how humour functions in such a context, by comparing the two cases, we tested the hypothesis that the content, form, humour mechanisms, and the comments on humour can be influenced by the nature of the controversy and by the psychological distance to the source of the initial triggering controversy. We used the data collected and coded within the CELSA¹ network project “Humour and Conflict in the Public Sphere: An Interdisciplinary Analysis of Humour Controversies and Contested Freedoms in Contemporary Europe”. The analysis revealed that 1) the most popular forms of humour in the online public sphere (primarily memes) are shaped by the patterns of the online communication in general and not by the particular cases or controversies; 2) humour mechanisms depend moderately on the nature of the controversy and their distance from the meme-makers; 3) content is most dependent on the nature of the controversy, and is affected by the tension between globalisation and localisation trends; and 4) the distance to the controversy influences the humorousness of the comments.

Keywords: global, local, meme, public sphere, psychological distance

1. INTRODUCTION

Conflicts and controversies often result in the prolific use of humour in the public sphere. In contemporary globalised and mediatised society where news spreads faster than lightning, both national and transnational controversies trigger humour. This happens even in the countries that are not directly involved in the controversy. Important events, conflicts and controversies have habitually become topics of humour; for example, disaster jokes about the attack on the World Trade Center immediately became popular not only in the USA, but also in the Netherlands and elsewhere (Kuipers 2002). It has been noted in the case of historical events as well – e.g., jokes and caricatures about the sinking Titanic were reported in Czech newspapers from 1912 (Chovanec 2019). With the increasing availability of social media, humorous reactions to important international events are also on the rise, having become an indispensable part of the public sphere.

The article builds on theories of the public sphere and observations on how humour functions in such a context. We focus on two public controversies that sparked plenty of humour in Estonia to reveal the global/local dimensions and the humour aspects (format, mechanisms, etc.) in the vernacular reactions. We test the hypothesis whether the controversy, form, humour mechanisms and comments to humour are influenced by the nature of the controversy, and the psychological distance to the source of the initial triggering controversy, by comparing the two cases.

2. BACKGROUND OF THE TWO CASES

This article focuses on 1) the Wagner group rebellion and 2) the scandal involving Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas. These cases were selected because both of them were notorious controversies in the Estonian public sphere that, on the one hand, have a number of differences, but on the other hand, have some shared features. The two cases differ in their degree of closeness to Estonian politics and in their nature (one belonging primarily to the economical domain, and the other primarily to the military domain). As for their similarities, they both occurred in summer 2023 against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine, have strong political content, their media coverage was intensive but relatively short (around a week of daily coverage and later only occasional mentions), and there were clearly identifiable targets for blame and/or ridicule. The combination of such similarities and differences makes the humour revolving around these two cases a suitable target for comparative analysis.

2.1 Wagner group rebellion

The Wagner group rebellion took place on 23–24 June 2023, when the then leader of Wagner group, Yevgeny Prigozhin, announced the march on Moscow. The Wagner group is a Russian private military company that has been actively involved in the Russian war in Ukraine, but as the war progressed, Prigozhin started criticising the Russian Ministry of Defence for their lack of support for his company. The controversy culminated with the abovementioned march, during which the Wagner group occupied a part of Russia but stopped around 200 km short of Moscow, and after Prigozhin's negotiations with Belarusian illegitimate president Aleksandr Lukashenko, his army moved to Belarus.

2.2 Kaja Kallas's case

In August 2023, the Estonian (and later, also international) media revealed that a logistics company that is partly owned by Kaja Kallas's husband has continued doing business with Russia even after the start of the Russian full-fledged invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Moreover, earlier in the summer of 2023 Kaja Kallas lent 350,000 euros to the company via which her husband owns his stake in the logistics business. The sharp contrast between Kaja Kallas's rhetoric – since February 2022, she has been constantly urging European businesses to stop cooperating with Russia – and her husband's involvement in this business caused heated discussions not only in Estonia but also on the international scale.

3. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

3.1 Public sphere (and humour)

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1991 [1962]), Habermas described the public sphere as belonging to small-scale bourgeois circles. Originating in the nineteenth century in countries such as France, England and, to a lesser degree, Germany, the public sphere was a landscape where political journals challenged the traditional feudal rule and referred to a new authority, namely the consensus emerging from societal debate. Although originally exclusive and limited to certain social classes, Habermas pointed out that the fact that the public sphere was ruled by the principle of universal participation meant that inevitably access would have to be granted to other groups. During

the nineteenth and twentieth centuries voting and political rights were indeed extended to previously disenfranchised groups, but the media system also became commercialised, and the public sphere lost its independent critical edge and became more sensationalised and trivialised.

Moreover, in today's polarised, mediatised, and diverse societies, a unified idea of the public sphere, organised around the media system – no matter how mainstream and manipulable – no longer captures the reality of public communication. As Dahlgren puts it, the term “public sphere” is used in singular, but sociological realism points to the plural (2005: 158). In his critical assessment of the concept, Bruns (2023: 1) highlights that the public sphere “fractured into a multiplicity of online and offline, larger and smaller, more or less public spaces that frequently ... overlap and intersect with one another”.

The Estonian public sphere does not constitute an exception and presents a polarised and mediatised scenario where social, political, and cultural topics (particularly those of a conflictive nature) are played out. In Estonia, as in other Western societies, humour plays a fundamental role in these public discussions. All kinds of controversies are often expressed in the public sphere through humour, and these humorous responses are related to group membership and cultural or political allegiances (Becker 2014).

The freedom to joke and to satirise in the public sphere is a defining attribute of democratic societies and is widely recognised as one of the hallmarks of the freedom of expression. Halliwell observes that a classical Athens comic drama was characterised by a high degree of ridicule and vilification of notable individuals. However, this practice often generated undesired consequences and had to stand “*vis-à-vis* explicitly legal and political restrictions” (1991: 48). Not much has changed in the present day, as public humorous expression often sparks controversy and is employed actively to express and fuel social divides. However, this freedom of expression is nowadays generally defended by politicians, supported by the media, applauded by the public, and often protected by law. For instance, current politics in Europe present daily opportunities to mock the events and their key participants through various channels and by using different genres (see, e.g., Lockyer & Pickering 2005; Tsakona & Popa 2011; Kuipers 2011). It has been shown that the use of humour in public conflicts increases political polarisation (Nissenbaum & Shifman 2017; Herkman 2019) and may lead to increasing social and political tensions but at the same time more public involvement in the political sphere (Chiaro 2018; Wiggins 2019). Fast movement and adaptation of humour across borders causes a simultaneous globalisation and localisation of humour (Shifman & Thelwall 2009; Kuipers 2011; Boxman-Shabtai & Shifman 2016). This may result in transnational controversies (e.g., the 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* tragedy; see Sienkiewicz 2018).

Therefore, humour shows itself as a multifaceted phenomenon in relation to the public sphere. On the one hand, humour and satire contribute significantly to a healthy public sphere, since discrepancies and criticism in their different degrees of intentionality and guises (including humour) are key indicators in assessing the democratic health of a country. Certainly, restrictions on humour are deeply at odds with the ideal of open debate that is central to European public culture. On the other hand, it is difficult to maintain that some forms of humour (e.g., anti-democratic memes; see Laineste & Fiadotava 2024) make positive contributions to public life; quite the contrary, they can aggravate social tensions. For instance, as Kuipers (2011) and Nieuwenhuis and Zijp (2022) have observed, humour can be used as a weapon to divide and draw boundaries between political and religious communities. Thus, debates on humour and the public sphere highlight the central dilemma of the freedom of expression: what can be done when the freedom of expression articulated through humour clashes with other fundamental democratic values.

3.2 Humorous reactions to societal controversies and what influences them

Humour reacts to topical events and comments on phenomena that are currently fashionable, interesting or talked about in society. Not all events and controversies, of course, receive the same amount and type of humorous reverberations in the public sphere. What are the factors that the nature of humour depends on is the focus of interest of this article.

3.2.1 Nature of the trigger and subsequent humour

Not many studies have tried to establish a connection between the nature of the trigger (whether the controversy is political, whether it refers to socially sensitive problems like xenophobia or discrimination, etc.) and the humour that follows it online. An exception is Denisova (2019: 99–100), who argues that the economic problems of Russia gave inspiration to many memes that used juxtaposition/opposition as one of the principal humour mechanisms. The topic afforded this choice because of the obvious clash between the optimistic forecasts and the economic reality. Additionally (and perhaps to support this choice), a juxtaposition of image and text is used to produce a shocking effect. Image (the harsh reality) confronts the slogan (the optimistic forecast), and a meme is born.

Mememes about politics often use satire to critically address the shortcomings. Mememes following Putin's victory in the 2018 presidential elections in Russia have been analysed by Wiggins (2019: 72–74) as an example of “digital analgesic”: satirical humour needs to accompany such public discussions in order to attract the audiences and to advance the visual argument (ibid.: 75). The criticism underlying the fun is delivered through the satire that the internet natives are always ready to employ (Milner 2013).

Through humour, people intend to attract attention and enhance audience participation on serious subjects. Simarro Vázquez (2016) has analysed tweets from 1 March 2016, the day when Arnaldo Otegi was released from prison. Otegi is a Basque politician who was sentenced to ten years for membership of the terrorist organisation ETA and was released in 2016, after serving a full sentence. He then announced that he would run for president of the Basque Country. Simarro Vázquez (2016: 35) observes that anonymous authors use verbal humour with the ultimate goal of criticising Spanish society and politics, even if the discussed topic – terrorism and politics in this case – is not funny originally. According to the author, funny Twitter remarks are surprising “since it is a serious subject for the Spanish society, where any issue related to the terrorist activities of ETA is of a delicate nature” (ibid.: 42). The author tries to find out how such an event can generate humorous reactions (1.4% of the tweets in her corpus are humorous) (ibid.: 37). According to her (ibid.: 44–45), Twitter users make use of different logical mechanisms (outlined in the General Theory of Verbal Humour) to generate incongruence between the serious topic and a funny remark by the tweet, the latter serving as a punchline. This opposed script usually exploits a superficial aspect related to Otegi, thus avoiding the seriousness of the topic (ibid.: 47–48).

In our data, some of the humorous items focus on the incongruity of the fact that Kaja Kallas's husband kept doing business with Russia, despite her public harsh anti-Russian stance, but there are also other, less relevant topics that are brought on the table. In the following examples, humorousness is achieved via attacks *ad hominem*: e.g., calling her a liar² or someone who has a limited mental capacity.³ Some others refer to her willingness to be kept in ignorance about her husband's dealings.⁴ In these reactions, a serious debate on her possible resignation is not undertaken, instead internet users jump at every opportunity available to react humorously to the trigger by using universal stereotypes (politician as a liar; target as stupid). Similarly, in the Wagner rebellion case, the items do not discuss the consequences of Prigozhin's decision to attack only Russia. Instead, they highlight in a condensed way the spectacular and unexpected turnaround caused by Prigozhin's decision, either verbally⁵ or combining image and text.⁶

However, in both cases humour can still act as bait to promote further, more serious discussion on the main topic. As we see in the analysis (5.4), many of the comments on these items are indeed non-humorous and go into more detail regarding the controversies around which they revolve. Studying the reactions to humour is a useful analytical tool to explore people's attitude to the topic that triggered humour (see, e.g., McGraw & Williams & Warren 2014). Comments on humorous items tend to be milder in their tone than comments on serious texts (Elsayed & Hollingshead 2022), but they still reflect their authors' concerns about the controversial issues.

3.2.2 Psychological distance and subsequent humour

In an earlier article about memes on the war in Ukraine, we analysed the main characters that personify the war in Ukraine in Russian, Belarusian, Estonian and Spanish memes, and studied their dependence on the psychological distance from the source of the conflict (Laineste et al. 2024). As a result, we posited that the psychological distance from the events does have an effect on the choice of characters representing the war in memes. For example, the memes circulating closer to the source of conflict feature a larger variety of mostly local actors and their content is connected closely to the war. On the other hand, the memes originating and shared in the public sphere further away from the conflict are more general and global. Studying humour via personification indicated that psychological distance not only relates to the perception of and reaction to humour as confirmed earlier (see Bischetti & Canal & Bambini 2021; Skalicky et al. 2023), but also to its creation and sharing.

The studies that address the effect of psychological distance on humour have so far been scarce. Skalicky et al. (2023) have pointed out that humour may have an impact on the perception of spatial and social distance, while McGraw et al. (2014) advocate that psychological distance shapes humorous responses to tragedy. Hee et al. (2022: 12) also mention that personification in humorous climate change posters attenuates psychological distance from the problem, but the nuances of the relation between psychological distance and humour are yet to be studied thoroughly.

The distance between humour creators/sharers and the topics of humour also has an impact on how memes oscillate between critical commentary and entertainment. How the humour is adapted to a particular cultural context may vary: humour adjusted to meet the local circumstances is more disruptive and socially critical (Nissenbaum & Shifman 2022) and can be less ambiguous. Global political humour tends to be more entertaining and does not aim at

changes in the public sphere (see also Wiggins 2019). Events can be reflected in memes by pronouncing the distance (Nissenbaum & Shifman 2022: 938), showing that “they” are ridiculous, while “we” are sane and act reasonably. The further the controversies, the easier it is to create this alienating effect, and to laugh at the result. However, the quick pace of meme domestication and adaptation between local and global contexts makes the boundaries between the entertaining and critical aspect of memes fuzzy (see also Laineste et al. 2024).

According to Laineste et al. (2024), there are more variations in the memes circulating closer to the conflict, while those meme-makers who are further away use simpler humour mechanisms like ridicule to “create localization through *estrangement*: a concurrent cynical and distanced look at the other and self” (Nissenbaum & Shifman 2022: 938). The memes about local events, thus, want to deliver a point about the state of affairs, engaging in and extending on it through discursive practice (Wiggins 2019). By doing this, they become a vehicle for political critique. The proximity to the source of the controversy makes it relatively easy for the meme-makers to critically comment on the actions of the local politicians, as their knowledge of the cultural, political and social background as well as of their audience is sufficiently deep. Subsequently, the further we get from the event/controversy/trigger, the thinner and more superficial the depiction of it becomes.

Delving deeper into the earlier research and results, we suggest that in the same way that personification in memes (who is depicted and how) is influenced by the psychological distance, also other aspects of public humour are affected by how far away the public perceives to be positioned from the source of the problem. Thus, the format of humour along with the humour mechanisms and language used in the humorous communication is dependent on the perceived distance from the public controversy. This study sets out to check the hypothesis, using a database of humour in the public sphere.

The research questions are as follows:

RQ1: Is the form of humour affected primarily by the nature of the controversy (topic, other particular features) or by the distance of meme-makers to the source of controversy?

RQ2: How are the humour mechanisms affected by these factors?

RQ3: How does localisation / globalisation affect the content of the compared cases?

RQ4: How do the comments to humour differ in the compared cases?

In the following sections, we provide the information on the database of humour in the public sphere that we have used and summarise the results that we have obtained from it.

4. METHODS AND DATA

The article uses the data collected and coded within the CELSA network project “Humour and Conflict in the Public Sphere: An Interdisciplinary Analysis of Humour Controversies and Contested Freedoms in Contemporary Europe”. The project focuses on humour that revolves around conflicts and controversies in four countries – Estonia, Belarus, Poland, and Belgium. In each of the countries we have identified at least two events that provoked plenty of humour in the public spheres of these countries in 2022–2024. We collected 50 humorous items per event, trying to ensure the variability of their content, format, stance, and professional/amateur nature. For the current study we single out the Estonian data revolving around two events – the controversy involving Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas and the Wagner group rebellion. Both of these controversies were widely covered by the Estonian media and discussed in Estonian online public sphere. The Estonian data were collected from social and mainstream media and the satirical news portal *Lugejakiri* (Reader’s Letter). The Estonian data on the Wagner rebellion were collected mostly from Facebook, namely, from the group “Ukraina meemid” (Ukrainian memes), which is dedicated to Estonian humour revolving around the Russian war in Ukraine, and individual publicly available Facebook accounts of Estonians, as well as from the major Estonian news portal *Postimees* and the satirical news website *Lugejakiri*. Similarly, the Estonian data on the Kaja Kallas case were collected mainly from individual Facebook accounts and from the Facebook group “Nõuame Kaja Kallase tagasiastumist” (We demand the resignation of Kaja Kallas). Some of the data were retrieved from news portals *Postimees* and *Õhtuleht*, as well as the satirical news website *Lugejakiri*.

We coded each of the items based on several criteria that define their form and content. Firstly, we identified their genre or combination of genres, namely, video recording of an event, photo, cartoon, internet meme (image only), internet meme (image and text), internet meme (video), text-only joke, humorous comment, satirical news article, blog post, stand-up performance, television comedy, non-humorous comment, or other. Secondly, we indicated whether verbal, visual, or both verbal and visual elements are present. Thirdly, we coded the humour mechanisms of the items (humorous stereotype, sexual innuendo, status reversal or challenging, transgression, grotesque, juxtaposition of text

and image, parody, caricature, ambiguity, exaggeration, irony, recontextualisation, word play). Fourthly, we marked whether communication style of the items that had verbal element(s) was direct and/or based on overstatement, or indirect and/or based on understatement (cf. the discussion of verbal communication styles in Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey 1988). Fifthly, for the items that had verbal text we coded its rhetorical format using the following categories: statements, questions, commands/imperatives, verbless phrases, expletives, paraverbal comments, longer texts including several of the above.

In the coding phase we selected 25 most commented items out of 50 per event and coded the comments to these items. The comment sections of the humorous items that we analysed were open for anyone to comment; in social media such as Facebook, internet users commented using their personal accounts while the comments on news media (including the satirical news portal) were anonymous. We looked at the humorousness of the comments (distinguishing between humorous responses, non-humorous responses, unlaughter and unclear responses) and their assessment of humorous items (positive/negative/neutral or unclear). We also looked at the format of the comments and categorised them in the following way: verbal responses only, emoticons only, responses in the form of images/gifs, combination of verbal and non-verbal responses and hyperlinks. For the comments that had verbal elements, we also coded their rhetorical format (see categorisation of rhetorical formats above). Finally, we calculated the number of meta-comments, comments about the people who posted the items / other users in the comment thread and meta-linguistic comments.

Using the comparative method and quantitative analysis, we explore if – and if yes, then how – the formats and content as well as humour mechanisms differ in these two events. We also look at the comments on the humorous items to find out if Estonians preferred to discuss these events in predominantly humorous or serious terms.

5. ANALYSIS

5.1 Format (RQ1)

The format of the humorous items seemed rather homogenous and did not differ across the two cases – most of the items reflecting on these are memes that combine verbal and visual elements. Much of the data that we have collected fits under the notion of a meme, i.e., texts, images, audio or video items, or a combination of these that spread online, often in mainstream and social media (see Shifman 2014). Verbal-only humour was rare. Kaja Kallas controversy

invited slightly more visual humour: 78% of the items are memes that include static visual elements (as opposed to 66% in the Wagner rebellion case), 16% are cartoons (as opposed to 14% in the Wagner rebellion case), 4% of the items include videos (as opposed to only 2% in the Wagner rebellion case). Curiously, we have not found any recorded text-only jokes on the Kaja Kallas controversy (as opposed to the Wagner group case, where text-only jokes constituted 12%). This discrepancy might stem from slight differences in data sources, but also from the fact that more images were readily available and easily findable for Estonian humour creators and sharers as the Kaja Kallas controversy was closer to home.

A closer look at the genres of humorous items reveals that photos or video-recordings related to the events were not actively used to create humorous items: they feature only in 6% of both cases. The only exceptions are photos and videos that have become backgrounds for internet memes (that were accordingly coded as internet memes and are not included in the count of photo- or video-recordings) – for example, a screenshot of Prigozhin standing against the dark background and shouting (see Fig. 1). The screenshot derives from a video published by Prigozhin on 4 May 2023, where he emotionally accuses Shoigu (Russian Minister of Defence) and Gerasimov (Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces) of not sending enough ammunition to the Wagner group soldiers in Ukraine. His words, “Shoigu, Gerasimov, where the fuck is the ammunition?”, imposed over the screenshot immediately became memetic. During the Wagner group rebellion the meme was adapted to the current event – for example, Figure 1 uses it to comment on Prigozhin’s “disappearance” (i.e., silence in social media) during the day following the march.



Figure 1. The text reads (in Russian): “Shoigu, Gerasimov! Where am I?” Source: <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=10224235758941261&set=a.1114729788055>, last accessed on 9 April 2024.

On the whole, we can see that Estonian internet users strongly preferred visual formats in both cases.

5.2 Humour mechanisms (RQ2)

In both cases the most popular humour mechanism was status reversal or challenging – 88% of humorous items employed it in the Wagner group rebellion case, and 96% in the Kaja Kallas case (see Table 1). This mechanism involves bringing down a powerful figure by ridiculing their behaviour; for example, making fun of their disgraceful or humiliating activities (the operational definitions of humour mechanisms derive from the project “Humour in the European Public Sphere”⁷). The focus on status is not accidental since both controversies featured people of power. The notable difference was that most humorous items related to the Kaja Kallas case reversed or challenged Kaja Kallas’s status, whereas in the case of the Wagner group rebellion targets were more varied – mostly Prigozhin and Putin, but also other Russian authorities and Lukashenko.

In line with the slightly bigger emphasis on visual humour mentioned above, the humour of the Kaja Kallas case used the juxtaposition of text and image (48% vs 28%) and caricature (22% vs 16%) more often than the Wagner group rebellion humour. It was also richer in irony (46% vs 22%), probably because the context of the controversy – the contradiction between Kaja Kallas’s anti-Russian rhetoric and her husband’s involvement in the business in Russia – invited ironic commentary. The Wagner group rebellion humour had less irony as initially there was no sharp contrast between what was said and what was being meant – quite on the contrary, Wagner group’s activities seemed pretty straightforward. As the rebellion progressed and eventually vanished, some ironic commentary cropped up, for example, comparing Putin’s plans to capture Kyiv in three days and Prigozhin’s plan to capture Moscow in an evening.⁸

The Kaja Kallas case was also richer in word play (20% vs 6%). This might be explained by the fact that all the examples in our dataset that revolve around this case are in Estonian only (except for the one that has no verbal text). In contrast, only 60% of Wagner group humour was in Estonian (or Estonian combined with other languages) – hence, even though we collected it from the Estonian (social) media, much of it was borrowed from other languages and cultures. As it is easier to make puns in one’s mother tongue, it comes as no surprise that they were more notably present in the Kaja Kallas case humour. One of the most recurrent wordplays in the data was the use of the acrostic resulting from the first syllable of the name and surname of the Estonian premier, with obvious scatological connotations (KaKa meaning ‘poo’) (see Fig. 2).

Figure 2. Text on the jar label (in Estonian): “Russian. KaKa soup. Without meat.” Source: https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=701089868731252&set=a.296445385862371&locale=nl_BE, last accessed on 9 April 2024.



On the other side, the Wagner group rebellion humour used grotesque (50% vs 10%), recontextualisation (46% vs 28%), exaggeration (38% vs 20%) and humorous stereotypes (18% vs 2%) more often. Grotesque might have become so prominent due to the fact that – especially at its initial stages – the rebellion of the Wagner group seemed so surreal and unexpected that humour was used, among other things, to underscore the fact that it did happen despite seeming so implausible. As Wiggins points out, the uncertainty and contentiousness that characterise the contemporary world “encourage a migration from the real” (2019: 69). The Kaja Kallas case, on the other hand, seemed much more real and tangible, and fit into the script of “corrupt politicians”; therefore, grotesque seemed a less suitable choice of a humour mechanism. Exaggeration also proved to be an effective mechanism in the Wagner rebellion case: humour creators both exaggerated the possible impact of the rebellion and its short-livedness and failure. The more prolific use of humorous stereotypes in the Wagner rebellion case may be explained by the fact that the controversy itself involved the characters (Putin and Lukashenko) that had become memetic before and thus had humorous stereotypes attached to them; humorous stereotypes about Russia and Belarus were also involved. Kaja Kallas and other participants of the scandal revolving around her, on the other hand, did not have a clear-cut “memetic personality”.

The difference between the use of other humour mechanisms across the two cases was less significant (less than 10%), and some mechanisms, such as transgression and sexual innuendo, were almost or entirely absent in both cases. This can also be explained by the nature of the cases – none of them put sexual or other taboo topics to the forefront also in the serious discussions of the cases.

Table 1. *Distribution of humour mechanisms across cases*

Humour mechanism / Case	Wagner group rebellion	Kaja Kallas scandal
Ambiguity	10%	2%
Caricature	16%	22%
Exaggeration	38%	20%
Grotesque	50%	10%
Humorous stereotype	18%	2%
Irony	22%	46%
Juxtaposition of text and image	28%	48%
Parody	28%	20%
Recontextualisation	46%	28%
Sexual innuendo	4%	0%
Status reversal or challenging	88%	96%
Transgression	10%	2%
Word play	6%	20%

5.3 Globalisation and localisation in the content of humour (RQ3)

As we mentioned before, the humorous items revolving around the Wagner group rebellion were clearly more international in their origin. This is obvious from the language of the examples: in 60% of them Estonian language is present, only 30% of them are exclusively in Estonian, and 30% combine Estonian and other languages (Estonian is often the language of the post itself while a humorous item is in another language). 40% do not have any Estonian text at all.

The more global nature of humour also transpires in the content of humorous items. In the Wagner group case, most characters and settings that feature in humour are either Russian or Ukrainian. Only two items (4%) contain some references to Estonia: one of the items alludes that a person who looks like Prigozhin was spotted in Estonia,⁹ and another one jokingly claims that Lukashenko promised to keep Prigozhin under control at least till Estonian singer Tanel Padar's wedding.¹⁰ The unwillingness to localise and domesticate the humour on the Wagner group's rebellion may mean that Estonian internet users felt a certain distance between themselves and the controversy; even though they have shared, laughed at and commented on humour related to this case, they preferred to keep it separate from their local context. At the same time,

local references did spark the interest of the internet users – the item featuring a Prigozhin-like character is among the most commented ones in our dataset.

The humour revolving around the Kaja Kallas case differed in terms of its localisation/globalisation approaches. As opposed to the Wagner group rebellion case, all the humorous items related to the political scandal involving Kallas and her husband are in Estonian. Moreover, only a marginal number of comments on these items are in another language, namely in Russian. The fact that the languages used in both the humorous reactions and the associated comments are the ones most widely spoken in Estonia (Andmed 2021) gives an idea of the local nature of this case.

Content-wise, this case also shows its national scale. In most items, Kaja Kallas appears alone. When accompanied, she does it side by side with mainly Estonian political figures. They either belong to Kallas's political party, such as Hanno Pevkur (Minister of Defence), are members of one of the parties in the governing coalition, as MP Irja Lutsar, or supported Kallas when the scandal broke out, as did Alar Karis, the sitting president. Each of them can be found in one item (2%). Siim Kallas (Kaja Kallas's father, who also served as PM between 2002–2003) is also present in one item, as is the activist Johanna-Maria Lehtme, who resigned over another scandal involving Estonian aid to Ukraine. This might explain why she is in the humour production revolving around this case. One item shows Lehtme and Kallas taking office in a very similar position, as if they were the same person – the capture reads “Lehtmekaja” – and the accompanying text is an ironic reference to their alleged misbehaviour: “I will remain loyal to the Republic of Estonia and its constitutional order”.¹¹ Kallas's husband Arvo Hallik appears in 12% of the items because the scandal was mainly about the misdoings of Stark Logistics, a transport company partly owned by Hallik, which continued its business in Russia even after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Stark Logistics and Metaprint AS, another firm involved in the scandal, are also frequent in the data (20%).

Finally, one of the items has a global character. In it, Kallas and Zelenskyy appear in what seems to be an official meeting. Kallas addresses the Ukrainian president and the caption reads “Don't worry, Volodymyr. It's just one truck a week”.¹² The item highlights the alleged hypocrisy of Kallas, who publicly advocated for a harsh stance against Russia since the start of the war, but at the same time covered her husband's business transactions with the neighbouring country after the invasion.

5.4 Comments on humorous items (RQ4)

The analysis of the comments on humorous items helps to have a glimpse on how people in Estonian public sphere reacted not only to a particular humorous item but also on the issue in question. The comments on the Wagner group rebellion humour were mostly humorous themselves (60.3% of them were humorous, 33.5% were non-humorous and 6.2% were coded as unclear¹³). This means that the items that were posted often triggered online humorous banter: just like the oral joke-telling often reframes a conversation from serious to humorous (cf. Oring 2003: 86–93), digital conversations that were initiated by memes or other forms of internet humour can contain threads of humorous comments. Some of the commenters in such humorous threads respond to each other and co-create humour. Others post humorous images, videos or verbal jokes that do not constitute any obvious reaction to the humorous item that they comment on, except for the fact that they are (almost) always united by the same topic.

In the Kaja Kallas scandal the respective ratio of the comments was different: 37.8% were humorous and 52.8% were non-humorous. Many comments reflected on the political situation in a serious manner, with a humorous item being only a trigger for serious discussion.

At the same time, commenters on the Kaja Kallas scandal humour tended to express their opinion on humorous items more often in their comments, especially when it came to positive evaluations: 57.3% evaluated the humorous items positively, 0.7% negatively and 28.4% did not express a clear stance towards the humorous items that they had commented on. In the Wagner group rebellion case, only 12.5% of comments contain positive evaluation and another 1.5% contain negative evaluation, while 86% of the comments do not contain any evaluations at all. Such a discrepancy may partly stem from the fact that commenters were more willing to evaluate the locally created and locally embedded (i.e., with local references) humour than the humour that was clearly borrowed from other cultural and linguistic spaces and seemed less relatable. Another reason might be connected with the stance: by positively evaluating a humorous item, commenters often also (indirectly) supported the stance of its creators towards the issue itself. The Kaja Kallas scandal was closer to home, stimulated many people to take a stance towards it and thus showed the polarisation within the Estonian society, while the Wagner group rebellion did not provoke such strong feelings and clear-cut distinctions between different stances.

In terms of the format of the comments, the only notable difference was that the comments on the Wagner group rebellion humour combined verbal and non-verbal elements more often than the comments on the Kaja Kallas scandal

humour (37.8% vs 17.6%). Comments on the Kaja Kallas scandal humour were largely verbal only (65% as opposed to 46.6% of comments on the Wagner group rebellion humour). This pattern in the format of comments aligns with their content: comments that combined verbal and non-verbal (emoticons, images, gifs, etc.) elements often tended to be humorous.

6. DISCUSSION

The two cases present an opportunity to compare the content, form, and humour mechanisms in the humorous reverberations of controversies in the public sphere, as well as in the comments on the triggers. The cases differ in terms of psychological distance to the event (global/local dimension) and the nature of the controversy, i.e., the central focus of the case (military/political dimension). We examined the content, form, mechanisms, and comments in order to find out whether the humorous items (and comments on them) were influenced by the 1) psychological distance to the source of the initial triggering controversy, or 2) nature of the controversy (or by both, or by neither).

With regard to our first research question (RQ1), we can note that the form of humour remains largely the same regardless of the nature of the controversy and the distance of meme-makers to the source of controversy. We can thus conclude that the most popular formats of humour in the online public sphere – memes and other forms of multimodal humour – are shaped by the patterns of the online communication in general and not by the particular cases or controversies (see also the discussion in Denisova 2019: 163–170). The slight prevalence of visual humour in the Kaja Kallas case may suggest that the controversies that are closer to the humour creators make it easier / more likely to use visual humour, but this conclusion has to be tested on larger and more diverse datasets.

Humour mechanisms (RQ2) seem to depend more significantly on the nature of the controversies and the specific topics that arise within the conflicts. The popularity of some mechanisms – such as humorous stereotypes – also depends on the background of the participants of the controversies, and, to be more specific, their earlier appearance (or lack thereof) in memes. Humour mechanisms also depend on how real or surreal the controversy seems to the observers (Wiggins 2019). These results may relate to both the proximity to the controversy and its nature. Finally, some humour mechanisms are affected by the closeness to the controversy in another, more practical way, namely, via the language: our analysis showed that word play is more likely to occur when the humour on the controversy is created locally in the local language.

Online communication enables the fast sharing of news and related memes (sometimes even giving the humour a chance to replace the actual news; see Bolaji 2020). Even though the local news section remains important, more and more global events reach people's everyday newsfeed (see also Oring 1992: 38). This foregrounds the tension between globalisation and localisation (Cronin 2003: 10–17). The ways in which the affordances of the new media influence the spread of humour are especially visible in small languages that borrow memes from large “meme pools” (Coscia 2013: 100–101). Localisation and globalisation processes in humour (RQ3) work not only via language, but also via adaptation of meme themes, and the (sometimes mixed) use of local and non-local references. Understandably, a closer to home controversy would be richer in local references, but local references could also contribute to the increased attention to the humorous items that revolve around a more distant controversy. Localisation thus seems to contribute to the popularity of humour, but also – from another perspective – the omnipresence of a triggering situation in the news and media on the whole acts as a stimulus for localising the humorous reactions.

Whether the humorous reactions are more entertaining/global/unspecific, or, on the contrary, critical/local/detailed, is difficult to say based on the comparison of the two cases only. The Wagner case is characterised by the former features, being entertaining rather than critical and carrying global motives, while the Kaja Kallas case is characterised by the in-depth and often critical treatment of the controversy. It may be that in the case of the Wagner rebellion, the abundance of “foreign” memes made it impractical to create specifically local ones, especially as it did not relate to any local current topics (apart from the singer Tanel Padar's wedding). Similarly, Kaja Kallas memes were very local visually and textually (employing word play, predominantly in Estonian) because the global templates did not express the concerns of the Estonian internet users acutely and precisely enough. In any case, the opportunity to create humour is always welcomed by internet users, given the trigger carries a humour potential (see Laineste 2013: 43).

Reactions to the humorous items in the form of comments (RQ4) tend to be most dependent on the closeness or distance of the people to the controversial situation, in comparison with other factors analysed in the study. When discussing humour about a case that is psychologically closer to humour creators and sharers, serious discussions of the controversies come about more easily. Humour is then more than just a joke; it is a stimulus to reflect on an issue. When a case is more distant, commenters are more prone to playfully react to humour with further humour. They are more eager to enjoy humour as it is, without dwelling deeper into the serious aspects of a controversy that triggered such humour. At the advent of a controversy, internet users jump at every

possibility to be the wittiest in the digital jungle (Laineste & Voolaid 2020), using every tool in their toolbox – a catchy format, juicy content, supporting humour mechanisms – that they think might work. In the end, as we have shown in our analysis, many users resort to similar formats and humour mechanisms.

The interrelation between the closeness to the controversy and its nature, on the one side, and the format of humour, humour mechanisms and reactions to humour, on the other side, is summarised in Figure 3.

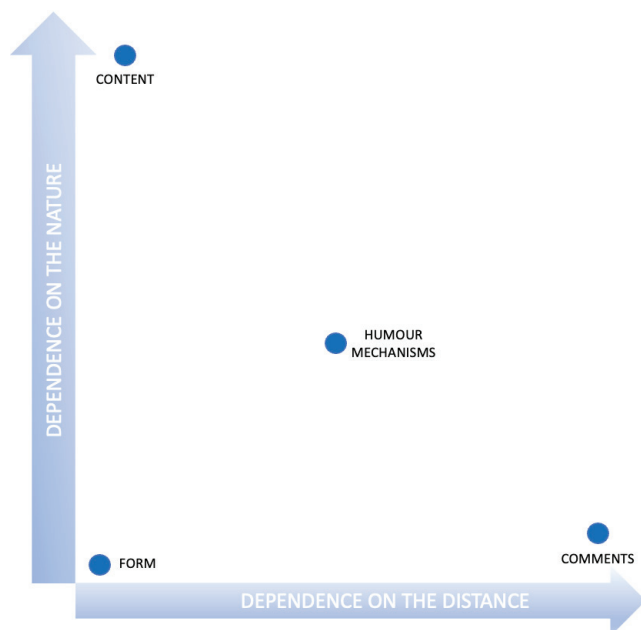


Figure 3. *Forms, humour mechanisms, content and comments and their interrelation with the nature of controversy and distance to it. The closer to the top of the diagram, the stronger the dependence on the nature of the controversy. The closer to the right side of the diagram, the stronger the dependence on the distance to the controversy.*

The limitation of this study is the small number of cases that we have analysed in the current article. Expanding the study in various directions (for example, adding cases that were discussed only locally, or broadening the range of countries) will help to enhance our interpretation of the interrelation between format, content, humorous mechanisms and comments on humour, on the one hand, and the nature of the trigger and psychological distance to it, on the other hand. Additionally, other factors that are embedded in humour could also be analysed – for instance, the stance of humour creators could be most

dependent on both the nature of the controversy and the psychological distance from it, because taking a certain stance involves both in-depth understanding of the nature of the controversy and a high degree of psychological closeness to it. The authors aspire to address these questions and test new hypotheses in their further research.

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NOTES

- ¹ Central Europe Leuven Strategic Alliance.
- ² See <https://www.facebook.com/politicsandbullshitt/posts/pfbid0J9FAq1wbr-JzyRSjd4irxtLM4bMTuUxdBbHJhKesZ6mVpUTxuf5Qf5fTf2Trs7UFel>, last accessed on 10 April 2024.
- ³ See https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=696045062569066&set=a.296445385862371&locale=nl_BE, last accessed on 10 April 2024.
- ⁴ See https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=697435112430061&set=a.296445385862371&locale=nl_BE, last accessed on 10 April 2024.
- ⁵ See <https://www.facebook.com/aimar.ventsel/posts/pfbid09Jgdby3KJ4YP3t26BBEM-HtmsDPxTsTwaw1NZwvKxpPERzjkv8WoPyvKhPTsrgFdhl>, last accessed on 10 April 2024.
- ⁶ See <https://www.facebook.com/aimar.ventsel/posts/pfbid09Jgdby3KJ4YP3t26BBEM-HtmsDPxTsTwaw1NZwvKxpPERzjkv8WoPyvKhPTsrgFdhl>, last accessed on 10 April 2024.
- ⁷ See <https://humorinpublic.eu/glossary/>, last accessed on 9 April 2024.
- ⁸ See <https://www.facebook.com/groups/534314991238265/posts/810427786960316>, last accessed on 10 April 2024.
- ⁹ See <https://www.facebook.com/groups/534314991238265/posts/811190183550743/>, last accessed on 10 April 2024.
- ¹⁰ See <https://lugejakiri.ee/lukaskenka-lubab-prigozinit-vahemalt-tanel-padari-pulmade-lopuni-kontrolli-all-hoida/>, last accessed on 10 April 2024.

- ¹¹ See https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=700517918788447&set=a.296445385862371&locale=nl_BE, last accessed on 10 April 2024.
- ¹² See <https://www.facebook.com/poliitilisedmeemid/posts/pfbid0dww9AgF8SjB6rn7Gg-6K3UZTS6qrD5E3UKdNZ8mou991PCAQvUbEYfN6jC9TdTGaUl>, last accessed on 10 April 2024.
- ¹³ The number of comments displaying unlaughter (i.e., explicit refusal to be amused by the humorous item in order to show discontent with it; see Billig 2005: 192) was insignificant in both cases: 1.4% in the Wagner group case and 0.7% in the Kaja Kallas case. Therefore, we do not analyse it separately.

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