Irony as a Political Demarcation Tool of the New Russian Nationalists

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses how and why the new nationalists, who call for political self-determination of Russians but share some ideological concepts with liberals, use *stiob* – form of ironic parody based on overidentification and decontextualisation, resulting in destruction of the authoritative discourse. Their entertaining, or educational-cum-entertaining projects located in the gray area between politics and counterculture strive to undermine domineering political discourses (liberal, neo-Soviet, leftist, official patriotic and old nationalist) and to go beyond the left-right dichotomy. The author concludes that the main function of *stiob* and other forms of irony for the new nationalists is negative identification. Ambivalence of the language of *stiob* simultaneously attracts the target audience of nationalists ("those in the know") and does not prevent solidarizing with any political platform when needed. The article is based on qualitative analysis of narratives produced by nationalist social media influencers, including fiction, essays, talks, lectures, interviews, live broadcasts, posts in blogs, social networks and messengers.

KEYWORDS

new nationalists, irony, *stiob*, parody, digitalization of politics

Introduction

In this article, I will speak about nationalists who envision the Russian Federation as a state dominated by ethnic minorities and call for political self-determination of Russians (Mitrofanova, 2006; 2016), although most of them understand Russianness in terms of culture, not biology. Their political ideal is known as the Russian nation-state (*Russkoe natsionalnoe gosudarstvo*),

commonly abbreviated as *RNG*. I focus on a stream that shares some ideological concepts with Western-style liberalism, known as National Democrats (the *Natsdem*), liberal conservatives, right-wing liberals, or simply as the new nationalists (Laruelle, 2018, pp. 174–180; Mitrofanova, 2012)[1]. They antagonize the old right, or the old nationalists and sometimes solidarize with liberal political figures, such as Mikhail Svetov, Valerii Solovei, or Alexei Navalny. In many aspects they resemble the American alt-right (see: Naked Pravda, 2020b) and the European right-wing populists. The new nationalists renounce the style of the old ones and self-identify ironically as "beardless". Besides, they became notorious for their use of satire as a political instrument. The new nationalists in Russia utilize such concepts of the Western far right as "cultural Marxism", but the question of mutual influence remains so far open; some interactions exist, but they hardly have serious impact on both sides.

The article discusses how and why the new nationalists use a specific form of ironic parody known as *stiob*[2]. It is based on qualitative analysis of narratives produced by social media influencers, including fiction, essays, talks, lectures, interviews, live broadcasts, posts in blogs, social networks and messengers. Visual content, such as memes, demotivators, cartoons, etc. remains outside the framework of this publication (see: Babikova & Voroshilova, 2017; Kalkina, 2020; Sanina, 2015). I relied mostly on individual online platforms such as personal or friendly YouTube[3] channels; profiles on Yandex[4] Zen and Facebook[5]; Discord[6] and Telegram[7] channels; personal websites. Of collective projects, I used Telegram-channels *The Right News* [Правые новости] and *Memes for Russians* [Мемы для русских], *Vespa.media – Journal of the National Revenge* (website, Facebook and Telegram). To be confident that the narratives are not parodies, I chose resources created by eminent nationalists, or, at least, by people whose belonging to the milieu had been confirmed by well-known influencers. Key personalities are Konstantin Krylov (1967–2020), Vladimir Lorchenkov (b. 1977), Dometii Zavolskii (b. 1980), Egor Prosvirnin (b. 1986), Aleksandr Bosykh (b. 1978), and Nikolai Rosov (b. 1995). Data collection took place in 2018–2020, although sporadically I refer to older digital content, retrieved with the help of keywords. The research was based exclusively on observation and was limited to profiles and posts open to the public. No quantitative methods were applied.

Themes brought up in the publication have been partly discussed by linguists studying irony as a narrative technique in the Russian language in general (Guseinov, 2005; Kornilov, 2015; Panchenko, 2016; Ruzhentseva, 2014; Tomson, 2009; Vokuev,

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[1]   I prefer calling them «new nationalists», because this definition seems to be acceptable for the majority of the milieu.

[2]   *Stiob* – a form of parody, an ironic aesthetic that "required such a degree of overidentification with the object, person, or idea [...] that it was often impossible to tell whether it was a form of sincere support, subtle ridicule, or a peculiar mixture of the two". According to Alexei Yurchak, it was the fundamental feature of late Soviet and early post-Soviet culture (Yurchak, 2005, p. 250).

[3]   YouTube™ is a trademark of Google Inc., registered in the U.S. and other countries.

[4]   Yandex™ is a trademark of Yandex Inc., registered in the U.S. and other countries.

[5]   Facebook™ is a trademark of Facebook Inc., registered in the U.S. and other countries.

[6]   Discord ™ is a trademark of Discord Inc., registered in the U.S. and other countries.

[7]   Telegram™ is a trademark of Telegram Messenger LLP.

2011), or with a focus on political discourse (Babikova & Voroshilova, 2015; Fenina, 2015; Gornostaeva, 2018; Shilikhina, 2011). *Stiob* and related forms of irony have been extensively studied by anthropologists and sociologists of Soviet and early post-Soviet counterculture (Boym, 2006; Dubin, 2001; Gudkov & Dubin, 1994; Ioffe, 2016; Klebanov, 2013; Stodolsky, 2011; Yoffe, 2013; Yurchak, 2005, 2011) and mass culture (Dunn, 2004; Hutchings, 2017, 2020; Noordenbos, 2011; Yoffe, 2005).

The Aesthetics of *Stiob*: Between Politics and Counter-Culture

Digitalization definitely provides for further blurring of the border between politics and fun (for a review of contemporary literature on humour in politics, see: Petrovic, 2018). Political discourse as a whole becomes more entertainment-oriented. In last years, gamification became a visible characteristic of social media broadcasting (see: Woodcock & Johnson, 2019). Apart from being an important part of contemporary leisure culture, videogames are also communication platforms for networks of like-minded people. It is reported that American far right use in-game chat rooms to recruit new supporters (Kamenetz, 2018). In Russia currently there is no such evidence; nevertheless, the new nationalists extensively use streaming of videogames – live or pre-recorded – to convey their message. Communication often takes place in chat rooms created on platforms, like Discord, designed for videogamers. Some nationalist authors consider street-level political activism outdated and suggest that one clip dedicated to Fallout and published on Youtube does more for advancing the right-wing ideas that hundreds of demos (see: Maksimov, 2018).

To be watched, nationalist streams need to provide some interesting information, mostly not related to the ideology. Most of social media influencers create educational-cum-entertaining ("edutaining") content, such as popular lectures about science, or talks with Internet celebrities (Figure 1). History is the most popular topic, because in Russia it is commonly discussed as a substitute to politics.

Figure 1. Anthropologist Drobyshevskii, a Youtube celebrity, as a guest of Nikolai Rosov's stream; pre-recorded game Ancestors in the background reflects the profession of the invitee (Groza, 2020a)

The easiest ways to attract more viewers are satirical parody and irony, especially their most harsh forms, such as *stiob*, conceptualised by Alexei Yurchak (Yurchak, 2005). Mark Yoffe who invented a bunch of words to discuss the phenomenon (stiobbing, stiobber, stiobbee, stiobby, to out-stiob[8]) understands *stiob* as interaction between "those 'in the know' who presume that their utterances, aside from signifying the obvious, also signify something else, often the opposite of what is being stated straightforwardly" (Yoffe, 2013, p. 209). Successful *stiob* is ambivalent and indistinguishable from the original discourse (Klebanov, 2013, p. 232; Yoffe, 2013, p. 222; Yurchak, 2011, p. 319). Sometimes the degree of overidentification becomes so surprise that *stiob* is often described as a blatant, cruel and merciless form of communication.

Yurchak suggests that overidentification is necessarily accompanied by decontextualization, when the object of stiobbing is placed in a context that is unintended and unexpected for it (Yurchak, 2005, p. 252). Lev Gudkov and Boris Dubin also define *stiob* as a public deflation of symbols by their demonstrative use in the context of parody (Gudkov & Dubin 1994, p. 166). A. Kugaevskii (2006) suggests that there are two kinds of *stiob*: direct defamation of the object (another words, its decontextualization) or exaggerating the object's qualities and reducing them to an absurdity (i.e., overidentification). Both kinds aim at deconstruction, or even total destruction of a discourse.

Scholarly attention to *stiob* resulted from the studies in the second Russian avant-garde. Some directions in art of that period based on overidentification with the domineering discourse: for example, conceptualist performances could hardly be differentiated from the normal Soviet life (a *stiobby* visit of conceptualists Vadim Zakharov and Igor Luts to the Lenin's Museum in 1979 did not differ from any other visit). *Stiob* works well in the situation of a hypernormalized authoritative discursive regime, where reproduction of formulaic structures becomes more important than solidarity with their initial meanings (Yurchak, 2005, p. 284). This kind of irony is commonly associated with political languages of (post)socialist countries; however, it is not uncommon to apply the concept of *stiob* to Western societies. Yoffe traces it in Black American culture and in the work of Tarantino (Yoffe, 2013, pp. 216–217); Boyer and Yurchak discuss the emerging genre of American *stiob* in the sphere of news media (2010). Similar kind of irony is utilized by the alt-right in the U.S. (see: Woods & Hahner, 2019) and by the European populist right, wearing pig masks or carnival Muslim costumes during their demos (Pilkington, 2016, pp. 192–193).

Yoffe suggests that *stiob*, at least, in Russia, "is a more powerful tool in the hands of right-wing nationalists" (Yoffe, 2013, p. 210). In fact, the second avant-garde was politically ambivalent: commonly associated with leftism, it was, nevertheless, "right-wing oriented" (Ioffe, 2016). This ambivalence was equally characteristical of the first avant-garde and of the post-Soviet counterculture exemplified by a conceptualist artist Sergei Kurekhin (Boyer & Yurchak, 2010; Klebanov, 2013; Yurchak, 2011) who eventually became a promoter of ultraconservative political agenda. *Stiob* shaped many activities of the National Bolshevik Party; both Aleksandr Dugin and Eduard Limonov, once its leaders, could not be precisely categorized in accordance with left-

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[8]   Boyer and Yurchak offer also "stiobesque".

right scale. Kurekhin, Limonov and Dugin are transitional figures providing a bridge between the artistic world and the domain of politics.

The new nationalists are not necessarily artists, but following the suggestion of Fabrizio Fenghi (2017, p. 184) that the aesthetics of the National Bolsheviks should be seen as an adaptation of the style and posture of the historical avant-gardes, I locate them in the grey zone between art and politics. Maria Engström states with regard to politicized Orthodox groups that some radical discourses are so marginalized that they have to ally themselves with counter-cultural forces (Engström, 2015, p. 71). The same assumption is correct about the new nationalist milieu, where writers and other art-makers play an important part.

New Nationalist Literary Parodies

Boris Dubin rightly mentions that *stiob* is tied to literature (Dubin, 2001, p. 174); therefore, I would like to begin with literary parodies produced by three new nationalist writers: the late Konstantin Krylov, head of the National Democratic Party that existed mostly on paper (also known as a sci-fi writer Mikhail Kharitonov), Vladimir Lorchenkov and Dometii Zavolskii. From many Russian literary canons listed by Alexei Yudin (2017, pp. 346–347), nationalist writers have selected the genres of mass literature (detective stories, adventures, sci-fi, etc.) and juvenile literature, often blending them. Books belonging to these literary canons are unmistakably recognizable and easily comprehensible; they are also conveniently structured to perform political tasks: both genres admit no undertones and are built on clear antagonism between good and evil, us and them (Nosova & Chernyak, 2016, p. 34). Writers of parodies use fixed discursive units or "precedent phenomena" (Babikova & Voroshilova, 2017) loaned from the original text to invert its meaning and to switch between good and evil. Inversion is then presented as revealing the true nature of things, which the original text conceals. Politicized parodies, of course, target not the original texts as such; bit a social context to which these texts belong (Yudin, 2017, p. 339).

Konstantin Krylov's relatively popular novella *Rubidium* [Рубидий] travesties a famous novel "Monday begins on Saturday" [Понедельник начинается в субботу] by the Strugatsky brothers. The parody is complex and includes a scrupulous stylization of the original text, but I will like to limit my analysis to the types of ethnic Russians shown in *Rubidium*.

The first type – a Soviet Russian – is the protagonist, Privalov. Following the original text, Krylov pictures him as a naïve person, unaware of what actually happens in his social environment, which miraculously acquires an ability to see the true essences of people. Then three other types of Russians are revealed. One is Korneev, who was a talented young scholar in the original novel, whose only problem was "rude" speech (in Krylov's parody, he endlessly spews *mat* and obscenities). Magic reveals Korneev's true nature as of a "red", i.e. Soviet, man who is not Russian any more. Professor Vybegallo, poorly educated and mean in the original novel, turns out to be an enchanted pre-revolutionary Russian *intelligent* Filipp Filippovich Preobrazhenskii (a personage from Mikhail Bulgakov's story *Heart of a Dog*). He explains that Privalov

is under control of numerous spells, which do no harm to his non-Russian colleagues because they have nationality, and it blocks such things (see: Kharitonov, 2016). The fourth Russian is Sasha Drozd, a loafer from the original text, who eventually degrades to the position of the local analogy to house elves, but after disenchantment reincarnates into a talented photographer.

While *Rubidium* is based mostly on decontextualization, some other parodies by Krylov imply high degree of overidentification. He wrote a blog on behalf of a Jewish poet Yudik Sherman [Юдик Шерман]. Travesty nature of this mask is mostly evident, but there are some exceptions, such as "a genuinely Jewish verse in the style of the Jerusalem Poetry Almanac" written on behalf of a Jew who gets outraged because of a phone bill for a conversation with Jerusalem. He laments about Jews who had to pay "for the right to exist" and declares that some indefinite "them" should pay: For our Bible, for our Einstein, for our women, for our genius, and for our pain (see: Sherman, 2009). The verse is totally ambivalent and can be mistaken for serious poetry, although several suspicious lines are still present. Obviously, Krylov hints here to Jewish greed, but this layer of parody is superficial. Krylov considered anti-Semitism a "marginalizing ideology" aiming at provoking a feeling of complete helplessness and inability to do anything (see: Krylov, 2009). Krylov's *stiob* targets the "old right" sharing this ideology and envisioning Jews as all-mighty people whom Russians will never be able to overcome.

Vladimir Lorchenkov, who lives in Canada and spells his name as Lorcenkov, is not politically active; more than once he claimed not being a Russian nationalist. Nevertheless, his essays demonstrate that he supports the idea of a Russian nation-state, although evaluates its perspectives pessimistically. Lorchenkov's works, as well as those by Krylov, are full of *stiob* and other types of irony, as well as of *mat*, violence and physiological details. A short story *The City of the Sun* [Город Солнца] refers to a modern fairy tale by an Italian Communist writer Gianni Rodari, *The Adventures of the Little Onion [Cipollino]*, belonging to the Soviet canon of juvenile literature. The original text is about a proletarian revolution in the kingdom of vegetables and fruits, but Lorchenkov decontextualizes it, describing a country torn by civil war, where a revolutionary squad of vegetables perpetrates monstrous violence (Lorchenkov, 2012). The author parodies the style not of Gianni Rodari, but of Isaac Babel's collection of short stories about civil war *Konarmiya* [Конармия]. He mentions a combatant named Garlic ([Чесночок], a hint at Jewishness) who wants to become a writer and takes Babel as a pen name (this personage also resembles Eduard Bagritskii and other early Soviet authors). Lorchenkov's target is left-wing ideology in general; that is why he choses an Italian children's story with a clear reference to an utopian book by another Italian author, Tommaso Campanella. Lorchenkov also authors a cycle of fake translations from writers and poets representing Soviet nationalities. These personages are given stiobby names and texts: for example, a verse by "Petro Zakolbyuzhnyi, a Ukrainian poet" consists of one phrase – "Glory to Ukraine"; in every line, syllables and letters mingle until the text gradually becomes a mess (TsarGori, 2018). "Translations" target not some concrete authors, but the concept of national literature as such, both Soviet and post-Soviet.

Dometii (Dmitrii) Zavolskii is much less known than Krylov and Lorchenkov; besides, unlike them, he avoids *mat*, aggression, obscenities and physiological

details. His cycle of short stories "Mishka and I, and all the secrets of the USSR" [Мы с Мишкой и все тайны СССР] refers to books from the Soviet juvenile canon, such as Nikolai Nosov's short stories about two friends, one of whom is called Mishka, and short stories by Viktor Dragunskii about Deniska and Mishka (Zavolskii provides no name for the narrator). Both authors were known to each Soviet child and are available in bookstores even now. Zavolskii also refers to the mass literature canon, namely, to Soviet sci-fi and adventure fiction.

Short stories about Mishka are overloaded with details: the discourse there is so thick that leaves a grotesque impression (Zavolskii, 2014). Zavolskii uses some discursive units recursively until this condensation of discourse results in its full destruction. Konstantin Krylov commented on extremely high concentration of specific personages untypical of the real Soviet literature: spies [шпионы], chekists [чекисты], and even Masons (Kharitonov 2015). The target of Zavolskii's parody is so-called Soviet nostalgia (see: Zavolskii 2019). By condensing the Soviet discourse, he wants to demonstrate that contemporary "Sovietophiles" intentionally distort the image of the Soviet Union and edit out most of its negative characteristics.

Stiob as a Narrative Technique in the New Nationalist Social Media

Most of stiobby texts, written or visual, heavily rely on using specific languages, the most prevalent of which are Padonkoffsky jargon, *Lurkoyaz* – the language of a parodic Lurkmore encyclopedia [Луркоморье], and the language associated with a fake web personage Lev Sharansky.

Gasan Guseinov associates Padonkoffsky jargon with the historical Russian avant-gardes (Guseinov, 2005); it implies deliberate distortion of words, which then become fixed as the new norm (e.g., *afftar* instead of *avtor*). *Lurkoyaz* is notorious for using *mat* and other obscene words, as well as unique neologisms and memes (see: Dementiev, 2015; Ivannikov, 2019; Shulgin, 2010). The new nationalists have also borrowed such characteristics of *Lurkoyaz* as English transliterations, Ukrainian memes, and caricature «Jewish accent» (*oy vey* and the like). Lev Sharansky is a *stiob* parody of a former Soviet dissident, now a liberal blogger, living in America but commenting on Russia. His avatar image is Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (it is not clear who actually authors the meme). Sharansky was extremely popular in 2011–13, although the blog is still operating. Memes, such as "freedom is better than non-freedom because of the presence of freedom", are known as "sharanisms".

Sharansky's personality is based on perceiving the language of the Russian liberals as hypernormalized and consisting of "esoteric" formulaic structures (similar phenomenon in the U.S. is described in Boyer & Yurchak, 2010, p. 182). While Padonkoffsky and *Lurkoyaz* are totally ambivalent and give an opportunity of mutual stiobbing for all ideological platforms, including liberals (see: Dementiev, 2013, p. 39; Guseinov, 2005), the language of Sharansky targets a specific group of pro-Western liberals. It distorts, misuses, or excessively concentrates their discursive units to providing a stiobbing effect. Ambivalence of shcharanisms is that they can be utilized by all non-liberals, either left- or right-wing. An example of this newspeak is: The fall of

the regime is inevitable. The days of the Putin's dictatorship are counted. Vlad Putin, a bloodstained tyrant, from the Kremlin wall gloomily looks through binocular at the creative class that drinks smoothies at Jean-Jacques Café (see: Sharansky, 2015). And this is how a nationalist shows overidentification with liberal discourse using Shcharanisms: While you are celebrating here, the Bloodstained KGB [Кровавая Гэбня] exposes the opposition to pshychotrope warfare! Everyone, urgently follow the example of the handshakable parliamentarians and make protective equipment! (see: Bosykh, 2012).

Similar techniques of stiobbing are used when nationalists borrow stereotypic formulations directly from the antagonistic discourses:

- Liberal discourse: As a Russian I am deeply ashamed of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, thanks to which Hitler, without any effort, was able to access the magnificent industrial base of Czechoslovakia. Forgive us, the Czechs! (see: Prosvirnin, 2019). Here the speaker refers to a meme "Forgive me (us)", associated with a 2014 Echo of Moscow [Эхо Москвы] broadcast (see: "Liya Akhedzhakova", 2014).
- Soviet discourse, a dialog between right-wing broadcasters Nikolai Rosov and Vatoadmin (a stiobby nick): in Rosov, words, in a Soviet country store it was always fully packed by people, sort of "comrade, I am now going to eat your ear", this was how closely to one another they stand. Vatoadmin asks: Were there situations that they ate ears? Rosov responds: Well, no, I am kidding. Sorry (see: KoVerArab, 2020). This dialog exemplifies an attempt to utilize condensed Soviet discourse; besides, it is exactly what Yoffe means speaking about "the mutually mocking conversation of two stiobbers trying to out-stiob each other" (Yoffe, 2013, p. 223).
- Official patriotic discourse: Egor Prosvirnin and his guest Artemii Sych declare that "a German spy [Putin] has banned the Victory Day" (because of lockdown); by saying this they seemingly solidarize with those who celebrate the holiday in spite of the ban, but immediately proceed to stiobbing Communists who went to the city center armed with the Victory Banner and butthurt [English transliteration] and were detained (CzarStream, 2020)[9].

Target Groups: Noviops and Uncool Boomers

Targets of nationalist *stiob* fall into three complex categories: (1) Pseudo-liberals, because the new nationalists envision themselves as the true liberals/non-Russians as oppressors of ethnic Russians; (2) "Sovietophyles"/leftists/loyal citizens of the Russian Federation; (3) the "old" nationalists, or the old right, i.e., Orthodox monarchists. The first two categories can be further generalized under the umbrella of the *noviop* (for "new historical community of the Soviet people" [новая историческая общность]). This stiobby abbreviation referring to a Soviet formulation was invented by philosopher and writer Dmitii Galkovskii. It stresses genetic and spiritual kinship between the two

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[9]   Prosvirnin confirmed many times that for him the Great Patriotic War was "a war of Kolyma with Buchenwald" (CzarStream, 2019); this adds more layers to the nature of stiobbing in this broadcast.

groups, because liberals are seen as main beneficiaries of the Soviet and post-Soviet "friendship of peoples".

The new nationalists declare that liberals pretend to descend from groups persecuted in the USSR (the nobility, dissidents, ethnic minorities, etc.) but have no right to claim this heritage, because they and/or their grandparents belonged to the anti-Russian Soviet elite and were responsible for the 1917 revolution and subsequent political repression. Vladmir Lorchenkov, in accordance with his own formula "scratch a *noviop* – you'll find a hangman" (TsarGori, 2019), provides a fake biography for above-mentioned "Zakolbiuzhnyi", informing that the poet was born in a family of a party functionary and a Komsomol activist, and that he became an active member of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) to destroy the regime from within (see: TsarGori, 2018). Sovietophiles, leftists, and liberals appear in the nationalist ironic discourse as dogmatists, unable to think independently and following guidelines: the sheep of Navalny do not even need arguments – they are just driven like an unconscious herd (see: Bosykh, 2020); biorobots, loaded with software worked out by Western cultural Marxists (see: Bennen, 2017). They are also portrayed as people alien to Russia and hating it; mostly as having non-Russian origins: Some Shenderovich[10], clever head, has read in his life one book about 120 recipes of *vorschmack* (see: CzarStream, 2020).

Nationalists often speak on behalf of a younger generation, which never experienced life in the USSR, and contrast it to people of forty or fifty, "uncool boomers" (CzarStream, 2019). Nikolai Rosov describes Vladimir Putin ironically as an obsolete Soviet pensioner: If you ask him what sort of dream he has in life, it will be something like Soviet slippers and the fish that bites (see: Andrey_Funt, 2020). A creator of "Memes for Russians" describes the generations born in the USSR in the absurdist manner as those who fixate too much on some emotions from their childhood or youth, when there were seltzer, ice-cream; two-roubles sausage sits in sour-cream, when comrade Lenin's head rises two times per night, etc. (see: CzarStream, 2019).

Nationalists equally despise people loyal to the Russian Federation, and particularly its public officials: one of the figures most stiobbed by them is Margarita Simonyan, an ethnic Armenian and editor-in-chief of *Russia Today*. Hypernormalized official political language of the Russian Federation (see: Brock, 2018, p. 285) became for the new nationalists a source of meaningless formulations (traditional values, spirituality, the Great Victory, etc.), which they use as building blocks for stiobbing.

From the very start of the new nationalist movement in the mid-2000, its participants jeer at the "old right" (Orthodox nationalist monarchists). One of the first *Natsdem*, Aleksandr Belov, stated that nationalists should look respectable and wearing not beards and huge boots, but suits and ties (see: Kozenko & Krasovskaya, 2008). This stiobby attitude to the style of the old right remains prevalent. Krylov described the old nationalists as lunatic lads of undefined age, often in some rags and with sunken eyes (see: Krylov, 2009); others offer descriptions like "our bald-bearded-fat alt-right [English transliteration]" (Maksimov, 2018).

While the above-said might be designated as detractive *stiob*, overidentification examples are also abundant. Marina Urusova, Egor Prosvirnin's fiancée, has issued

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10   Victor Shenderovich is a liberal journalist.

a 30-minutes feature video "The Foundations of Orthodox Culture (real)", where she appears as someone scrupulously observing everyday Orthodox rites: lighting candles, kissing icons, putting sign of the cross on everything, fasting, confessing; she even rinses throat with holy water and prays instead of medication (CzarTalks, 2020). The video looks like a serious message except that Orthodox discourse there is overly condensed; there are also some subtle clues, for example, cheerful music that decontextualizes the scenes of strict fasting. The heroine prays at the icon of The Holy Tsar Nicholas II, obviously hinting at Orthodox monarchists; after kissing this icon she fells seriously ill.

Making this short but semi-professional film obviously required a significant amount of time and money; it signifies that demarcation with the obsolete version of nationalism is extremely important for the new generation. The latter make effort to destroy the image of Russian nationalism as something overly-serious, asserting instead that it can be fashionable; it can be youthful; it can be funny (see: CzarStream, 2019), or even that nationalism should be "cute [няшный]" (Groza, 2020c).

Breaking the Taboos: Sex, Violence and Fascism

Focus on violence and sexuality have been characteristical of the historical avant-gardes, asserting themselves through direct or indirect calls to violence, symbolic violent acts, such as burning books, obscene words (including *mat*), rough speech, criminal jargon, uncensored descriptions of sex. At the same time, Dennis Ioffe theorizes that these grotesque violence and sexuality were purely symbolic, unserious, and that the surrealistic terror of the brutal stiob was needed to blow up the established social practices, either Soviet or bourgeois (see: Ioffe, 2016). National Bolsheviks were notorious for their aggressive and sexualized style in the aesthetics and ideology (Fenghi, 2017, p. 195). Stiobby aggressiveness of this sort was not rare with some of the old nationalists; for example, the Union of Orthodox Banner-Bearers [Союз православных хоругвеносцев] practiced burning books and photographs of its antagonists (Engström, 2017).

Some linguists are convinced that the language of politics is naturally "agonal" (deathly) and destructive (see: Gornostaeva, 2018, pp. 58–59). It is no surprise that the new nationalists extensively exploit violence and sexuality. Answering a reader, Konstantin Krylov explained that he could not refrain from "*stiob* and obscenities", because poesy was a dialog with the world, and the world was so nasty that any other communication with it seemed impossible (Krylov, 2015). Sometimes nationalist broadcasters use aggressive nicks like *Pogrom*, or Thunderstorm [Гроза]; most of them publicly use *mat* and other obscene words, or trivialize violence through calls to "shoot", "hang", or "execute" their antagonists. Egor Prosvirnin-Pogrom ironically suggests shooting down all the obstetricians as a method of raising birth rate (CzarStream, 2019); Nikolai Rosov joyfully proposes using a nuclear strike to destroy ugly Soviet buildings (Andrey_Funt, 2020); Pogrom and Artemii Sych make jokes about hanging Margarita Simonyan (CzarStream, 2020). Some nationalists go into detailed descriptions of violence under the pretext that they need it to expose the state's repressive system (Groza, 2020b).

Unlike the old right, seriously concerned about the emerging threats to morality, the new nationalists see sex more as a fun than a danger. They portray nationalism as something "sexually attractive", and their invitation-only forum is called Russians. sexy. At the same time, their broadcasts and visual memes are full of rude jokes about sex, including rape, homosexuality and other sensitive topics. This dialog between Prosvirnin and an imagined interlocutor from an Orthodox monarchist TV-channel *Tsargrad* shows that he envisions moral wars of the old right as irrelevant: *Tsargrad* channel, what can they say about the protests in Khabarovsk? Well, they can say: in America, you know, there are [...] transsexuals there. Ok, what about Khabarovsk? In Khabarovsk we need no [...] transsexuals; one should pray, fast and put the sign of a cross (see: Sergei Zadumov, 2020).

As well as their Western like minds, the new nationalists in Russia target the highly formalized language of political correctness, which became, as Boyer and Yurchak correctly state, a new authoritative discourse (2010). Apart from using *mat* and other obscene words, they publicly demonstrate socially unapproved habits, such as smoking (Figure 2). The calling card of the new nationalists is using fascism as a material for stiobbing. Contrary to neo-Nazi groups seriously associating themselves with fascist ideology, they mostly speak about it using stiobby words, such as *svaston* [свастон] instead of swastika. Nevertheless, such evident despise of fascist symbols does not prevent them from borrowing fascist aesthetics and ideology. I suggest that, as well as in the case of National Bolsheviks, this fact "should not be interpreted literally, but as part of a new performative mode of political dissent" (Fenghi, 2017, p. 193). The same way of appropriating fascist symbols can be found in Russian counterculture, especially in rock-music (Gabowitsch, 2009; Kasakow, 20096).
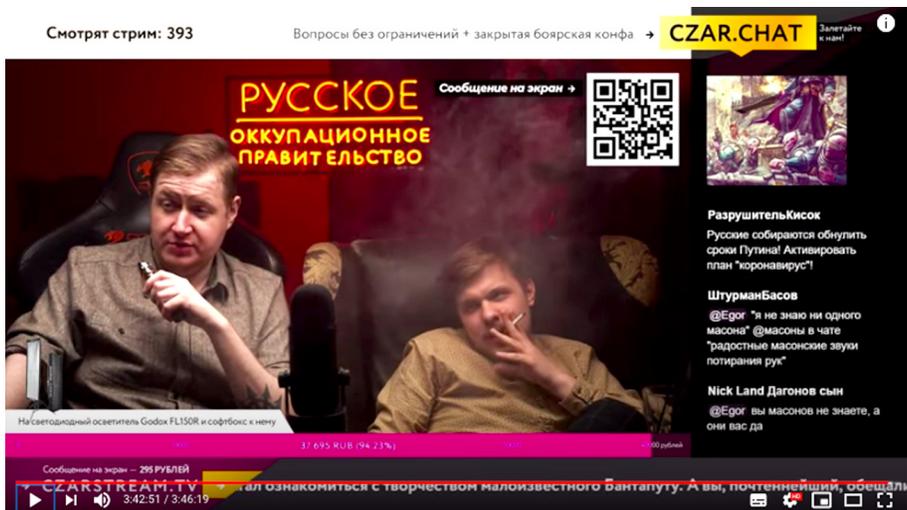

Figure 2. Egor Pogrom and Artemii Sych smoke during a live broadcast. The plaque reads: Russian Occupation Government[1] (CzarStream, 2020)

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[1]   Alert: Smoking seriously damages your health and those around you.

The new nationalist discourse of fascism is mostly ambivalent and does not betray the "true" position of a speaker. For example, Nikolai Rosov produced a videostream "Smiling Fascism", where he describes the British fascists as a women rights-oriented and "cute" movement, while jeering at both the USSR and Nazi Germany (Groza, 2020c).

Racism in 2020 became another popular topic for stiobbing. The new nationalists overidentify with the discourses of oppressed groups: as Vladimir Lorchenkov says, for a Frenchman, [...] means you, or me (Chuzhbina podcast, 2020); Egor Prosvirnin refers to Russian as "victims of the Holocaust" (CzarStream, 2019). In June 2020 a libertarian broadcaster Mikhail Svetov initiated a hash tag #RussianLivesMatter against police brutality in Russia, which was immediately caught by nationalists. It is unclear whether Svetov's initiative was stiobby; my personal opinion is yes, because he demonstrated obvious overidentification with civil rights activism in the U.S. (Naked Pravda, 2020a). Whatever his intentions might have been, the use of the hash tag by the nationalists is an example of decontextualization.

Conclusions

Negative identification is the main function of *stiob* and other forms of irony for the new nationalists. They make use of hypernormalization of the available political discourses (liberal, neo-Soviet, leftist, official patriotic and old nationalist) and undermine them from within leaning on their own formulaic units. All these political platforms, in the eyes of the new nationalists, are interwoven and constitute one domineering discourse, evaluated as obsolete and irrelevant, regardless of ideology. Nationalists go beyond the left-right dichotomy, rejecting, instead, the discourse as a whole.

Applying *stiob* as a specific technique of narration lets the new nationalist influencers express their opinions with such degree of ambiguity that these opinions sound totally obscure and not comprehensible. This ambivalence provides a successful decision for two tasks. Firstly, it helps to map out the peripheries of the milieu, or, as Alexei Yurchak formulates, to reach the public of *svoi*, or "normal people" (Yurchak, 2005, pp. 287–288). This public consists of those who get the point even in case of multi-layer *stiobbing*; mostly it becomes possible thanks to the fact of belonging, of knowing (in real life, or – more often – on the web) the right people. Those who miss the point and take *stiob* at face value reveal their alienness and get expelled from communication. Second, *stiob* enables the new nationalists at any moment to take back what has been said and solidarize with any political platform when needed. They, for example, experienced no difficulties in supporting the people's republics in Donbass together with pro-Soviet and leftist groups, or with supporting a libertarian initiative #RussianLivesMatter. Besides, irony provides escape clause to avoid moderation of social networks and other public platforms.

Extensive usage of *stiob* and parody reveals that the new nationalists remain minoritarians in Russian politics. It is symptomatic that other ideological groups never practice similar ironic overidentification with them. At the moment, the new nationalists constitute a highly marginalized group and more a counter-cultural than political

phenomenon. Most of their propaganda is currently done via live Internet-broadcasts having a lot in common with staged performances; nationalist web resources mostly provide entertaining or educational-cum-entertaining content often barely related to any ideology. Those of them, who reach relative political success, for example, through winning elections at municipal level, avoid using *stiob*; instead, they promote local "apolitical" agenda (environmental and urban issues, and the like). Both options let the new nationalists to preserve ambivalence and to be simultaneously "in" the domineering discourse and "out" of it.

I can conclude that the new nationalism in Russia repeats worldwide developmental trends of socio-political movements known as the right-wing populists, the new far right, or as the neo-nationalists. These movements increasingly become less ideology-driven and less interested in the traditional conservative agenda; instead they produce either handy or entertaining (or both) content to attract as many people of diverse ideological orientations as possible. For researchers this means turning from party platforms and political manifestos to seemingly non-political (i.e., non-electoral) phenomena, often in the field of web culture. There is, nevertheless, an important distinction between similar right-wing movements in Russia and in the Western countries: the new nationalism in Russia became entirely digitalized. In the period from early 2010s to the mid-decade, their legally operating organizations were outlawed and their leaders arrested; informal groupings, involved into street-level violence, were dispersed by the law-enforcement bodies. At the moment, activists who still show interest in the electoral process do not disclosure their affiliation with nationalism; radical street politics is currently non-existent for all ideological platforms. As a result, researchers of Russian politics intending to figure out what goes on in the nationalist milieu need to focus on seemingly non-political spheres, such as videogames, digital comedy shows, popular science lectures and other phenomena of digital culture.

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