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Protest Slogans of the Snow Revolution in Russia (2011–2012) as an Expression of Peaceful Resistance against the Authorities

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ABSTRACT: The expression of resistance against the authorities during the street protests of the so-called snow revolution in the years 2011-2012 reached a level of mass creativity and visuality previously and since unrecorded in Russian social life and, despite its lack of success, it is worth attention due to its openness and intensity. During the snow revolution a certain corpus of texts (slogans) was shaped, with repeatability typical for folklore – it was a recurrence of themes, motifs, characters, linguistic tricks, images, textual models. The aim of analyzing selected protest slogans is to showcase contexts that constitute the source of oppositional expression on the textual (slogan on a poster), visual (image on a poster) and object (artifacts) level. The examples of the protest creativity presented in the article prove that verbal, visual and material ways of resistance realized functions typical for political folklore, such as integrating the rebels, mocking the stronger enemy as a defense strategy, unmasking the crimes of the government, and expressing the expectations of the protesters.

KEYWORDS: political folklore, Russia, Putin, social resistance, street performance, poster, snow revolution

Introduction

Snow revolution (or mud revolution, after the location of the protests – the Mud Square in Moscow) was a protest movement that occurred in the years 2011-2012 in Moscow, Petersburg, and, on a smaller scale, also in other cities in Russia (e.g. Tyumen; see Lobanova, Semenov 2013). Mass peaceful street

political demonstrations, remembered as the snow revolution, began after the elections to the State Duma in December 2011, continued during the campaign prior to the presidential election and also after the presidential election in March 2012, when Vladimir Putin won in the first round. At that time, the expression of resistance against the authorities reached a level of creativity and visuality previously and since unrecorded in Russian social life and, despite its lack of success, it is worth attention due to its openness and intensity.

The chrononym snow revolution is an unofficial term describing events “particular for the given time period and separating them into a separate entity” (Dudek-Szumigaj 2022: 217); in addition to its main function, that is, naming, it also fulfills a function of assessing and evaluating. Revolution is a significant change taking place in a relatively short period. And although it is now known that the snow revolution did not bring about radical changes in the political system and the situation of the citizens of the Russian Federation, the chrononym was preserved in the memory of its participants, media and academic publications. The anti-government protests were swiftly named snow revolution by international press (e.g. Osborn 2011; Halpin 2011) and Western bloggers (e.g. Ioffe 2011). The term also became commonly used in Western scientific (e.g. Gabowitsch 2017; Olaya 2019) and academic discourse (eg. Bucharin 2015; Dewaegenae 2018). The use of the chrononym snow revolution in Russian-language scientific discourse can be evidenced by, among others, publications used in the present article.

The material for the present analysis consists in photographs of posters and other artifacts used by the protesters during the 5 meetings and protest actions that took place in Moscow and Petersburg from December 2011 until April 2012. Examples of slogans were chosen from among 780 photographs of posters published in the book *ABC of Protest!* (Lur’ye 2012) and 59 photographs published in the scientific articles by Andrey Moroz (Moroz 2012), Maria Akhmetova (Akhmetova 2012) and Dmitriy Gromov (Gromov 2012)². The aim of analyzing selected protest slogans is to showcase precedent-setting texts and events that constitute the source of oppositional expression on the textual (slogan on a poster), visual (image on a poster) and object (artifacts) level.

The Folklore of the Snow Revolution

The phenomenon contemporarily referred to as political folklore has existed in Russia in some form since the beginnings of its statehood, before it started

1 The authors of the photographs are: Vadim Lur’ye (folklorist and photographer), Mikhail Alekseyevskiy (State Republican Center of Russian Folklore in Moscow), Mariya Akhmetova (journal “Zhivaya Starina”), Andrey Moroz (Russian State University for the Humanities in Moscow), Ol’ga Belova (The Institute for Slavic Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow), Tat’yana Bystrova (translator).

2 Photographs from rallies were published on www.24december.visantrop.ru and on the Facebook account “Snezhnyaruvolyutsiya”. Since the escalation of Russian aggression towards Ukraine on February 24, 2022 both sources have become unavailable.

to be known as “folklore” and referred to as “political”. Acts of vernacular creation as a form of resistance towards the authorities would appear in various intensity and variants in the Duchy of Moscow (see e.g. Vlasova 2001), in the Russian Empire (see e.g. Lozanova 1935) and in the Soviet Union (see e.g. Miller 2006); it was usually unofficial, secret, underground in nature, as high fines would be imposed for its dissemination (Kodan 1980; Konovalova 2014; Kurukin, Nikulina, 2008: 150–251)³. In the USSR Russians usually expressed their resistance according to the rules defined by James Scott as the hidden protocol (Scott 1990: 183), that is, through non-verbal and verbal behaviors creating a community of rebellious identities, resulting from tactics based on awareness of the distribution of power and threats (Kozlov 2017)⁴. Due to such actions, hidden from the view of the Soviet authorities, it was possible to express resistance without exposing oneself to danger. This pertained even to official channels of communication, e.g. print, thanks to the use of Aesopian language (see e.g. Loseff 1984; Yefimov 1985). It was only the reforms of the 1980s, known as the perestroika, that created conditions for introducing political rights and freedoms, such as the right to organize meetings, rallies and demonstrations independent from the authorities, or creating political organizations and parties⁵. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the 1993 Constitution of the Russian Federation in its article 31 continued to ensure the citizens’ right to peaceful assembly – rallies, demonstrations, marches and pickets – but only gradually did the society of post-Soviet Russia learn to make use of this right. Street protests in Russia in the late 1980s and early 1990s bloomed but – as Andrey Moroz has it – they were essentially kept in a serious tone. Principled slogans dominated, e.g.: “Yeltsin is faith, hope, love to Russia” (Rus. Yel’tsin – vera, nadezhda, lyubov’ Rossii), “Government! Stop mocking history!” (Rus. Vlast’! Khvatit izdevat’sya nad istoriyey!), and only sporadically would there appear slogans using wordplay, e.g. “Land for farmers / factories for workers / Communism for communists” (Rus. Zemlya – krest’yanam / fabriki – rabochim / kommunizm – kommunistam!), “Boris, fight!” (wordplay in Russian: Boris, boris’) (Moroz 2012: 173–174). There were practically no slogans and posters using collage, caricature, etc., these were

3 In the USSR, paragraph 10 of article 58 of the Stalin Penal Code from 1927 to 1961 deemed propaganda or agitation containing calls to overturn, undermine or weaken the Soviet authorities, including dissemination of political jokes, to be punishable with no fewer than 6 months of imprisonment.

4 The demands of Russian and Soviet society rarely took the form of open protests – that happened only when they pertained to the most urgent social problems (see Kozlov 2006). The circle of scientists who research the features of legal regulation of the phenomena of social and political protests in pre-revolutionary Russia is fairly narrow (e.g. Konnov, Vasil’kov 2007).

5 Only in 1988, when the Decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR from 28th July 1988 “On the organizing and conducting meetings, rallies, street processions and demonstrations in the USSR” was passed, did there appear new categories of expressing social and political protest in Russian legislation – rally, street procession and demonstration (see Slavín 2005: 145).

mostly individual demonstrations and thus few forms of street protests from the period of the perestroika and the early 1990s can be considered folklore material (Moroz 2012: 174), and few of them were preserved and analyzed by scholars. After the “decade of the Disastrous 1990s” (Rus. *likhiye 90-ye*)⁶ Russians would time and again openly express their resistance towards the actions of the authorities, e.g. in the period 2005–2008 joining street actions called the Dissenters’ March (Rus. *Marsh nesoglasnykh*) in large cities. The Russian opposition organized these protests as an expression of resistance towards Putin’s actions, the then-introduced rules of police state and imprisoning the opponents of the government (Chebotarev, Verba, Svinin, Timchenko 2005). Since 2009 in Moscow, instead of the Dissenters’ Marches, there were organized actions called Strategy-31. This was a national citizen movement in defense of the right to freedom of assembly (the name refers to the Article 31 of the Constitution of Russian Federation that guarantees this right), which gathered ca. 5,000 people at protests in Moscow in 2009, but only 1,000–2,000 the following years (Grani.Ru 2010). Due to the restrictions introduced in post-Soviet Russia, the citizens’ protest activity did not reach levels that would lead to real changes in political and social situation in the country. For example, in December 2007 in Moscow, an action against the illegality of parliamentary elections gathered only about 50 people (Gromov 2012: 135). In 2008, when protests against the conflict between Georgia and South Osetia were happening around the world, a rally against the entrance of Russian forces to Georgia only gathered about 150 people (Grani.Ru 2008). In turn, the contesting public activity of Russians in the election cycles between 2007 and 2012 achieved a surprisingly high level. It was characterized by long campaigns and short actions pertaining to defense of collective interest, social and political issues (safety and protection of children, the juvenile justice system, transport reforms, corruption). In these years among the new participants of protests there were students, defrauded shareholders, parents and nationalists. In these open activities they used both traditional (rallies, pickets, signature collecting) and new forms of social activity (counter-action, street parties) (Lobanova, Semenov 2013). Communication networks created during these actions made it possible to build foundations for more effective mobilization of a community of the dissatisfied in the following years: the protesters had the experience not only in acting publically or contacting the authorities, but also in transferring the majority of messages concerning matters of public importance to the Runet (blogs, social media). In the process of mobilization of those protesting in December 2011 during the snow revolution, a decisive role was played precisely by virtual contacts. As Colombian scholar Daniel Higueta Olaya notes, the movement in opposition to Putin’s government was characterized by a high degree of using information and communication technologies in mobilization strategies, protest actions and

6 On the genesis of the chrononym “disastrous 1990s” see Gołębiowska-Suchorska 2020.

reporting. According to this scholar's assessment, it is also for this reason that it is important to analyze the behavior of the participants of the snow revolution who, thanks to the Internet, had the ability to connect in a situation of limited opportunities to express their views (Olaya 2019).

The anonymous creativity of the participants of the snow revolution, caused by "a state of social boiling" (Robotycki 1990: 44), made spontaneously without in-depth preparation and expressed in public through statements and behaviors, bears the marks of political folklore, that is, "a part of folklore that reacts to and interprets current political, economic and social events" (Łysiak 1990: 15; see also Jackowski 1990; Łysiak 1998). During the snow revolution protests a certain corpus of slogans was shaped, with the repeatability typical for folklore. On the verbal level, it was marked by a recurrence of themes, motifs, characters, linguistic tricks (allusion, wordplay), images, textual models (Moroz 2012: 174), while on the non-verbal level it was a recurrence of slogan carriers: cardboard, plywood, surgical masks, condoms, plush toys, tennis rackets standing for prison-like bars, and vases-amphoras. In the protest ephemera used in the actions in Moscow and Petersburg in 2011-2012, Russian scholars noted an example of folklorization (Moroz 2012: 174)⁷ of individual creations thanks to the common use of the Internet among the protesters, which facilitated their dissemination in social network, with authorship simultaneously being lost. Digital record, while fostering multiplying, processing and repeated using of generated messages, results in the recurrence of texts, motifs and the images and items that supplement them "bringing to mind formulaity characteristic for the oral world" (Grochowski 2013: 8). The slogans of the snow revolution are also characterized by variability typical for folklore, resulting from the fact that "in computer culture different versions of the same media object are commonly generated" (Manovich 2006: 105).

The slogans of the snow revolution as expression of political folklore constituted a set of messages created by a group of mutinous citizens, which was relatively small, given the size of Russia; they were aimed at three main recipient groups:

The first consisted of representatives of the government. They were absent during the protests, and therefore the message was supposed to reach them thanks to everyone who wanted to pass it on (e.g. witnesses, journalists), and its direction was expressed by slogans with verbs in the imperative and the names of the addressees, e.g. Putin, go away (Rus. Putin, uydi); Putin, give Churov to Obama (Rus. Putin, podari Churova Obame); Churov – shave yourself, Putin – kill yourself (Rus. Churov – pobreysya, Putin – ubeysya).

The second group comprised of the unengaged part of society, to whom the message was delivered directly during the actions (onlookers in the street), on

7 Folklorization in this case means spontaneous taking on of features typical for folklore (among others, anonymity, repeatability, variability, formulaity, inclusivity), and not folklorizing according to Jozef Burszta, that is, artificial placement of elements of folklore in new context, or folklorism (Burszta 1966: 39-40; Moser 1962).

the Internet (blogs, social media) and through the media (press and television materials), including the pro-government ones that transmitted any information about the protests with discrediting comments⁸.

The third group were the protesters themselves and the people absent at the protests but sharing the same views. With regard to these addressees the protest slogans fulfilled the functions of identifying, mobilizing, integrating and amplifying common attitudes.

According to Moroz, the slogans of the snow revolution showed how the heretofore silent “street” – hipsters, “net hamsters” (Lur’ye 2012: 138), “penguins” (Lur’ye 2012: 86) – learned to speak and write; in the winter 2011–2012 they finally felt the need to express their opinions and feelings connected with Russian public life in a loud and clear way. “Net hamsters” is a term used by pro-government politicians, but made popular by politicians of the opposition (Alexei Navalny) and Runet, inspired by the English word “homepage”, phonetically close to the Russian word “hamster” (Rus. khomyak), a common name for the main page of a given website. The term, aiming to describe people active and brave only in the virtual world, was used by the demonstrators to create the image of an oppositionist-hamster – a harmless rodent that can become a dangerous animal and take to the streets. The participants of the snow revolution were mostly people without experience in political activism, whom Navalny also described as “timid penguins”, whose safety needs to be protected during the protests (hence the instructions on how to behave while arrested, disseminated on the Runet⁹). The protesters used the technique of fighting the enemy with their own weapon: they used terms suggesting their own weakness to create images that would textually and visually express strength, dignity and courage. In the posters, drawings of hamsters, e.g. breaking down bars, were connected with such slogans as “The hamster has straightened its back”, “Hamsters are raging and will show you what’s what”, “Caution! Bad hamster!” (Rus. Khomyak raspravil plechi; Khomyachki razbushevalis’ i poka-zhut vam kuz’kinu mat’; Ostorozhno! Zloy khomyak!) (Lur’ye 2012: 138). Posters of penguins, frequently depicted as standing in a row as a chain of demonstrators, expressed the following demands: “We want a Putin-free Russia” (Rus. Za Rossiyu bez Putina), “Penguins want fair elections” (Rus. Pingviny za chestnyye vybory), and sometimes were the expression of persistence of those protesting in difficult weather conditions – “We are little penguins and we are not cold!” (Rus. A my pingvinchiki, a nam ne kholodno!) (Lur’ye 2012: 86). These animal monikers, used with self-directed irony by the protesters, transferred to the posters, started to fulfill the function of particular self-identifiers, creating certain associations both in recipients sharing the views of the protesters and in their opponents.

8 On communication models of protest actions, see e.g. Fedorova 2014.

9 The instructions included recommendations of how to behave when being shot at or attacked with gas, during struggles with the police, in detention, etc. (Gromov 2012: 137).

In the further part of the article I present selected thematic groups of slogans that illustrate ways and mechanisms of using precedent-setting texts and events to create verbal (chiasm, wordplay using names, allusions to statements by politicians and literary texts) and extra-verbal (items referring to precedent-setting texts and events, enriching the wordplay present in slogan with extra-verbal elements) messages of the opposition.

The Color White, or the Telling Lack of a Slogan

A blank white piece of paper expressed resistance towards the actions of the current authorities, as well as the similarity of their methods to those from the Soviet times. The lack of a slogan on a poster invoked an association with a joke from the times of Leonid Brezhnev, which would be legible to Russians: in the joke, a USSR citizen was arrested for distributing flyers, but he only gave the passers-by blank white pieces of paper. Asked by the militia why there was no text on the flyers, he said: “Why should I write? Everything is clear anyway” (Rus. *Chto pisat’? I tak vse yasno*) (Lur’ye 2012: 20). During the snow revolution the symbolism of whiteness – the result of current anti-regime events – became imposed over this historical meaning of a blank white piece of paper. The anti-government actions began at the point when the Russian law had not yet included such harsh penalties for acting against the authorities as during the later war of Russia against Ukraine (which started in 2014 with the annexation of the Crimea). However, in 2011 the Russians also tried to protect themselves from potential repressions: hence, in February 2012, in order to avoid the necessity of having an assembly accepted by the authorities, a form of protest that could not be qualified as a rally or a picket was chosen. The participants of the assembly did not obstruct traffic, they had no posters, they did not shout slogans – they were only supposed to create a chain out of people connected physically and ideologically; it was supposed to go down the Garden Ring (*Sadovoye Kol’tso*), the length of about 13 kilometers. The participants agreed on social media that those gathered would distinguish themselves only by the symbolic expressed by the means of a white ribbon attached to their clothing (Titkov 2017). A white ribbon had already appeared as a sign of Russians protesting earlier, in 2006, as a symbol of resistance towards government cars abusing their privileges¹⁰. During the snow revolution, it became a symbol of distrust towards the official results of election to the State Duma of the Russian Federation (4th December 2011) and the presidential election in Russia (4th March 2012). Fearing that it would not be possible to complete the human chain due to too few participants being present, it was advised on social media that people take all kinds of white items that could become connectors between them (toys, bed sheets, plates, simple

¹⁰ In March 2006 the radio station “Silver rain” announced a national campaign “Away with emergency lights”, whose aim was to abolish emergency light and sound signals on cars driving government members, as these can be used only by emergency vehicles (ambulances, rescue services) (Gorodovoy 2006).

white pieces of paper). Given the winter weather conditions, there were also plans to use snowmen as white substitutes for people; however, it turned out that protesters gathered in such numbers that at some points there were two rows of the human chain (Lur'ye 2012: 16). Gradually, the color white as such took on symbolic meaning, regardless of the item, e.g. cars would drive around cities with white balloons attached as a mark of protest.

Election Fraud

The central slogan of the snow revolution protests was a demand for fair (parliamentary, presidential) elections conducted, among others, by the means of motifs referring to rigging the election results. Existing texts concerning election fraud, functioning as types of verbal folklore in oral and online circulation, were transposed to posters. One of the jokes used a paradoxical motif of “fair fraud”, constructed around a rhetorical figure (chiasmus), reversing the sense of a typical media message regarding the correctness of the electoral procedure: “Election fraud was undisturbed. No votes were noted while the fraud was going on” (Rus. *Fal'sifikatsiya proshla normal'no. Golosovaniy v khode narusheniy ne zamecheno*) (Lur'ye 2012: 136).

Demonstration of the motif of election fraud in the posters was also provoked by the piece of information mistakenly shown during the presentation of election results on national television: in a table there appeared a result suggesting that the voter turnout in Rostov Oblast reached 146%. This mistake, which the protesters interpreted as unintentional reveal of the truth about election fraud, became an impulse for creating posters with ironic references to the misinformation: “This poster is made of 146% recycled paper!” (Rus. *Etot plakat na 146% sostoit iz pererabotannoy bumagi!*), “There are 146% of us here!” (Rus. *Nas 146%*), “Is the glass 70% full or 70% empty?” (Rus. *Etot stakan na 70% pustoy ili na 70% polnyy?*) (Lur'ye 2012: 156, 145, 144).

Election fraud was also exposed by posters with slogans and images referring to precedent-setting texts, literary or film characters, and to statements by politicians that invoked an association with elections, voting, vote counting. For example, a considerable thematic group of posters constituted reactions to statement and actions by the chairman of the Central Election Commission, Vladimir Churov. Back in 2007, the rallies would already feature slogans calling Churov to shave his beard, as he had promised to do so should the election turn out to be rigged. This activist call returned in the 2011–2012 rallies, as prior to the 2011 elections Churov prepared a forecast of the election results and the results turned out to be in line with his expectations – the One Russia party allegedly received 49.3% votes. Thus, the posters joked about the method of achieving this result: “Churov's arithmetic $4\% + 9\% = 49\%$ (Rus. *Arifmetika Churova $4\% + 9\% = 49\%$*) (Lur'ye 2012: 150). Dmitry Medvedev, the president of the Russian Federation at the time, carelessly commented on this accuracy of expectations with the words: “You are almost a magician” (Rus. *Vy zhe volshebnyk pochti*) (Lur'ye 2012: 144), which, according to the protesters,

confirmed the citizens' accusations against the authorities – “magicking up” the election results, rather than counting them on the basis of election ballots. The electoral process as such was also described as magic in the posters, e.g. “Yes – to the reforms, no – to magic!” (Rus. Reformam da, volshebstvu– net!) (Lur’ye 2012: 147). The demonstrators would call the country whose citizens believed in the fairness of the election “be-chured” (“bewitched”), using a wordplay based on the similarity between the first syllables of Churov’s name and the word miracle (Rus. chudo), e.g. “Wake up, be-chured country!” (Rus. Prosnis’, ochurovannaya strana!) (Lur’ye 2012: 28). Medvedev’s words provoked the motif of Churov the wizard, which first appeared in collages on the Runet, and then became transferred to street posters. Churov was verbally and/or visually likened to magicians/wizards known from literature and cinematography, and finding analogies was additionally facilitated by his, still unshaven, beard. Therefore, the Commission’s chairman appeared in the posters as:

1. Khottabych the genie, a character in Lazar Lagin’s 1938 novel *Old Man Khottabych*¹¹, about adventures of a pioneer who finds a vase inhabited by a genie at the bottom of the Moscow river; initially, the genie serves the pioneer, but later he is “reeducated” to be a Soviet citizen (Lur’ye 2012: 28);
2. Ded Moroz (Grandfather Frost) (Lur’ye 2012: 144), as the elections took place around the New Year;
3. The Wizard of Oz, or, more accurately, the Wizard of Emerald City from the 1939 tale by Alexandr Volkov, adapted from the American writer Lyman Frank Baum’s *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. Using this character, people would e.g. suggest that Churov should leave Russia: “Churov – suitcase – train station – Emerald City” (Rus. Churov – chemodan – vokzal – Izumrudnyy gorod) (Lur’ye 2012: 146);
4. Dumbledore – the headmaster of the Hogwarts School of Magic and Wizardry from J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter book series; this character was connected e.g. with the slogan about the Central Election Commission: “CEC – it’s not Hogwarts” (Rus. TSIK – eto tebe ne Khogvarts) (Lur’ye 2012: 28);
5. Gandalf – a character from the Middle Earth mythology, created by J.R.R. Tolkien in, among others, *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* (Lur’ye 2012: 28, 144).

In the context of election fraud accusations the motif of voice (vote)¹² stolen from the citizens would frequently appear. The conviction concerning taking away the vote from the voters was presented in silence – by the means of taping over one’s mouth, sometimes with the accusatory caption “My vote was taken away” (Rus. U menya otnyali golos) (Lur’ye 2012: 42). At times, one’s mouth would be covered by a surgical mask inscribed with words of resistance: “I have a vote” (Rus. U menya yest’ golos) or demand “Give me back my vote” (Rus. Vernite moy golos) (Lur’ye 2012: 43). The same captions would also appear in the posters.

11 Novel adapted for screen in 1956 and 2006.

12 In Russian, the same word (golos) means both “vote” and “voice”.

The motif of the voters' voices/votes being taken away also invoked associations between those demonstrating and the fairytale Mermaid who, out of love for a human man, gave up her voice so that she could exchange her tail for legs. This character, known to the Russians e.g. from the literary fairytale by Hans Christian Andersen and the Soviet animated movie by Ivan Aksenchuk *Rusalka* (Rus. Rusalochka) from 1968 would declare in a poster: "I will give my voice/vote according to my choice" (Rus. Otdam golos po svojemu vyboru) (Lur'ye 2012: 41).

Another literary/film character who made it to protest posters in the context of demanding fair elections was Cheburashka – a character in Eduard Uspensky's book and Roman Kachanov's animated movies (1969–1983), known to Soviet and contemporary generations also from advertisements. The protesters used Cheburashka to express their defiance against election rigging for two reasons. Firstly, in the fairytales this naïve, simple-minded creature fought evil, injustice and bureaucracy, and thus the protesters would identify with this hero of children culture. Secondly, inspiration was derived from the similarity between the first syllables of Cheburashka's name and the Russian word fair (Rus. chestnyj). With the consent of the author of this image, Cheburashka-opponent in a red shirt with a white ribbon appeared not only in posters, but also flyers, stickers, T-shirts. Glancing from behind bars, he would ask: "I am an extremist because I fight for my rights?" (Rus. Ya ekstremist potomu chto zashchishchayu svoi prava?) (Lur'ye 2012: 143), or he would hold a poster with the slogan "Cheburashka demands fair elections" (Rus. Cheburashka za chestnyye vybory) (Lur'ye 2012: 142, 143).

Bandar-Log

Many literary allusions present in protest posters were provoked by Putin himself. One of his statements using the term "Banderlogs" (Rus. banderlogi) resulted in a whole series of allusions to Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, where the tribe of monkeys hated by the rest of the jungle was called Bandar-Log. It lived in complete anarchy, chaos and lawlessness, and did not recognize the Law of the Jungle; it mistreated other animals and did not even respect the members of its own tribe. In the language of communication characteristic for the Runet the term "banderlogs" has many negative connotations: it denotes stupid, aggressive, garish people who speak bad Russian and are boors. It is not known whether Putin knew the context in which this word was used on the Runet, or whether he only referred to Kipling's novel, but he indirectly quoted a fragment of the novel in one of his speeches. Namely, he used the words "Come to me, banderlogs" (Rus. Idite ko mne, banderlogi!), which Kaa the python says to the monkeys that he first hypnotizes, and then eats. Putin said these words to his opponents in a theatrical manner, slowing down, raising his arms and directing hands towards the audience, as if he were making hypnotic hand movements over



Fig. 1. Slogan on the poster: A boa constrictor knows how to deal with banderlogs – but not with humans. Source: (Akhmetova 2012: 200).

the body of a person hypnotized¹³ (Akhmetova 2012: 195). Putin’s opponents interpreted this statement as a challenge connecting a threat and an insult, and they would put responses directed at Putin the snake on their posters, such as: “Now be afraid, the banderlogs are here!”, “You called us, Great Poo? We have arrived”, “We came to you, Poo! The banderlogs have come. Kaa, slither out!” (Rus. Nu, boy sya, banderlogi prishli!; Ty nas zval, Velikiy Pu? My prishli; My prishli k tebe Puu!; Banderlogi prishli. Kaa, vpolzay!) (Akhmetova 2012: 197). Thus, the protest was presented as a response to the call, and the thousands of protesters – as a crowd of “banderlogs” who not only did not fear the snake, but also could potentially evoke fear in him.

Dmitry Bykov, a thinker and political oppositionist, also reacted to Putin’s words comparing his opponents to “banderlogs” by writing a satirical poem *Fresh Law of the Jungle*; it was read in December 2011 on air in Echo of Moscow (Yefremov 2011). In this text Puu the boa constrictor, whose name the Russians saw as a clear allusion to the president’s name, commonly called “Pu”, keeps all animals at a distance – with the exception of the “banderlogs”. Indeed, the latter ignore his hypnosis and eventually transform into Mowgli, that is, people the boa constrictor is powerless against. The plot of Bykov’s poem is

13 The so-called “passes” (Rus. passy) – slow, repeated hand movements over the body of a person hypnotized, used as one of the techniques of inducing hypnosis and in bio-energotherapeutic treatments (Świtkowski 1939: 38).

not connected to *The Jungle Book* at all, and besides, in Kipling's novel Kaa the snake is a positive character, while in Bykov's text Pu the snake is a negative character. Nevertheless, both sources (Putin's allusion to Kipling's book and Bykov's poem) served as an inspiration to create posters with the use of textual and visual allusions. For example, one of the posters connected a motif from Bykov's poem (a banderlog transforming into Mowgli) with a parody of the visual image of evolution from an ape to *homo sapiens* (cf. fig. 1).

Putin as a Slave, a Snake and a Condom

It was Putin himself who provoked the emergence of many of the mocking images he had gained in the protest posters. The snake from Kipling's and Bykov's texts inspired the protesters to use this animal in order to express a negative assessment of the Russian president in the form of a picture of a boa constrictor snake; a toy snake carried on a stick or the commonly known drawing from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *Little Prince* (Ahmetova 2012: 201–202; Lur'ye 2012: 130–135).

During one of his press conferences Putin said: "I have worked like a galley slave [...] morning till night, and I have given all I could to this work" (Rus. Ya pakhal, kak rab na galerakh s utra do nochi. I delal eto s polnoy otdachey sil.) (Lur'ye 2012: 34). The self-comparison to a slave also generated the phonetically motivated nickname "crab". The words "like a slave" (Rus. kak rab) sound similarly to "like a crab" (Rus. kak krab) in Russian; social networks filled with images of Putin with crab pincers, a crab with Putin's head, etc. Another source of slogans for the demonstrators consisted in word play based on the phonetic similarity between the verb "to rob" (grabit') and the neologism "to crab" (krabit'), e.g. "Enough crabbing of the country!" (Rus. Khvatit krabit' stranu!) (Lur'ye 2012: 66).

In turn, during one of the State Duma meetings the president called on the opposition "not to rock the boat", that is, not to disorganize the functioning of Russia (Lur'ye 2012: 34). The contamination of Putin's self-comparison to a galley slave and the comparison of Russia to a boat generated a series of slogans and drawings on the posters that depicted Russia as a galley put in danger by Putin the galley slave, who was called to leave the boat by the following slogans: "Freedom for the galley slave" (Rus. Svobodu rabu (rabam) na galerakh); "Vova, with you the galley turns into Titanic" (Rus. Vova, s toboy galera stanet Titanikom) "Vova, free the galley, it's already in the shallow" (Rus. Vova, osvobodi galeru, ona i tak uzhe na meli), "Vova, leave the galley, you're going to sink it" (Rus. Vova, uydi s galery ty yeye utopish'); "Slave! Give the oar back to the owner!" (Rus. Rab! Otday veslo khozyainu!) (Lur'ye 2012: 34–37).

The self-comparison to a (galley) slave also evoked associations with the character of Dobby (Rus. Dobby) from J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter novels. They were motivated by earlier associations that emerged in 2002, after the adaptation of the novel *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. There were remarks concerning the similarity between the appearance of the house elf, Dobby, and Putin appearing in the media and on the Runet; allegedly, it was

even discussed by foreign press (Lur'ye 2012: 48). In the unofficial circulation the nickname "Dobbi" started to function in reference to Putin. During the 2011–2012 protests, following the president's statement concerning his alleged slave-like efforts for the country, the posters featured slogans and images referring not only to Dobby's appearance, but also to the novel's plot. In J. K. Rowling's book and its film adaptation this character is a slave who can gain his freedom if he receives a piece of clothing from his owner. Over the course of the novel he does, indeed, receive a sock, and thus protest posters called for Putin to give up power with the following slogans: "Free Dobby from working beyond his strength!"; "Time to give him a sock!"; "Take a sock and leave!" (Rus. Osvobodite Dobbi ot neposil'noy raboty!; Pora dat' yemu nosok!; Zabiray nosok i ukhodi) (Lur'ye 2012: 48–49). The image of Putin himself did not appear in the realizations of this motif in the posters – the pictures of the movie Dobby were enough to interpret the slogans unambiguously.

After the 15th December 2011 rallies Putin, still as a prime minister, discredited the importance of the protests stating that he thought that the white signs (ribbons) of the protesters are contraceptives used to symbolize an anti-AIDS campaign (Lur'ye 2012: 88). In response to this dismissive statement, there appeared many variants of slogans using the motif of a condom, in textual form as well as in the form of a visual or a prop. The picture of a condom, or a condom attached to the posters, became a symbol of protection from Putin. He was also equated with a condom, e.g. by using a response to name calling drawn from children folklore: "He who calls others names, calls himself those names" (Rus. Kto kak obzyvayetsya, tot sam tak nazyvayetsya). Many slogans were generated due to the similarities between the first syllables of the word "president" (Rus. prezident) and "condom" (Rus. prezervativ), e.g. "A good condom is a new condom" (Rus. Khoroshiy prezik – novyy prezik). Disposability as a distinctive feature of a condom was showcased as a feature expected from a president – "We don't need a used president!" (Rus. Nam ne nuzhen ispol'zovanny prezident), "Caution! Not to be reused!" (Rus. Vnimanije! Povtorno ne ispol'zovat'!) (Lur'ye 2012: 88–93). A condom give-away action was organized under the slogan "You didn't like one condom, take another. You have a choice!" (Rus. Ne ponravilsya odin gondon? Vyberi drugoy! U tebyay est' vybor!), which was an allusion to the right to choose the president (Lur'ye 2012: 88). Slogans were written on images of condoms cut out of cardboard or on inflated condoms and balloons; next to the slogans, people would put actual condoms or their drawings.

Examples of Putin's presence in the media also became precedent-setting texts for the creativity of the protesters. In August 2011 national television showed material concerning Putin allegedly dragging out two sixth century amphoras from the depth of two metres out of Taman Bay (the Sea of Azov) (Lur'ye 2012: 11). The forgery was obvious and the event was used in the posters in the context of demands for fairness, e.g. "We want fair amphoras!" (Rus. My za chestnyye amfory!) (Lur'ye 2012: 11).

Putin – Hitler

Putin was also put in the posters in the context of the Second World War (in Russia referred to as “the great patriotic war”, Rus. *velikaya otechestvennaya voyna*). As a result of contamination between his name and the name of Adolf Hitler, as well as the German adjective *kaput* (broken, finished), such linguistic creations as *Putler*, *KaPutin*, *KaPut*, *Putler kaput* emerged (Lur’ye 2012: 94). Representing the election results and Putin in the context of the Great Patriotic War took the form of a kind of reverse statement, wherein the proper message and the initial statement were switched. Putin, the head of the state that had once defeated Nazi Germany, was put in the place of Hitler, and his anticipated failure was also presented in reference to the failure of the Fascist leader. The slogans of the demonstrators compared Hitler and Putin, prophesying the end of the Russian politician’s rule in the year of the protests, e.g. “In 1941 Hitler was defeated during frost, in 2012 Putin kaput” (Rus. *V 1941 Gitlera v moroz pobedili, v 2012 Putin kaput*) (Lur’ye 2012: 78). A similar switch between the historical and current message also took place in the case of the slogan “We will not forget, we will not forgive” (Rus. *Ne zabudem, ne prostim*) (Lur’ye 2012: 76). The slogan created in 1942 was the title of a cycle of anti-Fascist drawings by Dementi Shmarinov – permeated by angry pathos and presenting the suffering and courage of the Soviet nation in their fight against the Nazi enemy. This slogan, together with St. George’s ribbon, is currently used during the celebrations of anniversaries of the end of Second World War in Russia. In 2011, it became an expression of the protesters’ efforts not to forget the rigged elections and not to forgive the forgery.

Conclusions

Various kinds of posters and hybrid forms¹⁴ presenting the slogans of the snow revolution constitute an expression of enormous creative invention and ingenuity, used in order to achieve social and political goals, in which one can clearly see that those manifesting have been inspired by culture (not only Russian culture) and the technique of fighting one’s enemy with their own arsenal (precedent-setting texts and events). A high level of ludic features and humor in the texts, visuals and artifacts seen in manifesting anti-government views made it easier to remember their meaning¹⁵ and demonstrated peaceful, if postulative, attitude of the protesters.

The presented examples of the protest creativity of the participants of the snow revolution demonstrate that verbal, visual and material ways of contesting the political situation in Russia realized functions typical for political folklore, such as integrating the rebels, mocking the stronger enemy as a defense strategy, unmasking the crimes of the government, expressing the expectations

¹⁴ For more on the classification of poster forms see e.g. Kulak 2020.

¹⁵ For example, an experiment conducted by linguists and cognitive psychologists demonstrated that wordplay in text improves remembering and recalling even those pieces of information that were not included in the wordplay as such, for more see Hannah, Lippman, Hyman 2010.

of the protesters. In the introduction to the book *ABC of Protest*, which preserves the protest ephemeras of the snow revolution, the author Vadim Lur'ye writes that having seen how numerous and multi-faceted these demonstrations were, he has decided it is necessary to preserve and research them, because whatever they are, they have already changed life in Russia and became a historical fact (Lur'ye 2012: 3). From the perspective of the year 2023, one can state that the approach of the Russians to reality has not changed as much as it could and should have changed according to the participants of herein described demonstrations. The development of the political situation in Russia after the snow protests showed that the message of the demonstrators had reached the authorities, but it had not resulted in consequences and reactions expected by the protesters – there were no repeated elections, Putin did not give up power, while restrictions against the opponents of the government started to increase (Kommersant 2016). The silence of the majority of Russian society, deaf to the very intellectually attractive and convincing message of the participants of the snow revolution made it possible to introduce increased repressions which, however, did not fully stifle oppositional actions. The protesters have been coming up with new forms of public resistance that help them to avoid being stopped by the police. For instance, since 2017 the so-called serial pickets have become common in Moscow. They consisted in one participant standing alone with a poster from only 30 seconds to 15 minutes, and then giving the poster to the next participant standing somewhere nearby and waiting their turn. There could have been simultaneously from 4-5 to several hundred people in such a picket queue. In fact, serial individual picket constitutes camouflaged mass action (Arkhipova, Zakharov, Kozlova, Gavrilova 2019: 65–66). In 2019, after the protests connected with regional elections, there was a noticeable drop in active participation of people aged 25 to 50 in street actions; however, grassroots solidarity in other forms (being present in court, donations, packages for the detained, etc.) remained at a high level (Arkhipova, Zakharov, Kozlova, Gavrilova 2019: 67). From January to April 2021 there were mass political actions in many Russian cities after the arrest of Alexei Navalny. Due to the high risk of people with posters and slogans being detained, symbols such as slogan-free drawings or artifacts were used – these were toilet brushes and men's briefs. Toilet brushes were a reference to the film "Putin's Palace. History of World's Largest Bribe", broadcast by the Anti-Corruption Foundations (Rus. Fond bor'by s korruptsiyey/FBK)¹⁶, which showed the golden brush for Putin's toilet. Holding ordinary toilet brushes, the protesters pointed to the absurdity of the fact that the president's brush is worth more than the average salary in the country. In turn, after it was revealed that agents of Russia's Federal Security Police had applied the "Novichok" poison to Alexei Navalny's underwear, men's briefs became a sign referring to repressions and political

16 A non-profit organization founded in 2011 by the oppositionist Alexei Navalny, funded by the means of private donations.

murders in Russia (Arkhipova, Zakharov, Kozlova 2021: 302–304). Ten years after the snow revolution, due to Russia's aggression on Ukraine on 24th February 2022, Russians protested individually, once again using the symbol of a blank piece of paper as a declaration of anti-war attitude; they were accused of discrediting the Russian army (see e.g. Yugov 2022); they also concealed anti-war slogans under dots put in the place of letters. The protests of Russians against aggression on Ukraine again took the form of individual efforts – courageous but ineffective. Due to increasing repressions, many Russians do not want to attend mass protests, but they are ready to help those who are brave enough to do so. They donate money to protest organization, provide the detained with money for taxicabs or drive them from faraway places of isolation, bring tea and sandwiches to pickets of support for the detained, send packages to prisoners, come to courts in defense of those detained during street actions (Arkhipova, Zakharov, Kozlova, Gavrilova 2019: 64).

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