Humour as a Diplomatic Tool: Mediating Estrangement in Times of War

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Submitted to

Central European University

Department of International Relations

In partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts in International Relations

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Vienna, Austria

2023

Abstract

The emergence of public digital diplomacy has significantly changed diplomatic conduct. In the realm of public digital diplomacy, diplomats deliberately and strategically use humour in their diplomatic tweets to engage with their wider audiences. This research scrutinizes the use of humour within the framework of public digital diplomacy in a war setting, particularly in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war. Since war is a deadly serious and sensitive issue, the employment of humour seems unexpected and even inappropriate. Even though war is not a laughing matter, I argue that humour is used as a diplomatic tool to mediate estrangement between different actors, groups and communities. To illustrate my argument, I selected humorous tweets created by Russian and Ukrainian state representatives as well as tweets and comments produced by their audiences. Humour's ambiguity allows actors to convey multi-layered and complex messages which creates space for various meanings, understandings and interpretative approaches. Thus, humour enables diplomats to navigate the complexities of the war, negotiate their ambiguous identities and ultimately mediate estrangement.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor Pr. Alexander Astrov for his guidance and unwavering support. Your passion for the topic inspired me and helped me expand my knowledge, challenge my ideas, and develop a critical perspective of diplomacy.

I would like to extend my gratitude to all my professors and friends at Central European University for making my academic journey memorable. A special thank you to Pr. Robin Bellers for his invaluable guidance and constructive feedback which significantly improved my writing. I am also forever grateful to Pr. Erzsebet Strausz for her insights and tremendous support.

Most importantly, I would like to express my sincere gratitude and appreciation to my family, especially my mother and grandparents for being a source of unconditional love, strength and inspiration for me. I am forever grateful to you!

Last but not least, I would like to thank my amazing friends for listening to my endless conversations about diplomacy, and the cups of Moroccan mint tea which kept me awake and focused while writing my thesis.

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Introduction

“When Metternich was informed of the death of the Russian ambassador at the Congress of Vienna, he is supposed to have exclaimed "Ah, is that true? What can have been his motive" (Morgenthau, 1946, 1067). This statement perfectly illustrates how ambiguity enables the coexistence of humour and diplomacy in the diplomatic discourse. It also shows that humour has always been part of the diplomatic culture, primarily used between diplomats who share the same diplomatic culture. Nevertheless, in the realm of public digital diplomacy, the use of humour becomes challenging because the general public does not share the same culture as diplomats. Therefore, this research endeavours to explore how humour is used when diplomacy goes public, and the public becomes digital, specifically in a wartime setting.

This research aims to examine the employment of humour in public digital diplomacy in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war. The topic of this study holds significant relevance because it challenges our preconceived views of diplomats and diplomatic practice and raises important questions on why and how diplomats are using humour on digital platforms during war scenarios, such as the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine. In fact, the Russian-Ukrainian war has transformed digital platforms into a battlefield and attracted global attention. Moreover, the ongoing war has witnessed a significant rise in digital diplomacy, with diplomats from both countries are actively using social media platforms, namely Twitter, to engage with the general public.

Since war is not a laughing matter, the use of humour by diplomats is unexpected in conflict and war scenarios. While previous research has delved into the use of humour in public digital diplomacy, little attention has been paid to its employment in war settings. Multiple scholars have explored the use of humour in public digital diplomacy and have argued that diplomats use humour to convey messages and shape the public’s perceptions of sensitive topics and

controversial issues. In this respect, Manor (2020) examined the use of humour by Russian diplomats and concluded that humour enables them to create a unique iBrand online. In the same line, Chernobrov (2022) also focused on Russia's use of humour in public digital diplomacy and coined the term "strategic humour" to describe the deliberate and strategic use of humour by states to shape public opinion around contested issues and advance their national interests and foreign policy goals. On the other hand, Alder-Nissen and Tsinovoi (2019) studied the use of humour in Israel's public diplomacy and argued that the use of humour contributed to deepening Israel's international estrangement. In the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war, Budnitsky (2022) analysed governmental digital humour by Russia and Ukraine during the ongoing war and the gist of his argument is that the use of humour creates disengagement between the two countries.

In this study, I argue that humour is a diplomatic tool through which mutual estrangement is mediated. Since the ultimate goal of diplomacy is to mediate estrangement (Der Derian, 1987), I suggest that humour is used as an instrument to facilitate the objectives of diplomacy. I emphasize that diplomats do not simply aim to convey a message or sway public opinion. They are using new digital tools and adopting the norms of the digital society to mediate the estrangement and negotiate ambiguous identities. By using humour to engage with their large and diverse audiences within the framework of public digital diplomacy, diplomats play a crucial role in mediating estrangement between different actors, social groups and communities. In this sense, humour enables diplomats to mediate the estrangement since it establishes a framework that allows estranged actors to coexist and create a common ground to understand each other and negotiate their ambiguous identities. In a way, humour allows ideas to move beyond estranged boundaries. Therefore, I argue that, in a world of estranged individuals, groups and communities, which are by definition separated from each other, the use of humour

in public digital diplomacy serves as a tool for mediating relationships of estrangement in war contexts.

By investigating the employment of humour in public digital diplomacy, during times of conflict and war, this research endeavours to provide insights on how humour is not only used to send messages, sway public opinion or gain the public's support but also to ultimately mediate between estranged communities and groups in war settings. The present study explores the following research question: In what ways does humour function when diplomacy becomes public, and the public sphere becomes digital in wartime, specifically in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war? To identify suitable humorous tweets to illustrate my argument, I carefully examined the official government Twitter accounts of Russia and Ukraine, their respective foreign ministries and defence ministries, and some of their most followed embassies' accounts. Moreover, humorous tweets and comments generated by the audiences were taken into consideration in order to comprehend how the humorous tweets posted by state representatives are received, understood and interpreted.

This study has been broadly split into two parts. The first part includes a comprehensive literature review and theoretical framework that explores the existing body of research on the use of humour within the framework of public digital diplomacy. This part aims to shed light on the ways in which humour is used by diplomats in conflict and war settings to mediate estrangement. The subsequent part aims to illustrate the argument by providing an analysis of specific humorous tweets using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The analysis emphasises the role of humour as a diplomatic instrument in mediating estrangement in war contexts in the realm of public digital diplomacy.

Part 1

1.1 Negotiating the Meanings Attached to Diplomacy

There has always been a debate over the meanings attached to diplomacy in the literature as scholars perceive it differently. For example, a group of scholars place diplomacy in the context of interstate security relationships, which makes high politics the central preoccupation of diplomacy (Balzacq, Charillon and Ramel, 2020). While I understand this focus on interstate security in the context of the Cold War, I aim to highlight that diplomacy is not solely concerned with high politics, and a shift from this state-centric approach which differentiates between "high politics" and "low politics" is needed. In other words, this narrow understanding of diplomacy was common during the Cold War where preserving security, establishing stability and ensuring a peaceful coexistence constituted the key concerns of diplomats and scholars contemplating diplomacy. However, after the end of the Cold War, this narrow and limited understanding of diplomacy started to seem increasingly insufficient in the face of emerging global issues. As a result, a more thorough and comprehensive understanding of diplomacy emerged, and a wider perspective on its diverse functions started to take shape.

Der Derian (1987) states that the history of diplomacy is the history of mediation of estrangement. In addition to that, Sharp (2009) argues that diplomacy is necessary to mediate the "separateness" between sovereign states, communities and other groups. Drawing on the perspectives of Der Derian (1987) and Sharp (2009), we can say that the main task of diplomacy is to mediate estrangement while maintaining separateness. This means that diplomacy is rooted primarily in recognizing alterity and accepting differences (Balzacq, Charillon and Ramel, 2020). In this sense, diplomats have to mediate between estranged communities that are characterized by their separate identities and different values without aiming to overcome this estrangement. Put differently, diplomats have to

mediate estrangement while acknowledging that identities are necessarily ambiguous, fluctuating and necessitate ongoing negotiation. Additionally, Constantinou (2013) defines diplomacy as the way in which we can live together with differences. In other words, diplomacy can be seen as a mode of living where differences are sustained. In this regard, a group of scholars in which we find Der Derian, Sharp and Constantinou have adopted an extensive perspective of diplomacy, perceiving it as the art of mediating mutual estrangement, sustaining a world of difference and negotiating ambiguous separate identities. Accordingly, diplomacy is perceived as a means to mediate ambiguous identities, reconcile differences based on identity, and engage in negotiations.

Since identities are not defined in fixed terms, are embedded in different cultural, political and social contexts, and are continuously constructed and reconstructed by the communities and groups they represent, strong knowledge of these various contexts and actors is essential to negotiate and mediate these ambiguous identities. In this respect, states have historically developed a shared knowledge through their diplomatic interactions and negotiations. This shared knowledge is crucial in mediating ambiguous identities and fluctuating relationships as well as preserving diplomatic relations and resolving conflicts. Nevertheless, Constantinou (2013, 143) argues that the emergence of new actors (i.e., non-state actors) in international relations as a result of globalization has made it necessary for diplomacy to develop multiple and plural knowledges that goes beyond the one developed historically between states. In order to mediate the estrangement and negotiate the ambiguous identities, in an increasingly globalized and networked world, he suggests that plural knowledge is essential since multiple actors and audiences are now being considered and negotiated. Along the same lines as the humanist legacy, he considers diplomacy a knowledge practice that pursues numerous aims while negotiating interests, social meaning and identity (2013, 143). Accordingly, Constantinou emphasizes the importance of

knowing, understanding and ultimately mediating the plurality of different "Others" who are characterized by distinct histories, cultures and languages.

1.2 Unravelling the Emergence of Public Digital Diplomacy

Globalization, the increasing democratization of states and the communication revolution have significantly affected the practice of traditional diplomacy and made the emergence of public diplomacy possible (Huijgh 2016, 437). Public diplomacy has marked a substantial change in the conduct of traditional diplomacy and has included the domestic and foreign publics in the discussion of foreign policy matters. Deos and Pigman (2010, 153) argue that public diplomacy is a diplomatic mechanism that facilitates the mediation of estrangement between different actors. Furthermore, the growing use of digital technologies by diplomats, foreign ministries and embassies has also impacted diplomatic practice. Manor (2020, 1) suggests that the first transition in the conduct of public diplomacy is due to the adoption of digital platforms by diplomats. In the context of the "Internet age" in international relations, the digital dimension of public diplomacy started receiving growing attention from researchers, diplomatic actors and policymakers. The new information and communication technologies have introduced substantial changes to the diplomatic practice and the power dynamics between governments and citizens (Gilboa 2016, 540-542). In this respect, a new diplomatic practice has emerged as a result of the widespread use of digital technologies by diplomats and ministries of foreign affairs.

In his book entitled "The Digitalisation of Public Diplomacy", Manor (2019) argues that we cannot comprehend the impact of digital technologies on public diplomacy without defining first the characteristics of the digital society. According to him, "the digitization of public diplomacy" refers to a process in which the norms, principles, and logic of the digital society impact diplomatic conduct (2020, 2). This means that the norms that govern the digital society have significantly influenced the way diplomats behave and engage with

audiences online. In showing this impact, Manor (2019, 39) states that diplomacy has historically relied on proximity, however, the digitalization of public diplomacy has made the conduct of diplomacy at a distance. For Manor (2019), the norms of the digital society, including the continual sharing of private information on online platforms, openness, authenticity and the quest for a distinct digital voice have influenced the way diplomats use digital technologies since they started embracing and adopting these norms. In this way, Constantinou (2018, 3) states that a post-protocol world of diplomacy emerged thanks to digital diplomacy. In other words, diplomatic conduct is no longer governed only by the traditional diplomatic protocol and the emergence of digital technologies has introduced the norms of the digital society to the diplomatic practice. Moreover, the emergence of plural knowledges, identities and audiences has significantly changed diplomatic conduct. By using social media platforms like Twitter, diplomats transformed diplomacy into a public performance (Kopper, 2021, 314). The use of social platforms has not only enabled diplomats to communicate with larger audiences but transformed diplomacy into a public performance in front of these larger and more diverse audiences. Some researchers argue that diplomats use social media to communicate their messages and policies with a larger audience and strategically shape public opinion. Nevertheless, others suggest that diplomats do not simply aim to convey a message or sway public opinion. They are using new digital tools and adopting the norms of the digital society to mediate the estrangement and negotiate ambiguous identities. The present research embraces the second perspective since it will uncover the ways in which diplomats use digital platforms to mediate estrangement. In addition to adopting the norms of the digital society, diplomats have also embraced the necessary instruments to comply with the rules of the digital society including social media applications like Twitter. Gilboa (2016) argues that Twitter has thus become the most popular channel for communication between state officials, diplomats, politicians

and the public. Twitter has not only provided diplomats with a platform where they can share their ideas with a wider audience, but it has also relocated the process of negotiating and mediating estrangement to a diverse and intricate setting. Diplomats and embassies started using Twitter to communicate with internal, domestic and foreign publics and explain their foreign policy goals in 280 characters, which forced them to reduce their government's message to its core (Gilboa, 2016, 544).

The engagement with a wider audience and the emergence of mass digital technologies have substantially impacted the diplomatic practice in general and the diplomatic language in particular. Given the historical and cultural differences between the countries, diplomats needed strong linguistic abilities to make sure the message transmitted was the message understood in a specific location (Oglesby 2016, 244). To negotiate complex and sensitive issues, while minimizing misunderstandings and conflict, a suitable diplomatic language is needed. Accordingly, adopting a language characterized by ambiguity, vagueness and the use of euphemisms can provide room for interpretation, negotiation, dialogue and compromise. In this regard, courtesy and constructive ambiguity are considered characteristics of the professional diplomatic language (Jönsson, 2016, 82). In their efforts to mediate between estranged individuals, communities and groups, diplomats must navigate cultural, political, social and linguistic differences. Therefore, the use of standardized diplomatic language allows diplomats to negotiate their separate and ambiguous identities while minimizing the risk of offence and exacerbating tensions. A diplomatic language is an important tool used by diplomatic actors to prevent and minimize misunderstandings that lead to conflicts, bring reason to interstate discussions, soothe international relationships and ease tensions between states (Oglesby, 2016, 242). Additionally, it should be noted that diplomatic language is also used to indicate conflict in a way that prevents the conflict from escalating.

1.3 Humour as a Diplomatic Tool: Between Ambiguity and Common Culture

Oglesby (2016) suggests that the degree of ambiguity in diplomatic communication increases with increased visibility. Since diplomats are assigned to manage relationships of friendship and enmity, the use of a non-abrasive style of communication and the preservation of dignity and honour during diplomatic interactions are crucial to keep the lines of communication open even during hostile situations (Oglesby, 2016). Within the new global media ecology, the diplomatic discussion has changed and adopted a less scripted and less formal tone. Since diplomats can engage with the general public, there has been a shift towards an accessible and understandable language that includes the use of humour and popular culture references. In this context, the use of humour in public digital diplomacy emerged. As already mentioned, Manor (2020) argues that the first shift in the practice of public diplomacy was due to the growing use of digital technologies by diplomats and the second transition refers to the increasing use of humour online. The use of social media platforms by diplomats has fundamentally changed diplomatic conduct and language. Instead of long speeches, public digital diplomacy is now relying on short messages. To respect the cacophony of 280 Twitter characters, there is no room for nuance or extensive explanation which encourages the use of brief and humorous messages to convey pieces of information (Kopper, 2021, 313). Thus, it can be argued that in a world of estranged actors and communities, which are by definition separated from each other, the use of humour in public digital diplomacy serves as a tool for mediating relationships of estrangement.

While the use of humour in "Twiplomacy" is remarkable, it is crucial to recognize the strong connection between humour and diplomatic language since they both rely on the use of ambiguity. Ambiguity does not only occupy a particular place in the diplomatic

discourse but also in the humorous discourse. In this sense, ambiguity is intrinsic to both diplomacy and humour. Constructive ambiguity is widely used in diplomatic discourse and refers to the use of ambiguous language to deal with sensitive topics in order to further a political agenda (Byers, 2021, 93). Kopper (2021, 311) demonstrated that the concept of "constructive ambiguity", coined by Henry Kissinger, which has been frequently emphasized for diplomatic conduct is also used in humour. In this regard, he confirms that a diplomatic tweet relies on constructive ambiguity that has been proven to be useful in diplomatic conduct. In Kissinger's perspective, ambiguity can be constructive since some aspects of the conflict are flexible which makes room for negotiation (Pehar, 2001). Based on this logic, we can say that diplomats employ ambiguous language because their foreign policy goals are not defined in fixed terms, and they are always ready to make adjustments and negotiate. In diplomatic settings, diplomats intentionally use ambiguous language and purposefully leave some elements for interpretation when negotiating contentious issues. Similarly, the jokester also uses ambiguous language that is open to different interpretations. This suggests that different interpretations of the diplomatic and humorous discourses become constructive if and only if the communicator and the audience share the same interpretative culture.

In this way, Housni, Maliki and Biad (2019) demonstrate that the understanding and appreciation of certain jokes depend significantly upon sharing the same culture with the jokester. Along this line of thinking, a shared culture is deemed important for both diplomacy and joking. In this sense, the use of humour in diplomacy can be possible and even appears natural if diplomacy and joking involve sharing the same culture. This demonstrates that the existence of a shared culture and ambiguity is intrinsic to both humour and diplomacy. Der Derian (1996, 85) states that the diplomatic culture facilitates the mediation of estrangement. In this regard, since diplomats do not share the same culture

as the general public, the task of creating understanding and managing relationships of estrangement becomes challenging. Therefore, in order to communicate with different, plural and diverse audiences that do not share their same culture, diplomats have adopted the norms and embraced the tools used by the digital society and started employing humour to mediate estrangement within a complex setting that does not solely involve states but also includes different audiences and identities. In the realm of public diplomacy, diplomats are conveying a message to a different audience. To constructively communicate this message to the new audience, it must be framed and presented in a certain way, which may be different from the traditional presentation. In this sense, humour serves as a tool that allows diplomats to not only make the message accessible and relatable to the audience but to ultimately mediate their estrangement within the realm of public digital diplomacy.

This research focuses primarily on the information-conveying type of humour. In fact, the information-conveying jokes or the "substantial" jokes which contain historical, political, socio-economic and cultural information related to certain circumstances, events and communities, go beyond the entertainment of the recipient but aim to transfer a particular message (Housni and Maliki, 2018). The tweets posted by Russian and Ukrainian state representatives contain political, historical, cultural and social information as well as popular culture references. In this way, the recipient can indeed appreciate the amusing aspect of the joke while understanding the piece of information conveyed. Moreover, the joke can serve its dual purpose if the recipient is able to discern the subliminal message that triggers the humorous reaction (Housni and Maliki, 2018). Based on this logic, in the context of public digital diplomacy, the general public does not share the same culture that diplomats share with each other, operates on the basis of new knowledge and is not familiar with the mechanisms of international relations and diplomacy. For this reason, diplomats had to adapt their language and use other means and arguments because they acknowledge

the plurality and differences in the audiences, and they are disposed to mediate these new differences. In this sense, it can be argued that since diplomats adopted the norms of the digital society and adapted their language to the wider audience and started using humour to communicate with them, a new shared culture between the diplomats and their audiences has emerged within the realm of public digital diplomacy.

1.4 Diplomats' Constructive Use of Humour Online

To explore the use of humour in public diplomacy, Chernobrov suggests the term "strategic humour". According to Chernobrov (2022, 279), strategic humour refers to the use of humour by states to advance particular interpretations of debated international events to domestic and foreign publics. Simply put, by constructing ambiguity and exploiting uncertainty, states strategically use humour to convey serious messages to their different audiences, in an entertaining way, to frame events in ways that serve their interests, advance their state narrative, divert external criticism, and challenge opposing narratives (Chernobrov, 2022, 286). Moreover, Chernobrov (2022, 292) argues that strategic humour is employed as a tool of public digital diplomacy and contributes to the spread of post-truth diplomacy because it exploits and intensifies the ambiguity surrounding contested events and uses emotive messages to assert consensus and truth. Following this line of thinking, diplomats employ humour because they operate in a space of ambiguity, already established by social media platforms, where various knowledges and truths can coexist and be negotiated.

Manor (2020) perceives the audiences as passive recipients of the messages conveyed by the diplomats. While studying the use of humour by Russian diplomats in the context of online public diplomacy, Manor (2020, 6) argues that diplomats use social media platforms to create a unique iBrand that leads to the individualisation of the nation-state. In their efforts to develop a distinctive iBrand, diplomats started employing humour online. The

use of humour by diplomats on social media can help them attract the digital public, make their arguments more persuasive by making people laugh and create a positive impact towards the ministry, embassy and state (Manor, 2020, 8). Based on this logic, he pointed out that diplomats strategically employ humour to achieve specific public diplomacy objectives and sway public opinion. In contrast, Chernobrov (2022) emphasizes the audience's agency in responding and interpreting and interacting with the humorous messages. In this study, I adopt the perspective that the audience possesses agency in receiving and interpreting the conveyed message. The audience is not passive recipients but active contributors to the meaning-making process since they are actively creating and negotiating the meanings of the conveyed messages. This approach will enable me to examine the interactions between diplomats and their audiences and comprehend how diplomatic messages are received, understood, interpreted and perhaps even changed in various settings and tailored to different contexts.

Moreover, since strategic humour is driven by post-truth public diplomacy, some states strategically employ a humorous style to promote their narratives, resist dominant hegemonic discourses and contrast mainstream interpretations with their own version of the "truth" (Chernobrov, 2021). The substantial change that public diplomacy has known due to the mass adoption of digital technologies has made the use of brief, catchy and easily shareable sarcastic messages increasingly popular in informing the public about foreign policy issues and challenging certain narratives. In this way, humour is used to convey serious messages since humorous messages are memorable, widely shareable and produce viral content (Chernobrov, 2021). Humour also provides the audience with a feeling of engagement. Laughing at political memes on Twitter may give people a feeling of political engagement without actually understanding how complex a problem is (Malmvig, 2022, 8). Political humour can shape the audience's perception of politics and influence public

opinion. It can be appealing to youthful viewers who are learning about politics more and more through comedic shows and soft news (Chernobrov, 2022, 291).

1.5 Unveiling the Role of Humour in Times of War

While nation-states always place high importance on public diplomacy, it is during times of crisis that it becomes a crucial instrument as nations work to mediate mutual estrangement when the relationships are conflictual. Moreover, in times of crisis and war, the public becomes increasingly eager to learn about foreign policy matters and the evolution of the conflict. In this way, Diplomats may use humour, during crisis times, to rally domestic and foreign public support, shape the public's perception of the crisis and ultimately mediate mutual estrangement. In the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war, Budnitsky (2022) argues that the use of humour by diplomats has deepened the disengagement between the two countries. He suggests that diplomats from Russia and Ukraine employ humour to engage their target audiences to support their short-term and long-term objectives. Following this line of thinking, Budnitsky asserts that by ridiculing and belittling its Ukrainian and Western adversaries through humour, Russia aims to justify and legitimize its full-scale invasion of Ukrainian territory. On the other hand, Ukraine's jokes about Russia aim to keep the public's interest and, consequently, maintain wartime assistance.

The central argument of this study is that diplomats employ humour to mediate estrangement by sending ambiguous messages that can be negotiated and adjusted based on the audience's reactions. To better understand how exactly humour helps to mediate mutual estrangement when confronted with different and plural audiences in a space that does not have the traditional diplomatic shared culture, we need to take a closer look at humour. In humour studies, there are numerous theories and models that attempt to analyse humour in all of its manifestations that can serve as a theoretical framework for this study. To understand how humour is used in public digital diplomacy in times of war, two theories of humour seem relevant to my study: the

superiority theory and the relief theory. According to Meyer (2000), the superiority theory implies that people laugh at others because they perceive some form of superiority over them. Along this line of thinking, Thomas Hobbes (as cited in Brassett, Browning and O'Dwyer, 2021, 13) considered humour as the victory over the people we are laughing at. In this sense, triumph and glory are symbolized by laughter. In his "Essay on Laughter", Elias (2017, 293) stated that "In Hobbes' circles, laughter often had an edge and a point, sharp like those of a dagger, and it was meant to hurt, wound, and humiliate". Moreover, some theorists also call this theory "the disparagement theory" since the type of humour used is called "disparagement humour". In their article entitled "Social Consequences of Disparagement Humour: A Prejudiced Norm Theory", Ford and Ferguson (2004, 79) define disparagement humour as "the humour that denigrates, belittles or maligns an individual or social group". This type of humour is known for its tendency to deride and humiliate social out-groups. Because of its dire negative consequences, humour theorists disapprove of the use of disparagement humour in public spheres. In this respect, Martineau (1972) argued that disparagement humour has a divisive function since it fosters and intensifies hostility towards the targeted group.

On the other hand, Brassett (2016) argues that humour is employed to challenge and disrupt existing power relations. In this way, according to Kant (as cited in Brassett, Browning and O'Dwyer, 2021, 1), humour should be used against members of ruling circles. Housni and Maliki (2018) suggest that humour can also be considered a coping mechanism which helps in resolving the contradictions, ambiguities and inconsistencies brought on by power imbalances. Humour offers people the chance to undermine a force they would otherwise be unable to oppose and release suppressed emotions. Humour enables the dominated side to express their dissatisfaction with the frustrating reality and the existing inequalities. It can also play a substantial role in challenging power dynamics and opposing oppression (Housni and Maliki, 2018). In this way, humour can be employed to denounce the tragedy of the war and challenge

power relations. Accordingly, humour is seen as a means of resistance in the hand of the less powerful.

Following the logic of the superiority theory, Housni, Maliki and Biad (2018) suggest that humour initiation is linked to power and dominance. McGhee (1979) states that jokes are generally initiated by those in higher positions than those in lower-status positions. The existing hierarchical structures, the relationships of power and the inequality of status make it possible for the more powerful to direct jokes at the less powerful, while the latter only has the option of demeaning themselves in front of their superiors. Humour contributes to preserving the social relationships that exist within the hierarchy structure Housni and Maliki and Biad, 2019). In this respect, in unequal encounters marked by power disparities, the "privileged" believe that using humour represents a way to sustain and maintain the current social order, which would guarantee the protection of their interests, their authority and their position of power, while the "unprivileged" sees joking as a strategy to cope with the injustice of established social hierarchal structures (Housni and Maliki and Biad, 2019).

Proponents of the superiority theory argue that in conflict times, the dominant group make jokes about the group they are attempting to control (Zelizer, 2010). In this way, humour contributes to solidifying in-group unity and excluding others. Since jokes often rely on the existence of a shared culture and knowledge, it allows individuals to identify with a broader community. Communities have the tendency to create "in-jokes" to strengthen self-identity and membership (Brassett, Browning and O'Dwyer, 2021, 13). Humour serves as a substantial tool for building community and (re)producing narratives of self-identity by defining "in-group" and "out-groups" (Brassett, Browning and O'Dwyer, 2021, 13). Malmvig (2022, 5) suggests that through humorous practices, identity is constructed by distinguishing an idealized "Self" and an assumedly ridiculous and delegitimized "Other". In this case, the other who is considered the butt of the joke is ridiculed, belittled and portrayed stereotypically. Based on this logic, humour

differentiates between an “in-group” who gets the joke and an “out-group” who serves as the butt of the joke (Brassett, Browning and O'Dwyer, 2021, 15).

By laughing alongside certain people and laughing at others, the jokester includes some people in their inner circle and excludes others. By mocking, ridiculing and fostering stereotypes about the enemy, humour contributes to reinforcing in-group solidarity. Based on this logic and in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war, Budnitsky (2022) suggests that Ukraine has used liberal Western audiences to mock Russia in order to claim its unity with the Euro-Atlantic region while keeping Russia outside. In order to symbolically distinguish Ukraine from her historical Russian Other and, more practically, to keep the West's attention on Ukraine's battle for independence, public diplomacy humour in Ukraine consists largely of jokes made at Russia's expense, while Russia’s humorous tweets are directed to the West and not to Ukraine (Budnitsky, 2022).

The other theory that is relevant to my study is called the relief theory and it suggests that people laugh in order to release psychological tension (Meyer, 2000, 312). According to relief theorists, humour allows people to release their worries, fears, stress and anxieties. Accordingly, humour enables people to undermine a force they would otherwise be unable to oppose and to release suppressed emotions (Meyer, 2000, 312). In times of war, humour also allows people to express their deepest worries and frustrations to endure their pain and the uncertainty of the post-war future and heal emotional wounds (Willis, 2002, 82). This goes along with the relief theory that suggests that humour helps release tensions and process difficult emotions. It enables them to fuel emotional release and cope with the effects of the conflict. In this way, humour operates as a coping mechanism during wartime.

Drawing on the two theories, we can say that they generate two different hypotheses: diplomats use humour as a disparaging tool to reinforce or challenge power dynamics or as a way to alleviate tensions. In a way, it can be hypothesised that diplomats use humour as a strategy to

reduce tension or as an abrasive tool to challenge power relations. In fact, various researchers have explored the different functions of humour. Some argued that it serves to ease tension, solidify in-group solidarity, reinforce power dynamics or challenge them. Nevertheless, I can argue that these various functions are ultimately linked to power relations that are open for negotiation given the ambiguity of humour. Humour's ambiguity makes the negotiation, the reinforcement and the subversion of power dynamics possible. Therefore, I think that the superiority theory enables us to better understand how humour functions in online public diplomacy within the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war.

Following this line of thinking, it can be argued that Ukrainian state representatives are employing humour to challenge power dynamics and claim their agency that is not acknowledged by Russia as Budnitsky (2022) noted that Russian public diplomacy humour is directed to the West rather than to Ukraine in order to deny Ukrainian agency in the conflict, which is seen as a local incident in a larger existential conflict with the West. This demonstrates that in this case, power and humour are closely linked and that humour can be employed to reinforce, negotiate or subvert power dynamics.

In fine, the intrinsic ambiguity of both diplomacy and humour enables the employment of humour not only as an instrument to convey certain messages, communicate foreign policy or shape the public's perceptions around a particular issue but to ultimately mediate between estranged actors, communities and groups, particularly in the context of online public diplomacy where diplomats are communicating and engaging with a broader audience. Furthermore, as highlighted in the existing literature, the use of humour is strongly connected to power dynamics and its ambiguity gives room for the messages to be adjusted and negotiated. In the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war, diplomats do not send fixed messages, but they are always ready to adjust them based on the reaction they get from the audiences. In this way,

humour's ambiguity allows diplomats to adjust their messages, navigate complex power relations and ultimately mediate estrangement.

Part 2

2.1 Critical Discourse Analysis of Humorous Twitter Posts

In order to conduct an in-depth analysis of the humorous tweets, the present study will adopt the methodology of critical discourse analysis (CDA). Since humour relies on ambiguity, it allows diplomats to convey complex and multi-layered messages. Therefore, humorous tweets should be thoroughly examined to uncover plausible interpretations.

Fairclough suggests that CDA includes "analysis of text, analysis of processes of text production, consumption and distribution, and sociocultural analysis of the discursive event" (Fairclough, 1995, 23). CDA explores the underlying meaning beyond what the apparent meaning suggests in order to rationalize ideas. As a result, discourse practice is tightly linked to discursive events, which provide historical contexts that reveal how and why texts were created (Aljarallah, 2017, 12). Critical discourse analysis carefully examines the broader historical, political, social and cultural context in which texts were produced and communicated and looks for meaning that goes beyond the grammatical structure (Harvey, 2012-2023). In this sense, critical discourse analysis aims to expose ideology and power to comprehend the connection between textual elements and broader social practices (Harvey, 2012-2023).

Most importantly, CDA focuses primarily on the role of discourse in legitimizing, reproducing and challenging power relations and dominance (Van Djik, 1993). In this respect, CDA would enable me to comprehend the power dynamics at work in the creation of humorous Twitter posts by Russian and Ukrainian state representatives. CDA is therefore suitable for my study since it will allow me to examine and reconstruct the political, social, cultural and historical contexts that shape the production and consumption of the texts to enable a comprehensive

interpretation. In this case, it is concerned with the broader discursive context of the Russian-Ukrainian war in which the tweets were posted and received by the audience.

For the purpose of this study, I carefully selected humorous tweets created by state representatives and their audiences before and after the outbreak of the war on the 24th of February 2022 to illustrate my argument. To do so, I went through the Russian and Ukrainian official government Twitter accounts, their respective foreign and defence ministries and their most followed embassies. I have also chosen tweets and comments generated by the general public.

The analysis of humorous tweets brings up methodological limitations, most importantly, concerning their interpretation. Since ambiguity is intrinsic to diplomacy and humour and given that humour is known for its contingency and volatility, it is challenging to interpret the tweets because there is no correct interpretation, and the tweets are open to various interpretations. Although I cannot say with absolute certainty that the creator of the tweets intentionally intended this specific meaning, I am convinced that by carefully examining, contextualizing and analysing the humorous tweets, I can provide valid interpretations. Moreover, the study presents other limitations. Judging what is humorous or not is subjective. However, the selected tweets contain linguistic features that are frequently linked to humour (like the use of puns, sarcasm, ridicule, and irony …), the use of memes, images, videos or GIFs that can be seen as funny. In this study, I am using the term "Humour" in a general sense as an umbrella term for everything that is considered "Funny". I also employ the terms "humorous", "ludicrous" and "funny" interchangeably.

Moreover, due to the narrow focus of this research and the limited number of examined data, the study cannot draw broad generalizations and lead to general conclusions about how state representatives employ humour in online public diplomacy during times of war. it is therefore important to note that the study of this complex and multidimensional phenomenon cannot be

limited to a single argument. However, looking at the analysed tweets through the lenses of mediating estrangement provides new insights into how humour is used by diplomats in public digital diplomacy during war settings.

2.2 Mediating Estrangement by Other "memes"

Humour serves as a diplomatic tool to mediate between estranged actors and groups. The following section will illustrate and support this proposition with examples of wartime humour from Russian and Ukrainian state representatives as well as the audiences. The war between Russia and Ukraine started after Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula in 2014. Amid this unlawful annexation, which was condemned by the international community, tensions raised, and the conflict further escalated between the two countries and transformed into a full-scale invasion in 2022 (Jenkins, 2023). The war between Russia and Ukraine has started not only on the battlefield but also on social media platforms. Before the war's outbreak in February 2022, Budnitsky (2022) suggested that Ukrainian humour shed light on the approaching Russian threat. To do so, the Ukrainian official government Twitter account @Ukraine posted an image depicting four types of headaches.

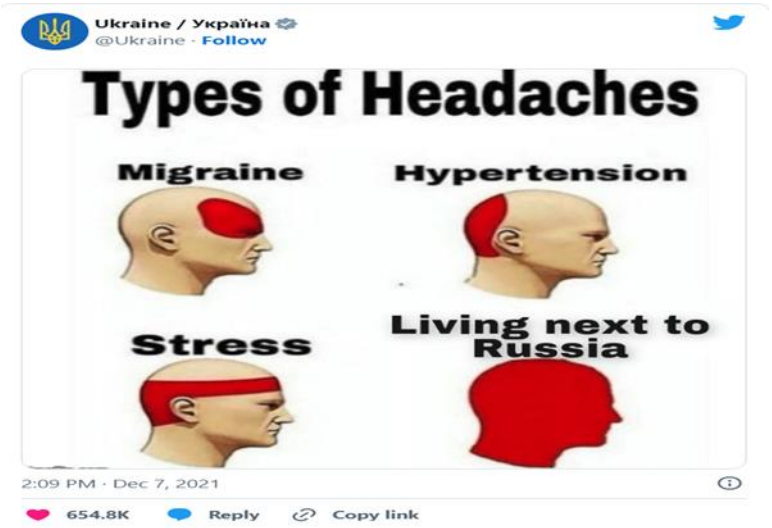


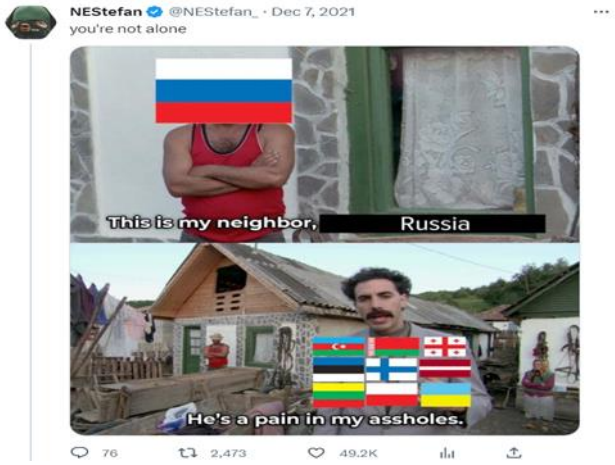
Figure 1: "Types of Headaches" tweet
Source: https://twitter.com/Ukraine/status/1468206078940823554

Figure 1 shows an image that displays four types of headaches: migraine, hypertension, stress and “living next to Russia”. The tweet is entirely image-dependent and was posted with no caption attached to it. The image depicts four types of headaches while showing in red the exact affected area of the head. In the last type labelled “living next to Russia”, the red colour covers the entire head. This suggests that among all the types of headaches, the headache attributed to living next to Russia is all-encompassing compared to the other types that only impact specific zones of the head and it is thus portrayed as the most severe one. In this tweet, the use of the image enabled to emphasize the fact that having Russia as a neighbour results in severe and widespread discomfort and pain that is challenging to pinpoint and manage.

The tweet was posted on the 7th of December 2021. In November 2021, Russia stationed a large number of troops near the Ukrainian border (Amiel, 2021). Given that specific context and the broader context of the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine, this tweet came to comment on the hostile Russian-Ukrainian relationships in general and on the deployment of Russian troops on the Ukrainian border in particular. After analysing the subtext of the humorous message, I argue that the message conveyed in this tweet is not new. Ukraine has always denounced Russia’s hostile actions and stated that Russia is a bad neighbour. However, the tool used to convey the message is new. The message has always been said in a serious and elaborate way in summits and via diplomatic channels. However, Ukraine used humour because they are communicating with the general public, and they aim to make the message understandable without having to give a history lesson to their audiences.

By designating the final form of headache as "living next to Russia," Ukraine highlights its position as a victim of Russia’s hostile actions and implies that Russia is the source of its pain. It also shows that due to Russia’s aggressions and unlawful annexation of Crimea, Russia is the one responsible for the conflict between the two countries. By doing so, Ukraine is aiming to

challenge Russia's dominant position and power dynamics. The tweet went viral and other subtexts were created by the audiences who interacted with it.



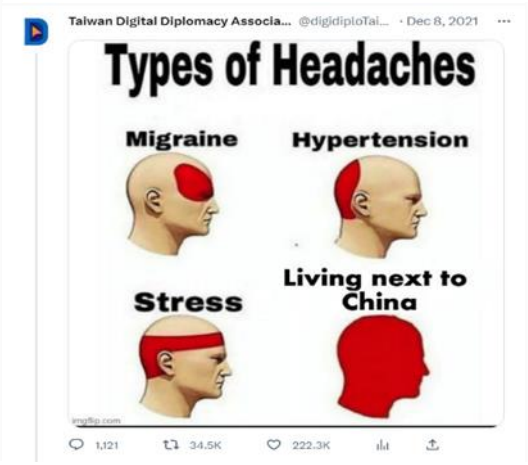


Figure 2: "This is my neighbor" comment

Figure 3: "Living next to China" comment

The first comment (Figure 2) is featuring a scene from the movie "Borat" where he was talking about his neighbour. Russia is portrayed as Borat's neighbour and Borat is embodying Russia's neighbouring countries: Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine. In this tweet, these countries are saying: "This is my neighbour Russia and he is a pain in my assholes". The text attached to the picture is "You're not alone". The image and the text attached to it suggest that Ukraine is not suffering alone and Russia's neighbouring countries also think that Russia is a bad neighbour, and they are all suffering from its hostile actions and aggressions. The second comment (Figure 3) was posted by an account named "Taiwan Digital Diplomacy Association" and it features the same image posted by @Ukraine about the types of headaches but instead of labelling the last type of headache as living next to Russia, the user changed it to "living next to China". This shows that the audience adapted the same "meme" and tailored it to their specific context.

Two days later, the Russian official government Twitter account @Russia responded to the humorous tweet by @Ukraine (Figure 1).

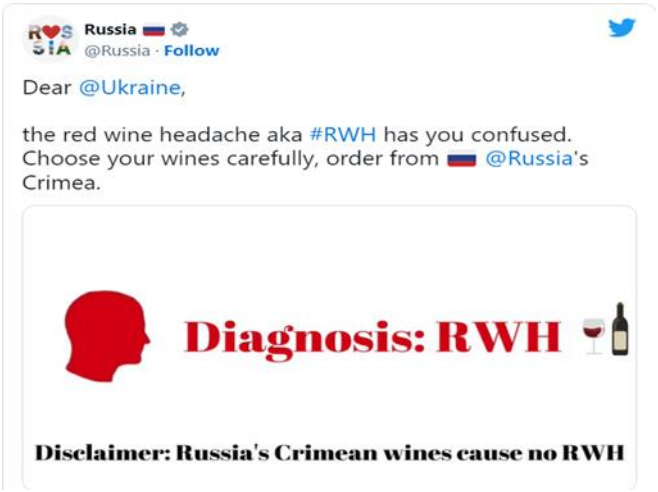


Figure 4: "Russia's Crimean Wines" tweet
Source: https://twitter.com/Russia/status/1468908945024692228

This tweet (Figure 4) was a direct response to the tweet posted by @Ukraine. The official government account of Russia @Russia tagged the official government account of Ukraine @Ukraine and stated that the headache that spans the entire head featured in @Ukraine's tweet is actually a red wine headache (RWH). The tweet contains an image depicting the head covered in red (the one previously featured in the @Ukraine tweet to show that living next to Russia causes an all-encompassing headache) with a text that reads: "Diagnosis: RWH" accompanied with a small emoji of a glass and bottle of red wine. Moreover, at the bottom of the visual, there is a text that reads: "Disclaimer: Russia's Crimean wines cause no RWH".

In this tweet, Russia undermined Ukraine's assertion that the severe headache results from living next to Russia and claims that it is due to their poor wine choices. The hashtag #RWH (Red Wine Headache) emphasizes the tweet's sarcastic tone by suggesting that Ukraine's headache is the result of bad wine choices. Russia advised Ukraine to carefully choose the wine they drink and purchase it from "Russia's Crimea" because they have good quality wines that do not cause headaches. By recommending Crimean wines and encouraging Ukraine to purchase wine from "Russia's Crimea", Russia is making a statement and confirming its control and sovereignty over the contested territory of Crimea which was illegally annexed by Russia in 2014.

The message that Russia aimed to convey via this tweet is that Ukraine needs to accept the hard truth that Crimea is Russian and not Ukrainian. In short, they want to say: "Crimea is ours and you are in pain because you are not able to accept this truth". By doing so, Russia aims to undermine Ukraine's political legitimacy and sovereignty over Crimea and maintain its superior position and dominance over Ukraine. The tweet received negative reactions from audiences who were calling out the Russian illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014.

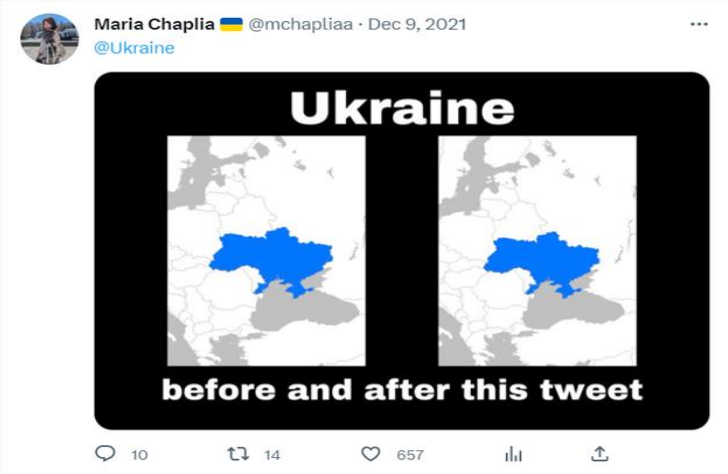


Figure 5: "Before and After" tweet

As shown in Figure 5, the user tagged the official government account of Ukraine and posted a map of Ukraine before and after the tweet posted by Russia. The two maps include Crimea in the Ukrainian territory. By doing so, the Twitter user confirms that Crimea is Ukrainian and not Russian. In short, the tweets created by state representatives and the general public show the way in which humour enabled the establishment of a framework where all actors understand each other and agree to disagree.

Budnitsky (2022) states that since the full-scale invasion started in February 2022, Ukraine has significantly increased its use of humour to keep the West's attention and support. According to him, in the first six months of the war, @Ukraine posted twice as many humorous tweets as they did in the six months prior to the full-scale invasion. The 24th of February marks the first

day of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. On this day, the Ukrainian official government Twitter account @Ukraine has posted a political cartoon depicting Hitler and Putin.

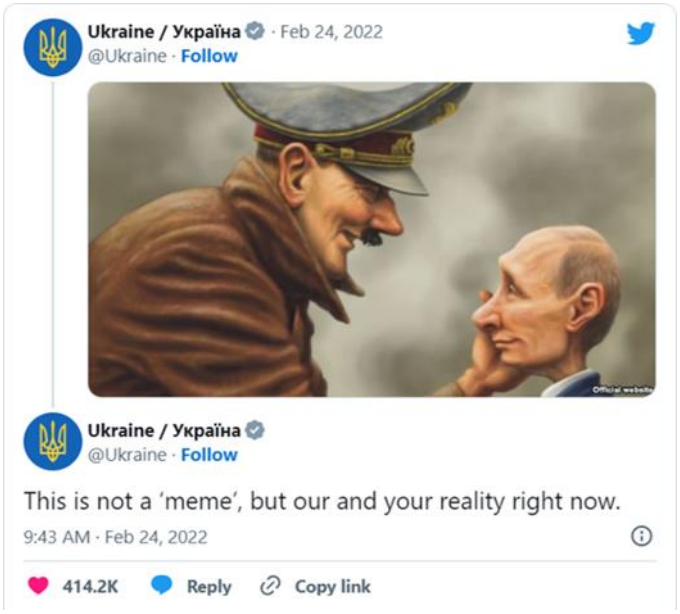


Figure 6: "Hitler and Putin" tweet
Source: https://twitter.com/Ukraine/status/1496767831182041089

It is important first to mention that the cartoon is inspired by the well-known photograph of Hitler patting an apprentice from Hitlerjugend (Nazi Youth Organization).

Figure 7: photograph of Hitler
Source: https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/volkssturm-im-zweiten-weltkrieg-hitlers-letztes-aufgebot-100.html

Figure 6 represents a cartoon depicting an oversized Hitler smiling down and looking at Putin with admiration, affection and pride while putting his hand on Putin's cheek. Since this tweet

is inspired by Figure 7, it suggests that Putin is considered an apprentice of Hitler. The tweet is entirely image-dependent and was displayed without an attached text to it. The same account posted a follow-up tweet, after approximately two hours, saying: “This is not a meme, but our and your reality right now”. @Ukraine uses the expression “our and your reality” in their follow-up tweet which may imply that Ukraine is attempting to create a shared reality and experience with the audiences. By stating that this is not only Ukraine’s reality, but it is also the reality of the audiences as well, Ukraine tries to show that Russia is not only a threat to Ukraine but to the world in general and Europe in particular.

On the 24th of February 2022 which marks the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Washington Post reported that Putin compared Ukraine to Nazi Germany in his war declaration (Berger, 2022). According to the same source, Putin claimed that the war against Ukraine aims to stop the genocide of Russian speakers on the Ukrainian territory and “de-nazify Ukraine” (Berger, 2022). In this way, this tweet came as a response to Putin’s claims. By comparing Putin to Hitler, the official account of @Ukraine implies that negotiations with Putin are pointless as confirmed by the “Munich stereotype” that suggests that we do not negotiate with the villain. In other words, Hitler represents the embodiment of evil which is largely due to the horrors committed during the Holocaust. The portrayal of Putin as Hitler’s apprentice suggests that Putin’s Russia is an absolute evil that cannot be subject to diplomatic negotiations, and it represents an entity that is beyond the pale of negotiation.

Within hours, the image went viral and sparked a range of responses on Twitter. The comments on this tweet suggest that people found that it was not the proper response to a deadly serious and sensitive issue like the invasion.

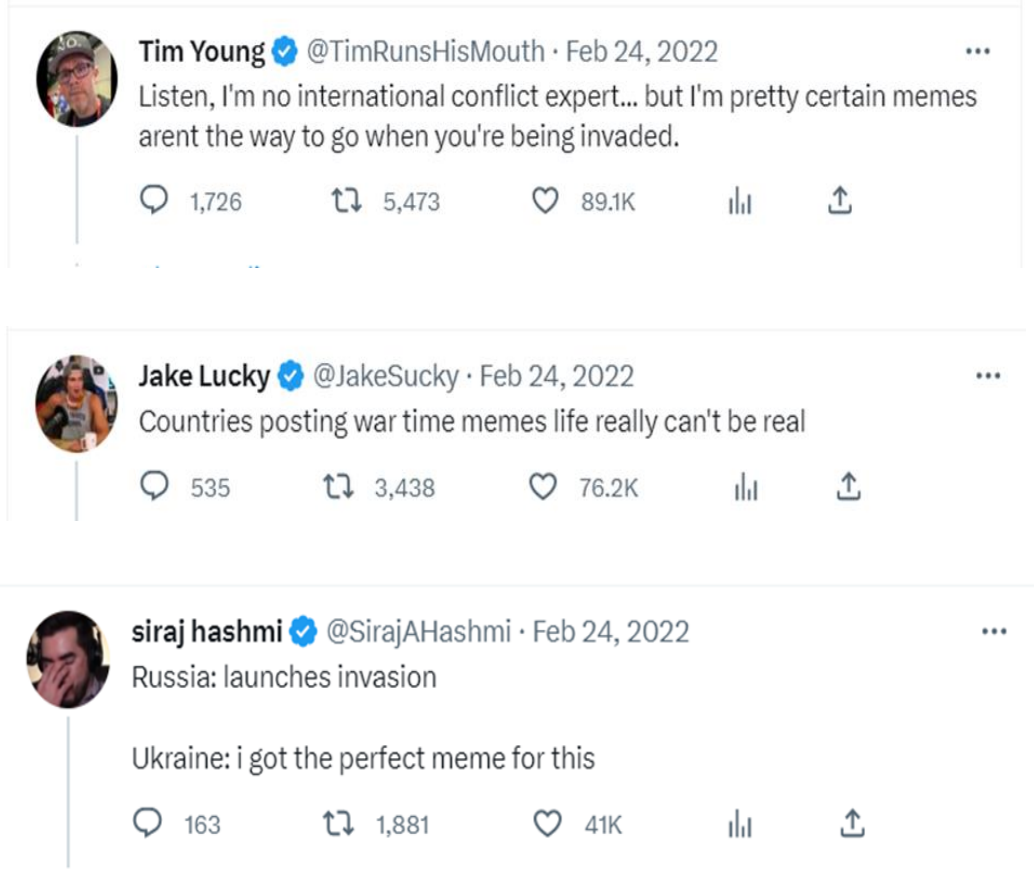


Figure 8: Comments from the "Hitler and Putin" tweet

These comments (Figure 8) show that the use of humour by @Ukraine was not well received by the audience since they considered it inappropriate to make "memes" about serious matters like war especially when the country was just invaded. In the first comment, the commenter started his comment with "I am no international conflict expert". This clearly emphasizes the importance and effectiveness of using humour to engage with the general public who may not possess the necessary background to understand the complex historical and political contexts of a certain topic. While diplomats do not need to use such cartoons or memes to communicate with other diplomats, these visuals represent an effective tool to communicate with a wider audience, capture their attention and make the conveyed message accessible and engaging. In sum, the comments show that the audiences did not approve of the use of humour in the war context. For this reason, the account posted a follow-up tweet to indicate that this is not a "meme", but it is "our" and "your" reality. The follow-up tweet is a reaction to the criticism

that the cartoon had provoked. By doing so, @Ukraine aimed to highlight that the cartoon is not a "meme", and it is portraying a serious and tragic reality that Ukraine and the world are facing.

In its efforts to mediate estrangement between different actors and collectives, @Ukraine made a reference to a well-known historical event that can easily be recognized by the audiences and resonate with their existing ideas and knowledge.

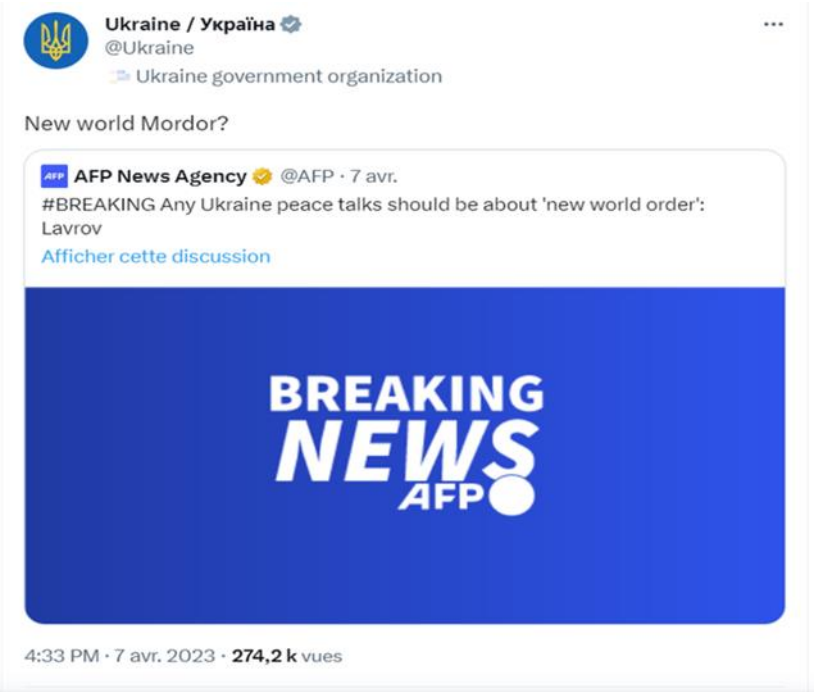


Figure 9: "New World Mordor" tweet
Source: https://twitter.com/Ukraine/status/1644347755861536772

The Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that Ukraine peace talks must establish a "new world order" where Russian interests are taken into consideration (Euronews, April 8, 2023). After this, the official government account of Ukraine @Ukraine retweeted that and added a caption saying, "New world Mordor ?" It is clear that there is a play on words between "Mordor" and "Order". The word "Mordor" is referring to a fictional place created by the author of Lord of the Rings, J.R.R. Tolkien. In the book series and the movie adaptations, Mordor is represented as a dark and desolate place that is controlled by the evil antagonist Sauron (Lowne,

Hall, Bauer, 2018). Mordor can be thought of as the land of darkness controlled by evil forces (Lowne, Hall, Bauer, 2018).

It is crystal clear that Ukraine used a reference to Mordor from the Lord of the Rings to imply that the new world that Russia is asking for would be dark, dangerous, oppressive and full of evil. Moreover, since Mordor, in the lord of the Rings, is ruled by Sauron (an evil character), it appears that the new world proposed by Lavrov would be controlled by Russia which is compared to the fictional character Sauron and portrayed as evil. From another perspective, the word "Mordor" sounds similar to the word "Murder", it is possible that Ukraine purposefully used a wordplay, exploiting the existing phonological and syntactic similarity between "Mordor" and "Murder" to imply that the new world suggested by Russia might lead to aggressiveness, violence, bloodshed and death. In this sense, the tweet entails that Ukraine perceives Russia as a danger to the norms and tenets of the liberal order by making reference to a fictional land plagued with tyranny, authoritarianism, violence and oppression.

Moreover, it is important to mention that other tweets posted by the official government account of Ukraine also make a reference to the "Hobbit" and "Lord of the Rings". In this way, Ukraine is using popular culture references from well-known Western movies to convey serious messages and make them accessible, understandable, appealing and memorable to their audience. The use of references from these two movies and depicting fictional characters can be seen as a public diplomacy strategy to engage with a wider audience, especially with a younger one while ridiculing Russia and showing the absurdity and the ridiculousness of its actions. The "Hobbit" and the "Lord of the Rings" are significantly popular around the world and employing these characters makes the memes more relatable and accessible for an audience which is not equipped with the necessary knowledge and is not familiar with Ukrainian politics and the ongoing war. By strategically exploiting the inherent ambiguity of the humorous

message, Ukraine aims to create a framework within which estranged actors learn to understand each other and agree to disagree.

Budnitsky (2022) states that most of the humorous tweets posted by Russian state representatives are directed to the West and not to Ukraine. However, this tweet was essentially directed at Ukraine.

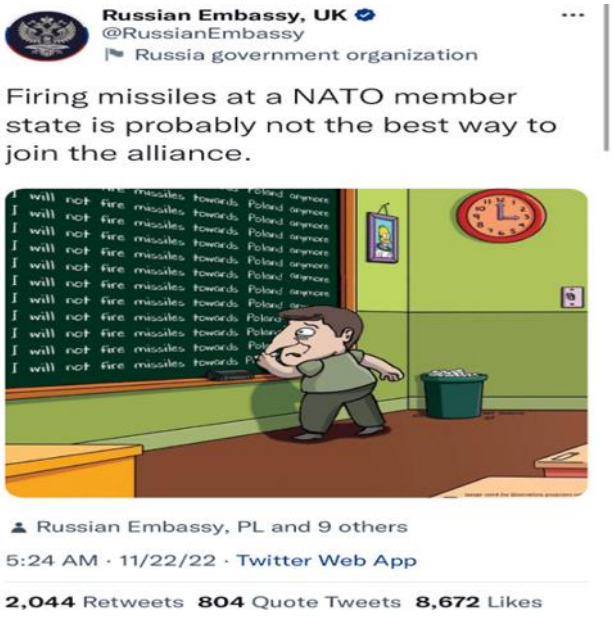


Figure 10: "Firing missiles at a NATO member state" tweet
Source: https://theintercept.com/2022/11/22/twitter-allows-russian-officials-share-antisemitic-cartoon-zelenskyy/

Figure 10 was posted by the Russian embassy in the UK and was deleted after. It is important to mention that I found the screenshot of this tweet in a journal article in "The Intercept". The tweet depicts a Simpson-style cartoon with a text that reads: "Firing missiles at a NATO member state is probably not the best way to join the alliance". The cartoon ridicules the Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky portraying him as a junior boy "Bart Simpson". This cartoon is taken from a scene where Bart Simpson had to write the same phrase on a chalkboard repeatedly as a sort of punishment. The sentence that is written several times on the chalkboard is "I will not fire missiles towards Poland anymore".

The text of the tweet refers to a missile that was more likely launched by Ukrainian forces to defend its territory from Russian strikes and landed on Polish territory and killed two people

(Mattingly et al., 2022). The tweet represents a sarcastic response to this incident. The depiction of Zelensky as a cartoon character with a large nose writing: “I will not fire missiles towards Poland anymore” on a blackboard in a classroom may be an attempt to ridicule and belittle the Ukrainian President's alleged incompetence and lack of experience in handling the crisis. By portraying Zelensky as a school kid, Russia is implying that Zelensky is just a kid who is not able to discuss matters of high politics. The caption that accompanied the text that reads: “Firing missiles at a NATO member state is probably not the best way to join the alliance” suggests that Russia is mocking Ukraine’s aspirations and efforts to join NATO. This sarcastic comment implies that the missile incident is a counterproductive step if Ukraine wishes to join NATO. The use of sarcasm and ridicule in this tweet demonstrates Russia’s aim to sow the seeds of doubt about Ukraine’s ability to join NATO and portray it as an unreliable partner and a weak state that cannot be taken seriously. The conveyed message in this tweet is not new but it is a consistent and longstanding message that was always expressed by Russian state representatives. Russia does not consider Ukraine a real independent state and Putin claimed in a NATO summit that “Ukraine is not even a state” (Düben, 2020). This means that the central message was always expressed in a serious way, however, humour is used in this case to engage with the general public.

The Tweet received backlash from the audience as they considered the cartoon “antisemitic” because it depicts Zelensky with a big nose which constitutes a stereotype of Jewish people. The audience asked Twitter to remove the tweet because it is insulting, and it circulates stereotypes about Jewish people. The tweet was deleted, and I was only able to find this tweet as a screenshot from a journal article. Numerous articles from “The Intercept”, “The Jerusalem Post”, “The Jewish Chronicle”, and “Israel National News” denounced the antisemitic nature of the tweet and urged Twitter to remove it (Mackey, 2022). In its efforts to justify its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia portrays Ukraine as an unreliable state that represents a threat to its

neighbours. This suggests that this tweet aims to reinforce the power dynamics between Russia and Ukraine by implying that Ukraine is an irresponsible actor that cannot be trusted while Russia remains the powerful actor.

Diplomats are not the only ones posting humour tweets related to the Russian-Ukrainian war. The audience is also actively engaged and produces humorous tweets as well. This tweet (Figure 11) is taken from an account named "Královec" @KralovecCzechia, and it says: "that it is the official account of Královec, formerly Kaliningrad".

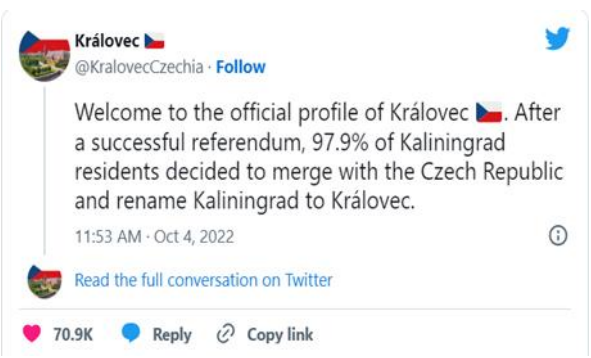


Figure 11: "Kralovec" tweet
Source: https://twitter.com/KralovecCzechia/status/

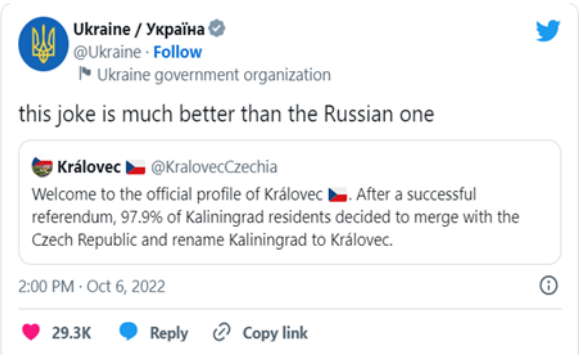


Figure 12: "Russia joke" tweet
Source: https://twitter.com/Ukraine/status/

The tweet (figure 11) states that a referendum was implanted in Kaliningrad and 97,9% of the city's population voted in favour of joining the Czech Republic and changing the city's name from Kaliningrad to Královec. The city of Kaliningrad is a Russian exclave that is geographically not connected with the rest of the country and shares borders with Poland and Lithuania. Before 1946, Kaliningrad belonged to Germany and was called "Konigsberg" in honour of the Czech king Přemysl Otakar II (Tétart, 2005). After 1946, the city was ceded to Russia as restitution for the Second World War and became part of the Soviet Union's territory and was renamed Kaliningrad (Tétart, 2005).

After the Kremlin's invasion of four regions in Ukraine (Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Luhansk and Donetsk), Russia held referendums similar to the one held in 2014 in Crimea to justify the unlawful annexation of Crimea (Al Jazeera, 2022). The Russian News Agency reported on the

27th of September that the accession to the Russian Federation was supported by 98.35% in Donetsk, 97. 83% in Luhansk, 97.79% in Zaporizhzhia and 97.05% in Kherson (Russian News Agency, 2022). Ukraine, members of the G7 and NATO confirmed that they would not recognize Russian-staged referendums and condemned them as illegitimate and sham (US embassy in Italy, 2022).

It is clear that the tweet has a sarcastic tone and was inspired by Russia's annexation of these four regions in Ukraine. The use of the expression "successful referendum" accompanied by the high percentage (97.9%) can be considered as a reference to Russia's staged referendums. The tweet depicts a hypothetical scenario of Kaliningrad joining the Czech Republic through a referendum. This suggests that the tweet is drawing a parallel with Russia's controversial referendums. By imitating Russia's rhetoric and justifications and framing it in a humorous way, the tweet aims to show Russia's actions as ridiculous and absurd and challenge their legitimacy. By doing so, the tweet aims to challenge the dominant narrative of Russian justifications and delegitimize them. The tweet mocks and ridicules the idea of using illegitimate referendums and forcing people to vote in order to justify the annexation of a territory.

The official government account of Ukraine retweeted this (Figure 12) and added a text that reads; "This is much better than the Russian joke". In this way, @Ukraine also contributed to portraying Russia's staged referendums and justifications for annexation as a "joke" and suggests that this fictional scenario of Kaliningrad joining the Czech Republic is funnier and more amusing compared to Russian justifications.

In the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war, social media is shaping the way the war is experienced and understood (OECD, November 3, 2022). Since the start of the full-scale invasion in February 2022, Russia has considerably increased its disinformation campaign and propaganda. On the other hand, Ukraine has made significant efforts to counter Kremlin's

propaganda by providing correct information and implementing legislative measures to counter the dangers posed by state-affiliated media in Russia (OECD, November 3, 2022).

Alongside the government, individuals have also responded to Russian disinformation and propaganda. In this respect, Budnitsky (2022) notes that the Russian-Ukrainian war witnessed a rise in the use of humour by "state-aligned jokesters" like the NAFO. Budnitsky defines the North Atlantic Fella Organization (#NAFO) as "a grassroots coalition of anonymous trolls, activists, and supportive politicians united in countering Russian narratives and raising funds for the Ukrainian army" (2022). The visuals used by this coalition generally feature Shiba-Inu and they are widely present in the online discussions of the Russian-Ukrainian war (Budnitsky, 2022).

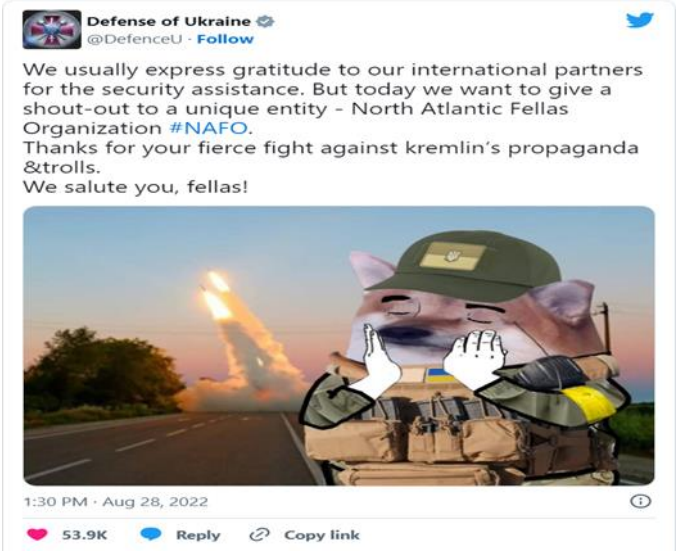


Figure 13: "NAFO" tweet
Source: https://twitter.com/DefenceU/status/1563851548643426304

In this tweet (Figure 13), the defence ministry of Ukraine is showing gratitude towards the NAFO for their fight against Russia's propaganda, disinformation and trolls. As mentioned before, the Russian-Ukrainian war has known a wave of misinformation from Russia that tries to justify and legitimize their invasion of Ukraine. Accordingly, many Twitter users like the NAFO, have started using humour to counter Kremlin's propaganda by ridiculing Russia's actions, messages and justifications. By acknowledging the NAFO's fierce fight against

Russian propaganda, the Ukrainian defence ministry is recognizing the importance of fighting propaganda in addition to military action in times of war. In this sense, the Ukrainian defence ministry acknowledges the importance of countering propaganda in addition to security assistance and military action. The visual used in this tweet depicts the Shiba-Inu dog that is featured in NAFO memes and trolls, in a military suit. By doing so, the Ukrainian defence ministry implies that NAFO is fighting Russia like what the Ukrainian military is doing. The Ukrainian military is fighting on the battlefield and NAFO is fighting Russia's propaganda online.

Conclusion

In *fine*, the chosen tweets have shown that diplomats use ambiguous language to negotiate their ambiguous identities. The deliberate and strategic use of humour in diplomatic tweets creates a space for different meanings, understandings and interpretative approaches. In this sense, humour's ambiguity allows the inclusion and coexistence of different perspectives and interpretations and ultimately mediate between estranged actors and communities. In a world characterized by estranged actors and social groups, humour can be considered a diplomatic instrument through which estrangement is mediated.

The tweets above have vividly shown that the strategic use of humour allows the establishment of a framework where different actors can learn to understand each other and agree to disagree about complex and controversial issues. Humour contributes to establishing and maintaining a shared framework of ideas in which conflictual interaction can take place. Moreover, the diplomatic humorous tweets have shown that diplomats are ready to adjust their messages based on the reactions they get from their broader audiences. Since foreign policy goals and national interests are not fixed, diplomats use humour because its ambiguity allows them to adjust their messages, negotiate their positions and navigate power dynamics. In this way, humour allows

diplomats to convey multi-layered messages, and navigate the complexities of the war while keeping the bridges when relationships are conflictual.

Furthermore, the chosen tweets have illustrated that diplomats have embraced the norms and rules of the digital society and employed humour to engage with a wider audience that is not intimately familiar with the diplomatic culture. Therefore, humour enabled the conveyed messages to move beyond estranged boundaries. As shown in the analysis, the use of humour gave state representatives the opportunity to make their messages understandable and engaging to their wider audience. In this respect, the selected tweets emphasized the role of deliberately using historical and popular culture references that resonate with the wider audience's knowledge and background in mediating estrangement. The inherent ambiguity of humour creates room for negotiation and dialogue even if relationships remain conflictual. In this sense, the humorous message contains multiple layers of meaning which provide space for a variety of interpretations and perceptions, establish a framework where ambiguous identities and ideas can coexist and ultimately mediate estrangement.

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