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The People's Laughter: War, Comedy, and the Soviet Legacy

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology

by

Amy Marie Garey

2020

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The People's Laughter: War, Comedy, and the Soviet Legacy

by

Amy Marie Garey

Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology

University of California, Los Angeles, 2020

Professor Nancy Levine, Chair

This dissertation argues that the massive Soviet socialization project, one that re-arranged people's relationships to time, to space, to money, to information, and to each other, left a legacy of traditions that re-entrench Soviet-marked moral frameworks. The ethnography describes one of the most popular extracurricular activities in the former Soviet bloc, the Club of the Cheerful and Clever (*Klub Veselykh i Nakhodshivykh*, or KVN), a team improv and skit game for young people that began in the Soviet 1960s, paying particular attention to the relationship between macro-level political structures, micro-level interpersonal discourse, and the traditions that result from the interaction between the two. The war that began in Ukraine in 2014 rocked the KVN world, creating physical barriers to travel between the two countries, media blockages, and cleavages in KVN organizations that had operated for over fifty years. I examine how team comedy institutions in Russia and Ukraine changed in the wake of the war, but it is people, unfortunately, have been divided more than institutions as such. In the main, this dissertation describes how, and why, social structures get reproduced. People re-make, alter, and reinscribe traditions as they orient towards locally-constructed regimes of value. I draw on data from archival sources, participant observation, interviews, attendance at live competitions, and analysis of fifty years of performance footage to trace moral evaluations in the activity that Russians call the "national game" (*"narodnaia igra"*),

focusing on two cities: Irkutsk, Russia and Odessa, Ukraine. KVN offers a lens through which to investigate moral stancetaking in Russia and Ukraine—two countries where the “same” traditional game indexes different narratives of belonging, exclusion, nation, and personhood. By linking discourses of ideal virtues to the everyday practice of contemporary KVN—brainstorming sessions, rehearsals, parties—I survey the institutional, interdiscursive, and interpersonal dynamics that led Soviet ideology to outlive the Soviet Union.

The dissertation of Amy Marie Garey is approved.

David MacFadyen

Mariko Tamanoi

Yunxiang Yan

Nancy Levine, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2020

For Stapp Beeton—not in memory of a teacher no longer teaching  
but as evidence of influence still felt.

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## NOTES ON TRANSLITERATION AND TRANSCRIPTION

My transliteration from Russian to English follows a modified version of the Library of Congress standard. Transliteration from Ukrainian to English follows the Library of Congress standard.

<b>Russian</b>	<b>Romanization</b>
а	a
б	b
в	v
г	g
д	d
е	e
ё	ë
ж	zh
з	z
и	i
й	i
к	k
л	l
м	m
н	n
о	o
п	p
р	r
с	s
т	t
у	u

ф	f
х	kh
ц	ts
ч	ch
ш	sh
щ	shch
ь	' (soft sign)
э	e
ю	iu
я	ia

In the final position  
 ii becomes y  
 iia becomes ia

In the initial position  
 Ia becomes Ya  
 Iu becomes Yu

There are often both Russian and Ukrainian spellings of Ukrainian place names. I have defaulted to Ukrainian spellings except when quoting someone who used the Russian name (e.g. “Kharkov” instead of “Kharkhiv”) or because that's the way it was written in the media originally cited.

### Notes on Transcription

Much of the transcribed speech in this dissertation is done not in blocks, but in intonation units—psychologically salient chunks of discourse (Chafe 1994, 57–59). Breaks between intonation units usually occur when a breath is taken or speech is slowed down, often at the end of a phrase (Du Bois 1992). Transcribing in intonation units allows for the analysis of patterns in discourse, especially across speaker turns.

*Transcription conventions:*

Em dash (—)	Truncated intonation unit
Underline	Emphasis
Brackets [ ]	Overlapping speech
<VOX>	Marked prosody
°small circles°	Whisper

## AKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project would not have been possible without the support of league editors in Irkutsk, Odessa, Kharkiv, Rivne, and the Moscow region who welcomed me not only at KVN games but often into rehearsal, training, and editing sessions, as well. Thanks, in particular, to the editors at Odessa National University, the Odessa League of Laughter, League of Laughter, the Baikal League, and the Moscow Region First League. I won't single out individual teams for thanks. I can neither count nor quantify all the ways the teams I met, on- and off-stage, contributed to this dissertation. The same goes for individual KVNshiki. I feel lucky to have interviewed over sixty individuals (not counting "team interviews"), ranging in age from eighteen to eighty, and none of those people can be called key informants. Everyone's story proved terribly valuable to me, even if it is not represented in the pages that follow.

I would also like to thank the professors at UCLA who helped me think through and shepherd this text to completion, especially my committee members, Nancy Levine, David MacFadyen, Mariko Tamanoi, and Yunxiang Yan. I am glad, too, that I got to work with two scholars whose work did not directly bear on this dissertation, but who enriched my time at the University and guided me towards new projects: Vyacheslav Ivanov (Slavic) and Russell Schuh (Linguistics). Both passed away shortly before the dissertation was completed, proving that even academics are mortal, and reminding me to cherish the conversations we have while we can have them.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Before beginning doctoral studies at UCLA Amy Garey worked as an educator and social justice advocate. She has taught English as a foreign language to university students in Russia, to undocumented Central American immigrants in Texas, and to Congolese refugees in California. She's worked or volunteered for a number of nonprofit organizations, including the Texas Campaign for the Environment, the Literacy Coalition of Central Texas, the Angel Coalition (human trafficking prevention), Winning Words (speech and debate), and Global Scholar. A drive to service also led her to posts in Americorps and the U.S. Navy.

Garey received her B.A. at the University of Texas and her master's degree at the University of Chicago. She has published on issues of semiotics, gender, and historical representation.

## Introduction

*Together we will create high spirits  
The laughter of rainbows ignites the sky  
A new century—a new generation!  
A new generation of KVN<sup>1</sup>  
—Hymn of the KVN Youth League (Russia), 2016*

On November 2, 2018, a poster on a Russian social media channel wrote, “I should have posted this on November 8th, but I know you all will be sentimental enough on that day without me adding to it.” She then related a touching story about one of her students, a sophomore who had chosen to participate in the same extracurricular activity that the professor had in her youth. Why, though, had the poster told her story early? Why would emotions run high on November 8th? What’s special about that day?

As the 3,000 readers of the post likely knew, November 8th is the anniversary of the first broadcast of a Soviet game show, the Club of the Cheerful and Clever (*Klub Veselykh i Nakhodchivyykh*, or KVN), which debuted in 1961. November 8th is KVN’s “birthday.” It may seem unlikely that thousands of young people across Russia and the former USSR commemorate this day with parties, get-togethers, and KVN quizzes, but they do, and these are emotional events—not because of a TV show, but because of the student-led movement that KVN, a comedy game, would become by 1963. KVN ranks as one of the most popular extra-curricular activities in the former Soviet bloc to this day, with millions of participants. KVN is a team comedy competition: part sketch, part improvisation, scored by a panel of judges. The state, in 1961, created a game; people crafted of it a tradition. And its Soviet-steeped practices continue to encourage orientations towards art and emotion that, if not entirely Marxist, read as not-quite-neoliberal, either.

KVN posed a set of riddles for me: How did a Soviet TV game show become a grassroots

---

<sup>1</sup> “Мы вместе сделаем настроение,  
Смех радугой взорвет эфир  
Новый век – новое поколение!  
В КВНе новое поколение”

folk sensation? How did the activity survive an official ban in the 1970s and 1980s? And, most perplexingly, why are young people today spending dozens of hours a week playing this game from the 1960s?

There is a logic; there is a logic behind not only the history—why events have unfolded the way they have—but behind the tradition—why events continue to get recreated in the way that they do. There is a logic guiding the daily choices people make to write jokes with friends instead of playing basketball, to use KVN as a teaching tool in elementary classrooms, to go to a KVN game after work, to paint stage scenery for a friend. Young people in Ukraine, where Soviet symbols have been banned, continue to play this very Soviet game for culturally salient reasons. KVN isn't a Soviet relic, and it isn't still here out of inertia. It's here because it is embedded in, and reinforces, value systems that have meaning for the people I met in Russia and Ukraine.

This dissertation describes how, and why, people reproduce social structures. Individuals re-make, alter, and reinscribe traditions as they orient towards locally-constructed regimes of value. In part, what follows is a story about how geopolitics shapes tradition. Mostly, though, this is an ethnography about joy, and about why people think its manufacture is worth the trouble.

### **Overview: geopolitical landscape**

“The element of laughter was accorded the least place of all in the vast literature devoted to myth, to folk lyrics, and to epics,” wrote Mikhail Bakhtin in his analysis of humor in Rabelais. “Even more unfortunate was the fact that the peculiar nature of the people’s laughter was completely distorted...” (Bakhtin 1984 [1965], 4). Like the carnival humor Bakhtin described, KVN became a folk comedy tradition as people, en masse, chose to participate in the cultural form. Youth took KVN from television screens and adapted it for gameplay in university auditoria, in classrooms, and in the summer camps where many worked. Teachers liked KVN, too. If theater can be a teaching tool, why not KVN, which combines skit-writing, quizzes, and scavenger hunts?

Planning a KVN competition is an exercise in what today's educational theorists would call "project-based learning," in which students tackle a theme, question, or task by creating something themselves. KVN also allows students to practice three of the five "global skills" now promoted by international "Education 2030" action plans: communication and collaboration; creativity and critical thinking; and emotional self-regulation and wellbeing (Mercer et al. n.d., OECD 2018, UNESCO 2016.)<sup>2</sup> Soviet educators in Novokuznetsk framed KVN's advantages in terms of critical thinking skills, writing,

Many who put on KVN pursue mainly entertainment-driven goals...Students compete in ingenuity, wit, and resourcefulness. We believe that this somewhat reduces the value of KVN. With more systematic thought and advance planning, KVN's benefits can be incomparably greater. We have prepared materials for thematic KVN [here]. Along with entertaining questions and assignments, we've paid a lot of attention to including materials that contribute to students' cognitive development (Kantorovich 1973, 3).<sup>3</sup>

KVN, thus, came to live in and through educational institutions, sometimes for explicitly pedagogical reasons. It became popular among university students, though, because it was fun. KVN appealed to some because comedy helped them, as octogenarian Ukrainian Eduard Chechel'nitsky put it, "get round" the censors: young people could critique the state nonreferentially, voicing sentiments no one would allow in direct speech. Others enjoyed KVN's intellectual battle of wits. Most, though, simply wanted to laugh and make others laugh. While competitors made (and make) political jokes, and while many, in the Soviet period in particular, found value in a forum that let them speak truth to power, it is humor that attracted participants.

Jokes tend to worry ideologues, however, and in 1972 officials banned KVN—at least on television. But by that time KVN had already spread to schools and universities across the USSR,

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<sup>2</sup> The fourth skill, digital literacies, was not yet relevant, and the fifth skill, intercultural competence and citizenship, is not directly engaged through KVN.

<sup>3</sup> "Однако многие проводимые КВН преследуют прежде всего развлекательные цели...Учащиеся соревнуется в смекалке, остроумии и находчивости. Нам кажется, что это несколько снижает ценность КВН, польза которых при более строгой продуманности и предварительной подготовке к ним может быть несравненно больше. Нами предпринята попытка подготовить материалы тематических КВН. Наряду с занимательными вопросами и заданиями, большое внимание уделяется такому подпору материала, который бы способствовал развитию познавательной активности учащихся."



and it largely stayed there. Teachers continued using KVN even when it went off airwaves from 1972-1986, and universities hosted internal competitions during that period, as well. KVN endured as an illegal tradition that nearly all children participated in, strangely, with the full support of the Komsomol (Communist Union of Youth).

The ban on large-scale and televised KVN marked the biggest rupture in the history of the activity until 2014, when Russia and Ukraine began armed conflict over the Ukrainian territory of Crimea. The war splintered the KVN world, creating physical barriers to travel between Russia and Ukraine, media blockages, and cleavages in KVN organizations that had operated for over fifty years. After MH17 was shot down near the Ukrainian border, direct flights between Russia and Ukraine ceased. All passengers now have to make an intermediary stop in a different country if they want to travel between the two countries. While technically possible for Ukrainian teams to continue competing in the Russia-centric international leagues—where they had historically held dominant positions—they didn't want to. How could a Ukrainian team write jokes for a Russian audience during wartime? And how could a Russian audience possibly applaud them?

Ukrainians did not stop playing KVN within Ukraine, though, in school, university, and city leagues. The problem, once again, was television. With all Russian TV programming blocked, a media vacuum emerged, and, therefore, a need for Ukrainian comedy shows. But Ukrainians could not legally call any show "KVN" because the TV program is trademarked. To address this problem, two Ukrainians who were working with the televised KVN Top League in Moscow, head editor Andrei Chivurin and head producer Naum Barulya, returned to Ukraine and came up with a new game format, League of Laughter, in 2015. They worked closely in this with Volodymyr Zelensky, the artistic director of the production company Kvartal 95. Zelensky had named the company after his KVN team.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Here is a short clip from 95 Kvartal's 2002 Top League octofinal performance (June 6, 2002): <https://amygarey.files.wordpress.com/2020/04/zelensky-octs-2002.mp4>

During my fieldwork in Odessa in the spring of 2017, Zelensky was still two years away from the presidential position he would go on to win in a landslide in April 2019. While I was in Ukraine he was the main emcee for the League of Laughter. Although he did not exactly schmooze with all the students, he did participate in events at the annual League of Laughter festival (described in chapters 2 and 3). I was in Moscow on the night he was elected; Russian KVNshiki<sup>5</sup> there turned out to celebrate.

## **Methodology**

I conducted fieldwork in Irkutsk, Russia (eight months) and Odessa, Ukraine (six months) for a total of fourteen months of fieldwork between 2015 and 2017. I returned to Russia in 2019 and completed additional research in Moscow from January-October 2019. My data consist of participant observation at rehearsals, brainstorming sessions, editing sessions, and post-game debriefings; interviews; attendance at live KVN and League of Laughter competitions; archival sources; and performance footage. I attended eighty live games and interviewed sixty-five individuals.

Most of my informants were KVNshiki or former KVNshiki. Some of them are already celebrities, some are local celebrities, and a great many want to become famous. Most, therefore, preferred that I use their real names (in some cases, including last names) rather than pseudonyms. While I did attend competitions between school-age KVN competitors, my informants are only those eighteen years and older, and it is this population that is the subject of the dissertation.

I'd like to make a brief note about my positioning as a researcher. No one's yet accused me of being an ethnographic ambulance chaser, of profiting off of the war in Ukraine because it's a good story, but I can see how that could happen. I didn't plan to do this dissertation research in

---

<sup>5</sup> I have opted to transcribe this word as the simplified "KVNshik" instead of the more correct "KVNshchik" (КВНщик) on the model of similar words familiar to English speakers, like apparatchik. Most English speakers will discern little difference between "sh" and "shch," but the added letters impede reading flow (especially since this word is repeated often).

Ukraine, though, when I initially proposed it in 2009. It was supposed to take place in Kazakstan, which boasts a very strong KVN infrastructure, and the project focused on how KVN, a Soviet tradition, had evolved in a non-Soviet time and a non-Russian space. In the best case I'd hoped to site the project in both Kazakhstan and Russia.

Then the war between Russia and Ukraine broke out, and it rocked KVN's competition base. When, in the fall of 2014, the Ukrainian team "Odessa Tales" simply failed to attend an important semifinals match in Moscow, I knew I had to reframe the dissertation. If I was going to write about "changes in KVN tradition from the 1960s to the present," I would have to find a way to conduct research in both Russia and Ukraine.

## **Chapter summaries**

Chapter one examines how state-level policies on education, socialist morality, and recreation became realized in two cities outside of European Russia, Irkutsk and Odessa. Odessa, self-styled "capital of humor," hosted some of the most successful KVN teams of the Soviet era. Irkutsk teams have consistently competed at top levels in the post-Soviet era, and KVN has had a strong community presence since the 1960s. Historical accounts from these two cities illustrate how individuals worked with and within local Communist Union of Youth (Komsomol) cells to play a game that often featured subversive content. After discussing how the KVN movement developed in the USSR, I trace how government policies shaped KVN practice during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Chapter two describes typical games, features of competitions, and traditions associated with KVN. It also details league structures in Russia and Ukraine, provides an overview of multi-week humor festivals, and discusses joke writing as craft.

Chapter three outlines recent changes in Ukrainian KVN traditions, including ruptures in KVN institutions since 2013. Ukrainian KVNshiki still play KVN on local levels, but this has been overlaid by the League of Laughter competitive infrastructure, one which has not only a central,

Kiev-based league, but ten regional leagues and satellites in Israel, Estonia, Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan. The chapter concludes with an examination of the new kinds of KVN publics created by the Russia-Ukraine war.

Chapter four draws on data from offstage rehearsal and feedback sessions to illustrate how KVNshiki take stances about the social function of humor, appropriateness, and comedic quality. Through these interpersonal negotiations, always structured by KVN norms, I argue that KVN as an institution reproduces Soviet-marked values. The activity keeps Soviet ideas in circulation, in a sphere where those elements carry social currency. KVN is not the only institution which accomplishes this, and, of course, alignment with Soviet moral frameworks co-exists with neoliberal strivings, Orthodox prescriptions, and other, more individualized valuations of right and wrong, worthy and shameful, admirable and embarrassing. But some of the principles the Soviets worked so very hard to instill—through written behavior codes, mass media, reading groups, youth organizations, and more—took root and endure. I show how the pro-happiness frames of these games interact with Soviet ideologies of moral personhood, describing how competitors discursively reinforce the cultural capital associated with socialist ideas as they fashion themselves into ideal KVNshiki, today.

Chapter five analyzes the social life and architecture of KVN jokes, semiotic complexes designed to create specific emotional effects. What makes a joke funny? What distinguishes a joke from a statement? What ideologies of humor underlie punchline construction and topic selection? Here, I survey semantic theories of humor, propose a semiotic approach to understanding jokes, and illustrate how KVNshiki themselves theorize humor. I conclude with a discussion of how social media reporting on KVN events constitutes a culture of comments on comments, of metapragmatic evaluation as lifestyle.

Chapter six argues that KVN, as an institution, elicits patterned types of emotional experiences from competitors and audience members alike. Team members, at least those in

Odessa, Irkutsk, and Moscow, largely orient towards the norms of joyfulness, positive humor, and out-loud laughter laid down by league editors. Audiences, in turn, then revel in performances that occasion mass gaiety and, sometimes, paroxysms of laughter. Here, I link discourses about private emotional experience to the structures—including leagues, municipal organizations, national governments, and KVN traditions—that shape affective responses during competitions. The afterword describes some of the ways in which KVNshiki on either side of the border imagine themselves to be in community, despite the war, and despite continued contestation of nationhood.

## Chapter One: Origins

*On the given day  
At the given time  
We're happy to see you again  
Cheerful, brainy friends<sup>6</sup>*  
—KVN theme song, 1960s and 1970s

Eduard Arkadievich Chechelnitsky<sup>7</sup> was twenty-five years old when he became, in 1962, the director of Odessa State University's Student Club. Like similar clubs across the Soviet Union, Odessa State's (*Odesskii Gosudarstvennyi Universitet*, or OGU) organized dance groups, amateur theater performances, and musical ensembles. Eduard Arkadievich himself had danced as a soloist at Odessa's Palace of Students, a place where "all the talented young people in the city got together" (interview with author, April 26, 2017). Soon, activities for a new game sweeping the nation fell under his purview, as well. In 1961 the first KVN game aired on Soviet television. Viewers loved the funny, live, largely improvisational competitions, and students across the USSR rushed to form their own Clubs of the Cheerful and Clever. By 1963 Odessa was already hosting city championship matches. Representing either their universities or departments, students and professors played together on KVN teams. But OGU, the oldest, most prestigious university in town, could not compete in the 1963 championship.<sup>8</sup>

OGU's departmental teams had held contests against one another, the activity was popular, and young people considered KVN "fashionable" and "interesting." But the OGU students' jokes

---

<sup>6</sup> "В урочный день,  
в урочный час  
мы снова рады  
видеть вас  
Весёлых, любознательных друзей"

<sup>7</sup> Russian naming conventions include a first name, a patronymic, and a last name. The patronymic is derived from the father's first name.

<sup>8</sup> Valentin Krapiva, likewise, noted that by 1966 his team the Odessa Chimney Sweeps had "no small amount of experience in KVN," if only on the inter-departmental level. When he claimed, then, that when the Chimney Sweeps began their first season in televised, Central KVN "there were not yet any KVN traditions in Odessa," he likely meant styles that came to be associated with Odessa after the team's 1966-1967 TV success rather than a tradition of playing KVN (Krapiva 1996, 14 and 53).

proved too controversial. “Our writers (*avtory*) were wonderful, but we were required to go to the Party Committee of the University (PARTKOM) and show them [what we planned],” Eduard Arkadievich recalled. “And they forbade us from performing.” Some of their jokes had been “uncomfortable for the government,” so they were limited to interdepartmental games. “At that time we were supervised by the Party Committee,” Eduard Arkadievich continued. “I wasn’t a member of the Party, but we still had to start with them. Or get round them (*obkhodit’*) somehow.” Perhaps out of longtime habit, he then lowered his voice and said out of the corner of his mouth, “It wasn’t that hard to get round them.” In a representative example of fooling the censors, OGU students put the script that had gotten them banned into the city championship competition anyway. They gave it to the Medical Institute team, who happily performed their material (interview with author, June 2, 2017).

The young director could not have known, then, that he would lead his KVN teams to become some of the most beloved celebrities in the Soviet Union. Speaking near his eightieth birthday, in the same Student Club office he’d occupied for fifty-five years, Eduard Arkadievich recalled the height of of the OGU students’ popularity: “We performed for, I don’t remember the name of the Party Congress, but we performed for Gorbachev. In the State Kremlin Palace...we had a police escort. All of that happened” (interview with author, June 2, 2017). In the 1980s taxi drivers gave Odessa’s famous KVNshiki free rides. They toured the entire Soviet Union and, in the 1990s, Europe, Israel, and America.

But before it became one of the most popular extra-curricular activities in the Soviet Union, KVN was the most popular television show (Evans 2016, 193; Roth-Ey 2011, 270). Three men, Sergei Muratov, Albert Akselrod, and Mikhail Yakovlev, sketched out the rules for the game at the direction of Soviet Central Television’s Youth Programming Desk (Evans 2016, 186-187). They based it on a short-lived but very popular program called *Evening of the Cheerful Questions* (VVV, *Vecher veselykh voprosov*), which was itself based on a Czechoslovakian quiz show called *Guess*,

*Guess, You Guessers* (GGG, *Gadai, gadai, gadal'shchik*). Much like the American game show *The Price is Right*, in VVV members of the audience were called up on stage to answer questions for the chance to win small prizes. But producers cancelled the show after a uniquely chaotic live broadcast. It only ran for four months, from May to December 1957 (Roth-Ey 2011, 246-247). Youth Desk editor Elena Gal'perina, though, wanted to channel the best of VVV into a more controlled format. KVN, with its structured games and a pre-selected students, satisfied censors and thrilled young people, too (Roth-Ey 2011, 253-254). Recalling his youth in Dnepropetrovsk, Ukraine, Alexander Grushko claimed, "Its popularity was crazy. At that time, not all families had televisions, and they would go over to others' houses just to watch KVN" (interview with author, January 9, 2018).<sup>9</sup> By 1966, nearly ninety percent of those between fourteen and eighteen years old "always" watched KVN, and 74% of the aggregate fourteen through thirty age group watched religiously (Roth-Ey 2011, 270).

Most scholarship on the history of KVN focuses on these TV matches (Evans 2016; Janco 2013; Roth-Ey 2011). Accounts end, thus, with the 1972 cessation of televised central league KVN games, based in Moscow. Russian writers and a French researcher have written about KVN as a student activity after 1972, but, with the exception of KVN legends Mikhail Marfin and Andrei Chivurin, largely surveyed the ways KVN's popularity declined once the central league dissolved (Iunisov 1999; Marfin and Chivurin 2002; Ostromooukhova 2003). Instead, I focus on how widespread KVN remained, looking in particular at traditions in internal university games. While KVN did not return to airwaves until 1986, oral history interviews reveal that students continued playing KVN in (non-televised) university leagues and, more informally, in primary schools and summer camps, throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Banning the show did not end its practice, any more than banning the World Cup would stop people from playing soccer.

As early as 1963, two years after the first KVN broadcast, the game had become a folk

---

<sup>9</sup> "Да, популярность была сумасшедшая. Тогда ещё было время, когда не в каждой семье были телевизоры и друг ко другу в гости ходили именно для того, чтобы посмотреть КВН."



activity. The state invented a game, and people crafted of it a tradition. The story of KVN reveals the mechanisms involved in reproducing tradition, demonstrating the complex interplay between state policies, cultural values, and individual agency. This chapter details the institutional and interpersonal interactions that led KVN to become not only popular in the 1960s, but prestigious, all while linked to Soviet systems of value that still hold sway.

Here, I examine how state-level policies on education, socialist morality, and recreation became realized in two cities outside of European Russia, Irkutsk and Odessa. Odessa, self-styled “capital of humor,” hosted some of the most successful KVN teams of the Soviet era. Irkutsk teams have consistently competed at top levels in the post-Soviet era, and KVN has had a strong community presence since the 1960s. Historical accounts from these two cities illustrate how individuals worked with and within local Komsomol cells to play a game that often featured subversive content. After discussing how the KVN movement developed in the USSR, I outline how government policies shaped KVN practice during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Jokes that criticized the government were, in principle, not allowed, and KVN was, in some spheres, banned as well. But students continued playing KVN, using Aesopian language in a game that was, as Russians say of many activities, “forbidden, but possible” (*“nel'zia no mozhno”*).

### **Intellectual gymnastics**

KVN proved so popular that, as in Odessa, people quickly established leagues in their own cities. In the mid-1960s Komsomol leader Olga Bondaletiva from Belgorod wrote to KVN’s producers in Moscow, saying,

Dear comrades! We have a big favor to ask you. The thing is, that we have decided to organize KVN. And there’s the problem. We very much want to do it well. That, of course, is not the problem. The problem is that we don’t know where to start (Gal’perina 1967a, 9).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> “Дорогие товарищи! У нас к вам большая просьба. Дело в том, что мы решили устроить КВН. Но вот беда. Мы очень хотим что делать очень хорошим. Это, конечно, не беда. А беда в том, что мы не знаем с чего начинать.”

Students from Rostov-on-Don also wrote in to request materials (Gal'perina 1967, 5). In *KVN Answers Letters*, KVN editor Elena Gal'perina re-printed some of this correspondence and addressed questions. In addition to concrete advice about the content and duration of KVN skit segments, she wrote about KVN's value system: "KVN is a competition. But it is also an intellectual battle and a cheerful scramble" (Gal'perina 1967b, 73).<sup>11</sup> Gal'perina noted that KVN's main importance was as "intellectual gymnastics" rather than the quest for a trophy, observing, "So the jury messed up. So today our folks lost—they'll win tomorrow! Surely it is not a total calamity" (Gal'perina 1967a, 73).<sup>12</sup>

In the 1960s televised games featured more tasks—such as guessing the number of centimeters the newspaper *Pravda* measured—than jokes or even skits. The live, improvised nature of some of these sequences added interest for the audience. But it also meant that performers and judges often had to figure out what to do as they went along. One competitor in the 1960s, for example, never made his way out of a "maze race." The show's hosts, Aleksandr Masliakov and Svetlana Zhil'tsova, stood by with the other competitors on the stage, trying to offer witty commentary as the young man struggled. In a 1965 finals match featuring Friazino (a small town north of Moscow) and the St. Petersburg factory team Banner of Labor (*Znamya Truda*), teams competed to untangle balled-up audio tape, thread it onto reels, then play it. The show's organizers had gnarled the tape into the kind of mess only cats and toddlers can usually engineer. After three not terribly entertaining minutes, neither team had unraveled the tape.

The 1965 game also featured a complicated dress-up game on a large spinning platform. A series of costumes hanging on racks spun around, offering teams an initial glimpse of the costumes and giving them a chance to confer about what literary figure the costumes represented. Then the platform stopped and a representative from each team went up to look more closely at the clothes. When a young man from Friazino tried to remove a rough woolen wrap from its hanger, Masliakov

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<sup>11</sup> "КВН—соревнования. Но это интеллектуальный бой и веселые схватки."

<sup>12</sup> "Ну, ошиблось жюри, ну, сегодня ребята проиграли, завтра выиграют! Разве, это такая уж беда."

stopped him with, “No, no, no. You don’t need to take them off the hangers. Everything is in sight.” The two competitors from the Friazino and St. Petersburg teams then whispered their guesses about the personage depicted by the costume into Masliakov’s ear. “And so, both teams think that this is the costume of Odysseus,” he responded. “Absolutely right. Each team gets one point.” Then, in a set of instructions increasingly reminiscent of Calvinball rules, Masliakov told the two students to put the costumes on. The game went on like this for a little over five minutes, with contestants guessing the costumes of Little Red Riding Hood, Jacques Paganel (a character from Jules Verne’s *In Search of the Castaways*), and Sherlock Holmes. After team members had put on the costumes, the emcees added an improvisational component. Competitors chose objects such as a jar of jam, a blanket, or a sword from a “store” (a set of shelves on the stage), then took turns explaining their choices and why it suited their character. Amusing responses earned the highest scores. In the YouTube comments section following this footage, viewer Sergei Sosnovskii wrote, “I, of course, don’t think this is funny, but I think that every generation has their own Galustyan and Svetlakov [famous contemporary KVNshiki]. Our grandfathers sincerely laughed and found joy in this humor.”<sup>13</sup>

Like Sosnovskii, most people today wouldn’t class games like those described above as comedy. And they no longer feature in contemporary KVN. They were, however, “cheerful” and required some cleverness. The game also called for more mental dexterity than traditional quiz shows; competitors needed a solid grasp of history and literature, true, but they also had to have acting skills, experience with improvisation, and musical ability. Why, though, would intellectual gymnastics gain such traction across the Soviet Union? What structural conditions in the USSR spurred KVN’s success? Why did young people take KVN from the television screen into their own universities? There are three main reasons the improv-vaudeville-party game mishmash known as

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<sup>13</sup> “Мне конечно не смешно, но я думаю у каждого поколения свой Галустьян и Светлаков. И наши деды искренне смеялись и радовались тому юмору.” YouTube, May 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CnCCj1zjD78&lc=z13mghpbikzshocv22cjcbumyze3hfl> (accessed January 28, 2020).

KVN became—and remains—so terribly popular in the former Soviet Union. First, it aligned with the intellectual values pushed by the Party in nearly all spheres of everyday life—schools, workplaces, clubs, mass media. Second, KVN drew on pre-existing, even pre-revolutionary, student theater traditions. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Komsomol representatives actively contacted Komsomol cells outside of Moscow and Petersburg to help set up the game in local communities. This support was vital not only to the spread of KVN, but to its institutional durability now, more than fifty years later.

### **Culture and communism**

Cosmonauts and chemists were heroes in the 1960s—and KVNshiki were, too. KVN flourished in the 1960s because it drew on the prestige afforded to intellectual, creative activities and formed part of a rising trend towards student amateur activity of all sorts in universities. The creative intelligentsia, Kristin Roth-Ey argued, helped fulfill broader ideological goals to educate and “elevate” the population. In the Soviet cultural imagination, “only artists were living as everyone ought to live, in a contemporary state of grace,” she added (2011, 4). Albert Aksel’rod, one of KVN’s creators, called KVNshiki the new youth ideals:

At the same time, it seems to us, KVN managed—in its own way—to solve the problem of the positive modern hero. Look, here he is, the young Soviet person of our times. He’s a little wily, a little snide, a little vain, quick with decisions, cheerful and clever—a young, handsome, modern individual (Aksel’rod 1974, 3).<sup>14</sup>

In its conduct and content, KVN reinforced qualities expected of the New Soviet Man, building up their spiritual-qua-intellectual worth. Molding this New Soviet Man, *Homo sovieticus* was, in fact, an explicit goal of the 1961 22nd Party Congress. Its proceedings stated, “During the transition to communism there will be more opportunities for cultivating the new man, one who

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<sup>14</sup> “И при этом КВН, как нам кажется, сумел по-своему решить проблему положительного современного героя. Смотрите, вот он какой, молодой советский человек сегодняшнего дня. Немного лукавый, немного ехидный, немного щеславный, быстрый в решениях, веселый и находчивый, молодой, красивый современный человек.”

harmoniously combines spiritual wealth, moral purity, and physical perfection” (22nd Party Congress 1962).<sup>15</sup> The same congress also described the model communist citizen in a twelve-item list, the Moral Code of the Builders of Communism. The code’s tenets included: “love of the motherland; conscientious labor for the good of society; a high sense of public duty; collectivism and comradely mutual assistance; moral purity, modesty, and unpretentiousness in social and private life...” (McNally 1971, 47). Soviet children studied this code in all major educational institutions. It formed the bulk of the items in the official “Rules for Students,” the “Pioneer Laws,” and the “Komsomol Laws” (Dobrenko 2005, 240). This set of rules became presupposed behavioral norms partly because they were drilled into students. The 22nd Party Congress planned to build communism within twenty years, and influencing youth formed a key part of their strategy (Tsipursky 2016). Leaders urged Komsomol organizations to “use all forms of propaganda, campaigning and cultural-educational work—lectures, political circles (*kruzhki*), seminars, discussions, theoretical conferences, question and answer evenings, oral journals, meetings with delegates, [with] Party and other leaders” (*cited in* Uhl 2011, 224). KVN rarely featured ideological content on the level of lectures or political circles, but it operated under the Komsomol umbrella that promoted the Moral Code and intellectual development as normative.

The overall value placed on intellectual activity, among everyone, not just the elite, impressed many foreign observers. Sheila Fitzpatrick wrote, “Even in their spare time, after work and after class, Soviet citizens were busy improving their minds. Every visitor to the Soviet Union in the 1930s commented on the passionate love of reading and zest for learning of the Soviet population” (1999, 87-88). This reputed voraciousness sprang, in part, from an intense state campaign to eradicate illiteracy from 1923-1927 (Clark 2000, 18). The success of the state’s literacy efforts, in fact, help demonstrate why KVN, a game of wits, became so popular, and so

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<sup>15</sup> “В период перехода к коммунизму возрастают возможности воспитания нового человека, гармонически сочетающего в себе духовное богатство, моральную чистоту и физическое совершенство.”

prestigious, in the Soviet Union, for two reasons. First, it illustrates how much money and manpower the Soviet state spent to make intellectual activity, of some kind, accessible to all. Second, ordinary citizens were, later, actually expected to participate in intellectual activity—that is, to read, from discussion circles, and otherwise develop their “spiritual wealth.”

In 1897, 39% of Muscovites could read. In 1920, this number rose to 72%. While many of these gains resulted from tsarist educational reform, the Soviet state invested significantly more resources into teaching the population to read—in both urban and rural areas—and saw corresponding surges in literacy rates (Clark 2000, 17). Between 1920 and 1928, over eight million people enrolled in literacy schools (Kenez 1985, 157). In 1926, the literacy rate in rural areas was 51%. By 1939 that number had jumped to 85% (Fitzpatrick 1994, 225-226).

The increase in rural literacy is significant because it makes plain just how much investment, in terms of both money and manpower, the Soviets made to create a fully literate country. In Moscow and St. Petersburg, large urban areas with pre-existing schools, universities, and libraries, it is all but expected that literacy rates would rise. But the state had to build such educational infrastructure nearly from scratch in villages. They sent teachers, literacy trainers, and books to towns and villages spanning over six million square miles—and that only counts the RSFSR, not Central Asia. For reference, that area is 40% larger than the continental United States.

The Soviets mobilized a largely volunteer force from 1923-1927 for the *likbez* campaign (abbreviation for “*likvidatsiya bezgramotnosti*,” or “liquidation of illiteracy”) (Clark 2000, 26). In the first year and a half, *likbez* had taught five million Russian adults to read (Clark 2000, 26). Stellar organizing was the key to the movement’s success. Networks of cells in a variety of overlapping organizations, the largest of which was the Down with Illiteracy Society,<sup>16</sup> enrolled adults and youth alike in literacy schools, signed up dues-paying members, gave presentations about the importance of literacy, and enlisted volunteers to teach. An elaborate bureaucratic

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<sup>16</sup> *Obshchestvo “Doloi negramotnost”*

infrastructure supported this work. At the top was the People's Commissariat for Education (Narkompros),<sup>17</sup> which helped coordinate the efforts of the Emergency Commission for the Eradication of Illiteracy (Gramcheka)<sup>18</sup> and trade unions in providing libraries and community "reading rooms" with books, magazines, and agricultural how-to manuals (Clark 2000, 117). Each reading room had its own director, an *izbach*, available to answer questions. These directors underwent varying degrees of training, with some doing three-day intensive seminars and others completing over 100 hours of instruction. According to Clark, training sessions covered,

...the tasks of the party in the countryside, the work of the red corner soviet in coordination with activists, the village soviet, and the liktpunkt [literacy school]. Reference, art, drama, and the organization of "judicious" relaxation were discussed on day three. Days four and five were filled with instruction on work with newspapers, wall newspapers, books, mobile libraries, and various circles: agriculture, home economics, and the co-op circles (2000, 122).

In essence, the likbez campaign trained thousands of literacy directors to create intellectual community, either by guiding locals through the resources of the reading rooms, organizing "circles" (*kruzhki*) for study and discussion, or by directing those that could not read to the newly-established literacy schools. In 1927, there was one reading room (*izba chital'naia*) for every fourteen square miles of the RSFSR (Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic), for roughly two to five rooms per rural district (*volost'*). Reading rooms in larger villages fed "red corners" in communities further from the center. Red corners were places in schools or even private homes where people could find books and agricultural pamphlets. By 1927 there were between ten and twenty red corners per rural district. As a representative example, the reading room in Il'insk, on remote Sakhalin island, had around 1,000 books; the red corners in surrounding villages shelved around fifty books. While not all, or perhaps even most, villages had the funding to follow all the guidelines outlined by pedagogues, literacy advocates maintained that reading rooms should include sections for agricultural propaganda, aid to villages, newspapers, cooperative societies, political education, agricultural circles, revolutionary holidays, sanitation campaigns, anti-alcohol

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<sup>17</sup> Narkompros comes from *Narodnyi komissariat prosveshcheniia*

<sup>18</sup> Gramcheka comes from *Chrezvychainaiia komissiya po likvidatzii negramotnosti*

campaigns, and the “struggle for the new way of life,” as well as dedicated areas for literacy instruction and individual study (Clark 2000, 119-127).

The elaborate literacy and learning infrastructure Narkompros built made adult learning normative, even in non-urban areas of the USSR. Individuals who could not read faced censure from their peers (Kenez 1985, 151). In fact, one responsibility of the literacy director in rural areas was to post a public list of all illiterate people between the ages of eleven and thirty-five. Individuals might be called in before a panel of their peers, as well, to account for their actions. As Clark imagined some of these conversations, “Did Petr Ivanich want to learn to read? Why not? Did Liudmila Vasilevna have a legitimate excuse for not attending night courses?” (2000, 133). It is hard to imagine literacy workers in, say, rural Arkansas, shaming local adults in this way. But American town councils also do not have the right to summon people to tribunals for not attending night classes. The Communist Party did. Their legal and administrative reach allowed them to compel adult as well as juvenile education.

Simple literacy, though, was not enough. The Soviets created a culture in which constant learning and improvement was expected not only of scholars and lawyers, but of the working and agricultural classes. As Lenin said, “The illiterate person stands outside of politics. First it is necessary to teach him the alphabet. Without it there are only rumors, fairytales, and prejudices, but not politics” (Lenin 1927). The drive to educate rural and working class individuals was an intentional, political act, and it worked. From the standpoint of moral socialization processes, however, what is significant is not that Soviet citizens learned to read. More striking is the fact that they *did* read. In 1936, ten thousand people in the steel-producing city of Magnitogorsk, population 200,000, held library cards. Citizens also bought 40,000 books that year (Kotkin 1995, 190-191). Literacy training resulted not only in surface proficiency, but in behavioral uptake. The populace became a reading public.

People read because in this new system, one of not-really-voluntary reading circles, after-



work committee meetings, and choir clubs, intellectual activity earned people cultural capital. Cultural capital is a set of competencies that buy prestige in given social groups (Bourdieu 1984, 65). The Soviets built a social system in which there was a payoff for engaging in intellectual activity—and interpersonal, even professional, reprobation if one did not.

The literacy campaign, though, was part of a larger effort to mold the population into a modern, efficient workforce. Fitzpatrick identified four main facets of the Soviet civilizing mission: basic hygiene, literacy, “behavior in public places,” and petty-bourgeois culture, which included, “...good manners, correct speech, neat and appropriate dress, and some appreciation of the high culture of literature, music, and ballet” (1999, 80). It is this final aspect, of instilling “culturedness,” or *kulturnost*, in the population, that is most relevant to the study of KVN. Becoming cultured meant actively learning, developing the mind, and re-fashioning the self into a politically aware, bureaucratically capable Soviet political subject.

*Kulturnost*<sup>19</sup> began as a Stalinist emphasis on manners (Dunham 1990, Fitzpatrick 1999). Eventually, though, it came to denote the educated individual, not just the “civilized” one. Vadim Volkov describes the expanded concept of normative *kulturnost* as one of continual intellectual development:

To become a cultured person one must read classical literature, contemporary Soviet fiction, poetry, newspapers, works by Marx-Engels-Lenin-Stalin, as well as attend the cinema and exhibitions with the purpose of self-education. A cultured person must have a broad cultural horizon (broad within the frame set up at a given historical moment) and a cultured inner world (Volkov 2000, 225).

Fitzpatrick, speaking of the social pressure to become cultured, maintained, “A worker who mastered *War and Peace* as well as the *Short Course [on the History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union]* was a high achiever, deserving praise; the wife of a manager who was ignorant of Pushkin and had never seen *Swan Lake* was an embarrassment” (Fitzpatrick 1999, 82). The Soviets worked to instill *kulturnost* using advertising campaigns, reading groups, and even “Are You a

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<sup>19</sup> I will omit italics from now on, following the example of “glasnost,” since this word will be used throughout the dissertation.

Cultured Person?" quizzes in periodicals (Volkov 2000, 224). If questions on a quiz stumped a reader, the magazine *Ogonek* offered this guidance: "Remember, if you are not able to answer any one of the ten suggested questions, you, apparently, know very little about a whole sphere of science or arts. Let this compel you to WORK ON YOURSELF (*porabotat' nad soboi*)" (caps in original; cited in Volkov 2000, 224). The quiz from the first week in 1936 is far from easy:

- 1 Recite by heart at least one poem by Pushkin.
- 2 Name and characterise five plays by Shakespeare.
- 3 Name at least four rivers in Africa.
- 4 Name your favourite composer and his three major works.
- 5 Name five Soviet automobiles.
- 6 Convert  $\frac{3}{8}$  into a decimal.
- 7 Name the three most significant sport tournaments of the last year and their results.
- 8 Describe the three paintings which you liked most at last year's exhibitions.
- 9 Have you read *Red and Black* by Stendahl and *Fathers and Sons* by Turgenev?
- 10 Explain why the Stakhanovite movement became possible in our country

(cited in Volkov 2000, 224)

This overall ethic of learning, improving, and working on the self created an incentive for individuals to present themselves in certain ways. Aleksei Yurchak observes that Soviet citizens often maintained a cognitive split, voicing official rhetoric while not necessarily believing it (Yurchak 2006, 50). For instance, the Komsomol, the Soviet youth organization, tasked university students in Leningrad with holding "political education" lectures. No one wanted to organize, listen to, or give these lectures. So the group existed only on paper. Students submitted fictional reports about the contents of each lecture to the regional Komsomol committee and no one was the wiser (Yurchak 2006, 180). But the work of doing bureaucracy, of doing-being-ordinary in a Soviet context, redefined the ways people approached everyday life. Being ordinary, performing a normative social role, takes work (Sacks 1984). And in accomplishing the work of being ordinary, even if no one was truly interested in Pushkin or rivers in Africa or political education lectures, citizens molded their selves—Soviet selves, *homo sovieticus*. The daily effort of enacting socialism created habits, and habitus (cf. Bourdieu 1984). Some of the skills relevant here include planning events, recruiting participants, and organizing groups. People also learned to value education, to

make use of it (personally and professionally), and to seek intellectual entertainment. Reading Turgenev was encouraged; reading Pasternak and Solzhenitsyn was forbidden. But people consumed classic and bootleg (*samizdat*) literature out of the same impulse, the same hunger for information, the same drive towards intellectual community.

The Komsomol leaders' fictional lecture series were socialist in form, insubordinate in content. KVN, as it rode waves of repression and reprieve, followed a similar path. The game thrived in the USSR because, by the 1960s, the population had adopted the socialist ideal of *kulturnost* as their own. Soviet educational theorist A. Arnol'dov argued that, "The guiding principle of socialist culture is the development of the individual as an intelligent personality with a creative mind" (Arnol'dov 1974, 11). KVNshiki were sharp, well-versed in literature, kept up with current events, were excellent students, and could often sing and dance. And they made people laugh to boot.

A game that involved word play, riddles, and spoofs on literary themes became a riotously good time in communities all over the Soviet Union, including Central Asia, once people gained the shared educational background to play. Before someone can enjoy chess, after all, they have to learn the rules. Competitors themselves worked hard at KVN because it was fun, to be sure, and because it earned them admiration from peers and teachers. But KVN's links to *kulturnost* also rendered it prestigious. As an activity, KVN promoted what the 22nd Party Congress called "spiritual wealth:" sincerity (*iskrennost'*), soul (*dusha*), truth (*istina*), and, of course, *kulturnost* (22nd Party Congress 1962). KVNshiki gained cultural capital by participating in the game, within the bounds of a governmental system of praise that highlighted both intellectual achievement and creative work.

Despite socialist realist dreariness, creativity had its own conceptual category, its own ideological purpose, and its own set of associated policies and bureaucratic apparatuses in the USSR. Arnol'dov wrote, "In the Marxist definition of creative activity, a differentiation is usually

made between spiritual culture as the sum total of intellectual values—ideas, artistic images, ethics, etc.—and material culture as an aggregate of material values, i.e., objects which embody new ideas and concepts in material form” (Arnol’dov 1974, 9). The Soviets linked intellectual development to social change. To the chagrin of censors, KVNshiki often saw KVN as a platform for change, as well, rendering obliquely the social critiques they could not voice openly.

### **From STEM to KVN: Soviet amateur theater**

When they created KVN, Aksel’rod, Muratov, and Yakovlev incorporated elements from existing Russian student theater culture, both pre-Revolutionary and early Soviet. KVN sketch comedy drew on three main Russo-Soviet traditions: *kapustniki* (skits), “living newspapers” (*zhivye gazety*) and amateur student theater. While *kapustniki* have been performed for hundreds of years, mostly in informal and impromptu settings, living newspapers and Soviet student theater had points of clear emergence, popularity, decline, and transformation. These traditions operated alongside one another—and KVN, when it began—as its practitioners tacked between select activities and larger artistic movements, all, of course, structured by overarching Soviet institutions: cultural commissions, youth organizations, trade unions, writers’ unions, universities. The traditions that fed into KVN overlapped, competed, and held different relationships with the state. KVNshiki incorporated elements from each, particularly those that they could easily teach others.

It does not take much know-how, money, or equipment to put on skits, for instance. One only needs a handful of people and a little imagination. Some children I’ve known do not even require audiences (though parents are welcome to attend). “*Kapustnik*,” the Russian term for skit, comes from the Russian word for “cabbage” (*kapusta*). Because of this odd name, a number of theories circulate about how *kapustnik* came to denote a comedy short. In her work on Soviet mass media, Kristen Roth-Ey repeats one of the most commonly-held: poor pre-Revolutionary actors would cut-up at each others’ homes in the evenings, eating pies (*piroshki*) filled with cabbage because they

couldn't afford meat. Their informal performances took the name of the cabbage pies (Roth-Ey 2011, 246). But Mikhail Marfin and Anatoly Chivurin, both successful KVNshiki and long-time editors of KVN's Top League, disagreed with this version. They argued that the first "theater parties" featuring parodies happened not in the 1920s among "Vakhtangovtsy," students of the Evgeny Vakhtangov Drama Academy in Moscow (*Gosudarstvennyi akademicheskii teatr imeni E. Vakhtangova*), but ten to fifteen years earlier, by actors at the Moscow Art Theater (*Moskovskii Khudozhestvennyi Teatr*) (Marfin and Chivurin 2002, 8). More, though, than splitting hairs over Moscow theatrical communities that likely shared actors, Marfin and Chivurin see *kapustniki* roots in traditional Russian village life. In their words,

Long, long before the dark autumn evenings set in, village girls would gather in a large cabin and cut cabbage to ferment it for the winter. The work was hard and boring. And the girls were young and beautiful. So the village guys came to them and entertained the girls as best they could: they composed couplets, told funny stories, and, of course, keeping the themes local, poked fun at the spectators. So "*kapustnik*" is in fact a pure Russian folk genre. And a passion for timely humor, apparently, sits in us at the genetic level (Marfin and Chivurin 2002, 9).<sup>20</sup>

It is difficult to authenticate informal performances such as these, either in villages or student collectives. Soviet student theater is better documented because the state was so heavily involved in student amateur activities. This meant that it was in a position to standardize and promote extracurricular activities like KVN among students across the USSR. But oversight also meant censorship, obligation, and, perhaps, fear; laughter is healthy, but political jokes might stir up trouble. Yunisov reports that government involvement ruined much of what people loved about *kapustniki*:

In the 1920s and 1930s, the creation of the state institute of culture's club initiative meant that instead of *kapustniki* as cheery, cooperative, leisure activities and the informal responses of intellectual amateurs (local and significant), events became censored by communist cells—cultivated, like wall newspapers and agit-estrada in the form of living newspapers, and, later, artistic-

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<sup>20</sup> "Потому что еще задолго-задолго до этого долгими осенними вечерами деревенские девушки собирались в большой избе и рубили капусту, чтобы заквашивать ее на зиму. Работа была большая и занудная. А девушки были молодые и красивые. Поэтому к ним приходили деревенские же парни и веселили их как могли: сочиняли частушки, рассказывали смешные истории, причем, разумеется, на местную тему, и подтрунивали над зрительницами. Так что "капустник" - это на самом-то деле чистой воды русский народный жанр, и страсть к актуальному юмору, видимо, сидит в нас на генетическом уровне."

agitation groups (Yunisov 1999, 162).<sup>21</sup>

“Living newspapers” were skits that depicted current events of the day, often in an amusing way (Von Geldern and Stites 1995, 238). People began acting out current events on the Armenian front of the Civil War as a way to transmit news (Kukshanov 1978, 88). The living newspaper trend got a boost in 1919, when the Central Committee of the Soviet Union Communist Party decreed that newspapers be read to the illiterate, along with “visual aids” and “concert numbers for the purpose of attracting a large number of guests” (Cosgrove 1982, 7). Mikhail Pustynin, director of a Moscow firm that produced agitprop posters (Rosta), took this edict to heart. In 1919, he established the Terevsat (Theater of Revolutionary Satire), which aimed to dramatize the messages of Rosta posters in skit form (Casson 2000, 108). There were, thus, multiple influences, originators, and styles of living newspaper performances circulating in the 1920s. Living newspapers were not limited to the intelligentsia, either. The performance style spread not only among university students—the typical *kapustnik* crowd—but became popular in factory towns.

Unlike *kapustniki*, individual skits which were not necessarily thematically connected, the living newspaper performances had a cohesive structure—sometimes dramatizing the content of an actual newspaper—and lasted about an hour (Mally 2003, 325). The performances also addressed issues of social concern: alcoholism, hooliganism, homelessness, illiteracy, and the equality of women (Kukshanov 1978, 90). In 1923, performances by the group “Blue Blouses” from the Moscow State Institute of Journalism made a particular splash. They took their name from their signature costumes, blue blouses and black pants, the uniform of agitprop activists. The Blue Blouses (*sinebluzniki*) punched up living newspapers with vaudeville-style entertainment, adding singing, accordion music, “acrobatic dance,” and gymnastics to their comedic sketches (Deak

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<sup>21</sup> “В 1920-30-е годы создание в рамках государственной культуры института клубной самодеятельности привело к тому, что вместо капустников как веселого корпоративного досуга и неформального отклика интеллигентов-дилетантов на местные и общезначимые события стали культивироваться подцензурные коммунистическим ячейкам стенные газеты и агитэстрада в форме живых газет, а позже—агитационно-художественных бригад” (Yunisov 1999, 162).

1973, 38; Kukshanov 1978, 88-89). Blue Blouses began each performance with a “parade” of all the actors on stage. Between ten and fifteen individual numbers then followed (Deak 1973, 38). A report in the *Christian Science Monitor* from 1928 described a Moscow performance as “fresh” and “lively,” writing,

One of their most effective skits is entitled ‘Industrialization.’ One after another the actors come out in fantastic costumes, adorned with symbols indicating factory buildings, installation of electrical stations or other items in the program of industrialization. Finally, chanting in chorus lively verses, they scramble on each other's backs and shoulders, forming a structure which is supposed to represent the finished industrial system (*Christian Science Monitor* 1928, 12).

The *Monitor's* Moscow correspondent praised the Blue Blouses’ gymnastic elements, as well, noting “handsprings, somersaults, and balancing feats” (*Christian Science Monitor* 1928, 12). Teams from other universities soon borrowed the winning Blue Blouse formula—often calling themselves Blue Blouses too (though teams took names like “Construction” and “Machine,” as well) (Kukshanov 1978, 89-90). Blue Blouse (*Siniaia Bluza*), then, became synonymous with the living newspaper genre. Near the end of 1924, only one year after the Blue Blouses started shows, the Moscow City Council of Trade Unions began publishing a Blue Blouse periodical. The *Blue Blouse* magazine included skit outlines, how-to’s, and updates about active Blue Blouse groups (Kukshanov 1978, 89-90). Some luminaries of the avant-garde literary movement contributed to this publication, too, including poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, writer Osip Brik, and playwright Sergei Tretyakov (Cosgrove 1982, 15; Kukshanov 1978, 89-90). Mayakovsky, incidentally, also painted over 400 Rosta posters between 1919 and 1922, and in 1921 he wrote a script for a living newspaper staged at Pustynin’s Terevsat theater (Casson 2000, 108). The Blue Blouses actually styled their aesthetics explicitly after Mayakovsky’s. They wrote in the group’s manifesto, “The text must be clear and sharp without unnecessary words. It should resemble the speech of a good orator, and the poems of Mayakovsky, Aceyev, and Tretyakov” (*cited in* Deak 1973, 39). The manifesto further underlined the link between political mission, humor, and aesthetics, arguing that skits “[Have] got to be short, compact and ideologically sound, rich in

satirical incidents and events” (*cited in Cosgrove 1982, 15*).

The Blue Blouses, despite adopting avant-garde, even Futurist, theater techniques from the intelligentsia, styled themselves as working class. “We are not musical nightingales,” proclaimed one song. “We are only cogs, in the great soldering together of one working family” (Leach 1994, 169). An early Blue Blouse, A.M. Argo, wrote that teams would exit the stage singing the following march:

We are the Blue Blouses  
We are trade unionists  
We know everything about everything  
Around the world  
We lift up our satire  
Like a bright torch (Kukshanov 1978, 89)<sup>22</sup>

The Blue Blouses drew inspiration from some of the pioneers of the early Soviet art world, including Vsevolod Meyerhold and Sergei Eisenstein. Meyerhold’s “bio-mechanical” school of acting appealed to many working-class performers who lacked formal acting experience. This school of thought saw the actor’s body as a machine, stressing not only precision (as in ballet), but mechanization, efficiency, physicality, and reproducibility (Deak 1973, 45-46). From Eisenstein the Blue Blouses took the aesthetics of montage, going so far as to add flickering lights to the stage to simulate the look of a film projector (Deak 1973, 38, 45). They also prodded the audience to re-think the relationships between actor, role, and spectator. They would, for instance, refuse to perform unless the audience joined them in a song. At other times the Blue Blouses would invite the audience to predict how a living newspaper would end or plant actors among the audience members (Cosgrove 1982, 14). But troupes always framed these experiments in terms of a political project. As Eisenstein put it, “The theatrical program of the Proletkult does not involve the

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<sup>22</sup> “Мы, синеблузники,  
Мы, профсоюзники,  
Нам все известно обо всем,  
И вдоль по миру  
Свою сатиру,  
Как яркий факел, мы несем”



‘utilization of the values of the past’ or the ‘invention of new forms of theater’ but the abolition of the very institution of the theatre as such, replacing it with...an instrument for raising the standard of the training of the masses in their day-to-day life” (Eisenstein and Gerould 1974, 77). Ultimately, living newspapers, like the literacy and kulturnost initiatives, served a revolutionary function. The Soviets were not just building a state, but (re-)forming its subjects.

By 1927, there were over 7,000 amateur living newspaper troupes in Russia (Cosgrove 1982, 9). The popularity of living newspapers has bearing on the history of KVN for two reasons. First, the Blue Blouses worked to export the format to the countryside. This non-urban focus meant that people even in small towns gained experience staging skits in an organized way. Second, the Blue Blouses encouraged people to write about local problems (Cosgrove 1982, 15). Rather than simply creating dramatic shorts about history, literature, or the life of Stalin, living newspapers taught people how to caricature their everyday lives. This would become typical of local KVN performances, as well.

Blue Blouse popularity peaked in 1927. That year several troupes left to tour Europe, where they were so successful that Blue Blouses sprung up, at least briefly, in England, France, Germany, and the United States. Living newspapers even played a role in New Deal America as an official part of the 1930s Federal Theater Project (Cosgrove 1982, iii). In the Soviet Union, though, the avant-garde aesthetic began to lose ground to socialist realism. Stalin pushed obedience rather than revolution. In 1928 the government shut down the *Blue Blouse* magazine. Troupes were told to focus on rural areas and, in the 1930s, to write skits that praised Stalin. By the early 1930s the Blue Blouses had all but disappeared (Leach 1994, 168).

Agitprop, or political proselytizing, did not stop, though. In the tradition of the agit-trains, agit-boats, agit-trollies (*agittramvai*), and agit-cycling groups of the Civil War era—all filled with activists putting on short theater performances—university students spearheaded agitbrigades in the 1950s and 1960s. The brigade based in Moscow State University's physics department

(physfak, from “physics faculty”), for instance, staged shows in smaller towns within the Moscow region during the school year and traveled to more distant places during holidays (Siberia, Sochi). Unlike the agit-trains, though, physfak’s agitbrigade staged light comedies. Its standard performance piece was a musical called “Archimedes,” which loosely depicted the life and times of the Greek scientist. Physfak students V. Kaner and V. Milyaev wrote the play, which the department performed for the first time in 1960s.

Even as part of agitbrigades in the 1960s, though, students seemed more concerned with socializing with the young people they met during their travels than promoting a political agenda. After a performance of “Archimedes” in Leningrad, physfak student Svetlana Kovaleva recalls that physics students from Ryazan regaled those in Leningrad, Moscow, and Tallinn with fantastic (*skazochno*) singing and dancing, then the group “as if enchanted, wandered around the nighttime city, forgetting for a while that in the morning we had to get up early and rehearse the play” (Kovaleva 2003, 243).<sup>23</sup> Describing a five-day trip to Lipetsk (three hundred miles south of Moscow) in November 1961, Kovaleva wrote mainly about the songs and dances they performed. “Valerii Milyaev from somewhere brought into our agitbrigade [Okudzhava’s] ‘Song about Vanka Morozov.’ We immediately fell in love with it and used it in all keys and with all people” (Kovaleva 2003, 233).<sup>24</sup> The reference to Bulat Okudzhava, known as a guitar poet, bard, or folksinger, is significant because it cites the constellation of student amateur activity that fed and was fed by state-sponsored endeavors like the agitbrigade. Okudzhava’s songs were not officially recorded (i.e., could not be officially recorded) until the 1970s. While his songs more often dealt with themes like love instead of politics, the Soviet state did not recognize him as a musician. His music spread, then, as young people either learned his songs on their own or traded bootleg audiorecordings. Okudzhava lived in Moscow. Trips like those of the agitbrigades helped

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<sup>23</sup> “Мы долго, как зачарованные, бродили по ночному городу, пока не вспомнили, что завтра нам рано вставать и репетировать оперу.”

<sup>24</sup> “Валерий Миляев откуда-то принес в агитбригады ‘Песенку о Ваньке Морозове.’ Мы сразу же влюбились в нее, исполняли на все лады и в лицах.”

disseminate his work to other regions, where students would teach the songs to their friends, and so on. The Komsomol signed off on the physfak train tickets. Students used them to have a good time.

Physfak students illustrate how official university extracurricular activities intersected with other youth trends in the 1950s and 1960s. Stalin's death in 1953 ushered in Krushchev's thaw era, a time when citizens relaxed their guard a bit; they had "missed socializing" under Stalin (Lebina and Chistikov 2003, 288). Kovaleva wrote that, "At that time there was a turning point in the public consciousness, one associated with the death of Stalin and the arrest of Beria. We breathed freely" (Kovaleva 2003, 13).<sup>25</sup> She continued,

Sixties youth—it's not just an age. It's a way of life, it's an attitude born of the change of epochs, the death of Stalin, the 20th Party Congress, the first timid attempts to feel like a person. It's the first ambition of a people accustomed to total obedience to suddenly live for themselves. The Student Construction Brigades appeared as a reaction against a system of complete bans, a system of the suppression of the individual (Kovaleva 2003, 32).<sup>26</sup>

The Student Construction Brigades, in fact, were not terribly radical. These were groups of Moscow State University students who went out into the countryside during the summer to help with large-scale manual labor projects. In 1958, for instance, 500 physfak students harvested grain in Kazakhstan. While fully state-run, the students made these trips their own. Kovaleva remembered this time with great nostalgia, saying, "In [our] hearts to this day live memories of the "virgin lands," of the spirit of camaraderie, of brotherhood—of those things which we are now for some reason embarrassed to talk about out loud" (Kovaleva 2003, 32-34).<sup>27</sup> Because so many students did go on trips like these, many of which involved camping, contributed to the explosion of outdoor activities of all kinds during the thaw: hiking, camping, sports. In the late 1950s people

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<sup>25</sup> "К этому времени относится и перелом в общественном сознании, связанный со смертью Сталина и арестом Берия. В воздухе повеяло свободной."

<sup>26</sup> "Шестидесятники—это не просто возраст, это образ жизни, это мироощущение, рожденное сменой эпох, смертью Сталина, XX съездом, первыми, еще робкими попытками почувствовать себя человеком. Это первые амбиции привыкших к полному послушанию людей, которым вдруг захотелось самим себя реализовать. ССО возникли как реакция на систему тотальных запретов, на подавление личности."

<sup>27</sup> "В их душах до сих пор живут воспоминания о 'целине родной,' о высоком духе товарищества, о братстве—обо всем том, о чем сейчас почему-то стесняются вслух говорить."

began having campouts attended by hundreds of people, mainly students, often lugging guitars (Lebina and Chistikov 2003, 275). Enthusiast music, theater, and craft-making all fell under the umbrella of the “do-it-yourself” (*samodeiatel’nost’*), or amateur, movement that swept the USSR in the 1950s and 1960s. Moscow State University’s talent show in the 1960s was even called an “amateur competition” (*konkurs samodeiatel’nosti*) (Kovaleva 2003, 69).

In 1960 the Moscow State University Student Construction Brigades began incorporating agitbrigade performances into their work in rural areas. “During the day—work; evening—rehearsal; on rare weekends—performances on our own or a neighboring collective farm,” Kovaleva wrote (2003, 68). Between 1961 and 1965, MGU’s physfak agitbrigade held 111 performances, most in the Moscow region, but traveling in the summer months as far as Omsk in Siberia (around 2,000 miles away and two days’ journey even on today’s trains). In 1969 they went to Sakhalin Island, near Vladivostok. These exemplars of communist youth did not depart without guidelines, however. Written rules stipulated that members of the agitbrigade “love work;” “love their agitbrigade comrades;” “observe good hygiene;” and “follow the orders of the leadership.” Perhaps underscoring the fact that this was, indeed, a group of young co-eds, the rules also noted that, “Every agitbrigadchik has a right to love in his TIME OUTSIDE OF WORK” (Kovaleva 2003, 194; capitalization in original).<sup>28</sup>

A detailed schedule for the spring of 1966 shows, in the main, performances in neighboring cities. But Moscow State University also held inter-departments agitbrigade contests, and in April 1966 its students competed in an agitbrigade tournament between all the universities in Moscow (Kovaleva 2003, 196-197). This matters in the history of KVN because it demonstrates that competitive amateur theater leagues were commonplace and very well-organized in the 1960s.

A number of amateur theater practices, then, flowed into what would become community KVN leagues. People performed *kapustniki* long before the revolution. Living newspapers were

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<sup>28</sup> “Каждый агитбригадчик имеет право на любовь в СВОБОДНОЕ ОТ РАБОТЫ ВРЕМЯ”

widespread, if, in the end, too revolutionary for the political atmosphere of Stalin's purges. The theater format that most directly influenced KVN, though, emerged alongside the agitbrigades in the 1950s. This was a skit style unique to Soviet students called STEM, the Student Theater of Estrada Miniatures (*Studencheskii teatr estradnykh miniatiur*). According to Marfin and Chivurin, "In the 1950s and 1960s, STEM was crazy popular" (2002, 9). STEM performances typically included short, even ultra-short, skits, and were staged simply for the amusement of the student body. Unlike KVN, STEM was not judged. Skit themes were typical of those in student songs of the time: "homeland, wine, love, wild parties, friendship" (Yunisov 1999, 18).

Although KVN competitions included a variety of games, some comprised only of verbal responses, some requiring a physical task, the heart of KVN from the 1970s forward was STEM-style skits. The two formats were so similar that Marfin and Chivurin laid out the advantages of transforming an existing STEM group into a KVN team in a section of their book called "How to Form a Team:"

First, KVN still has some STEM roots. Second, you already have a group of performers and a writing team. But it would be naive to think that a STEM group is in and of itself a finished KVN team. The fact is, STEM leans more towards estrada-type theater productions, and KVN is, in the end, the art of parody. And that is the primary, most fundamental difference between these genres: the density of humor in KVN is much higher (2002, 110).

The "density of humor" is higher in KVN than STEM mainly because of the conventions of the genre. STEM and KVN co-existed at universities, though KVN's biting wit quickly gained popularity among students. STEM and KVN performances both consist mainly of skits. But in most KVN performances humor, rather than what Marfin and Chivurin call "estrada-type" theater, holds pride of place. Estrada is a theater and music style in Russia that is popular, sometimes schmalzy, often overproduced (cf. MacFadyen 2001, 2002). Estrada is mass entertainment. Satire, with its low production values, subtlety, and requirements for intellectual interpretation, is not. Especially in local performances, song and dance take a backstage to "pure" humor in KVN. Teams with simple costumes get high scores if they made judges, and audiences, laugh. On the televised stage, the

success of teams such as the duo “Detective Agency Moonlight” (*Detektivnoe Agentsvo Lunnyi Svet*, or DALs) from Belgorod, Russia illustrates the appeal relatively low-budget teams can wield when they’re funny. This two-man team came up with fantastic jokes and very clever skits, winning second place in Top League both in 2014 and 2015. Their clothes were simple. They had no elaborate dance numbers, zero singing ability, and no set pieces. It is common, in contrast, for regional representatives in televised Top League performances to pull out all the stops to showcase their best, with governors and oil companies funding expensive costumes, choral ensembles, and props. DALs, with their plain blazers and deadpan delivery, were the opposite of estrada.

Elements of STEM comedy beyond the skit endure in KVN, however. The skit format called a “miniature” came from STEM. Miniatures are extremely short skits, as few as two lines total. Especially in live KVN performances, miniatures are very popular. Sometimes miniatures get used transitionally, as well, like palate cleansers between larger skits. The Irkutsk team “Rich with What” (*Chem Bogaty*), for instance, sandwiched miniatures in between two longer pieces during a 2015 semifinal competition. A young woman introduced the act with, “And now, a miniature about a crab. An incident on the street.” One student walked up to another carrying a third student dressed in a crab costume. “Hello (*zdorovo*),” said the first young man. “Here,” said the second, unshouldering his cargo. “Have a crab.” The joke came from the fact that “have a crab” (*derzhi kraba*) is slang for shaking hands. This miniature was one quick, embodied pun. The audience laughed out loud for long seconds. You, the reader, probably did not. The moment is not funny when fixed on the page. Brevity and unexpectedness drive the miniature format.

“Rich with What” followed the crab miniature with a series of others. In one, a young man tries to guess the age of a woman he is hitting on by asking her questions from pop culture (“What was the first *Fast and Furious* movie you saw?”). In another, a man distracted by a fireworks show loses his son. He abandons his search with the next round of roman candles. Each of these miniatures lasted less than fifteen seconds, and they were not thematically related. Intentionally or

no, they fall in line with Eisenstein's tradition of theater montage—a montage of acts, if not attractions. Information comes quickly, scene after scene. Miniatures are quick and funny, and they delight audiences.



**“Have a crab,” Irkutsk State University, December 19, 2015. Photo by author.**

Student theater that began as avant-garde went underground almost entirely under Stalin, re-emerged in agitbrigades and STEM under Khrushchev, and pieces of that tradition then evolved into KVN in the 1960s. The Irkutsk region Komsomol sponsored living newspaper competitions in 1977, and it is likely these were holdovers from previous decades.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, the small towns surrounding Odessa hosted agitbrigade competitions in the 1960s.<sup>30</sup> So both Odessa and Ukraine had traditions of skit-making competitions when KVN appeared on television. Komsomol networks and pre-existing amateur theater groups laid the foundation for a game show to leap from TV

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<sup>29</sup> “Справки и информации о работе Домов пионеров и школьников, Учеба Пионерского Актива” [“Inquiries and Information about the work of Houses of Pioneers and schoolchildren, a study by the Pioneer association”], Государственный архив Иркутской области [State Archives of the Irkutsk Region], 1977.

<sup>30</sup> Irina, interview with author, June 10, 2017. Dachnoe, Odessa Region, Ukraine.

screens to universities in the space of only a few years.

## **Komsomol and KVN**

Albert Einstein said, “Bureaucracy is the death of all sound work.” Sometimes, though, bureaucracy’s institutional infrastructure helps social practices spread. The Komsomol, the Soviet youth organization for those aged fourteen through twenty-eight, proved crucial to moving KVN from Moscow to towns across the USSR. According to Yuri Isakov of Ekaterinburg, a telephone call from one Komsomol cell to another might be all it took to establish a KVN program. The story below comes from the 1980s, after KVN returned to television. It is illustrative, though, of how Komsomol leaders networked to establish KVN in new places in the 1960s, too. Isakov recalled,

Socialism even helped. For all of the editors of the departmental wall newspapers at the time were certainly members of the Komsomol committees of those departments...And then a call from Moscow. I can’t recall it word for word, but the meaning was something like this:

—Hello, is this the Komsomol committee of Ural Polytechnic Institute?

—Well, something like that, yeah

—We’re the ones from Moscow

—Oh, hello!

—We heard that you had some talent that might be able to play in Central KVN?

—What talent? In what KVN?

—Well, in the Club of the Cheerful and Clever...

—Ah, that show they had on TV recently?

—Yes, we’ve revived it here, and we need one more team. We heard that you guys at UPI have a STEM team that is famous across the country. Maybe you guys could participate?

—Yes, of course we’ll take part, but first we have to think a little!

—How long do you need to think?

—A few days is probably enough.

—Great! In a few days we will call you! Goodbye.

—Call us, please. And who is this?

—... Beep! Beep! Beep!

—Ah, got it! It will be done! (Isakov 1996, 91)

The Moscow organizer hung up, knowing Isakov would do what was asked. The exchange above seems informal. Two guys chatting. Its backdrop, though, is state authority. This was a phone call, yes. But it was not a social one. Even if the Komsomol official in Moscow did not outrank Isakov (they were both students), the favor he asked was for the state, not for himself or even for



KVN. A limit case might make plain how extraordinary it is that a request like this could be made. Could a lacrosse captain at the University of Chicago cold call the soccer club leader at Texas Tech University and say, “Hey, I heard you have some good goalies down there. We need another lacrosse team for the Central League. Would you mind establishing one? Great, thanks!” Soccer and lacrosse are similar, of course, but not the same. Recruiting a team of students, teaching them a new game, and asking them to train for it took effort and organization.

KVN spread across the country because people enjoyed it, but Komsomol cells often brought it to universities in the first place. The game moved from Moscow to Odessa to Bishkek because it institutionally piggybacked on a network of bureaucratically-knitted Komsomol cells. Konstantin, a KVNshik at Moscow State University of Civil Engineering (MISI) in the 1980s, described how, more concretely, Komsomol resources helped create teams. Nearly all university students were Komsomol members; thus, they all participated, to some extent, in an organization with a hierarchy and a chain of command. Orders could be issued, tasks assigned (Riordan 1989, 22). In addition, Komsomol officers had to complete some kind of service, or “ideological work,” and KVN could fulfill that requirement. As volunteer work goes one could do worse than comedy. Konstantin explained, “I was the secretary of the Komsomol Committee, and since KVN at the time was considered part of ideological work, I was entrusted with the task of sponsoring a team...This meant helping the team organize rehearsals, traveling, and ensuring communication between the team and the university administration” (Ostromooukhova 2003, 82).

Once universities had created KVN teams, its association with *kulturnost* made individual competitors, not just the game itself, popular. The best players became known and loved because KVN talent became prestigious. Yuri, Konstantin's teammate at MISI, pointed out the link between the cultural capital KVN participants earned and the privileges this secured them within the university—in this case, the freedom to organize events (likely with funding and supplies from the Komsomol). He recalled that, “When we were at MISI [Moscow State University of Civil

Engineering], KVN was very prestigious. That's why all university bodies supported us, including the Komsomol, the party committee and the education authority...The club had a lot of activities, constantly. But I feel like KVN had carte blanche" (in Ostromooukhova 2003, 65). Mikhail, his teammate, likewise pointed out that KVNshiki became semi-celebrities, touring in agitbrigades much like the physfak students. He wrote, "Dima and I very often took part in KVN performances, and we came up with our own act. At one point they turned us into an agitbrigade; the university sent us. I remember that we toured military bases by helicopter" (in Ostromooukhova 2003, 65).<sup>31</sup>

Yuri and Mikhail might well have believed in the Komsomol's overall mission. They may have simply enjoyed KVN, however, and considered themselves lucky beneficiaries of state support for their interests. Individual Komsomol officers had a great deal of latitude to organize events, even those that fell slightly outside the bounds of the ideologically approved. Moscow Komsomol leader Igor Karimov, for instance, loved unofficial Soviet bards like Bulat Okudzhava and Aleksandr Galich. While he never hosted these singers at Komsomol events, in the 1960s he did procure funding (and even busses) to organize student hiking trips where students sang their songs. Communist Party officials eventually hauled him in to interrogation about his seeming support for Galich, who wrote quite subversives songs (e.g., calling Stalin a bastard). Despite this misstep Karimov still got invited to join the Party. They offered him a high-paying engineering salary—if he gave up all association with informal music. Karimov turned them down (Karimov 2004, 47). Since KVN is a game of satire, it is easy to imagine that Komsomol KVNshiki played the line between acceptable and subversive in a similar fashion, all while using state institutions, funds, and networks to promote the activity (Garey 2011).

## **1960s: The Cheerful Game**

*Let our souls fly*

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<sup>31</sup> *"Dima et moi, nous faisons très souvent des concerts, à partir de KVN, on a fini par former notre programme. A tel point qu'à un moment donné on a fait de nous une brigade d'agitation, et c'était la fac qui nous envoyait. Je me rappelle, on avait fait une tournée dans des bases militaires, en hélicoptère..."*

*To cosmic heights  
We call on others  
To join the battle against indifference*<sup>32</sup>  
— “Introduction,” Irkutsk Energy Systems Institute KVN team, 1966

Aleksei was, perhaps, a typical Khrushchev-era college student. He went to class, stayed active in the Komsomol, and felt proud of the Soviet system he was helping to build. In 1957 he became head of the ideological section of the Komsomol’s Council of Young Scientists. He recalled in a 2006 interview, “Sometimes I get terribly hurt that those who were once close to me are now rabid haters of communist ideas, of the Party. I could almost lose my temper. In principle a lot was allowed. For example, we opened the first youth cafe here in Irkutsk...We opened two.”<sup>33</sup> Aleksei also played in Irkutsk’s first KVN season, in 1966, as a student at the medical institute. He only competed for a year, though, before becoming a long-time jury member. He judged KVN competitions until 1982. “It was required to have a representative from the regional Komsomol on the panel,” he said (Aleksei, interview with Bella Ostromooukhova, May 2006).

KVN and televised KVN arrived at the same time in Irkutsk, perhaps reflecting the influence of what was, at the time, the most popular TV program in the USSR. Competitions from Moscow got broadcast throughout the country. Irkutsk was unique in that it produced and broadcast its own local KVN shows, as well. One of the young competitors Aleksei judged was the captain of the Energy Systems Institute KVN team (*Institut Sistem Energetiki*, or SEI), Aleksandr Koshelev (Aleksei, interview with Bella Ostromooukhova, May 2006). In his memoirs Koshelev described KVN this way, “As in a dance, you need a partner. As in a debate, you need an opponent. As in sports, you can’t do without fans. As in a competition—you can’t run away from your rival. And you also have

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<sup>32</sup> “Пусть до космических высот  
Поднимем наши души  
И за собой других зовет  
В бой против равнодушья” (Koshelev n.d., 8).

<sup>33</sup> “Иногда мне бывает страшно обидно, те кто со мной рядом шли, а теперь оголтелые ненавистники коммунистических идей, партии. Я так не озверел. В принципе многое же было позволено. Например, первое молодёжное кафе мы открывали в Иркутске здесь...Мы два открыли.”

to be cheerful, inventive, and very clever, all very quickly. The enemy is always alert” (Koshelev n.d., 1).<sup>34</sup>

In KVN, Koshelev favored both the cheerful and the satirical. Three days after the first Irkutsk competition, he, a teammate, and the Energy Systems Institute’s Komsomol secretary wrote to the director of Irkutsk’s television studio, T.A. Sheshukova, to complain. The organizers, they said, had fallen down on their duties. First, the emcees did not properly introduce the teams. “Before the competition,” they wrote, “the hosts should briefly describe the competing teams, present the teams to each other, introduce the captains, etc.”<sup>35</sup> Television viewers also did not have equal views of both teams on the stage, the scoring system was “unsuccessful,” two numbers got cut from the program (the day-of), and jury members delivered their scoring evaluations incorrectly. “The jury should have given their decisions on individual competitions within the game and explained their reasoning, as it's done in Moscow,” their letter read.<sup>36</sup> Koshelev and his friends also objected to the comportment of one of their competitors, who they said looked like he could have “punched someone in the face.”<sup>37</sup> One of the judges, moreover, had reportedly told Koshelev’s team, “Why did you play so badly today, showing us what look like rehearsals! I built the whole show around what your competitors did.”<sup>38</sup> The disappointed, wounded, insulted members of SEI concluded their nine-page letter to Irkutsk’s television director with three requests for future programs:

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<sup>34</sup> “Как в танце—здесь необходим напарник. Как в споре—здесь нужен собеседник. Как в спорте—не обойтись без болельщиков. Как в соревновании—не избежать соперника. И к тому же надо быть веселым, находчивым и очень остроумным, тратя на это очень мало времени—противник всегда начеку.”

<sup>35</sup> “Перед соревнованиями ведущим следовало в своем вступительном слове коротко охарактеризовать соревнующиеся коллективы, представить друг другу команды, познакомить капитанов и т.д.”

<sup>36</sup> Letter from the personal archive of Aleksei Koshelev. Collected by Bella Ostromooukhova. “Жюри должно было бы сообщить свое решение по отдельным видам соревнований и мотивировать его, как это делается в Москве.”

<sup>37</sup> “набил бы любому морду”

<sup>38</sup> “Что же вы сегодня так плохо показали на репетициях! Я всю передачу построил на показе ваших противников!”

- (1) The event must be decidedly friendly
- (2) The program must get a public response; that is, satire is absolutely required
- (3) Judging should be qualified and objective<sup>39</sup>

Without high standards, Koshelev and his friends argued, “a good thing might stall or degenerate into empty banter.”<sup>40</sup> Satire would preserve the game as one of intellectual rigor. He framed the need for biting comedy, thus, in the ideological language of *kulturnost*—a value few could argue with.

Koshelev also claimed that KVN had concrete social and interpersonal benefits for young people. In one of the first in a string of articles for Irkutsk newspapers spanning twenty years, Koshelev outlined KVN’s social value. “So what does competing in KVN give to the collective?” he asked. “Of course, in the case of victory, we get great joy and moral satisfaction.” That, though, came second to the opportunities KVN offered to connect with others. He continued, “The most important thing [KVN offers], in my opinion, is the healing (or prevention) of people shutting themselves off in the shells of their specializations, or their companies. It is a shake-up, it adds zing to cultural work; it is the identification of talent, team-building—a complex of KVN-therapy” (Koshelev 1967).<sup>41</sup>

Core socialist values included, according to Aleksei Yurchak, “community, selflessness, altruism, selflessness, friendship, ethical relations, safety, education, work, creativity, and concern for the future” (Yurchak 2006, 8). KVN may have received state support because it was seen to further these values. But participants also benefitted from an environment that prized community, friendship, education, and creativity. Many thousands still do.

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<sup>39</sup> “(1) Встреча должна быть подчеркнута дружеской  
(2) Передача должна иметь общественное звучание, т.е. в ней абсолютно необходима сатира  
(3) Судейство должно быть квалифицированным и объективным”

<sup>40</sup> “...хорошее дело может заглохнуть или выродиться в пустое зубоскальство.”

<sup>41</sup> “Так что же все-таки дает КВН соревнующимся коллективам? Разумеется, в случае победы—великую радость и моральное удовлетворение. Но это не основное. Главное, на мой взгляд, это лечение (или профилактика) от замкнутости в скорлупе своей специальности, своего предприятия, встряски, оживление культурно-массовой работы, выявление талантов, сплочение коллектива—целый комплекс кавеэнотерапии.”

Even though KVN, STEM, and agitbrigade skits all built their performances around *kapustniki*, KVN became far more popular. KVN drew in crowds partly because it was a game; competition adds drama for an audience. In another departure from standard amateur theater groups, though, KVN incorporated improvisational elements. KVN's signature event, *razminka* ("warm-up" or "exercises") required competitors to respond in a humorous way to questions from judges or their competitors. Another standard event, the Captain's Contest, saw team captains trade quips on a given theme. Sometimes competitors floundered, failing to come up with a funny answer. But audiences delighted when one hit the mark.

As a mishmash of theater, comedy, improv, and variety show, KVN was to student theater what pickleball is to tennis.<sup>42</sup> Albert Aksel'rod, one of KVN's creators, listed the elements of KVN as the following:

1. estrada<sup>43</sup>
2. student amateur activity
3. sport
4. a contest of scholars
5. a tournament of wits
6. tomfoolery
7. theater
8. criticism of shortcomings
9. a game
10. an evening of recreation (Aksel'rod 1974, 21)

Teams opened with a pre-prepared Introduction (*Privetsvye*), a short number that often included singing. An improvisational segment then followed, either a game (like untangling audiotape) or giving witty responses to questions in *razminka*. In the opening game of the 1964 season, competitors quizzed each other during *razminka* with questions that all began with the word "why." If the questioning team stumped the other before five questions had been asked, they

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<sup>42</sup> "Pickleball is a court sport played on a badminton-sized court...with a perforated plastic ball similar to a wiffle ball and composite or wooden paddles about twice the size of ping-pong paddles." USA Pickleball Association Fact Sheet, <http://www.usapa.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Pickleball-Fact-Sheet-2015.pdf>.

<sup>43</sup> *Estrada* comes from the French *estrade* or Spanish *estrado*, meaning platform or stage. It refers to variety shows, light entertainment, and popular music (MacFadyen 2002a, 5)

would get two points. The team from the Moscow Institute of Transport Engineers asked those from the Moscow Aviation Institute, “Why do we use the real number system?” The young men from the Aviation Institute answered, “We use real numbers because people began counting to ten using their fingers.” The exchange continued:

Transport: And why did people begin counting to ten on their fingers, in particular?

Aviation: Because they are easily available for a person.

Transport: And why are they the most easily available?

Aviation: Because counting on your toes is harder than counting on your fingers.

Transport: And why is it harder to count on your feet than your hands?

Aviation: Just try it! You would have to take your boots off.

(KVN 1964)

The exchange is not riotously funny, especially in translation. The crowd enjoyed it because teams responded on the spot, on live TV. Improvisational performances up the level of potential surprise in a punchline. As Albert Aksel’rod argued in a book called *Course in the Cheerful Sciences*, “the comic = the recognizable + the unexpected” (1974, 86). People must share background information in order to understand a joke (recognition), but the best punchlines catch the audience off guard (unexpected). “What does cat plus mouse equal?” Aksel’rod asked, by way of example. Answer: “Cat.” He continued, “What is ‘water and stone?’ Mineral water.” In early KVN people most loved watching off-the-cuff wit. Masliakov wrote, “We considered KVN to be improvisation plus rhythm” (Masliakov 1996, 19). One literary event, popular in the 1960s but gone by the 1980s, combined prepared skits and improvisation. BRIZ (*Biuro po ratsionalizatsii i izobretenie*), or the Bureau of Rationalization and Invention, required competitors to write a *kapustnik* on a given theme, but teams got a limited amount of time to prepare. Unlike skits in the “Introduction” or “Homework” sections of the show, which teams scripted in collaboration with writers from their home regions, organizers announced the theme for BRIZ only after teams arrived in Moscow. They got a few days to brainstorm, then performed what they came up with for the show’s producers before airtime (Janco 2004, 22). Most likely, editors wanted to vet content for ideological appropriateness rather than punchline quality. Commenting on her time managing

Soviet television programs, KVN editor Elena Gal'perina noted, "The ideal show is one where there is no text at all" (Gal'perina 1983, 9). Without words, chances for political missteps were circumscribed. It's difficult to get too cheeky with an audiotape race.

Gal'perina had cause for concern. Until 1968 all KVN shows were live. And funny, intelligent youth tend not to abide by rules. KVN only had four: don't joke about the Central Committee; don't joke about the Politburo; don't joke about countries that had strained relations with the USSR; and, finally, don't joke about the KGB (Janco 2004, 38). I imagine all of these were broken, by some team, somewhere in the Soviet Union. But a group of Ukrainian students transgressed the final one spectacularly during the 1966 finals round.

In 1966 the team Chimney Sweeps (*Trubochisty*) from Odessa satirized the KGB. The theme of that year's competition was "Telepathy Surrounds Us." Odessa sang a song whose lyrics spoke of telepaths working "some with telephones, some with automatics" acting as operators on a global communications network: "They connect our friendly signals." Telepath, though, also meant KGB agent. The word "automatic" (*avtomat*) could mean any machine, but calls to mind, as in English, automatic weapons. Read this way, their song depicted not benevolent telepathic operators but KGB agents alternatively listening in on phone calls and gunning people down (Janco 2013, 132-133). Of course, the second meaning is deniable, which is why the satellite feed was not cut (this had been done for bawdy jokes in the past). Historian Andrew Janco maintains, however, that even those people who had not caught the second meaning of the joke during the show would have heard about it as people inevitably discussed KVN the next day, amplifying the effect of the pun beyond the broadcast moment. During the same show the Chimney Sweeps even mocked KGB disapproval for illicit humor. They said, "Laughter is a personal matter (*lichnoe delo*) for everyone. Let's make everyone a 'personal matter' and laugh." *Lichnoe delo* translates both as personal matter and personal *file*. The second sentence, about *making* someone a "personal matter/file" reveals that "file" was an intended meaning. In this context, then, the personal file is a KGB



file: “Let's make everyone a KGB file and keep laughing.” Strong stuff. There is no indication, though, that the Chimney Sweeps faced reprobation for their skit. It is, after all, hard to prove the meaning of a pun, especially since performances were not recorded. We have one of the Chimney Sweeps themselves, Simon Livshin, to thank for this story; he related it to Andrew Janco in 2003 (Janco 2004, 37-38).

Aleksandr Koshelev recalled a few scandals in Irkutsk KVN in the 1960s, as well. In one improvisational game, contestants were shown a photograph of a poster that promoted educational progress and asked to explain its significance. The poster stood in front of the Church of the Holy Cross, which gave KVNshiki room to juxtapose church and state. The winning answer was the “philosophical law of unity and battle of opposites”—but the church stood above the Party poster, indicating that it had won. This was not the approved position of the atheist state. “They almost put us all in prison for this,” Koshelev said. “They took the editor to the mat immediately,” he continued. “These are the kinds of things that happened [back then]. Of course, no one spoke against the Party or government, and no one laughed at the leaders as is done today. Then everything was clear, strict” (interview with Bella Ostromooukhova, May 2006, Irkutsk).<sup>44</sup>

Another member of the Odessa Chimney Sweeps, Valentin Krapiva, spoke about a less controversial incident from the 1966 Moscow broadcast. As representatives of Odessa the team thought they should reference works by native author Isaac Babel. Since some of Babel’s most famous personae were bandits, so the Chimney Sweeps decided to kick off their skit with this kind of character. Krapiva walked onto the stage, approached the microphone, and said, “Look to the right!” A thousand people in the audience turned their heads to the right. And, Krapiva realized, viewers at home might be doing the same thing. “Once and for all,” he wrote, “I understood that television is not a toy. And KVN—KVN is a great, magical power” (Krapiva n.d.). He was right. KVN's satire could spur change. Or, as in the case of the telepaths number, it could acknowledge

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<sup>44</sup> “Конечно, никто не говорил против партии и правительства, никто не смеялся над лидерами как сейчас это принято, там было всё очень чётко, жёстко.”

the darker corners of everyday Soviet life. The ability to broadcast ideas instantly, to millions of viewers, presented stunning possibilities. Television's drama, danger, and novelty launched KVN not only onto TV screens across the USSR, but into schools, universities, houses of culture, and factories. From Belgorod to Bishkek, grade school and university students alike played KVN.

It was here, at the end of the 1960s, that KVN as a television program and KVN as an oral tradition began to diverge. Sergei Lapin, who became chairman of the State Committee on Television and Radio in 1970 "did not like the game, hated it," and, according to Yuli Gusman, schemed for two years to get the program cancelled (Janco 2004, 54; Shchedrinskii 1996, 20). He won. The television show went off the air from 1972 to 1986. KVN as a community activity, however, continued—a story I detail in the next few sections.

### **1970s: Forbidden but Possible**

*"For us, KVN is not what's on television. For us, KVN is here [pats heart]. It's what's inside."*  
—Team Kamyzaki, Kamyziakskii Krai, Russia, Top League 2016 Gala Concert in Sochi<sup>45</sup>

Valentin Krapiva joked in his memoirs, "We all love rhetorical questions like 'What came first, the chicken or the egg.' In answer to the question, 'What came first, cheerfulness or cleverness?,' any KVNshik would answer, without hesitation, 'Censorship'" (Krapiva n.d.).<sup>46</sup> Censorship worried artists of all media in the USSR. And comedians took more risks than most. In 1971, at a Moscow competition celebrating KVN's tenth anniversary, the Odessans once again broke rules. They were not, in fact, supposed to attend at all. A new cadre of Communist Party leaders in Odessa had categorically banned the team from going. However, Mikhail Shchedrinskii recalled, "Right or wrong, as they say, the Odessans went on their own dime and appeared on the

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<sup>45</sup> "Для нас КВН—не то что на телевидение. Для нас КВН—это там, внутри." KVN Top League 2016 Gala Concert in Sochi, January 23, 2016 (broadcast February 22, 2016). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AngizvCoRW4> (accessed January 28, 2020).

<sup>46</sup> "Все мы любим риторические вопросы, например: 'появилось первым—курица или яйцо?' В КВН на риторический вопрос: 'Что появилось первым, веселье или находчивость?' — любой КВНщик, не задумываясь, ответит: 'Первой появилась цензура.'"

recorded footage" (Shchedrinksii 1996, 26). The team put on a wonderful performance and got called back to the stage for not one, but two encores. The audience demanded more *razminka* (question-and-answer prompts). In response, the game's presenters gave the team a scenario to respond to: "There is a room with a doctor sitting in it. A lion walks in. The question: how would you react in this situation?" The team answered, "Hunters argue that if you put your head in a lion's mouth and hold it there for just a second, the novelty wears off for the lion" (Shchedrinskii 1996, 26).<sup>47</sup> It is absurd, of course, but the audience went wild for the joke (*rukhnul*). None of the TV viewers at home ever saw the Odessans, though. Censors excised them from the show. "Not a single trace of them remained," Shchedrinksii wrote (1996, 26). Censorship became even easier after 1968, when producers began pre-recording KVN instead of broadcasting the shows live. Aleksander Masliakov said, "They started to cut more and more from each show, and later all but disfigured them" (Masliakov 1996, 20).<sup>48</sup>

Central Television cancelled the KVN television program entirely in 1972. The intellectual elite (particularly the Jewish elite) got cast as threatening during the conservative Brezhnev era. Masliakov remembered the changes the new Central Television director, Sergei Lapin, introduced when he took over in 1970: "People with beards weren't allowed, because they looked like Lenin or Marx; Jews weren't allowed; this wasn't allowed, that wasn't allowed" (Shchedrinksii 1996, 19-20). Lapin schemed for two years to shut down KVN. He started by mandating that senseless games be played in KVN, such as "who can spit the farthest" or "who can crow the loudest." Such contests carried no risk of political missteps. Or humor. Lapin also barred a successful team from Azerbaijan, led by captain Yuli Gusman, from competing. In response, a Kyrgyz team performed the following couplet during their performance:

I brought you a gift from the heart  
This little volume by Gogol is the reason

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<sup>47</sup> "Охотники утверждают, что если в пасть льву положить голову и подержать там минуту, то лев теряет ощущение новизны..."

<sup>48</sup> "Передачу стали вырезать все больше и больше, а потом и просто уродовать."

No inspector could strangle KVN  
With his dead soul<sup>49</sup>

After the performance, Lapin began shouting, “Does that mustachioed [kid] think that I don't understand who the “inspector” is? I'm the inspector!” (Shchedrinksii 1996, 20).<sup>50</sup> In addition to barring Gusman from competing, censors now began cutting his image as an audience member from all broadcast footage. “I never missed a KVN performance. I came with my ticket and sat in the 9th row, in the center,” he said. All the same, producers edited him out of even panorama shots of the audience. While well-intentioned, Kyrgyzstan's show of solidarity helped sink KVN. Gusman recalled, “Then someone, I think from the KGB, began to seriously work to discredit KVN: there was a wave of rumors about KVNshiki sending diamonds to Israel. Processes began in all cities. There were denunciations of Masliakov.” No one got reprimanded, though; all accusations were found baseless. Gusman attributed this to the inherent goodness of KVN and KVNshiki, saying: “KVN is and was a holy thing” (Shchedrinksii 1996, 20).

Holy or no, the program had been in peril for several years before the Central Asians stirred up trouble. Elena Gal'perina claimed that every broadcast brought criticism. “Sometimes they wanted to shut us down because we discredited Soviet students by asking questions that were too simple, and sometimes they wanted to shut us down because the questions were too tough...And because the students were too good to face the workers and collective farmers, we got accused of discrediting the workers and collective farmers” (cited in Ostromooukhova 2003, 66-67). KVNshiki stood at the heart of a struggle about the image of ideal Soviet youth. And Masliakov's comments above make it plain that, to many officials, *Homo sovieticus* did not have a Jewish face.

Anti-semitic tendencies shaped the first years of KVN's history, as well. KVN's primary creator, Sergei Muratov, recalled how the show's first emcee and co-creator, Albert Aksel'rod, got

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<sup>49</sup> “Я подарок Вам преподнес от души,  
В этом томике Гоголя есть свой резон  
Чтобы наш КВН не сумел задушить  
Своей мертвой душой никакой ревизор”

<sup>50</sup> “Лапин на летучке орал: ‘Этот усатый думает, я не понимаю, кто ‘ревизор?!’ Это я—‘ревизор!!!’”

replaced by the ethnically Russian Sergei Masliakov in 1963:

The administration pressured us to switch the presenter, Aksel'rod, with a Russian guy. At that time it was simply glaring that the most popular emcee in the country was Jewish. I didn't want to find out all the unpleasant details, but perhaps they directly told Alek, for instance, you're a Jew and you won't climb to that level (Kasperovich 2011, 39).

Aleksei, though, remembered very little anti-Semitism among KVNshiki in Irkutsk. When

Bella Ostromooukhova asked him if he had observed this, he replied,

Never, because [in KVN] the brightest performers were the Jewish guys. And the Russians were good too. Sasha Koshelev—that was a Russian guy...We were all normal guys. We got together in the regional committee of the Komsomol—I was in charge of youth activities for the sciences. All the biological sections fell to me. No one told me anything. And in the theater I was the unquestioned authority. If I said it would be one way, even if they jumped down my throat, it would go my way all the same (Aleksei, interview with Bella Ostromooukhova, May 2006).<sup>51</sup>

Here, Aleksei claimed that even if there had been anti-Semitism, he was in a position to quash it. Later in the interview, though, he mentioned a time when some money went missing from the ticket proceeds. “They looked at each of us,” he said. Then, trailing off, “And two of the guys were Jewish...” Luckily the money was found (Aleksei, interview with Bella Ostromooukhova, May 2006). But the fact that Aleksei even mentioned that two on the team were Jewish implies that they would have fallen under special suspicion.

Whether out of anti-semitism or a generalized fear of controversy, Moscow axed the show. A bland youth program called *Auction* replaced KVN. It valorized wholesome Soviet youth who, according to one television producer of the time, “can’t find the right word right away, are shy, can’t improvise” (Evans 2010, 152-153). These new role models were, in other words, the opposite of KVNshiki.

The 1972-1973 KVN season had already begun when Central Television cancelled the

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<sup>51</sup> “Никогда, потому что там самые яркие личности были еврейские ребята. Ну и русские были хорошие. Саша Кошелев—это русский парень. Умнейший из умнейших человек...все были нормальные ребята. Ну вот в обкоме комсомола нас собирали—я же заведовал молодёжным движением научным, биологическая вся секция на мне висела. Никто мне ничего не сказал. А в театре я вообще был непререкаемый авторитет—если я сказал будет так—то они могли хоть вниз головой прыгать, всё равно это будет так.”

program. Albert Aksel'rod's hometown team, Voronezh, had filmed one of the first competitions of the season. Aksel'rod described the disappointment of the young men from the Voronezh Engineering-Construction Institute when the game did not air:

It was 1972. The team was determined to fight for victory in this new season. We met the opening game with this attitude. Our scripts glittered! Eyes burned! We rehearsed like mad. Our captain, Anatoly Shulik, even shaved because an instruction came out saying, "beards distort the image of the Soviet youth." We played—once! The program was scheduled for November 1st...But November 1st turned into an unfunny April 1st. Despite the TV schedule, the KVN broadcast didn't happen. It was decided that these three letters also distort the image of the Soviet youth (Aksel'rod 1996, 34).

Canceling the television show did not stop KVN, however. "They only ended the program. The game remained," claimed Mikhail Marfin and Andrei Chivurin, longtime KVN editors (2002, 12). In his memoirs about KVN, Aleksandr Masliakov also wrote, "But there was always KVN. Even when it was not on television screens. People still played it, all the same" (Masliakov 2017, 6). Marfin and Chivurin further noted that although tournaments were "not encouraged," everyone knew the game. "Almost everyone indulged in the game at one point in their lives—at school [in competitions] between classes, in a Pioneer camp, or in a contest between departments at university" (Marfin and Chivurin 1996, 12-13).<sup>52</sup> Ukrainian Alexander Grushko, who worked as head teacher at a Kiev primary school during the 1970s, likewise maintained, "There were, for instance, Pioneer camps where school children—pioneers—vacationed. There was KVN there regularly, always" (interview with author, January 9, 2018).<sup>53</sup>

It might be expected that KVN remained popular among university students. More surprising is that school administrators and pedagogical writers recommended this supposedly banned game for primary school children in the 1970s and 1980s (Kantorovich 1973, Kogan and Kantorovich 1975). In the 1970s, the Novokuznetsk National Pedagogical Institute put out a series of annual handbooks called, "KVN in school and the Pioneer camp" with specific recommendations about

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<sup>52</sup> "И почти каждый в своей жизни хотя бы разок этой игрой побаловался—в школе между классами, в пионерском лагере между отрядами или в институте между факультетами."

<sup>53</sup> "Были, например пионерские лагеря, где школьники, пионеры, отдыхали, там КВН проводился регулярно, всегда."

how to conduct games, possible themes and competitions, and quizzes (with answers). The introduction to the 1975 edition stated,

One of the most widespread forms of extracurricular activity among schoolchildren is KVN, which is becoming increasingly popular among students of all classes. KVN takes place not only in schools, but in city and suburban pioneer camps. Fascinating in form and focused on content, KVN games can contribute to the development not only of cognitive skills but of professional interests (Kogan and Kantorovich 1975, 1).<sup>54</sup>

In 1975, then, three years after KVN's ban and eleven years before its return to television, the Novokuznetsk Pedagogical Institute and the Pedagogical Society of the RSFSR<sup>55</sup> promoted the activity as one that could help young people develop creative and cognitive skills. The 1975 manual described a ballet-themed game, complete with detailed instructions for the following competitions: a "homework" skit; a contest for the best humorous story, an artistic contest; a pantomime contest, a dance contest; a stamp-collecting contest (for stamps related to ballet); a medal-collecting contest (for medals related to ballet); a postcard contest; and brainteasers (Kogan and Kantorovich 1975, 28-29). Several of these contests, like stamp- and postcard-collecting, don't lend themselves well to presentation on stage. But they could be judged well within classrooms. This was KVN for education, not for large-scale entertainment. Few game shows likely met with such crossover success. KVN did, though, and the fact that it was embedded in schools and Pioneer camps as well as universities, with the support of Soviet pedagogues, meant that it thrived in these spaces throughout the 1970s and early 1980s.

Liubov, for instance, now director of the Irkutsk History Museum, recalled that she played KVN in biannual primary school competitions during the 1980s, then continued to compete during the 1990s at the Irkutsk Pedagogical Institute (interview with author, November 11, 2016). Grushko, similarly, reported that at his school students in each class formed KVN teams, then

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<sup>54</sup> "Одной из распространенных форм внеклассной работы со школьниками являются КВН, приобретающие все большую популярность среди учащихся всех классов. КВН проводятся не только в школах, но и в городских и загородных пионерских лагерях. Увлекательные по форме, целенаправленные по содержанию, они могут способствовать развитию не только познавательных, но и профессиональных интересов" (1).

<sup>55</sup> Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic

competed against other classes within their grade level. Teachers got involved, helping to plan thematic KVN competitions based on their specialties: chemistry, physics, literature. For one of the chemistry-themed competitions, for example, students had to demonstrate a chemical magic trick of some sort on stage (interview with author, January 9, 2018). A video recording another teacher at Grushko's school made of a KVN competition between classes 9-A and 9-B ("ashki" and "beshki") in 1979, seven years after KVN was "banned," is available on YouTube.<sup>56</sup>

Sergei Ostashko, a Ukrainian KVN competitor in both the late 1960s and early 1980s, said, "And so, for fourteen years KVN wasn't broadcast on a big stage, but it always continued, at least in Odessa, it always went on on the level of university-internal competitions...on the day of the Physics Department, there was a game between the students and the professors" (interview with author, March 25, 2017). Olga, who was born in the Irkutsk region but attended St. Petersburg's Higher Trade Union School of Culture (*Vysshaia Profsoiuznaia Shkola Kultury*) from 1979-1983, described an active KVN scene within her university, as well, complete with defined roles for first-, second-, third-, and fourth-year students. Fourth years, for instance, wrote the bulk of a team's material and trained the younger cohorts (interview with author October 20, 2017). Interdepartmental competitions remained popular in Irkutsk, as well, but Irkutsk may have been in the minority of cities, along with Odessa (for a while), that continued inter-university competitions after 1972. Igor, a former French professor at Irkutsk State Linguistic Institute, maintained that between 1973 and 1985 the best teams from city universities would play against each other:

That's why there was a very branched structure. That is, here's a group of ten people, and they could...make up a team. Then each department had a team. And there were competitions between departments. And then between universities. But that was already on the level of the city (interview with author, October 20, 2016).<sup>57</sup>

But not all universities were able to maintain KVN when the all-union competitions ended.

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<sup>56</sup> Footage of game fragments available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CI9yv7irmEM&t=34s> (accessed April 21, 2020).

<sup>57</sup> "Поэтому была такая очень разветвлённая структура. Т е вот группа 10 человек, и они могли, ну не все 10, могли несколько человек, - своя команда. Потом факультет, - своя команда. И между факультетами соревнования были. А потом между ВУЗами. Но это было на уровне города."



Mikhail, a KVNshik from the Moscow State Institute of Civil Engineering, remembers trying to keep KVN alive at their school, reporting, “We met for a while afterwards in groups of five or six. We even had performances. We tried to tour for about six months” (Ostromooukhova 2003, 65).<sup>58</sup> Aksel’rod’s group in Voronezh put on between forty and sixty performances in the year following KVN’s closure, but staged no competitions. “Concerts, festivals...Terrible to remember!” (Aksel’rod 1996, 34). In Kharkiv, in eastern Ukraine, some university competitors shifted back into activities like STEM (the “theater of miniatures”) or other forms of skit-making instead of KVN. While the STEM sketch below comes from the 1980s rather than the 1970s, its content is likely similar to those of the previous decade. Conflicts between students and teachers are common topics at universities—and rarely offend political sensibilities. The STEM group of Kharkov Polytechnic Institute (1987) depicted an exam as a pistol duel between student and teacher:

Teacher: What is Boyle’s law? (Pistol shot)  
Student: You didn’t tell us. (Pistol shot)  
Teacher: You should have gone to lecture. (Pistol shot)  
Student: But I...I was sick, I was giving blood, I was in a competition. (Three shots in succession)

(Yunisov 1999, 75-76)

The performance ends with the student taking a crib note out of his pocket and miming pulling a pin with his teeth, as one would with a grenade. He hurls the cheat sheet at the enemy, his teacher, and triumphs over the exam. Skits like these entertain. But they carry no biting humor, no social criticism. Yunisov claimed that, “STEM reigned in the world of student wit until the second half of the 1980s, when KVN returned to TV screens. They continued STEM in institutes throughout the so-called ‘stagnation’ years” (Yunisov 1999, 4). Yunisov depicted STEM as calm, quiet, and potentially unchallenging—either to the status quo or for students themselves. When KVN came back to television, he wrote, “Suddenly, out of this quiet family of student joy, KVN became one of the most powerful channels of emancipating the mind and realizing creative

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<sup>58</sup> “*Nous nous rencontrions encore entre nous pendant un temps [après la fermeture du KVN], par groupes de cinq ou six. On donnait même des concerts, on avait essayé de faire des tournées pendant environ six mois.*”

ambitions” (Yunisov 1999, 4).<sup>59</sup>

KVN's space for satire set it apart from STEM, especially during the heady glasnost years. Students could speak their minds, and did, with both innuendo and brazenness. Vladimir Tertyshnik was a Ukrainian KVNshik in the 1980s who later became a lawyer and judge. In his memoirs he related some of the KVN songs and couplets he composed during his student days in Kiev. Among them was the following, “New Jokes on an Old Theme.” It was set to the tune of the 1953 song “So Many Golden Lights” (*“Ognei tak mnogo zolotykh”*) which tells the story of a woman in love with a married man. The first stanza of “So Many Golden Lights” runs:

There are so many golden lights  
On the streets of Saratov  
There are so many bachelor boys,  
But I love a boy who's married.

In parallel fashion, the first three stanzas of “New Jokes” start off lamenting the narrator’s luck in hanging out with guys instead of beautiful women:

There are so many beautiful girls  
So many with slender legs and waists  
And I'm stuck with a chubby mug  
With the ugly name Vitaly<sup>60</sup> (Tertyshnik 2006, 79)

The joke seems straightforward, contrasting the attributes of desirable women with the chubby Vitaly, the lazy Sergei, and the bum Andrei. Tertyshnik flips the meaning in the last stanza, though, revealing that these men he’s stuck with are actually government tails:

There are so many nice women  
Believe me, dear reader  
And I’m stuck with a shameless mug

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<sup>59</sup> “В эту игру продолжали играть в вузах и все предыдущие так называемые «застойные» годы, но вдруг из тихой «семейной» студенческой радости КВН стал одним из мощных каналов раскрепощения сознания и реализации творческих амбиций.”

<sup>60</sup> “Как много девушек хороших,  
Как много стройных ног и Талий,  
А мне досталось с пухлой рожей,  
С противным именем Виталий”

Either a Censor or a Snoop (Tertyshnik 2006, 79)<sup>61</sup>

Resuming KVN as a TV show revitalized the activity. But this was not because people watched it on television and suddenly wanted to (re-)establish it in their towns. KVN never left most communities entirely. When the USSR-wide system of competitions returned to the air, students who were already playing KVN or who had, at some point, played in school were poised to step in. Students brought sharp satire to the stage in the more liberal 1980s, too, which pleased fans. They critiqued the Party, censorship, and economic planning—but, overtly, at least, in the context of preserving the system.

### 1980s: KVN returns

*Vse prodet, a KVN ostanitsia  
Ne portitsia ne staritsia  
A lichno oborot  
I v goda v god  
Puskai on povtoraetsia  
I tak uzh, poluchaetsia  
Chto KVN zhivet  
A mozhet byt eto bylo navsegda  
Chem-to ne zametnym  
I v etim vse beda  
Listaem stranitsy, i v poslednye  
Poit te zhe littsa...*

*Everything passes, but KVN remains  
It doesn't spoil or age  
But, honestly, the opposite  
And from year to year  
Let it repeat  
And it turns out  
That KVN lives  
And maybe it was always that way  
Something unnoticed  
And in that—all the trouble  
Turn the page, and, in conclusion,  
The same faces are singing...*

—Mikhail Marfin, 1987 Central League Final

Mikhail Gorbachev, the last General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, implemented swift, dramatic reforms when he took the helm in 1985. As when a fog begins to lift, censorship eased almost immediately. Banned books re-appeared. Newspapers published articles criticizing Soviet society. Topics like forced collectivization, Stalin's crimes, and the Cuban Missile crisis even featured in theater performances (Suny 2010, 484). Gorbachev wrote, "Democratic

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<sup>61</sup> "Как много девушек хороших  
Поверьте, милый мой читатель,  
А мне досталась с наглой рожей  
То ли Цензура, то ли Наблюдатель..."

development presupposes glasnost—that is, openness, freedom of information for all citizens and freedom of expression by them...freedom of criticism in the fullest sense of the word” (Gorbachev 2000, 61). Discussions about bringing back KVN began to “float around” in 1985 (*vitat’ v vozdukhe*) (Shchedrinskii 1996, 39). It was no small help that the two youth editors for Central Television at that time were renowned former KVNshiki themselves. A.V. Menshikov had been captain of a successful Moscow State University of Civil Engineering (MISI) team in the 1960s and B.A. Salibov had written jokes as a member of an Odessa team (Shchedrinskii 1996, 39). On May 25, 1986, the first KVN show since the 1970s aired. Mikhail Shchedrinskii, a St. Petersburg competitor who played in Top League in the 1990s, called KVN’s return the “herald of glasnost,” arguing that the funniest, sharpest pieces of satire were not cut from performances in this era (1996, 43). In the 1987-1988 season, for instance, a team from Novosibirsk criticized both socialism and lingering state control over free expression. In the first semifinals round they joked that capitalism was the same as socialism—“plus electrification for the entire country.” Another team member countered, “We have electrification. It’s just that there aren’t enough ‘plusses.’” Even more radically, this team satirized censorship, stationing a team member by the phone in case “the Party” called in with objections to their skit. The phone began ringing after the “plusses” joke. A young man answered, then informed his teammates, “They said that we can talk about this. But it’s nothing to be happy about.” All of the judges gave Novosibirsk the maximum of five points, proclaiming it the best skit they’d seen that season (KVN Top League 1988a).

Twenty years earlier, even mentioning the Central Committee of the Communist Party—abbreviated TsK, for *Tsentral’niy Komitet*—shocked the audience. In 1967 a team from Dnepropetrovsk replaced the words of a children’s poem, “*Mukha-tsokukha*” (“Chirping Fly”) with “*Mukha, mukha-TsK-tukha*.” There was no commentary, no further joke about the Party (Janco 2013, 131). This pun, mild as it was, broke the first rule of playing KVN: “don’t joke about the Central Committee.” Given this history, Party secretaries at institutes in the 1980s “could not

believe what people were allowed to talk about ‘on television’” (Shchedrinskii 1996, 43). Yuri Isakov, a competitor from Ekaterinburg who would go on to write for a number of television shows in Moscow, including the contemporary cartoon “Fiksiki,” described the 1986-1987 season, the first season of KVN's return, as like “a first love.” “It is most likely very dear to us” (Shchedrinskii 1996, 96). One of the highlights of Isakov’s second season was that Vadim Samoilov, leader of the Russian rock band Agata Christie, played as one of their musicians. In the third season, though, things started to change. Programs added slick production. Teams had sponsors (like the Bashkir Oil and Chemical Factory). “A time came,” he said, “when a team had to have an image.” He continued,

This was a different time—a time of sponsors, and more and more it became possible to talk about things which were previously forbidden. It became a lot easier to breathe. It was during that season, when it was still interesting to joke about forbidden topics—but we were nonetheless allowed to do so to the max—that was the high point for our team (Isakov 1996, 92)

Teams did not wait three seasons to begin talking about taboo subjects, however. The Odessa Gentlemen ended their introduction in the third quarterfinals in 1986 by thumbing their noses at censorship. They said, “As ancient gentlemen used to say, *‘Ave Caesar, morituri te salutant.’*”<sup>62</sup> In translation that means, ‘Hello, censor. Those headed towards laughter greet the jury!’” *Morituri te salutant*, in fact, means “Those who are about to die salute you.” The team thus declared their intention to tell edgy jokes, ones that may well be cut from broadcasts, in the name of humor. The audience grinned widely and clapped for fully forty-five seconds. Eduard Uspenskii, famous author of the Soviet children's series “Cheburashka” and “Three from Prostokvashino,” looked particularly delighted (KVN Top League 1986). The same quarterfinals match featured another celebrity judge, whom Aleksander Masliakov introduced with the words, “This is a person that is, it seems to me, very “KVN” in his soul. Cheerful by nature. And he has undoubtedly proven to us all that he is very clever. Well, what can I say. Here is the World Chess Champion, Gary Kasparov.”

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<sup>62</sup> “Those who are about to die salute you.”

While teams in the 1980s satirized the Party, society, and even brought up sexual relations (also an untouchable topic in Soviet times) they worked within an institutional framework that promoted preserving the Soviet system. One judge in 1988 lambasted a team for joking about trivialities like sports. Satire, even if it ruffled feathers, made socially relevant statements and worked to improve flawed aspects of everyday life. The judge scolded both teams in the second 1988 semifinal round, saying,

I'm sure that tomorrow, in the papers that cover KVN, they will say that KVN has deteriorated. Before, both Moscow and Ufa gave more interesting performances. I don't think today's game was especially interesting—sporting...There are so many problems among the youth, problems among students. Today we didn't see any of these. So I'm just waiting for the final" (KVN Top League 1988b).

The judge found the performance vacant because it carried no larger social message. The 1980s, then, were a time when some extremely controversial topics became the subjects of jokes. But KVN's evaluation rubrics also reinforced specifically Soviet ideas about the role of entertainment in society. Soviet theorist Arnol'dov, echoing contemporaries, argued, "In today's conditions there is a striving in every collective to create an atmosphere of high culture and high Communist morality so that the collective's cultural microclimate should correspond to society's growing demands, and man's spiritual need for man" (Arnol'dov 1974,137). In this view, even leisure activities should advance kulturnost, learning, cleverness, morality, joyfulness and community (cf. Tsipursky 2013). KVN supported these core Soviet values despite critiquing the Party, surveillance, and censorship.

Stand-up comedian and former KVNshik Mikhail Zadornov touched on the themes of both joyfulness and surveillance in an October 2015 performance in Irkutsk. In the middle of a marathon three-and-a-half-hour one-man show, Zadornov related a Soviet-era practical joke. A friend of his invited four people to a cafe. Before they arrived, though, he paid the waitress and asked her to bring out five cups of coffee at exactly eight o'clock. Right before eight, with his guests assembled, the man leaned into the floral centerpiece and whispered, "Five cups of coffee,

please.” His friends looked on in horrified amazement as the waitress immediately appeared with the order. “Why do this?” asked Zadornov, laughing. “To live more joyfully! (*Chtoby zhit’ veselee!*)”

Surveillance structured everyday Soviet life. People learned to stay silent on trains and busses so informants couldn't overhear them. Friends discussed controversial topics in their kitchens, where, in theory, they could speak without fear. The practical joke indexed anxiety about hidden microphones, technology that could destabilize privacy even within the home. It parodied the mics as well, though, turning a frightening situation into the Soviet version of a MacDonald’s drive-through.

The phenomenon of hushed kitchen conversations, and the need for them, was so widespread that songwriter Yuli Kim wrote a musical play called “Moscow Kitchens” in 1990. A sequence of scenes show people discussing friends and dissident icons lost to political violence. One of the darker stanzas features a man speaking to a mother whose son has been sent to the Gulag:

Don't put together a care package, mama  
Your son doesn't need it  
It's the last time he'll see the sky  
Under a Kolyma moon.  
He doesn't need anything:  
Not tears, not a headstone, not a cross,  
And as long as there are people in the world  
They'll forget about him, forever<sup>63</sup>

Kim's lyrics remind us that saying the wrong thing carried serious consequences in the USSR. And it highlights the importance, during glasnost, of being able to talk—much less joke—about

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<sup>63</sup> “Не собирай посылку, мама,  
Она сыночку не нужна.  
Последний раз он в небо смотрит,  
А там колымская луна.  
И ничего ему не надо:  
Ни слез, ни камня, ни креста,  
А лишь бы люди все на свете  
О нем забыли навсегда.”

mundane yet pervasive forms of violence. This is why the Odessa Gentlemen rose to to rock star fame. It isn't only that they wrote funny jokes, it is that they wrote funny jokes about subjects people had been afraid to talk about for a long time. During glasnost, these got put on TV.

Even the new KVN theme song rang defiant. Both the tune and the lyrics of the 1960s theme were changed when the show returned for the 1986 season, and it is still used today, both on TV and in many local leagues. It begins with the line, "Once again in our theater" (*snova v nashem zale*), underscoring the fact that KVN was *back*; it had triumphed. The rest of the song speaks to why KVN *should* come back, casting KVN as a social game devoted to making people happy:

Though it won't solve all our problems  
Won't solve all our problems  
Everyone will be happier  
Everyone will be more cheerful

Why play KVN? To live more joyfully. Teams pursue laughter (*smekh*); joyfulness; a good mood. And teams and audience members alike, usually local friends and family members, seek community in KVN. Nearly six hundred people, for instance, filled the auditorium of Irkutsk's Siberian Institute of Law, Economics, and Management in December 2016 to watch primary school students compete in the Baikal League Quarterfinals. The event came across as a mixture of recital and party, as relatives and classmates cheered on competitors. Even more people, around eight hundred, packed into the auditoria of Irkutsk State University and Irkutsk State Agricultural University in the fall of 2015. At those events the audiences were primarily college students, the humor tended to be more sharp, and teams worked to create collective emotional highs through laughter. Through events like these, KVNshiki have maintained their commitment to kulturnost, cleverness, and (mostly) clean jokes for over fifty years.

As Marfin and Chivurin noted, a majority of Soviet young people knew how to play KVN and often did so informally, much as people might play charades as a party game. Resuming KVN as a TV show revitalized the activity. As Irkutsk French professor Igor Livant put it, "KVN was not a show, but a movement" (interview with author, October 20, 2016). Students transformed an



approved format into a space for free expression. When I asked Igor what topics he wrote jokes about in the 1970s, he told me, “What I didn’t like I criticized....I criticized America, [for example].”

Igor Livant and Eduard Chechelnitzsky were both young men when KVN began. With funds from a Soviet state that dissolved, on a Komsomol platform that no longer exists, they helped build an institution that endures to this day, a club of cheerful brainy friends who still delight their audiences.



**Eduard Chechelnitzsky holding a stripped-down umbrella that helped the Odessa Gentlemen win the Captain's Competition in the 1987 Central League Final. Odessa, Odessa National University, 2017. Photo by author.**

## Chapter Two: Traditions

### Cold War heritage

*Moscow, Suburban Clinic, Spring 2005*

- Yes, it's from my boyfriend's cat. It seems like ringworm.
- I'm the doctor, I'll make the diagnoses.
- Okay.
- There's nothing wrong with you.
- It's just that it's spreading along my arm. Maybe a cream?
- Your problem is that you're a foreigner. You're allergic to Russia. Also, foreigners take too many baths.

She did not give me the cream.

*Irkutsk, First of May neighborhood, Fall 2015*

"Amerikanka go home!"

*Irkutsk State University, University Library, Fall 2016*

- Hello, I am a visiting graduate student here (*shows student ID*). Could I check out Yuri Olesha's *Envy*?
- You're a foreigner. Foreigners can go to the city library.

I had scheduled an interview with Igor Livant, retired French professor from Irkutsk State Linguistic University, over the phone. He had seemed friendly and eager to talk with me about KVN, and we agreed to meet on the following Thursday. I got to his street, in Irkutsk's old quarter of 19th-century wooden houses, about fifteen minutes early. I walked around while I waited, admiring the neighborhood's lacy scrollwork, and rang Igor at 10:00 on the dot. No answer. He had given me his street address but not the house number, so I wasn't sure which of the houses lining the courtyard off the main road was his. He had said to call. I waited three minutes and called again; then waited three minutes and called again; then waited ten minutes and called again. No answer. Mikhail Rozhansky, the Irkutsk sociology professor who had given me Igor's

number had said, as he flipped through a mental Rolodex of potential KVN contacts, “Igor’s a—*theatrical* type. He might be willing to talk to foreigners.” Maybe Mikhail had been wrong.

The vast majority of Russians I’ve met have been friendly and hospitable. But Irkutsk residents simply don’t meet a lot of Americans, in contrast to people in Moscow or St. Petersburg. Not all of them knew quite what to make of us. The first question a lot of college students asked me in 2016 was, “Is it true that Americans hate Russia?” I explained that America was a country of immigrants, that millions of Russians and Russian speakers lived in America, and that Americans had Russian neighbors and friends and teachers and definitely did not hate Russia or Russians. With elections approaching, a lot of students’ second question was, “What do you think of Trump?”

Senior citizens, though, reared in the Soviet Union, thought less about U.S. sanction policies or diplomatic scuffles. Their minds skipped straight to war. I’d been asked once to give a presentation about California at the Irkutsk Resource Center for Pensioners. I decided to talk about neutral topics like the redwood forests and California’s 19th century relationships with Russian traders. But after the presentation, a woman in her sixties came up to me and said, “I am afraid Hillary will start a war.” (At that time most people still thought Hillary would win.) Another grandmotherly-looking lady with dyed jet-black hair and piercing blue eyes continued, “It is just like with Kennedy. Back then, with Cuba, when the missiles were already ready to go. Sometimes Hillary does not think about what she is saying. She doesn’t understand that we can surround [the United States]—like that! You understand, we have a large territory. The United States is small. We are a big country. We have enough. We understand this. We have understood this since back then.”

In essence, someone’s dear *babushka* was arguing that Russia could survive a nuclear strike, even a first strike, and the U.S. could not. And she seemed, personally at least, willing to risk it. *Kto kogo*: who will beat whom? Stalin’s catchphrase formulation always functioned as

challenge, not rumination.

For some people, any American who (1) claimed to be doing “research” in Siberia and (2) had managed to actually learn Russian somewhere could be nothing but a spy. Even Siberians who did agree to interviews—and, unlike in Odessa, a good many declined—often addressed me warily. “So,” a middle-aged museum director said, her eyes flitting nervously towards the door, “what exactly do you want to know?” I wondered if Igor had gotten spooked.

I heard a noise behind one of the houses and went to see if maybe Igor had come out to meet me. Instead, my pacing around the courtyard drew the attention of a nicotine-thin man in a red tracksuit jacket. He leaned out from his window and yelled, “What do you want?” He was too young to be Igor himself. “I’m looking for Igor Livant,” I said. The man pointed out the entrance to Igor’s house, up some stairs from a sign that said “Auburge d’tiatr” (“Theater Hostel”).

I rang the doorbell. No answer. I rang again. A man in a blue and white checked shirt, a burnt orange argyle sweater vest, and grey wool slacks opened the door. So he hadn’t just rolled out of bed. Igor looked at me for a moment, a slight narrowing at his eyes disclosing a decision process, and invited me in.

We sat down at Igor’s kitchen table. He started off guarded and unsmiling. “What’s your name again?” “How did you end up on a life path that led you to Irkutsk?” “Why are you interested in KVN?” “When was the first KVN game?”

“In 1961,” I answered. Igor nodded, lips puckered out a bit in approval. I had passed a sincerity test. For the rest of the interview Igor talked to me like an old friend, reminiscing about KVN, his time teaching theater in France, and life in the Soviet 1960s.

“There was a lot of criticism,” he told me. “KVN in Russia, that is, in the Soviet Union, was always an opportunity to criticize...There were some things we could say in KVN that we couldn’t say in other places. And that’s why when they shut it down—”

KVN never got shut down everywhere, of course. It did end early in one forum, though,

where it might not have—if not for one team’s recklessness. In 1974, two years after televised KVN had gone off the air, authorities cancelled the Odessa KVN City Championship. “Why did they end the city competitions?” I asked Sergei Ostashko, who had played for both the Odessa Chimneysweeps in 1969 and the Odessa Gentlemen in the 1980s.

“Because of one joke,” he said. “I can quote it for you...The team of the Construction Institute brought several drummers out on stage, and different kinds of drums—from children’s drums to very large ones—and [they said], ‘the team of drummers is playing the part of the knockers.’”<sup>64</sup>

A “knocker” (*stukach*) is an informer. “A *stukach* is someone who turns everyone over to the KGB,” Ostashko explained. “To snitch (*stukachit’*), to knock (*stuchit’*).” He rapped his knuckles on the table. “He calls the KGB, on us all.” The Construction Institute team had also punned on the words “parts” and “Party,” making the joke’s final line “the Party (*partii*) of informers.” Ostashko gave some soundless chuckles, saying, “Well, of course, after the phrase ‘Party of informers’ they shut down KVN [on the city level]” (interview with author, March 25, 2017).

“The leaders weren’t idiots, not idiots at all,” Top League editor Mikhail Marfin told me, similarly. “They knew that even though KVN was a game, people would make jokes about what they worried about, what they were interested in, and so on.” At that time people worried about things like KGB informers, so KVN got relegated to small stages. Marfin, from Moscow, had been one of Ostashko's opponents in a legendary 1987 finals match, the first since KVN's return to TV. “One of my most [vivid impressions of that season] is the story about how Slavik defeated Misha Marfin in the Captain’s Challenge,” Ostashko had told me, sipping his tea. Drinking coffee in a cafe in Moscow two years later, Marfin, who had been captain of the Moscow Chemical-Technical Institute (MKhTI) team, talked to me about the game in general, saying, “Well, we had ten people and they had sixty” (interview with author, June 3, 2019).

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<sup>64</sup> “Команда барабанщиков исполняет партии стукачей.”

Both teams had shown a lot of guts in that perestroika match. The Chemical-Technical Institute team, calling themselves “the youth,” quipped, for instance, “Not everyone needs to learn four foreign languages. Better just to learn how to speak our native language. But freely” (*svobodno*).<sup>65</sup> The Odessans, in response, said in their skit:

Yuri Kordonskii: I look out on our youth...Look at how freely they speak, how unconstrained they are, how bravely they express themselves. We, surely, wouldn't have done that at their age.

Oleg Filimonov: Yeah, and maybe that's why we're still alive.

The Chemical-Technical Institute team, in turn, addressed why KVN had gone off the air more or less directly. Presenting themselves as accountants, they clicked off figures on abacuses:

- For this reporting period, in the Club of the Cheerful and Clever
- We did more than was required twice
- We amassed a surplus of ten percent
- We broke surface no less than five times
- Victims and violations — zero
- For this reporting period, the following measures were taken:
- One group of comrades was fired
- One group of comrades was demoted
- One group of comrades was reconciled
- And one comrade repaired one television

In the straight reading of this skit, the “reporting period” is simply the 1986-1987 season, in which one group of comrades (a team) got eliminated from competition, another took a lesser place, teams became friends (“reconciled”), and, in a nod to KVN’s return, someone repaired the TV. Elements of the teams’ performance cue a second interpretation, however. First, this segment immediately followed an exchange about “closing KVN,” with its dual allusions to closing out KVN for the season, in the final match, and to KVN’s controversial cancellation. The Moscow team had also brought out gates painted with a large padlock and the letters “KVN.” They periodically set up these gates and kicked them back down, laughing: “Comrades, please allow the solemn closing—ha ha ha ha ha!” The reporting period in question, then, stood in for both the previous year's season and KVN’s fourteen-year hiatus. As Marfin had sung in the skit's introductory song,

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<sup>65</sup> “Пусть научить говорить на родном. Но свободно.”

quoted in the epigraph of chapter one, "Time goes on, and KVN remains, it doesn't spoil or age...it turns out KVN lives, and maybe it was always that way." KVN did live on in university and school games, as audience members would well know. But because one comrade "fixed" the television, or stopped KVN broadcasts, *no* comrades got fired, demoted, or had need for political reconciliation because of jokes they made on the national stage—jokes about "what they were worried about" during the 1970s and early 1980s. The Chemical-Technical Institute team reinforced this interpretation with their concluding lines, saying, "We call for the temporary termination of consideration of complaints about the Cheerful and Clever, and authorize the provision of regular furloughs. Ministers. Deputy Ministers. And other responsible workers. Take a rest, we'll wait" ("*Otdokhnite, my vas podozhdëm*"). KVN could wait out political crackdowns.

Censorship required rebellion that shaped KVN tradition, gameplay, and lore. "If audience members worried at some moment, if they started to develop political consciousness, KVNshiki would absolutely make jokes about politics," Marfin said. But contemporary KVN audiences may think less about such subjects than their parents did. "Teams [today] try to make jokes about politics, but audiences just don't get it," Marfin told me. "On one hand, you don't want to take out political elements because, well, they were always *there*, right? And there are political elements in life, now. And on the other hand, those jokes just don't come off." Marfin might set his standards for risky humor too high. Students do still make jokes about local, national, and international politics, and about agencies from the FSB<sup>66</sup> to the CIA,<sup>67</sup> just rarely with as much seriousness of purpose as during the Soviet era, and perhaps with fewer official reprimands, KGB interviews, and "prophylactic chats" (cf. Cohn 2017).<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> *Federalnaia sluzhba bezopastnosti* or Federal Security Service)

<sup>67</sup> See, for example, this short subtitled clip from Lukoil's KVN team, "CIA Uncovers Top Secret Oil Extraction Plans Direct from Moscow," available at this link: <https://amygarey.files.wordpress.com/2019/08/top-secret-oil-extraction-plans-direct-from-moscow.mp4>

<sup>68</sup> According to Cohn (2017), KGB officers "invited" Soviet citizens who fell out of line to "prophylactic chats" where agents could explain an individual's political mistakes and, out of concern for the citizen's moral and spiritual development, lay out how such missteps could be avoided in the future. Such conversations were an alternative to arrests.

Still, Cold War reverberated affected my fieldwork, even when people didn't think I was a spy. One KVN coach in Odessa, for instance, after initially agreeing to an interview, later snubbed me with, "Oh, I see what you're all about," and ignored all further messages from me, when a NATO report which analyzed KVN as information warfare was published (NATO StratCom 2017). He seemed to think I only wanted information that might undermine or, worse, weaponize KVN. Another KVNshik told me, as I neared the end of my time in Irkutsk in 2016, "You have really big balls (*u tebia bol'shie iaitsa*). To come here, now, with all of this going on." I was struck by the disconnect between his impression of the diplomatic conflict between Russia and the United States and my own. Yes, Obama had imposed new sanctions. Yes, some leaders in my country had accused some leaders in his country of hacking recent presidential election results. But I didn't see Russians as enemies, past or present. In that moment, though, I realized that a lot of Russians might not feel the same way about Americans, including me.

## **The Game**

*We are starting KVN  
For what?  
For what?  
So that no one stays on the sidelines  
No one!  
No one!  
Even though it won't solve all our problems  
It won't solve all our problems  
Everyone will become happier,  
Everyone will become more cheerful*  
—KVN theme song, 1986 to the present

This section describes what happens at KVN games. All Americans more or less know what baseball games are like, even if they've never been to one. But most Americans can't envision a KVN game, and there is no close Western equivalent. It isn't much like stand-up or debate competitions. It's scored like figure skating but is, of course, team comedy. Here I give an overview of the types of events common in contemporary KVN games, then provide ethnographic snapshots from two representative games, one in Irkutsk and one in Odessa. Understanding the sequence of



events at games will become important to understanding analysis in later chapters, which don't discuss games themselves at all. Instead, the chapters following this one all analyze activity and discussions that surround competitions: teams' brainstorming meetings, feedback sessions with league editors, and commentary about games (and commentary about commentary about games).

After walking through these two typical games, I explain how leagues work in Russia and Ukraine, describe multi-week humor festivals, and give a short KVN glossary. I conclude with a discussion of how people maintain joke writing as craft.

*We are starting KVN*

"KVN has probably gone on for so long because no one thought it up, not in the form that it's in now," Marfin told me as we sat in a cafe across the street from the House of KVN in Moscow.<sup>69</sup> KVN started out more like a quiz game, he said, where people answered questions with a bit of humor thrown in. "And then at some point some team came up and said, 'Can we do some kind of Introduction (*Privetsvye*) for a minute and a half?' And now we have Introductions. And they just walked out and said, 'We're going to light the atmosphere on fire with humor'...they laid the foundations of the genre through trial and error, no one knew anything..." (interview with author, June 3, 2019).

Each KVN competition consists of a number of events, some pre-scripted, some improvised. Organizers decide which events to include based on the abilities of their competitors, the interests of community members, and the number of teams competing. A classic KVN competition might include an Introduction skit, a *razminka* ("warm-up") improvisation section, and a musical skit. Introduction skits are now the most common events in KVN competitions. A lot of games, in fact, only have Introductions, especially if more than six or so teams are competing. Otherwise games

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<sup>69</sup> The Moscow Youth Center "Planet KVN" (*Moskovskiy Molodezhniy Tsentr Planeta KVN*), more often called the "House of KVN" (*Dom KVN*) was built in 2013. Premier League, Youth League, and Moscow Region KVN games and rehearsals are held in this space. Theater productions that are not related to KVN use the space when it is not needed for KVN events.

just get too long. In Marfin's definition, KVN “doesn't really consist of anything. Some number of teams competes in some number of events—*kto kogo*—who's funnier? And that's all. Everything else can change.”<sup>70</sup>



**The Moscow Youth Center "Planet KVN," Moscow, Russia. Photo by author.**

Events common in contemporary KVN include:<sup>71</sup>

Introduction (*Privetsvye*) Often the first event in KVN competitions. Teams perform a series of pre-prepared skits or ultra-short numbers (miniatures).

Business Card (*Vizitnaia Kartochka*) Differs little from Introduction skits; difference mainly of name.

Homework (*Domashnee zadanie*) Pre-prepared skits.

STEM STEM stands for *Studencheskiy teatr estradnykh miniatur* (Student Theater of Estrada Miniatures), a skit-making activity that preceded KVN. For STEM, teams write skits, often on a predetermined theme. Some STEM competitions require that there be no more than three team members on stage at any time.

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<sup>70</sup> “В нём ничего нет. Это какое количество команд, соревнуется в какое-то количество конкурсов—кто кого? Кто будет смешнее? Все. Все остальное может меняться.” Interview with author, June 3, 2019.

<sup>71</sup> I have omitted games that people no longer, or rarely, play, such as the artist's contests popular in the 1960s and 1970s.

Razminka Razminka is a classic component of KVN games. It usually consists of questions posed to teams from judges, members of the audience, or read from slips of paper prepared in advance. Teams are scored on how cleverly they are able to improvise answers. "Questions" can take a variety of forms, from a riddle to the first line of poetry or a song, or perhaps a visual image that contestants must explain in a clever way.<sup>72</sup>

Biathlon Biathlon is a joke contest. Teams take turns reading two jokes each. At the end of each round, judges decide which team was the least funny and either the entire team or one member of the team gets eliminated. Teams continue to read jokes until there are only two teams remaining. A final round (or two, or three) determines a final victor. The teams that survive the most rounds earn the most points.

Muzathlon Muzathlon is much like Biathlon, but teams sing humorous re-workings of the lyrics of popular and well-known songs.

Familiar subject (Znakomiy suzhet) A skit built around a theme from literature, folklore, or popular culture.

Musical contest (Muzikal'niy konkurs) In musical contests teams write humorous scenarios set to music.

KOP KOP stands for *Konkurs odnoi pesni*, or Contest of One Song. It is much like the musical contest, but scenarios must be built around a single song.

Captain's contest (Konkurs kapitanov) Captains' contests are stand-offs between the captains of KVN teams. These used to be more improvised battles of wits, but now more often feature pre-prepared individual performances or monologues.

To give a fuller sense of what Introductions and other events during KVN competitions are like, I describe two typical games, one from Irkutsk and one from Odessa, below.

*Baikal League Final, Irkutsk, December 4, 2015*

Every seat in the Irkutsk National Research Technical University's 800-person auditorium had been filled. Upbeat music primed the crowd as we waited for the game to start. Since this was the final game of the year, a short KVN quiz with prizes from the game's sponsors preceded the game, just to add to the festive atmosphere (this isn't typical). A KVNshik who had played in Top League came out on stage. "Which team told the following joke?" he asked. People in the audience raised their hands, offered guesses, and the first person to answer correctly won a gift certificate to a local

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<sup>72</sup> A subtitled clip from Irkutsk State Agricultural University's 2015 Rector's Cup razminka is available at this link: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QSNH\\_Wbx8MI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QSNH_Wbx8MI).

restaurant. The jokes came from Irkutsk teams across a number of years. Next came a series of questions about teams' signature songs, or *otbivki*. "Guess the *otbivka*!" the KVNshik announced. I only knew one of the answers, the *otbivka* for team Raisy, an Irkutsk team who had played on television. I didn't raise my hand.

The quiz ended and the lights dimmed. People began clapping and cheering, even standing up to applaud once the teams made their entrance on stage. Five teams competed in that night's competition: Irkutsk State University's Pedagogical Institute; Young People, from Irkutsk State University (IGU); Irkut, the team of the Irkutsk Aircraft Factory; Irkutsk Policeman, the team of the Eastern Siberian Institute of the MVD (*Ministerstvo vnutrennikh del*, or Ministry of Internal Affairs); and Five Stars, a team with members from Irkutsk and Yerevan, Armenia. The emcee walked to the center of the stage and said, "Good evening, friends, hello. Tonight the most important event of the outgoing year will take place in Irkutsk's Club of the Cheerful and Clever. I am happy to welcome you to the final of the Baikal League, 2015 season. We are starting KVN (*My nachinaem KVN*)."

Right before the game began, he appealed to the audience, "Let's wish the teams the traditional 'neither fluff nor feathers' (*ni pukha ni pera*)."

Audience members said in unison, "Neither fluff nor feathers!" The teams on stage shouted back, "To the devil!" (*k chertu!*) Emcees and teams use this exchange as a version of "break a leg" before a lot of KVN games.

Five Stars started off the Introductions with jokes based on Armenian and Buryat stereotypes, which they ended with an upbeat song: "I have one dream, that in the city where I live, there is my game!" Team Irkutsk Policeman followed, saying, "In the final you can sing well—or like this!" Their front man sang weakly, "The final, the final. Cops, cops..." as five uniformed young men on stage performed jumping-jack style choreography. The rest of their Introduction included skits about crime and police officers, and one surprising number in which a female police cadet lifted one of the male members of the jury over her shoulder and carried him away. Young People, the Pedagogical Institute, and Irkut followed with their Introductions.



**Irkutsk State Pedagogical Institute's Introduction, Baikal League Final, Irkutsk, December 4, 2015. Photo by author.**

After all the teams had performed their Introductions the panel of judges raised score cards, ranging between one and five, for each team. Scores for the Introductions were as follows:

Irkut	5.0
Five Stars	4.9
Pedagogical Institute	4.8
Irkutsk Policeman	4.6
IGU	4.4

The teams then competed in photo razminka. The first photo, of two children making strange faces during a martial arts match, was displayed on a large screen behind the competitors. Teams got thirty seconds to prepare their responses. Some of the best answers included those from the Pedagogical Institute, who replied, "Give me fifty cents!" and from Five Stars, who, noticing that the judge in the picture had his back turned towards the kids, said, "The judge really could care less." The next picture was of a man getting into a car almost entirely submerged in floodwaters. After that round the judges each held up a number corresponding to the team they thought they had given the least funny responses. Irkutsk Policeman got the most votes, and they left the stage with 0.5 points out of a possible 1.0.

Photo razminka continued with pictures of a hammock suspended over a ravine, men

standing on an ice overhang, a seal kissing a woman, a man carrying a huge log, a woman standing on a man's back in a grocery store to reach a high shelf, an alarmed baby, one extremely tall African-American basketball player among a group of white players a foot and a half shorter than him, and a cat at the dog pound. After every two rounds, judges voted for one team to leave the stage. Five Stars and Irkut faced off for the full 1.0 points; Five Stars won. These were the scores for razminka:

Five Stars	1.0
Irkut	0.8
Pedagogical Institute	0.7
IGU	0.6
Irkutsk Policeman	0.5



**Judging panel, Baikol School League First Quarterfinals, Irkutsk, December 17, 2016. Photo by Baikol School League.**

The final event of the night was the Musical Contest (Muzikalka for short). Irkutsk Policeman performed a series of numbers. The first was a rap about vegetarianism, the second was a take on the Russian true crime show *Man and Law* (*Chelovek i Zakon*) narrated on a backdrop of Soviet cartoons, and the third was a dance number between two people in Baikol seal costumes. The Pedagogical Institute built their musical skit around a medieval theme. The princess ran off with the

health teacher and Lancelot went to rescue her. In the end, the princess told Lancelot, "You're rich and you have a big, beautiful castle, but I'm staying with him. Yes, he's poor. But he's a teacher. And that's a noble profession." The narrator then said, "This production was brought to you by the Irkutsk Region Ministry of Education."

IGU came on next. They started off their Muzikalka with a skit about extreme wilderness vacations:

Wilderness guide	I haven't been with a woman for three years.
Tourist	But we've only been out here for two weeks.
Wilderness guide	I know! I just thought out here we could be open with each other.

For the second half of their performance IGU brought out a young man from Angarsk, a nearby city, who had recently played on the Russian version of *Wheel of Fortune* (*Pole Chudes*). While parts of this performance made me laugh to tears, the team's Musical Contest contained very little music, which may have hurt their scores. Five Stars followed. Their skit revolved around a conflict between the Armenians, dressed classily in bow-ties, and the Buryats, who kept clowning around on stage. But the Buryats had also brought a secret weapon to help them win the final: a Buryat shaman.

Armenian Shaman	Shaman Dzhangalovich, how did you become a shaman?
	Oh, a long, long time ago, my great-grandfather, a great person, found [secret wisdom]. And my grandfather then passed it on to a very great person. Generation by generation...
Armenian Shaman	I think you're a charlatan!
	And I think—so too.

Irkut ended the night's performances. The team wrote skits that spoofed their own status as factory workers, and middle-aged ones, rather than the college students who more commonly play KVN. In one of their numbers fortysomething MC Vitaly Ivanovich and his friends came out in hip-hop style clothes, saying, "One, nine, seven, three. Yeah! That's when I was born!"

After Irkut's final song all the teams assembled on stage. The judges each gave comments on the night's game, mentioning their favorite teams, jokes, and KVNshiki. Then they gave the scores

for the Musical Contest and the emcee announced the game's ultimate winners. In the end, Five Stars took first place, Irkut second place, and the Pedagogical Institute got third. Viktoria Karnovich from the Irkutsk Policeman, the cadet who carted off a member of the jury, won the title of best female KVNshik, and Sergei Tsyrenov from Five Stars won best male KVNshik. The prize for best joke went to Irkut.



**Five Star's Musical Competition, Baikal League Final, Irkutsk, December 4, 2015. Photo by author.**

The final score breakdown was as follows:

*Musical Competition*

Five Stars	5.0
Pedagogical Institute	4.8
Irkut	4.6
IGU	4.5
Irkutsk Policeman	4.5

*Cumulative Scores for All Three Events*

Five Stars	10.9
Irkut	10.4
Pedagogical Institute	10.3
Irkutsk Policeman	9.6
IGU	9.5





**Teams (left to right) Five Stars, Irkutsk Policeman, IGU, Pedagogical Institute, and Irkut wait for results. Baikal League Final, Irkutsk, December 4, 2015. Photo by author.**

KVN games in other parts of Russia—Krasnoyarsk, Moscow, and the Moscow suburbs—varied noticeably but unradically from games in Irkutsk. The same is true for KVN games I saw in Ukraine. Below is a description of a semifinals match I watched at Odessa National University (ONU) in 2017.

*Odessa National University Semifinals, Odessa, Ukraine, April 27, 2017*

“Odessa National University is the most ‘KVN’ University in Odessa,” announced a video introducing ONU’s spring Evening of Culture, an interdepartmental talent contest which took place about three weeks before the university’s KVN semifinal. “It is from *our* university that the legendary team Gentlemen became champions [of the Central League] two times. And the team New Reality continued the tradition of champions when they won the Ukrainian league [in 2004]. Now we have the open ONU KVN championship, in which almost every department of the university participates.”<sup>73</sup> ONU, among the first universities in the USSR to host a KVN program,

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<sup>73</sup> Evening of Culture, Odessa National University, Odessa, Ukraine. April 8, 2017. Notes and video recordings taken.

showcases its KVN pedigree even at non-KVN events like the Evening of Culture. It's that important in the narrative the university tells about its history—a history that also includes professors like Dmitry Mendeleev, who created the periodic table of elements, and Ilya Mechnikov, who won the Nobel Prize for research in immunology.

ONU's 2017 semifinal game began with the KVN theme song pumping through loudspeakers: "Once again in our hall, no empty seats in our hall" ("*Snova v nashem zale...*"). The teams, eight in all, lined up on stage. Then the emcee walked out and said, "Good evening, good evening ladies and gentlemen! I'm happy to welcome you to the open ONU championship. Applause!" After introducing the teams and judges, he said, "The teams are ready, the jury has convened, the audience is ready, and by old KVN tradition I would like to say, "Neither fluff nor feathers!" The teams then shouted, "To the devil!"

Televised KVN games left Ukrainian airwaves in 2014, when the war between Russia and Ukraine began. KVN fans still watch Top League games (and, if inclined, Premier League and First League games) on YouTube, but KVN as such is no longer broadcast in Ukraine. Ukrainian KVN traditions, though, from the game itself to the theme song, do not rely on Moscow-based televised leagues.

The first team to perform in ONU's game was actually not competing. The emcee explained that the team, from Odessa National Economic University, was just starting out in KVN and sought the support of the audience. They were, in essence, practicing. The teams in the competition itself included Igor, from Odessa National Polytechnic University; 3D, from ONU; Friend Zone, from Odessa National Maritime University; Native Odessans, from ONU; Breathe In, Breathe Out, from the Odessa National Medical Institute; Team ONU from ONU; the Trump Cards, from ONU; and team Brahms, also from ONU. The night's game consisted of Introduction skits and a Contest of One Song (*KOP*).

The Native Odessans began the Introductions. Their skit relied on tropes of Odessa as a city

of bandits. Either by mistake or subversion, they reverted to their original team name, "Odessa Bandits" instead of "Native Odessans" when they announced themselves. "Team Odessa Bandits," they said. "More of a team than bandits." They continued, "I'm, of course, not a *stukach* (informer), but I'm going to tell you what's about to happen." This line got laughter and applause from the audience, who appreciated the team's semi-criminal yet somehow ordinary personae. The sketch that followed, about a young man who practices kissing on a potato instead of a tomato, got a fair response from the audience. "We have set ourselves the task to make it to the final and die," they said. "And so we're in clean [underwear] just in case."



**Teams (left to right) Igor, 3D, Friend Zone, Team ONU, Odessa Bandits, Breathe In, Breathe Out, the Trump Cards, and Brahms. Odessa National University Semifinals, Odessa, April 27, 2017. Photo by author.**

Team 3D performed next, followed by Brahms, Friend Zone, and Breathe In, Breathe Out. The Medical Institute team cracked jokes about doctor-patient situations, doctor-dentist rivalries, and problems common to all doctors. "We medics don't often get free time. And even when we find some, medicine finds us." A skit about a man on a date then followed.

Woman      Dear, I'm so glad you have some free time.  
 Doctor     Me too. We can finally sit for a while in peace.  
               (phone rings) Just a second.

Valera. Valera, it's just a breakout. It's normal. Okay.  
(turns back to woman) Anyway. It just seems like I never get a chance with you—  
(phone rings)

Things escalated from there, with Valera calling again, a neighbor knocking on the door with questions about her cat, and the doctor's girlfriend herself even asking questions about her crooked nose. Team ONU came on next, with a song about the merits of traditional smoking versus vaping (which the judges in the youth auditorium might not have liked), followed by Igor, who chose a camping trip as their skit's theme. The Trump Cards, a team of four young women and a semi-closeted gay man, Dima, gave the last Introduction. Dima came on stage last, singing and dancing out to the song, "Cooler than everyone" (*Kruche vsekh*) by the Quest Pistols Show. "Ah, girls, notice anything?" he asked, twirling. "Dima, we've been pretending for three years that we don't notice anything," said Alisa. They ended their number on a high and humorous note, bringing their "parents" out on stage. "Dasha, sweetie, did you eat?" asked one of the mothers. "Yes, mom, why?" answered Dasha. "Nothing. Probably shouldn't have, is all."

These were the scores for the introductions:

Trump Cards	5.0
Odessa Bandits	4.8
Igor	4.8
3D	4.6
Breathe In, Breathe Out	4.5
Brahms	4.3
Team ONU	3.6
Friend Zone	3.5

Team Brahms began the Contest of One Song. While they usually incorporate classical music into their skits, they did not try to write lyrics to Brahms. Instead, they sang to the 1988 hit "Music has tied us together" (*Muzika nas sviazala*) by the group Mirazh. They ended with the words, "Friends, value music" and Brahms' Hungarian Dance No. 5. Next was the Odessa Bandits with a song about their pipe-smoking grandma, the Trump Cards, singing about male-female relationships, and Friend Zone, with a song about female friendship—and spats—set to the 2017 hit "Ice

Melts" (*"Taet lëd"*) by Griby. "Your legs remind me of the letter K, your breasts look like the letter V, Nastya, your legs look like the letter N. Now we understand how you all ended up in KVN," they sang, joking that they might become plus-size models.



**Breathe In, Breathe Out's Introduction, Odessa National University Semifinals, Odessa, April 27, 2017. Photo by author.**

Igor followed, then 3D, then Breathe In, Breathe Out. The medical students' Contest of One Song got delayed by a light-headed person backstage. "Breathe In, Breathe Out are actually performing their duties right now," the emcee said, explaining that someone had started feeling ill. The medical students were checking the person's pulse. To fill time the emcee started quizzing the audience about the game's sponsors.

"We have two more teams left tonight, but we also have some wonderful sponsors, about whom you have already heard. But that doesn't mean that you remember them, am I right? So, what sponsors do we have?"

"Legal specialists!" responded the audience.

"Yes, yes," said the emcee. "And chocolate!"

Breathe In, Breathe Out took the stage after only a few minutes, with a song about saving

lives. Team ONU concluded the competition. They sang about how we spend most of our lives sitting—on bus commutes, waiting for partners as they shop, or in armchairs after work—but they set their sedentary number to the upbeat theme from the musical *La La Land*. They sang:

What a terrible day!  
Hello, family—I have a ton of work to do at home today...  
I'm so tired of sitting  
Now I'm going to relax for a bit  
First, I'll sit down<sup>74</sup>



**Team ONU's Contest of One Song, Odessa National University Semifinals, Odessa, April 27, 2017. Photo by author.**

After ONU's performance, the judges, all of whom had played in Top League—two on the 1980s team Odessa Gentlemen, two on the 1990s team New Reality, and two on the 2014 team Odessa Tales—gave the teams extended comments before issuing scores. These were the final results:

*Contest of One Song*

Odessa Bandits	4.8
3D	4.7
ONU	4.5
Igor	4.3
Trump Cards	4.3
Breathe In, Breathe Out	4.2

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<sup>74</sup> A clip from ONU's performance is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rUAvIQUgjFU>

Brahms	3.8
Friend Zone	3.8

*Cumulative Scores for Both Events*

Odessa Bandits	9.6
Trump Cards	9.3
3D	9.2
Igor	9.1
Breathe In, Breathe Out	8.7
ONU	8.1
Brahms	8.1
Friend Zone	7.3

ONU ran its semifinal match a little bit differently than most, though. To determine which teams advanced to the finals, teams' scores from both the quarterfinals and the semifinals were added together. The top four teams would go on to the final. According to this calculation, those four teams were the Trump Cards, Brahms, the Odessa Bandits, and Breathe In, Breathe Out. A member of the jury, though, stood up and said, "Wait a second, wait a second, four teams is too few...I would like to see team Igor in the final." The audience cheered. Then another member of the jury said, "Well, that was obviously a creative decision. But we would also like to see team 3D." Once again, the audience cheered and applauded. The emcee replied, "Wonderful! So that means we have six teams in the final." There was a bit of back-and-forth between the judges and the emcee, and finally league editor Viktoria Pis'michenko cut in with, "Excuse me, is this some kind of anarchy? We want to decide—Pavel and Viktoria, thank you again—well, let's determine what fifth team to add, according to the members of the jury. It's either Igor—" The fans of team Igor exploded in such loud screaming and clapping that Viktoria could not continue for half a minute. She then continued, "or 3D—" The auditorium erupted again. Viktoria and Pavel agreed to let both Igor and 3D play in the final.

The Baikal League final and ONU semifinal did not have the same events. But skit style, team competition, and scoring methods all made the games feel similar, even though they were separated by 4,000 miles. Emcees also followed the same conventions as they began games

(“Neither fluff nor feathers!”) and as they introduced teams, often foreshadowing the content of teams’ skits. Below, I list KVN competitions from various leagues and locations across Russia and Ukraine to illustrate the range of possible events at KVN games.<sup>75</sup>

### *Irkutsk, Russia*

Irkutsk State Agricultural University  
Rector's Cup, October 29, 2015

- Introduction
- Razminka

Baikal School League  
First Quarterfinal, December 5, 2015

- Business Card
- Contest of one skit
- Razminka

Irkutsk State Transport University  
Quarterfinal, December 12, 2015

- Introduction

Irkutsk State University  
First Quarterfinal, December 18, 2015

- Introduction
- Biathlon

### *Krasnoyarsk, Russia*

Asia League  
Final, November 26, 2016

- Introduction
- Musical biathlon
- Freestyle (skit)

### *Moscow Region, Russia*

First League of KVN Moscow Region, East Division  
First Quarterfinal, April 5, 2019 (Voskresensk, Russia)

- Introduction
- Biathlon

Moscow Student League 2  
First Stage, Game One, April 17, 2019 (Moscow, Russia)

- Razminka
- Introduction

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<sup>75</sup> I was present at all these games. Many competition recordings, of course, can be found online, but there's no way to assess what content gets edited out before posting.



Central League of Moscow and the Moscow Suburbs  
First Quarterfinal, May 26, 2019 (Moscow, Russia)

- Introduction
- Razminka
- Musical Number

### *Odessa, Ukraine*

KVN League of the Odessa Jewish Community Center Beit Grand  
First Octofinal, March 12, 2017

- Introduction
- Razminka

Odessa National Polytechnic University  
First Quarterfinal, March 20, 2017

- Introduction
- Biathlon
- Razminka

Mayor's Cup for Schoolchildren  
Final, March 29, 2017

- Introduction
- Video razminka
- Homework
- Battle<sup>76</sup>

Mayor's Cup  
First Quarterfinal, May 18, 2017

- Introduction
- Razminka
- Musical Competition

Odessa National Academy of Food Technology  
Individual game, May 19, 2017

- Homework
- Razminka

### *Kharkiv, Ukraine*

Laughter Cup  
April 1, 2017

- Introduction

## **Primer: People**

On-stage performers dominate discussions about what happens at KVN games. Teams,

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<sup>76</sup> Battles are new and usually specific to League of Laughter, though one was added impromptu to this KVN game to break a tie. I will discuss battles in the next chapter.

though, usually consist of a number of people—sometimes several dozen people—that work off-stage. Leagues also employ editors that train KVNshiki and shape the content of KVN games.

## **Editors**

Editors (*redaktery*) help teams improve their material before performances, usually in official, paid capacities. Teams perform skits and pitch ideas to one or several editors, who then offer feedback. The number of editing sessions a league hosts before a performance varies. In the First Moscow Region League, which is considered a “teaching” league for new KVNshiki, teams attended three editing sessions before their quarterfinal match. Teams in the Odessa National University league had editing sessions every day for the eight days leading up to the semifinals. Editors Pavel Demchenko and Viktoria Pis'michenko gave teams advice about how to re-formulate punchlines, arrange their skits, and make their characters stand out. They also asked teams to take out some material, either because it was illogical, irredeemably unfunny, or negative (dealing with drugs, death, or sexual themes). During an editing session before the ONU semifinals, for instance, Demchenko pushed the Odessa Bandits to “find a reason” to include a number based on *The Godfather* or not show it at all. The Bandits presented a skit they called “bandit store” to Demchenko and Pis'michenko. In their sketch, a bandit walked in and told the shop attendant that he needed to buy a sign that would let someone know that it was their last day on earth. The attendant said that they had several products available, at different price points. The most basic option was a horse head left in the bed (like in *The Godfather*). The second, more original, was an elephant head. The third option involved a combination of several animals.

Demchenko, unsmiling, took few notes as he watched the skit. Afterwards, he said, “Well, the idea is interesting. But you need something from real life...I would like you to be more of a team than bandits.” To give them some ideas about how to write jokes about everyday life instead of mafia movies, he said, “Everyone sees children in the morning, and not bandits, because of the people they know. You see? Something from real life.” The Odessa Bandits ended up omitting

“Bandit Store” from their semifinal performance.



**Editors Mikhail Marfin (back left) and Leonid Kuprido (back right) with Irkutsk team Quartet at the 2019 Sochi festival, Sochi, Russia. Photo by author.**

### *Marfin and Chivurin*

Editors Mikhail Marfin and Andrei Chivurin deserve special mention. They worked together as Top League editors for eight years (Marfin from 1991-2004 and Chivurin from 1996-2012), and wrote the definitive KVN handbook, *What is KVN? (Chto Takoe KVN?)* (2002). Marfin told me, though, “The theory of humor in the book—that’s mine. That’s my own theory of humor.” He said he wrote the first version of the book in complex language, “So that people would read it with difficulty, so that they would understand that they were reading about a serious, important topic” (interview with author, June 3, 2019). Chivurin, he said, re-wrote parts of it for simplicity and clarity later on.

The book has made the names “Marfin and Chivurin” seem like an inseparable collocation. Marfin met Chivurin, though, in editing sessions. I asked Marfin during an interview if he had any favorite teams. He said, “Your favorites become those who made you suffer the most. And you suffer the most with the teams you start with—with those teams who you yourself brought out from

their universities, who you yourself shaped as an editor. That team, for me, is the team of the Kharkov Medical Institute, whose captain was Andrei Chivurin. I learned on that team. I taught them, and I learned from them. And then they became champions in 1995” (interview with author, June 3, 2019).

Chivurin stopped editing for Top League in Moscow in 2014 when the war broke out, went back to Ukraine, and helped create League of Laughter, a set of Ukraine-based team comedy competitions similar to KVN. Marfin, after working on other television projects for fifteen years, returned as a Top League editor in 2019. The theme of the 2019 season was “What is KVN?”

Thinking of Chivurin's League of Laughter project (Chivurin is the lead editor) Marfin told me, “It's a wonderful time in the life of Ukrainian KVN because it's doing things in a new way...There you have amateurs with fire in their eyes, and the work's a lot more interesting than it is here right now. I would be super thrilled to help out with that, but everything is very sad—with this divorce between Russian and Ukrainian KVN.”

Ukrainian teams, with the exception of some from Russia-controlled areas, stopped competing in Russia-based televised leagues in 2014. These teams, from Donetsk and Lugansk in eastern Ukraine and Sevastopol and Simferopol’ in Crimea, still attend the annual KVN festival in Sochi. At the opening ceremony of the 2019 Sochi festival, Marfin said, “Last year there were 446 teams here. This year we will have even more, and teams are still showing up. We will have even more when the Ukrainian teams come. I hope they will join in soon.”<sup>77</sup> The large auditorium applauded him. Marfin, here, probably meant the eastern Ukrainians and those from Crimea, who did indeed attend the Sochi festival, but teams from Odessa, Kiev, Dnepr, and the rest of Ukraine may have been on his mind.

About two weeks later, at the 2019 League of Laughter festival in Odessa, Ukraine, Chivurin told the assembled competitors, “If you've played long enough in the regional leagues and you

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<sup>77</sup> Mikhail Marfin, Opening Ceremony, KVN Festival in Sochi 2019, Sochi, Russia, January 13, 2019.

don't have anything to do, if you're tapped out, you have the opportunity...to play in the international KVN leagues—"

League of Laughter emcee Vladimir Zelensky, still a few months away, at that point, from the presidency, interrupted in an irritated tone, "League of Laughter!" The auditorium clapped and laughed at Chivurin's gaffe. The editor then clarified that competitors could play in international *League of Laughter* competitions, newly opened in Israel, Estonia, and Armenia.<sup>78</sup> When or if Ukrainian teams will compete in Russia-based leagues again remains uncertain.

## **Authors**

Not all team members appear on stage. Authors (*avtory*), for example, write material but don't perform themselves. Aleksei Eks, now a professional comedy author and league editor, began as one such teammate. He started selling jokes when he was still in college. A journalism student at the time, he also wrote humor columns for two newspapers, "I wrote jokes, then, knowing that people would buy them from me immediately" (interview with author, October 28, 2019). As teams advance, especially to national levels of competition, a market develops for selling jokes. Authors write jokes, skits, and musical numbers, and sell them.

In contemporary Moscow region student competitions, one joke costs about 300 rubles (\$4.80 in 2019). Jokes for Top League sell for much more, though pricing has a lot to do with an author's relationship to a team. People who were from Irkutsk, for instance, helped the team Buryats come up with material for their Premier League games because they wanted to see local teams succeed. Supply-and-demand rules the day, however, which means the richest teams, like Gazprom and Tatneft (Tatarstan Oil), often do very well in competitions—though fans grumble about "bought victories."

Teams in Top League and other televised leagues can hardly do without authors, both

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<sup>78</sup> Andrei Chivurin, League of Laughter Festival 2019, Odessa, Ukraine, January 30, 2019. Instagram Live broadcast.

because of the quantity of jokes suddenly required and because of the professionalism expected for TV. A team selected for Top League will compete three times between January and May, writing, in the process, seven sketches, each one packed with jokes. Most teams need at least a little help. Even teams at lower levels, though, will call on authors for important games. Friend Zone got some jokes from a friend back in Odessa before their octofinals match in Rivne, for example. The editors had cut most of the material they brought with them and they were left scrambling to put a number together two days before the competition. And during an editing session at the 2017 League of Laughter festival, editor Chingis Mazinov said of a team from Kharkhiv, in defense of their promise as a team, "Apparently they don't have authors." Chivurin replied, "You can tell." In one of the more insulting comments I've heard a judge tell a team, in a debriefing session after a game in Odessa one young man told the all-female team Friend Zone, "That game was even worse than the last one. Girls, date some authors."

## **Judges**

Every game has judges, usually six or seven. Organizers often choose former KVNshiki, though sometimes prominent members of the community, like businesspeople, teachers, or members of the local government also serve as judges. I was asked to judge two quarterfinal competitions for the Baikal School League in Irkutsk in 2016.

## **Other team members who don't appear on stage**

Sound operators: Sound operators play musical clips and sound effects supporting a team's performance. Each team has their own sound operator.

Requisitioners: Requisitioners help teams get props, costumes, live animals, and other things they need for their performances. Small-scale student performances usually have small budgets and small prop requirements. Requisitioners for televised leagues often have more to coordinate.

Administrators: Administrators handle finances, hotel bookings, flights, scheduling, tickets, etc. for teams.



**Judges hold up scorecards at a quarterfinals match at the Beit Grand Jewish Community Center in Odessa, Ukraine on April 23, 2017. Photo by author.**

### **NB: Who is Masliakov?**

“I’d like to be brief and witty. That’s what the game we call KVN asks for,” said Alexander Vasilievich Masliakov in the introduction to his book, *KVN Lives!* “But for me KVN isn’t just a game,” he continued. “KVNshiki often say, ‘KVN is a way of life.’ For me KVN is simply life. And life is not always amusing, as it turns out, though it goes by quick enough” (Masliakov 2017, 5-6). Alexander Masliakov is the main host, or emcee for KVN's Top League, and has been since 1964. He is also the president of Amik, the International Union of KVN, and thus oversees the operations of a hierarchy of leagues based in Russia.

He’s led every KVN Top League game nearly anyone remembers, goes to every annual KVN festival in Sochi (a rite of passage for KVNshiki), and is like a father figure to many in the KVN world. Online reporting about KVN games that Masliakov is watching rather than emceeing often notes the moment he arrives: “Dad's in the building” (“*Batia v zdane*”). During their 2018 Top

League final, the Irkutsk team Raisy took time to thank Masliakov for his years of support.

- Friends, over all these games, Alexander Vasilievich has become a really close individual. But we can't pin down who, exactly.
- Maybe he's a teacher?
- Well, he doesn't give us grades.
- Maybe he's a friend?
- Well, he doesn't follow us on Instagram.
- Girls, I understand. He's like our father.
- Birth father or adopted?
- We see him six times a year. Obviously our birth father!<sup>79</sup>

## League Structures

### Televised and Student Leagues

A team of schoolchildren competing in the Moscow regional KVN festival joked about the tension between humor and show business by saying, “Jokes aren't the most important in KVN. I know. I watch Top League.”<sup>80</sup> The audience applauded heartily. The game's emcee shook his head and said, “You know, the young man is right.” Television programs must be sold to mass audiences. Community KVN games only have to make a few hundred people, perhaps up to a thousand, laugh. And it is easier to make people that you know laugh than complete strangers. “In Moscow, in essence, it's not KVN anymore. There it's already show,” said Dima, from the Irkutsk State Transport University team Knight's Move. “For Masliakov it isn't even a hobby anymore, it's some kind of business. But for us it is the basic meaning of life, if you want to put it like that” (interview with author, December 3, 2016). Masliakov himself had said the word KVNshik had “achieved some special status, and it is still unclear what lies behind it—either a profession, or a hobby, or a state of mind, or as they themselves say, a diagnosis” (Masliakov 2017, 29).

Dima contrasted money, business, artificiality, and “show” to humor, authenticity, and a way of life. Business and KVN didn't mix for him. Amik is a company, like the NFL (National Football

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<sup>79</sup> KVN Top League 2018 Final, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X5\\_4JwMS-OI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X5_4JwMS-OI) (accessed January 28, 2020).

<sup>80</sup> Team Lame Catfish (*Khromoi Som*), KVN Festival of the Leagues of Moscow and the Moscow Region, Fifth game, March 9, 2019.



League) or the NBA (National Basketball Association), that administers some KVN leagues. Its association with profit is what Dima found distasteful. Amik, though, does not manage most KVN in Russia, any more than the NBA runs playground basketball games.

Until 2014, Amik's more "pro" league structures spanned Russia and Ukraine (as well as Central Asia, Latvia, and Western European countries like Germany and Great Britain). I will go into detail about how KVN in Ukraine changed after the war began in the next chapter (chapter 3). Here, though, I will present a brief overview of league hierarchies in Russia and Ukraine. Any organization that hosts competitions can form a league. Irkutsk State University holds league competitions, for example, that are "open," or open to competitors from other universities. But Baikal State University held closed, university-internal competitions during my fieldwork, and so could not be said to have a league. The Beit Grand Jewish Community Center in Odessa hosts a league, one of the most popular in the city, attracting competitors from all of Odessa's major universities.

University, community, and televised leagues intersect and overlap. And in Ukraine, KVN leagues run alongside League of Laughter leagues. The next two sections map out league structures based in Russia and Ukraine, as well as the leagues that were active in Irkutsk and Odessa during my fieldwork (2015-2017). From Belgorod to Bishkek, Rivne to Tallinn, the lists that follow illustrate the geographic range and institutional variety of these leagues. Each of the eighty-plus cities that hosts an "official" league, moreover, implies hundreds of competitors, a training infrastructure, a pool of judges, and, most likely, smaller tributary leagues.

## **Leagues based in Russia**

### *Leagues in Irkutsk*

The following Irkutsk institutions hosted KVN seasons when I conducted fieldwork in the fall of 2015 and the fall of 2016.

Irkutsk State University  
Baikal State University  
Irkutsk State Polytechnic University  
Irkutsk State Transport University  
Irkutsk State Agricultural University  
Baikal League  
Baikal School League

### *Amik Leagues*

The company Amik is to KVN what the NFL (National Football League) is to football: Amik runs the KVN “pro” leagues based in Russia just like the NFL runs pro football in America. Amik doesn’t control local, university, or school games, though, just as the NFL doesn’t get involved in high school games in small town America. That said, a number of leagues, both televised and non-televised, do fall under Amik’s umbrella. Teams competing at the highest levels, in Top or Premier Leagues, for instance, likely devote all of their energy (and financial resources) to competitions in these leagues. Teams that compete in Central and Official leagues may opt to compete in a variety of Amik and non-Amik local leagues, according to their schedules and interests. University students in Irkutsk, for instance, very often play in competitions at their home universities, a number of other universities, the Baikal League (which is not affiliated with Amik), and the Asia League in Krasnoyarsk, which is in an Amik Central league—and a twelve-hour train ride away.

The advantages of playing in Amik-affiliated leagues include tougher opponents, often from other regions or countries; advice from skilled editors; and a potential path to the televised leagues. Thus, there is competition to play in Amik leagues, and the process to decide which teams can play outside of their local or university leagues starts at the annual KVN Festival in Sochi, Russia in mid-January of each year. Any team in the world that would like to attend the Sochi festival can try, for three minutes, to prove to a panel of five editors that they are ready to compete on the (Russian) national or international levels. Between four and five hundred teams come to Sochi each year for the chance to compete in one of three sets of Amik leagues:

- (1) Televised leagues

- (2) Central leagues
- (3) Official leagues

The Sochi festival consists of a first round (all teams, 464 in 2019), a second round (95 teams in 2019), and a televised Gala Concert (22 teams in 2019). In 2019, 180 teams got an “elevated rating” (*povyshenniy reiting*) from the editors. An elevated rating gives teams the right to participate in any of Russia’s eight Central leagues. More or less anyone can compete in Official leagues, which numbered 60 in 2019. Local teams, though, even teams without Sochi ratings, get preference over unrated teams from other regions, who cannot exceed 30% of total participants in Official leagues. Teams for Televised leagues get chosen during the Gala Concert and through conversations with league editors afterwards.<sup>81</sup>

#### *Televised leagues*

Top League (*Vysshaia Liga*), Moscow  
 Premier League (*Prem'er-Liga*), Moscow  
 First League (*Pervia Liga*), Kazan'  
 International League (*Mezhdunarodnaia Liga*), Minsk, Belarus  
 Children's KVN

#### *Central leagues*

Asia, Krasnoyarsk  
 Krasnodarskaia, Krasnodar  
 League of Moscow and the Moscow Suburbs (*Liga Moskvy i Podmoskov'e*), Moscow  
 Povolzhe, Kazan'  
 Start, Voronezh  
 Tikhookeanskaia, Khabarovsk  
 Uralskaia, Chelabinsk  
 Yugo-Zapadnaia, Kursk

*Official leagues (Note: not all official leagues are based in Russia, but they feed into the Russia-based system)*

Adigeia, Republic of Adigei  
 Ala-Too, Bishkek, Kyrgystan

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<sup>81</sup> “*Pravila KVN i Ukazy Prezidenta MS KVN*” [“Rules of KVN and Decrees of the President of the International Union of KVN”]. <http://kvn.ru/pages/pravila-i-ukazi-prizidenta-ms-kvn> (accessed July 30, 2019).

Alania, Vladikavkaz  
Altai, Barnaul  
Arktucheskaia (ReAL), Salekhard  
Armavir, Armavir  
Azerbaidzhanskaia, Baku, Azerbaijan  
Baltika, St. Petersburg  
Black Sea, Novorossiisk  
Brianskaia, Briansk  
Briukhovetskaia, Briukhovetskaia  
Crimean League, Sevastopol  
Donskaia, Rostov-na-Donu  
Georgia, Tblisi, Georgia  
Irtysh, Pavlodar, Kazakhstan  
Kavkaz, Stavropol'  
KVN.bel, Gomel  
KVN on the Yenisei, Krasnoyarsk  
KVN Smolensk Style, Smolensk  
Kuzbass, Kemerovo  
League of Small Cities, Vyshnii Volochek  
League of Solov'inogo Kraia, Kursk  
Moldova, Kishinev, Moldova  
Moscow Student League, Moscow  
Moscow Suburbs (*Podmoskovnaia*), Korolev  
Murmanskaia, Murmansk  
Nevskaia, St. Petersburg  
Nizhniy Novgorod, Nizhniy Novgorod  
Omskaia, Omsk  
Orenburgskaia, Orenburg  
Prikam'e, Perm'  
Primorskaia, Vladivostok  
Respublika, Kazan'  
Riga, Riga, Latvia  
Riazanskaia, Riazan'  
Samara, Samara  
Slobozhanskaia, Belgorod  
Sevastopol'skaia, Sevastopol'  
Severnaia, Niagan'  
Severniy Desant, Surgut  
Siberia, Novosibirsk  
Siberia-NEXT, Novosibirsk  
Stolitsa, Cheboksary  
Sverdlovsk, Ekaterinburg  
Sura, Penza  
Tomsk, Tomsk  
Tula League, Tula  
Universitetskaia, Lipetsk  
Ufa, Ufa  
Verkhnevolsh'e, Tver'  
Vladomirskaia Rus', Vladimir  
Voronezhskaia, Voronezh  
Vyatka, Kirov  
West of Russia (*Zapad Rossii*), Kaliningrad  
Yaroslav League, Yaroslav'  
Youth League of the Republic of Bashkortostan, Sterlitamak

Zabaikal'skaia, Chita  
Zapad Rossii, Kaliningrad  
Zasib, Tiumenskaia Oblast'

## **Leagues based in Ukraine**

People still play KVN in Ukraine in university, school, and city leagues. In 2017 they also still played, incidentally, in one Amik league, East UA (*Vostok UA*) in Kharkhiv, in eastern Ukraine (it finally lost official Amik status in the fall of 2019). But no KVN games make it onto TV. Because of licensing issues and bans on Russian media in general, “KVN” is, like in the 1970s, off the airwaves in Ukraine. But League of Laughter is not. Editors Andrei Chivurin, Naum Barulya, and the comedy production company 95 Kvartal, founded, in part, by Volodymyr Zelensky, created League of Laughter to take the place of pro-level KVN competition—and entertainment—in Ukraine. KVN and League of Laughter co-exist in Ukraine, with students very often competing in both formats. Below, I list the KVN leagues in Odessa and the League of Laughter leagues active in Ukraine in 2019.

Even teams from Kharkhiv, though, do not attend the KVN festival in Sochi. Ukrainian teams, instead, vie for spots on TV at the annual League of Laughter festival in Odessa, first held in 2015 (just one year after the war began). The League of Laughter festival happens in late January or early February. Like Sochi, teams at the festival compete in a first round, a second round, and a Gala Concert. There is no rating system. The best teams from the gala concert get selected for the Central League of Laughter, the main televised league. Other teams may apply to or be invited to compete in regional leagues throughout the country.

### *KVN Leagues in Odessa*

Odessa National University  
Odessa National Polytechnic University  
KVN League of the Odessa Jewish Community Center Beit Grand  
Mayor's Cup  
Mayor's Cup for Schoolchildren

### *League of Laughter Leagues based in Ukraine*

Central League of Laughter (televised)  
Brovary  
Dnepr  
Kharkhiv  
Kiev  
Kramatorsk  
Odessa  
Rivne  
Ternopil  
Vinnitsa  
Zaporozh'e

*League of Laughter Leagues abroad*

Armenia  
Azerbaijan  
Estonia  
Israel

**Festivals**

I arrived in Odessa about a month before the February 2017 League of Laughter festival, joined a team, Friend Zone, as a sound operator, and attended with them. I went to the Sochi festival only two years later, in January 2019, where I shadowed two Irkutsk teams that I had met previously (IGU and team Buryats). League of Laughter modeled its week-long structure closely on the larger, two-week annual event in Sochi. While called festivals, the Sochi festival (more officially, the “International Festival of KVN Teams”) and the League of Laughter festival are not events designed for entertainment, like the Coachella or Glastonbury music festivals, but are instead huge tournaments that are closed to the public. Here, hundreds of teams converge and compete for the chance to play in televised leagues. In Russia, this means one of four televised leagues. In Ukraine, teams can land a place in only one main televised league. Regional league competitions, like those based in Odessa and Kiev, often are broadcast on local television channels, as well. But applications to those leagues are made separately from the head-to-head competition at the festival for coveted prime time slots.

Close to five hundred teams, for instance, attend the Sochi festival, and most teams incur significant expenses for flights and hotel reservations; they may have worked for years to earn sponsorships from their local leagues. Sochi is, thus, an important annual gathering for some of the best KVN teams in Russia and the near-ish abroad (though a few teams from Israel, America, and Western Europe attended in 2019). Sochi is a KVN rite of passage. A group of Russian KVNshiki turned pop musicians even composed a song for KVN on the theme of the Sochi festival. Rodnopolis' song, "My First Festival," incorporates motifs from KVN's original theme song and waxes nostalgic about fellowship at the Sochi festival:

Прошли лиги и года	Years have passed, we've been through leagues
Но всё равно сюда	But we're here all the same
Судьбы ведёт спираль!	Fate runs in a spiral
Все здесь больше чем родня,	Everyone here is closer than family
Все они - часть меня	You are all a part of me
Мы вместе - Фестиваль!	We are together—the Festival! <sup>82</sup>

Both festivals have two rounds and a final performance ("gala concert") during which judges decide which finalists will play in the countries' highest leagues. In 2019 the Sochi first round lasted four days. Teams began performing three-minute skits at 11 a.m. and continued without interruption until around 10 p.m. Editors would leave to take short breaks, but otherwise stayed in the auditorium the entire time, watching, keeping time, and taking notes. Evening entertainment began each day after the performances, at around 11 p.m. For the first round, these events included a DJ battle, a Contest of Emcees, a Rap Evening, a rock concert, and What? Where When? (*Chto? Gde? Kogda?*), a team quiz game. KVN training and professional development lectures also took place in the afternoons.

A lot of teams, especially those in serious preparation for the second round, skipped the DJ battles and spent their nights writing and rehearsing. And some people simply preferred to party more privately. Nearly everyone at the Sochi festivals stays in the same hotel, so it is easy to move

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<sup>82</sup> Group Rodnopolisy (Native Polis), "*Perviy Festival*" ("First Festival"). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9dwLoqHr3c> (accessed January 28, 2020).

from performance to rehearsal to bar to party and back, and many make this circuit. In an interview with IGU team Young People (*Molodye Liudi*) about Sochi, captain Sergei Ioffe told me, “Some people go [to Sochi] just for the *tusovka* (party). His teammate Yuri said that evenings in Sochi were always a lot of fun. They usually involved a lot of drinking, he added. “But it's all very cultured” (“*no ochen' kultur'niy*”), Daniil assured me. Yuri countered doubtfully, “Hmmm, yeah. But fun, at any rate.”

The League of Laughter festival works much the same way. The first round, though, only ran two days. League organizers left one day for editing sessions between the first and second rounds, one day for the second round, two days for rehearsals before the Gala Concert, and one day for dress rehearsals and the Gala Concert itself. Below, I provide reports from both festivals, side-by-side, to illustrate how hard teams work, but also how much fun they have, and why these events prove central not only to the respective KVN and League of Laughter competitive seasons, but to the social networks that team comedy has created.

- *Sochi drawing of teams (zherebëvka), January 13, 2019, 9:00 p.m.*

While not the festival’s official opening ceremony, which would happen at 11:30 p.m., the “drawing of teams,” or announcement of the order in which teams would be performing, felt like the kickoff. A live brass band played the KVN theme song. People around me in the thousand-person auditorium sang the lyrics joyfully, clapping. There weren’t enough seats for everyone, so some sat on the concrete stairs lining the aisles. All three Top League editors, Dmitry Shpenkov, Mikhail Marfin, and Evgeny Donskikh, spoke about the organization of the upcoming festival. Shpenkov said little, except to introduce Marfin. Marfin began by recalling, “Twenty-nine years ago, in 1990, I ran the first festival. There were thirteen teams. Out of those, twelve performed in the Gala Concert. And out of those eight ended up in the season. Of Top League. As there weren’t any others. This year things will go a little bit differently.” Donskikh concluded remarks from the editors with, “KVN is, KVN lives, KVN will continue to live!”





**Top League editors Mikhail Marfin (second from left) and Dmitry Shpenkov (third from left) open the 2019 Sochi Festival, January 13, 2019. Photo by author.**

- *Sochi rehearsals and editing session, January 13-14th, 2019, 10:00 p.m.-2:00 a.m.*

I did not go to the official opening ceremony, which featured champagne and speeches by Top League champions Raisy, from Irkutsk, because I met up with the team from IGU, who had rebranded themselves as Bravo, James (for simplicity I will just refer to them here as IGU). I watched them as they rehearsed in the large, gymnasium-like space in the festival hotel where dozens of other teams also ran through their material.

The team was all business. Sergei Ioffe himself did not perform, instead watching the team and generally keeping them on track. "Well, [once again] in order?" he said after the first hour. The team seemed to know most of their lines, struggling only in a few places. They worked more on stage placement, especially during a fight scene. They went through all of their numbers painstakingly, checking music, tracking down props, and calling in extras from other Irkutsk teams. At about midnight Sergei told me that they had an unofficial editing session planned with Top League editor Dmitry Shpenkov. IGU got this opportunity because they had played in Premier League the previous year and were a favorite to compete again in a televised league.

They didn't know when Shpenkov and two other regional editors would be ready to see them, though. They queued up behind other teams, waiting. And they were tired. The guys lolled around on a sofa outside the main auditorium, chilly, hungry, and ready to get the editing session over with.

The editors finally called them in at 1:15 a.m. The team greeted the editors and then performed their Introduction skit from start to finish. Afterwards, Shpenkov, and almost only Shpenkov, gave them comments. He looked down at his notes and said, "So far you don't have any material." He then criticized each of their numbers in turn: "no, not interesting;" "meeting the parents—I don't like this setup;" "that won't work on stage."



**Irkutsk team IGU (Bravo, James/Young People) in an unofficial editing session at the 2019 Sochi festival, January 14, 2019. Photo by author.**

The team took the criticism in stride. They still had two days to re-write material before their first round performance. Some of them went back to their hotel rooms and some headed to the Diner, the notoriously sticky-floored cafe and nighttime party spot in the festival hotel. The editors called in the next team.

The editors didn't have to do the editing session and didn't get paid to hold it. Shpenkov

does edit for Top League, but the session described here was not one of his Top League duties. The three editors in the room volunteered their time to help a few promising teams, in the middle of the night. This is part of the ethos of KVN, and of professionals who care about supporting the next generation of KVNshiki.

- *League of Laughter rehearsals, February 4, 2017, 2:00-5:00 p.m.*

I met team Friend Zone before the festival began to rehearse. They were shooting a video for their performance at a small student theater in Odessa. They needed a green screen, though. And they needed to press out all the wrinkles. So they spent about an hour ironing it, awkwardly, on the floor of the theater. Then they had to hang it, which required removing posters from the theater's walls. Then there was lighting to be arranged. Then their lines had to be run through multiple times. In short, we didn't rehearse our festival skit at all. They did shoot their video on the green screen, though, and we all agreed to meet up later that evening at the League of Laughter festival hotel, the OK Odessa, for the opening ceremony.



**Team Friend Zone, Odessa, Ukraine, February 4, 2017. Photo by author.**

- *League of Laughter opening ceremony, February 4, 2017, 7:00 p.m.*

In the speech that opened the 2017 festival main editor Andrei Chivurin said, "Well, first of

all, I would like to congratulate everyone on fifty-five years of KVN. We never lost anything from the past, from KVN (*My nikogda ne poteriali byvshie KVNovskie*). Happy birthday.” From the beginning of the most important League of Laughter event of the year, Chivurin linked League of Laughter to KVN tradition, interpellating participants as KVNshiki as well as Liga Smeshniki. We can imagine how this could be otherwise. Ukraine banned all Soviet symbols in public discourse in May 2015. Affiliation with Russia is, obviously, unpopular. So there could have been moves to erase all vestiges of KVN, a game created by the Soviets and now dominated by Russians. Chivurin advocated the opposite, no doubt out of genuine affection for the game.



**Editors Andrei Chivurin and Naum Barulya open the 2016 League of Laughter Festival, February 4, 2017. Photo by author.**

In some ways, though, calling the assembled participants KVNshiki was just a statement of the obvious. While KVN in Russia exists both in student leagues and on television, there is a division between these sectors in Ukraine. Student leagues across Ukraine are still called KVN. There is no money to be made, there are no television shows, and thus no copyright breaches. Only the televised leagues in Ukraine are called League of Laughter. Therefore, the vast majority of the festival's participants play KVN all year and League of Laughter only once, at the February festival. The team “Two Times Two” (*“Dvazhdy Dva”*) from Nizhyn, a town north of Kiev, spoofed

this tension in their first round act. They introduced themselves by re-voicing a catchphrase from the KVN theme song, one that Aleksander Masliakov often uses to announce the new KVN season: "We're starting KVN" ("My nachinaem KVN"). The four young men stood on the stage, a bit visibly nervous, and said, "This is our first time in League of Laughter. And so, apologies, we're starting KVN."<sup>83</sup>

Only people who really love KVN like to sit and watch novice first round teams for eleven hours a day. I happen to be one of those people, and am not alone. Auditoria in the festival hotels for both the Sochi and League of Laughter hotels were usually full. People did drift in and out, some coming only to support select teams, then rushing off to rehearse themselves. I can't list here all the teams from first and second rounds at the Sochi and League of Laughter festivals, nor re-cap the best jokes. Relevant excerpts from the festivals, especially from my time with Friend Zone and from editing sessions, will be cited in later sections of the dissertation. Below, I've simply given an overview of the schedules for the Sochi and League of Laughter festivals to give a sense of the rhythm of the events.

- *Sochi first round, January 14-17, 2019*
- *League of Laughter first round, February 5-6, 2017*
- *Sochi editing sessions, January 18, 2019*  
—I only watched editing sessions for Irkutsk teams.
- *League of Laughter editing sessions, February 7, 2017*  
—I observed editing sessions with all the teams.
- *Sochi second round, January 19-20, 2019<sup>84</sup>*
- *League of Laughter second round, February 8, 2017*
- *Sochi Gala Concert, January 24, 2019*
- *League of Laughter Gala Concert, February 11, 2017*

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<sup>83</sup> "Это наш первый раз в Лиге Смеха. Так что, мы начинаем КВН, извините."

<sup>84</sup> I was not present for the Sochi second round or Gala Concert, but did observe the League of Laughter second round, rehearsals, and Gala Concert

### *Other festivals*

Other competitions also get called festivals. The League of Moscow and the Moscow Suburbs, for instance, holds eight games over a four-day period to determine which teams will play in the central Moscow league and which ones in Moscow region student leagues. This is called the Festival of the Leagues of Moscow and the Moscow Suburbs (*Festival Lig Moskvy i Podmoskov'e*). Every summer, too, the Musical KiViN Festival (*Golosiashchiy KiViN*) takes place among the twenty or so strongest KVN teams internationally. This is a one-day, single competition.<sup>85</sup>

### **Glossary: KVN terms**

Definitions of some of the following terms, like *kalambur* (pun) can be found in dictionaries. Others, like *dobivka* (punchline), are KVN terms of art. Some words, like *khod* (literally, “move”), have dictionary entries but mean something different in KVN.

bloc: a set of jokes on a common theme

biathlon: a joke contest within KVN games. Teams each read two jokes, and the weakest teams are eliminated in turn. The teams that survive the most rounds earn the most points.

bolt: a zinger; a joke that gets audience members to “fall out of their seats” laughing (Marfin and Chivurin 1998, 15).

dobivka: punchline

geg: a gag. Gags usually involve physical comedy of some kind or a trick with props. For example, the Belgorod team Radioactive People (*Radioaktivnye Liudy*) used cherry tomatoes as their punchline in the following sketch:<sup>86</sup>

Young man: Actually, I learned to kiss on tomatoes.

((Another young man stage right begins kissing a tomato))

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<sup>85</sup> This was the competition analyzed in the controversial publication StratCom Laughs (NATO StratCom 2017).

<sup>86</sup> Subtitled clip (15 seconds) available at this link: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=13&v=7R2s7fPh2PM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=13&v=7R2s7fPh2PM). Team Radioactive People (Radioaktivnye Liudy), Belgorod, KVN Festival of Moscow and The Moscow Suburbs, Game 1, March 7, 2019, Moscow, Russia. Footage of the entire game available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1UT-M7nk9D4>

Young man: Katya?! What about our—children?! ((throws cherry tomatoes onto the stage))

*karapulya*: a song that overlays humorous lyrics onto a well-known melody



**Biathlon, Baikal League Semifinals, October 2, 2016, Irkutsk, Russia**

*kalambur*: pun

*khod*: an approach to, theme, or setting for a skit

*coda*: a short, concluding line in a team's performance; often a clever line or moral. The military team Commissars of the Capital from Moscow, for instance, after showing a politician awkwardly touring a tank, offered the following coda: "Let politics climb wherever it wants around the military. As long as the army never climbs into politics."<sup>87</sup>

*KOP*: *Konkurs Odnoi Pesni* (Contest of One Song). In this competition, often last in the line-up of a KVN game's events, teams build a skit around a single song, usually a well-known tune for which they write new, humorous lyrics.

*lineika*: a line-up of KVN players. Team Snezhnogorsk, below, relies on humorous introductions of individual characters on their team rather than traditional skits or dialogue. The introduction given for Mikhail, the shirtless man to the far left, was, "This is Mikhail, Snezhnogorsk's novice porno actor. So far he just watches."

*muzikalka*: *muzikal'niy nomer*; a skit with a musical component

*obraz*: persona on stage. As KVN author Aleksei Eks said, "You're just a student...but when you're in your persona, you can start to say something" (interview with author, October 28, 2018).

*obzor*: a written or video review, in this case of a KVN or League of Laughter game.

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<sup>87</sup> KVN Festival in Sochi 2019, January 15, 2019.



**Team Snezhnogorsk, from the Murmansk Region, in a *lineika* at the 2019 Sochi Festival.  
Photo by author.**

*otbivka*: a music clip played between sketches in a team's performance. The same songs may also be played upon a team's entrance and/or exit, or the team may choose other songs for these.

*paravoz*: when a joke causes the audience to explode with laughter.

*privetsvye/privetka*: literally "greeting," a skit-type number that often opens competitions

*perebivka*: a music clip played between a team's sketches

*redaktura*: an editing session. During editing sessions teams present proposed material to one or several editors, who give the team feedback.

*razminka*: an improvised question-and-answer section of a KVN competition.

*refrain*: a phrase or punchline that is repeated across several jokes in a skit.

*vykhod*: a character's entrance on stage

### **Conclusion: humor as tradition**

A painful loss in 1998 pushed college sophomore Aleksei Eks (who now writes for KVN teams and television shows professionally) to get serious about joke writing. "It was about three weeks from the game. And I knew we wouldn't have time to write the skits. I knew three weeks before the game that we were going to lose. And that upset me very much." His team took third



place out of six, but did not advance to the finals. Eks then started reading humor magazines and setting himself assignments to write jokes. “I came up with a system where you write ten jokes a day. And I stuck to that for several years.” Eks spent the summer after his final round loss writing every day. So when the next school year started, Eks brought in three hundred quality jokes to the first team meeting. “Other people did nothing all summer, and I wrote jokes,” he said, laughing. His team chose twenty-five out of the three hundred he'd written, wrote skits around them, and did well the following season. “We ended up at the gala concert of our local KVN festival, and we were even on TV,” he recalled. Following his trip to the Sochi festival later that season, after watching hundreds of teams' performances, Eks boosted his output even more. “When I go to Sochi, I don't leave the auditorium for a week. There's humor going on for twelve hours a day.” After Sochi he started writing twenty-five to thirty jokes a day. “Once I even wrote a hundred,” he said. “But that was just an experiment” (interview with author, October 28, 2018).

Eks, at least during that summer, wrote alone. Many teams brainstorm together. In the writing session pictured below, during a three-day School of KVN training retreat held in the Moscow region, our team wrote topics on nine sheets of paper: sports, nature, relationships, politics, music, etc. Each person took a sheet and jotted down either jokes or humorous situations for five minutes. Then we switched papers. After everyone had written on every topic we read out the ideas, talked them over, and built three skits out of the best punchlines.

Less ad hoc teams also frequently make use of brainstorming circles. At the 2019 Sochi festival, for instance, the Irkutsk and Ulan-Ude team Buryats worked to write a few new jokes to fill out their existing numbers. The team, though, made up not only of competitors but also of several dedicated authors, split into two groups. They decided that one group would write jokes for their first skit and the other would write jokes for the second. I sat with the second group in their Sochi hotel room as they scribbled furiously. Tanya, who I'd met in Irkutsk in 2016, kept time. No one spoke. *Write. Time's up. Switch. Write. Time's up. Switch.* After about an hour the two groups

got together and read what they'd come up with. A young man named Valera had the most jokes by far: “Ha ha! You pay for gasoline!” Valera rattled off a punchline and everyone chuckled. It was one of the best jokes of the evening.



**School of KVN, Kolomna, Moscow Region, February 2, 2019. Photo by author.**

KVNshiki learn joke writing traditions from coaches, from older teammates, and perhaps even from competitors. Sergei Chumachenko, the director for suburban Moscow KVN leagues, stressed the idea that KVN was a mass, rather than elite, activity, during a KVN training event for high school students. “Anyone can play KVN,” he said. “It is important, and Masliakov has always insisted on this, that you don't have to have special talents to participate in KVN.”<sup>88</sup> KVNshiki present humor as a teachable skill, not the result of individual brilliance. It results from, and requires, training. As Igor Lastochkin of the KVN—and now League of Laughter—team Dnepr, said, “It is a chance [for youth] to show their abilities...they need something to do” (interview with author, February 9, 2017).

KVN lore gets passed down, too, in traditions like those associated with KVN's birthday.

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<sup>88</sup> Sergei Chumachenko, School of KVN, Kolomna, Moscow Region, February 1, 2019.

On November 8, 2015, about 100 people clustered around tables in the main dining room of Botanik, a Chinese restaurant in Irkutsk. Alexander Lanin, a nationally-successful KVNshik announced, "Welcome, everyone, and happy birthday, KVN!" Teams from universities all over Irkutsk gathered to celebrate with dinner, drinks, and a KVN quiz. "Which team made it to the final round of Top League three times?" Lanin asked. "Which team uses this *otbivka* (tune)?" "Name the people in these photographs and give the league they competed in." Teams discussed answers, writing them down on answer sheets. Questions from televised Top League, Premier League, and First League competitions made up about 60% of questions. The rest were about local Irkutsk teams. In the hardest section of the quiz, Lanin read out twenty-five jokes and individuals competed to name which team—most of them local—had said it. The first person to get six correct won a baseball cap that said "Germany" and 1,000 rubles (about \$14 at the time). Answering the questions required deep knowledge and attendance at local KVN events for years. And people did know the answers, shouting over each other and giving high-fives.

The next year followed a similar format, with a new emcee. That year Sergei Ioffe from Irkutsk State University (*Irkutskii Gosudarstveniy Universitet*, or IGU) led the quiz, which, again, tested crowd's knowledge of both Top League and local teams. True to an event dedicated to KVN, the quiz was followed by *razminka* and biathlon (a joke contest). The birthday parties honored the game's history and acknowledged Irkutsk teams that had advanced to televised competitions (a team from Irkutsk State University won the Premier League championship in 2011 and three teams advanced to Top League between 2014 and 2019). People came out on a chilly Siberian night, though, to celebrate with the people with whom they play and played, toasting "Happy birthday, KVN!"

## Chapter Three: Ruptures

*We can overcome division only by refusing to be divided.*  
—Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*

In 2015, a member of the Ukrainian team Dnepr, Vladimir Borisov, made an inquiry about a survey on KVN that I'd put up on vKontakte. "Why are you studying KVN?" He'd asked me. I answered, probably gushing too much about what a big fan I was, and he didn't write me back. It happens. Besides, he's a star, along with all of team Dnepr. But nearly two years later I sat in the green room of an Odessa theater with Borisov as we waited for teams to come in for editing sessions before a performance. "So, as far as I understand, you're studying this here because you like it, because you wanted to—and my head is just spinning, thinking, 'Why did this person come here from America, who needs this?!'"

I asked about the status of KVN in contemporary Ukraine. "I view it very simply," he said. "Young people come out on stage, joke, and people laugh. What we call it—what does it matter?" KVN or League of Laughter, as long as young people participated, it was all the same for Borisov.

But Ukrainian teams, always among the best, have stopped competing in international competitions like Top League. In March 2014, Alexander Masliakov announced, "A few weeks ago the captain of the Odessa team called me." Pause. "And [the captain] said that—well that it wasn't possible for them to find sponsors, or to find what they needed to pay for the trip from Odessa to Moscow." Only four teams instead of five faced the audience for the 2014 Top League semifinal round. "I agreed, understood," the seventy-something Masliakov continued, shrugging his shoulders and fluttering his lips in resignation. "And I hope that we'll see this team, a very good, funny team, 'Odessa Tales,' in the future" (KVN 2014). End transmission. Cue comedy.

Odessa not attending a semifinal round is tantamount to Andy Murray skipping the tennis U.S. Open "for lack of travel funds." In truth, *Odessa Tales'* withdrawal caught few off-guard: fighters, no one knows whether they were pro-Russia or pro-Ukraine, had shot down Malaysian

Airlines Flight 17 near the border only three months before that competition. As Pavel Demchenko, a member of the team told me, “We debated going to the semis. We were already in Moscow. But every day, for an hour before rehearsals, we would see what they showed about the war on Russian TV. And there was nothing to joke about” (interview with author, January 18, 2017).

Four years later, Ukrainian teams still abstain from competition in the international, televised, Moscow-based leagues. But KVN leagues remain active within Ukraine itself. Odessa, for instance, has four regular leagues and one for school children. People still watch the game, too. Over three hundred people attended a KVN game hosted by the Odessa Jewish Community Center in February 2016, sitting in the aisles of the theater when they ran out of seats. Eight games took place in Odessa in the month of March 2017 alone. So the game is as popular as it ever was. But the tradition is now cut off from the larger KVN community. It is becoming insular, like an island language, and significant changes in tradition—conditioned by radical shifts in the game's political context—have already presented. First, the Ukrainian “League of Laughter” has markedly different rules than KVN. Second, Ukrainian teams can no longer, by law, reference Soviet symbols. KVN teams in international games very often index the Soviet past because this is something that people in Russia, Kazakhstan, Georgia, Israel, and Great Britain all share. But Ukraine banned all Soviet symbols in public discourse in 2015. Finally, since games are now for an exclusively Ukrainian audience, people often speak Ukrainian and Ukrainian *metis* (*surzhyk*) within their performances. This shift in language use, too, signals disaffiliation with Russia. People still like KVN as an activity, but take pains to redefine it as *not* Soviet and *not* Russian.

Ukrainian KVN is a tradition in flux. It is a real-time example of how political and economic changes affect cultural practice. Raymond Williams, also concerned with the ways structural constraints affect everyday life, suggested that students of tradition examine three cultural levels: everyday experience (“lived culture of a time and place”); recorded culture (texts, media, videos); and the strand that he said linked these two spheres of activity, “the culture of the selective

tradition” (Williams 1961, 101). Ukrainian KVNshiki are crafting the culture of the selective tradition through both everyday practices, like rehearsals and live games, and the circulation of digital texts: recorded performances, Instagram photos, memes, and humorous online surveys. Both levels, of course, inform each other. In university leagues, students spoof performances they watched on YouTube. Memes featuring local players circulate on social media. Students poke fun at other teams. They write jokes about local judges. Dramatic moments of the local season—who did well, who failed to measure up (again)—get re-purposed in both interpersonal and media spheres. Largely, though, these inscriptions of tradition stay local, in Ukraine, shoring up city and national KVN imaginaries rather than linking them to the international (read: Russian) KVN community. I begin a discussion of recent changes in Ukrainian KVN traditions by outlining ruptures in KVN institutions since 2014. I then analyze the ways KVN participants represent the current conflict and the Soviet past. I conclude by examining the new kinds of KVN publics created by the Russia-Ukraine war.

### **Institutional ruptures**

*“...the significance of an activity must be sought in terms of the whole organisation, which is more than the sum of its separable parts.”*

—Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution*

Odessa Tales’ 2014 absence highlights some of the prosaic ways in which people on both sides of the Russia-Ukraine border experience the conflict. Those in Odessa and Kiev do not fear shelling. No tanks roll by the Potemkin Steps. But air travel between the two countries is prohibited and information exchange unreliable at best. Both sides censor. Both sides block websites. And KVN fans miss Ukrainian teams for some of the same reasons it would cause a stir if English tennis players began boycotting all games outside of the UK. In many ways, KVN’s roots are in Ukraine. Sergei Muratov, one game’s creators, was from Kharkiv. Odessa, “the capital of humor,” was the first city outside Moscow to adopt KVN. Across KVN’s fifty-year history, Ukrainian teams have

nearly always advanced to Top League. Odessa also launched some of the most renowned—and controversial—KVN teams of the Soviet era. The Odessa Chimney Sweeps notoriously cracked jokes at the KGB's expense in 1967. In a move less daring but with more airtime, during perestroika the Odessa Gentlemen critiqued the government with a ferocity not seen before, or possibly since, on Russian TV. They were so popular that they toured the USSR throughout the late 1980s, going everywhere from Baku to Vladivostok. Once they even visited a *sharashka*, a closed, top-secret community of scientists. Ordinary people could not enter these spaces and, in general, the scientists themselves could not leave. When the Gentlemen showed up with their standard satire about the Communist Party, team member Igor Losinsky told me, “[The audience’s] jaws dropped. They were in shock. They had never heard anything like this” (interview with author, January 23, 2016). Most of the country, in fact, had never heard public jokes about Party failures or the “red button” that could summon atomic war. But the Gentlemen brought more than shock-value to the stage. They also joked about male-female relationships, work, and everyday life. It is just that everyday life in the USSR included censorship, Party propaganda, inadequate consumer goods, and the threat of nuclear holocaust. The team confronted these subjects head-on, with wit, and became the darlings of the entire country. When I told the director of Irkutsk's Ministry of Culture that I would be going to Odessa and meeting with members of the Gentlemen, he asked me to let them know that, “We remember them. We love them and we remember them, from those days” (interview with author, December 12, 2016).

Thousands of miles have always separated Irkutsk and Odessa. I felt like an emissary in the winter of 2017, though, because now warfare divided the two cities, as well. Broadcasts of Russian television channels abruptly stopped in 2014. Ukrainians cannot access all Russian websites, and I found myself unable to even view some pages about the Ukrainian language from Russia. During a discussion about when information about the KVN festival in Sochi, Russia would be available online, a KVNshik from Odessa mentioned that he had, at times, lost access to the official KVN

website (amik.ru).

Odessa Tales chose not to return to Moscow in 2015, either. Instead, they played in the first season of a brand-new set of competitions based in Ukraine, League of Laughter (*Liga Smekha*). At least one KVN luminary took offense at the team's decision, noting, "It's doubly offensive that people who were very close to us in the past are competing elsewhere. One of them I've known, speaking frankly, longer than my own wife" (KVN v Ukraine 2015). An institution defined by laughter now negotiates wounds. Friends avoid each other, revealing the human side of political conflict. In only eighteen months, politics rent KVN's half-century tradition. Naum Barulya, a Ukrainian who had worked as KVN's main producer in Moscow for seven years before the war broke out, said, "We knew that no one would let us use those three letters [KVN] on this side of the border...And we knew that if we did not find a way to channel our youth's talent the tradition would be lost. So we came up with League of Laughter" (interview with author, February 10, 2017).

The problem was not that the letters "KVN" became unpopular or maligned in Ukraine. It was that they are trademarked. Aleksander Masliakov, Top League Moscow's emcee for fifty years, bought the KVN enterprise after the break-up of the USSR and created the company Amik. Amik owns the rights to all four televised leagues—Top, Premier, First, and International—and administers the eight "central leagues" that feed into them: Krasnoyarsk, Krasnodar, Moscow, Kazan, Voronezh, Khabarovsk, Chelyabinsk, and Kursk. Any team that can pay the \$170 participation deposit, airfare, and hotel costs for a week or two at the Sochi KVN festival has a shot of making it to a televised league. As Tatiana, an Irkutsk businesswoman who played in the 2015 and 2019 Top League seasons told me, "KVN is one of the only ways someone from Irkutsk can get on television. Without killing someone." Every year, one hundred amateur performers from places like Yakutia and Kaliningrad jump from the provinces to (usually fleeting) stardom. However, teams that make it to the finals can count on income from touring comedy shows, at a minimum. Playing



on the obvious links between KVN wins and money, Eldar, the Kyrgyz team captain of the 2016 Top League champions, joked about this during the final with his young daughter (guest team member for the day). Looking at the gold medals hung on the Christmas tree on stage, she asked, "Papa, is there any chocolate in those medals for me?" He replied, "Oh, daughter, in those medals there is chocolate for you, and a fur coat for mama, and work for these guys, and even a husband for your aunt Sitora!"<sup>89</sup> Indeed, only one year after winning the 2015 Top League final, a team from Kamyziak (population 16,000) had spin-off TV contracts in Moscow. The Sochi festival serves as the gateway to all of those opportunities.

Ukrainians, of course, would have to cross back-and-forth across the border several times if they advanced to the quarter- or semifinals of a central league. Few teams would want to. I asked Igor Lastochkin, a three-time competitor in Top League from Dnipropetrovsk, Ukraine whether a Ukrainian team, if they were fantastically talented and had financial sponsors, would be allowed on Russia's Channel One. He paused and said, "What can Ukrainian teams even joke about right now?" (interview with author, February 9, 2017).<sup>90</sup>

The conflict has reshaped the geography of KVN participation. As the maps below illustrate, in 2013 twenty-four Ukrainian teams attended the Sochi festival, including five from the now-disputed territories in Ukraine (one from Crimea and four from Donetsk). In 2017 no unambiguously Ukrainian teams competed; that is, none claiming Ukrainian citizenship. However twelve teams from Russia-occupied territories did go—five from Crimea, six from Donetsk, and one from Lugansk. A team from Simferapol', in Crimea, even advanced to televised leagues in both 2019 and 2020. I had heard rumors that a Ukrainian team from Odessa had traveled to Sochi in 2017, so I asked a member of the team, called "Nicole Kidman," if this was true. "No," he said. "We did not go over there." The rumor made me wonder, though, if any team had signed up. It

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<sup>89</sup> KVN Top League Final 2016, December 24, 2016, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OkHh8UlxicY&t=1953s&index=14&list=PLnP4EuRGIgUG8IQOraep6GkOTLB5\\_cDKM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OkHh8UlxicY&t=1953s&index=14&list=PLnP4EuRGIgUG8IQOraep6GkOTLB5_cDKM) (accessed March 3, 2017).

<sup>90</sup> "О чем можно шутить Украинские команды сейчас?"

would take about two days on the train to get there, but, over winter holidays, in a train car full of friends, I thought a team might chance it. When I asked Naum Barulya about it he said, unequivocally, “No. None of ours went. Some went *from there*. From the other side” (interview with author, February 10, 2017). I met another Lugansk team, one from what Barulya would call *our side*, at the annual League of Laughter festival in Odessa in February 2017. They ended their performance in the second round with these words, “Odessa, thank you for the warm welcome. For you—Team Lugansk. Lugansk—Ukraine.”<sup>91</sup> The team captain then gave his chest a victory thump and extended his arm out towards the audience, who cheered, whistled, applauded, and nodded their heads.

Three conditions serve to sequester Ukrainian KVN: the interpersonal effects of enmity, economic sanctions, and trademark restrictions. The first factor, enmity, reflects how the war has bled into friendships. Several Ukrainians I have talked to said they are not even on speaking terms with relatives in Russia. That said, there are Ukrainian citizens working in Russia and Russian citizens working in Ukraine. One comic from Odessa, Dmitry Romanov, works for the television station TNT in Moscow and does stand-up comedy there, as well. I also met a college student in Odessa who was planning a series of stand-up performances in Moscow in April 2017. KVN differs from stand-up in its political indexicality because KVN teams represent cities and regions. Stand-up performers may compete for a one-time purse, but they don’t do so as avatars for their homelands. In KVN, Astana plays *against* Moscow. Murmansk plays *against* St. Petersburg. Baku plays *against* Tblisi. Ukraine playing against Russia, in the current climate, feels less than cheerful.

For some of the same reasons, Russia did not send an entry to the 2017 Eurovision Song Contest, held in Kiev. Russian MP Vitaly Milonov said, “The reality is that we will be unwelcome guests in a country seized by fanatics, who dream of destroying all the good between the Russian and Ukrainian peoples.” Ukrainian MP Olga Chervakova responded by claiming that Russians

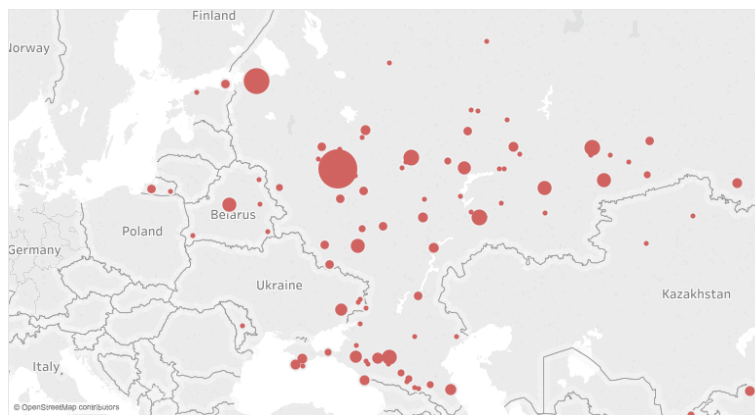
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<sup>91</sup> “Одесса, спасибо за теплый грел. Для вас—Луганская Сборная. Луганск—Украина.”

already boycott “many things”: “In the UN Security Council, Russia has been boycotting common sense, in Crimea and the Donbas, Russia has been boycotting international agreements, while at home [with anti-EU sanctions] it’s boycotting Swiss cheese.”



**Teams at the 2013 Sochi Festival, by city<sup>92</sup>**



**Teams at the 2017 Sochi Festival, by city<sup>93</sup>**

Domestic Russian artists have felt a chill, too, if they have spoken out against their

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<sup>92</sup> International KVN Association, “KiVin 2013. First Round.” <http://kvn.ru/news/10960> and <http://kvn.ru/news/10962> (accessed March 8, 2017). Official Site of KVN Activity for the Krasnoyarsk Region, “Order of performances. First Round, Day Three of the festival,” <http://kras-kvn.ru/novosti/kivin-2013-spisok-vystuplenii-komand-per-3> (accessed March 8, 2017). Maps on this page were created using Tableau software.

<sup>93</sup> International KVN Association, “Order of Performances for the First Round.” <http://kvn.ru/journal/14153> (accessed March 8, 2017).

government's actions in Crimea. One of the judges from the 2013 Top League season, the much-loved rock 1970s musician Andrei Makarevich, found himself functionally banned from performing concerts after making critical comments. He said, "If the guy who makes the concert is not so brave, and usually they are not because they want to live and feed their children, then the concert is stopped."<sup>94</sup> Twenty-eight of Makarevich's concerts were cancelled between the spring of 2013 and fall of 2014, under the guise of "double-booking" or "repair work." Before the conflict it would have seemed inconceivable that people would pelt such a popular star with tomatoes and call him a "friend of the junta" for performing in Eastern Ukraine. Before the conflict, war with Ukraine was so far off the radar that another judge, the Director General of Russia's Channel One TV station, even kidded with Dnepr KVNshik Igor Lastyochkin about Ukrainians stirring up trouble.

Russia, of course, is not alone in issuing sanctions. Ukraine has banned the work of fourteen Russian actors and musicians because the individuals pose a "threat to national security."<sup>95</sup> Their crime? Supporting Russia's annexation of Crimea. Thus, the second hurdle to Ukraine's participation in the wider KVN world involves the mutual blockade of products, people, money, and information across the Russia-Ukraine border. Russian goods only enter the country via Belarus. Air passengers must stop in an intermediate country if they want to travel between the two countries. Ukrainian TV stations do not air Russian programs, including KVN, anymore. Merely getting to Russia has become much more expensive for Ukrainians. And, in the off chance that Ukrainian KVNshiki played on television, their friends back home could only watch them on YouTube.

The third problem is Amik's trademark of "KVN." Ukrainians cannot create their own

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<sup>94</sup> Sarah Rainsford, "Russia's Music Stars Split in Culture War over Ukraine," BBC News. November 19, 2014. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30087935> (accessed March 10, 2017).

<sup>95</sup> BBC News, "Ukraine Blacklists Russian Artists for Rebel Support," August 8, 2015. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-33839418> (accessed March 10, 2017).

television show with that name. Universities, primary schools, and community centers throughout Ukraine still host KVN leagues. But putting it on TV would violate royalty and copyright protections. Whether de jure or de facto, the road to television in Moscow is closed to Ukrainian KVNshiki right now. This is why the main producer and main director for Amik, who were both Ukrainians, left Moscow in 2014, came to Kiev, and founded the League of Laughter. Odessa Tales, the last Ukrainian team to compete in Russia, ended their season early, in April 2014. Only one year later, in January 2015, Odessa hosted the first League of Laughter festival. In 2017, 172 teams registered for the festival. They came not only from cities in Ukraine but from Israel, Georgia, Moldova, and Belarus. One brave Russian team even attended. Of these, fifty-five teams advanced to the second round of competition. Twenty-five competed in the final, gala competition, broadcast on Ukraine's national 1+1 television station. Fourteen then moved on to the regular season, where they competed from double-octofinals to a final stand-off between two teams.

Just as Sochi launches the televised KVN season, the League of Laughter festival in Odessa marks the start of Ukraine's comedy season. Ukraine's festival is smaller, admittedly, hosting under 200 teams in 2017 versus Sochi's 444. But it is also much easier for the average Ukrainian student to attend than Sochi was. First, there is no participation fee. Sochi costs \$170 per team. Second, teams can easily and relatively cheaply take trains from their hometowns to Odessa. Third, the conference organizers went out of their way to get discounts for their young participants. "It should not be expensive for them to come," Barulya said.<sup>96</sup> In 2014 he approached the director of the OK Odessa Hotel, which hosts the festival, and promised to fill all of the rooms for a week in the winter off-season if they would make some changes for the competitors. First, a bed in a two-bed room could not cost more than \$7 per night. Second, the food prepared by the hotel kitchen had to be filling but affordable. OK Odessa complied, reserving the hotel exclusively for contest participants, changing their menu, and letting League of Laughter's security team control all access

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<sup>96</sup> "Для них не должно быть дорого."

to the hotel. He also struck a deal with a nearby restaurant that hosts the festival's evening events, activities like song contests, joke contests, and trivia games (much like at Sochi). Barulya asked the venue to take "elite cocktails" off the menu. Thus, participants could choose from beer, wine, vodka, and whiskey. Some people did, of course, make special requests of the bartenders. But, for the most part, students drank \$1 drafts of Stella Artois. Knowing that students will not tip, Barulya always gives the waitstaff some extra money up front (interview with author, February 10, 2017).

As Barulya put it, his job is to take care of food, housing, and performance space arrangements so that participants can play without worrying about logistics. "We don't want them to think, 'Oh, where am I going to find food in Odessa? How do I get to the restaurant?'" Andrei Chivurin's task, on the other hand, is to teach the students *how* to play. Chivurin was born in Kharkhiv, Ukraine in 1964. From 1990 to 1996 he played in Top League and the now-defunct Top League Ukraine, then became the editor (*redaktor*) for Amik's Top League in 1996. He is just short of a legend among KVNshiki. In addition to his success in Top League and long experience coaching Top League teams, Chivurin co-authored the only contemporary primer on playing KVN, *What is KVN?* (Marfin and Chivurin 1996). He is now the main editor of League of Laughter.

An editor, in the world of KVN and League of Laughter, is someone who offers feedback to team on the content of their skits. "That joke about sex? No, no, no! That's not funny," Chivurin told an Israeli team during editing sessions (*redaktura*) before the second round of League of Laughter performances in 2017. "Do you have any other material?" he asked another team. "The thing is, we already have a team with stuff about Trump. So if you are going to make jokes about Trump, too, they have to be absolute bombshells (*prosto bomba*)." Two other editors sat in the conference room with Chivurin during the editing sessions. But Chivurin did almost all of the talking. "Liga Smeshniki," as League of Laughter participants call themselves, look to him—as KVN grandfather and League of Laughter founder—for advice as they create new team humor traditions in Ukraine.

In the first and second rounds of the League of Laughter festival, the game is, however, identical to KVN. In these preliminary competitions teams get three minutes to perform a short number. The three league editors make notes and decide who will go on to the second round, and from there to the televised level. Once the final fourteen teams get selected, however, League of Laughter's format begins to diverge from KVN. In KVN each judge holds up a score card after teams perform, as in the Olympics. KVN competitions usually consist of three games (a combination of skits and joke contests), and the team with the highest score at the end wins. League of Laughter teams do not get scores from the judges. Instead, they get one point for each judge that stands up after they perform. If four of the seven judges stand, they get four points. If six judges stand, they get six points. The twist is, each of the seven judges selects two teams to train throughout the season. These trainers help the teams write material, rehearse with them, coach them, and perform with them. Trainers cannot stand for their own team. But they also may choose not to stand for a team that might beat their's—even if they performed brilliantly. After all, they want their own teams to advance. Chivurin told me, “This adds more intrigue (*intriga*). The format is more interactive, since the jury plays as well. So this opens up new kinds of possibilities. Possibly, unsportsmanlike ones. There's an opportunity for petty revenge (*melkiy mest'*). A judge can say, ‘You didn't stand for my team, so I won't stand for yours’” (interview with author, February 11, 2017).

Aside from the scoring system, the other main difference between KVN and League of Laughter is the range of improvisational “battles” that take place when teams tie. Ties happen more frequently in League of Laughter than KVN because teams get a single whole-number score for each game (e.g. 4, 5, or 6) rather than an average of seven judges' scores, as in KVN (e.g. 4.8). A battle called “Alphabet” proved popular in the 2016 season. Here, two teams must co-create a dialogue based on a scenario (“a new police officer stops an old militiaman”). Competitors do not get any time to confer or prepare. Each side takes turns giving lines, immediately, and the first letter

of each response must follow Ukrainian alphabetical order. In this example from a 2016 semifinal match, "of course" ("konechno") follows "yogurt" ("iogurt") in the Cyrillic alphabet:<sup>97</sup>

Й: [young man holds out hand to female competitor]

Йогурт—будешь?  
*logurt—budesh'?*  
Yogurt—would you like some?

К: [female competitor licks his hand]

Конечно—нет.  
*Konechno—net.*  
Of course—not.

Л: Лизнула. Она лизнула меня на ладонь.  
*Liznula. Ona liznula menya na ladon'.*  
Licked me. She licked me on the palm.

[laughter from the audience]

In other battles, competitors had to give amusing answers to trivia questions; come up with a monologue based on random objects on a table; and act out a skit while sliding down a mini-stage tilted to a forty-five degree angle. "We have a lot of experimental formats," Chivurin told me. "This is not ordinary KVN—though nothing against KVN. We are only just starting our tradition. We have different styles. Our format has a lot of risk. We aren't afraid of that." Improvisation is risky on TV because it can go wrong. A competitor might blank entirely. That did happen in League of Laughter in the 2016 season, as one team searched for a logical story to tell about a chess board, a bottle of vodka, and an atomizer: "Well...actually. Um, let's think about...how to solve this difficult puzzle."<sup>98</sup> Chivurin maintained that audiences appreciated true improv, though. "When they can see that it's real, that you're not trying to trick them, it is interesting" (interview with author, February 11, 2017). He may be right. The dialogue above would seem odd at best if it was

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<sup>97</sup> Third semifinal of the second season. October 29, 2016. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9qxRf-J8k\\_8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9qxRf-J8k_8) (accessed March 11, 2017).

<sup>98</sup> "Ну и собственно...аа...подумаем...Как...решить сложную задачку." League of Laughter 2016. Final, second season. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NWvttSMb5q4&t=2979s> (accessed March 11, 2017).



scripted. But there is drama in watching funny, intelligent people work out problems on the fly. There is intrigue.

For reasons of copyright if no other, League of Laughter had to come up with some marked differences from KVN. An identical game under a new name would still incur legal issues. Aleksander Masliakov's son, Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Masliakov, said in 2015, "I don't like [League of Laughter]. Honestly, it is because in one form or another it is KVN, and everything is from KVN..."<sup>99</sup>

League of Laughter may have given Chivurin an excuse to re-create some improvisational elements televised KVN lost after the 1990s precisely because they were risky. From its beginnings in the 1960s, the "clever" part of the Club of the Cheerful and Clever came from improv. Two games in particular featured in every KVN competition for thirty years: *razminka* ("warm-ups") and the Captain's Contest. In *razminka* judges, other competitors, or members of the audience would pose questions, read parts of poems, or ask riddles. Teams got high scores for amusing responses. In the Contest of Captains two team captains would spar with riddles or trade jokes. At the end of the 1990s, though, Russia's Channel One became less tolerant of dead airtime, off-the-cuff jokes that fell flat, and performers who fumbled for words. Biathlon (which requires competitors to read off two pre-prepared jokes) replaced *razminka* and the Contest of Captains in televised KVN. This is one of the reasons Mikhail, a sociologist who played in Irkutsk university leagues in 1971, felt that KVN had become less and less interesting over time. "There was more censorship after shows stopped being live-broadcast [in the late 1960s]," he said. "The program moved from improvisation to show [*estrada*]. In the 1990s it became funny again, but then moved back to just a show [*estrada*]" (interview with author, October 10, 2016). The ability to think on your feet, not just act out a script, is what makes KVN different from simple sketch comedy. In the eyes of many, improvisation is central to KVN tradition. For this reason, local, non-televised leagues often still

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<sup>99</sup> "Плохо я отношусь к этой передаче. Честно могу сказать, потому что в том или ином виде это КВН, и все это из КВНа..."

stage improvisational games. There, people perform largely for friends and family and no one is worried about TV ratings. In Irkutsk, for example, university, primary school, and local leagues include *razminka*. When talking to the main editor of Irkutsk's Baikal League about my upcoming research in Odessa, he told me that some KVNshiki in Irkutsk considered League of Laughter to be better than KVN, partly because it included so many improvisational tasks. “A lot of people here watch [League of Laughter] online,” (interview with author, December 18, 2016). A Russian website that publishes KVN commentary also suggested, “If you would like to watch funny KVN—go watch League of Laughter [instead].”<sup>100</sup>

Putting improv on TV, as it was when Chivurin himself played in Top League, may be a way to revive KVN as a game of wits rather than a “show.” As he wrote, with Mikhail Marfin, in *What is KVN?*, “If the game is not rigidly tied to a television program, then it may be possible to find a place for improvisation” (Marfin and Chivurin 1996, 99).<sup>101</sup> With Amik exiled from Ukraine, KVN in Ukraine suddenly became entirely decoupled from a television program. Chivurin has a free hand to experiment with League of Laughter; he has the ability to celebrate KVN’s roots. Perhaps, then, KVN did not absent Ukrainian television screens. Perhaps it was revived.

## Representations

*“In society as a whole, and in all its particular activities, the cultural tradition can be seen as a continual selection and reselection of ancestors. Particular lines will be drawn, often for as long as a century, and then suddenly with some new stage in growth these will be cancelled or weakened, and new lines drawn.”*

—Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution*

KVNshiki make and re-make KVN tradition everyday, as they stay up late to write jokes in each others’ rooms, as they pilfer classroom space at their universities to rehearse, and as they compete, locally and in other Ukrainian cities. Each of these quotidian actions re-frames the

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<sup>100</sup> “Хотите смотреть смешной КВН—смотрите Лигу Смеха.” A Dark Look at the Top League Third Quarterfinal, <http://voronlinch.ru/post?id=264> (accessed March 11, 2017).

<sup>101</sup> “И если игра не привязана жестко к телевизионной передаче, то в ней вполне можно найти место для импровизационного конкурса.”

“doing-being-ordinary” of KVN in today's Ukraine (cf. Sacks 1984). When they write material for competitions, students imagine their audiences. Often, those audiences are local students, so they discuss events in their towns, make digs at other teams, or tease the judges, former KVNshiki themselves. Those that do make it to televised League of Laughter competitions write for a larger audience—but still an exclusively Ukrainian one. This is in contrast to Top League teams, who build skits for international post-Soviet audiences in Russia, Central Asia, Chechnya, Armenia, Georgia, and Belarus. Their punchlines must rely on citations that people in those countries share: pop culture, language, and references to the Soviet past. These are precisely the lines along which Ukrainian teams have started to diverge from their Amik colleagues. League of Laughter competitors refer almost exclusively to Ukrainian musicians, actors, and celebrities. Many teams code-switch between Russian and Ukrainian, and some from Western Ukraine speak exclusively Ukrainian. Language, if nothing else, cordons off the space of Ukrainian KVN as Ukraine-internal.

Teams do make Soviet references, nonetheless. When they do, though, it is not with nostalgia, as is often the case in Russia (Oushakine 2007). Rather, the Soviet past gets invoked as a provincial bogeyman. Amik teams also often characterize their audiences as a united post-Soviet community. During one skit, for instance, a Kazakh team referred to its Russian audience as “neighbors” and “relatives.”<sup>102</sup> Discourse that shores up Soviet brotherhood promotes a Russian sphere of influence because post-Soviet space overlaps with the Eurasian Economic Union (which Russia controls). Arguably, the war in Ukraine began over the then-president Viktor Yanukovich's choice, in November 2013, to scuttle a proposed trade agreement with the European Union in favor of ties to the Eurasian Economic Union.<sup>103</sup> Ukrainian teams, then, do not refer to a post-Soviet imagined community in their skits (cf. Anderson 1983). In this section I examine the ways in

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<sup>102</sup> KVN Top League 2008, First Octofinal, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y7ald7uD4JA> (accessed September 25, 2016).

<sup>103</sup> Benoit Vitkine, “Vladimir Putin's Eurasian Economic Union gets ready to take on the world.” *The Guardian*. October 24, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/28/eurasian-economic-union-russia-belarus-kazakhstan> (accessed March 11, 2017).

which Ukrainian KVNshiki construct their audiences as domestic, represent the war, and address the Soviet past in rehearsals and editing sessions as well as performances. Through everyday practices, they erase and replace elements of KVN that are no longer relevant, like aspiring to televised league play in Moscow, or would be upsetting to recall, like the multi-thousand person annual KVN festival in Sochi, a giant party that Ukrainians now find it nearly impossible to attend.

### *Imagined audiences*

This article's public, according to Michael Warner, is anyone who is reading it (Warner 2002, 413). A public is a community of people who consume, in some way, a cultural text. Rather than publics, I would like to discuss how Ukrainian KVNshiki imagine and orient towards their perceived *audiences*. A lot of Russian KVN fans do, in fact, watch League of Laughter on YouTube. Thus, League of Laughter's public consists of Russians as well as Ukrainians. But Ukrainian KVNshiki do not represent their audience as international, as Amik leagues consistently do. They index national and local events, Ukrainian TV programs, and Ukrainian League of Laughter teams. This is in contrast to intertextual practices in Amik leagues. An example from the 2015 Top League season illustrates how performers presuppose knowledge about past Top League performers. The Krasnoyarsk KVN team "Bad Company" (*Plokhaiia Kompaniia*), which did not make it to the final round in the 2014 Top League competition, began their octofinal skit in 2015 with a complaint. The team captain, Mikhail, said, "The competition last year was unfair." His teammate then replied, "But Mik, there are editors..." implying that people carefully count the scores. Mikhail cut in, saying "I'm talking about DALs."<sup>104</sup> DALs was a talented team from Belgorod who had beat them in the previous season. This joke was funny, true. But it also served a social function. By invoking KVN lore, the joke interpellated its viewers as a circle equipped to share in the skit's presuppositions. Anyone who watched the 2014 competition would remember DALs''

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<sup>104</sup> KVN Top League 2015, First Quarterfinal. May 15, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watchv=HYKzfaFsmi8&list=PLnP4EuRGIGUEfpF2U3x9KLtMusfygSATT&index=6> (accessed March 11, 2017).

unconventional breakout showing. Unlike most teams that make it to the televised leagues, their performances included zero elements of “show.” They could not sing. Their skits featured no elaborate dance numbers, no beautiful woman, and no high-production videos. Their costumes were, generally, jeans and blazers. They brought no stage scenery. In fact, rather than a full team, DALŠ was just a duo: a goofy-looking tall guy and a mustachioed short guy. They took second place in Top League in 2014 and 2015 on a shoestring budget because they wrote exceptionally funny jokes. Fans, to include Aleksander Masliakov, appreciated their bare-bones humor. A Georgian team also praised DALŠ during one of their 2015 performances, displaying a sign during their opening act that said, “Viva DALŠ!” (“DALŠ, vpered!”).

Teams often riff off of one another's skits, sometimes as tribute, sometimes as mockery. Siberian teams index Top League performances in their skits, too. In the 2016 Krasnoyarsk central league final, for instance, the team Somehow (*Tak-to*) dressed up in DALŠ's trademark blazers. Irkutsk teams borrow from the televised leagues, as well, as they define what to means to be a knowledgeable KVNshik.

Trading KVN references happens off stage, too. On November 8, 2017, Irkutsk teams got together to celebrate KVN's birthday (officially, International KVN Day). Around seventy young people gathered at a local restaurant for a KVN quiz and *razminka* contest. KVNshiki competed to identify the teams associated with certain theme songs (*otbivki*), to name the Top League teams that had told certain jokes, and to complete partial jokes with the correct punchline. The quiz required encyclopedic knowledge of the last five years of KVN. The group that I sat with knew about half the questions. Even when groups did not know the answers, they were at least conversant with recent Top League skits. “Oh, exactly! That's the [song] about the mayor, Kamyziaki,” said one of students in the group I was sitting with. “Yes!” the others exclaimed, and hurried to pencil in their response. Team Kamyziaki had sung the song the teams had to guess in a Top League quarterfinal match four years earlier, but everyone at the table, none older than twenty-one, immediately

recognized the reference.

Few Ukrainian KVN teams cite Amik's televised leagues in their performances now. Their imagined audience is in Ukraine. Even if Ukrainians watch Top League on YouTube (and they do), they do not represent their audiences as a public that watches the Russia-based competitions. It would seem inappropriate, somehow, to presuppose knowledge of banned Russian television programs. Instead, League of Laughter teams reference the performances of other League of Laughter teams and poke fun of League of Laughter judges. For instance, when a team who made it to the League of Laughter finals in 2016 did not advance past the second round of the League of Laughter festival in 2017, fans voiced their shock. League of Laughter's producers knew that audiences would appreciate some small inclusion of the team, Lukas, in the first televised contest of the year, so during the broadcast they aired a videotaped song from the team that lamented their early defeat:

We wanted to make it into the season  
We came to the festival in Odessa  
We wrote jokes about everything  
And nothing  
When we got into the second round  
We were really happy  
We hoped and we believed  
But did not advance  
Forget her, forget her  
The season disappears, like smoke<sup>105</sup>

Lukas's video included shots of the hotel conference hall where more than five hundred young people spent a week as they performed and watched the festival. That particular allusion

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<sup>105</sup> “Хотели мы попасть в сезон  
Приехали на фест в Одессу  
Писали шутки обо всем  
И не о чем  
Когда мы второй тур прошли  
Мы били очень сильно ради  
Надеялись и верили  
Но не прошли  
Забудь её забудь

Уйдет сезон как дым.” Sung to the tune of Yuri Shatunov's 2001 song “Forget Him, Forget” (“Забудь его забудь”). League of Laughter 2017, Third Festival in Odessa, Part 2. February 24, 2017. Accessed March 11, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BqH7TVj8BRc>.

was for the festival participants, most of them partners in Lukas's defeat in the OK Odessa auditorium. The lyrics as a whole, though, construct the League of Laughter viewership as Ukrainian, first of all, and as one that understands the significance of the League of Laughter festival in Odessa. If they had not watched before, the show's host explained, "League of Laughter is the humor network for all of Ukraine." The first broadcast of the year also included behind the scenes interviews with the festival's young participants. Then in its third season, League of Laughter already had a significant fan base, and one that would wonder at Lukas's conspicuous absence. Just as teams from Krasnoyarsk and Georgia premised their 2015 skits on knowledge of DAL's success, the show's producers presumed that most viewers would know who team Lukas was and that they had taken third place the previous year.

Jokes told during the season's opening performance also shored up the internal League of Laughter community. The Bible Team from Kamenskoe, whose jokes all revolved around religious topics, poked gentle fun at the judging panel. They continued, "In League of Laughter, there are trainers for everyone. We don't know if it is coincidence or not, but the wages of sin are death for everyone, as well."<sup>106</sup> Knowledge of teams' successes (and failures) were presupposed as early as the semifinals of the very first season. In the 2015 second semifinal, a team from Lutsk quipped, "How do you say 'loser' in Lutsk?" They then rattled off the teams they hoped to defeat that season. "Well, the Generals. And Castle Liubert, Manhattan, Lukas."<sup>107</sup>

Pop cultural references in League of Laughter also center on Ukrainian artists. For instance, in the 2015 semifinals each team invited a celebrity to compete with them. Their guests included three Ukrainian singers (Nastya Kamenskykh, Pavlo Zibrov, and Vitaly Kozlovsky), two actors (Yevgeniy Koshevoy and Olga Freimut), and a KVNshik (Garik Bircha). They are well known within Ukraine, but get little air time outside of it. The unabashedly nationalistic themes of those semifinal

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<sup>106</sup> "В Лиге Смеха, всем наставников. Мы не знаем, совпадение или нет, но смерть на грехов также всем."

<sup>107</sup> League of Laughter 2015, Second Semifinals. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ICv2TUZjH4&t=1s&list=PLP8qlV2aurYoPUnN7p5Tl\\_-DV\\_\\_nVeTuJ&index=7](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ICv2TUZjH4&t=1s&list=PLP8qlV2aurYoPUnN7p5Tl_-DV__nVeTuJ&index=7) (accessed March 11, 2017).

matches catered to a Ukrainian audience, as well. The theme of the first semifinal was, “The history of Kiev.” The theme of the second match was “Literary authors born in Ukraine.” Skits and musical numbers had to address those topics.<sup>108</sup> KVN Top League themes seem milquetoast in comparison. Themes in 2015 included “friendship,” “faster” and “earth and sky.” Skits in Top League are not supposed to cause offense. Russians watching League of Laughter in 2015 may well have taken offense. If watching, though, they were interpellated as eavesdroppers rather than an intended audience. That said, themes in League of Laughter’s third season quarterfinals struck a more neutral note, as competitors wrote skits about “civilizations” and “inventors.”

To be funny, though, jokes have to be, as Andrei Chivurin noted, “relevant and unexpected.”<sup>109</sup> Everyone can relate to a joke about a stereotypical elderly man in the grocery store. These kinds of jokes are often funnier than, say, another joke about Mikhail Saakashvili, one-time governor of Odessa, because they seem relevant to audience members’ lives. But for many Ukrainians, the war also figures as relevant. Some of the students playing in Odessa leagues are themselves refugees from the disputed territories in Donetsk and Lugansk. Just as students write about partners, jobs, and parents, they write about conflict and its fallout. In one representative, if not terribly politically correct joke, a team member from Kiev announced an overweight teammate’s entrance on stage with, “Look, look. Crimea returned to us on foot!”<sup>110</sup>

While the televised League of Laughter competitions reach the widest audiences, they are not the most important aspects of team comedy in Ukraine. League of Laughter culls almost all of its participants from student KVN leagues. Odessa alone hosts four KVN leagues: the Odessa National University League, the Odessa National Polytechnic University League, the Mayor’s Cup, the School League, and the KVN League of Beit Grand, the Jewish Cultural Center in Odessa.

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<sup>108</sup> League of Laughter 2015, First and Second Semifinals. [https://www.youtube.com/watchv=E3V6MDE5nLg&index=6&list=PLP8qIV2aurYoPUnN7p5Tl\\_-DV\\_\\_nVeTuJ](https://www.youtube.com/watchv=E3V6MDE5nLg&index=6&list=PLP8qIV2aurYoPUnN7p5Tl_-DV__nVeTuJ) and [https://www.youtube.com/watchv=2ICv2TUZjH4&t=1s&list=PLP8qIV2aurYoPUnN7p5Tl\\_-DV\\_\\_nVeTuJ&index=7](https://www.youtube.com/watchv=2ICv2TUZjH4&t=1s&list=PLP8qIV2aurYoPUnN7p5Tl_-DV__nVeTuJ&index=7) (accessed on March 11, 2017).

<sup>109</sup> “*aktual'naia i neozhidannaia.*” Andrei Chivurin, editing session, February 7, 2017.

<sup>110</sup> “Смотрите, смотрите. Пешком сам Крым вернулся!”



Students in these leagues play with KVN's scoring system and without battles. They often enter the stage to the KVN theme song, written in 1986. The form of these games maintains continuity with KVN tradition and joke forms rather than the newer League of Laughter format—for the most part. At the Odessa Mayor's Cup for Schoolchildren final on March 29, 2017, for instance, three of the six teams tied, according to the final points tally. The judges decided to arrange a battle to break the tie. In this case, the battle was *razminka* with questions from the judges.

League of Laughter has also had an effect on what kinds of skits people write in Ukraine, even in KVN competitions. League of Laughter editors stress continuity of story within a given skit. In KVN's traditional "homework" segment, an inexperienced team might present two skits and three miniatures within three minutes, all of which are completely thematically unrelated. Novice teams, in particular, think only about their time limit and the number of laughs they can get within that time limit. League of Laughter editors, at least the ones I met in Odessa and Rivne, instead instructed competitors to write numbers that had logical beginnings, middles, and ends. This didn't mean miniatures had no place, but they had to make thematic sense.

Editors in Ukraine, as in most local leagues, have a lot of power to regulate content. Teams perform their skits for editors ahead of time, then editors coach them on what to include, what to take out, and how to improve their jokes. "Your punchlines need to come a little more quickly," Pavel Demchenko, the Odessa Tales team member mentioned above, told a group of sophomores. "Everything needs to be more distinct (*chetko*)." Most university leagues are run by former KVNshiki, like Demchenko. In Odessa these leagues rarely have political sponsors. Thus, restrictions on content fall mainly to the editors, who make their decisions along the lines of funny and not funny rather than appropriate and inappropriate. The KVN League of the Jewish Cultural Center in Odessa, though, operates differently. The Center has clear rules about what participants can discuss. "We do not touch political themes here," said Andrei, the main editor of the Center's KVN league during a pre-season meeting in February 2017. "Political news—sure, go ahead. But

not unpleasant situations.”<sup>111</sup> KVN, in this league, is supposed to leave audiences feeling cheerful, not encourage them to dwell on conflicts in Ukraine and Israel. In a March 2017 octofinal match, though, one of the teams violated this advice. They presented some material that the editors had not approved in rehearsals—and it was about the Russia-Ukraine conflict. After the competition, when the teams assembled for feedback, the league director told them. “Guys, you cannot joke about things like that. It isn’t even that I don't want you to. It is that we have sponsors. If our sponsors saw a recording of tonight's performances, it’s possible that we would not even have a league.”

KVN tradition gets constituted a bit differently, then, at the Center. Andrei told participants that material on Jewish themes was more than welcome; the audience would appreciate it. Non-Jewish teams acknowledged that they were out of their depth in making these kinds of jokes. They tended to make tongue-in-cheek references to not eating pork, for example. “There! A joke on a Jewish theme!” one even exclaimed during the March 2017 octofinals. The emcee at that match made a running gag about the Jewish holiday Purim, which fell on the same day as the octofinals. After reading a long, fairly dry text about the history of the holiday, he joked, “We're going to take an intermission now, but some of you should stay. I am going to read more about Purim. Jews, for you, it’s required!”

The Center interpellated its audience as a maximal in-crowd: not just Ukrainian, not just residents of Odessa, but Jewish residents of Odessa. Or, as guests of the Center, friends of the Jewish residents of Odessa. The suggestion to write about Jewish topics was a gesture towards community-creation, but not all participants or audience members were truly in on the jokes. Ukrainian language use can often have the same effect. In Western Ukraine, Ukrainian is the norm. Odessa residents, though, primarily speak Russian, even though Ukrainian is now the only official language in Ukraine. Nearly all official documents and written communication is in Ukrainian.

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<sup>111</sup> “Политические события мы не трогаем. Политические новости—пожалуйста. Но неприятные ситуации мы не трогаем.”

This caused some Odessa residents I encountered some difficulties. For instance, a woman working at a service counter needed help filling out an application form. She turned to her co-worker, in Russian, to ask the names of months in Ukrainian:

*"Listopad—is that October?"*  
*"No, listopad is November," he replied.*  
*"How do you say October, then?"*  
*"Zhovten"*

Another representative example came from a time I went to fill out a housing registration form at Odessa National University. Tatiana, the university administrator who had helped arrange my Ukrainian visa, introduced me to the dormitory staff in Russian. The woman handling payment said, half in Russian, half in Ukrainian, "Don't speak to me in Russian! We're in Ukraine, speak Ukrainian!" She said this jokingly, but then proceeded to speak to me exclusively in Ukrainian. Tatiana left me to negotiate the housing paperwork with the three women there on my own. This went fine until they hit a snag on the form. No one knew how to spell "four-hundred" in Ukrainian. They tried out several variations but no one was really sure. They decided to phone someone in the philology department, who answered promptly, and they jotted down the figure. Until very recently, it seems, no one in the office needed to know how to spell numbers in Ukrainian. The interaction struck me, too, because the women called a friend when an American (or perhaps even a younger Ukrainian) would have just Googled the answer.

Thus, if the state thinks everyone should speak Ukrainian, not everyone does. A team from the Western Ukrainian town of Lviv, which is near the Polish border, even ribbed its Odessa audience at the League of Laughter festival for not speaking Ukrainian, beginning their act with the quip, "You might be wondering why a team from Lviv is speaking Russian. Well, we just thought that you in Odessa probably wouldn't understand Polish." Many League of Laughter teams, even and especially those that compete on the televised level, speak Russian. A team from Lutsk ended their skit in both languages during 2015, with a touch of irony. As much as they might have liked to live in a "single, big, united" Ukraine, cross-border fighting disproves it. Viewers were left to

wonder if they were sincere when they said it did not matter what language someone speaks:

In Russian:               **Не важно, играешь ты в Лиге Смеха**  
*Ne vazhno, igraesh' ty v Lige Smekha*  
It's not important whether you play in League of Laughter

In Ukrainian:           **Чи в Лізі Сміху**  
*Chi v Ligi Smikhu*  
Or in League of Laughter

In Russian:               **Важно что, то мы живем в одной, большой, единой стране**  
*Vazhno chto, to my zhivem v odnoi, bol'shoi, edinoi strane*  
What's important is that we live in one, big, united country

Speaking Ukrainian is presented as normative in League of Laughter, even if not everyone in the audience has mastered it. In practice, it is normative but marked. Russian signaled a neutral political stance in Odessa. Ukrainian indexed a marked affiliation with the Ukrainian state. Nonetheless, when teams spoke Ukrainian, or judges responded in Ukrainian, the assumption was that they would be understood—or should be. On one two-man Odessa team, one teammate, Yuri, spoke Russian and the other, Andrei, spoke Ukrainian. This underlying contrast drove their skits. The other main image the team, called “Walked/Rode (*Poshlo/Poekhhalo*),” played with is the fact that Yuri, a “sit-down comic,” has been in a wheelchair since a 2015 car accident.



**Yuri and Andrei made their return to KVN for the first time after Yuri's accident at the 2017 Odessa Mayors Cup. Mayor's Cup First Quarterfinals, May 21, 2017. Photo by author.**

Naum Barulya said, "It's all the same to me, whether teams speak Russian or Ukrainian. I understand both. But when we hear a team speaking beautiful, contemporary Ukrainian, not Ukrainian from 200 years ago, it changes the way they think about the language" (interview with author February 10, 2017). League of Laughter is a game whose KVN mentors grew up in a Russian-dominated activity whose competitive centers were located in Russia. During editing sessions for regional League of Laughter games in Rivne, for instance, in Western Ukraine, most teams spoke Ukrainian, but all three of the editors replied to them in Russian. Everyone understood each other. Everyone spoke their language of preference. The state is still fairly young, independent from the USSR for less than thirty years. The leagues mirror Ukraine as a whole as it finds its linguistic feet.

### *Representations of war*

Outside of the Jewish Community Center KVN league and the league for primary school students, the conflict with Russia is common, unsurprising fodder for jokes in Odessan KVN. Top League references tend towards the oblique, but do occur. For instance, in a 2015 Top League match, a team from Kyrgyzstan proposed a revision to the Russian reality show *Swimming with Dolphins*. "We have a show that all of Russia is guaranteed to watch," he said. "It's called *Swimming with Sharks*. And we already have a list of stars to put on it." The joke refers to fourteen Russians whose work Ukraine had recently banned. The joke could be made on Russian television because it was a gentle inversion. Suggesting a list of Ukrainians that could swim with sharks would sound overly harsh. Wishing Ukrainians harm strikes no one as funny. But by playing the character of a bumbling, provincial Kyrgyz fool, he strategically misunderstood "the enemy," and advised the director of Russia's Channel One, who sat on the match's jury, to put Russians in the shark tank. Another joke from the Moscow team "Armenians" depicted an Armenian immigrant's love for Russia, portrayed by a curvy blonde. The Armenian waxed romantic, but added, "You know Russia, you look a lot different in your pictures." Turning away shyly, Russia confessed that

she'd put on a little weight since 2014.<sup>112</sup>

Some actual Crimea residents, a Simferopol' team (*Poluostrov*), told an edgier joke in a 2019 competition. This competition was not televised, though it was held in a major Moscow league. Simferopol' stands a good chance at competing in Top League in the future, however, so the joke could end up on TV yet. Their spring 2019 joke ran:<sup>113</sup>

**Narrator:** Crimea gets drunk and calls his ex.

**Crimea:** (on phone) Hello?  
Ottoman Empire?  
Whatcha doin'?  
What do you mean you broke up?

Just as for teams in Ukraine, the war emerges as real and relevant for Simferopol' residents. Actual fighting is far from Irkutsk doorsteps, so few teams write jokes about the conflict. Ukrainians and Crimeans represent the war, and its aftermath—complete with poverty, corruption, and displacement—differently. A team from Donetsk competed at the 2017 League of Laughter festival, for example, even though its members all lived in different cities (Odessa, Kiev, Kharkiv). They ended their first round skit by thanking the League of Laughter festival “for the opportunity to get together again.”<sup>114</sup>

During the second round of the League of Laughter festival, a Lugansk team similarly highlighted their town's contested status. Separatists have controlled the territory since 2014. They team observed, “We've been coming to the League of Laughter festival for three years. And we haven't made it into the season. I get the feeling that no one wants Lugansk.” His teammate responded, “Ah, no. That is the wrong impression.” Too many people, of course, want Lugansk. Team Lukas, mentioned above, went on to dramatize the friction many now feel with family members in Russia. “A lot of Ukrainians probably have relatives in Russia. And our team thinks

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<sup>112</sup> KVN Premier League Second Semifinals, Freestyle with Music, April 26, 2019.

<sup>113</sup> Central League of Moscow and the Moscow Suburbs Third Octofinals, April 14, 2019, Moscow, Russia.

<sup>114</sup> League of Laughter festival, Odessa, Ukraine, February 8, 2017.

every family has had this kind of conversation on Skype.”<sup>115</sup> After agreeing not to talk about politics—they immediately began talking about politics. “What did you do last summer?” asked the Ukrainian. “Well we vacationed over at our place. Crimea,” replied his Russian relative. The two started shouting, the Ukrainian insulted Putin, and it ended with them singing their respective national anthems. In comedy, Ukrainians are still fighting for Crimea.

Ukrainian teams discuss the conflict. Russian teams do so rarely. In the symbolic battlefield for still-disputed territories like Donetsk and Lugansk, Ukrainians win by default. But they have been bleeding territory in the military theater since 2014. Team Lugansk claiming, “Lugansk—Ukraine” gets a rousing response from audiences. It is a hollow victory, though, when rebels run the government.

#### *Soviet references*

In the first 2015 Top League quarterfinals round, after playing part of a song by Bulat Okudzhava (a Soviet-era bard originally from Georgia), a Georgian team member said, “We’re very glad that our compatriot wrote these golden words. But he is not just our compatriot, but our shared compatriot.” He thus stressed a pan-Soviet community that exists despite nation state divisions. That a Georgian team said this is significant since it went to war with Russia in 2008. Okudzhava, a widely-loved, mildly subversive, and at any rate non-state performer is an ideal symbolic catalyst for recalling shared Soviet experience, but not the Soviet regime. Just as newspapers allowed people from different villages to suddenly imagine themselves as part of a nation, Top League KVN, as an international yet Soviet-rooted institution, creates a virtual, mass mediated post-Soviet community of imaginers. In League of Laughter, in contrast, KVNshiki put Soviet references to different purposes. They cite Soviet films, especially children's cartoons, because everyone in the audience shares knowledge of them. When skits depict the Soviet past

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<sup>115</sup> Subtitled clip available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=So8Y6oxJOZw>. From League of Laughter 2016, Second Festival, Part One. March 5, 2016, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ctOhTmgC35I&list=PLP8qlV2aurYqdhyXW9ErqUW9Fw9F\\_mheM&index=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ctOhTmgC35I&list=PLP8qlV2aurYqdhyXW9ErqUW9Fw9F_mheM&index=1) (accessed June 2, 2016).

itself, it is with mild mockery rather than nostalgia. During the 2017 League of Laughter festival, for example, a team from Vinnytsia wrote a sketch about team of Soviet engineers who try to remedy the sex gap (rather than missile gap) between the U.S. and USSR. They gather around a table, poring over blueprints. When someone knocks at the door they say, “Not now, Petrovich. We’re busy with sex.” The sketch mocks a provincial Soviet attitude towards sexuality, one that, the team implies, no longer meshes with Ukrainian reality.

The team Minipunks also poked fun at their parents’ generation. They brought some middle-aged actors on stage, introducing them as “Minipunks born in the 1950s.” In their skit, someone tries to find sausages in a Soviet store where the Beatle's “Yesterday” is playing.

Customer:	Hello, do you have sausages?
Merchant:	This is a Soviet store. We have a fantastic selection of sausages.
Customer:	Do you have Doktorskaya sausages?
Merchant:	No.
Customer:	Do you have salami?
Merchant:	No.
Customer:	Do you have smoked sausages?
Merchant:	Also no.
Customer:	You said you had a fantastic selection of sausages!
Merchant:	What, picking out sausages while listening to the Beatles isn't fantastic? <sup>116</sup>

There is an element of nostalgic indulgence in this skit. Parents and grandparents in the audience can reminisce about small victories, in the 1960s and 1970s, obtaining bootleg Beatles albums. Overall, though, the Minipunks cast the Soviet past as a joke. KVN’s Top League is an international forum, where representation of Self (e.g. Kyrgyz) and Other (Russian) is always done with reference to a (post-) Soviet frame. That is what unites Top League teams. Ukrainian KVNshiki are carving out a different discursive space. When the Soviet past makes an appearance, it is as the past, not as a framework—political, ideological, or moral—that organizes the present.

## Publics

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<sup>116</sup> Subtitled clip available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m7b58Muyt\\_w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m7b58Muyt_w). From League of Laughter 2017, Third Festival in Odessa, Part 2. February 24, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BqH7TVj8BRc> (accessed March 11, 2017).



*"[Recordings'] essential material existence is in the reproducible notations, which are then radically dependent on the cultural system in which the notations are current..."*

—Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*

When Ukrainians could not compete in KVN Top League they immediately created a new one to take its place. KVN-style comedy fills an important cultural and televisual niche, and fans come to know the rhythm of the season. After the 2014 Top League final, judge Valdis Pelss said, "I don't want to bring up problems, but a member of the jury must be objective. And I wanted to mention a problem. Until 2015 there will be no KVN. How are we going to winter this long month and a half?"

Like Pelss, people who watch KVN get used to following teams' progress. There is drama, tension, improvement (and always laughter). Ukrainians can still watch KVN on YouTube. But for the first time, their teams are not represented in the hegemonic international forum. Russians and Ukrainians alike feel the omission.

People on both sides of the border also follow each other's seasons on YouTube, vKontakte (a Russian social networking site similar to Facebook), and Telegram (a social media news and messaging platform). Ukrainian teams regularly post links in social media groups as Top League broadcasts become available on YouTube. During the 2017 Sochi festival, Ukrainian social media sites paid special attention to "Ukrainian" teams who attended. All sixteen teams came from Crimea and separatist-controlled areas in the east. They identified as Russian, not Ukrainian. An Odessa KVN community re-posted commentary from Amik's website (kvn.ru) about all the (former) Ukrainian teams' status in the tournament. Commentary for the team Yura, Forgive Me from Sevastopol serves as a typical example: "A joke about the Zenith Bridge. Weak, according to audience reaction. Unfortunately, the situation has not changed. Rating: 2 stars." Updates about the (former) Ukrainian teams got posted on Ukrainian pages as scores went online on Amik's website, much like live coverage of sports events.

The same Odessa vKontakte group re-posted a call for donations for a member of a

Russian KVN team (Piatigorsk) who was fighting cancer in the spring of 2017. The original post, on Amik's vKontakte page, said, "Let's show that taking care of every member of our big KVN family is not just a bunch of empty words." Ukrainian KVNshiki do, then, still consider themselves part of the international KVN community. They just do not perform for that audience anymore.

On the whole, though, Ukrainian teams use platforms like vKontakte and Instagram to build interdiscursive relationships with other Ukrainian teams and fans. Memes and quizzes presuppose, largely, knowledge of League of Laughter, which shores up an imagined community of domestic KVNshiki. A weekly vKontakte quiz called "Guess the Liga Smeshnik" posted pictures of contestants when they were children and asks readers to guess which League of Laughter competitor it was. Other quizzes polled respondents on the best trainers, predictions about which teams would win the season, and which teams people thought got short shrift in scoring. Memes featuring favorite competitors circulated, too. Sometimes, the official League of Laughter vKontakte page posted pictures and asked readers to come up with funny captions. These drew on knowledge of games, judges, and individual characters within League of Laughter.

However, vKontakte, the preferred social networking platform of Ukrainian youth in 2017, got banned during my fieldwork because a Russian company owns it. There were concerns that Russians could use the site to collect location and other compromising information about Ukrainians.

I was with the Odessa team Friend Zone in Rivne, Ukraine when news of the vKontakte ban started to filter through. Fokin, one of the teammates, came in from the balcony of the apartment where the team was rehearsing and said, "Vova said he heard something about it, but nothing is for certain." Yana immediately began downloading a Virtual Private Network (VPN) app on her iPhone. This would allow her to choose a foreign IP address and bypass content restrictions in Ukraine. "What's a VPN?" asked Nastya as Yana complained that her download was not installing. "It's what's going to let me use vKontakte when you can't!" Yana teased.

The next day, May 16, 2017, President Poroshenko did, in fact, order cell and internet providers to block access to vKontakte (sixteen million Ukrainian users), as well as the Russian search engine Yandex (eleven million Ukrainian users) and the mail.ru email domain (twenty-five million Ukrainian users). Students demonstrated, holding signs that said, “Don't change vKontakte.” And they also responded with humor. KVNshiki at the Odessa Mayor's Cup on May 21st used the stage to criticize the new policy and to gently mock its ineffectiveness. One team in Odessa, Ukraine replaced the saying that marks the beginning of KVN seasons, “We are starting KVN” (“*My otkryvaem KVN*”), with “We are starting VPN” (“*My otkryvaem VPN*”). Another team at the Mayor's Cup mimed stealthily sneaking up to the Russian border, placing first a toe, then an entire foot on the other side. As he leaned over the invisible boundary, a volley of vKontakte's familiar “new message” pings filled the auditorium. It was a raw subject that day, when thousands of young people had signed a petition asking the president to unblock vKontakte (by mid-June over 25,000 Ukrainians had signed). It was also topical, though. And because the joke mocked President Poroshenko's official policy during a time of war, the edgy punchline caught the audience a little off-guard.

Just as Ukrainians keep up with Russian KVN on YouTube, many Russians watch League of Laughter on the internet, as well. When talking to Anton, the main editor of Irkutsk's Baikal League in 2016, about my upcoming research in Odessa, he told me that some KVNshiki in Irkutsk considered League of Laughter to be better than KVN because it included so many improvisational tasks. “A lot of people here watch [League of Laughter] online.” A Russian website that publishes KVN commentary likewise suggested, “If you would like to watch funny KVN—go watch League of Laughter [instead].”<sup>117</sup> Anton himself even watched other Ukrainian comedy programs, including Crack Up the Comic (*Rassmeshi Komika*). “It used to be on our Channel 2, but they took it off,” he said. “There is a lot of stuff on YouTube” (interview with author, December 18, 2016).

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<sup>117</sup> “A Dark Look at the Third Quarters of Top League” [*“Temniy Vzliad na Tretyu Chetvert' Vyshki”*] Available at <https://voronlinch.ru/tag?id=44> (accessed October 15, 2019).

Russians are not the imagined audiences for League of Laughter. But they are part of its public. Ukrainians are not participants in international leagues. But they remain part of the community. Every day the vKontakte group “I love KVN” posts some of the best skits from the past several years. On March 2, 2017 they posted one of Odessa Tales’ 2013 performances. The Ukrainians, if absent, have not been erased.

### **Conclusion: meeting points**

Aleksei pulled a thermos, plastic cups, and a baggie of pre-sliced lemons out of his backpack. Denis pointed to his baggie. “That’s—that’s age. That is age,” he said, both praising Aleksei’s organizational skills and reminding him that twentysomethings wouldn’t bother. Denis and Aleksei make up 2/3 of the team Middle-Aged Humor, whom I first met in Odessa at the 2017 League of Laughter festival. They are, in fact, middle-aged. And as Russians competing in Ukraine, they drew a lot of attention from the Odessa audiences—and applause. When they ended a spring 2017 octofinals performance with a hug for their Western Ukrainian trainer, the crowd clapped for over a minute.

On this occasion, though, in May 2019, Aleksei poured me some cognac from his thermos outside the House of KVN in Moscow as we waited for a regional competition to begin. I asked the team how their second season in League of Laughter had gone, and whether they planned to keep competing in Ukraine.

“Are you going to go to the festival this year?”

“Maybe,” they said. If they could come up with enough material before the February festival in Odessa they would go. If not, they wouldn’t. The novelty of just being Russians competing in Ukraine had worn off and they sought a new angle.

The conversation then turned to kids, vacations, and the Russian education system. “You know,” Aleksei told me. “I never thought, back then in high school, that I would be sitting and

drinking with an American spy.” I bit into my lemon.

Aleksei and Denis had come to support a team from the Russian State Social University in the Moscow and Moscow Region second quarterfinals match. But the next day an Odessan actually competed alongside a Russian team, Manhole Cover (*Kryshka Liuka*), in the third quarterfinal. Alexander Sas, a Ukrainian professional author, wrote for the Russian team and took the stage with them for the game. No Ukrainian teams (outside of the Crimea and disputed eastern territories) compete in Russia right now. But Ukrainian authors like Sas can still sell their material on the Russian KVN market, one that is, of course, much larger and more lucrative than the Ukrainian one. Whether Sas joined Manhole Cover as a diplomatic gesture, an advertising manoeuvre, or out of nostalgia for the KVN stage is difficult to say. But both he and Middle-Aged humor demonstrate where the trajectories of Russian KVN and Ukrainian League of Laughter intersect.



**Alexander Sas (center) and Manhole Cover (left) at the Central League of Moscow and the Moscow Regions Third Quarterfinal, May 18, 2019. Photo by author.**

## Chapter Four: Stances

Arguing that Soviet morality has a life outside of the Soviet Union is a contentious claim. But it is one I make here, drawing on data from backstage rehearsal and feedback sessions to illustrate how KVNshiki take stances about the social function of humor, appropriateness, and comedic quality. Through these interactions, negotiations structured by KVN norms, KVN as an institution reproduces Soviet-marked values. As in any institution, KVN has evolved as variation among individuals gave rise to new trends: chain shifts in the current of the ordinary. Though KVN games today feature stereo systems instead of on-stage pianos, jokes instead of riddles, and jabs at presidents instead of premiers, many of its core principles, particularly those related to KVN's social function, continue to regiment the operation of the game.

I begin with a discussion of stance-taking between a Russian team and a Ukrainian editor before a game in Odessa, Ukraine. Then, by examining moments of conflict and censure, I detail how KVN participants orient towards the values of joyfulness, kulturnost, and work for the collective good through moral stancetaking.

### Taking stances

*"You can't say things like that"*

The scene: three Muscovites take a train to a town in western Ukraine (Khmelnitskyi), a place known for its historical resentment towards the Soviets and, now, the Russians with whom Ukrainians are at war. Denis, Aleksei, and Roman step onto the platform. "Okay," says Denis. "One...two...three...Ha! And they said we wouldn't survive three seconds here!" The joke, despite its simplicity, relied on three sets of contrasts. First, there is the disjunction between people's general warnings and Denis' too literal interpretation—he counts off exactly three seconds, rebutting the letter if not the spirit of naysayer claims. The second contrast is between Denis'

proclamation of safety and the nastiness the audience predicts will soon follow. Muscovites might not die in Khmelnytskyi, but they won't make a lot of friends either. The third contrast invokes the performance space itself, a theater in Odessa, Ukraine during the May 2017 Odessa League of Laughter octofinals. The team members on stage, Denis, Aleksei, and Roman, were, in fact, KVN competitors from Moscow. (They were the only Russian team competing in any Ukrainian league that season.) So the skit hyperbolized their actual situation. They were Russian “enemies” visiting a place where no one wanted them.

Yet they got a warm welcome, even so, as the audience applauding them well knew. Unlike western Ukraine, Odessa is a Russian-speaking city; feelings about the Russian Empire, the Soviets, and the Russian Federation tend to be milder. One man in Odessa even told me, “I don’t think the sanctions [against Russia] accomplish anything. They just hurt everyone. They should remove those.” In contrast, a young man near Lviv, in the west, railed against Ukrainians who spoke Russian instead of Ukrainian. “How can they speak the language of the imperialists!” he exclaimed. There is real animosity between Russia and Ukraine right now. But there are also perduring ties of culture, kinship, and shared history.

People outside of Odessa, of course, recognize these commonalities too. The Ukrainian League of Laughter trainer who played with the Muscovites that season was from Khmelnytskyi. Both trainer and team used the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, often, as a foil for displaying bonds between the two countries. In one skit, the Russians roll into town stereotypically searching for *shchi* (Russian cabbage soup) and vodka. But Ukrainians drink their share of vodka, too, and can see themselves in these characters. The trainer spoke to the team in Ukrainian. They answered him in Russian. He called them imperialists (*vatniki*). They called him a Nazi sympathizer (*Banderovets*). There was contrast, conflict, and the pairing generated jokes that hit like aces. All in good fun. The audience applauded long after their performances, tears pricking the corners of many people's eyes (including my own). When the team, “Middle Aged Humor” (*Iumor srednogo*

*vozrosta*), competed at the main League of Laughter festival in February 2017, chief editor Andrei Chivurin told them, “Thank you for your daring. I am glad that you are with us.”<sup>118</sup>

Middle Aged Humor did not make it into the top, Ukraine-wide League of Laughter season in February. But they did advance to the octofinals in Odessa’s regional League of Laughter competition in the spring. They, along with sixteen other teams from across Ukraine—Kiev, Lviv, Rivne, and Odessa—pored over material for eight days before the May 2017 game, writing a lot, rehearsing a lot, and sleeping very little. At eleven or twelve each morning, teams began filing into ONU’s “Gentlemen Room,” the room where the Odessa Gentlemen rehearsed in the 1980s, current ONU teams practice today, and where, in their capacities as both ONU league editors and Odessa League of Laughter editors, Pavel Demchenko and his mentor, Viktoria Pis’michenko, based editing sessions. They, along with Vladimir Borisov, a League of Laughter representative from Kiev, sat on a couch near the second-floor room’s windows, faces a little stern, taking notes on legal pads as teams pitched their intended performances. They are all former KVN Top League competitors. Pis’michenko played during the 1993-1995 seasons, Borisov from 2010-2013, and Demchenko from 2013-2014. The editors met with each of the sixteen teams for thirty to forty-five minutes on each day leading up to the on-stage rehearsal (*progon*). Sometimes teams would come back later in the evening to go over new revisions, too, so the editors rarely left before ten or eleven o’clock in the evening. Demchenko told teams, “You can email me stuff until 2:00 a.m. tonight, and I will go over it.”

Just like editors for print publications, KVN’s editors make recommendations about what bits to cut out entirely, what jokes to re-write, and where to add material. The term “editor” is especially appropriate since these leaders pay such close attention to a team’s language; they suggest revisions to the phrasing, tempo, and wording of jokes. Teams usually meet for at least two editing sessions before any performance. Some leagues require teams to meet with editors every

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<sup>118</sup> “Спасибо за смелость. Спасибо, что вы вместе с нами.”



day for the eight days leading up to a show—resulting in marathon fifteen-hour days for the editors themselves.



**Editors Pis'michenko, Demchenko, and Borisov (seated) during an Odessa League of Laughter editing session with the team Liapas from Ternopil, Ukraine. Photo by author.**

However, if a newspaper editor decides they do not want to print a sentence, they own the printing presses and get the final say. KVN and League of Laughter performances are live. Teams, therefore, do occasionally buck editors' mandates and tell forbidden jokes anyway. It happens rarely, though, in part because teams respect the editors, in part because they would like to get invited back, and in part because the editors are professionals who truly can help teams improve their jokes, stage presence, and timing. Just as college football players need good coaches to succeed, even talented KVNshiki need feedback from experienced comedy professionals if they hope for long-term success. If they annoy the editors they will not get help from them in the future. In extreme cases, editors can ask judges to subtract points from teams in upcoming games if they perform off-limits jokes.

Editors and judges may also lambaste intractable teams in debriefing sessions, which occur immediately after each game. In these, the league's editors and the game's judges give the teams

honest—generally brutally honest, often obscenity-laced—opinions about what went well during the performance and where teams could improve. Together, editing sessions and debriefings offer insight into the regulation of KVN norms, the teaching of tradition, and the reinforcement of moral orientations. Editors take stances towards certain Soviet-marked ideals through the material they encourage and the type of atmosphere they seek to build in games.

Experienced comedians know that eliciting laughter from strangers requires wit, good timing, and practiced delivery. Live audiences rarely give pity laughter. And viewers at home turn off boring shows. So editors already spend a lot of time honing timing, syntax, joke content, punchline density, and overall theme. Demchenko, Pis'michenko, and Borisov, though, also had to walk a fine line between helping Middle Aged Humor write relevant jokes about the war in Ukraine and offending people. The Russian team and the Ukrainian editors did not always agree about what constituted an offensive joke. In one editing session, the Muscovites pitched a piece about Ukraine's recent acceptance into the European Union's visa-free zone. They joked that now there would be incentive to get the roads fixed. Demchenko, told them, "From *you*—no...About the roads. I don't want you to point out inadequacies in my country." He said the joke could possibly work if their trainer, who was from Khmelnytsky, said the line instead. In the end they omitted it without further comment.

Another joke, however, spurred much more debate. Middle Aged Humor thought it was funny. Demchenko said it was "terrible." At base, the conflict over including the joke revolved around a clash of values. The team considered rattling off clever zingers to be their most important task. Demchenko, though, told them that their mission in Odessa, ultimately, was a diplomatic one. For him, maintaining an overall friendly atmosphere in the performance space took precedence over a witticism, even if the audience appreciated it.

Some background information is needed in order to understand why the joke raised hackles. Russia has long maintained that its military is not involved in the conflict in eastern Ukraine and

does not support the pro-Russian rebels there with either personnel or equipment. However, several Russian soldiers who were officially deployed to the Russian city of Rostov, near the Ukrainian border, were suspected of fighting on the Ukrainian side (Yaffa 2015). Russian soldiers had also been routinely captured on the Ukrainian side of the border, but the Russian government maintained that any personnel found had either “accidentally wandered into Ukrainian territory” or had gone to fight with the rebels out of personal conviction (Bertrand 2015). The Kremlin insists that Ukraine's war is a civil one; Ukraine's leaders accuse Russia of fueling fighting in the east. Given its relevance to a Ukrainian audience, Middle Aged Humor decided to cite this controversy in one of their jokes. Just like the soldiers, they would say they had “accidentally” found themselves in Ukraine.



**Middle-Aged Humor in an editing session on April 22, 2017. Photo by author.**

In the lines below, Roman and Denis are Russian members of the team, Kostya is a Ukrainian competitor who is helping them write jokes for a Ukrainian audience, and Demchenko is advising them in the capacity of official league editor. The joke, about how to explain how they ended up at

a train station in Khmelnytsky, ran like this:<sup>119</sup>

(1)

- |   |                |  |
|---|----------------|--|
| 1 | <b>Aleksei</b> | <i>nu, khorosho, my zhe ruskie</i><br><b>well, okay, we're Russians, after all</b>   |
| 2 |                | <i>skazhem, chto byli v Rostove</i><br><b>we'll tell them that we were in Rostov</b> |
| 3 |                | <i>guliali k granitse</i><br><b>we were walking near the border</b>                  |
| 4 |                | <i>i sluchaino zabludilis'</i><br><b>and we accidentally got lost<sup>120</sup></b>  |

The punchline presupposed an audience that would immediately grasp the parallel between Russian soldiers “accidentally” finding themselves in Ukraine and Middle Aged Humor, who would seem to have no business in Khmelnytsky. Demchenko did not like the joke—at all. He told the team that it was “really bad,” not bothering to spell out why he thought so. Middle Aged Humor, in contrast, knew that any reference to Russian soldiers in Ukraine would be controversial. That is why they considered the quip effective. As Chivurin put it, punchlines only get laughs if they are *relevant* and *unexpected*. The Rostov joke achieved both. It was relevant because it indexed the root of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and unexpected because no one was prepared for Russian competitors to contradict the Kremlin party line and imply that Russian soldiers in Ukraine were hardly “lost.” Demchenko told them to cut the joke, saying,

(2)

- |   |                  |   |
|---|------------------|---|
| 1 | <b>Demchenko</b> | <i>kak vstretili, ne nado</i><br><b>when you meet, not that one</b> |
| 2 |                  | <i>eto uzhasno</i><br><b>that's horrible</b>                        |
| 3 | <b>Kostya</b>    | <i>kakaia?</i><br><b>which one?</b>                                 |

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<sup>119</sup> Editing session, League of Laughter octofinals, May 30, 2017. Audiorecording.

<sup>120</sup> Editing session, May 30, 2017, Odessa, Ukraine.

4	Demchenko	<i>nu, mesto kak vstretili</i> <b>well, the place [in the script] where you meet</b>
5		<i>eto plokho</i> <b>that is bad</b>
6		<i>nu tak plokho</i> <b>just really bad</b>
7	Kostya	<i>chto kak vstretili?</i> <b>what about where they meet?</b>
8	Demchenko	<i>nel'zia takogo govorit'</i> <b>you can't say things like that</b>

Demchenko told them the topic was off limits (“you can't say things like that”). This was, in fact, the second time during this editing session that Pavel had told them not to include the joke about Rostov. About four minutes earlier, as they were discussing all the team's jokes in order, Pavel said, “Not the first one. You don't *need* to say things like that, obviously...that's not a joke.”<sup>121</sup> The first time Aleksei did not argue, responding only with another off-the-cuff joke: “So we're leaving without Rostov” (“*My ostavim bez Rostova*”). In this context, the phrase implied that the Russians were retreating without *taking* Rostov, in a military sense. The pun played off of both the battle overtones of the Rostov joke and the team's decision to back down from using it. When it came up again, though, Aleksei tried to defend leaving the joke in the skit. He argued that the bit was funny and it acknowledged what everyone knew, i.e., that the Russians were “jerks” who really were (or had been) sending troops over the border:

9	Denis	<i>nu bylo</i> <b>well there was</b>
10		<i>bylo my i skota</i> <b>there was—we were jerks</b>
11		<i>i ostavit</i> <b>and to leave it</b>
12		<i>potomy chto eto smeshno</i> <b>because it's funny</b>

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<sup>121</sup> “Не нужно такой конечно сказать...это не шутка.”

- 13                                    *tvoia versiiia [iavl'aetsia] gumannoi*  
**your version is humanitarian**
- 14                                    *a uzhe, eh*  
**and already, uh**
- 15                                    *pered vami*  
**in front of you**
- 16                                    *a uzhe uh pered*  
**and in front of—**

Aleksei countered that the joke was funny, even if it wasn't "humanitarian," in this case, meaning "politically correct." He continued, saying that even the other competitors they had performed it for in rehearsals thought it was funny ("in front of you and in front of—"). But Demchenko asked the team to do more. He wanted them to think not just about whether they could get a cheap laugh, but about the "strength," or merit, of the joke. What did the joke do to earn its inclusion in the six-minute performance? In other words, he wanted the team to tell jokes that meant something, especially in the Russians' role as ambassadors, as it were, from Moscow. Demchenko cut off Aleksei's protests with a value-laden accusation, telling him to work harder instead of worrying about one joke:

- 17        **Demchenko**                    *vy lenite*  
**you're being lazy**
- 18                                    *vy sechas smeshno ne smeshno reshaite*  
**right now you are talking about funny and not funny**
- 19                                    *a po sil' shutki*  
**and what about the strength of the joke?**
- 20                                    *to est—*  
**that is—**
- 21        **Denis**                            *a my—*  
**but we—**
- 22        **Demchenko**                    *my—*  
**we—**
- 23                                    *my boremsia s tem chtoby liudi poverili chto mezhdu*  
**we are fighting, so that people will believe that between—**

24	<i>chto v ukraine smeitsiia ot—</i> <b>so that in Ukraine they laugh [at jokes] from</b>
25	<i>Rossii</i> <b>Russia</b>
26	<i>kommanda iz Rossii</i> <b>a team from Russia</b>
27	<i>chto etom</i> <b>and that</b>
28	<i>a vy govorite pri etom</i> <b>and you say, thus,</b>
29	<i>vot u vas zapreianie</i> <b>that you have restrictions</b>
30	<i>vot tak</i> <b>like that</b>

With the phrase, “we are fighting, so that people will believe,” Pavel introduced the idea of an external audience. The Muscovites were not just visiting friends in Odessa, joking around and putting on some skits in someone's living room. Instead, their performance would be broadcast on an Odessa television channel, during primetime, and would go up on YouTube, too; Russian as well as Ukrainian viewers could watch. Demchenko said they were working to prove something to these publics. If Ukrainian audiences could laugh at the jokes of a Russian team it would show that, despite political conflict, they shared elements of a common humanity. But the Rostov joke felt a little too much like cutting up at a funeral for Demchenko. Nearly 10,000 Ukrainians had been killed since fighting began in 2013 (Council on Foreign Relations 2017). The joke referenced the fact that Russian troops came over the border with guns and tanks and mortar shells, taking aim at young Ukrainian soldiers and maiming grannies when their bombs exploded. To Demchenko, “that is not a joke.” The restrictions he referred to, here, are supposed limitations on the team’s artistic freedom. He argued, instead, that the Muscovites could make the audience laugh with jokes that served a larger purpose, in the context of Russian-Ukrainian relations. He continued,

(3)

- 1     **Demchenko**     *ya posle etoi shutkoi ne vazhno mezdy razberus'*  
**after that joke it's not important to me to sort things out between**
- 2     **Denis**           *oikai*  
**okay**
- 3     **Demchenko**     *negativo uzhe nabralsia*  
**negativity has already accumulated**  
  
*[seven lines omitted]*
- 4     **Demchenko**     *da, potomu chto my borimsia za eto*  
**right, because we are fighting for this**
- 5                    *vy zhe kommanda dlia chego?*  
**you formed a team for what?**
- 6                    *dlia chego vy ezдите—*  
**for what do you come here—**
- 7                    *pochemu vy igraete v KVN tam?*  
**why do you play KVN there?**
- 8                    *pri etom Liga Smekha*  
**and, for that matter, in League of Laughter?**
- 9     **Kostya**           *[inaudible]*
- 10    **Demchenko**     *stavit' mosti kakie-to*  
**to build bridges of some kind**
- 11                    *a my govorim 'pri etom'*  
**and we say 'for that matter'**
- 12                    *u vas i pizdets*  
**what you have is fucked up**

In the end, Pavel drew on two sources of moral authority. First, he asked the team to recall that their performance had ramifications outside the space of the game. He implied that they had a (moral) obligation to join him in “fighting for this,” a line that referred back to his earlier comment about demonstrating human connection through conflict. He further justified his perspective, though, with an appeal to *KVN's* moral authority. He invoked *KVN* tradition, and even the *KVN* theme song, to remind Aleksei about his presumed values as a *KVNshik*. *KVN's* theme song



includes the lines “We are starting KVN. For what? For what?” The full second stanza of the theme song runs like this:

We are starting KVN  
For what?  
For what?  
So that no one stays on the sidelines  
No one!  
No one!  
Even though it won't solve all our problems  
It won't solve all our problems  
Everyone will become happier.  
Everyone will become more cheerful.<sup>122</sup>

KVNshiki know these lyrics well. The question, “For what? For what?” (*“Dlia chego? Dlia chego?”*) is repeated twice in the song, and Demchenko, likewise, repeated this twice in lines 6 and 7. In a context mirroring that of the song, he asked, with a repeated “for what...for what,” why Middle Aged Humor played the game “there,” in Russia, or in League of Laughter, in Ukraine (lines 6-8).if not, in the end, to “build bridges of some kind” (line 10). “This indexes repetition of KVN’s rationale in the song: “We are starting KVN. For what? For what?...Though it won’t solve all our problems...everyone will become more cheerful.” Pavel, thus, reinforced the idea that their goal was not (merely) to crack jokes, but to make people happy—or at least happier, at least for a little while.

In this performance, in particular, the team had a chance to act as diplomats. Exchange between Russia and Ukraine had become increasingly difficult for everyone, and all but impossible for KVNshiki. Middle Aged Humor performed just over two weeks after Ukraine barred Russia’s 2017 Eurovision entry, wheelchair-bound Yulia Samoylova, from competing in Kiev

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<sup>122</sup> “Мы начинаем КВН!  
Для чего?  
Для чего?  
Чтоб не осталось в стороне  
Никого  
Никого!  
Пусть не решить нам всех проблем  
не решить всех проблем,  
Но станет радостнее всем,  
Веселей, станет всем!”

(Stolworthy 2017). A connection, any kind of connection, serves a diplomatic purpose in this context. Moreover, the team could bring laughter to a Ukrainian audience, demonstrating that Russians and Ukrainians were not so different, in the end. Rather than accomplishing that, Pavel said they wanted to include a joke that was “fucked up,” ruining a cheerful mood and killing the desire “to sort things out” (line 1).

Fostering joyfulness is, in fact, an unwritten KVN rule. Editors and players alike constantly orient towards this value in editing sessions, both explicitly and through the interactional texts they construct. When Demchenko said, “That is terrible,” he voiced an opinion. But he also took an interactional stance. And, at several points during this one-minute interaction, Demchenko also adopted *moral* stances. He prodded the team: (1) to avoid laziness; (2) to fulfill a diplomatic responsibility—to their own country and to the Ukrainians hosting them; and (3) to conduct themselves like proper KVNshiki, i.e., people whose reason for playing is to create a joyful atmosphere. Pavel did not say all this denotatively. Some stances, like the interactional implication of quoting the KVN theme song, coded a moral evaluation both more subtle and, perhaps, more effective.

### *Defining stance*

In his description of stance, John Du Bois explains that, “Stance has the power to assign value to objects of interest, to position social actors with respect to those objects, to calibrate alignment between stancetakers, and to invoke presupposed systems of cultural value” (2007, 139). The dialogue above illustrates how two actors, Demchenko and Denis, assigned value to a particular joke and assessed it in terms of cultural codes of behavior. Denis argued that the Rostov joke should be included because it was funny. As a competitor, showcasing (his) cleverness seemed the point of the game. But in his role as editor, Demchenko’s stake in the performance differed from the team’s. He made maintaining a joyful atmosphere in the auditorium his overall priority, with a secondary goal of displaying amicable relations between Russians and Ukrainians.

For him, the potential “negativity” the joke introduced outweighed its merit as humor. He, personally, also did not find the exchange funny (“after that joke it's not important to me to sort things out”). Even though people from other teams had laughed at the joke during rehearsals, Demchenko thought it marred the team's diplomatic mission, something he asked the Russians to value as much as he did. Through argument, implicature, references, and tone of voice, Denis and Demchenko took stances not only towards the joke itself, but towards the competing values of humor versus joyfulness.

We could simply analyze the conflict above in terms of opinions: Denis wanted to crack a joke, Demchenko thought it was inappropriate, and the two laid out the logic of their respective positions. Stance, though, offers several conceptual benefits. First, it shifts emphasis away from what people think, at which we can only guess (cf. Briggs 1986), and towards what people do, which we can observe. I cannot with confidence say that Demchenko thought the overarching goal of KVN was to create joyfulness. But I can state that he aligned with that idea by quoting the KVN theme song; that he indexed a presupposed cultural value when critiquing the team's motivations (“You formed a team for what? For what do you come here?”); that he evaluated the proposed skit according to moral rubrics; and that he asked the team to adjust their performance in accordance with the values he cited. Demchenko's discursive stances in this interaction reveal how editors (and others) re-entrench moral frameworks as they instill KVN tradition. Attention to moral stancetaking builds, as well, on Susanne Cohen's use of the term “metapragmatic morality” to describe the regulation of conduct, speech, and appearance among female, white collar employees in Russia (Cohen 2013).<sup>123</sup> Like the women Cohen worked with, KVNshiki, their coaches, and their editors discuss ways ideal performers should behave, speak, look, and interact with one another. KVNshiki adapt their behavior to normative expectations, not only about humor,

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<sup>123</sup> For a discussion of the ways in which first- and second-order indexicality overlap with direct and indirect indexicality to signal interactional stances (such as “laid back” via Mock Spanish), see Jane Hill, “Intertextuality as Source and Evidence for Indirect Indexical Meanings,” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 15, 1(2005): 113–124.

but sportsmanship, preparation, stage presence, and friendship.

In these data, moral assessments often take the form of explicit evaluations: “that is horrible;” “that’s rubbish;” “don’t talk about sex;” “be more cheerful.” However, as the reference to KVN’s theme song illustrates, not all stances are referential; that is, a stance may be articulated with an index rather than an argument. The conceptual vocabulary of orientation, evaluation, and alignment describe how individuals situate opinions in fields of cultural value.

As Clifford Geertz said, “Culture is public because meaning is” (Geertz 2000 [1973], 12). Rather than looking at (private) moral selves, stance-taking lends itself to examining (public) social persons and the way they orient towards moral values (Shoaps 2004, Du Bois 2007). For instance, in the dialogue above Pavel invoked two values that Denis could hardly contest: being hard-working and furthering KVN’s goal to promote joyfulness. He had to convince the team, however, to view their performance in terms of diplomatic obligations instead of just entertainment. Attention to stance moves such as these allows us to track how value systems, and the traditions that support them, shift and get maintained. It happens haltingly, incompletely, and with reference to presupposed concepts of the right and the good.

### **Orders of stance: making moral frames**

Indexes, like words, can signal more than one meaning. They may also refer to more than one plane of interaction—i.e., the interpersonal and the (imagined) social. Through his concept of orders of indexicality, Michael Silverstein explains that such a stratified understanding of indexicality can illustrate how people link, and discursively recreate, the macro- and micro-social planes: “Indexical order is central to analyzing how semiotic agents access macro-sociological plane categories and concepts as values in the indexable realm of the micro-contextual” (Silverstein 2003, 193). First-order indexes refer to surface-level pragmatic meanings within a speech event, as when *tous* and *vous* in French or *ty* and *vy* in Russian code informal

versus formal interlocutor relationships. But the same *tous / vous* opposition can also index stereotypes, identity groupings, or other personae, and this invocation of macro-sociological categories in the micro-context of the speech event is second-order indexicality (Silverstein 2003).<sup>124</sup>

Similarly, first- and second-order *stances*, following Kockleman (2004), map out different levels of meaning, illustrating how seemingly trivial comments about whether a joke is amusing or not, as when an editor says a joke about sex is “not funny” or, conversely, that a joke about pregnant teenagers is “timely,” the remarks link up to larger frameworks of valuation. A lot of American comedians make jokes about sex, and Russophone comedians do as well (though largely outside of KVN). The fairly commonplace assumption in KVN that sexual themes are not funny represents an orientation towards values outside the immediate speech event of the editing session—a second-order stance, or a statement not just about a team’s jokes, but a moral stance about what KVN, and sometimes society, should look like.

We might consider Demchenko’s blunt criticism of the team, “You’re being lazy,” a *first-order stance*. Paul Kockelman defines first-order stances as, “stances we take towards states of affairs” (2004, 143). Stances towards states of affairs also reveal orientations towards value-laden norms, however. As Jaworski and Thurlow argue, “Stance may be predicated on intellectual, moral, or affective grounds, but always indexes a particular ideological position—political, social, cultural, economic, religious, and so on” (2009, 218). It is this second index, a stance that presupposes an ideological position (in this case a presupposed expectation among KVNshiki), that

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<sup>124</sup> Michael Lempert and Michael Lambek reached loggerheads in the pages of *Anthropological Theory* a few years ago, with Lempert claiming that Lambek thought ethics come from a unified, a-historical, and context-free source, and Lambek arguing that this view of “intrinsic” morality mischaracterized his argument (Lempert 2013, 2015; Lambek 2015). The concept of moral stance-taking, though, offers a theoretical way out of the impasse because it links micro-level interactional data (Lambek’s examples) to structures of power, ideology, and institutional hegemony (Lempert’s complicating concerns) (Shoaps 2004, 2009).

can be captured by Kockelman's concept of *second-order stances* (2004, 143).<sup>125</sup>

Demchenko's first-order stance responded to Denis' plea to keep a joke in the show. But he took second-order stances towards two normative KVN values: (1) working long hours and (2) making people happier. Demchenko, thus, adopted a second-order stance to speak not just with the authority of an editor, but with that of KVN tradition.

The first, working hard, refers to the expectation that KVNshiki will revise material constantly and, often, go without sleep in the days leading up to games. As Stanislav, a nationally-successful competitor from Irkutsk argued, the most important quality of a good KVNshik is being hard-working. He said,

Being hard working is especially [important]. Sometimes there are moments when you arrive [to an editing session] with complete material. And they cut out almost your entire text. The entire opening number. What do you do? You have one night to [write] something you can show the next day. That's how it was for us in Krasnoyarsk, in the Asia League. It is really difficult. We went to bed at 6:00 a.m., got up at 8:00 a.m., and again re-wrote everything. Again presented our material. And if it weren't for our desire, our patience, our, as it were, hard-workingness, on this account we would have burned out immediately and a long time ago. That's why you have to love this game very very very much and give your all to it. Work work work. Don't sleep at night, but do it (interview with author, November 14, 2017).<sup>126</sup>

Demchenko, thus, cited a value that KVNshiki find commonplace. Working late into the night is routine. Denotationally, Demchenko said—and meant—the Moscow competitors were being lazy. But the interactional text, in this scenario, included a shaming mechanism that reinforced KVN values specifically. When an editor cuts jokes, competitors are called on to write new ones, that night, regardless of how long that takes them.

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<sup>125</sup> This division of first- and second-order stances according to speech event reference and indexed moral frameworks differs slightly from Kockelman's stance and meta-stance examples, but is compatible with his explanation of ordered stances mediating the presupposing and entailing discourse practices that mold speaker subjectivity (Kockelman 2004, 144).

<sup>126</sup> “Трудолюбие именно вот в этом. Бывают такие моменты, когда ты приезжаешь с полным материалом. Тебе просто вырезают выступление почти. Всё приветствие. Что делать? У тебя ночь, чтобы что-нибудь сделать и завтра выступить. У нас было так в Красноярске, в Лиге Азии. Это очень сложно, мы ложились в 6, вставали в 8 и опять писали все. Опять ставились. И если бы не наше желание, не наше терпение, не наше, скажем, трудолюбие, вот в этом вопросе, прогорели бы мы очень давно и сразу. И поэтому, очень очень очень надо любить эту игру и уметь отдавать всего себя. Трудиться трудиться трудиться. Не спать ночами, но делать.”

The second value Demchenko endorsed, via his index to the KVN theme song, was the idea that KVN should help people. KVN should not exclude individuals, like audience members potentially alienated by insulting jokes (“so that no one stays on the sidelines”) and KVN should make people happier (“everyone will become more cheerful”). Pavel, thus, took two layered stances: one towards the material the team presented and one towards a moral framework that privileged audience cheerfulness over artistic expression. In invoking the framework, he renewed its social consequence.

Jaworski and Thurlow observed that a stance is “an evaluation or appraisal of an object...as being somehow desirable/undesirable or good/bad” (2009, 217). The moral imagination that structures what is good and bad, desirable and undesirable also often dictates what counts as funny. In KVN, joyfulness (*vesel'e*) emerges as the quality that organizes taste—in jokes, in atmosphere, and in events. Joyfulness, as opposed to simple laughter or entertainment, is, I argue, linked to ideas about the collective good that were consonant with values the Soviets promoted through cultural policy aimed at youth recreation.

### **Joyfulness: interactional frames**

At the summer 2017 “Singing KVN” in Svetlogorsk, Alexander Masliakov, beaming, greeted the crowd with, “KVN is always a celebration!”<sup>127</sup> Local games, indeed, feel like parties. In Irkutsk women dress for a night out—cocktail dresses or jeans with jewelry. Excitement ripples through auditoria, many filled with 600 to 1,000 people even on weekday nights. Upbeat, usually Western, Top 40 songs pump up the crowd as they wait for teams to come on stage. “I keep hopin’, we’ll eat cake by the ocean” boomed out as people filed into the auditorium of Irkutsk's Siberian Institute of Law, Economics, and Management in October 2016, about half running late. But not as late as the

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<sup>127</sup> Голосащий КиВиН в Светлогорске [Singing KVN in Svetlogorsk], broadcast October 22, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kllA-VqD568&list=PLnP4EuRGIGUGLhWobYT-rVVc92fSDWoVG&index=9> (accessed November 5, 2017).

performers. Feet tapped as the audience waited. Friends air-kissed and chatted as they waited. College students scrolled through Instagram. People looked at their watches. “KVN never starts on time,” a local coach told me. “It’s a tradition.” The half-hour of waiting only heightened anticipation, though, and the audience clapped loudly as the house lights finally went down. The first jokes rolled out soon after, and spectators lost themselves in laughter.

After the show, I bustled out into the night with the others. We pulled scarves tight against the Siberian autumn, smiling, milling around the entrance. It seemed all of us felt reluctant to go home, to end the euphoria. Some students made plans to go out drinking, recounting the best jokes of the night as they walked off.

“It is important to me to give people something,” Demchenko said of his duties to an audience. He wanted to gift a mood, one much like the Irkutsk residents had left with. Speaking about the teams themselves, he continued, “It is important to me that people play well as a team and that their mood improves.”<sup>128</sup> Humor, and KVN in particular, is not about entertainment; it serves a social function. “That person in the audience—we want to make his life *better*,” Demchenko said.<sup>129</sup> Katya, a competitor in Odessa, shared a parable the popular editor often told teams after games:

What is the point, after all, of humor? What is the point of your going out on stage? Every person that comes, every member of the audience—A man comes, forty years old, he has a bad job. He works as a driver and he’s tired. He wants to go somewhere and just relax his mind. Let’s say he fought with his wife. He heard—he remembered some kind of joke, went home, and instead of quarreling with his wife he told her the joke. They laughed together and made up (interview with author March 23, 2017).

For Demchenko KVNshiki should write funny jokes not just to make people laugh, but to make them *happier*. And he is far from the only editor who thinks this. Data from “editing

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<sup>128</sup> “Мне важно дать людям чего-то. Мне важно, чтобы, чтобы сыгрались люди и их настроение улучшалось.” Training session in Odessa, April 22, 2017.

<sup>129</sup> Training session in Odessa, April 22, 2017.



sessions" (*redaktura*) and "debriefings" (*razbor poleta*)<sup>130</sup> illustrate how KVN editors, judges, and participants enforce KVN's pro-happiness interactional frames. During editing sessions teams present their material to between one and three of a given league's editors.

### *Interactional frames*

KVN competitors behave in certain ways in performance spaces, and with a particular set of goals. Clearly, they would like to be funny, to make the audience laugh, and to win the game. But norms pervade all aspects of social life, as Goffman explains, with interactional frames guiding the way we speak, the moral ideals we assume, and our understanding of rights and responsibilities in a given setting. The frame of a church service, for instance, differs from that of bachelor party. Goffman defines primary frameworks as interactional norms that range from formal rules to "a lore of understanding, an approach, a perspective" (Goffman 1974, 21). Socially successful KVNshiki absorb the frameworks editors work within and the perspectives they seek to impart. The most important of these values—KVN's cardinal value, its organizing principle, its metapragmatically regimenting dogma—is to create joy. Not just humor. Joy. KVNshiki layer rhythm, format, and content to bring about emotional and intellectual highs in the performance space.

KVN's cheerfulness mandate disallows much content typical of American comedy. For instance, competitors rarely swear. Editors don't typically allow dirty jokes, nor any jokes that would be downers, as Pavel's dismissal of the Muscovites' arrival joke, above, illustrates. Cheerfulness always trumps mere humor. As Nikita, a current League of Laughter competitor and main editor of Odessa's School League put it, "If a kid, five years old, starts saying a bunch of vulgarities—someone would laugh at that, of course. Everyone has their own sense of humor. But that's not for us. That is not for the well-brought-up generation, you could say...[People in the audience] are thinking people" (interview with author, March 22, 2017). Editors in Irkutsk and

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<sup>130</sup> *Razbor poleta* literally means "scrutiny of the flight." The phrase originally referred to post-flight discussions about errors and best practices among pilots.

Odessa disallowed anything vulgar (*poshliy*), sad, negative, or containing references to cigarettes, drugs, or alcohol. They uniformly asked teams to increase the density of jokes in their performance and to add upbeat music. They wanted to create an emotional high.

Towards this end, editors try to excise prohibited themes long before they can reach the stage. When an inexperienced, all-female team brought some stanzas about death into an Odessa National University editing session in April 2017, they met with pushback. Reading from plain white paper filled with handwritten lines, their captain chanted a song about a middle-aged man who electrocuted himself with an electric tea kettle. The editors, Pavel Demchenko and Viktoria Pis'michenko, went quiet for a bit, preparing tempered comments for the young team's first forays into writing comedy. "The song is—very sad," said Demchenko. Pis'michenko continued, "It's not just that it's sad. It's just very base." Taking the stanzas one by one, Demchenko said, "You can keep the first one. The second one, about the tea kettle, is a bit—cruel. The third one you can probably re-write." The captain pressed her manicured, pale pink fingernails to her forehead, leaning on her elbow. "This is really difficult," she said.

Grisha, an editor in Odessa's Polytechnical Institute League, criticized another team, Connected Odessa, for similarly dark material. Connected Odessa, though, had performed theirs on stage. Judges had already issued them very low marks. During the debriefing Grisha told them, "Depressing stuff (*chernukha*), Connected Odessa. Two jokes about death. Then—death, death. You need quality jokes." Teams, thus, test boundaries as they try to write funny material. Editors consistently stress creating a joyful atmosphere, instead.

They also discourage references to harmful substances, such as cigarettes, alcohol, and drugs. Andrei, an editor for Rivne's League of Laughter told a team, "Drugs? What is that there for? We told you yesterday. Euthanasia, drugs...In the drugs bit there could be some kind of joke—but no. Just—think very carefully."<sup>131</sup> Here, Andrei told the team that these are inherently uncheerful,

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<sup>131</sup> Editing session, Rivne, Ukraine, May 17, 2017.

and therefore probably unfunny, themes. He didn't tell these adults that they weren't allowed to talk about death and drugs. But he did ask them to "think very carefully" before setting a negative tone, reminding them that the editors had already told them their thoughts on the skit. Unfortunately, a number of teams in this set of editing sessions annoyed Andrei by re-performing material the editors had already told them to cut out. One team read off a number that involved them hitting on their female trainer, an experienced League of Laughter competitor who played with them. "Shhiiiiiii—," ("blyaaa—") said Andrei, raising his voice. Echoing Demchenko's logic for disallowing Middle Aged Humor's arrival joke, claiming that laughter alone was not their goal, he said, "We took all that out yesterday. It is just a *cheap joke (deshevka)*, guys." It was a joke, true, and writing one is something not all teams can accomplish. But Andrei pushed them to put creating a positive atmosphere first. He ended by recommending that the team become a bit more cheerful as they worked out their material: "Have fun (*khaifuete*) yourselves, so that the audience will laugh with you." Andrei urged the Kiev Princesses to make their performance cheerier, too, after first issuing a reprimand. He asked the team, "Who on your team is recording this? Because you still have jokes that we took out...From *that* kind of mood, you need to create a different mood. More cheerful!"

Later, Andrei told a local Rivne team that sexual jokes were not welcome. He asked this team, as well, to make their material "more cheerful," reminding them that they were "building humor!"

(4)

**Andrei:** *tam byl seks na dache*  
**there was that part about sex at the dacha**

*eto ne nuzhno*  
**that is not needed**

**Team member:** *my dobavili seksa*  
**we added in sex**

*potomu chto ona beremena*  
**because she is pregnant**

**Andrei:** *ne nuzhno govorit o sekse*  
**you don't need to talk about sex**

*pochemu-to vse vokrug chernaia*  
**for some reason everything is black humor**

*bodree, veselee*  
**more peppy, more cheerful**

*my ustroim iumora!*  
**we are building humor!**<sup>132</sup>

Andrei took stances that reinscribed cheerful frames. Maintaining a happy atmosphere, in itself, does not reference a Soviet value system. Employees in many spheres, from restaurants to yoga studios, get charged with maintaining positive environments as well. The reason this particular frame represents an orientation towards Soviet values has to do with the role of art in the USSR. For many Soviets, art was not about the artist's vision, personal expression, or even creativity—at least not for its own sake. Much like KVN editors stress that humor is necessary but not sufficient for a number's inclusion in KVN, the socialist approach to art mandates that creativity achieve something in the realm of politics, not just aesthetics. Art represented a tool that could be used in the transformation of society, most particularly in the training of the new socialist person (Arnol'dov 1974, 11). Demchenko voiced a version of this ideology in his comments to Middle Aged Humor when he said, "Right now you're talking about funny and not funny. And what about the strength of the joke?" The "strength of the joke" refers to the function of the material, either in the performance space or socially, not just its entertainment value.

During a training session for participants in Odessa National University's semifinal match, Demchenko put it even more plainly, "I'd like you to come around to the idea, so that you understand, that humor is a big weapon. That humor changes people."<sup>133</sup> Humor has the power not just to amuse, but to *transform*. And by changing individuals, society could be changed, as

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<sup>132</sup> Editing session, Rivne, Ukraine, May 17, 2017.

<sup>133</sup> "Хочется, чтобы вы пришли к тому, чтобы вы поняли, что юмор, - очень большое оружие. Что юмор, - он меняет людей." Training session in Odessa, April 22, 2015.

well. Later in the speech Demchenko elaborated on this theme, telling the roughly seventy competitors assembled that they were free to make petty jokes if they so chose. But they wasted time. “You have this weapon, in that you can say anything you want,” he said. “And it turns out, we talk about [trivialities]. We spend time to do this, and it turns out that we only have jokes about people’s thighs. The Trump Cards only have jokes about thighs.”<sup>134</sup> Joking about trivialities comes at the expense of material that “changes people.”

Editors take stances such as these not just so that customers will return, as in yoga studios. Instead, they make claims about the social function of KVN. Editors prod teams to stay within a joyful frame. A competitor could always violate the norms, telling dirty jokes or, in Russia, trashing Putin, but it would seem as inappropriate as peddling stolen watches at church. It's just not done. Maybe in stand-up, but KVN is not the place. That said, local presuppositions influence the material that gets considered joyful. Ukrainian KVNshiki revile Putin often, to the delight of crowds. The frame in both Irkutsk and Odessa is the same, though. KVN is jolly, it's wholesome, it's intellectual. It's warm. At its best, it is emotional. KVN competitors revalidate these expectations, judges reward them for doing so, spectators flock to watch it, and millions view performances on the internet. People that attend KVN games share presuppositions about what it is, was, and should be. Attending KVN—a Soviet island institution that has lost the nation state that created, promoted, funded, and regulated its activities—is a bit like going to church picnics for a church that no longer holds religious services. There are no sermons. No one preaches to the picnic participants about right and wrong, sin and good works. Yet people at the picnic will presuppose and orient towards Catholic or Baptist or Seventh-day Adventist ideas about society, correct behavior, and appropriate speech. Attendees will shape their speech to match the frame of the event. KVN works the same way.

Despite these seemingly structural constraints, however, individual actors negotiate tradition

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

in line with their own goals. Stanislav, an Irkutsk competitor who has played in Russia's Top League, described how his team eventually won his high school's KVN championship in the late 1990s with jokes about smoking and alcohol. He recalled,

In the end we wrote a number that made us the champions of our school. It was difficult for us to win in our school because there was the impression that we joked about adult themes: smoking, alcoholism. We ridiculed them, and for that reason the director of the school would scold us. He always gave us low scores for the performances because he said, "Don't talk about those things in school." We tried to explain to him that we weren't praising [these things], we were ridiculing them so that people would understand that they were negative. He said that they weren't jokes, that it wasn't allowed. But we hewed to our own line, and, anyway, in the end he had to accept that we were funnier and give us that ill-fated five, [the score] that made us champions of the school (interview with author, November 14, 2017).



**Stanislav as guest on the stage of the Baikal School League Quarterfinals in 2015**

Even this apparent aberration from KVN norms might have upheld an overall joyful frame, though. Stanislav noted that his team's skit both (1) made the audience laugh and (2) promoted a positive social message, referencing smoking and alcohol only to satirize their abuse. To win a school competition, a team would almost certainly have to make both their peers and the adults judging them laugh out loud, and it difficult to imagine them doing that with material that rang negative. So smoking and drinking are not downer subjects a priori, but KVNshiki must incorporate them carefully. The same is true for numbers about death. A team from Tambov, about

500 miles south of Moscow, managed to bring off some terribly jolly assassination humor in the 2016 Top League competition.<sup>135</sup> The skit, entitled “an incident on a roof,” begins with a sniper taking aim at a businessman who is talking on his cell phone, pacing. Just before he shoots, though, a competitor in a pigeon costume pops up in front of the rifle scope. The pigeon moonwalks, belly dances, and, with the James Bond theme playing in the background, turns to confront the assassin through the crosshairs. Assassination is a particularly dark theme in a country where politicians get murdered with some regularity.<sup>136</sup> The joke’s topic, coming straight from recent headlines, made the audience laugh with the help of a cute, life-sized bird and a clever juxtaposition of the everyday (pigeons, assassinations) and the absurd (moonwalking birds). Tambov met the hard standard of being both funny and joyful.

The funny / joyful distinction was echoed in a slightly different way by Igor, the French professor from Irkutsk, who said, “Humor is when we laugh with kindness. Satire is when we laugh with meanness. And so I’d rather have humor” (interview with author, October 20, 2016). KVN stood on a foundation of humor, which he associated with goodwill, rather than satire, whose punchlines sometimes hinged on bringing someone down rather than lifting everyone up. Editors Pavel, Nikita, Grisha, and Andrei all reinforced a distinction between funny and joyful, systematically telling teams to cut material that would not contribute to a positive atmosphere.

### **Kulturnost: principle of a worthy life**

Writing jokes is hard. Coming up with funny jokes, quarterly, while also going to university or a full-time job, is even more difficult. But many post-Soviet children train to do this from the first grade onwards. KVN is an intellectual tradition, like chess. Participation takes a lot of work,

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<sup>135</sup> KVN Top League First Octofinal, February 16, 2016. Available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hjk\\_p4UyTBA&t=1s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hjk_p4UyTBA&t=1s). Subtitled clip available at <https://amygarey.files.wordpress.com/2019/02/team-tambov-incident-on-a-roof.mp4>.

<sup>136</sup> Boris Nemtsov, a physicist and politician, was shot in 2015; FSB officer Alexander Litvinenko was poisoned in 2006; Sergei Yushenkov, a politician in the Liberal Russia party, was shot in 2003.

though, just like Mayan weaving, Tuvan throat singing, classical Thai dance, or battle rap. There has to be a payoff for putting effort into mastering these activities. The concept of cultural capital helps explain why parents choose to take their children to after-school KVN practice instead of, or at least in addition to, soccer or ballet. People value the skills KVNshiki cultivate: wit, intelligence, knowledge of literature, and current affairs. The reasons people do value these skills and not, say, excelling at rugby, are tied to the fact that people still idealize KVNshiki as role models under a deeply Soviet rubric of correct behavior.

Players exhibit *kulturnost*, “culturedness,” a trait Soviets tried to instill using advertising campaigns, reading groups, and structured youth activities. Vladimir Volkov claimed that the Soviet person with *kulturnost* was required to “read classical literature, contemporary Soviet fiction, poetry, newspapers, works by Marx-Engels-Lenin-Stalin, as well as attend the cinema and exhibitions with the purpose of self-education” (Volkov 2000, 225). These days, KVNshiki lack knowledge of socialist texts. But just participating in KVN requires some measure of creativity and intelligence. It’s hard to write jokes, after all, if you don’t read the newspapers. KVN is an exercise in *kulturnost*, a quality editors motivate teams to draw out.

KVN, as an activity, asks a lot of competitors. In Odessa competitors met with a coach every day for eight days before Odessa National University’s semifinal match. Teams would present what they had revised or written since the last meeting, the coach would often axe at least half of it, and the team was expected to spend the next twenty-four hours writing new material. Few KVNshiki went to classes during this time. Their sole focus was KVN. This is something that the university systems in Ukraine and Russia allow; it would be much more difficult to miss a week of classes in the United States and succeed in the course. But it also indicates how much motivation students have to put work into this activity. Few sleep much during the week leading up to a big game. Dima, a university competitor on the team “Knight’s Move” in Irkutsk, likewise said, “You’re killing three months of your time for the sake of five minutes on stage.” His teammate, Aleksander,



continued, “Right, yesterday how long did we spend? Five hours? Do you know what you could do with five hours? Finish a book. Go to work and work a bit. And you write jokes for five hours...That [the editors] cut out!” (interview with author, December 3, 2016).

Competitors put in this much effort because it earns them prestige. Veteran Odessa KVN coach Valery Khait, now in his seventies, said, “KVN is prestigious because you get a reputation as a sharp, witty person.” When I asked if playing KVN still garnered competitors esteem he said yes, adding that the real chance of landing on TV meant that Ukrainian KVNshiki could become minor (or major) celebrities. “If it wasn't prestigious they wouldn't do it. And now it is even more prestigious because of [new Ukrainian TV programs]” (interview with author, January 26, 2017). Reminiscing about intellectual life in the USSR as compared to today, though, he concluded that the market economy had eroded *kulturnost*. He argued,

With us everything was from the soul. We liked to make the public cheery. The problem is the market. The level of culture [has gone down].<sup>137</sup> All the result of social consumption. The market. Everything is for sale. It's one thing to sell goods, it is another to sell culture. The prestige of being cultured doesn't exist anymore because that doesn't earn anyone any money (interview with author, January 26, 2017).

Khait said he had long-ago created a rule to live by that focused on enduring qualities instead of fleeting satisfaction, which he lumped in with consumption: “A person should live not for pleasure, but for happiness.”<sup>138</sup> The oppositions he drew between pleasure and happiness, commerce and culture, mirror the contrast KVNshiki draw between (mere) humor and (soulful) joyfulness. Happiness, *kulturnost*, and joyfulness all rang authentic, for Khait. But pleasure, money, and cheap jokes fell into the realm of the base—the uncultured.

For many, KVNshiki exemplify *kulturnost*'s creative values. Katia, an Odessa competitor, noted that KVNshiki are “the pride of their universities.” Because KVN takes so much time, however, she said that “either you study at university or you play KVN” (interview with author, March 23, 2017). There is not time for both, at least not before a big competition. Emily, from the

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<sup>137</sup> Here Valery moved his hand down below his knee.

<sup>138</sup> “Чтобы человек жил не за удовольствие, а за счастье.”

team Friend Zone, cited above, nonetheless spoke proudly of the fact that she and her teammates stayed up late more nights than not, crashing at each others' apartments (they all still lived with parents) as they hammered out material. She said, "There are people that don't do anything. School and home. And you somehow feel that you are on a higher level than those people (*vyshe etikh liudei*)" (interview with author, March 7, 2017). Vitaly, a former KVNshik in Irkutsk, said that playing video games or athletics, especially if you excelled in these activities, would earn a person 55% of the benefits of KVN. Some kind of extra-curricular activity was better than nothing. He added, though, "Of course, in comparison to KVN..." and trailed off. The conclusion seemed obvious. KVN presents tougher challenges, requires more work, and trains students in an intellectual sport that confers greater benefits than most extracurricular activities (interview with author, May 1, 2017).

In terms of prestige, joke writing skills offer a sure ticket to cheers during performances, the respect of professors, and smiles from the opposite sex. Most teenagers long for such popularity. KVN makes cleverness look not just admirable, like winning chess tournaments, but *cool*. Success in KVN draws cultural capital, much like being a football quarterback does in the United States. And just as football players sometimes get special privileges in the U.S. (from field house access to coursework extensions), many people in higher education give KVN prima facie importance over, for instance, mundane school tasks. Ostap, now a professor in Poland, used to lecture in the journalism department at Odessa I. I. National University (ONU). He elaborated on the esteem in which university administrators held KVN, and the ways they worked to support KVNshiki. "If there was something Edward Arkadievich or one of his people needed—that was it. He got it, the cost did not matter" (interview with author, June 24, 2017). Ostap also noted, more with amusement than resentment, that administrators outright told ONU instructors to "help" KVNshiki pass their classes when they had to miss weeks or more preparing for competitions.

Municipal governments often support KVN efforts, too, providing funding to leagues and

sponsoring individual teams (those that travel to competitions in other cities). Naum Barulya, one of the founders of League of Laughter, said “[the government] understands that these kids are the most active segment of the youth. And they try to help them” (interview with author, February 10, 2017).

Stanislav, in Irkutsk, likewise spoke about the amount of time he and his classmates spent on KVN when he was in high school (1999-2002). Joke writers would meet after class, working together. Then they would go over material with other teammates during school:

Three of us, it turns out, would get together at my house: me, Sasha, and Oksana. We wrote all of the KVN that we showed on stage. And later we just handed out roles. We came to class later, got all the other people together. Those that had not taken part in the writing. Because it was just simpler for them to be off. We gave them some kind of roles, they performed them, and that's how we did KVN. In principle it's a normal way of doing things. The whole team can't write. Because there are, in any case, always differences. That's how I found two like-minded people and we as a trio did our KVN in school (interview with author, November 14, 2017).

All of this effort eventually landed Stanislav his school's championship. And fourteen years later, in 2016, he competed in KVN's Top League finals in Moscow, for a televised audience of millions. Stanislav, granted, has an unusual gift for writing humorous songs. As an adult, one of his KVN teammates at the factory where they worked (the local aircraft manufacturer) once approached him with an idea for a scenario and asked him to write a song about it. “I just went over into a corner of the room where we were rehearsing and started to write a song,” he said. “After a few minutes something was working out for me, and I called out: ‘Hey, Igoryok. I’ve got something here’” (interview with author, November 14, 2017).<sup>139</sup> Several teams from other cities (Moscow, Tyumen, Bishkek) have used jokes Stanislav wrote at the highest level of KVN competition, Moscow's televised Top League (*Vysshaia Liga*) (with his permission). Millions of viewers have likely laughed at his couplets. He learned to write those jokes, though, in the company of former KVNshiki who trained him and in a community that admired these efforts.

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<sup>139</sup> “И я просто уходил в угол, в комнату, где мы репетировали и я начинал писать песню. Через несколько минут у меня что-то или получалось или я звал: ‘Игорёк, вот помоги. У меня тут вроде получилось.’”

*On not being a clown*

The values of joyfulness and *kulturnost* work in tandem. Editors, audiences, and other competitors create an interactional frame that privileges joy. And the themes they call joyful, fun, and humorous often coincide with those considered cultured. Editors and competitors reveal how they align with this normative framework through the stances they take during editing sessions. “Be more witty!” editors called out in hourly refrain. They wanted jokes that were intellectual, sharp, and clever. This style of humor, in contrast to situation comedy or stand-up, typifies KVN tradition. In the 1960s, a teacher in Moscow wrote to KVN’s editors to praise the program, saying, “Save our souls, give us this show which has infused joy into our lives for a long time. We hunger to see the cheerful, talented, witty” (Gal’perina 1967a, 5). In response to a joke by the all-female team Friend Zone, for instance, Rivne editor Valentin asked the students to cut a number entirely if they could not deliver a more complex punchline:

(5)

**Yana**

*v frendzone*  
**being friendzoned**

*kak notbuk bez Windowsa*  
**is like having a laptop without Windows**

**Valentin**

*”eto kak notbuk bez Windowsa”*  
**”it’s like a laptop without Windows”**

*eto ne shutka*  
**that’s not a joke**

*khochetsia ostroumnost’*  
**we’d like to see some wittiness**

Another team, the Bible Team from Kamenskoe, Ukraine, cracked some jokes about religion that would normally get discarded because they risked offending the audience. One of their lines included, “Our jokes are just like the Bible—we write [them] ourselves.” But legendary head editor Chivurin, said, “Hmm, you’ve introduced a witty topic. Let’s experiment a little bit. We’ll decide

based on the reaction of the audience [in the second round of the League of Laughter festival]."<sup>140</sup> Here, the fact that the jokes were intelligent bought the Bible Team some leeway with appropriateness.

Not all editors, though, would allow religious jokes, at least not for all audiences. During an editing session before the Moscow Region First League semifinals, held in Voskresensk, about sixty miles south of Moscow, editors Ksenia Shpileva and Sergei Chumachenko quickly nixed the following exchanges from a team from Moscow State Pedagogical University, the first because it was mildly but generally rude (line 3), and the second because it could be read as disrespectful to religious figures (12-14).

(6)

- |    |                    |   |
|----|--------------------|---|
| 1  | <b>Student A</b>   | <i>kakoi teplyi zal</i><br><b>what a warm auditorium</b>  |
| 2  | <b>Student B</b>   | <i>da, zamechatelnye liudi</i><br><b>yes, wonderful people</b>  |
| 3  | <b>Student A</b>   | <i>da pofig na luidei, glavno zal teplyi!</i><br><b>darn the people, what's important is that the auditorium is warm!</b> |
| 4  | <b>Chumachenko</b> | <i>nu kakaia raznitsa</i><br><b>well, what's the difference</b>   |
| 5  |                    | <i>ne nada govorit pofig na luidei</i><br><b>don't say "darn people"</b>  |
| 6  |                    | <i>nu kak by</i><br><b>it's like</b>  |
| 7  |                    | <VOX > <i>kakaia raznitsa,</i><br><VOX> <b>what does it matter</b>  |
| 8  |                    | <i>glavno zal teplyi &lt;VOX&gt;</i><br><b>what's important is that the auditorium is warm &lt;VOX&gt;</b>                |
| 9  |                    | <i>shutka ne meniaetsia</i><br><b>the joke doesn't change</b>   |
| 10 |                    | <i>prosto ne obizhaeshsia v zale</i><br><b>you just don't offend the audience</b>   |

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<sup>140</sup> Editing session, Odessa, Ukraine, February 7, 2017. Notes taken.

- 11 **Student A** *a eto Masha*  
**and this is Masha**
- 12 *ona nasto'lko pravil'naia*  
**she is so correct**
- 13 *chto na den' rozhdeniia Khrista*  
**that on Christ's birthday**
- 14 *ona zadula vse svechki v tserkove*  
**she blew out all the candles in the church**
- 15 **Shpileva** ((softly and slowly)) *Ne, ne Khrista.*  
((softly and slowly)) **No, not Christ.**
- 16 *Davaiete uberem.*  
**Let's take that out.**
- 17 **Chumachenko** *No vy zhe sami ponimaete naschet etu shutku.*  
**Well you yourselves understand about this joke**
- 18 *Dal'she.*  
**Next.<sup>141</sup>**

I'd heard jokes about drafty university and "house of culture" auditoria in both Russia and Ukraine, whose radiators often can't keep up with the large rooms. Chumachenko seemed to object to the team's phrasing more than their sentiment, adopting the voice of a character to suggest a variation other than "damn the people" (lines 5-10). The second joke, though, provoked something just short of horror from Shpileva, whose tone in rejecting the joke about Jesus said more than the words she used. Neither she nor Chumachenko, it seemed, needed to give much justification for why the joke could offend members of the audience (lines 15-18). The editors may also have sought to avoid legal (or criminal) ramifications. In 2013, Russia passed a law prohibiting people from publicly "insulting believers' religious feelings." Stand-up comedian Aleksander Dolgoplov left the country in January 2020 because authorities had started investigating jokes about orthodoxy he'd told at a show a year earlier. Meanwhile, the Ukrainian team "Sex" announced during their 2020 League of Laughter performance, "Team Sex is a very religious team.

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<sup>141</sup> Editing session, Voskresensk, Russia, April 5, 2019. Tape recording.

And so, [we present], ‘Jesus and the cleaning lady.’” Teams in Ukraine only have to worry about audience and editor expectations, not felony charges (Schreck 2017, REF/RL 2020).



**Bible Team, Kamenskoe, at the 2017 League of Laughter Festival, Odessa, Ukraine. February 8, 2018. Photo by author.**

KVNshiki value writing, as opposed to buying, funny material. Some people, like Stanislav, mentioned above, are so talented that they can sell their jokes. A joke markets exist across Russia and Ukraine and, at the highest levels, across national borders. Professional joke writers, “authors,” tend to be experienced former KVNshiki who see a way to keep their hands in the game—and profit from it. Teams commonly buy jokes, especially before big competitions. Usually these are small-scale transactions between a friend in the local KVN community and a team they would like to help. No team will get voted down for animating a script someone else wrote. But people do not consider a team comprised entirely of actors to qualify as true KVNshiki. This emphasis on creativity rather than acting skills got reflected in some of the editors’ comments. After a March 2017 Odessa Polytechnical University quarterfinal KVN match, one of the league editors told a team, “Well, your jokes aren't actually that funny. But it is obvious that you write them yourself.” The audience may only see non-stellar jokes. But editors see potential in budding joke writers,

even if they cannot quite deliver zingers yet. The editing process teaches them how to do that.

Another Ukrainian League of Laughter editor, Valentin Ivanov, said that KVN was a valuable activity because, “Young people can present their thoughts publicly. It’s not just a show. It’s a mode of creativity for youth. Students. Not professionals” (interview with author, May 17, 2017). Alla Podkosova-Fokina, an editor in Kharkhiv, Ukraine, likewise stressed creative development, saying, “We teach them how to walk, speak, write. And it is important that they write their own jokes. Form teams. Because KVN is a team game. And you just have to start from zero” (KVN Kharkov 2016).

Examples from editing sessions illustrate what falls into the category of “witty,” for editors, and what does not. An all-Armenian League of Laughter team from Kiev, for instance, showed Chivurin and two other editors three numbers based on Armenian stereotypes. In the final one, a competitor joked that he could not see his watch through his mass of arm hair. Chivurin told them, “A little more intelligent. Not too stereotypical.” About the watch joke in particular, he commented, “It’s a funny joke. That’s true. But is it *witty*?” In KVN, jokes must be more than funny. They must further *kulturnost*.

Editors also regulate un-cultured material. Rivne league editor Andrei cracked down on a team for ignoring previous advice to cut out base material. As soon as the team walked in for an editing session after dress rehearsals, he gave them a stony glare and said,

Do you not want to play, or what? You don't rehearse. We give you advice, and you do your own thing. Did you not practice with the sound operator or what? It was the same thing in Odessa [at the League of Laughter festival]. It was the same last season.

The team kept forgetting their lines, which was part of the reason for Andrei’s ire. But they also performed a number that the editors considered gross. The skit featured a young man in a long-sleeved denim shirt. Underneath the shirt he had worn pantyhose colored with a red sharpie. I’d seen the team outside diligently making their costumes, working with markers in the warm May sunshine. “How much did you pay for those hose?” asked a member of team Friend Zone. “One



hundred hryvna,” one young man replied (about \$4). “You can find them for cheaper!” the girls told them. The young men, therefore, had invested some time and money into the skit Andrei wanted to cut. In the number they proposed, a young man tries to prove how tough he is by pulling off the skin on his arms. On stage, a team member rolled back his shirt sleeves to reveal arms in pantyhose colored blood-red. Andrei told them, “Why did you go back to that? The first time you showed some kind of grossness. And now it is still gross.”

As a first-order stance, calling the skit gross comments on its lack of humor value, at least to Andrei. But Andrei's second-order stance orients towards intellectual themes overall and an idea of politeness that, like not spitting on the floor, also falls under the umbrella of *kulturnost* (Fitzpatrick 1999, 82). Of course, some popular humor is gross. Much of American comedian Jim Carrey's repertoire is exactly that and millions of people like it (*Dumb and Dumber*, *Dumb and Dumberer*, *The Mask*). Andrei enforced a vision of comedy based on wit, instead, and in this way policed the bounds of KVN's interactional frame. People can revise the frame, of course. Traditions change. So when editors privilege certain kinds of material over others, they are making choices rather than following rules. These choices reveal values, some of which are related to stagecraft, theories of humor, and the tension between KVN as a game and KVN as a performance. But some of these values reference ideas about qualities of the ideal person (what editor Nikita called the “well-brought-up person”), and *kulturnost* emerges as one of these.

Vlad, from the Irkutsk team *Knight's Move*, similarly equated the intellectual style of a KVNshik with their qualities *as a person*. In a series of parallel statements, Vlad listed the kind of person a KVNshik was, to him. The organization of his discourse, here, demonstrates an alignment of direct object attributions after “you” and the linking verb “are”: *you are a KVNshik, you are a person, you are not a clown, you are exactly a person who can present, write humor*. He added special emphasis to the word “clown,” setting up a contrast between silliness and what Vlad considered “humor” (interview with author, December 3, 2016).

(7)

- 1 *esli ty KVNshchik*  
**if you are a KVNshik**
- 2 *ty chelovek—*  
**you are a person—**
- 3 *ty ne klon*  
**you are not a clown,**
- 4 *v pervuiu ochered*  
**above all**
- 5 *ty imenno chelovek,*  
**you are exactly a person**
- 6 *kotoriy imeet podavat', pisat' iumor*  
**who can present, write humor**

Igor, the former French professor in Irkutsk, also tied KVN to a person's internal qualities. He claimed that Soviet KVN, in contrast to similar French improvisation games, required cleverness (*nakhodchivost'*), not just theatrical know-how. Sipping tea in his tidy kitchen, Igor told me that cleverness was a widespread, particularly Russian trait. Cleverness led Russians to defeat the Nazis. Cleverness allowed Russians to live where no one else in the world could survive. “Everything you see here, I do with my own hands,” he said, pointing to the lamp he had made and the staircase he had built. “And Russia has a lot of people like that...Cleverness is a quality of the Russian person” (interview with author, October 20, 2016).<sup>142</sup> He continued, saying that a good KVNshik did more than simply improvise well. They could “orient themselves,” or find unconventional solutions. “As I said,” he told me, “How Russian KVN—Soviet—differs from French [improvisation], is that there, an actor comes out, they give him a topic, and he improvises.<sup>143</sup> That's it...With us it is different and it comes from human qualities, from the abilities

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<sup>142</sup> “Всё, что вы тут видите, я делаю своими руками. И таких людей очень много в России...Поэтому, находчивость — это качество русского человека.”

<sup>143</sup> Igor's self-correction here, from “Russian” to “Soviet” is also telling. We could well imagine a correction that went the other way, from “Soviet” to “Russian,” recognizing contemporary political boundaries. Igor adjusted his phrasing in order to include KVN players outside of Russia, such as those in Central Asia and Ukraine. He defined the nation relevant to KVN, even today, as Soviet. He defined the game itself as Soviet, and, presumably, the “human qualities” important to the activity.

of the person” (interview with author, October 20, 2016).<sup>144</sup> For Igor, playing KVN well comes less from theatrical skill and more from a creative disposition towards practical problems encountered in daily life.

Another Igor, Igor Kneller of 1960s Odessa Chimney Sweep fame, characterized the talent required for KVN in a similar way. “Let’s say someone gives you a choice, either A or B. You have to come up with a third way. KVN is finding the third way” (interview with author, June 17, 2017). Both men depicted KVN as, fundamentally, a game of wits. For Igor from Irkutsk, KVN is one of several arenas in which Russians brandish primordial cleverness. In converse fashion, Igor Kneller saw KVN as a training ground for cleverness that could be applied to other aspects of one’s life. Neither used the word “kulturnost,” but for both KVN was anything but slapstick.

Discussing his approach to both KVN and theater (he still directed local plays), Igor in Irkutsk said that he worked to make sure nothing indecent ended up on stage. He told me that no one (meaning no one in the Soviet government) ever stopped him from performing something that he wanted to. He said, though, that he practiced “self-censorship,” to keep material appropriate for all ages—much like the editors quoted above. Igor called this all-audience stance “a principle of a worthy life.”<sup>145</sup> He explained, “That is, it is commendable when a young child listens and is interested not because someone said something indecent, but because the form is interesting. Well, and the content” (interview with author, October 20, 2018).<sup>146</sup> Igor located the importance of cultured performances more in their effect on young people than in creating a joyful atmosphere, necessarily. But his emphasis on appropriateness as fundamental to a “worthy life” speaks to the same overarching values of kulturnost that guided the KVN editors.

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<sup>144</sup> “Я вот сказал, чем отличается КВН русский—советский—от французского, та актёр выходит, ему дают знание и он импровизирует. Всё. Т.е. он идёт туда, он—у нас это по-другому и это идёт от человеческих качеств, умений человека.”

<sup>145</sup> “Это принцип такой достойной жизни.”

<sup>146</sup> “Ну т.е. достойной, это когда маленький ребёнок слушает, ему интересно, но не потому интересно, то что-то неприличное, а потому что это по форме интересно. Ну и по содержанию.”

### *Black humor*

People filled every table on the top floor of Corvin's Pub in Odessa in May 2016, anticipating a better-than-average stand-up open mic night. A member of Odessa's successful League of Laughter team, Ilya, had come to compete for the open mic's first prize: 500 hryvnia (\$18). Amateur comics often face stony, silent audiences as they forget lines and tell anecdotes that fail to amuse. But Ilya was a professional, had competed on television, and people expected a charismatic three minutes from him. And, if nothing else, open-mic regulars knew that the night's emcee, Alexander Sas, would come up with a few jokes even if none of the participants managed to. Sas had won a Moscow-based televised competition called *Comedy Battle* in 2014 and was a local celebrity in his own right. That night he wore his trademark uniform, a flat bill baseball cap, sneakers, and jeans.

I, incidentally, was also performing that evening. It was my first attempt at stand-up, in Russian or any other language. Much like the time I ate liver from a freshly slaughtered sheep in a Siberian village, the raw, bloody organ still radiating body heat, I did stand-up as an exercise in cultural immersion rather than from genuine inclination. Several KVNshiki I knew did stand-up as well as KVN and I thought I should participate as much as possible in Odessa's comedy world.

I sat nervously sipping mineral water in the pub as Sas warmed up the crowd. "I didn't know there was a ring in the middle of the chocolate egg!" he said, explaining how he had accidentally proposed to his now-fiancee with a Kinder Surprise. Then he went over the open mic's ground rules. There were only two: don't go over the time limit and don't curse (*materitsia*). After this brief introduction, Sas picked up a clear glass bowl filled with scraps of paper. All the contestants had written their names on these strips as they came in. He drew the first name, read it silently, and put it back in the bowl. He drew a second name, read it, and again returned it, muttering something I could not hear. Then he drew a third name. It was mine. "Amy Garey, applause!" he said, as I nervously approached the microphone. Voice shaking only a little, the first anecdote earned a few

chuckles. Ilya laughed and nodded his head. “Someone who is funny thinks I’m funny!” I thought. It was the best encouragement I could have received in that moment. In the end, my three-minute monologue—about the interpersonal implications of the chill in Russian-American relations—got laughs, applause, and fourth place out of the twelve contestants. After the show was over, Ekaterina, co-organizer, with Sas, of the Stand-Up series, told me, “You did well.” She said that I’d had the “cleanest” performance of the night. They sought humorous, intelligent jokes, she said, like mine. “Too many of the performers tonight had bad, black material,” Ekaterina added.

“Black” humor includes crude, usually sexual themes. In a move I have never before seen at stand-up open mics, Sas intervened twice during the performance when contestants started making sexual jokes. After the third man did this, regaling the audience with a story about a glow-in-the-dark condom, Sas took the microphone. “Everyone is going along, telling normal jokes,” he said. “And then, suddenly, ‘Oh, and by the way, I have a MEMBER (*chlen*).’” He parodied the contestants, miming a man unzipping his pants and waving his member at the audience. Sas asked those in the crowd, “Honestly, do you guys even like these jokes about sex and prostitutes?” No one had laughed, or even smiled, during the spate of crude jokes that afflicted the male open mic contestants that night. So the question was less to the audience than to the competitors that had told the jokes. He said, in effect: “You yourselves know that you made no one laugh with this material. So why did you come here? What is your purpose? What did you hope to achieve?”

Only about half the contestants had performed. Sas may have hoped ridiculing black humor would change the tone of the evening, cutting off an unpleasant trend early. But the rule-breaking and vulgarity continued. First, almost all of the remaining performers annoyed Sas by going over the time buzzer, sometimes by a minute or more. He manifested his frustration by slapping the table with his hands. Whack! Whack! Whack! He did the same thing, mouthing “why?” and looking up at the ceiling in exasperation, when people started making crude jokes again. I felt relieved to see Ivan, a former KVNshik I had met in the audience at a previous open mic, stand to

take his turn. I smiled, thinking that the clean-cut young man in the blue Oxford shirt would definitely deliver something family-friendly. Instead he spoke literally and at length about his member. Sas interrupted him after the first ninety seconds. "Okay, that's good," he said, taking the microphone and motioning Ivan back to his seat. "Now you know the rules, and you can come back another time."

Black humor demonstrates what *kulturnost* is not. Not all open mics have rules against telling dirty jokes and profanity. Sas and Ekaterina preferred this. It seems the audience at the pub did, as well. Stand-up illustrates how frame influences content. Unlike KVN, there is no editing process. At open mics there are no auditions, either. They represent, thus, what comedic spaces can look like when there are fewer traditional norms and fewer people in charge of regulating them. Nonetheless, people in the KVN world often work to reinforce values from that format outside of KVN's interaction framework.

### **Collective: work for others**

There is nothing intrinsic to acting or improv that promotes orientation towards the collective. However, the norms and interactional frames of KVN do encourage a collective, rather than individual, view of social relations in two respects. First, the game itself is generally played in teams of three to fifteen. As distinct from open mic nights or stand-up comedy, KVN is a group activity. "I played KVN to socialize," a 27-year-old editor in Irkutsk told me. Second, whether or not it is uniformly true, people stereotype KVNshiki as civic-minded. Irkutsk journalist Elena Vlatan argued that KVN participants are more willing than other students to do volunteer work: "For any kind of good work, for example, community service (*subbotniki*), it is much easier to gather KVNshiki than ordinary school children or university students" (Vlatan 2010, 11). Vlatan did not analyze why this should be the case, but observed, "KVN is a conduit of a particular worldview,

one which promotes helping out, supporting people, and being easy-going” (2010, 11).<sup>147</sup>

The traits Vlatan named represent aspects of idealized moral personhood, a concept that Robin Shoaps defined as “an ethnographically situated concept that encompasses morally evaluated notions or models about the relationship between the individual and the social order, as well as conventional subject positionings” (Shoaps 2009, 93). KVN, as an activity and institution, keeps Soviet values in circulation because each practice session and each performance references a moral cosmology that privileges wit, intelligence, and education—in and for the collective.

### *KVN as collective activity*

Not only do students rehearse and perform together, as in theater groups, but they usually collaborate to write material, as well. Working with a team is part of the appeal for many KVNshiki. “It is fun to be in a collective (*v kollektive*),” said Evgenii, an Irkutsk law student (interview with author, October 21, 2016). KVN teams break up sometimes, just like rock bands, and sometimes particularly talented singers or performers will swap teams, trading up to improve their chances of competing on national stages. But many teams stick together for years and maintain close friendships even after they stop playing. To cement their bond, for instance, the Odessa team the Trump Cards, which has four members, each got a tiny tattoo of a playing card suit on their right ankle: one heart, one spade, one diamond, and one club. One of the reasons KVNshiki become so close is that many teams spend a lot of time together outside of institutional spaces. Team members very often work together late, writing material and practicing. Speaking about the inside jokes and internal shorthand team members come up with, Nikita, a member of Odessa team “Igor” said, “[Teams] are like different countries. Each one has its own language, its own relationships, and its own mentality” (interview with author, March 23, 2017). Adding to Nikita’s observations, Slava and Katia chimed in, noting that they call a team member that works

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<sup>147</sup> “А еще КВН формирует особое мировоззрение носители которого всегда придут на помощь, поддержат и будут легки на подъем.”

through the night a “machine” or a “monster.”

(8)

- |    |        |  |
|----|--------|--|
| 1  | Slava  | <i>mezhdu soboi</i><br><b>among ourselves</b>  |
| 2  |        | <i>my shutim inogda</i><br><b>sometimes we joke</b>  |
| 3  |        | <i>kogda kto-to</i><br><b>when someone</b>   |
| 4  |        | <i>priam'</i><br><b>just</b>   |
| 5  |        | <i>nu my lozhimsia spat i</i><br><b>well we all go to sleep and</b>                                  |
| 6  |        | <i>kto-to odin ostoetsia i prosto—</i><br><b>someone stays up by himself and just—</b>               |
| 7  | Nikita | <i>monstor</i><br><b>monster</b>   |
| 8  | Slava  | <i>ochen mnogo rabotaet my nazivaem “machina”</i><br><b>works a whole lot, we call him “machine”</b> |
| 9  | Nikita | <i>monstor</i><br><b>monster</b>   |
| 10 | Katia  | <i>da</i><br><b>yes</b>  |
| 11 |        | <i>monstor</i><br><b>monster</b>   |
| 12 | Nikita | <i>vot eto u nas Slavik</i><br><b>that's our Slavik</b>  |
| 13 |        | <i>vsia kommanda lozhitsia spat</i><br><b>the whole team goes to bed</b>                             |
| 14 |        | <i>i on sidit pishet</i><br><b>and he sits and writes</b>  |
| 15 |        | <i>i do utra stanovitsia mashinoi</i><br><b>he's a machine until morning</b>                         |
| 16 | Slava  | <i>s krasnymi glazami</i><br><b>with red eyes</b>  |



In this narrative, it emerges as quite normal for teammates to live together for periods of time, sleeping in the same apartment, perhaps working through the night, and rising to start again in the morning. Team Friend Zone described a similar work pattern before games, but their shared spaces were likely even smaller since all four girls still lived with parents in Odessa. Teams that travel to other cities for games pack into train compartments and hotel rooms, often spending close to a week together rehearsing, going to editing sessions, performing in the competition itself, and taking what might be a fifteen-hour train ride back home. Teams eat meals together, walk to class together, and seem to leave little space for secrets. It is easy to see how teammates could become close, and why many would value working in creative collectives of friend groups.

At the same time, the teams do *work*. University students, already saddled with homework, could much more easily socialize with their friends by watching television, playing video games, or drinking beer instead of staying up until dawn—writing. The intellectual labor required to produce KVN material is valued by large segments of the Russian and Ukrainian populations, and KVNshiki pour sleepless nights into the activity because there are emotional and social benefits to doing so. At least in some teams, people earn respect by working a lot, demonstrating commitment both to KVN and to the team. The norms of game preparation, thus, encourage close relations between team members and set up creative labor as a normative social good.

#### *KVN as civic action*

Pavel Demchenko reinforced the idea humor should benefit the public in his comments to a team from Summy, a city in eastern Ukraine. They proposed a skit in which a young man's arm gets frozen, then shatters. His friends, trying to piece it back together like a puzzle, sigh, "They say the sky is the hardest part." The editors had already spent hours listening to teams make excuses about why they had not written new material since the previous day, float ideas for skits for which they had not written scripts, and present skits that had plots but no jokes. Summy's puzzle joke, then, struck me as refreshing and funny. But Demchenko told them in an irritated tone, "What you

just showed is nonsense. It is cool when you show something *social*. Like showing a mother smoking in the park. *That's a window on life.*" Here, he compared the puzzle number to one in which Summy mocked teen mothers who drink and smoke in parks, towing their babies along in carriages. The puzzle joke was funny, but carried no social message. Demchenko disapproved, it seems, because the teams wasted time on an empty joke instead of offering a critical "window on life."

After the Odessa Mayor's Cup quarterfinals match, two Odessa editors also reinforced the idea that teams were meant to please audiences with their performances, not themselves. They took one local team to task for ignoring their advice in editing sessions leading up to the game. Grisha asked them, "What's with your script? Why did you sing songs that we cut out? Why did you show material that we cut out? I am ashamed of you." Nikita, likewise, continued, "We gave you a chance to play for a full auditorium. There were teams that people clapped for. There were teams that not many people clapped for. And that is important." Grisha and Nikita, thus, told the team that by performing material offensive to the crowd, they had let the editors and the audience down.<sup>148</sup>

It is this view of KVN as a platform for both individual moral development and other-oriented social action that has led some pedagogues, such as Ukrainian Olga Kol'tsova, to argue for including KVN in school curricula. In language that sounds strikingly Soviet, Kol'tsova wrote: "With this in mind, the essence of collective creative education can be defined as the formation of the individual in a work process in the interests of other people, process of the organization of a certain life of the collective, where everything is based on the principles of morality and social creativity" (Kol'tsova 2013, 111).<sup>149</sup> In a departure from Soviet dogma, Kol'tsova also argued that

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<sup>148</sup> Debriefing session, Odessa Mayor's Cup second quarterfinals, May 21, 2017.

<sup>149</sup> "Учитывая это, сущность коллективного творческого воспитания можно определить как формирование личности в процессе работы в интересах других людей, в процессе организации определенного образа жизни коллектива, где все основано на принципах нравственности и социального творчества."

KVN could act as a vehicle for teaching self-realization, self-determination, and individual decision-making (2013, 110). This parallels some of the priorities Thomas Matza observed in “psychological” training camps for children near St. Petersburg (Matza 2018). But while those camps were ultimately geared towards creating successful, money-making businessmen—cultivating individual prowess—the goal of pedagogues using KVN is to teach children a sociocentric moral code.

This statement resonates with Soviet ideas about children's ideological training. Nikolai Bogdanov, a Soviet journalist and author of children's literature, wrote in 1961, “[Heroes] help Soviet society to educate the children to grow up to be humane, kind, freedom-loving, to actively build a better world and to wish well and do good to their fellow creatures” (Bogdanov 1961, 164). Kol'tsova's assumptions about the training of creative, moral future citizens who concern themselves with the welfare of the collective is a sentiment alien to most Western educational contexts, and normative in Soviet ones. Whatever Soviet socialism was, it was not neoliberal. But it isn't joke contests, in themselves, that keep a particular worldview in circulation. It is, rather, community expectations of how KVNshiki should act and the types of values they should uphold.

Since the KVN format is so pervasive in Russian culture, the game commonly features in primary school lesson plans even today. Irkutsk's public and municipal libraries stock monthly and bi-weekly publications that outline lesson ideas which integrate theater, readings, games, and, as a combination of all three, KVN. This is an example rhyme from a 2015 lesson which uses KVN-style skits to explain the history of terrorism. This lesson was published in December 2015, only two months after a bomb detonated aboard a Russian passenger jet over the Sinai peninsula. Teaching students about terrorism via KVN exposes them to frightening events through a familiar medium. The lines are sing-songy in Russian, in a meter marked for children's rhymes.

“Терроризм не пройдет”

Терроризм многообразен  
Во многих странах бывал

“Terrorism Will Not Go Forward”

Terrorism takes many forms  
It has visited many countries

Подлый, очень безобразен,  
Всю планету он достал!"

Vile, monstrous  
It has taken the entire planet!  
(Savelov 2015, 5)

Rather than an activity limited to a few hundred or even thousand elite comics, KVN is a commonplace format, a competitive framework that can be used to achieve a variety of pedagogical and recreational objectives. People of all ages and backgrounds play KVN, in rural and urban areas, casually and competitively. Dima, a university competitor, said that in Krasnoyarsk “they practically require you to play” KVN in school. Unlike Irkutsk, which has one inter-school league for primary school students, Krasnoyarsk has three. Dima argued, though, that Krasnoyarsk children themselves showed a lot of enthusiasm for the game. Twelve year-old students, he said, had “a rabid (*beshenoe*) desire to play KVN.” Krasnoyarsk also organizes a three-to-four-day summer workshop for KVNshiki, run in conjunction with a larger youth camping and self development program (interview with author, December 3, 2016). But informal KVN games among primary school students influence far more students than these competitive leagues. Stanislav Mazytkin, the director of Irkutsk’s Regional Children's KVN league, which covers rural areas as well as the city of Irkutsk, said that in villages children do KVN exercises (*razminka*) every day, even though most of them do not travel outside the village for competitions. Doubtful that the students really played KVN that often, I repeated my question to the director, who competed in KVN's Top League in the 1990s. “They do *razminka every day*” he said.

The Russian federal government also distributes special funds for KVN in non-urban areas. Rural children compete in a set of regional competitions that run separately from the Irkutsk and Krasnoyarsk school leagues. Travel and expenses for these competitions is completely underwritten by the government, and finalists fly to Moscow (interview with author, December 6, 2016). The Russian government, it seems, much like the Soviet government before it, deems KVN a wholesome, beneficial activity for youth, and one that serves as a “conduit for a worldview” seen as socially valuable.

### *Enforcing norms*

Stanislav Mazytkin no longer judges KVN competitions, but as director of the Irkutsk Regional Children's League he is in a position to allocate funding, organize events, choose editors, and implement a KVN training program in schools. He is a member of Irkutsk's old guard KVNshiki, from the Irkutsk State University (IGU) team who were the most successful Top League players before the all-female collective Raisy made it to the televised leagues in 2013. Most KVN judges are former competitors—all of them successful, many of them, in Irkutsk and Odessa, internationally so. Members of the community, like deans and ministers of culture, local celebrities, and successful local business owners also judge KVN. They all help enforce KVN norms, in ways less direct but at least as important as the editors. Because teams want to win, they write material that judges will reward with high scores. They also give public feedback at the end of every competition before final scores are announced. These comments, like those of the editors, tell competitors (and audience members) explicitly what they believe KVN norms are and what KVNshiki need to do to meet them. At the primary school level, in particular, these often include advice about stage placement, timing, and rehearsal. More often, though, judges discuss joke content and effect. For instance, after a 2015 quarterfinal match among primary school students in Irkutsk, one judge told a team from Primary School #21, "I liked a lot of your jokes, they were social (*sotsialnie*)." "Social" in this context means socially-oriented. The team had performed a rap about the importance of making schoolwork a priority. The judge, Anton Gerneshev, in addition to being the chief editor of the Baikal League, was a history teacher. In part to tease the editor, judge Stanislav Gopersky had asked teams during an improvisation contest to describe their favorite subject in school and to say a few words about history. One girl said that her favorite subject was gym because she could break a leg and skip history entirely. During the comments section Gerneshev told the team, "I wasn't completely happy with your response, the one about history. We can talk about it afterwards." Perhaps predictably, the former KVNshik issued a dry joke

masked as offense.

Gerneshev did, however, speak sternly to adult competitors after the 2016 Baikal League finals. "Let's talk about the future," he said, beginning a ten-minute reproof. The highlights were that the teams had not worked hard enough, had not written material that was funny enough, and had under-rehearsed. "As we all know, KVNshiki are in their best form on the day of the game. But it seems like you started practicing three days before the competition. That's fine in internal university games. But this is the Baikal League." He also piled on shame, reminding them that the league's organizers had worked very hard to provide them what they needed for the competition, only to have the players themselves fall short. "People who were very successful in KVN are organizing all of this for you. When we played KVN, there was nothing like this...In my opinion, KVN has gotten much weaker. Next year the level of humor must be unbelievably better."

Teams that want to win take judges' preferences into account. In this way judges reinscribe KVN norms. Audiences appreciate wit. Judges do too, but they are also guardians, in a sense, of KVN tradition. One young judge who had recently stopped competing in KVN himself told students at the end of the quarterfinal match, "I no longer play KVN. It is yours. KVN is my gift to you." KVN's aim is an altruistic one, ultimately. The goal of going out on stage, one coach argued, was not to show off, find personal fulfillment, or even, strictly speaking, to entertain. It was to create a joyful atmosphere. "No audience member should leave empty-handed," said another Odessa competitor, recalling the advice of his favorite editor, Demchenko. "They have to leave with some kind of joke, amusing song, something...they have to take something home with them. That's our task" (interview with author, March 23, 2017).

### **Negotiating stance as a team**

I met team Friend Zone in Rivne after a 436-mile, twelve-hour train ride from Odessa. Emily, Nastya, Yana, and Fokin had arrived a few days earlier and had already begun editing sessions with

the Rivne League of Laughter editors. I caught up with them at Rivne’s Musical School before their second meeting with the editors. We waited outside the school's auditorium for the team’s turn, then we all went in. I sat in the audience while Friend Zone took their places. The three editors sat in the first row of seats, directly in front of the stage.

The team began with a cheesy pick-up line number. Then they presented some skits I’d seen them perform at other Odessa KVN competitions that season—at Odessa National University and at the Jewish Community Center. They’d written some new material, too. Their team dynamic had changed a bit with the addition of Fokin (Foks for short), a male in the usually all-female team. Including Fokin meant that they had more latitude to make jokes about male-female relationships, like those in their opening number. Friend Zone ran through miniatures about dieting, about what to do over the Victory Day holidays, about “airhead” news, about women's giant purses. In that one, Yana struggled to lift her heavy bag, tugging at it as if it were filled with bowling balls. Finally, she did a series of cartwheels off the stage, allowing the momentum of her body weight to fling the bag forward. Though short of hysterical, the gag came across as unexpected and clever.



**Friend Zone performs their material for editors in Rivne. May 16, 2017. Photo by author.**

The editors, though, cut almost all of Friend Zone’s material. After listening to their feedback,

the team thanked the judges and we all headed back to the apartment the team was renting. They would spend the rest of the afternoon and evening writing new material for their second-to-last editing session the following morning. As we wound our way through Rivne’s dusty, sunny May streets, the girls vented their frustration: *blakha!* (oh fudge!). “How come the skit with the two girls is ‘too KVN’ and the one about the news is not?” asked Nastya. Emily turned to me and said, “We’re nervous. This is more difficult [than in Odessa]. We came with a really big script, and we left the first day with almost nothing.”

After picking up some food at a local grocery store, the team settled in for four hours of uninterrupted brainstorming. One of the first sets of jokes they decided to rewrite were the pick-up lines. These jokes, which begin with “are you by any chance...” / “are your parents by any chance...” (“*ty sluchaino ne...*” / “*tvoi roditeli sluchaino ne...*”) make up a recognizable joke genre in Russian-speaking areas. Here are some examples of “are you by any chance” jokes, to illustrate the format the students played with:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| —Твои родители случайно не террористы?      | —Are your parents by any chance terrorists?      |
| —Нет...                                     | —No...   |
| —Тогда откуда у них такая бомба?            | —Then where did they get a bomb(shell) like you? |
| —Твои родители случайно не наркоманы?       | —Are your parents by any chance drug addicts?    |
| —Нет  | —No  |
| —Тогда почему у меня от тебя такая эйфория? | —Then why do you give me such euphoria?          |
| —Твои родители случайно не менты?           | —Are your parents by any chance cops?            |
| —Да   | —Yes   |
| —Молчу                                      | —I'll stop talking                               |

Being pick-up lines, the jokes in this genre can sometimes edge towards the bawdy. However, the genre conventions of the student comedy competitions mandate family-friendly humor. Editors, who act both like newspaper editors for columnists and like coaches in sports competitions, routinely tell teams to cut out “black” material, which means anything considered to be “negative” in this game: death, alcohol, drugs, and, of course, sexual themes. The rationale for omitting such material is not, in fact, because talking about these subjects is taboo, or even that



they would offend audience members. Instead, black jokes get the axe because they are rarely funny: they would be downers. Stand-up comedians in Russia and Ukraine, like those in the United States, do crack jokes on sexual themes. But topics like these tend to spoil the atmosphere of KVN competitions, where positivity, out-loud laughter, and the pursuit of emotional highs take priority. The Odessa team oriented towards the presupposed moral framework of KVN tradition as they evaluated potential jokes for their Rivne performance. The team members interactively navigated the genre clash between pick-up lines and the norms of the performance space, making judgements of “funny” and “not funny” based on their imagined audiences.

Close examination of the interactional stances the team members took reveals the ways in which their approval and disapproval of jokes reinforced normative KVN values, where joyfulness always trumps humor. Here, I analyze two categories of the team's evaluations:

- (1) explicit comments, such as “that one’s weak,” “no,” “don't go there,” and “that’s funny”
- (2) uptake of material, signaled either by topic continuation, silence, or topic shift

A more subtle interactional dynamic can be seen in these data, as well. For most of the forty-five minute segment where the team members were talking about pick-up line jokes, of which parts of four representative minutes are transcribed, Foks told jokes and the girls on the team issued judgements. The girls chipped in, but Foks was a more experienced KVN competitor and four years older than the college sophomores. When Foks told jokes that got a little too sexual, the girls, sometimes in chorus, issued mock-shocked disapprovals. But when one of the female team members said something unchaste, such as, “Are you by any chance a brick house? I would lay one of my bricks in you,” the girls giggled together and Foks tended to say nothing, often just moving on to the next potential joke set-up. While none of the sexual jokes were considered for their performance, by anyone, they were deployed to create interactional humor—even silliness—in the space of the rehearsal.

#### *Explicit commentary*

Only a handful of the hundreds of proposed pick-up line jokes got included in the team's eventual skit. Often, someone explicitly said that they did not like a joke, either because it was mediocre, because it was overly sexual, or because, as in the first excerpt below, the joke was gross (referring to bodily waste).

(9)

- |   |               |  |
|---|---------------|--|
| 1 | <b>Foks</b>   | <i>A tvoi roditeli sluchaino ne assenizatory?</i><br><b>Are your parents by any chance sanitation workers?</b> |
| 2 | <b>Nastya</b> | <i>[Nu—]</i><br><b>[Well—]</b>   |
| 3 | <b>Foks</b>   | <i>[Togda otkuda]</i><br><b>[Then where]</b>   |
| 4 |               | <i>Togda otkuda u nikh takoe govno@@o</i><br><b>Then where did they get such shit@@t?</b>                      |
| 5 | <b>Emily</b>  | <i>FOK-IN</i><br><b>FOK-IN</b>   |
| 6 |               | <i>Fuu ia by 'shas skazala</i><br><b>Ugh is what I'd say now</b>   |

When extremely negative reactions emerged, such as those in line 5, there was usually no explanation offered for why the joke was inappropriate. Voicing reproach, even by just repeating Foks' full name loudly (FOK-IN, line 5), was enough to signal a disapproving stance. Stances may be verbal or nonverbal, referential or nonreferential, but in all cases comment on some aspect of interaction, either immediate or mass-mediated. According to the relationship outlined in Du Bois' stance triangle (below), Emily (subject 1) evaluated Foks' punchline (object), thereby taking up a position towards tacit standards of humor.

Emily did not have to explain her disapproval, and, unlike in other places in the transcript (lines 152-155), Foks did not defend his joke. Foks revealed that he, too, knew that his joke edged over the line of the appropriate, both thematically and because he cursed, and that's why he laughed as he pronounced the word "shit" (line 4). In fact, Foks aligned with Emily's opinion of the

joke, at least regarding its suitability in competition. His laugh revealed that he told the joke because of its interactional effects on the girls, and, more importantly, for his own amusement.

The fact that Emily's reaction was so strong, though, reveals something about the participation framework of KVN jokes (Goffman 1974). KVN audiences expect clean, "cheerful" humor. KVNshiki write jokes with an aim to creating a positive atmosphere in the performance space. Performers therefore keep harsh satire to a minimum. The putdowns that often typify stand-up routines and *Saturday Night Live*, while sometimes funny, tend to be downers. KVN emphasizes, instead, feelings of elation and joyfulness (*vesel'e*). In line 6, Emily reinforces this vision of KVN, marking the sanitation joke as no good. This is genre-enforcing work that must be done; it isn't a given that the joke has no humor value—especially since Foks laughed. Not everyone, after all, thinks bathroom humor isn't funny; the movie *Dumb and Dumber* grossed \$247 million, and a number of its scenes featured bodily fluids (Weinrub 2005). Emily, however, put forth a more cultured image of humor.

Emily later dismissed a joke that Foks, Yana, and Nastya brainstormed as mediocre ("so-so") (line 4). Here, her evaluation appeared to be on the grounds of humor alone, though it is possible that Yana's punchline suggestion, "I'd sleep with you" would have also been too blatantly sexual for the competition (line 2). Several of the girls laughed together at Yana's joke, though, because the mild "sleep with" pun operates with the same dual indexicality in Russian as it does in English.

(10)

- |   |            |   |
|---|------------|---|
| 1 | Foks       | <i>ty sluchaino ne plushevaia igrushka</i><br><b>are you by any chance a plush toy?</b> |
| 2 | Yana       | <i>ia by s toboi by spal</i><br><b>I'd sleep with you</b>                               |
| 3 | (Multiple) | ((giggles))   |
| 4 | Nastya     | <i>ia by tebia obnial?</i><br><b>I would hug you?</b>                                   |
| 5 | Emily      | <i>nu takoe</i>   |

### **it's so-so**

Yana's punchline, nonetheless, elicited laughter. But the team members evaluated the funniness of jokes in their immediate interaction and jokes meant for a KVN auditorium differently. At times, too, they brainstormed some material that they seemed to know would never make it on stage because they found it funny amongst themselves. Often these were jokes of a sexual nature. In a suggestive joke Emily told, "Are you by any chance a satellite? My meteorite would draw up next to you" (lines 7-10, below), once again the girls laughed, but even Emily herself wrote off the joke as useless.

Neither the brick house joke above nor Emily's satellite one followed terribly strong logic, however. Even if sexual themes had been acceptable for their performance, the jokes simply weren't very good (good, that is, if a well-formed joke is understood to create a cohesive image or storyline in the minds of listeners). Neither "I'd lay one of my bricks in you" nor "my meteorite would draw up next to you" act as very close analogues to sexual activity. (Do meteors sidle up to satellites?) But this is one of the reasons these jokes made the students laugh. They were silly, semi-intentional parodies of the pick up line genre that delighted the team in the space of rehearsals. These types of interactions, then, often reveal dual evaluations. Members may have laughed at an inappropriate joke, signaling approval and appreciation, but adopted negative stances towards including such material in the performance. Just like Demchenko's dual stances cited above, these participants took first-order stances towards the jokes in the space of interaction, but signaled second-order stances toward a superordinate moral framework—in this case, the regime of values affirmed in KVN.

#### *Uptake of material*

Not all of the proposed jokes, though, elicited explicit commentary. Instead, the team members marked approval and disapproval via uptake, or how they reacted to and referenced an

utterance in their replies. In the examples below, jokes deemed unsuccessful simply got little uptake. They were either ignored (line 18) or dismissed in a few syllables: “well yeah,” “don't” (lines 7-10). Emily's failure to acknowledge her own satellite joke is telling. Both Nastya and Yana had offered continuations on the “are you by any chance a satellite” set-up that Emily floated (lines 13-15). The topic, it seemed had potential—unlike Foks’ Geiger counter line, which the girls shot down immediately (lines 7-9). But both Yana’s and Nastya’s contributions were met with silence rather than either praise or continuation, effectively eliminating them from contention. Emily herself issued a punchline in line 16, and Nastya laughed. But instead of refining the idea, Emily instead cursed the fact that they’d only come up with one joke so far, about the Titanic of a guy’s heart crashing on the iceberg of his crush. Even in her estimation, the satellite joke had not counted. As with Fokin’s sanitation worker joke and the brick house come-on, the punchline Emily voiced only served to amuse the team.

(11)

- |   |        |  |
|---|--------|--|
| 1 | Foks   | <i>ty sluchaino ne schetchik Geigera</i><br><b>are you by any chance a Geiger counter?</b>                 |
| 2 | Emily  | <i>nu da</i><br><b>well yeah</b>   |
| 3 | Nastya | <i>ne n:ado</i><br><b>don't</b>  |
| 4 |        | ((yawn))   |
| 5 | Foks   | <i>ty sluchaino ne</i><br><b>are you by any chance</b>   |
| 6 |        | <i>ty sluchaino ne</i><br><b>are you by <u>any</u> chance</b>  |
| 7 | Emily  | <i>ty sluchaino ne kosmicheskii sputnik ((yawn))</i><br><b>are you by any chance a satellite? ((yawn))</b> |
| 8 | Nastya | <i>ia ob tebya—</i><br><b>I around you—</b>  |
| 9 | Yana   | <i>ty dazhe ne dosiagaema</i><br><b>you're not even reachable</b>  |

- 10 Emily *moi meteorit k tebe by pritianulsia*  
**my meteorite would pull up next to you**
- 11 Nastya ((hhhhh))
- 12 Emily *vot blin'*  
**well darn**
- 13 *°nu vot krome etogo serdtsa°*  
**°well except for that heart°**

Rather than simple statements about whether jokes were funny or not, the evaluations Friend Zone made reflected ideologies about humor and its social role. All four team members presupposed norms not only about the kinds of jokes audiences would appreciate, but about the kinds of jokes they *should* tell during KVN competitions. Their actions in this rehearsal reflected the beliefs they held. While all topics are fair game during stand-up shows, including sex, brutal criticism of political leaders, and complaints about family life (or potholes, the job market, the rise of cell phones, discrimination, etc.), negativity ruins the mood KVN competitors work to create. Everyone wants to win, true, and winners are those that tell funny jokes. It isn't enough, though, for a joke to be funny. It must also be joyful, and ideally intellectual (or at least not crass).

By reinforcing this vision of comedy, even if only for KVN auditoria, Friend Zone also endorsed ideologies about the good and the right. They, like thousands of teams across Ukraine and hundreds of thousands in Russia and Central Asia, don't nix negative topics because they are censored or violate rules (KVN has no rules). They do this because they enjoy participating in a game whose goal is generating, as Katia said, "highs." At any time a team could choose to do otherwise, and occasionally they do, as Connected Odessa did with their jokes about death. The audience did not laugh and the judges gave the team low scores. KVNshiki thus operate within social structures not of their own making, responding to the regulatory pressures of audiences, judges, and editors. Importantly, though, they get to choose their jokes, their representations of reality, and their orientations towards sex, drugs, violence, and crude references. These choices

serve as moral stances, not just matters of taste.



**Team Friend Zone preparing for competition in Rivne, Ukraine, May 16, 2017. Photo by author.**

### **Conclusion: reproducing social structures**

Nearly twenty years ago Caroline Humphrey revised her classic Soviet-era ethnography, *Karl Marx Collective*, under a new title: *Marx Went Away—But Karl Stayed Behind* (1998). The book describes changes to collective farm life after socialism, but notes structural continuities, as well. At least in 1998, there were no good alternatives to collective farms in the rural areas Humphrey studied. Tradition persisted because it was economically easier. In contrast, people have little monetary incentive to continue participating in KVN. Students could spend their time playing video games, watching the hundreds of (largely Western) cable channels that flood TV screens even in Irkutsk, or working at part-time jobs. Instead they devote dozens of hours a week, in person, to an intellectual comedy game. The Komsomol went away, but KVN stayed behind.

Competitors play KVN (1) because they enjoy it and (2) because competing earns them cultural capital. It is the continued significance of this prestige that links KVN to Soviet systems of value. With each rehearsal, in each editing session, in each performance, KVNshiki orient towards

a moral framework that privileges the elements of joyfulness, kulturnost, and the collective—all in a non-profane, intentionally family-friendly style. The activity has remained popular among audiences because people like to laugh, almost universally. Unlike scrolling through memes or watching comedy on TV, activities which might also make people laugh, KVN is an event; competitions feel more like parties than theater performances. The games pull communities together in laughter in regular, predictable, and accessible ways, which causes KVNshiki to gain local esteem for some of the same reasons that hometown football players do in the United States.

No central authority dictates KVN game play or content, certainly not across international borders. However, norms in KVN prove consistent enough to count as “real.” Observations of live game play in Irkutsk, Moscow’s outskirts, Odessa, Rivne, and Kharkiv demonstrated that the themes KVNshiki and editors say are not allowed—sex, drugs, death, and anything else negative—tend not to crop up in performances. But each league, and each audience, determines negativity in its own way. Odessa’s Jewish Community Center League (Vzlët), for instance, instructs teams not to make jokes about politics (especially Israeli politics), but in other leagues political humor is common. Vzlët also encourages teams to write jokes on Jewish themes, but asks that they avoid allusions to Christianity. Likewise, jabs at Putin generally get considered joyous in Ukraine. In Russia, though, only those punchlines which in some way complimented Putin got staged in the performances I saw: “It is highly possible that Vladimir Vladimirovich was a child at some point.”<sup>150</sup> Participants constantly negotiate KVN norms according to audience expectations and their own objectives. But thematic prohibitions are not written down anywhere. They are not official, explicit, or centrally dictated. They are not Durkheimian social facts or “moral rules impressed...from without” (Goffman 1967, 45). Players reaffirm the meaning and mores of the game as they practice “doing-being-ordinary” KVNshiki (Sacks 1984).

As participants discuss what is appropriate in KVN, they take stances not about rules, but

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<sup>150</sup> “Наверняка, Владимир Владимирович был ребенком.”



about what the game represents: a positive, joyous, intellectual space. Editors in both Russia and Ukraine cut material that interferes with this vision. *That's base. That's not funny. Be more cheerful. That's dark. That's cruel. That's a cheap joke.* Further, the value of the activity bleeds into people's understanding of the characters of KVNshiki. In order to play KVN, the thinking goes, someone must be intelligent, creative, and sociable. Katia, on the Odessa university team Igor, said that editors praised them as role models: “All of the editors tell me, we are glad that you don't drink beer, that you don't do drugs. That, in short, you are doing something healthy and good...The stage is our drug” (interview with author, March 23, 2017). Of course, KVNshiki do very often drink beer at post-game parties. But not to excess, in my experience, and always after the game.

KVN has not remained popular because of indifference. Stand-up comedy, with its individual format, reduced labor time, and license to make crude jokes could have taken KVN's place. That it hasn't indicates that audiences and performers alike still prefer PG-rated, intellectual, joyful, socially-engaged comedy—a format that hands out gifts spectators take home with them. Humor in this context is a social donation, it is an ethics, and it is a statement about the kind of society participants want to build. If KVN survives as an activity, in the face of Western alternative formats, it will be because participants uphold this tradition of joyfulness rather than humor—a commitment to “making life better” through their craft.

## Chapter Five: Signs

*Not about me. In defense of the genre. I myself became tearful and thoughtful. I myself began to dive into words. I myself lost my life, and out of that—humor. And, after losing everything, walking around in the threadbare jacket of a disheveled philosopher, I can say—there's nothing better in life. And humor is life. It's a condition. It's not jokes. It's sparks in the eyes. It's love for your interlocutor and a willingness to laugh to tears.*

—Mikhail Zhvanetskii, “What is Humor?”<sup>151</sup>

Zhvanetskii might claim that humor lies in emotion rather than jokes, but it is jokes, nonetheless, that fuel KVN. As Marfin and Chivurin wrote, “So—jokes, jokes, and only jokes. Every thing else just frames them. And the KVN audience member, whether we want them to or not, takes in a performance fitfully: from joke to joke” (Marfin and Chivurin 1998, 15). Even in televised Top League performances, which often feature large dance ensembles and expensive costumes, teams succeed only if they write good jokes. Oil giant Gazprom’s 2019 Top League team, for instance, started the first game of the season with a full orchestra, twelve Cossack dancers, six Brazilian samba dancers in full feathered regalia, and seven kimono-clad Japanese dancers. Flush with cash but short on punchlines, they took last place.<sup>152</sup> As Odessa editor Pavel Demchenko told the team the Trump Cards, “Always start with the jokes. You have to start with jokes and write scenarios around them. It never happens the other way around.” When the team members protested, saying, “It’s just not that simple,” Victoria Pis’menchenko suggested that they write jokes about familiar subjects until they found inspiration. Demchenko continued, saying, “Write one joke about our university. Write one about the game’s emcee. Write two about life. And there, done.”<sup>153</sup> Demchenko, like other editors and team members themselves, used the verb

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<sup>151</sup> “Не о себе. В защиту жанра. Сам стал слезлив и задумчив. Сам стал копаться в словах. Сам потерял жизнь и от этого—юмор. И, потеряв это все, рассказывая в поношенном пиджаке задрюканного философа, скажу - ничего нет лучше жизни. А юмор—это жизнь. Это состояние. Это не шутки. Это искры в глазах. Это влюбленность в собеседника и готовность рассмеяться до слез.” From “Что такое юмор?” Monolog first performed in the 1980s. Available at [http://www.jvanetsky.ru/data/text/t8/chto\\_takoe\\_umor/](http://www.jvanetsky.ru/data/text/t8/chto_takoe_umor/) (accessed January 28, 2020).

<sup>152</sup> KVN Top League 2019 First Octofinal, February 15, 2019. Broadcast recording available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vb3wJn35NqM> (accessed January 28, 2020).

<sup>153</sup> Editing session, Odessa, Ukraine, April 19, 2017. Audiorecorded.

“write” to describe the creation process instead of “come up with,” “develop,” “plan,” or “sketch.” A KVNshik writes skits as surely as a journalist does articles—and often with as much brute force sit-down-and-do-it. Kurt Vonnegut once said of the writing trades, “They allow mediocre people who are patient and industrious to revise their stupidity, to edit themselves into something like intelligence.”<sup>154</sup> Vonnegut thought more or less anyone could learn to write essays. And KVN editors think more or less anyone can learn to write jokes. Aleksei Eks, a successful competitor on the Ekaterinburg team Dumplings from the Urals (*Ural'skye Pel'meny*) from 1993-2000 and now a professional KVN writer said,<sup>155</sup> “Don’t believe those that say you can't learn to write jokes. If you have the desire, you watch TV and read, and you can look around you and find something funny in what you see, you'll get there!”<sup>156</sup> Pavel, similarly told teams at a training session, “I want you to think about the fact that if you write a ton of jokes and you know some interesting set-ups...if you know a few small rules about how to put together numbers, you cannot be stopped.”<sup>157</sup>

Humor may be more art than science but, as with painting or writing, people who train in basic techniques can reach fair proficiency. Not everyone will create masterpieces. Still, most people can be taught perspective and shading. Student joke writers learn not an activity, then, but a craft. This chapter analyzes the social life and architecture of KVN jokes, semiotic complexes designed to create specific emotional effects. What makes a joke funny? What distinguishes a joke from a statement? What ideologies of humor underlie punchline construction and topic selection? Here, I survey semantic theories of humor, outline a semiotic approach to understanding jokes, and illustrate how KVNshiki themselves theorize humor. I conclude with a discussion of how

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<sup>154</sup> Kurt Vonnegut, *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloon* (New York: Dial Press, 2006), xx.

<sup>155</sup> As described in chapter 3, KVN writers are people who sell jokes to both professional and student KVN teams, often full time, often for large sums of money.

<sup>156</sup> “Не верьте тому, кто скажет, что нельзя научиться писать шутки. Если у вас есть огромное желание и вы что-то смотрите и читаете, а также наблюдаете за тем, что происходит вокруг и способны найти в этом что-то смешное ...у вас всё впереди!”

<sup>157</sup> “И я хочу, чтобы вы подумали б над тем, что если вы напишите просто кучу шуток и будете знать интересные схемы, после интересной подачи, то зная какие-то маленькие законы сложения номеров, вас не остановить.” Training session in Odessa, April 22, 2015. Audiorecorded.

social media reporting on KVN events constitutes a culture of comments on comments, of metapragmatic evaluation as lifestyle.

### **Semantic approaches to humor**

Albert Akesel'rod, one of KVN's creators, came up with a simple formula for humor: "You can express this in dry mathematical language: the funny = recognizable + the unexpected" (Akselrod 1974, 86).<sup>158</sup> Elementary math, perhaps, but skillfully combining these elements is no easy task. And while the equation works for punchlines, jokes usually require quite a lot more in terms of contextual setup. If I was sitting at an outdoor cafe, for instance, and a recognizable pigeon sat on my shoulder, quite unexpectedly, I might find it amusing but not funny. However, if a pigeon flew into a lecture hall, perched on a desk, and picked up a stray pencil, as if preparing to take notes, I'm sure I would giggle. It could be that a pigeon playing student breaches some kind of unexpectedness threshold. Adding the notion of contrast, however, might make it more plain why only the second scenario leads to laughter. The ordinary lives of pigeons and the ordinary lives of students clash comically.

In an attempt to concretize the effects of contrast in jokes, Victor Raskin developed the Script-Based Semantic Theory of Humor, which maintained that elements of situational oppositeness served as the foundation for every joke (Raskin 1985). He formally defined the theory as follows:

A text can be characterized as a single-joke-carrying text if both of the following conditions...are satisfied:

- (i) The text is compatible, fully or in part, with two different scripts
- (ii) The two scripts with which the text is compatible are opposite... (1985, 99)

A script, in this sense, refers to the set of presuppositions listeners hold about situations,

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<sup>158</sup> "На сухом математическом языке это можно выразить формулой: смешное = узнаваемость + неожиданность" (86).

people, and behavior. For instance, the macro-script RESTAURANT includes sub-scripts pertaining to behavior within the restaurant, such as SIT DOWN, ORDER FOOD, PAY BILL (Attardo 1994, 200). An example of an English joke with opposing scripts is, “Never go into the water after a heavy meal. You won't find it there.” The audience recognizes the first sentence as advice not to swim after eating. But the second sentence flips the script, punning on being “after” something. The disjuncture between the joke's two contrasting scripts, EATING A MEAL and LOOKING FOR A MEAL, generates humor. Jokes are funny, then, if they demonstrate script oppositeness in some way (Raskin 1985, 100). Since a joke is an overlap in scripts—an overlap in meaning potentials—in this conception of humor every punchline represents a kind of pun.<sup>159</sup> The punchline is the moment when two possible meanings, two possible interpretations, or two imagined worlds intersect, either because new information changed the interpretation of a preceding text (“you won't find it there”) or a contrasting image was added (pigeon picks up a pencil, looks attentively at lecturing professor).

The concept of script oppositeness offers a structural framework on which to hang the oppositions that crop up in a joke, such as categories of people, real and unreal situations, or conflicts of institutional values (Raskin 1985, 100-112). However, such contrasts can often be drawn out as “images” or “stereotypes” just as easily as by semantic scripts, and often a little more plainly. Further, the information that might make up a semantic script for a restaurant scene, such as SIT DOWN, ORDER FOOD, PAY BILL, while important, is rarely all that a listener needs in order to understand most jokes about restaurants. The following Russian joke, for instance, would probably confuse an American audience:

- A man is choking! Is there a doctor in the house?
- Where would a doctor get money to eat in restaurants?

In Russia and Ukraine doctors are notoriously underpaid. Armed with that information, the punchline now makes sense. But pulling the joke through a chassis of semantic scripts contributes

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<sup>159</sup> “A joke exploiting the possible meanings of a word,” Oxford English Dictionary

little to our understanding of where contrasts lie. The contrasting scripts in this joke could be described as ORDINARY PEOPLE EAT IN RESTAURANTS vs. DOCTORS ARE POORER THAN ORDINARY PEOPLE. This wedges the significant parts of the joke into unwieldy, unnatural categories, however. Instead, the information a joke presupposes could more accurately be described in terms of shared ground: what do people have to know in order to understand the joke? What contrasting images would Ukrainians identify?

Specifying this shared ground becomes crucial to explicating humor, as even simple jokes encode a lot of culturally-specific information. The following two short examples from the Russian KVN team DALS illustrate just how much information teams presuppose, often with very little text. Unfortunately, these examples do not sound very funny to English ears. I chose these two jokes not because they are hard to understand but because they, in fact, require less explanation than most (funny) KVN punchlines.<sup>160</sup> Both jokes were also terribly successful in competition, triggering laughter, applause, and cheers, most likely because the team skillfully managed contrasts.

- (1) "The director of a Kaluga mushroom factory often fantasized that he was a Columbian drug lord."<sup>161</sup>
- (2) From a speech by a former prisoner: "My children are helping me out today. [The son] is from my first marriage. And [the daughter] is from my second marriage. But I love them as if they were my own."<sup>162</sup>

These jokes do not ring very funny in English because neither of Axel'rod's criteria get met in English translation. The factory director joke is not relevant, for instance, because few people outside of the Soviet bloc recognize stereotypes about Kaluga or its factories. The contrast fails. And since the contrast never surfaces, we miss the punchline; it doesn't register as unexpected.

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<sup>160</sup> I have included a number of Top League jokes in this chapter because they usually require less background knowledge than local-level jokes in Irkutsk and Odessa, which often include references to events, places, and people that are specific to communities.

<sup>161</sup> "Директор Калуческого мухоморского завода часто фантазировал что он Колумбийский наркобарон." Team DALS, KVN Top League 2015, First Quarterfinal, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HYKzfaFsmi8> (accessed January 28, 2020).

<sup>162</sup> "Вот помогает мои дети. Это от первого брака. Это от второго. Но люблю я и как своих." KVN Top League 2015, First Quarterfinal. May 15, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HYKzfaFsmi8> (accessed January 28, 2020).

English speakers hear a statement, not a joke. But the Russian audience rolled with laughter.

Masliakov even pumped his fist in delight, turning to the jury to say, "By protocol I'm required to ask..." but everyone knew DALs had won. No one needed the pronouncement from the jury.

DALS' joke packed such power because it contained two simultaneous contrasts (four scripts): Kaluga factory director vs. Columbian drug lord and button mushrooms vs. hallucinogenic mushrooms. The first contrast plays on the image of a factory director in Kaluga, population 325,000. Industrial stereotypes from the Soviet era portray factory directors as responsible, yet plain and working class, and surrounded by snow and not a lot else. This is at odds with representations of Columbian drug lords as glamorous, rich, living in the tropics, and surrounded by scantily clad women. The second level of the joke revolves around ambiguity in the referent of the word "mushrooms," which, as in English, can also mean hallucinogenic varieties. Overall, then, the listener begins to develop a picture of a shabbily dressed Russian man only to have it crash headlong into a completely incongruous lifestyle. Moreover, the four-layer contrast hit the audience fast. The whole joke lasted less than five seconds, and the punchline took only eight syllables to deliver. So there was a double punchline, delivered quickly, with maximum unexpectedness and a high degree of relatability.

The rhythm of the second joke translates a little more naturally into English. This joke, too, made use of two contrasts. The first was between our expectation that the children from the speaker's marriages were his biological children and the reality, that his wife had borne the children of other men while he was in prison. The second is the contrast between the man's quite open, even cheery disposition towards the fact that he'd been cuckolded and our expectation that no one would willingly reveal such information. It is the kind of joke that Russians call *tonkii*, which means light or subtle. No one talked crassly about extra-marital affairs, there was just a floating insinuation that forced a reinterpretation of the first lines (Ritchie 2004, 60).

Graham Ritchie set out a four-part model for such reinterpretation mechanisms. He argued

that jokes like these have an initial set-up, a second set-up, a punchline, and moment when the punchline is interpreted. The former prisoner joke would thus look like this, schematized:

Set-up 1:	My children are helping me out today.
Set-up 2:	The son is from my first marriage, and the daughter is from my second.
Punchline:	But I love them as if they were my own. (Implied: These are not my biological children.)
Interpretation:	The man's wife bore the children of other men while he was in prison.

Even Ritchie, though, was dissatisfied with this model's ability to predict actual humor. He therefore tried to systematize additional potentially funny parameters of a joke: obviousness, conflict, compatibility, contrast, and inappropriateness. Ritchie argued that even these categories, however, would need more elaboration before they could serve as a reliable humor calculus, one, perhaps, that could be automated for computer programs (2004, 61). Seeking precise determinations of the comic, he asked, "What kind of incongruity is funny...How surprising must a portion of text be to count as a punchline?" (2004, 67).

There seems to be little utility, though, in trying to operationalize degrees of obviousness or incongruity even in pragmatic terms, much less semantic ones. The surprise quotient of any joke will vary not just with the text itself, but with its interpretation by individual audience members. The Kaluga joke depicted significant incongruity, but only for audiences hip to post-Soviet indexicality. Too much context underpins punchlines for any science to pin down. Most of the jokes made in live, student-level KVN, for instance, rely not only on widely-presupposed cultural knowledge, as in the nationally-broadcast DALs jokes listed above, but also on local and interpersonal knowledge. Local teams make fun of each other, riff off of others' skits, and assume an audience that remembers not only that season's performances, but performances from teams that go back years. For this reason, people very often say that live KVN performances, even student performances, are funnier than the "pro" leagues on television. KVNshiki can build on a lot more presupposed information with local audiences than they can with television viewers across Russia's eleven time zones (to say nothing of viewers in Central Asia and the Russian-speaking



diaspora), and they thus have more opportunities to build multi-layered, multiply-contrasting jokes. Sometimes these jokes concern events all residents of a city will know, such as the outcome of local elections. Or they might poke fun at landmarks everyone in town recognizes. Irkutsk's odd "Ice Palace" skating rink, for instance, looks like a truncated Aztec temple; its "renovation" resulted in a number of punchlines. Teams also commonly reference other competitors. For instance, in the 2018 Baikal League final match in Irkutsk, the emcee joked that there had been 5,000 jokes about Stanislav Gospersky (cited in chapter four) in the last ten years. National television viewers do not know who Stanislav Gospersky is, but he is a respected member of Irkutsk's KVN community.

KVN Top League champion Olga Kartunkova, from team Piatigorsk, called such inside jokes a challenge for teams transitioning from regional competitions to the (inter-)national Moscow stage. Discussing the semi-slang term "*vnytrak*," from the Russian word *vnutryi*, or "inside," she described it as, "When in the Stavropol league we can joke on internal themes, which only we understand, and we laugh about them."<sup>163</sup> What, though, makes *vnytrak* so much funnier than jokes on television? Why does a joke told by friends, about friends, cause people roll with laughter while slick comedy professionals rarely get chuckles from their audiences?

Humor's aesthetic, emotional qualities surpass context, relevance, and unexpectedness. Funniness remains ineffable. Specifying the elements of a joke, thus, differs from defining the structure of a haiku. If a poem has seventeen syllables that are divided into three lines of five, seven, and five syllables respectively, it is a haiku. But even expressions that meet Raskin's criteria for a joke might not achieve funniness. Racist jokes and dead baby jokes are still jokes, after all, but not everyone who understands the punchlines—intersections of contrast, relevance, and unexpectedness—finds them funny. A representative dead baby joke, for instance, runs like the

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<sup>163</sup> "Это когда в ставропольской лиге могут пошутить на внутренние темы, которые знаем только мы, и мы над ними посмеемся." Olga Kartunkova, in an interview in News Tracker, November 30, 2015, <https://newstracker.ru/interview/01-03-2017/v-kvn-stalo-deistvitelno-ochen-mnogo-nesmeshnykh-komand-17536> (accessed January 28, 2020).

following: “What gets louder as it gets smaller? A baby in a trash compactor.” Personally, I don't find jokes like these funny at all. Many people do. Both those that laugh and those that do not perceive the same degree of script oppositeness, but they do not have the same reaction. Something similar arises for the butts of jokes, both verbal and practical. If digs are more cruel than endearing, humiliation will outweigh humor for a joke's living punchline. These facts point up the biggest shortcoming of the script oppositeness theory of humor: how do we analytically handle jokes that are not funny? In an edited volume inspired by his own work, Victor Raskin wrote, “Most active humor researchers are SSTH-aware and cite it whenever convenient. For most, it is a matter of politeness rather than of intellectual necessity, and they hardly ever need to go beyond SSTH” (2017, 224). The concept of script oppositeness allows us to locate humorous hinges in jokes (where are the contrasts?) and provides a framework for understanding complexity (how many contrasts are there?). But we do need to go beyond SSTH, both to understand *why* a joke is funny and to describe *how* a joke signifies funny images.

Getting at why jokes are funny, I argue, requires two additional elements: *enjoyment* and *complexity*. The first, *enjoyment*, is a factor in any joke that someone considers funny. For example, the argument between the Moscow team Middle-Aged Humor and Odessa League of Laughter editor Demchenko from chapter five can be framed as a difference of enjoyment. Pavel told the team, “that's not a joke” because the idea of Russians shooting Ukrainians was abhorrent to him, not because he failed to perceive script oppositeness. The images the joke evoked proved unpleasant for Demchenko, a Ukrainian sensitive to the impact of casualties on the Ukrainian side of the border.

The second feature, *complexity*, is a characteristic of the funniest jokes. As DAL'S' Kaluga factory director joke illustrates, the best punchlines key contrast along more than one axis. DAL'S'' joke, brief as it was, made people laugh out loud for fully half a minute because it snuck two opposing images—factory director vs. drug lord and button mushrooms vs. narcotics—into a single

sentence. Either would have been funny on its own, and the combination hit the brain like a shot of vodka. A similarly short joke, “Never go into the water after a heavy meal, you won't find it there,” might make someone smile, it might make some people groan at the pun, but it would make very few people laugh out loud, at all, much less for an extended period of time. Performers who deliver multiple simultaneous punchlines get the most laughter. DALs excelled at this on a national stage. But local performers very often build triple or quadruple punchlines, as well, depending on their skill and how well they and the audience members know each other. Your friend's jokes sound funnier not just because you like them, but because you know them. Your friends can presuppose much more shared information with you than any professional performer can with a television audience. People you know, thus, find it much easier to make multi-layered jokes.

I would like to walk through one of DALs' entire numbers, a miniature (*miniatura*) from a 2014 Top League octofinals performance, to demonstrate how complexity and enjoyment function in ordinary KVN skits.<sup>164</sup> Outside of biathlon jokes, which are one or two sentences by design, most KVN jokes cannot stand alone without the miniatures and skits that provide their set-ups. Both performers and audience members, though, understand punchlines as the products of jokes rather than narratives. Some fans even include statistics about the number of jokes each team tells in online, usually unofficial reviews of games on personal blogs and YouTube channels. One individual, for instance, posted a video detailing not only how many jokes has been told in each segment of the 2018 Top League second semifinals, but also the ratios of “successful” jokes to total jokes, by team. Thus, while the team “Na te” (*Nate*) told thirty jokes during their seven-minute introductory skit, only twenty of these “hit” (*zashli*), or were successful. The team Wrestlers, in contrast, told only 29 jokes, but twenty-two of them hit. If all these jokes were distributed

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<sup>164</sup> KVN Top League 2014, Fourth Octofinal performance, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MmUq1WpK\\_Nk&index=1&list=PLqb8RylZM1NJBwdseHryoeKERuZBqi45y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MmUq1WpK_Nk&index=1&list=PLqb8RylZM1NJBwdseHryoeKERuZBqi45y) (accessed January 28, 2020).

uniformly, it would mean teams told a joke roughly every fifteen seconds—which is a demanding creative task. When teams are able to incorporate a lot of jokes (ideally successful ones) into their skits, KVNshiki consider the performance to have a high density (*plotnost'*) of humor. Statistical analyses by viewers are a way of systematizing this density. While the miniature presented below was only forty-five seconds long, Filip and Timur included four jokes, for a laugh roughly every eleven seconds. Filip introduced the skit by saying,

(1)

1	Filip	<i>a nachinaia s etogo momenta</i> <b>starting now,</b>
2		<i>my budem pokazyvat' miniatury</i> <b>we're going to be showing miniatures.</b> <sup>165</sup>
3		<i>esli miniatura smeshnaia</i> <b>if a miniature is funny,</b>
4		<i>vy eto poimete</i> <b>you will know</b>

*Joke 1*

The joke was simple, but received six full seconds of applause. The audience whistled. Why, though, did people find this quip so funny? Once again, the joke relied on a four-way contrast. The first contrast opposed the world of a narrated speech event and that of the performance space. The dependent clause in line 3, “If a miniature is funny,” prepares the audience to hear a concrete resulting action, such as “we will win the competition” or “Aleksandr Masliakov will smile.” Instead, the team finished their sentence with a clash of narrative frame. They switched from an imagined world of narrative, speculation about a subjunctive future, to the internal experiences of the audience members themselves, “If it's funny, you'll know.” Filip also played with the common Russian image of the fool, contrasting his deadpan delivery of a banal truism with his persona as purveyor of intellectual humor. This was the overall enjoyable impression evoked by the punchline. A joke like this is difficult to explain in terms of semantic scripts, though. It makes more sense to

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<sup>165</sup> Miniatures, described in chapter 3, a ultra-short skits typical in KVN competitions.

parse complexity of theme, image, and expectation.

The next jokes follow a more standard set-up and punchline format, and received positive but subdued responses from the audience. The first punchline, in line 16, reveals that a man who has come to donate blood is actually just injured (“I didn’t *plan* to donate”). The final punchline in the miniature puns on the Russian version of “make the best of a bad situation,” which is “extract maximum profit from what happens.” Profit usually is not meant so literally in this saying, and this mismatch serves as the crux of the joke—a man who has been stabbed tries to donate blood and sell the knife to benefit from his misfortune.

5 Filip *v punkte priema krvi*  
**at the blood donation center**

6 Timur *aaaaaaaa*  
**aaaaaaaa**

7 *zdravstvuite*  
**hello**

8 *eto vy krov' prinimaete?*  
**are you the ones who accept blood?**

9 Filip *da, my*  
**yes, that's us**

10 Timur *vozmite moi*  
**here, take mine**

**Joke 2**

*((Timur hands Filip a bucket))*

11 Filip *molodoi chelovek*  
**young man**

12 *no ona vse steril'no*  
**everything here is sterile**

13 *zachem vy krov' v vedre prinesli?*  
**why did you bring blood in a bucket?**

14 Timur *no ia*  
**well I—**

15 *chestno govoria*  
**honestly**

- 16                    ne planiroval sdavat'  
**I hadn't planned to donate** *Joke 3*
- [7 lines omitted, Timur and Filip discuss what to do with the blood]
- 23      Timur            a ne podskazhite  
**could you by any chance tell me**
- 24                    gde mozhno prodat' nozh  
**where can you sell a knife?**
- 25      Filip                vam zachem  
**what for?**
- 26      Filip                prosto ia khochu izvlech maksimum vygody iz slozhivsheisiaia situatsii  
**I just want to extract maximum profit from the current situation**<sup>166</sup> *Joke 4*

The last three jokes in this miniature, in lines 10, 16, and 26, relied on intermediate contrasts between expected behavior at a donation center and Timur's bizarre blood-lugging, before culminating in a final pun. They used lesser-impact jokes, about offering blood in a bucket and about donating after injury, to condition the audience for their punchline in line 26, which forced listeners to re-interpret the entire scenario through the lens of a common Russian saying.

DALS excelled at plays with audience expectations. Remarkably simple jokes, textually speaking, induced people to laugh until tears came to their eyes. In the following *razminka* joke, for instance, judge Leonid Yakupovich, host of Russia's version of *Wheel of Fortune*, posed the question, "What is original about your team?" In 2014, DALS was the first team to play in Top League with only two people as opposed to the standard six- to fifteen-person squads. DALS' bravery as a duo was their most obviously unique characteristic. Thus, the audience expected them to mention something about their unorthodox, perhaps competitively handicapped, team in their response. Filip, though, quickly approached the microphone and said in reply, "We are Aquariuses" ("My vodoleia"). The quip was unexpected, a bit absurd, and played on an intentional

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<sup>166</sup> "Просто я хочу извлечь максимум выгоды из сложившейся ситуации." DALS, KVN Top League 2014, Fourth Octofinal, Introduction, Available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MmUq1WpK\\_Nk&index=1&list=PLqb8RylZM1NJBwdseHryoeKERuZBqi45y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MmUq1WpK_Nk&index=1&list=PLqb8RylZM1NJBwdseHryoeKERuZBqi45y) (accessed January 28, 2020).

contrast between the team's unlikely make-up and the otherwise uninteresting fact that both Filip and Timur were Aquariuses. There were cheers and applause from the audience, and Yakupovich laughed for six seconds, eventually banging his fist on the table in mirth. He coughed a bit as he struggled to gain enough composure to ask the next team his question.<sup>167</sup>

The idea of contrasts, if not semantic scripts, best explains why “We are Aquariuses” acts as a joke. Deftly, Filip set the unexpected against the expected, added a dash of absurdity, and did it with comedic timing fast enough to catch the audience off-guard. While semantics can reveal much about the reasons certain strings of text create what those in the KVN community call funny (*smeshno*), there is much that referential analysis cannot capture. It cannot discuss indexicality, and it cannot describe non-textual jokes, jokes made with images, pantomime, and musical indexicality, at all. The unsaid often plays a much bigger role in humor than any words spoken. The most complex jokes include a host of such nonreferential elements, and these are best analyzed in terms of semiotics instead of semantics.

## **Semiotic approaches to humor**

### **The unsaid: punchline construction**

The information one needs to understand a joke lies in the unsaid: stereotypes (factory owners), double meanings ('shrooms), sociocultural background (Ukrainian doctors have low salaries), and common sayings (profit from misfortune). The funny parts of jokes often lie in these unstated, shared presuppositions rather than in explicit text. For instance, in the 2018 School League opening competition in Irkutsk, a team of school children called “Bokhan” joked that a money wire transfer service had opened in Bokhan, a village about eighty miles north of Irkutsk. In their skit, when a clerk at the service asked a customer—a young girl who appeared to be about five years old—where she wanted to send money, she said, “To Ust Orda.” The crowd laughed,

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<sup>167</sup> First Quarterfinal, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HYKzfaFsmi8> (accessed January 28, 2020).

clapped, and cheered for over ten seconds. It was a fantastic joke in a local context, but it could never be made on television. People outside of the Irkutsk region would not know anything about either Bokhan or Ust Orda, both rural and predominantly ethnic Buryat areas in the Irkutsk region. The audience found the joke funny for three reasons. First, sending money from one poor rural area to another poor rural area seems a bit absurd. Second, Bokhan was a team made up of some very young children. So part of the joke concerned the naïveté of a child wanting to wire money to (Buryat) relatives in a neighboring village. The third reason the crowd laughed so much has to do with the fact that cute schoolchildren lower people’s entertainment thresholds. The team from Bokhan got laughter and applause, in fact, as soon as they walked out on stage and said, “Hello, we are from Bokhan.” The little girl acting as their spokesperson was young enough to still struggle with Russian sounds, lisping a bit, and it is funny to see a child take on the role of a serious stage performer.



**Team Bokhan at the 2018 Baikal School League quarterfinals, December 8, 2018.  
Photo by Baikal School League.**

After laughter died down, the kindergarten customer clarified, “I only have kopeks, though.” The clerk took the girl’s coins and tossed them across the stage, presumably towards Ust Orda. Ust



Orda, however, is a place known for its Buryat shamanic sites. When passing sites like these, *arshans* (*arshany*, or “springs”), it is common to leave offerings of coins, small pieces of fabric, and cigarettes. So the girl may also have sought to use a money wire service to send a religious offering, which is funny because of the contrast between religious and commercial spheres implied.

Most of what made Bokhan’s joke funny, then, cannot be explained in terms of semantics (the meanings of utterances). Indexes matter more. Comedy relies on double-meanings, layered references, and an understanding of audience presuppositions. In order to interpret the meaning of the Ust Orda joke, a viewer had to understand: (1) the economic landscapes and physical locations of Bokhan and Ust Orda; (2) Shamanic traditions associated with the region; and (3) stereotypes about (provincial) Buryats. Audience members would have found the punchline even more enjoyable if they appreciated the performance as cute. A semantic analysis limits us to describing what words mean. A semiotic framework, in contrast, allows us to look at *how* words mean—what they index—in changing social and performance contexts, some of which are interlinked. C.S. Peirce’s semiotic framework provides a vocabulary for describing how symbols code such multiple meanings. Unlike Saussure’s two-part theory of sign systems, Peirce outlined a three-part model of meaning making. For Saussure, a symbol such as the hammer and sickle would be a *signifier* and its meaning the *signified*; the sign is binary. Peirce’s *sign vehicle* roughly corresponds to the signifier, the *represented object* to the signified (Enfield 2013, 44). But Peirce added an “interpretant” as well, which he defined as “the effect the Sign would produce in any mind upon which the circumstances should permit it to work out its full effect” (Peirce 1977, 110). The interpretant, then, is personal meaning. Peirce described several different kinds of interpretants in his writings, the immediate, the dynamic, and the final. All of these categorizations, though, cast the interpretant as an experience of signification for a sign perceiver.

If we pull the Bokhan punchline through a three-element Peircean analysis, “to Ust Orda”

acts as the sign vehicle, the represented object refers to the referential marker of Ust Orda as a place, and the interpretant is the ultimate “meaning,” the meaning in context, and the meaning held by each individual audience member. Some people in the audience probably had personally left coins at arshans and, if in a hurry, at least honked their car horns when passing the sites during long drives through rural areas in the Irkutsk region. There, no street signs guide nonlocal travelers, roads are often unpaved, and gas stations are rare. In Kuita, the Ust Orda region village where I lived in 2003, people would drive about an hour to a larger village that had a gas station, fill up gas cans, and return to Kuita with them jostling in their trunks. They honked at arshans on the way there and back and sometimes left cigarettes. People like this, who regularly prayed and left coins in sacred places, perhaps accompanied by family members, would have experienced the joke differently than those that understood only the first level of the joke, about the absurdity of wiring money from one area without banks or running water to another.

The interpretant captures these multiple, personal meanings, meanings that draw not only on widely circulating public information, but also individual biographies. Indexes that get widely traded on become public, which is why the team from Bokhan could predict that the audience would understand all the layers of their joke even if many had never spent much time in the Irkutsk region’s rural areas. Those that had, though, and those who linked those experiences to Buryat family traditions, had extra information with which to understand the joke. They and urban ethnic Russians sitting next to them in the audience would have shared near-identical represented objects. But their interpretants of Bokhan’s punchline would have been very different.

The interpretant is where meanings overlap: dictionary definitions, indexicals, analogic associations, histories, and personal recollections. The interpretant is cumulative meaning, an ultimate significance generated by the sign vehicle and represented object. In a joke, the ultimate significance is what makes a line funny: the interpretant is the understanding (or not) of the punchline. This idea builds on Raskin’s conception of humor as the product of overlapping scripts.

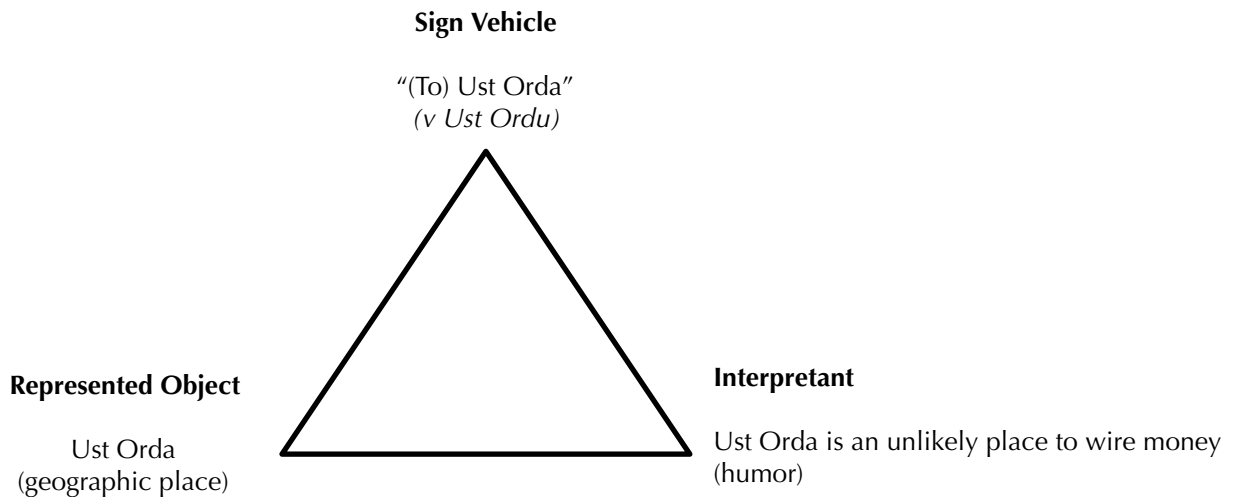
A semiotic approach looks more broadly, though, at confluences of meaning that result from a variety of symbolic resources. If we look again at the three syllables in Bokhan's original punchline, "To Ust Orda" ("v *Ust Ordu*"), the represented object, or "what the sign is about," in Parmentier's terms (1994, 8), is a geographic place, perhaps a geographic place that people understand to be rural and predominantly Buryat. But the interpretant is the meaning that caused people to laugh when the little girl pronounced those syllables. The interpretant is the four-layered set of contrasts made immediately present to audience members: usual destinations for remittances vs. rural Siberia; usual recipients of wire transfers vs. a young girl's grandparents; commercial banking vs. leaving religious offerings; serious stage performers vs. a lisping five-year-old.

Punchlines, if successful, reside in interpretants. In the joke, "The director of a Kaluga mushroom factory often fantasized that he was a Columbian drug lord," "drug lord" ("*narkobaron*") only operates as a punchline for people with the background knowledge required for a specific interpretant. Given the sign vehicles "Kaluga factory director" and "Columbian drug lord," readers will come up with fairly similar represented objects. But the interpretant, the "effect the sign produces in the mind," differs dramatically for American and Russian audiences because those populations know different stereotypes.

The punchlines of puns represent a special kind of overlapping. In the pun, "Never leave sulphuric acid in a metal beaker. That's an oxidant waiting to happen," the word "oxidant" takes the following common represented objects: (1) an agent that causes substances to lose electrons (oxidize) and (2) "accident." But the interpretant is the recognition that both of these meanings co-exist, comically. If hearers know that sulphuric acid will dissolve a metal beaker, causing a hazardous accident, they hold two represented objects in parallel as they formulate the phrase's ultimate meaning, a humorous pun. More clearly than any other phenomena, puns, demonstrate why we need a three-pronged sign to understand comedy. Contrasts of some kind may surface throughout a conversation, as people talk about men and women, cars and bicycles, vegans and

barbecue enthusiasts, but a *joke* is in the confluence of meaning; a joke—if you get it—is in the interpretant (Garey 2012, 33).<sup>168</sup>

*Peirce's semiotic triangle*



Some leading semiotics scholars, however, have recently pushed an understanding of the interpretant as a reaction that takes place after ultimate meaning has been absorbed (Enfield 2013; Kockelman 2007, 2010, 2013). For instance, if a red light signifies stop, in this reading, applying the brakes is the resulting interpretant (Enfield 2013, 18). For the chemistry joke above, presumably, the sign vehicle "oxidant" would produce the represented object "pun," and the interpretant would be laughter or a smile or an eye roll. In Bokhan's joke the sign vehicle "to Ust Orda" would take the represented object "geographic place," and the interpretant would be gleeful laughter. Such a model of the sign cuts out the analytic apparatus that explains how jokes manipulate multiple meanings, how they index public as well as private information, and how a number of contrasts merge to make some set of syllables (or a gesture, or a tune) funny. Interpretant-as-reaction does not leave space to analyze how signification occurs. In such

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<sup>168</sup> This way of looking at puns does not contradict the views of semantic script theorists (cf. Aarons 2017). However, locates the joke itself in *appreciation* of contrast, via the interpretant, instead of in textual, definitional contrasts.

conceptions, ultimate meaning gets determined in the represented object and the interpretant really doesn't have anything to do with the sign vehicle's meaning. The reaction is an addendum that happens outside the temporal space of the sign. Similarly, for Saussure, the signifier would be "oxidant," the signified "pun," and laughter some ancillary thing unrelated to the determination of the sign vehicle's meaning. Models of the sign posited by Kockelman and Enfield, thus, reproduce a Saussurean binary rather than taking advantage of the analytic power offered by Peirce's model. Interpretant-as-reaction cannot explain the mechanisms of a pun. It also handles multiple objects, multiple interpretants, and processes of resignification less well than a triadic model (Garey 2012).

In examples from Kockelman, interpretants can include (1) other utterances, (2) changes in attention, and (3) physical responses (such as ducking a punch in the mouth) (Kockelman 2007, 378; 2010, 2-7). However, any nonmental reaction, such as a shift in eye gaze made in response to an utterance, necessarily comes long after the absorption of a represented object's meaning. Enfield defines meaning, in fact, as "what we have when a sign gets someone to produce an interpretant, thus revealing an object of interpretation" (2013, 26). This approach treats all sign vehicles as bit actors in an interrogation, or, at least, as a second-pair part in traditions of conversation analysis. In the language of conversation analysis, a first-pair part might be Person A saying, "We're going to the movies." Person B's second-pair part, then, could either treat Person A's statement as leave-taking, saying, "Cool, have a good time," or cast it as a question, replying, "Great! I'd love to go!" Conversation analysts consider Person B's response represent the meaning of Person A's statement; Person A treats it either as departure or invitation, and subsequent replies must take this emergent social reality into account.

Exchanges like these, true, do fashion the interactional meaning of utterances. Person A could accept Person B's interpretation and follow up by telling Person B, "Alright, we're leaving in half an hour." Or they could contest it, saying, "Um, this is a date, and we'd planned to go alone." Even when analyzing conversation transcripts, though, we could hardly claim that the *meaning* of

“We’re going to the movies” amounted to an invitation, even if Person B produced an utterance that aligned with that presupposition. Whose meaning? And when? Person A may get Person B to produce an utterance, but what “I’d love to go!” reveals is not necessarily Person B’s represented object (i.e., “I think this is an invitation”). Person B, Susie, may have known very well that Person A, her brother Tom, was not inviting her to come along. But she might have tried to horn in on the outing by characterizing his statement as an invitation.

Following Goffman (1956), I argue that social scientists can observe how interlocutors work together to create ratified social meanings like “announcing departure” or “issuing invitation.” However, while representations do constitute presupposable social realities, they are not congruent with personal meanings. Goffman, too, noted that reality-as-reacted-to did not necessarily mesh with reality-as-understood. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, he wrote, “Together the participants [in an interaction] contribute to a single overall definition of the situation which involves not so much a real agreement as to what exists but rather a real agreement as to whose claims concerning what issues will be temporarily honoured” (Goffman 1956, 4). Statements, responses, and reactions are stances. Stances are public. Interpretants are not. Rather than an interpretant, then, Susie’s *I’d love to go* is a stance that may or may not line up with what Susie thought Tom’s utterance “meant.”

For social signs as for natural ones, the interpretant exists for an individual perceiver, not in aggregated, or even iterated, interactional data. For instance, green skies are only an index of tornado weather if someone both sees them and understands them as predictive—otherwise it’s not a sign. Likewise, *to Ust Orda* is only funny if someone knows why wiring money from Bokhan to Ust Orda seems illogical—otherwise it’s not a joke.

Even if social scientists cannot know what people think, viewing the interpretant as private mental significance becomes important to theories of meaning-making in humor because jokes themselves lie in interpretants, intersections of meanings, timing, expectations, and

understandings. Reactions, like laughter, come only later. Moreover, recognizing interpretants as individually-experienced allows us to explain how sign vehicles can signal different interpretants for people even when they apprehend the same represented objects. The effect a young Pioneer red necktie makes on the mind of a Soviet viewer may be one of both (1) childhood memories and (2) the tie's changed indexicality in the twenty-first century. Importantly, these two interpretants co-occur in time—with each other and with the other two points of the semiotic triangle, the sign vehicle and the represented object (Garey 2012). Tripartite signs allow us to cleanly describe how, like pulling on one side of a fixed-volume triangle, changing the semiotic ground alters the contextual meaning of a sign (interpretant). For example, a Soviet WWII victory song might be sung quite seriously. But a few tweaks of costuming, emphasis, and comedic context render it parody. Similarly, a picture of Putin (sign vehicle) in the backdrop of a comedy sketch takes on very different meanings (interpretants) in Ukrainian and Russian contexts (semiotic ground), even though audiences in both Moscow and Kiev recognize the image as the president of Russia (represented object). Emphasizing how context serves as a filter between sign vehicles and interpretants, via represented objects, also allows for easier explanation of how the meanings of the same sign vehicles—Stalin, a red Young Pioneer necktie, Soviet-marked elocution patterns—change from decade to decade.

### **The unsayable: signs and censorship**

Sign vehicles are polysemic, yielding multiple interpretants. Individuals themselves often apprehend all meanings of a given sign, but only *react* to one. A political pun made by the Odessa KVN team Chimney Sweeps in 1966 helps illustrate this point. The overall theme for 1966 competitions was “Telepathy Surrounds Us.” Odessa sang a song whose lyrics spoke of telepaths working, “some with telephones, some with automatics,” acting as operators on a global communications network: “They connect our friendly signals.” The word “telepath,” though, also

meant KGB agent. The word “automatic” (*avtomat*) could mean any machine, but calls to mind, as in English, automatic weapons. Read this way, their song depicted not benevolent telepathic operators but KGB agents alternatively listening in on phone calls and gunning people down (Janco 2004, 36). Of course, the second meaning is deniable, which is why the broadcast feed was not cut (this had been done for bawdy jokes in the past). During the same show the Chimney Sweeps even mocked KGB disapproval of political humor. They said, “Laughter is a personal matter (*lichnoe delo*) for everyone. Let's make everyone a ‘personal matter’ and laugh.” *Lichnoe delo* translates both as personal matter and personal *file*. The second sentence, about *making* someone a “personal matter/file” reveals that “file” was an intended meaning. In this context, then, the personal file is a KGB file: “Let's make everyone a KGB file and keep laughing” (Janco 2004, 37-38). Strong stuff. The audience very likely did not react, for fear of reprisal. Both meanings, “personal matter” and “personal file,” coexisted. In this case, interpretant-as-reaction limits the field of signification rather than helping us understand the relationship between the phrase in the pun and its social meanings. The sign vehicle “personal file” referred to multiple represented objects. The punchline lay in the interpretant, in the simultaneous apprehension of both meanings.

In my experience in contemporary Russia and Ukraine, KVNshiki themselves censored topics rather than government bodies. Editors, and, in televised leagues, TV producers who seek ratings, want to draw viewers in, not offend them. If there is money to be made, through network advertising time or sponsorships, then the market regulates KVN content (as it does in the U.S.) In the vast majority of games, though, in universities, youth centers, and schools, only audience reaction matters. Ultimately, different audience expectations in Russia and Ukraine—and even in Odessa versus Kiev—lead to variations in the kinds of political jokes told. For instance, a team at the 2017 League of Laughter festival played ominous music as they observed that one of their female team members bore an uncanny resemblance to Putin (and she did). Putin is an unloved bogeyman at best in Ukraine, but representing him like that on Russian broadcast television would



alienate people.

Other metrics of appropriateness vary from audience to audience, as well. During an editing session at the 2019 Sochi Festival, for instance, Moscow-based editors struck down a number the Irkutsk team IGU has successfully performed in their hometown Baikal League. In the skit a man got into a violent fistfight to defend the honor of his date, who'd been cat-called by another man. After the exhausted, panting man walked back to his girl, she rolled her eyes and said, "Even so it'll cost you 2,000 rubles." In Irkutsk the offhand punchline about prostitution faced no pushback. But Top League editor Dmitry Shpenkov told them, "That won't make it onto the stage." Televised league editors would cut a number like that. Shpenkov continued, "I understand, you're from Irkutsk..." and trailed off. His implication seemed to be, "I know that in Siberia you can say whatever you want, but not on national TV."<sup>169</sup>

Skits ultimately succeed if the audience likes them. If a joke makes people laugh out loud, if it lifts their spirits instead of making them cringe, it works. Editors, rather than trying to censor prohibited material, direct teams to write material that will play out well in front of particular audiences. Specifically on the topic of prostitution, Pavel told a group of over one hundred Odessa university students gathered for a lecture on theories of humor, "Teams come up to me and ask, 'Can we joke about prostitution?' You can. But how? Of course you can't say, 'prostitutes are louts,' there's no point to that." For Pavel, at least, a joke's value depended, in part, on its message. If teams wanted to write skits about unhappy topics, for example, teenage mothers who drink and smoke in parks—a skit idea that he praised—they should present it either as a social critique or suggest alternatives. He continued, "Teams from Lithuania come and say, 'Everything is bad, our city is bad, everything is terrible.' Teams from Riga come and say, 'Everything is bad, we have a bad mayor.' Those kinds of jokes. How can you laugh about that—how? If you offer a solution to those problems, then I'll laugh."<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Editing session, 2018 Sochi Festival, January 13, 2018.

<sup>170</sup> Training session in Odessa, April 22, 2015.

Mikhail Marfin, Top League editor from 1991-2004, then again beginning in 2019, similarly told a group of students at a training seminar in Krasnoyarsk to think about their audience when writing jokes. Material that cracks up friends won't affect strangers the same way. He said,

You can't tell an auditorium of 500 people what you would tell an audience of 100. For example, I can, right now in front of you, say the word "ass" (*"zadnitsa"*). But imagine that I went out on stage at the Palace of Soviets—you understand, in the theater at the Kremlin—and said that? Not a chance. I will not say that. Because here, it wouldn't really jar you. But in an auditorium of 6,000 seats in the Kremlin—people would think I was crazy.<sup>171</sup>

Incidentally, and probably only because the KVN Festival of Moscow and Moscow Region Leagues does not have an editing process (one hundred and twenty-five teams competed in 2019), a young man from the Russian Republic of Bashkortostan, 900 miles west of Moscow, began his team's performance by walking out on stage, spreading his arms wide, and saying, "Sex!" No one laughed. He continued, "I just wanted to say that. They won't let me in Bashkortostan."<sup>172</sup> Bashkortostani editors, though, likely told the team the same thing Moscow editors would: there was no joke.

Jokes about sex do make it on stage, though, even in Top League, if they're funny and, ideally, positive. Skits about sex within marriages tend to meet more success than those about infidelity and mistresses.<sup>173</sup> For instance, a 2015 Top League musical number from team Kamiziaki introduced frank images of sexuality, but also included a three-layered punchline that did, in the end, support conservative ideas of family values.<sup>174</sup> The song fragment used the tune of a 2012 pop song by Tornike Kvitiani and Vladi Blaiberg, "Let Us Pray for Our Parents" (*"Pomolimsia za roditelei"*) to create a musical pun, one immediately apprehended by an audience that knew the

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<sup>171</sup> Mikhail Marfin, Youth Camp "Junior" (*Territoria initsiativnoi molodezhi "Junior"*), August 13, 2018. Instagram live stream from the KVN Movement of the Krasnoyarsk Region, @kraskvn. Audiorecorded.

<sup>172</sup> Team "Litsa Respubliki," KVN Festival of Moscow and Moscow Region Leagues, March 8, 2019.

<sup>173</sup> However Moscow team Our Families will Become Friends (*Budem Druzhit' Semiamy*) made infidelity a pillar of their performances. One of their recent skits featured a man who was upset because his missress got married behind his back. KVN Top League 2019 Third Octofinals, broadcast March 17, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aEc4WmiXyL4> (accessed January 28, 2020).

<sup>174</sup> Team Kamiziaki, KVN Top League 2015, First 1/8 Musical Homework. Broadcast March 1, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3pGc2DWzGMI> (accessed January 28, 2020).

lyrics to the original song. The short couplet ran:

*Ja ot del'no zhit' stal ochen rano*  
**I began living by myself early**

*Voobshche shagi s svoei zhenoi*  
**In any case, with my wife**

*Molodoi zhenoi*  
**With my young wife**

*No paroiu, ochen' tyanet-ka moment*  
**But now and then, in a very tender moment**

*Kogda u nas beda s voidoi*  
**When we had misfortune with the water**

*S goriacheiu vodoi*  
**With the hot water**

[pause]

*Pomoemsia u roditelei...*  
**Taking a shower at the parents' house...**

This joke created an image of a young couple living alone, then hit the audience with a punchline that introduced two humorous scenarios. The first is the revelation that the young man was actually living with his wife's parents, not "on his own," and the second concerns the realities of trying to have conjugal relations at your in-laws' house. It was risqué enough to be funny, familiar to an audience used to cramped living quarters, and yet still socially acceptable since the couple was, after all, married. The final line, too, is a slant pun. The chorus in the original song begins "Let us pray for our parents"—in Russian, "*PoMOLIMsia za roditelei.*" Team Kamiziaki subtracted only the "l" in "*pomolimsia*" it to make "*PoMOEMsia u roditelei,*" literally "washing ourselves at the parent's," or "taking a shower at the parent's house" in more natural English.

Rather than playing with puns to fool the censors, then, as Soviet competitors had to, teams work to make topics like sex, prostitution, death, religion, and government surveillance funny. The team from Tambov who successfully built a sketch about an assassination, mentioned in chapter four, pulled it off because they added absurd elements, like a giant ambulatory pigeon. The skit

was entirely visual, as well, featuring no dialogue at all.<sup>175</sup> Crass comments from a hitman may have dampened the humor quotient, but a pigeon bellydancing to Bollywood tunes, moonwalking to Michael Jackson, and strutting around to the James Bond theme almost can't fail to delight.

In local level KVN, the limit condition for jokes making it onto stage—and, remember, teams can always choose to ignore editors' advice—is anticipated audience reaction. Censorship comes from the teams themselves. It is no fun to present material you've worked on for months and be met with hundreds or thousands of stony-faced people in the crowd. No team wants to get low scores from the judges, either. Thus, most teams at least try to write jokes that listeners will think are funny. Or they act like Bashkortostan and say “sex” just for kicks, to audience eye-rolls. Either way, local concerns and biases motivate topic selection in both Russia and Ukraine. For instance, shortly after a Communist Party candidate beat the favored United Russia Party contender in the 2015 gubernatorial elections, Irkutsk State University students highlighted the event with a skit. During a T-shirt fashion show, a young man walked out in a United Russia T-shirt (United Russia is the party of Vladimir Putin). “This is the T-shirt of United Russia,” the emcee said. “It's already been in style for thirteen years. But in Irkutsk, trends have changed.” The young model then lifted up his United Russia shirt to reveal the hammer and sickle on a dramatic red background.

Local themes draw the most laughs in Odessa, too. Shortly after the vKontakte ban, a KVN team in the Odessa Mayor's Cup mimed stealthily sneaking up to the Russian border, placing first a toe, then an entire foot on the other side. As he leaned over the invisible boundary, a volley of vKontakte's familiar “new message” pings filled the auditorium. It was a raw subject that day, when thousands of young people had signed a petition asking the president to unblock vKontakte (by mid-June over 25,000 Ukrainians had signed). It was also topical, though. And because the joke mocked President Poroshenko's official policy during a time of war, the edgy punchline caught the audience off-guard. In a world of top-down, government censorship, a joke like that would be cut.

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<sup>175</sup> Subtitled clip available at <https://amygarey.files.wordpress.com/2019/02/team-tambov-incident-on-a-roof.mp4>.

Instead, the joke earned very long but somber applause from the Odessa audience, a group that appreciated the risk involved in signaling affiliation, even of the most commonplace kind, with Russia.

These facets of topic selection in KVN are important because they contradict the picture of KVN presented in the 2017 NATO report *StratCom Laughs*. The authors thought of KVN as something like McDonald's, a company with a headquarters and franchises that follow its dictates. Instead, KVN is like soccer: a community game with pro leagues whose competitions get broadcast on TV. This misunderstanding led the *StratCom Laughs* authors to conclude that an individual team's performances were not only "tools of strategic political communication," or information warfare, but specifically that teams served as mouthpieces for President Putin (Denisa-Liepniece 2017). KVN jokes just don't get written or regulated that way. After seeing headlines like "NATO declared KVN a Threat to the Western World," student comedians in Russia, Central Asia, and Ukraine responded with—what else?—laughter, ridicule, and a bevy of jokes, memes, and online "confessions." A young man from St. Petersburg posted on Instagram, "Well, they have exposed us...we are agents. Yes, agents of humor. And we are going to destroy Western civilization with our sense of humor. It's always been like that, and it will always be like that." The hashtags #KVNagents and #theyvediscoveredus (#агентыКВН and #нараскрыли) circulated on social media for weeks.

There are hundreds of KVN leagues and thousands of KVN competitors in Ukraine, as well as in other post-Soviet states and Israel. So casting the game as Kremlin-centered both misses the mark and dismisses the efforts of student comedians who owe nothing to Putin. One former competitor and KVN coach in Odessa told me, "I didn't even read anything but the headline [about the NATO report]. It's silliness. What, am I also a weapon of the Kremlin?" When Ukrainian competitors joke about regaining Crimea, economic hardship, and war orphans, they are using humor to discuss politics, everyday life, and the ways those spheres intersect in broadly unpleasant

ways. Russians do the same, though they satirize different daily struggles. For instance, a Russian team joked, “Usually a girl won’t sleep with you because she doesn’t know you well enough. That works great for an FSB agent. He’d refuse anyway—he knows you too well.”

Political humor in local Russian leagues seems limited only by audience reaction rather than fear of government censure. If the letters KGB truly were unsayable in Soviet-era KVN, referenced slyly in even the most courageous of jokes, its successor, the FSB (*Federal’naia Sluzhba Bezopastnosti*, or Federal Security Service) makes a semi-regular occurrence in KVN jokes. During a KVN training session near Moscow in 2018, for instance, a member of one team joked, “My mom works for the city government and my dad’s in the FSB. So when I say I know everything, I mean *everything*.”<sup>176</sup> In another skit, by the Krasnoyarsk team *Prospekt Mira*, a pair of police officers patrolling a park on bicycles started to dress down two youths who were littering, ringing the little bells on their bikes as they approached. In the middle of their scolding, a man in a suit and sunglasses cycled smoothly across the stage with his hands crossed across his chest instead of on the handlebars. One officer turned to the other, a bit upset, and said, “Well, FSB are obviously ace!”<sup>177</sup> These jokes alluded to somewhat secretive government power but didn’t represent is as harmful, as did the Odessa Chimneysweepers’ “telepaths” pun.

A university team from Irkutsk also put on a very successful miniature about surveillance at the 2016 Irkutsk State University KVN League tryouts. The skit, called, “FSB radio,” featured two men in headphones flipping through channels in the evening. “Let’s see what’s going on at the Ivanov’s,” one said. The two agents, it turned out, were listening in on conversations in people’s houses. The audience smiled and laughed, but neither uproariously nor with shocked expressions. After the tryouts, I asked one of the young men from the team, “Is it a bit risky to joke about the FSB?” He told me, “No, we can say whatever we want. I’m not afraid of anything.”<sup>178</sup> At the same

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<sup>176</sup> School of KVN, Kolumna, Moscow Region, February 3, 2019.

<sup>177</sup> “Но ФСБщики конечно крутые!” Team *Prospekt Mira*, Premier Liga Third Octofinals, March 26, 2019, Moscow, Russia.

<sup>178</sup> Irkutsk State University KVN League tryouts, October 8, 2016.

time, though, the team never told that joke on the public stage. It stayed in the tryouts performance, for an audience of other student KVNshiki. Perhaps either they or the league editors thought the broader Irkutsk demographic wouldn't perceive the joke as cheery.

KVNshiki, then, negotiate joke formulation with editors, and, in non-televised leagues, control what material audiences see, in the end, entirely.<sup>179</sup> Regulatory strictures often even rely on the preferences of individual editors. Teams either orient towards these strictures or ignore them. A student team from Belgorod recently did exactly this during the 2019 festival in Moscow. The team, Radioactive People (*Radioaktivnye Liudy*), closed their performance with the words, "A lot of people say, 'End your numbers more logically.' But we aren't going to write jokes just a bit and little-by-little. Even though we enjoy that."<sup>180</sup> They thus ended their performance illogically, in a way that amused them and, it seems, only a few audience members. I can hear myself laughing, incidentally, on my audio recording of the performance; I found the unexpectedness of their final phrases funny. Perhaps the team did encode a punchline into their seeming nonsense, if only a rhythmic and nonreferential one. Radioactive People performed something non-standard, something no televised league editor would allow, and it is an open question whether their gamble paid off. The team got to choose their content, though, just as their Soviet predecessors did.

### **Native theories of humor**

Victor Raskin was born in Russia and received his doctorate in Structural, Computational, and Mathematical Linguistics from Moscow State University in 1970, at the height of KVN's early popularity. Drawing a boundary between his theories about jokes, then, and those of "the natives," may seem a little artificial. In this section, though, I want to highlight what KVNshiki themselves see as the elements of humor. Their prescriptions tend to be more practical than academic: *how to*

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<sup>179</sup> In televised competitions material from the live competitions very often gets cut, but in my experience (ten live Top League competitions) these were segments that dragged on without much humor.

<sup>180</sup> KVN Festival of Moscow and Moscow Region Leagues, March 7, 2019.

*write a punchline rather than algorithms of funniness.*

Even KVNshiki, of course, have diverse opinions about ideal jokes, skits, and performances. I base the discussion that follows on the perspectives of two editors, one Russian and one Ukrainian, who have thought deeply about humor and its creation. Both also help train student KVNshiki and Liga Smeshniki through lectures and editing sessions. The first editor is Aleksei Eks, originally from Ekaterinburg but now working as a humor writer in Moscow. Eks gives regular lectures about how to write material at KVN training events throughout Russia and has also written a number of articles on these subjects (Eks 2009, 2014, 2015). The second is Pavel Demchenko (from chapter four), the main editor for the Odessa League of Laughter and Odessa National University KVN league. Demchenko gives lectures to students competing in the leagues he runs, but shares a lot of his theories about humor creation during the leagues' week-long pre-game editing sessions.

During a telephone interview, I asked Eks how he knew what he had written was a joke and not just some kind of sentence. He responded with a ready list. "There are three criteria for a joke," he said. "Understandability, relevance, and novelty" (interview with author, October 28, 2018).<sup>181</sup> These elements recall Aksel'rod's "recognizable + unexpected" formula, but Eks' criteria focus on topic selection (write about what people know) rather than the shape of a punchline (surprise the audience). About understandability, Eks said, "We have to make jokes about what people understand." His second criterion, relevance, concerned the "now," or current events. "If someone just puts on some kind of skit about Beauty and the Beast without any jokes about current events, that wouldn't be KVN. It wouldn't be very funny. It would be some kind of theater." In contrast, a skit about Hilary Clinton and Donald Trump as Beauty and the Beast strikes people as funny. "It's something that can only be right now," Eks said. The material was fresh (or was during the 2016 elections). Novelty, he continued, required coming up with something no one had ever done

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<sup>181</sup> "Есть три критерия шуток на котором учат. Это понятность, актуальность, и новизна."



before. “Otherwise you’re just repeating one another, or teams are stealing from each other,” he said.

Eks compared this understandability, relevance, novelty recipe to American comedy, saying, “Well, you have Saturday Night Live, Comedy Central. They do *roughly* the same thing—occasionally.” The problem with American comedy, he argued, was one of relevance. American humor writers, especially in sitcom and film consortia, write not just for an American audience but for a global marketplace. This means that they often search for commonality in lowbrow themes. “Everyone has a backside,” Eks said, by way of example. “Backsides are relevant for everyone.” In Eks’ opinion, even humor for adults in America was “fairly childish” (interview with author, October 28, 2018). I wished I could disagree.

Pavel Demchenko echoed Eks’ ideas about the importance of relevance in jokes. Eks, though, who played in, writes for, and orients towards televised leagues, advised students to mine joke topics from mass media sources. At a training in Krasnoyarsk, Eks asked students to write down the last ten books they’d read, the last ten movies they’d watched, the last ten TV programs they’d watched, and the last ten songs they’d listened to.<sup>182</sup> People who perform for television audiences, especially a KVN audience that stretches from the Crimea to Central Asia, often have to build relevant jokes from popular culture and international news. Demchenko, on the other hand, advised teams to connect with audiences by writing jokes that were “maximally about ordinary life.” He continued, “A joke, any joke, is like a prism of truth. That’s the root of any joke.”<sup>183</sup> Demchenko shared these thoughts, and others, during a two-hour master class on theories of humor in the lead up to Odessa National University’s semifinal matches in 2017. Around a hundred students had assembled at the university on a Saturday morning. It was April, but most of us still shivered with our coats on in an unheated auditorium. Demchenko’s goal: help students

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<sup>182</sup> Aleksei Eks, KVN training in Krasnoyarsk, Russia, August 14, 2018. Instagram live stream from the KVN Movement of the Krasnoyarsk Region, @kraskvn. Audiorecorded.

<sup>183</sup> “Шутка, любая, это как будто призма правды. Вот это корень шутки.” Training session in Odessa, April 22, 2017.

write funny material, ideally within the week. He lectured, therefore, about the nuts-and-bolts of joke writing rather than giving a historical or philosophical overview.

Demchenko listed three main principles for choosing joke topics, then turned to a more technical discussion of joke set-up and structure. In addition to being about ordinary life, the second feature of a good joke, for Demchenko, was that they were above all cheerful. “I want you to understand,” he told the students, “That it doesn't matter what kinds of jokes you write, but they have to be cheerful.”<sup>184</sup> Like Eks, Pavel’s third recommendation concerned novelty. He said, “You have to create a unique performance, you have to, perhaps, find something unique in yourself, something no one has seen before. How? I don't know. But you must.”



**Pavel Demchenko lecturing on humor theory**

One of the most important parts of Demchenko’s lecture, though, concerned how to arrange jokes for maximum effect. He outlined a four-part scheme for blocs of jokes. The first joke should explain the situation at hand, he said. The second joke reaffirms the situation. The third joke should

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<sup>184</sup> “Чтобы вы понимали, шутки должны быть не важно какие, просто они должны быть весёлые.” Training session in Odessa, April 22, 2017.

introduce a turn—a new, unexpected element. The fourth and final joke in a series should offer resolution.

After I heard this sequencing pattern, I started to notice it in performances everywhere. Its power, in terms of timing and manipulation of audience presuppositions, can be illustrated with two joke blocs from the 2019 Sochi festival. The first is from the team Hello, We've Arrived (*Zdraste, priekhali*) from Russia's Krasnodar Region. In this skit, a young man named Valera came out on stage and confronted his girlfriend with a pistol. Their exchange ran as follows:<sup>185</sup>

(2)

- |    |                   |  |                                      |
|----|-------------------|--|--------------------------------------|
| 1  | <b>Valera</b>     | <i>Tak vot!</i><br><b>So!</b>  |                                      |
| 2  |                   | <i>Tak vot ty menya, promeniala</i><br><b>So that's how you're going to give me up</b>   |                                      |
| 3  | <b>Girlfriend</b> | <i>Pover—</i><br><b>Believ—</b>  |                                      |
| 4  | <b>Valera</b>     | <i>Molchat!</i><br><b>Quiet!</b>   |                                      |
| 5  |                   | <i>Ty chto, zabila radi kogo ia perestal kryt?</i><br><b>What, have you forgotten for whose sake I stopped the rats?</b>                                     | <i>Joke 1: Situation</i>             |
| 6  | <b>Girlfriend</b> | <i>Val—</i><br><b>Val—</b>   |                                      |
| 7  | <b>Valera</b>     | <i>Molchat!</i><br><b>Quiet!</b>   |                                      |
| 8  |                   | <i>Ty chto, zabila radi kogo ia na vsekh tantsakh zapisalsia?</i><br><b>What, have you forgotten for whose sake I signed up for all those dance classes?</b> | <i>Joke 2: Affirms the situation</i> |
| 9  | <b>Girlfriend</b> | <i>Valera—</i><br><b>Valera—</b>   |                                      |
| 10 | <b>Valera</b>     | <i>Molchat!</i><br><b>Quiet!</b>   |                                      |
| 11 |                   | <i>Ty chto, zabila s kem u tebia byl perviy raz?</i><br><b>What, have you forgotten who was your first?</b>  |                                      |

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<sup>185</sup> KVN Festival in Sochi 2019, January 14, 2019. Audiorecording.

*(2 seconds of silence)*

12 *((softly)) Skazhi chto-nibudt*  
***((softly)) Say something***

13 **Girlfriend** *Valera—*  
**Valera—**

14 **Valera** *Molchat!*  
**Quiet!**

***Joke 3: Turn, unexpected element***

*((laughter in the audience))*

15 **Girlfriend** *Nu, ya smykaiu*  
**Well, I'll shut up**

***Joke 4: Resolution***

The first two jokes in this set, in lines 4-8, set up a fairly logical scenario: a boyfriend reminds his girlfriend of all that he has done for her. The turn comes in lines 11-14, when Valera asks his girlfriend if she remembers her first partner. Instead of appealing to Valera, as she did after his first two questions, she says nothing. After Valera prompts her to say something, the girlfriend starts to address him again—only to be cut off. The joke lies in the fact that Valera, most likely, was not her first. He interrupts her, though, when she says his name, as if “Valera” was her answer to his previous question. People in the Sochi audience laughed heartily if quietly at the risqué yet quite good joke. It would not have worked, though, if the first two jokes had not primed the audience to expect a certain kind of response. The third joke confounded expectations.

The second example also comes from the 2019 Sochi festival, from the Novosibirsk team I’m Offended (*Ya Obidelas*). In the scene below, a boyfriend initially speaks to his girlfriend through a door, trying to convince her to leave with him. The girlfriend is putting on a KVN skit with another girl and does not want to leave. In the first two jokes, the humor comes mainly from the boyfriend’s repeated pleas that Yana come with him and Yana’s creative attempts to avoid him (lines 1-5 and 6-7). The third joke, in lines 10-17, puts the boyfriend’s refrain of “get your stuff, let’s go” in an entirely different, surprising context. “Oh, you have KVN?” the boyfriend asks (line 12). He continues, “An incident in ’37—get your stuff, let’s go” (lines 14-17). The punchline, which got

fifteen seconds of applause, refers to the height of Stalin's purges in 1937-1938. It was a particularly dangerous time to crack jokes. Those in the audience would be well acquainted with the ominous connotations of "get your stuff, let's go," if uttered by an NKVD<sup>186</sup> agent who appeared at the door late at night. The resolution of this skit came with the boyfriend asking Yana to hurry up and finish the performance.<sup>187</sup>

(3)

**1 Boyfriend**

*Yana, sobiraisia, poekhali*  
**Yana, get your stuff, let's go**

**2**

*dolga tebia zhdai?*  
**should I wait long?**

**3**

*net*  
**no**

**4**

*odevaeshsia chto delaesh, Yan'?*  
**are you getting dressed or what, Yana?**

*[4 lines omitted]*

**5**

*Yan', sobiraisia, poekhali*  
**Yana, get your stuff, let's go**

***Joke 1: Situation***

**6**

*davai uzhe*  
**come on, already**

*(Yana disappears behind a curtain as the boyfriend enters. The boyfriend lifts up the curtain to reveal Yana.)*

**7**

*sobiraisia, ia govoriu, poekhali*  
**get your stuff, I said, let's go**

***Joke 2: Affirms the situation***

**8 Yana**

*ty s uma soshel?*  
**are you crazy?**

**9**

*u nas seichas vystuplenie*  
**we're doing a performance**

*[three lines omitted]*

**10**

*ia nikuda ne poedu*  
**I'm not going anywhere**

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<sup>186</sup> *Narodnyi kommissariat vnutrennikh del*, or People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs

<sup>187</sup> KVN Festival in Sochi 2019, January 15, 2019. Audiorecording.

11		<i>u nas festival' KVN</i> <b>we have a KVN festival</b>	
12	<b>Boyfriend</b>	<i>a KVN u vas est'?</i> <b>oh, you have KVN?</b>	
13	<b>Yana</b>	<i>da</i> <b>yes</b>	
14	<b>Boyfriend</b>	<i>sluchaei v '37-om godu</i> <b>an incident in '37</b>	
15		<VOX> <i>vy chto tam delaete?</i> <VOX> <VOX> <b>what are you doing?</b> <VOX>	
16	<b>Yana</b>	<i>shutki shutim</i> <b>we're making jokes</b>	
17	<b>Boyfriend</b>	<i>sobiraisia, poekhali</i> <b>get your stuff, let's go</b>	<b><i>Joke 3: Turn, unexpected element</i></b>

During his lecture, Demchenko explained his four-part scheme with diagrams on the board and examples of jokes made by local Odessa teams. “You might have a lot of these initial jokes,” he said, referring to those that set up and affirm an initial situation. With this formula, Demchenko pushed Odessa KVNshiki to write not just individual jokes, which is hard enough, but to think about the most effective arrangement of jokes in any given skit.

Funny people all over the world intuit aspects of joke timing. Members of the Krasnodar and Novosibirsk teams cited above likely never heard a lecture like Demchenko’s—they simply wrote a skit they themselves found funny. A lot of good writers, usually those that write a lot and read a lot, avoid “be” verbs and nominalizations without explicit instruction. But writing guides help bring these elements of language use to the top of writers’ awareness, helping nearly everyone that applies these principles to write more clearly. Eks’ and Demchenko’s recommendations work the same way, imparting conceptual tools of a trade accessible to the masses.

### *Theories and meta-theories*

After I asked Eks some questions about the relationship of KVN to older forms of skit-making,

like *kapustniki* and agitbrigades, he turned instead to a much older Russian theorist of comedy. “I really insist that the origins of KVN are carnival culture,” he said. He elaborated,

Because—well, we have this big book, written by the Soviet scholar Bakhtin...Well, we all studied it in the Philology Department, in the Department of Philology and Journalism. We covered it all, and it was really interesting. And the carnival culture there, it is all about KVN.<sup>188</sup>

Eks studied Bakhtin as an undergraduate journalism student and also holds a master’s degree in sociology. Bakhtin had said carnival consisted of at least one of the following: ritual spectacles, comic compositions, and crude language (Bakhtin 2009, 243). KVN is, certainly, a ritual spectacle, and one made up almost entirely of parody and joke texts. I asked Eks, though, what elements of carnival he saw in KVN. He told me that laughter was a “gentle form of aggression” and a “very cultured form of aggression.” He continued, “If I have some kind of problem—I don’t like something, something is bothering me—if I present it in a funny way, I laugh. And then I soften my thinking about it.” This laughter does not, of course, solve the problem itself. But bringing issues to light, as the Odessa Gentlemen did with their “salute to the censors,” can seem a triumph in itself—and comedic aggression a pleasure in itself. Those who find their voices silenced in most contexts get to speak out. KVN, thus, can represent a kind of inversion, as those in subordinate positions get a word in against the government (cf. Bakhtin 1984 [1965]).

Eks said he discusses carnival with his student KVNshiki to let them know that they are part of a very old tradition of comedy, one that extends back to medieval Europe. More importantly, though, he shares, and practices, an ideology of humor as craft. This belief, that good jokes come not from individual brilliance but from training, is crucial to the continuance of KVN as an activity. I would argue, too, that it’s key to KVN’s obvious success. Hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of young people across the Soviet bloc habitually write jokes, and American young people do not. The difference is not ability, but education.

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<sup>188</sup> “Я настаиваю на то, что источник КВН это карнавальная культура. Потому что—но у нас такая книга большая. Написал советский ученый Бахтин...А там карнавальная культура, это все про КВН.” Interview with author, October 28, 2018.

## Conclusion: metapragmatics as lifestyle

*"[Humor] helps us survive. It draws people together. United over a joke as over a meal."*<sup>189</sup>  
—Mikhail Zhvanetskii, "What is Humor?"<sup>190</sup>

Before television, people tuned in to baseball, football, and soccer games on the radio. Fans also read about results in newspapers, waiting anxiously to find out how their favorite teams had fared in competitions that only stadium-goers could witness. Most KVN games are not broadcast, either, taking place in local auditoria or, like performances at the Sochi and League of Laughter festivals, staged for internal audiences. Even performances in televised leagues are not broadcast live. Fans don't see March Premier League games on TV, for example, until the summer. Thus, social media applications like Telegram and Instagram, as well as good old fashioned blogs, have assumed the role of radio for people who want immediate information about games and pre-game preparation.

In a typical example, tens of thousands of KVN fans (over 33,000) read reportage about editing sessions and dress rehearsals in advance of the 2018 Musical KVN competition in Svetlogorsk, Kaliningrad. Svetlana Mudrik, reporting for Amik KVN's official website, [kvn.ru](http://kvn.ru), wrote the following when teams began work in Svetlogorsk: "In the evening of July 14th, in the Amber Hall Theater, the first editing sessions took place. Four teams showed material to Dmitry Shpenkov and Aidar Garaev: Raisy, Russian Road, Intelligent People, and Muffins Named After Yaroslavl the Wise...reportage from the first editing session coming soon."<sup>191</sup> Fans, thus, follow not only reporting on games, but pre-game preparations that members of the public rarely see.

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<sup>189</sup> "Вот что такое юмор. Вот что такое его отсутствие. А нам он помогает выжить. Сближает всех со всеми. На анекдот - как на угощение." From "Что такое юмор?" Monolog first performed in the 1980s. [http://www.jvanetsky.ru/data/text/t8/chto\\_takoe\\_umor/](http://www.jvanetsky.ru/data/text/t8/chto_takoe_umor/) (accessed January 28, 2020).

<sup>190</sup> "Не о себе. В защиту жанра. Сам стал слезлив и задумчив. Сам стал копаться в словах. Сам потерял жизнь и от этого - юмор. И, потеряв это все, расхаживая в поношенном пиджаке задрипанного философа, скажу - ничего нет лучше жизни. А юмор- это жизнь. Это состояние. Это не шутки. Это искры в глазах. Это влюбленность в собеседника и готовность рассмеяться до слез." From "Что такое юмор?" Monolog first performed in the 1980s. Available at [http://www.jvanetsky.ru/data/text/t8/chto\\_takoe\\_umor/](http://www.jvanetsky.ru/data/text/t8/chto_takoe_umor/)

<sup>191</sup> "Голосящий КиВиН 2018. Все материалы" ["Musical KVN 2018. All Materials"]. <http://kvn.ru/journal/15140> (accessed November 5, 2018).



Svetlana Mudrik also acted as one of the administrators of a KVN Telegram channel that lists minute-by-minute commentary on games in progress, editing sessions, and dress rehearsals. Telegram is a social media app that works more like a textual, communal radio network than group chats or Facebook communication. The platform typically features very little discussion, at least on the channels that I follow (though there are chat channels). Usually, individual people send short messages about upcoming events, interesting links, or an event in progress. Live reporting on games and festivals are popular among KVNshiki, both for Top League games and for smaller, regional events. Around seventy people, for instance, viewed team-by-team reportage of Irkutsk's Baikal League first-round competition, which was not open to the public. In contrast, about 2,000 people followed the first and second rounds of the 2019 Sochi festival on the KVN channel Takstop! and over 1,500 followed the 2019 League of Laughter festival in Odessa on KARAGODINNN, the channel of Yuri Karagodin (from the KVN/League of Laughter team Dnepr). These are not the only channels that covered the festivals, though, so the total number of people who read about the performances—over one hundred performances per day at the Sochi and League of Laughter festivals—is difficult to estimate.

Reading Telegram commentary is much like reading notes on a tennis or soccer match: *And Rafael Nadal serves up another ace. Nice save by Croatia.* Readers get a sense of what happened but can't see plays themselves. Writing about the Tver team "+7" at the Sochi festival, for instance, one commenter noted, "One of the coolest set-ups today. Perhaps even the very coolest." Another wrote, "THIS IS THE FUNNIEST THING THAT HAS EVER BEEN IN KVN!" The posters didn't describe what +7 had done, however, leaving Takstop! followers to wonder what their extremely cool innovation could be. (Along with quite good jokes, the team opted to sing their musical transitions themselves, monotone, instead of using recorded background music.) A Takstop! poster provided the following commentary about +7's performance in the Premier League octofinals match:

They won the audience quickly. A dog's wedding is already close to an ovation, and it's just the third [miniature]. That's it—they killed it with the refrain about the cow! Ovation after the next one. Jeez, why are they always so funny?! The scarlet flower smashed it. That's it—we have the first favorite of the season.<sup>192</sup>

Takstop! followers glean that the team was successful, but the jokes the poster named, “a dog's wedding,” “refrain about the cow,” don't make sense to anyone who was not among the 1,000 people in the House of KVN for the game. Over 3,000 followers viewed the post. Most of those readers, though, would not understand why +7 was funny for three months, since the game's broadcast was slated for June 2019.

It is not humor, then, that attracts people to KVN commentaries. Even when posters quote jokes, they rarely register as funny out of context. Instead, followers read commentaries because of their drama value. People, especially current competitors and former KVNshiki, become invested in the fates of individual teams and regions. And they want to know more than just who won. People value the commentator's opinions, descriptions of audience reactions, and, often, how a team's material stacks up in comparison to previous performances. Short, representative comments about teams at the 2019 Sochi festival included: “Simply funny,” “Ha ha ha,” and “No emotions in particular.” A Takstop! post about the Irkutsk/Ulan-Ude team “Buryats” at the 2019 Sochi festival noted, “It's like some kind of KVN acupuncture—hits just the right spots. Have to see it.” One of the jokes the poster quoted was the following, which I saw the team write and refine collectively between the first and second rounds:

—I'm going to feed my sled dogs  
—Hahaha, he travels by dog!  
—Hahaha, he pays for gasoline!<sup>193</sup>

Other comments about teams in Sochi's second round included, “No, I haven't fallen asleep. Although I might have” (team Mama Will Be Happy, Kursk); “They re-wrote the material just a teeny bit not funny” (team Yura, Moscow); “They've somehow lost some energy since the first

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<sup>192</sup> Telegram channel Takstop! March 24, 2019.

<sup>193</sup> Telegram channel Takstop! January 19, 2019.

round” (team Recharge, Vladimir); “uncontrollable attacks of hysteria in the audience” (Mikhail Dudikov, Stavropol’). Commenters also paid special attention to two of the people who would be selecting teams for the televised leagues, Aleksander Vasilievich Masliakov (AVM) and his son, Alexander Aleksandrovich Masliakov (AAM). Comments about the reactions of these two, in particular, included:

- “AVM is smiling” (team Buryats, Irkutsk/Ulan-Ude)
- “AVM stopped smiling” (team Green Suitcase, Kemerovo)
- “AVM is watching very interestedly” (team Peninsula, Simferopol)
- “AAM laughed out loud (*v golos*)” (team Surskii Region, Penza Region)
- “AAM is in tears” (team Snezhnogorsk, Snezhnogorsk)<sup>194</sup>



**Team Buryats at the 2019 Sochi Festival. Photograph by author.**

Commentary like this relates not only results, but a game’s atmosphere. A poster wrote about the second of three 2019 Premier League octofinal matches, “Yesterday the auditorium was, of course, much more full. Warm it up!” A second person then commented, “Wooooot! After the applause from behind the scenes the auditorium seemed to remember that people are performing KVN for them and cheered powerfully.”<sup>195</sup> Telegram followers want to read about audience

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<sup>194</sup> Telegram channel Takstop! January 19, 2019.

<sup>195</sup> Telegram channel Sezon KVN - 2019 March 25, 2019.

reactions, too, often at least as much as they want transcriptions of the jokes themselves. A post about the third Premier League octofinals match in Moscow noted, for instance, “Their delivery is good, cheerful, but the audience doesn’t want to laugh yet.”<sup>196</sup>

Telegram posters write more informally, and often more candidly, than writers for websites or blogs. Unlike articles, posts are anonymous and unedited (although channel administrators ultimately decide whether or not to approve content). Both the register and the temporality of Telegram posts, then, differ from more traditional reviews of games (*obzory*). About the Temriuk team Hello, We've Arrived, for example, one person wrote, “They have great characters and gags, but it’s dragging.” Another poster observed at the Sochi festival, “Oh, miniatures are going to be rough for these guys, following +7” (team Those Very Guys, Stavropol).<sup>197</sup> Telegram coverage describes action in a game as it unfolds rather than reporting on results, like traditional reviews. On Telegram, even if followers catch up on posts a day or two after a game took place, people feel less like they are reading about a past event than that they are experiencing, however blindly, a game.

Telegram is not the only venue for game details, however. Leagues and individuals often post short, one- or two- minute videos from performances, usually shot from cell phones, on Instagram Live. The videos stay on Instagram for twenty-four hours and then expire, contributing to a sense of immediate spectatorship. The main platform for Top League reporting, however, is Amik’s website, [kvn.ru](http://kvn.ru). Articles on this website cover all the teams at the Sochi festivals, list results for seventy-four KVN leagues across Russia, and offer fans “behind-the-scenes” views of teams in rehearsals and editing sessions. The pages covering the 2019 Sochi festival's second round got over 11,000 hits. Takstop! reportage, in contrast, got around 2,000 views for the same events. More than 8,000 people, further, visited the [kvn.ru](http://kvn.ru) page that described the first Top League editing session of 2019:

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<sup>196</sup> “Поддача хороша, бодренько, но вот смеяться зал пока не желает.” Telegram channel Sezon KVN-2019 March 26, 2019.

<sup>197</sup> Telegram channel Takstop! January 19, 2019.

“First Octofinals of Top League 2019. Run-through for the Editors,” subtitled, “An ideal chance to see at least a little bit of what will be in the game.”<sup>198</sup> Suspense, drama, and, sometimes, personal connections with team members drive the desire for information about games, both those in progress and those yet to be played. Individuals also publish written reviews of games on local KVN websites and video reviews on YouTube. Video reviewers tend to cover televised games, and they interlace voice-over commentary with video clips from the broadcasts.

### *Metapragmatic communities*

All of these discourses about KVN are metapragmatic. That is, they are talk about talk, and talk about the social functions of linguistic choices (cf. Lucy 1993). Fans discuss how jokes could be improved, the emotional effects of numbers, and the ramifications of a performance for various KVN communities—who will advance, who will be upset, who got unfair scores, what a performance means for the upcoming season. A poster commenting on the team Dynamo Station during the 2019 Premier League octofinals, for instance, situated it in terms of the team’s past and rumored, though not realized, performances:

Dynamo Station starts out a bit rough, but it seems the people like Katya's character...Katya messes up her lines a bit, it was better at the [Moscow and Moscow Region] Festival. A completely new number about unnecessary gifts is funny. Olya’s hysterics go over very well. The rumors were true; the really funny bloc with inside jokes got cut out...it all went over less than ideally.<sup>199</sup>

These metapragmatic discourses do a few things, socially. First, they bind together a community of KVNshiki that share knowledge not only about KVN, but about a large catalogue of teams in both local and televised leagues. In Ukraine, KVNshiki tend to follow, and deliberate about, not only local KVN teams and televised League of Laughter competitions, but also televised (Russian) Top League competitions. For instance, when the team Medics came in for an editing session before the 2017 Odessa National University semifinals match, Pavel advised them

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<sup>198</sup> “Первая 1/8 Высшей лиги 2019. Редакторский просмотр. Online + Бонус.” The YouTube video of this game’s broadcast has over 1.5 million views as of March 28, 2019.

<sup>199</sup> Telegram channel Takstop! March 24, 2019.

to watch a Top League team from Chita, in Russia (*Sbornaia Zabaikal'skogo Kraia*) to see how they stitched together short musical couplets and sharp, clear scenes. “Watch the Zabaikal'skii take on it. It should look like that.”<sup>200</sup> Before another editing session, Viktoria Pis'michenko and Pavel Demchenko discussed a recent League of Laughter broadcast in which a team had dressed as clowns and shaken their rears at the audience. “Horrible. Before, Chivurin took them in hand. Masliakov never allowed that kind of vulgarity.” She continued on about another team in the competition, “I can't stand them. What they did—is *that* a joke?”<sup>201</sup> Active KVNshiki discuss other teams' performances to learn from them, to see how their team measures up, or, as a community of people who enjoys laughing, to let someone else's sense of humor amuse them. The wider community of KVN fans discusses what they like and dislike, and why. For Pis'michenko, vulgarity ruins humor. Discourses like theirs reinforce ideas about what comedy is, or should be.

Success in KVN requires attention to such expectations as well as to other teams' performances, local and mass-mediated. Talking about these performances, further, is a key component of social interaction among KVNshiki. With thousands of participants, there are never as many KVNshiki gathered in one place as there are at the Sochi festival. In 2019, over 7,000 competitors, editors, authors, and journalists settled in and around the iconic festival hotel Zhemchuzhina. Nearly all the teams try to get a room in Zhemchuzhina because activity starts in the morning (around 11:00 a.m.) and ends—in the morning (at around 5:00 a.m.) The day before the 2019 Sochi festival began, one of the Top League editors, Dmitry Shpenkov, posted on Telegram, “Guys, I hope you are prepared—fasten your seatbelts, get a lot of sleep tonight. Tomorrow we will be breakfasting in HELL.” People sleep very little and most work very hard during the festival. Being in Zhemchuzhina allows people to be close to other teams, to league editors, and to all the events. For one to two weeks, depending on whether they advance to the

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<sup>200</sup> “Посмотрите Забайкальский вариант. Должно так например выглядеть.” Editing session April 21, 2017, Odessa, Ukraine.

<sup>201</sup> Editing session, April 25, 2017, Odessa, Ukraine.

second round, team members spend their time rehearsing, watching other teams in the hotel's auditorium, and, of course partying, either at the official nightly entertainment events (improvisation contests, trivia games, rap battles, live concerts), in Zhemchuzhina's so-called "American Diner," so crammed with people by 2:00 a.m. that one can hardly move, or, perhaps, less frenetically but no more soberly, in people's hotel rooms.

On the third day of the festival I sat around with the team from IGU in the early evening as they took a break from rehearsing. Six of the team members plus me wedged ourselves into a hotel room some of them were sharing at Zhemchuzhina. As the team lounged on the room's two full-size beds, Alexander asked me what teams I'd watched that day and which ones were funny. I told him that I'd been in the auditorium since 11:00 a.m., and that one of the best teams I'd seen was from Tula. Chingiz and Alexander were both scrolling through reviews of teams on [kvn.ru](http://kvn.ru). "Hmm, five stars," Alexander said, seeming to scan the coverage for the most successful teams. [Kvn.ru](http://kvn.ru) reporters give each team at Sochi an "audience reaction" score of up to five stars. IGU themselves, when they competed, earned four stars, which is a very good rating. Alexander suddenly laughed and showed Chingiz a video clip of a KVNshik fumbling her words that would become a festival and post-festival inside joke. Chingiz smiled. They guys stared down at their phones and I took out my own, to check Telegram. Logistical information, including frequent schedule and location changes, happened through Telegram, not on the official timetable posted on [kvn.ru](http://kvn.ru). It seemed everyone was reading the Sochi festival channel, constantly, to find out where in the line-up their friends or favorite teams would be performing, to see pictures from the festival, and to watch festival-related videos on Instagram and YouTube.

At Sochi people reveled in talk about talk, and often talk about talk about talk. "Have you watched Denis Kosiakov's answer to Agafonov?" one of the members of team Buryaty asked me one evening. Kosiakov had recorded a negative video review of a team coached by Stanislav Agafonov, a successful writer and producer from Irkutsk. Agafonov then uploaded an answer on

YouTube, and Kosiakov uploaded a rebuttal. Team Buryats and I sat in one of their hotel rooms at Zhemchuzhina the day before Sochi's second round listening as someone played Kosiakov's diatribe from their phone. It had been uploaded just that day. "I, for example, love my son," he said. "And I'd never dress him in terrible clothes, knowing that he would look silly...And if I really loved a team, I wouldn't let them...go out on stage without a single joke, as Raisy did in the final."<sup>202</sup> No one said anything when the clip ended. Kosiakov had lambasted another Irkutsk team. Regardless of their opinions about Kosiakov or his review, though, it seemed important to stay current on KVN commentaries.

Telegram reporting keeps performances at Sochi alive in the popular imagination longer than they might otherwise. As teams advanced through the Top, Premier, and First League seasons, Telegram posters often noted how skits differed from those at the festival. About the Premier League octofinals performance of the team Surksii Region, for instance, a Takstop! writer observed that they started off with a number that had been cut out of the Sochi gala concert broadcast. The writer immediately noticed and commented not only on the recent history of a team, but of a single joke. Reporting on the same octofinals match, a commenter wrote about the Arkhangelsk team Arktika, "Even things received well in Sochi aren't hitting the mark. San Sanich [Aleksander Aleksandrovich Masliakov] is tapping his foot to the music, but he's looking up at the balcony through tight lips, disappointedly."<sup>203</sup> Since Aleksander Aleksandrovich Masliakov emcees Premier League games, he stays on stage, off to the side, for performances. His father Aleksander Vasilievich, though, sits, generally alone, on a balcony above the auditorium. Arktika's content had not changed much in the two months since Sochi; perhaps AAM and AVM had both expected it to.

But if KVNshiki like reading about national-level games before they are broadcast, they are, perhaps, even more interested in reviews about local games that they have seen (or competed in).

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<sup>202</sup> "Answer to Agafon" ("*Otvét Agafonu*"), Denis Kosiakov, January 18, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w2oFEAYCQiQ> (accessed January 28, 2020).

<sup>203</sup> Telegram channel Takstop! March 24, 2019.



Local competitors all know each other, often know the histories of predecessor teams that go back decades, and know the people who write reviews, who are usually students or recent graduates who have stayed very involved in the local KVN scene. Daniel Bibnev, for instance, of the Irkutsk team that would evolve into team IGU, frequently wrote reviews of Irkutsk games in 2018 on Irkutsk's main KVN webpage.<sup>204</sup> He praised IGU's performance in the 2018 Baikal League finals, arguing that they presented objectively funnier material than the team that had, in the end, won.

He wrote,

Take out some paper and write the following: killer joke, joke, half-joke, and cute images. If you count up the number of these elements each team has, you'll put a lot of people in their places. It's like the xG model in soccer—expected goals.<sup>205</sup> With this model we can calculate how many actual goals a team should have scored, taking all shots into consideration. Each shot gets assigned a quality value. In KVN goals are the reaction of the audience. The quality value is the strength of that reaction. So without a bunch of scales and dust in our eyes, we can evaluate the final match in terms of pure humor.<sup>206</sup>

Of course, not everyone agreed with Bibnev's calculations, including the game's judges. Bibnev even added the following disclaimer to his review: "The opinions of the author do not necessarily coincide with the views of the organizers or your own." The day after the piece was published, one person even wrote in on an Irkutsk KVN Telegram channel, "Things are kind of dull. Maybe someone could write a review of the Baikal final?" A brief exchange then followed, with one poster reminding readers that a review had already been written, and another implying that a different one should be. Despite Bibnev's claims, humor is not objective. If it was everyone would write the same jokes and there would seem little point in competing.

### *Interdiscursive comments*

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<sup>204</sup> <http://kvn-irkutsk.ru>

<sup>205</sup> Expected goals calculations measure a soccer team's consistency in shot-taking and goal-making.

<sup>206</sup> "Возьмите листочек, напишите на нем следующее: болты, шутки, полушутки и 'мульки'. Посчитайте количество этих элементов у каждой команды, многое встанет на свои места. На основе этой модели мы можем оценить сколько реально голов должна была забить команда, если учесть все удары которые она нанесла. Каждому удару присваивается коэффициент опасности. В КВНе голы – это реакция зала, а коэффициент опасности – это сила реакции. Вот так, без всякой шелухи и яркой пыли в глаза, можно оценить финал с точки зрения чистого юмора." Daniel Bibnev, *Obzor Finala Baikalskoi Ligi KVN 2018*, December 12, 2018. <http://kvn-irkutsk.ru/news/15955> (accessed April 11, 2019).

The first octofinals match of the KVN league of the Odessa Jewish Community Center, the Vzlët League,<sup>207</sup> took place on a mild, dusty March evening. I walked to the Center in fading daylight, hatless, like the other pedestrians, and it seemed as though Odessa had finally thrown off its bone-chilling coastal winter. I smiled in appreciation of the weather and in anticipation of the game, which was in many competitors' favorite league. They liked the Center's modern theater, its great audiovisual support, and, most of all, they liked its small band of KVN regulars. Unlike the larger Odessa League of Laughter or Mayor's Cup competitions, which a lot of ordinary Odessans attend for entertainment, just as they would the theater, Vzlët games attracted an audience of KVNshiki. Teams wrote for a small, in-crowd public.

About an hour into the competitions a young man named Nikita took the stage with his partner, Ksenia as members of the team Light at the End of April. One of their numbers was a miniature based on Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf. The audience laughed occasionally as Nikita and Ksenia ran through their version of the fairytale:

**Ksenia:** *Babushka, babushka, pochemu u tebya takie strannye ushi?*  
**Grandmother, grandmother, what strange ears you have!**

**Nikita:** *Normal'nye u menia ushi, chto ty nachinaesh?*  
**My ears are perfectly normal, what are you trying to start?**

**Ksenia:** *Babushka, babushka, pochemu u tebya takie strannye zuby?*  
**Grandmother, grandmother, what strange teeth you have!**

**Nikita:** *Ia by khotela na tvoi zuby vosemdesiat' let posmotret'!*  
**I'd like to see your teeth when you're eighty years old!**

Then Ksenia diverged from the tale, asking, "Grandmother, grandmother, why haven't you ever won the Vzlët League championship?" Nikita responded with six words that sent the audience into absolute fits: "Because grandfather didn't want that!" (*Potomu chto dedushka etogo ne khotel!*) People around me whooped with laughter, clapping for over thirty seconds. Nikita raised his microphone to continue on with the skit, but a new round of cheers cut him off. Thirty seconds

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<sup>207</sup> "Vzlet" means take-off or lift-off.

might not sound like a terribly long time, but it is much, much longer than people tend to clap during performances. A short subtitled clip from this skit, linked below, is worth watching for the audience reaction.<sup>208</sup> Students wiped their eyes as they laughed. I didn't get it.

About a week later I asked Nikita why the joke was funny. He said, "Yeah, only people in the Vzlët audience understand that joke. If I said it at ONU no one would understand...It's because last year I played in the final and Sergei Aleksandrovich Ostashko gave me a three. And because of that three our team lost the game. By one point" (interview with author, March 23, 2017). Sergei Ostashko, introduced in chapter two, was one of the renowned Odessa Gentlemen. He judges nearly every Vzlët competition, and the March 2017 octofinals was no exception. Nikita even turned and mock-glared at him as he issued his "grandfather" punchline. In the space of a second, at most, Vzlët fans grasped the contrast between the grandmother on stage and the grandfather on the judging panel, remembered a game that had happened seven months earlier, and began laughing.

The power of a semiotic framework is that it can explain jokes like this, which rely on indexes instead of words. In comparison to strictly semantic theories of humor, the language of semiotics—presupposition, entailment, sign vehicles, objects, and interpretants— allows us to (1) precisely describe meaning-making in jokes; (2) explain why some people recognize jokes but don't think they're funny (e.g. racist jokes); and (3) discuss nonreferential indexes. Like the other Vzlët audience members, I knew that Nikita's "grandfather" sign vehicle matched up with the represented object Ostashko / judge / Odessa Gentleman. But I didn't think the joke was funny because I didn't share the right interpretant. When they work, punchlines reside there, in the ultimate significance a sign holds for an individual perceiver. Nikita communicated more with four words, "grandfather didn't want that" ("*dedushka etogo ne khotel*"), than he could have with an entire monologue about the previous year's competition. In environments of censorship people

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<sup>208</sup> "Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oWE7daiRFuE> (accessed April 28, 2020).

have to find ways of saying without saying. But elision can also set up the surprises on which jokes depend. This is the unexpectedness of a punchline, like Nikita's, or the satisfaction in a pun. In the end, semiotics help us understand humor because jokes often rely as much on the unsaid as the said.

## Chapter Six: Structures/Feelings

*“The real communicative ‘products’ which are usable signs are, on the contrary, living evidence of a continuing social process, into which individuals are born and within which they are shaped, but to which they then also actively contribute, in a continuing process.”*

—Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*

I sat in the audience of the Baikal School League’s second quarterfinal match in December 2015, smiling at times, giggling at others, and occasionally joining the other three hundred people in the audience in waves of laughter. People delighted as the team Off Line poked fun of their parents’ generation, made skillful puns, and built jokes based on performances in Irkutsk’s (adult) Baikal League. As I waited to collect my coat after the performance I felt a bit giddy and a bit tired, more like I’d just run a half-marathon than spent an evening at the theater. Chemically speaking, in fact, KVN performances more closely resemble hard exercise than any other activity. Belly laughter, or laughter characterized by involuntary contraction of the orbicularis oculi (eyelid) muscles, floods the brain with endorphins that have opioid-like effects—only without all the sweating a runner’s high requires (Dunbar et al. 2012). Getting people to laugh out loud is not easy, of course, and teams can’t always achieve this. But even when KVN isn’t terribly funny the skits are still cheery, upbeat, and pleasant to watch. Stand-up that isn’t funny ranges from boring to unendurable.

This chapter argues that KVN, as an institution, produces patterned types of emotional experiences for competitors and audience members alike. Team members, at least those in Odessa, Irkutsk, and Moscow, largely orient towards the norms of joyfulness, positive humor, and out-loud laughter laid down by league editors. Audiences, in turn, revel in performances that occasion mass gaiety and, sometimes, paroxysms of laughter. Here, I link discourses about private emotional experience to the structures—including leagues, municipal organizations, national governments, and KVN traditions—that shape affective responses during competitions. I examine these narratives in terms of three levels of significance, the personal, the social, and the political, dividing

discussion into the following sections:

- (1) KVN as individual emotional experience
- (2) The social significance of emotion in KVN
- (3) Emotion and state objectives

Rather than analyzing emotion as an internal state, I view it as a socially-narrated, socially-produced phenomenon (Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990, Lutz 1988). I do not make claims about what people might actually feel. Instead, I focus on discourses about emotion, specifically, joyfulness, elation, and love. Discourse anchors emotion in social life, where, in the examples considered here, it finds significance. This also means that I employ the categories made relevant by informants themselves. No one used “collective effervescence” when talking to me, though I sometimes thought of KVN performances in those terms. They did, however, say “joy,” “delight,” “emotion,” “mood,” “sensation,” “cheery,” “peppy” (“*bodriy*”), and “a high.” Considering emotion in terms of these categories allows for a fuller appreciation of what KVN represents to participants, as well as an understanding of how the values they hold give rise to certain kinds of performance experiences. At base, KVN differs from most other comedy formats in that editors and teams work to design an atmosphere that is joyful rather than jokes that are funny. KVN games are exercises in creating a “good feeling,” whatever that may mean in a given community. One team at the 2016 League of Laughter Festival in Odessa was even called “Architect of a Good Mood” (“*Arkhitektor khoroshego nastroeniia*”). At the same competition, the Kiev team “Summer Evening” (“*Letniy Vecher*”) adopted the slogan, “Not a team, but an emotional state” (“*ne komanda, a nastroenie*”).<sup>209</sup>

In KVN, emotions, interaction frames, and value systems intertwine. As those researching “emotion pedagogies” have noted, socialization to cultivate certain emotional states often trains people in moral orientations, as well (Matza 2018, Wilce and Fenigson 2016). Instead of harnessing emotion in the service of neoliberal selves, however, KVNshiki discuss emotion, and

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<sup>209</sup> League of Laughter Festival, Odessa, Ukraine, February 4th-11th, 2017.

the creation of emotional states, in terms of creativity, teamwork, and social responsibility, all within a frame centered on others rather than the self.

### **Competitors: narratives of emotional experience**

Emotion drives the popularity of KVN for competitors and audience members alike. Nikita, the Odessa competitor who played both on Team Igor and Light at the End of April, said he enjoyed playing KVN because of the feeling a crowd's applause gave him. "When the audience blows up, you understand that it wasn't in vain," he said. "It wasn't in vain that we didn't sleep, that Slava [worked like] a machine, that the people at home don't understand why we do this. It just takes away all the meanness, all the fatigue." Katia defined this feeling as a "high" (*"kaiif"*), saying, "You go out on stage and perform, you get such a high from it" (interview with author March 23, 2017). Most competitors describe why they like KVN in much the same way—it's fun for them, as performers. But they draw much of their own enjoyment from the audience's reactions. Thus, they work to write acts that build excitement, create a "good mood," and trigger out-loud laughter.

Intense onstage experiences bookmark key moments in some competitors' lives. Yuri Isakov, introduced in chapter one, recalled a time when his Ekaterinburg team got straight high scores in the 1980s, saying, "Perhaps it is for the sake of such moments that it is worthwhile to play this game?" (Isakov 1996, 92). In a diatribe after a disappointing Odessa Mayor's Cup quarterfinal match, main editor Nikolai also tied the emotional experience of competitors to the excitement of the audience. Nikolai told the teams that all the editors had played for a long time (all had played in televised matches), and all had gotten a lot out of the game. "We are from our souls trying to make KVN [possible]."<sup>210</sup> A few of the teams, by skipping meetings and editing sessions, had both failed the audience and robbed themselves of the chance to ride the reactions of an elated crowd.

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<sup>210</sup> Debriefing session, Odessa Mayor's Cup second quarterfinals, May 21, 2017. Notes taken.

“We want you to have those kinds of emotions,” he concluded.<sup>211</sup>

Like Nikita, competitors on the Irkutsk team “Knight's Move” also shared narratives of emotional experiences in KVN. In the following excerpts, Dima and Aleksander of Knight's Move talked about the emotions they drew from enthusiastic crowd responses, including, “pleasure,” “indefinable sensations,” and “emotions” (interview with author, December 3, 2016). The exchange below followed a question from me about who coached children's leagues in Krasnoyarsk, where Dima grew up. I hadn't asked the team about emotion. I hadn't actually spoken at all for over a minute. Dima began reminiscing about his days playing in school leagues. He explained the enthusiasm Krasnoyarsk children had for playing KVN in terms of feelings, in terms of the reasons he, at least, enjoyed the game. Making people laugh gave him, he said, “moral satisfaction:”

(1)

- |   |             |   |
|---|-------------|---|
| 1 | <b>Dima</b> | <i>no KVN eto</i><br><b>well KVN is</b>   |
| 2 |             | <i>ty na tsenu ukhodish</i><br><b>you go out on stage</b>   |
| 3 |             | <i>no, ne znaiu</i><br><b>well, I don't know</b>  |
| 4 |             | <i>dlia menia</i><br><b>for me</b>  |
| 5 |             | <i>ia vykhozhu</i><br><b>I go out there</b>   |
| 6 |             | <i>i ia poluchaiu moral'noe udovol'stvoe ot etogo</i><br><b>and I get moral satisfaction from it</b> <sup>212</sup> |

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<sup>211</sup> “Мы хотим, чтобы у вас было такие эмоции.” Odessa Mayor's Cup second quarterfinals, May 21, 2017.

<sup>212</sup> Several of the excerpts presented here are transcribed in intonational units, following the guidelines of Du Bois et al. (1993). Each numbered line in represents an intonation unit. This way of displaying data allows for patterns in the organization of speech—such as disfluencies and parallels—to be seen more clearly than they can in blocks of text.



Aleksander then agreed, saying that they all get that kind of feeling from playing KVN (line 9). He, though, linked this to the audience’s response. Unlike theater performers or singers, who only get applause at the end of a performance, people will applaud KVNshiki “however much you want” (line 16). After the crowd “screams and claps,” he said, “you somehow *feel*...” Aleksander did not finish this statement, putting words to exactly what he felt. He raised both pitch and loudness on “feel,” though, adding emphasis to the idea of feeling, in particular (line 28).

- 7     **Aleksander**     *da, poluchaetsia*  
**yeah, it’s like**
- 8                     *nu i kak-to my vse*  
**well and it’s like that for all of us**
- 9                     *to est—*  
**that is**
- [20 lines omitted]*
- 10                    *ty ponimaesh’ v chem delo*  
**you understand, the thing is**
- 11                    *teatraly ili pevtsy*  
**theatergoers or singers**
- 12                    *im budiat appladirovat’*  
**people will applaud them**
- 13                    *tol’ko v kontse ikh vystuplenie*  
**only at the end of their performance**
- 14                    *a v KVNe*  
**but in KVN**
- 15                    *to est*  
**that is**
- 16                    *skol’ko ty zakhochish*  
**however much you want**
- 17                    *stol’ko tebe i budiat appladirovat’*  
**that’s how much they will applaud you**
- [3 lines of overlap omitted]<sup>213</sup>*

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<sup>213</sup> I have omitted some disfluencies and overlap from these transcriptions because they do not contribute to the analysis made here.

18	<i>to est</i> <b>that is</b>
19	<i>da</i> <b>yeah</b>
20	<i>to est</i> <b>that is</b>
21	<i>ty napishesh i</i> <b>you write and</b>
22	<i>tebe budiat khlopat' posle kazhdoi tvoei shutki</i> <b>they will applaud you after every one of your jokes</b>
23	<i>ty budesh poluchat' ovatsii</i> <b>you'll get ovations</b>
24	<i>to est vot—</i> <b>that is, like—</b>
25	<i>i posle etogo</i> <b>and after that</b>
26	<i>kak by</i> <b>it's like</b>
27	<i>kogda tolpa krichit, khlopaet</i> <b>when the crowd screams, claps</b>
28	<i>i kak by <u>chuvstvuesh'</u></i> <b>you somehow <i>feel</i></b>
29	<i>chto, nu...</i> <b>that, well...</b>

Dima chimed in, then, talking about the rush he felt on stage as an “indefinable sensation.” In a moment of rhetorical iconicity, Dima’s fluency of speech broke down as he tried to characterize this feeling in words. His intonation units became shorter and his narrative choppier as he paused to think about how to convey what a peak moment on stage felt like. Dima relied on more one-word filler phrases (“like,” “well”) and stopped several times to re-phrase (lines 9, 20, 23), before saying that he really could not convey the feeling, but that “there were emotions...*really*” (lines 56-57). In a middle passage not transcribed here (after line 32, below), Dima explained that his high school team was playing in a Krasnoyarsk finals match during their

senior year, and it was to be their last game. “They loved us in the city, and they knew that we were graduating,” he said. During their last number, a musical skit for an event called Contest of One Song (*Konkurs Odnoi Pesni*), they’d hoped to rouse the whole auditorium—and they did. Dima said that he didn't care that he’d lost the final; he’d remember the moment forever.

- 30    **Dima**                    *dlia menia*  
                                      **for me**
- 31                                *dlia menia eto samoe neopredeliaemoe oshchushchenie*  
                                      **for me it is the most indefinable sensation**
- 32                                *bylo togo, vot...*  
                                      **there was, like**
- [22 seconds omitted]*
- 33                                *no u nas byl KOP*  
                                      **well we had a [song for the] Contest of One Song**
- 34                                *pod Bon Dzhoviem*  
                                      **to Bon Jovi**
- 35                                *“It's my life”*  
                                      **“It's my life”**
- 36                                *i tam byl takoi moment*  
                                      **and there was this moment**
- 37                                *ia nekogda ne zabudu*  
                                      **I'll never forget it**
- 38                                *tam byl*  
                                      **there was**
- 39                                *poluchaetsia*  
                                      **like**
- 40                                *nu*  
                                      **well**
- 41                                *pripev, i v kontse bylo tipa—*  
                                      **the chorus, and at the end there was like—**
- 42                                *i khotelos' by, chtoby ves zal*  
                                      **and we wanted for the whole auditorium**
- 43                                *stal i nachal khlopat'*  
                                      **to stand and clap**

- 44 *i liudi*  
**and people**
- 45 *oni prosto*  
**they just**
- 46 *chetyre sto chelovek oni prosto stoiut i nachninaut khlopat'*  
**four hundred people stand and begin to clap**
- 47 *eto prosto neopredeliaemoe oshchushchenie*  
**that's just an indefinable sensation**
- 48 *tam prosto tam uzhe*  
**there just there already**
- 49 *ty pro—*  
**you jus—**
- 50 *nu tam uzhe ne pet' nichego ne mozhesh'*  
**well you can't even sing anymore**
- 51 *potomu chto ty prosto v shoke*  
**because you're just in shock**
- 52 *pro— nu—*  
**jus— well—**
- 53 *nel'zia*  
**it's impossible**
- 54 *eto*  
**it's**
- 55 *nu tak ne peredat'*  
**well can't convey it**
- 56 *emotsii byli*  
**there were emotions**
- 57 *voobshche*  
**really**
- 58 *tam dazhe*  
**there even**
- 59 *pofig chto etot final proigrali*  
**I couldn't care less that we lost the final**
- 60 *no eto na vsiu zhisniu ostanitsia eto v pamiati*  
**but that will stay in my memory my whole life**

In a similar vein, Nikita from Team Igor in Odessa claimed that pride in writing funny

material fueled emotion on stage, saying, “When you write it yourself, and you understand that people are laughing at what you wrote, that is the best thing.” His teammate Slava agreed, continuing,

(2)

- |   |               |   |
|---|---------------|---|
| 1 | <b>Slava</b>  | <i>da i bol'she potomu chto ty sam eto pridumal</i><br><b>yeah and even more because you thought it up yourself</b> |
| 2 |               | <i>i sam eto sygral</i><br><b>and you played yourself</b>   |
| 3 |               | <i>i ty ponimaesh, chto eto smeshno liudam</i><br><b>and you understand that it's funny for people</b>              |
| 4 |               | <i>to chto ty <u>sam</u> pridumal</i><br><b>what <u>you</u> yourself thought up</b>                                 |
| 5 |               | <i>chto tvoia komanda pridumala</i><br><b>what your team thought up</b>   |
| 6 |               | <i>i kogda tebe nachineaet khlopat'</i><br><b>and when they begin to clap for you</b>                               |
| 7 |               | <i>nachinaet vot stoit ot etogo</i><br><b>it begins to seem worth it</b>  |
| 8 | <b>Nikita</b> | <i>postaianno</i><br><b>always</b>  |

These narratives about emotional experience are valuable because they illustrate why KVNshiki themselves enjoy the game. Katya even said that emotions were why she “loved KVN, and why everyone who plays does” (interview with author, March 23, 2017). The competitors cited here, though, drew distinctions between the feelings they get from KVN and those that a theater performer might also receive from being in front of a crowd. For one, Alexander noted that KVNshiki get applause and laughter (ideally) throughout each three- to five-minute number instead of only at the end of a performance (lines 11-17). Teams actively modulate the mood of an auditorium. Nikita and Slava also pointed to the fact that they authored their own material, which was uniquely gratifying. The affective relationship between competitors and audiences is two-way

and agentive. KVNshiki *make* people laugh, which is part of the fun. They are inciting laughter, creating a mood, not just reading a script.

### *Onstage*

I played KVN during a competition only once during my fieldwork, though I was not actually on stage. I worked with the all-female team Friend Zone as a sound operator (*zvukooperator* or *zvukar'*) for the February 2016 League of Laughter Festival in Odessa. The team got in touch with me shortly before the festival in response to a post I had made on the social networking platform vKontakte. In my post in a local Odessa KVN group, I had described my research and said I would be happy to volunteer either as a sound operator or general helper for a team. Friend Zone needed a sound operator. I was in luck.

Sound operators manage the music that plays as teams enter and leave the stage, sound effects during and after jokes, and short musical clips that serve as transitions between skits. Friend Zone had eight clips for their three-minute performance, some of which were repeated. Sound operators have to memorize the skits so that they can play clips at exactly the right time, cued by the performer's lines. Ideally, the sound operator rehearses extensively with the team so that they can nail timing and adjust to changes the team makes. We were only two days away from the competition, though, so the team and I worked together only a few times. I met Yana, Nastya, Emily, and Vika at the hotel complex where 160 teams had assembled to compete for twenty-five slots in the central League of Laughter televised league. We found a hallway where we could practice. Rehearsing teams took up nearly every inch of the OK Odessa hotel, some leaping about, others sitting atop teammates' shoulders. Friends who had not seen each other since the last year's competition crowded around the bar area. In a relatively quiet spot, the team showed me their skit and told me when to play sound clips and songs on Nastya's laptop. We ran through their material for about thirty minutes, then went to meet with editors Pavel Demchenko and Vladimir Borisov in a different hallway. Neither Demchenko nor Borisov edited for the central League of Laughter

event, but both served as editors for the Odessa regional League of Laughter competitions. Demchenko, too, had worked with Friend Zone several times over the past two years through the Odessa National University league. Demchenko and Borisov volunteered their time to Friend Zone in part because it was a team they knew, and in part because they wanted Odessa teams to make a strong showing in this national competition.

I'd already interviewed Demchenko, so didn't feel terribly nervous trying out a gig as a sound operator in front of him. But Vladimir Borisov, who I'd watched on television in Top League competitions for years, left me feeling a little star struck. With only thirty minutes to rehearse, I really hoped I remembered all the girls' lines. I said hello to Demchenko and introduced myself to Borisov, who smiled. "And so, we have a *zvukar'* from America," he said, looking amused.

Both editors sat in chairs with their backs to a wall in the hallway, near a slightly larger space by the elevator landing. I sat on the floor a few feet away from them, with the laptop. The girls lined up to the left of the editors and prepared to make their entrance on "stage." They walked forward. Silence. They all looked at me. I'd missed the cue. I hadn't estimated correctly where the imagined stage began so that I could play the team's opening theme, a slick pop voice that proclaimed, "You've been friendzoned!" We tried again. I was still late. I got it the third time, and we went through the rest of the skit successfully. Demchenko told the team they should get to punchlines more quickly and write a few more jokes. Afterwards, Emily said they were going to go home to work on new material. We agreed to meet the following day, before the performance.

The next day, I got to the OK Odessa theater at 9:00 a.m. and watched about an hour of the first round performances before the girls arrived. The team had been up late practicing and trying to add speech bubble graphics to a video they'd recorded. In the end they cut the video and added in two numbers that I had not yet seen. The music, thus, had to be changed. The girls put on their red performance dresses, applied makeup (bright red lipstick), and sat discussing how best to arrange the skit. We did not begin to rehearse the new material in earnest until noon, about two

hours before the performance. We practiced in the sunlit circular hall surrounding the theater. All the other teams were talking and rehearsing, too, so the team had a hard time hearing the sound from my dinky laptop speakers. After a number of re-tries, with the girls stopping to stare at me even when I had played clips, unheard over the din, we seemed to have the number down pat. *This is going to go just fine*, I thought to myself. I believed that for all of ten minutes.



**Team Friend Zone, League of Laughter Festival 2017, Odessa, Ukraine. Photo by author.**

About forty-five minutes before Friend Zone, team number 56 in the queue, was due on stage, we met with Demchenko again for one more run-through. He recommended re-arranging the order of the skits and changing the final line (coda). He left, then, to help other teams. We managed to go over the new order five times. The girls seemed shaky in their lines. I was thrown a little, too, trying to re-order sound clips even as I played them. With fifteen minutes before our time slot, it was time to head to the auditorium. The girls lined up alongside the stage, waiting for their three-minute turn in front of the League of Laughter editors, Andrei Chivurin, Valentin Ivanov, and Chingis Mazinov, who decided which teams would advance to the next round. Emily, unofficial team captain, stared straight ahead and clenched her jaw. She may have sensed disaster.



Competitors from the other teams filled the thousand-seat theater, most awaiting their own first-round showings. It was the largest crowd Friend Zone had faced in the two years they'd been competing.

I sat on a platform mid-way up the theater, behind a large black sound console with ten or so sliding bars. I didn't know what any of these bars did. Panic set in as I wondered if I was about to completely ruin the team's performance. I watched carefully as the three sound operators ahead of me slid the bars up and down, creating fade-out effects with the music. All of them did this. It does, of course, sound much better for a theme song to slowly decrease in volume instead of just cutting off mid-phrase. It occurred to me that I would have to do this, too, if I didn't want Friend Zone's performance to sound choppy and strange. But I had never practiced modulating volume on a console and it threw another variable into a performance that felt less rehearsed by the minute. Stage fright nagged at my psyche like a bored, hyperactive child. As I took over from the sound operator for the team ahead of ours, I confirmed which bar controlled volume. *Okay, I thought. This might be okay.*

I plugged my laptop into the speaker and sat down at the console. Yana's head peeked out from behind the curtain. They would enter when I began playing the music. I pressed play, my right hand on the console's sliding volume bar. "YOU'VE BEEN FRIENDZONED" blared out before I could adjust the volume down a bit. A bauble; I managed to fade out the theme song successfully. The girls performed the first two skits as rehearsed and I did not flub their sound clips. Then things fell apart. One of the girls missed some lines, causing the other team members to impromptu skip punchlines and move on to the next skit. In negotiating this, Yana said lines for a skit that had originally followed the one that had gotten cut off, not for the next skit in the new order established day-of. I caught it and played the right song. But everyone was floundering. My carefully arranged playlist suddenly became irrelevant. I had to adapt to whatever the girls might say next, playing sounds wherever a punchline or transition might appear. When Nikita from Team

Igor later told me about how he felt after a performance, saying, “I remember every second of rehearsal, but on stage—nothing,” I understood what he meant. It is as if I blacked out for ninety seconds of the performance. I was simply reacting. The number ended with me not really knowing how the girls, “we,” had done. I knew only that what had just happened was not what we had planned, that the audience had clapped politely rather than enthusiastically, and that I had not messed up, at least not a terrible lot. I felt enormously relieved, actually. I had not let the team down and had not shamed my country, being, most likely, the only American to compete in team comedy in Ukraine.

Friend Zone did not advance to the next round. The girls looked hangdog after the performance and bickered among themselves, chastising each other for missing lines. But all seemed forgotten by the nighttime party, that night, like every night at the festival, in a rented-out top-floor nightclub near the OK Odessa. Friend Zone danced and chatted with the other Odessa KVNshiki, happy to be a part of a pan-Ukrainian, semi-international *tusovka* (party) of competitors. People made friends at these social events, danced, sang karaoke, played trivia games, drank, and faced off in *razminka*. Only twenty-five teams out of one hundred and sixty made it through the editing gauntlet to the televised gala concert a week later. But all of them partied, for days.

### *Love of the game*

Games themselves form only a piece of KVN sociality. KVNshiki meet and forge friendships, both within and between teams, at brainstorming meetings, rehearsals, editing sessions, after-game events, and festivals. When people speak of “love for KVN,” then—and many do—they refer to this larger set of interpersonal activities, not just what happens in the space of two-hour performances. Discourses of friendship and love, in fact, commonly crop up in student discussions about KVN. For instance, the vKontakte page (like Russian Facebook) for Russia’s First League says that the online community is “For everyone who loves KVN. For everyone who played and plays, or has a relationship with the First League.” Likewise, Irkutsk’s KVNshiki organized a get-together on

Valentine's day, calling it "A Good Occasion to Meet." The announcement for the event ended with the lines, "Eternal love. Love for KVN" ("*Vechnaia liubov'. Liubov k KVN*"). The Youth League in Kharkiv, Ukraine also hosted a special Valentine's Day competition in 2016. In an interview before the match, Yulia, a university student, described KVN as not only fun, but addictive. "KVN is a game," she said, "And it's a way of life. It's socializing, it's a party, and it's about meeting new people. And if you try KVN once—that's it. It's like a drug...It's impossible to kick the habit" (KVN Kharkiv 2016).

Dima of Knight's Move described KVN in terms of community, as well. "KVN is not a *competition*," he said. Teams competed, to be sure, but this was just one facet of the activity, for him. Just as in the song "My First Festival," Dima called KVN a family, saying, "All in all KVN is one big family...all the teams are friends" (interview with author, December 3, 2016).<sup>214</sup> "Behind the scenes," he said, "everything should be kind" ("*za kulisy dolzhno byt' dobriy*").

KVN's culture-as-constituted, if not necessarily culture-as-lived (Sahlins 2000), is one of camaraderie rather than cut-throat competition. In truth, rivalries do sometimes turn into feuds, teams occasionally steal material from each other, and some people play KVN for fame and wealth rather than "love of the game" or abiding friendships. But spectators want to see warmth, not infighting, and judges praise teams with, "that touched my heart" or "stole my heart." Yuli Gusman, who competed in the 1960s and now serves as a judge, highlighted some of KVN's core values in his comments to the 2013 KVN Top League finalists. "Our game has been going on since 1961," he said. "Since 1961, and it's already the 2000s...and if the television audience, people taken [with KVN], cry, suffer, make merry, become joyful, laugh out loud, and become friends—it's a wonderful thing, and we call it KVN." In 1967, KVN's television editor, Elena Gal'perina, similarly said, "And anyway, KVN *is*. And it exists because people want to be in the collective, to think, to joke, to laugh—to be happy, at the end of the day!" (Gal'perina 1967a, 28). But explicit statements

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<sup>214</sup> "КВН — это не соревнование. Вообще КВН это же одна большая семья...Все команды дружат."

like Gusman's and Gal'perina's would matter little if performers themselves did not reinscribe KVN as an activity that promotes positivity both on- and offstage.

### **Audiences: social significance of emotion**

The feelings team members from Knight's Move and Team Igor discussed, pleasure, shock, "emotions," and "the best thing," came, ultimately, from audience feedback. Teams draw what many call "energy" from the auditorium (*za*) and return it as glee. Some teams have textual styles, relying on punchlines alone to whip up audience laughter. Other teams excite through *draivogo* ("full of drive") performances punctuated with songs and upbeat dance numbers. The Tver team +7 highlighted the contrast between these two strategies during the 2019 Premier League semifinals, saying, "Today we are performing, as always, without music. Because when God was handing out music to other teams, we were standing in line for jokes (*miniatury*)."<sup>215</sup> Their jokes, in fact, ended up winning them that evening's competition.

Both ordinary audience members and game reviewers gauge the success of performances according to emotional responses. Telegram commentary about the 2019 Sochi festival, for instance, included the observations, "Individual people in the auditorium are crying" (Team Korgalzhino, Kazakhstan) and, "Well, okay. No emotions in particular" (Baikal Coast, Ulan Ude).<sup>216</sup> Dima from Knight's Move said that he once sat transfixed in front of a live stream video from the Sochi festival, fascinated not by the jokes, which did not transfer well remotely, but by the intermittently-convulsing audience. "There were times when for a minute or ninety seconds the crowd could not get a handle on itself," he told me (interview with author, December 3, 2016). Reactions like these spur KVNshiki to keep performing and audience members to keep showing up. I, at least, delight in the snorts, shaking shoulders, and cheers of others, and laugh more myself

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<sup>215</sup> Premier League first semifinal, May 31, 2019.

<sup>216</sup> Telegram Channel TakStop! commentary January 19, 2019.

in return. Watching jokes together also makes you feel like a participant at an event (a party, a group joke evaluation) rather than a spectator.

Dima and Alexander from Knight's Move argued that people should only watch KVN live, in fact, because laughter doesn't feed laughter except in the company of others. Dima highlighted "involuntary laughter," the belly laughter Robin Dunbar (2012) linked to endorphin release, in his discussion of emotions in the audience (lines 11-15) (interview with author, December 3, 2016).



**Baikal League Semifinals, October 2, 2016. Irkutsk, Russia. Photo by author.**

(3)

- |   |             |   |
|---|-------------|---|
| 1 | <b>Dima</b> | <i>da i ty kak by sidish</i><br><b>yeah and you like sit there</b>                        |
| 2 |             | <i>i vot</i><br><b>and there</b>  |
| 3 |             | <i>eti emotsii vot riadom dazhe</i><br><b>these emotions are just right there</b>         |
| 4 |             | <i>kakoi-nibud' diad'ka usatyi</i><br><b>there's some kind of old man with a mustache</b> |
| 5 |             | <i>esli on nachinaet smeiat'sia</i><br><b>if he starts to laugh</b>                       |
| 6 |             | <i>i ty ponimaesh chto ty shutku ponimaesh</i>  |

**and you understand that you understand the joke**

- 7                    *ona smeshnaia i ty smeeshsia*  
**it's funny and you laugh**
- 8     **Aleksander**     *takaia reakcia, da, idet*  
**that kind of reaction, yes, happens**
- 9     **Dima**             *da*  
**yeah**
- 10                   *kak by*  
**it's like**
- 11                   *i u tebia*  
**and you have**
- 12                   *neproizvol'niy smekh*  
**involuntary laughter**
- 13                   *i poluchaetsya ot siuda vot*  
**and it works out from here, like**
- 14                   *potomu chto KVN*  
**because KVN**
- 15                   *po televizory smotret' voobshee nel'zia*  
**you absolutely cannot watch on TV**
- 16                   *i on nuzhno smotret' tol'ko v zhivuii*  
**and you have to watch it live, only**
- 17     **Aleksander**     *nu zhelatel'no konechno*  
**well ideally, of course**

Without audiences, KVNshiki wouldn't write jokes. Why, though, outside of pride, do game organizers and performers want to make people laugh? What do they get out of it?

In most cases, they don't get money. KVNshiki earn the respect of their peers and parents and admiration from the opposite sex. But at the community level KVN generates no profit, for anyone. In contrast, even free stand-up open mics draw in drink-buying customers for the pubs that host them. Stand-up organizations that charge for tickets use the revenue to pay staff salaries. But community KVN tickets are either free or cost little (less than \$4.00). As important as audience emotion may be for its own sake, the way people discursively frame the importance of audience

sentiment also warrants analysis.

Editors, for instance, often justify the importance of emotion in terms of social responsibility, as we saw in chapter four. Pavel Demchenko, in particular, stressed that jokes should not merely entertain, but improve society—if only in the buoyed moods of people in the auditorium. He was not alone, however. Grisha, another Odessa editor, told teams in a debriefing session after the 2017 Mayor's Cup semifinals, “Have fun! The most important thing is laughter.” He went on to chastise a team that, in his opinion, had not considered audience reaction at all in their performance: “It's just dumb. Why did you even come here?”<sup>217</sup> Grisha, like Demchenko, reinforced the idea that a KVNchik's task was to create positive feelings for others, not to grandstand. Students could, of course, dismiss comments like these as an older generation's whingeing. Instead, though, competitors tend to listen to, heed, and cite the editors, audio recording editorial feedback so that they can consult it as they re-write their skits. Editors issue advice about timing, syntax, thematics, and staging to queues of KVNshiki with as much authority as doctors do when they send home patient after patient with prescriptions, splints, and pamphlets.

*Speech about speech: emotion authorities*

Valentin Voloshinov argued that reported speech is “speech within speech, utterance within utterance, and at the same time also, *speech about speech, utterance about utterance*” (1973 [1930], 115). As speakers bring the cited, narrated event into the world of the speech event (Jakobson 1971), they reveal their own stances towards the quoted material. Quotations, then, code evaluations of original utterances. In my interview with team Igor, for instance, Katya, while describing why she enjoyed playing KVN, recounted a story she said Demchenko often told at debriefing sessions after games, one that she said “everyone knows.” Katya voiced the editor, saying, “What is the point, after all, of humor? What is the point of your going out on stage...you don't even understand the influence you have on people. When they are in a bad mood and so

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<sup>217</sup> Debriefing session, Odessa Mayor's Cup second quarterfinals, May 21, 2017.

on.” She went on to relate a parable about a tired forty-year-old man who tells his wife jokes he heard at KVN instead of fighting with her (quoted in full in chapter four). “That’s the clearest example,” she said, of the reasons she liked KVN: she held the power to improve people’s moods (interview with author, March 23, 2017). In making this statement, Katya drew not only on Demchenko’s authority, but, in citing a story that “everyone knew,” on presumed norms in the Odessa KVN scene. She considered the tale important enough to share with me, a foreign researcher, while explaining what KVN was all about. KVN was about making people happier.

About a month later, at his lecture on theories of humor, I heard Demchenko himself repeat, at times nearly word-for-word, some of what Katya had said. “You have a great deal of power to influence people,” he told the assembled students—a sentiment that would serve as an underlying theme of the lecture. He concluded the talk by arguing that their task, as KVNshiki, was to improve people’s lives. For Demchenko, even laughter came second to spreading positivity:

We have a task. We have a task...Our task is not to make people laugh (*rassmeshit'*), even though you have things that will make people laugh. Humor has a very hard task...Because humor is a very large medium that brings the whole world closer, through positivity. One positive person leads to nineteen positive people, and you are all quite cheerful people...That person in the audience—we want to make his life better. That's the task you have. We don't need him to laugh. We don't need him to die laughing from jokes...Something different is important for us. We need for him to leave different [than the way he came in], and for him to not go beat his wife. What's important for us is that he leaves in a good mood.<sup>218</sup>

Demchenko believed that positivity on stage should filter out into the community, improving the moods, and therefore lives, of those outside of KVN auditoria. Katya’s repetition of these ideas demonstrates uptake; that is, it shows that at least one person, and probably hundreds, adopted Demchenko’s perspective. A few specific points of parallel between Katya’s narration and Demchenko’s humor lecture are listed below:

Katya	Demchenko
What is the point, after all, of humor?	Humor has a very hard task

<sup>218</sup> Training session in Odessa, April 22, 2017.



<b>Katya</b>	<b>Demchenko</b>
You don't understand the influence you have on people	You have a great deal of power to influence people
...When they are in a bad mood and so on	What's important for us is that he leaves in a good mood
...instead of quarreling with his wife he told her the joke	...and for him to not go beat his wife

Katya's story illustrates how moral discourses circulate and gain credence among a community of KVNshiki. This is how traditions get reproduced: reaffirmed as students follow the maxims of their mentors. Demchenko's own discourse recalled Odessa humor legend Mikhail Zhvanetsky, who also touted humor's potential to unite.<sup>219</sup> More importantly, though, Demchenko evinced an orientation towards society rather than the self, towards the transformative function of the arts rather than their commercialization, that echoes Lenin himself:

Art belongs to the people. It must leave its deepest roots in the very thick of the working masses. It should be understood by the masses and loved by them. It must unite the feelings, thoughts and the will of the masses and lift them up. It should awaken artists in them and develop them.<sup>220</sup>

In truth, though, I've never heard a KVNshik cite Lenin, and neither did Demchenko (at least in the text above), a young man born in the late 1980s. It could be said that KVN contributes to a Marxist-inspired hegemony, or a “lived system of meanings and values—constitutive and constituting—which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming” (Williams 1977, 110). That claims too much. But KVN does promote an aesthetic of humor that is consonant with Soviet values, and students continue to learn and pass on these ideas.

In her own analysis of the everyday speech of what Yurchak (2006) termed “the last Soviet generation,” Anna Kruglova argued that Marxism was still real and relevant in post-Soviet Russia

<sup>219</sup> “Вот что такое юмор. Вот что такое его отсутствие. А нам он помогает выжить. Сближает всех со всеми. На анекдот - как на угощение.” From “Что такое юмор?” Monolog first performed in the 1980s. [http://www.jvanetsky.ru/data/text/t8/что\\_такое\\_умор/](http://www.jvanetsky.ru/data/text/t8/что_такое_умор/) (accessed January 28, 2020).

<sup>220</sup> Lenin, cited in Tsetkin 1955. “Искусство принадлежит народу. Оно должно уходить своими глубочайшими корнями в самую толщу широких трудящихся масс. Оно должно быть понятно этим массам и любимо ими. Оно должно объединять чувство, мысль и волю этих масс, поднимать их. Оно должно пробуждать и них художников и развивать их.”

(Kruglova 2016, 2017). I think she got it right for the wrong reasons. Kruglova's strongest example described people who defined "ideology" in a manner conditioned by Soviet Marxism, that is, as a message designed to support a political position. She cited a discussion between herself and two others about whether Soviet books and films were "ideological." Kruglova's friend Svetlana insisted that they were not ideological, saying, "the authors never wanted to 'say something'! They merely, simply, stated the facts!" (2017, 765). Conversations with Western undergraduates, though, would likely produce similar statements: "*Star Wars* / *The Wizard of Oz* / *Legally Blonde* wasn't ideological, it was just a movie!" Terry Eagleton may define ideology as "action-oriented sets of beliefs" and "the medium through which conscious social actors make sense of their world" (Eagleton 1991, 1-2), but for social theory laypeople "ideological" just means "political." *Star Wars*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and *Legally Blonde* all make ideological statements, if not outright arguments, about points of tension and inequality between states and subjects, parents and children, and men and women. When speaking of the relevance of Soviet Marxism today, especially among those born after the 1980s, it may be more productive to think about orientations—partial, situational—instead of hegemonies, and about significance rather than stasis.

### **The state: manufacturing joy**

Nearly 2,000 years ago, the Roman satirical poet Juvenal criticized a populace lulled into political inactivity by the promise of bread and circuses—entertainment designed to distract people from the state's shortcomings so they wouldn't upset the status quo.<sup>221</sup> KVN began as a state-designed spectacle, too, and a Party-pushed youth activity, but officials' goal was not to dope Soviet citizens with yet another opiate of the people, but instead to encourage young people to get involved in collective activities, especially the creative arts, so that they could become better

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<sup>221</sup> "Now that no one buys our votes, we, the public, have long since abdicated our duties; the people who once bestowed commands, consulships, legions, and all else, now sits back, longing only for two things: bread and circuses." Juvenal, Satire X in *Thirteen Satires of Juvenal*, ed. John Mayor (London: MacMillian & Co., 1872), 43. My translation.

communists.

Like aftershocks from Stalin's kulturnost push in the late 1930s, in 1957 Komsomol First Secretary Alexander Shelepin launched the "aesthetic upbringing campaign," a policy aimed at teaching young people how to "relax properly" (Tsipursky 2011, 349). Khrushchev agreed with this new focus on youth cultural development, according to Gleb Tsipursky, and titled a section of his 1958 speech to the 13th Komsomol Congress, "The upbringing of active and conscious builders of a communist society" (Khrushchev 1961, 35-36).<sup>222</sup> The main strategy of the aesthetic upbringing campaign was to limit access to Western diversions (like American-style jazz) and aggressively promote Komsomol-run cultural activities. To facilitate this aesthetic training, the Komsomol issued an additional edict on "the march of Komsomol activists for further elevating the cultural level of young people," which local Komsomol chapters implemented, presumably, in ways of their choosing (Tsipursky 2016, 157-184). In Bashkiriia, for instance, the Komsomol Committee instructed members to participate in clubs, learn to dance, watch movies, visit the theater and museums, read actively, do volunteer construction work four times a month, and, if they had higher education, lead an amateur group of some kind themselves (Tsipursky 2016, 170).

It is unclear how many young people adhered to all these extracurricular requirements. Nonetheless, the Komsomol leadership went to a lot of trouble to channel young people into clubs, and KVN figured among these. Thus, state policy encouraged mass participation in amateur arts in the late 1950s, a standardized KVN format spread across the USSR in the 1960s, and the format carried along with it a distinctly non-Western ideology about humor—one that has endured. And this was the plan. "Ideally," Tsipursky wrote of Khrushchev-era cultural policy, "such young New Soviet Individuals would then use the leeway provided for activism from below during the early Thaw to organize normative cultural forms at the grassroots level" (Tsipursky 2011,

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<sup>222</sup> "Воспитывать активных и сознательных строителей коммунистического общества"

282).<sup>223</sup> Many students did exactly this, writing Moscow to request guidelines for starting their own KVN leagues (Gal'perina 1967a). The Komsomol supported KVN, to be sure, and information-sharing between cells allowed it to expand. But this also would not have happened if students, most of them Komsomol members themselves, had not worked to bring KVN to their towns and universities.

Komsomol chapters dissolved with the end of the Soviet Union.<sup>224</sup> But the complex of KVN traditions, personnel, and programs that make up KVN as an institution remained. The institution continues to structure emotional experience, in part through the aesthetics of humor that it promotes.

I don't take institutions to be single sites or even single organizations, as KVN is neither of these. Instead, KVN is a well-defined tradition with an entrenched normative order. As Andrew Graan put it, institutions in this sense are "processes of normed behaviors that intersect in particular ways, and come to be typified qua institutions" (Graan 2016, 143, citing comments by Michael Silverstein). The interaction frameworks, or behavioral norms, of KVN have proved durable. These promote social connection, friendship among competitors, and, above all, joyfulness. Granted, no one in the audience will have identical affective responses. A joke may ring funnier to some than others. There may be those, too, that get dragged to KVN with friends but don't like the game and suffer through the entire performance. Likewise, not all performers will feel the highs that Nikita, Katya, Dima, and Alexander described. Not everyone can write material that earns applause. But KVNshiki consistently try, and they succeed more often than not. A social structure, made up of coaches, editors, teammates, competitors, and audiences, conveys expectations; people orient towards those community norms; and KVN games, even at field sites separated by 4,000 miles, create cheery, joyful atmospheres. People leave smiling.

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<sup>223</sup> The Thaw, or Khrushchev Thaw, refers to a period of relaxed censorship following Stalin's death in 1953.

<sup>224</sup> There are still some local Komsomol and Young Pioneer chapters in Russia, but these are not state-supported.

The links between KVN and nation states today are more tenuous than they were when KVN could count on the Komsomol's organizational and financial resources. Nonetheless, authorities create conditions that influence how organizations like KVN function. As we saw in chapter three, media restrictions in Russia and Ukraine led a group of former KVN comedians and editors to create an entirely new set of competitions, League of Laughter. Financial policies influence KVN gameplay, as well. In Krasnoyarsk, for example, the governor supports teams that have potential to advance to national levels. Krasnoyarsk also boasts several leagues for school children. Institutional resources like these influence game play more than money, as teachers organize competitions, schools lend space in auditoria and time for rehearsals, and older KVNshiki volunteer to direct school leagues. Each person who trains pupils to play KVN imparts ideas about the purpose of participation. In schools, these goals include self-development (working as a team, building creative thinking skills) and audience enjoyment (joyfulness, laughter). As Ukrainian education professor Olga Kol'tsova wrote, KVN can aid in "the socialization of children and adolescents, the formation of unity in collectives, the teaching of tolerance, socializing, the development of leadership qualities, and [the development of] creative abilities of the younger generation" (Kol'tsova 2013). KVN has proved a popular activity in post-Soviet schools for nearly sixty years. With the help of appraisals like Kol'tsova's, it is likely to stay.

The logic I've laid out might sound deterministic: the Soviets established norms for KVN, the extant institution programs people to privilege some Soviet values, and this results in conventionalized emotional experiences. Instead of determinism, I would like to think instead in terms of practice: doxic KVN standards of play lead to patterns in the way people narrate their emotional experiences, both as competitors and as audience members, both in Russia and Ukraine (cf. Bourdieu 1977). The Russian and Ukrainian governments do still have a hand in manufacturing joy, mostly through financial incentives and the lure of the primetime stage. But most people never make money in KVN. The game links communities through laughter, the only reward most

competitors and audiences seek.

*Our president is a comedian*

“Putin, more than anyone else, spits on everything that goes on in America. I really like our president’s position,” Dima said. I spoke with Knight’s Move in December 2016, not long after the U.S.’s 2016 presidential elections. Dima continued, “Everyone’s just in shock that Trump won...But it’s just like United Russia here! Who beat United Russia? The Communists!” In an even more surprising victory than Trump’s, a candidate from the Communist Party had won the Irkutsk region’s governor’s race in 2015, defeating Putin’s United Russia party. Laughing, Dima and Alexander did impressions of Lenin rising from his mausoleum, and Alexander exclaimed, “Lenin, we choose you!” (interview with author, December 3, 2016).

The conversation then turned to how Putin was simply a stud (*krasava*), walking into the State Duma with a soccer ball. “Putin even watches KVN,” Dima added. “Well yeah, and he was at KVN, too—at the 55th,” said Alexander. Putin had made a special appearance on the program commemorating KVN’s 55th birthday on November 8, 2016. The president told the following joke during his three-minute speech:

...and a version [of KVN] started on television in the 1950s, VVV...*Vecher Velselykh Voprosov*<sup>225</sup> it was called. Well, time flows on, everything changes, and—new popular abbreviations appeared. I mean KVN. KVN is what I meant.<sup>226</sup>

The joke was a reference to the abbreviation “KGB,” where Putin had worked as a foreign intelligence officer, and its transition to “FSB” (*Federalnaia sluzhba bezopastnosti*), the KGB successor agency which Putin directed before becoming president. It was a good joke. It wasn’t his only joke. “He joked,” Dima said of the performance. “He had some jokes,” Alexander confirmed. “Our president is a comedian,” Dima concluded.

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<sup>225</sup> Evening of Cheerful Questions

<sup>226</sup> KVN 2016 Spetsproekt 55 let KVN [KVN 2016 Special Project 55 years of KVN], November 27, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2C32jWXQnQk&t=292s> (accessed January 28, 2020).

Following another electoral upset in the spring of 2019, the new president of Ukraine is a comedian, too. Volodymyr Zelensky played KVN, at the highest competitive levels, from 1997 to 2003. He then helped found the production company 95th Kvartal, which produces humorous television serials. The most successful of these was the comedy “Servant of the People.” In this series, which ran from 2015 to 2019, Zelensky played the role of a corruption-fighting high school history teacher who becomes the president of Ukraine. From February 2015 until April 2019 he also hosted games in League of Laughter, a televised comedy competition very similar to KVN that 95th Kvartal created after the war with Russia began. Zelensky had no prior political experience, made few campaign appearances, and announced his candidacy less than four months before the elections. And he won in a landslide, with over 70% of votes (Walker 2019). His experience, and fame, as a KVNshik paved the way for that victory. He didn’t have to campaign because everyone already knew who he was.



**Volodymyr Zelensky (center) and League of Laughter editor Andrei Chivurin (left) at the 2017 League of Laughter festival, Odessa, Ukraine. Photo by author.**

When the Ukrainian election results were announced, the vKontakte page (the Russian Facebook) for the International Union of KVN, which is based in Moscow, posted a video clip of

one of Zelensky's old performances along with a Ukrainian flag emoticon and the text, "President, don't forget your roots, remember!" The largest KVN Telegram channel, also based in Moscow, reposted video footage from former Ukrainian KVNshik Artem Gagarin's Instagram page that showed the celebration at Zelensky's campaign headquarters when the election was called. The Telegram administrator captioned the post, "Situation: Diner."<sup>227</sup> After midnight, the American Diner in Sochi's Zhemchuzhina Hotel fills to capacity with competitors at the annual Sochi KVN festival. Many speak of the diner with nostalgia. The post, thus, referred to Zelensky's crowded room of celebrating people, at least some of whom were former KVNshiki, but it also indexed an international collective of KVNshiki who were over the moon about Zelensky's victory. It was as if everyone, in that moment, stood cheering in the diner. Telegram mediated the celebration of thousands, across borders, despite war.

Zelensky's success may draw more young people to the activity, as presidential endorsement could increase the prestige associated with KVN participation. Alekander and Dima's reasoning went, *The president likes KVN, and this is just one more reason why we like him*. Others may think, *The president likes KVN—maybe I should sign up*. In addition to appearing on stage, Putin wrote a letter to the participants of the January 2019 Sochi festival final competition, partly in commemoration of the fact that it was the 30th annual festival. Putin, here, stressed values he saw as important to cultivate in young people, including talent, creativity, friendship, and positivity. The letter, circulated on the International Union of KVN's vKontakte page, read:

I am happy to congratulate you on this final competition (*gala kontsert*), one dedicated to the 30th international festival of KVN teams. This festival joined together, in Sochi's hospitality, thousands of talented, creative young people from Russia and other countries, people for whom affiliation with the friendly, cohesive brotherhood of the Club of the Cheerful and Clever has become an important, integral part of their lives. And, of course, it gave them the wonderful opportunity to work together on one stage, exchange positive experiences, and to meet their loyal fans, people who sincerely love the entertaining game called "KVN," and who know well its participants and traditions—passed on from generation to generation. At the end of the day, former KVNshiki don't exist, and many of those who became famous because of this project have not lost their connection to their native Club.

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<sup>227</sup> Telegram channel TakStop! April 21, 2019.



The letter validates the merit KVNshiki themselves find in the game. KVN is not just an after-school activity, according to the president, it is a “brotherhood,” one worth participating in, and one that lasts a lifetime. Public stances like these represent ideal young people as active, creative, and positive. Less than a month later, Putin addressed the youth of the nation in a speech to the Federal Assembly, saying, “your talent, energy, and creative ability are Russia’s strongest competitive advantage.” He did not limit the outlets for these strengths to the arts, though, instead encouraging students to get involved in new government-run programs, like “My First Business,” “I am a Professional,” and “Leaders of Russia” (TASS 2019). An active, creative life outside of school seems to be as important in today's Russia, though, as it was in the Soviet Union.

### **Conclusion: emotion pedagogies**

In an article called, “Emotion Pedagogies: What Are They, and Why Do They Matter?” James Wilce and Janina Fenigson described a new, privatized trend in teaching children how to feel properly. These commercial programs, one of which has 32,000 subscribing schools in the United States, promise to guide students towards “a self-managed, self-responsible, neoliberal selfhood” through emotion pedagogy (Wilce and Fenigson 2016, 86). Students must manage emotions correctly if they are to function well in Western corporate environments, the thinking goes. For instance, in one kindergarten class the teacher channeled children's exclamations about how they should act with friends (“Happy!” “Care about each other!”) into categories more conducive to working in white collar teams—“polite” and “careful” (Brison 2016, 144). In her research on workplace programs for adults in Japan, Cynthia Dunn found that instructors taught students to present a “bright, positive self” (Dunn 2016, 122). Discourses about KVN, in contrast, encourage competitors to create bright, positive *others*. Instead of regimenting personal feelings for personal success, trainers tell KVNshiki to lift the spirits of the audience in service to the community.

This other-centered, often socially-responsible, vision of emotion in KVN distinguishes it

both from emotion pedagogy programs and the youth psychological training programs Tomas Matza described in his research on state and commercial psychological resources for children in St. Petersburg, Russia (2018). Matza argued that one of these private programs, a camp he called ReGeneration, aimed to mold children into “feeling subjects” by training them to become self-knowing, socially-calculating, future-anxious, and autonomous—independent of the family, in particular, as it represented “a source of bad social reproduction and a brake on self-sufficiency” (2018, 128-129). In one of the children’s activities, a trainer instructed campers to come up with a “formula for self-regulation.” One group drew a scale with self-regulation on one side and distractions on the other. Another group had “self-regulation” mediate between the two poles of mind and desire. A third group wrote an actual formula: “emotions + thoughts = self-control” (2018, 132). Learning to label and manage their emotions set the children up for success, not *in* their interpersonal relationships, but *by means of* their interpersonal relationships. ReGeneration urged children to direct not only their thoughts, but their emotions, towards winning, achievement, and competition (2018, 137-138).

Such self-centric rhetoric runs counter to discourses about emotion in KVN, which ask KVNshiki to create emotions, not control them, and which instruct students to put their creative efforts towards improving society, not enriching oneself. Participating in KVN, then, embeds students in an other-centered socialization matrix, encouraging them to think about relationships between art, effort, and emotion in ways more concerned with the collective than the individual. While a lot of KVNshiki do very much want money, success, TV airtime, and careers in show business, emotion discourses in KVN stress connection and goodwill. Cheerfulness, joy, highs, and camaraderie typify discussions about KVN, and—normatively—pursuit of these emotions organizes all other KVN activity.

## Afterword

### Imagined Communities, Divided Nations

“KVN doesn't give a darn.” (“*KVNu pofig.*”)  
—Mikhail Marfin, 2018 Top League Final

Mikhail Marfin began editing again for Top League at the January 2019 Sochi festival, after a fifteen-year hiatus. About a month before that, though, he cameoed in the December 2018 Top League Finals match for the team Viatka (a city in western Russia). The team asked him near the end of their performance:

—Mikhail Naumovich! Do you know who won?  
—I do.  
—Who?  
—KVN.  
—Well—concretely. Us or others?  
—You. Or others. Concretely, KVN doesn't give a darn (KVN Top League 2018)

The phrase, “KVN doesn't give a darn” circulated in conversation among KVNshiki and got referenced in games for nearly a year after the final. In October 2019, a Telegram commenter consoled teams that had not advanced to the Moscow and Moscow Region final round with the words, “Thank you, everyone, for the evening, for the game, and for the battle. And remember—concretely, KVN doesn't give a darn.”<sup>228</sup> It seems the opening line from Marfin’s perestroika number, “Everything passes, and KVN remains,” proves as true for today’s KVNshiki as when Marfin first sang it in 1986. Particular winners and losers matter little to KVN as an institution (though teams would give up if they sensed systemic unfairness). New teams take the stage, new jokes appear quarterly (at least), and editors experiment with new events. But the fundamental game, in Marfin’s definition—“Some number of teams competes in some number of events...who’s funnier?”—could care less about individual winners and losers. Marfin himself did not win his

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<sup>228</sup> Telegram channel Zlye Volki (Evil Wolves), October 19, 2019.

final match, losing to the Odessans, but he has still spent the better part of his life working with KVN, both as an editor and with the channel KVN TV, which broadcasts parts of games, interviews with KVNshiki, and behind-the-scenes specials.

Despite the war, KVN games have remained in Ukraine. But team comedy there has changed in significant ways. Ukrainian teams no longer compete in the main, Russia-based international competitions, leading to competitive isolation within Ukraine and Ukrainians' marked absence on the Russian stages. In response, Ukrainians established League of Laughter, and, with it, their own set of international League of Laughter competitions in Israel, Armenia, Estonia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan. Ukraine also outlawed the use of vKontakte (the Russian version of Facebook) during my 2017 fieldwork in Odessa, which cut off an additional communications avenue. Ukrainian KVNshiki had used the platform to share information both within and across borders, as the social network was organized around communities that people could join (such as the International KVN community, based in Russia). While still possible, of course, to get around technical barriers, vKontakte's use in Ukraine became swiftly unpopular. Finally, of course, Russian KVN games, like all Russian media, are not shown on Ukrainian TV and Ukrainian media is not broadcast in Russia.

Everything, though, is available on YouTube. Russians watch League of Laughter and Odessans, at least, routinely watch Russian KVN competitions. But in the winter of 2018 over 600 people, mostly Russians, gathered online via a YouTube livestream hosted by the video blogger Crafty Sound (Konstantin Belevtsev), a former KVNshik based in Belgorod, to watch a Ukrainian League of Laughter competition together. Some seemed to cringe, during the online chat feed, when the competitors cracked jokes about Russians. Others wrote "Glory to Ukraine!" Maybe the commenters were Ukrainians—it's impossible to say. Crafty Sound has continued hosting viewing sessions, primarily of Russian KVN games, and, as of the autumn of 2019, he was regularly attracting over a thousand people to his streams. "It would be better to watch [this] together," he

said of a December 12th viewing of the 2018 First League first semifinal match, “because emotions are higher.” He added, “And also better with some [hard] lemonade.”

Few young people seem to watch TV broadcasts anymore, and with Russia’s eleven time zones, even television viewership isn’t experienced as simultaneous. Live streams like Crafty’s, though, let viewers watch with others, with commentary from a host, and from each other in the sidebar chat window. Streams and Telegram feeds create coterminous communities of KVN fans that envision their place in relationship to each other. These stream publics, then, do not passively consume KVN media, as when watching YouTube videos alone or aimlessly scrolling through memes.

Streams and Telegram, more even than KVN websites or YouTube, have created a space for KVNshiki across Russia—and, theoretically, the world—to imagine themselves as contemporaries (cf. Geertz 2000 [1973], 355). While both a community and, largely, an imagined, mass-mediated one, KVNshiki don’t make up an “imagined community” in Anderson’s (2006 [1983]) sense because they don’t count as even a metaphoric nation, being not politically unified (in many ways the opposite) and not sovereign. The KVN community is, instead, super- and transnational. The Soviet Union’s structure set KVN up to operate across national borders; it still does, now helped along not by the Komsomol’s infrastructure, but by the internet.

KVNshiki found digital platforms to take the place of television and vKontakte. Ukrainian author and former KVNshik Aleksander Sas has begun providing occasional commentary on Russian KVN games as one of Crafty’s invited guests during YouTube streams, for instance. His status as expert matters much more, in this forum, than the fact that he is a Ukrainian—at least to those that join the stream. One of the main Russian KVN Telegram channels also reposted commentary from Yuri Karagondin, of the Ukrainian team Dnepr, when the team lost in the October 2019 League of Laughter semifinals. Karagondin reported that, “Among others, during razminka with the audience there was the following question, ‘What’s the difference between KVN

and League of Laughter?’ and we answered honestly, ‘In KVN we would have won a long time ago.’”<sup>229</sup> Karagondin went on to give an account of what had happened in the game, which had not yet been broadcast, and described what the team could have done better in the League of Laughter battles. He then announced Team Dnepr’s departure from competition: “We became stronger. We became closer. We became better. I love Dnepr! ... [We] won't be in the next season.”<sup>230</sup>

And the cross-posting goes both ways. Just two days earlier, on October 9, 2019, Karagondin re-posted a video, shot from someone's cell phone, from the Top League second semifinal match that was held in Moscow on October 8th. On October 7th, Evgeniia Zharikova, wife of Team Snezhnogorsk team member Sergei Zharikov, died. Before the competition all the other teams had decided that, regardless of the game’s outcome, they would give the 500,000 ruble prize money to team Snezhnogorsk. Karagondin introduced the clip with the words, “A video that will give you goosebumps...Yesterday after the semifinals of KVN Top League all the teams hugged, supporting Sergei, the captain from Snezhnogorsk, one day after his wife died...the whole theatre stood...sometimes KVN is still a club, and these moments inspire timid hope.”<sup>231</sup>

That same week, on October 10th, 2019, President Zelensky held a fourteen-hour press conference. One of the questions he addressed was the possibility of a face-to-face meeting with President Putin. While noting that “everyone is against it,” he maintained that “the meeting must be held if we want the war to end” (Roth 2019). He presented the meeting, and a peace accord, as a question of timing rather than possibility. Everyone wants the war to end. There seems quite a lot of reason for hope.

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<sup>229</sup> Telegram channel Uzhe ne tot, October 11, 2019.

<sup>230</sup> Telegram channel KARAGODINNN, October 11, 2019.

<sup>231</sup> Telegram channel KARAGODINN, October 9, 2019.

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