

# FINNIC AND BALTIC NATIONALITIES AS ETHNIC TARGETS IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN JOKES

Arvo Krikmann

Estonian Literary Museum

*A paper presented to the ISHS 19<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference hosted by Salve Regina University  
(Newport, Rhode Island), July 1, 2007*

Lithuanians tell jokes about how stupid and slow Latvians are, Latvians tell jokes about how stupid and slow Estonians are, Estonians (who happen to be the real laughing stock of the Baltic States) tell jokes about how stupid and slow Finns are. Finns, as far as I know, just don't care.

<http://www.literaturejunction.com/showthread.php?t=4328>

## 1. Ethnic butts in Russian jokelore

My colleague Liisi Laineste (2004; 2005) has found three significant trends that characterize the temporal development of Estonian ethnic jokes from the 1880s to the 2000s:

- 1) a noticeable decrease in the relative share of ethnic jokes in the total of national folkloric jokes;
- 2) a clear increase in the number of ethnic butts and the scope of their geographic origin;
- 3) a close interconnection between ethnic and social-political aspects in the jokes of the Soviet period.

The same tendencies very probably also hold true for jokes of numerous other nations with similar recent historical faith.

In the Soviet period the list of principal ethnic targets in Russian jokes was quite short: the Jews, Chukchis, Georgians and Ukrainians. Of course Soviet Russian jokes involved other ethnic character as well, but the available sources do not allow one to estimate how frequent / popular / productive this or that of them actually was.

After the collapse of the USSR and the decay of the Eastern European socialist camp as a whole, the former ethnic butts have continued their existence in Russian jokelore – some with the former intensity, and others with decreasing intensity. Alongside and in addition to these, however, a number of new ethnic characters have emerged – first of all the representatives of the former Baltic Soviet republics that regained their national independence in 1991, i.e. the Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians. Of these, the Estonians, who were almost non-existent characters in Soviet jokelore, have evidently become the most popular (cf. also Shmeleva & Shmelev 2002: 47 ff., 75 ff.).

In Russia as elsewhere, jokes have largely moved from oral tradition to the Internet in the last decade, and there is good reason to believe that Russian joke sources on the Internet are perhaps the greatest of all national sources of e-jokes (including ethnic ones). The contemporary wave of political correctness and shying away from and avoiding ethnic jokes has left Russia almost untouched. As my former experience has shown, however, Russian e-sources have also canned, alongside recent layers of post-Socialist jokes, a huge number of older jokes from the Soviet period. Obsolete jokes certainly vanish from human memory faster than from the Internet, and therefore it is often difficult to decide what exactly in these immense strata belongs to Socialism and what to post-Socialism.

In awareness of these these overlappings and other possible noises, I performed a number of searches in the Russian search engine 'Rambler' to find responses to the search string 'X-ian' + 'joke' (*X-ey + анекдот*) where *X-ian* was Russian, Chukchi, Jew, American, Georgian, etc., following the list of ethnic favourites in the Russian biggest joke portal [anekdot.ru](http://anekdot.ru) compiled earlier by Dima Likhachev in September 2002 – see <http://dm-lihachev.livejournal.com/570686.html> Table 1 indicates the top 40 most frequent nationalities.

Table 1

1.	Russian	42753	21.	Tatar	905
2.	Chukchi	14981	22.	Greek	810
3.	Jewish	13369	23.	Turk	795
4.	American	7337	24.	Byelorussian	610
5.	Georgian	6642	25.	Kazakh	605
6.	German	4639	26.	Azeri	592
7.	English	4280	27.	Spanish	571
<b>8.</b>	<b>ESTONIAN</b>	<b>3800</b>	<b>28.</b>	<b>LATVIAN</b>	<b>543</b>
9.	Chinese	3787	<b>29.</b>	<b>"PRIBALT"</b>	<b>521</b>
10.	French	3207	30.	Chechen	504
11.	Ukrainian	2891	31.	Korean	475
12.	Japanese	2868	32.	Uzbek	462
13.	Armenian	2594	33.	Dutchman	442
14.	Pole	1959	34.	Bulgarian	317
15.	Italian	1205	35.	Khant	307
16.	Arabian	1137	36.	Persian	298
17.	Gypsy	1075	<b>37.</b>	<b>LITHUANIAN</b>	<b>286</b>
<b>18.</b>	<b>FINNISH</b>	<b>1059</b>	38.	Komi	275
19.	Czech	918	39.	Vietnamese	268
20.	Moldavian	906	40.	Eskimo	265

The twelve best positions are held by

1) Russians themselves (presumably including 'Russians in anecdotes', as well as 'Russian anecdotes');

2) old favourites from the Soviet times (Chukchi, Jew, Georgian, Ukrainian);

3) representatives of the biggest Western and Eastern nationalities (American, English, French; Chinese, Japanese), perhaps at the expense of a certain amount of translated texts of these nationalities again;

4) Estonian, the successful newcomer.

Perhaps the multitude and rank order of Russian contemporary ethnic butts as a whole reflects nearly the same process of widening as we saw in Laineste's "Estonian case". Anyhow, the rise of Estonians to the top ten has been notably sudden and sharp.

## 2. Our "Pribaltic"-Finnic sample and some specific features of Internet jokes

In creating my sample of Russian Internet jokes, I tried to be painfully objective towards the four target nationalities – Finns, Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians (and "Pribalts", which is a fuzzy common denominator for native inhabitants of the three former Baltic Soviet republics in Russian language and jokelore). I started from the above-mentioned searches in Rambler, got a preliminary draft of texts and addresses, compiled a preliminary list of "plot units" (technically: tables) where the texts belonging to one and the same narrative of formulaic plot were brought together (technically: as rows of one and the same table), and made a number of additional spontaneous searches based on various criteria, in order to find representatives of possible new, hitherto unregistered plot units. When the searches seemed to become practically inconclusive, the resulting list of **582 plots** was considered final.

The next logical step was then to try to estimate the "total power" (familiarity / productivity / frequency) of each joke as a plot unit. The only available parameter for that was, in my case, the sum of frequencies / occurrences of any textual variant throughout all plot units. I found the sums (including those of texts occurring in so-called "very similar sites", but registering the numbers of sites, not separate documents), but the results turned out to be devastatingly uninterpretable.

Internet joke sources may be divided into four main categories based on their context-free / context-bound and/or static / dynamic nature:

1. **Static context-free** sources, i.e. sites containing lists of contextless joke texts created by private individuals or organisations, mainly through the copying of texts from other previously created joke sites, digitalised publications or other sources. Once created, such static joke collections change little or not at all.

2. **Static context-bound** sources, i.e. jokes "told" in the context of various larger texts, like newspaper articles, stories, tales, novels etc. published on the Internet.

3. **Dynamic context-free** sources, i.e. various "joke departments", "joke books", etc. hosted by various portals, digital newspapers and magazines, that encourage users to add their jokes to their collection, permit one to read them and request that one rate the latest jokes that have been submitted. Such sites also often create and manage their own joke archives, the chronology of which occasionally spans several years. The expansion of these sites depends on texts copied from elsewhere and on those reproduced from memory.

4. **Dynamic context-bound** sources, i.e. various chat rooms and mailing lists where live communication takes place, during which jokes are also told, and witticisms are recounted or referred to. In contextual e-humour sources, jokes copied from elsewhere are logically ruled out, and are also actually very rare.

This categorisation also broadly reflects the folkloric value of Internet jokes as texts and "types" (i.e. plot-level units). Copies are certainly of lower value than texts reproduced from memory, although on the whole and in a statistical sense, the intensity of the copying of texts (frequency, the number of copies that have been made) is certainly one parameter of the value attached to a joke, and should not be ignored. Furthermore, the value of copies depends on whether someone has selected and copied from a broader collection individual joke texts that in his/her opinion are "good", or copied whole lists of texts that belonged to the topic he/she was interested in, or copied practically everything he/she found with the purpose of cumulating some "integrative" personal archive or an institutional database of jokes. Very frequently joke duplicates emerge simply due to "extra-humorous" reasons, for instance creating mirror pages or other permanent connections between different sites and portals.

By and large, though, Russian, Estonian and other joke sources on the Internet leave the impression of a huge pile of lifeless, mechanical copies.

Table 2 provides some general parameters of my joke sample at the plot and text level. (Abbreviations here and henceforth: EST = Estonian; FIN = Finn; LAT = Latvian; LIT = Lithuanian, BAL = "Pribalt")

Table 2

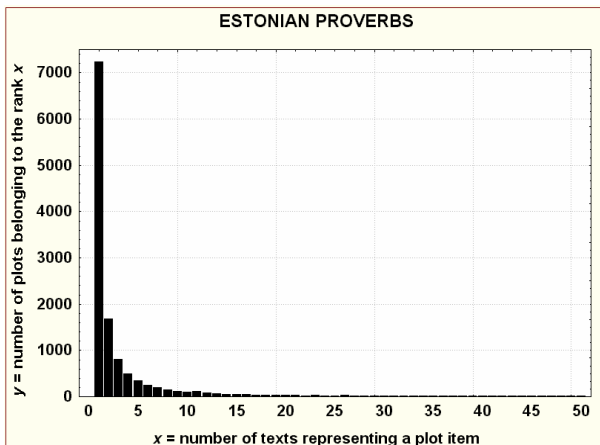
	<i>P</i> (lots)	<i>T</i> (exts)	<i>T/P</i>
EST	356	34,757	97.5
FIN	265	8577	32.4
LAT	87	5269	60.6
LIT	32	1595	43.8
BAL	28	1444	51.6
Σ		51,642	

The only significant information that I can read out of these statistics is the somewhat reduced status of FIN on the textual level. On the synchronic level it is quite difficult to find a good reason why the Finn as an ethnic target should produce less repetitions than plots. The reason most likely lies in diachrony, i.e. the fact that the Finn began his career in Russian jokelore much earlier than the other three nations, but has in recent decades surrendered much of his former relevance to the new "Pribaltic" competitors.

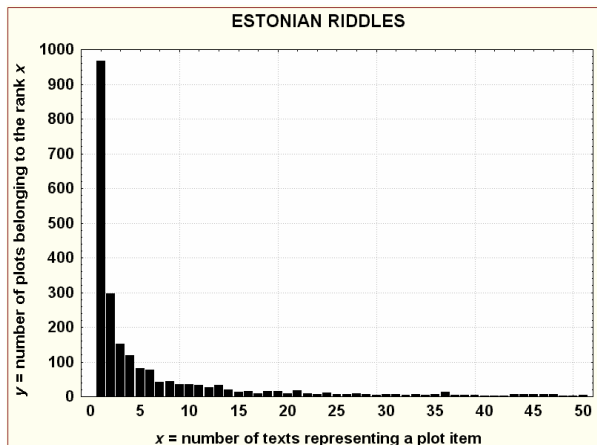
The distribution of the "power ranks" of the specimens of many natural populations tends to follow Zipf's law: a great deal of small (rare, weak, poor, ...) items, a very small number of big (frequent, strong, rich, ...) items, and a medium amount of middle-sized ones. The distribution of the ranks of textual productivity of plot items in our Russian joke sample remains nearly Zipfian too, but is remarkably flat (see Graph 1c) – the speed of decay of *y*-frequencies through the 50 lowest *x*-ranks is, for example, more than ten times slower than in the source material of Estonian riddles (Graph 1b), and about a hundred times slower than in Estonian proverbs (Graph 1a). The presence of a cloud of unique, improvisatory, challenging "trial"

plots is a reliable indicator of the vitality of a folklore genre, like any other natural population. Data concerning minor Estonian genres are based on corpuses of authentic records, from which duplicates and other falsified texts were preliminarily filtered. Seen from this perspective, Internet joke sources begin to look paradoxical: very extensive in their overall physical extent, but with quite a limited "actual core", and, despite the above-mentioned concessions, it continues to seem necessary to separate cases of real "retelling" (why not via keyboard) from cases of "simply distributed" jokes. Considering the specificity of web sources, however, the task is difficult to perform.

Graph 1a



Graph 1b



Graph 1c



### 3. Synonymity of target nationalities

Victor Raskin (1985) has claimed that it is impossible to transform a non-ethnic joke into an ethnic one by simply changing the "name labels" of some characters and adding some linguistic or other ethnic colouring. On the other hand, folk narrative plots reveal a great variability in terms of characters, including the TARGET level constituents of jokes (cf. Attardo & Raskin 1991).

For example, there is the following item in our Russian Internet material:

- A Latvian is blowing bubble gum bubbles in a café, and trying to mock an Estonian: Do you eat the entire loaf of bread? – Yes, of course. – Well, we gather the crust in a container, make muslix out of it and sell it to Estonia. The Latvian continues: Do you eat your bread with jam? – Yes, of course. – Well, we in Latvia use only fresh fruit, but we gather the seeds, skins and other rejects in a container, make jam out of it and sell it to Estonia. The Estonian loses his patience: What do you do with your condoms after you've used them? – We throw them away, of course. – Well, we gather them in containers, make bubble gum out of them and then sell it to Latvia.

An alternative pair of characters in Russian jokes can be the Finn (+) and the Swede (-). In Russia the joke is evidently a recent loan. In any case, Google indicates occurrences of the same plot with dozens of other combinations of peoples, e.g. the Canadian and the American, the American and the Canadian, the Filipino and the American, the Irishman and the American, the Frenchman and the American, the American and the Frenchman, the Greek and the American, the Indian and the American, the Thai and the American, the Asian and the American, the Kenyan and the American, the Mauritian and the American, the South African and the American, Nelson Mandela and George Bush, the Australian and the American, the Irishman and the Englishman, the Frenchman and the German, the Croatian and the Serb, the Lebanese and the Syrian, the Indian and the Pakistani, the Singaporean and Malaysian, the Thai King and the Singaporean, the New Zealander and the Australian, the Jamaican and the Trinidadian, the Guyanese and the Trinidadian, etc.

A similar synonymity holds between the Finnic and Baltic butts in Russian jokes. 143 (i.e. about ¼) of our 582 plots turned out to have two or more and 31 plots three or more different ethnic targets.

Table 3

<i>n</i>	<i>p(n)</i>
1	439
2	109
3	26
4	7
5	1
Σ	582

The list of plot items with three or more alternative ethnic butts (which in a few cases co-occurred in one and the same joke) is provided in the appendix at the end of the paper. More detailed data on the frequencies of target nations can be found in Table 3 (*n* marks the number of different nations in a plot item and *p(n)* the number of plots of the given *n*-rank; the rank *n* = 5 includes BAL as a separate "nation").

Further, an attempt was made to evaluate the degree of similarity of the four target nationalities. In order to do that, the cases of alternative or simultaneous co-occurrences of different butts were summed in pairs for all 143 plot items involving more than one single butt, and thus a two-dimensional array of intersections generated. The values of the diagonal cells of the matrix were reduced to zero and the "coefficients of similarity" were calculated for all pairs of target nationalities using the formula

$$\lambda_{AB} = \frac{A \cap B \times \sum_{tab}}{\sum A \times \sum B}$$

(Here  $A \cap B$  means the size of the common part (number of intersections) of events *A* and *B*,  $\sum_{tab}$  – the sum total of values in all cells of the matrix,  $\sum A$  – the sum total of occurrences of event *A* and  $\sum B$  – the sum total of occurrences of event *B*. If  $\lambda = 1$ , events *A* and *B* are independent; if  $\lambda > 1$ , then *A* and *B* are positively correlated, if  $\lambda < 1$ , then their correlation is negative)

The initial matrix of pairwise co-occurrences is shown in Table 4a, the field of  $\lambda$ -coefficients in Table 4b.

Table 4a

	EST	FIN	LAT	LIT	Σ
EST	135	234	80	26	475
FIN	234	121	54	16	425
LAT	80	54	45	22	201
LIT	26	16	22	18	82
Σ	475	425	201	82	1183

Table 4b

	EST	FIN	LAT	LIT
EST	0.00	<b>1.96</b>	1.30	1.03
FIN	<b>1.96</b>	0.00	0.98	0.71
LAT	1.30	0.98	0.00	<b>1.90</b>
LIT	1.03	0.71	<b>1.90</b>	0.00

Thus,  $\lambda$ -calculation successfully divides the field of our target nations into two clearcut clusters – Finnic (EST + FIN) and Baltic (LAT + LIT).

The large relative proportion of plots shared between the figures of Estonians and Finns, as well as between the three "pribalts", is not the only characteristic of their synonymity. Russian jokelore in

general does not make a clear-cut distinction between Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians, and the elements of their languages, their proper names, geographic places etc. are often confused.

For example:

- The ESTONIAN (sic!) dog does not react to its master's call "Sharik!", but reacts to the call "Sharikas!" with merry barking "Gavs, gavs!"

I am sure that Estonians have never had dogs bearing the name Sharik, let alone Sharikas.

- ESTONIANS (sic!) finally translated the fairy tale "Peter Pan" – in it they have named him "Питарас Пенис" ("Pitaras Penis").

"Pitaras" is apparently also an allusion to the vulgar slang word *нидарас* (= homo).

In the texts above the Estonian is confused with the Lithuanian and Latvian. Besides, there are a lot of jokes in Estonia (and certainly elsewhere) proceeding from the fact that the masculine substantives in Latvian have the ending *-s* and in Lithuanian the ending *-as*:

- 'Cat' in Lithuanian is "Kurnäuskas" (*kurnäu* is one of Estonian counterparts for *miaow*).
- The hare (*jänes* in Estonian) and *peni* (i.e. 'dog' in the Southern Estonian dialect) discuss moving to Latvia. The hare says: "In Latvia I will be called "Janis"." The *peni* (dog): "Oh? Mmm... I see... I guess I will give up moving to Latvia..."

Likewise, Estonian schoolboys can have Latvian or Lithuanian names, such as Janis, Mihalis, Peters, Vitas, Estonian farmers can have Finnish family names, like Kaakinen or Toivanen, etc.

The indistinguishability of the "pribalts" is well expressed in a Russian (self-ironic, I guess) joke:

- A Russian says about Lithuanians: "Well, they are those who live in Riga and speak Estonian..."

#### 4. The dominant of slowness

Accordingly to Raskin (1985), Davies (1990; 2002) and others, slowness is not among the most widespread features of ethnic characters in jokes. It has originally been ascribed to several Scandinavian peoples like the Finns, Norwegians and Swedes. Under Urho Kaleva Kekkonen's long rule, Finland had friendly political relations with the Soviet Union. Finns were often tourists in Russian cities, especially Leningrad, and also in Estonia since 1965, when regular ferry traffic began between Helsinki and Tallinn. For Finns who were sober at home, Russia and Estonian become traditional places for relaxed drinking, and Finland was one of the few foreign lands that were easily accessible to Russian shopping tourists. Perhaps in the seventies, the traditional proverb formula 'A is not a B' found a new Russian modification *Курица – не птица, Финляндия – не заграница* (Chickens aren't birds, Finland is not a foreign land).

It is difficult to retrospectively determine how outstanding an ethnic figure the Finn was in the Russian jokelore of the Soviet period. There is, however, a good reason to think that it is probably the image of the Finn that has initiated and mediated the process of the further southward expansion of the slowness stereotype in Russian jokelore, but later, in the 1990s, a great deal of slowness motifs were transferred to the now more current Estonian, who thus took over the role of the emblem of slowness.

Table 5

	total	slow	%
EST	357	210	58.3
FIN	264	105	39.8
LAT	87	19	21.8
LIT	32	3	9.4

I extracted the feature of slowness from a total of 244 plots from our Russian sample (i.e. 41.3% of the total plot supply). The division of absolute and relative frequencies of slowness between the four target peoples is shown in Table 5 (the column *total* marks the total number of plots including the given nationality, the column *slow* the number of plots referring to slowness, and the last column indicates the relative share of slowness jokes for each target nation).

From this it also becomes evident that shared slowness is the main factor to which the Estonian and Finn owe a great deal of their strong similarity.

Here I provide some further examples of Finnic slowness in Russian Internet jokes.\*

★ In contemporary Russian slang, the mocking name for Estonians (sometimes also for Finns, and slow people in general) is "stick-in-the-mud" (*тормоз*) [literally 'brake'], the symbol of Tallinn is "Старый Тормоз", an EFian behind the wheel is an emergency brake, EF vodka is brake oil and EF brake pads are the most effective in the world.

★ All EFians' reactions are extremely slow. They only beat up people who tell unpleasant jokes the next day. Their hangovers begin three days after looking at a pornographic magazine, and ejaculation comes three days after having sex.

★ An introverted EF looks at the tips of his own shoes while talking with others, and an extroverted EF looks at those of his conversation partner. An EF boss asks his Russian secretary to type a little slower, because he can't dictate that fast. EFians are the wealthiest nation in the world, because they are unable to spend their salary fast enough, and EF rally drivers are successful because they are unable to raise their foot from the gas pedal while in curves. EF ambulances bear the text 'Time heals all wounds' (*Время лечит*), and EF buses the sign 'Please speak to the driver to wake him up'. Physics has been removed from EF school programmes, so as not to traumatise children with the concept 'speed'. In EF casinos, stakes can be placed for the next day. In the EF version of the game show 'Who Wants to be a Millionaire' there is an additional lifeline – 'Write to a friend', and a new class of service has been created in EF-land – 'postal Internet'. An EF cyclist comes third in a running marathon, the EF ski team freezes at the start of the competition so as to wait for the first snows, and an EF Olympic winner only realises by evening that he has won first place. In EF hunting shoots, the figure of the 'running wild boar' has been replaced with the 'sleeping sloth', and EFians' favourite pastime is to watch frolicking sloths in the zoo. The slow waltz is EFians' rap music.

★ In EF-land slowly dissolving coffee has been invented, the EF hound is a breed specially designed to hunt wounded snails and tortoises, and the army of EF-land has slow reaction forces that kill their enemies with boredom.

★ In EF-land, natural processes in general take place much more slowly, time passes more slowly, and gravity is not as strong. NATO sends a dirigible to protect Estonian airspace. In EF-land, a new and harmless strain of the AIDS virus has been discovered – its incubation period is longer than a human lifetime. The EF Internet is so fast because seconds are longer there. Even in St. Petersburg, the tempo of life is slower than in Moscow, because the proximity of EF-land influences the city.

★ Also, there is a parody of proverb: If you chase two Estonians, you could end up catching a third. (Original: If you chase two rabbits, you won't catch either).

As on many previous occasions, I must once again complain about the absence of an AT-like register of contemporary jokes. While working on this topic I repeatedly found myself in a constant helpless need to know how broad was the actual area of distribution of this or that joke plot in other languages and cultures outside the given Baltic-Finnic-Russian region, which other ethnic butts could be in use there, etc.

Using search engines Rambler and Google, I made, just for fun, an attempt to observe which ethnic constants can substitute the variable *X* in the globally known expression "**hot X(-ian,-ish) guys ~ boys**", and how frequent those constants were in the Russian and Western web world. The numbers of responses for the first 17 positions are listed in Table 6.

---

\* Since slowness is characteristic of both Estonians and Finns in Russian jokes, and I have not wanted to use the collective name "Smogarians" or distinguish which motifs are connected with both, and which with only one or another, in the following review of examples the characters are identified by the abbreviation EFian and the corresponding countries by the abbreviation EF-land, and also, where necessary, EF-language, etc. These motifs are, however, more often associated with Estonians than with Finns.

Table 6

Rambler: горячие X-ские парни			Google: hot X(-ian,-ish) guys ~ boys		
1.	<b>FINNISH</b>	<b>6232</b>	1.	Indian	3220
2.	<b>ESTONIAN</b>	<b>2246</b>	2.	Russian	3159
3.	American	325	3.	French	1145
4.	Russian	312	4.	Mexican	911
5.	Georgian	302	5.	English + British	601
6.	<b>LATVIAN</b>	<b>213</b>	6.	American	501
7.	Swedish	173	7.	<b>FINNISH</b>	<b>441</b>
8.	<b>LITHUANIAN</b>	<b>172</b>	8.	Spanish	309
9.	Norwegian	122	9.	German	271
10.	German	87	10.	Chinese	269
11.	Mexican	76	11.	Jewish	106
12.	English + British	45	12.	Swedish	76
13.	Armenian	31	13.	<b>ESTONIAN</b>	<b>60</b>
14.	Jewish	30	14.	Norwegian	37
15.	French	28	15.	<b>LATVIAN</b>	<b>25</b>
16.	Cuban	22	16.	Georgian	11
17.	Chinese	16	17.	<b>LITHUANIAN</b>	<b>8</b>

The obtained rank sequences seem to be the result of several different factors:

- a) perhaps some guys are hot simply because they are members of big, well-known and authoritative nations (Americans, Russians, Englishmen, Germans);
- b) some other guys, especially southern ones, appear to be regarded as hot in earnest and literally (Indians, Georgians, Mexicans, Spaniards);
- c) yet other guys, especially Scandinavian ones, are ironically referred to as "hot" (Finns, Estonians, Swedes, Norwegians).

The positions of the Baltic and Finnic nations differ considerably in Rambler and (English) Google, although their mutual arrangement is the same in both. The Finn holds the highest position (and is immediately followed by the Estonian) in the Russian ranking, but is only the seventh in Google. Other "pribalts" are also located much higher in Rambler than in Google.

The strong shift upwards of the former Baltic republics of the Soviet Union hardly needs any further explanation.

## 5. Residual aspects: asexuality, stupidity, language, political matters

As mentioned above, slowness in and of itself is not very salient among the universal features of the objects of ethnic mockery. Finns' and Estonians' slowness is, however, evidently associated with dull-wittedness, linguistic incapability and sexual inertia, i.e. with the mainstream ethnic topics described by Raskin (1985: Ch. VI) such as ASEXUALITY, DUMBNESS, and LANGUAGE DISTORTION. These and other content constituents often coincide in one and the same joke. The motoric, physiological, mental, emotional and intellectual expressions of slowness are densely connected and overlap.

### *Asexuality*

★ As already noted above, an Estonian or a Finn gets angry three days after being told an insulting joke, has a hangover three days after drinking, gets an erection three days after looking at a pornographic magazine, and ejaculates three days after having sex.

★ On his wedding night, an EFian is only able to take so much initiative as to say good night to his bride. Sex seems to him to be more pleasant than Christmas, but then again, Christmas happens



more often. An EFian girl prefers sex to be 'either back or forth', not 'back and forth, back and forth'. An EF woman asks her husband to kiss her after having just returned from a long business trip; he is surprised: 'what is the need for such orgies!'

### *Dullness*

EFians in Russian jokes are not only physically slow, but their cognitive processes are sluggish and dull as well.

★ They think that their parents or grandparents never had children; look for dead crows in the sky and flies from the inside of their cheek; finding a friend's dismembered body parts by the road, an EFian worries that something bad may have happened to him; beats his car down because it won't fit in the garage with fully inflated tyres; an Estonian border guard thinks that the Audi Quattro is so named because it can only accommodate four passengers, etc.

★ An old Hant ~ Chukchi says on his deathbed: "Respect the forest – it gives us warmth. Respect the moose – they provide us with food. Respect the Estonians – otherwise we would be the only stupid people on earth."

★ As in the case of slowness, stupidity seems to extend to Estonian animals too: an Estonian wolf chewed off three of his paws and was still unable to get out of the trap he was caught in.

Unlike slowness, stupidity is the most central feature of ethnic targets in contemporary jokes, preceded by the long lineage of ancestors in the multitude of older folk jokes with a large variety of target characters that can be specified not only ethnically, but also by their social status, wealth, profession, gender, age, etc. Therefore, wherever stupidity is involved in jokes, one should expect an especially wide range of name labels of characters, especially long historical pedigrees behind certain plots, etc.

For example, the two following plots were, among others, formerly connected with the Soviet militia:

- Estonian policemen. One of them asks the other to check whether the strobe lights on the roof of their car are working. The other policemen gets out, looks up and says: "It's working... it's not working... it's working... it's not working..."
- An Estonian suffering from heat or a hangover asks a friend to bring him some lemonade. The friend returns and says: "There wasn't any lemonade, but I brought you some cookies."

The Estonian (or Finn) in Russian jokes is tardy and dull-witted, though not lazy, but orderly and sparing.

- Two Estonians ~ Finns go to a brothel and ask the madam what they could get for \$5. The madam says that for \$5 they could fuck each other outside in the bushes. They do so, return and ask: "Who should we pay the \$5?"
- An Estonian ~ Finn picks up a dead crow "just in case"; a year later he takes it back to the same place, because he has discovered that he does not need it.

### *Language: stretched speech and accent*

Telling jokes to a native Russian audience generally only takes place in Russian. In that sense it differs diametrically from telling jokes to Estonians in Soviet Estonia (and presumably also elsewhere in the USSR), where jokes of Russian origin were typically told in macaronic language, maintaining the necessary untranslatable fragments of text in Russian – first of all elements of direct speech, such as puns, punchlining formulae, etc. (cf. Krikmann 2006).

Shmeleva & Shmelev (2002: 47 ff, 75 ff.) draw a distinction between the two main types of ethnic objects in contemporary Russian jokes – "aliens" (*иностранцы*) and "foreigners"

(*иностранцы*), and claim that Estonians are only "foreigners" who have evolved a linguistic specificity that is more characteristic of the "aliens" like Jews, Georgians, Chukchis, etc.

Take, for example, the joke which in English translation is roughly as follows:

- A Russian customer attempts to speak to an Estonian salesperson in broken Estonian. The salesperson: "You can speak Russian, I understand your language!" The customer: "We listened to your Russian for 50 years – now you listen to our Estonian!"

One of the Internet variants of this in the original Russian looks like this:

- Заходит русский покупатель в эстонский магазин. За прилавком стоит продавщица, эстонка. Покупатель начинает на ломаном эстонском объяснять чего он хочет. Эстонка: – **Посалуйста, коворитте по-русски, я все поннимаю.** – Мы пятьдесят лет слушали ваш русский, теперь вы послушайте наш эстонский.

In Estonia this joke was told symmetrically, imitating both accents. In the Russian version, an Estonian accent (or rather, something conventional that used to be taken for it) is imitated, but the Russian customer's punchline-rejoinder (presumably in broken Estonian, like in some Estonian records: "**Мейе вийскюмменд астат кулис тейе вене кел, нюйд кулеб тейе мейе ести кел!**") is nevertheless conveyed in correct Russian.

The dimension of slowness regularly participates in Russian imitations of Estonian or Finnish accent as well. The Estonian in Russian anecdotes also speaks Russian – a horribly broken Russian with enormously stretched vowels and consonants and a harsh accent. This accent does indeed have something in common with the actual accent of Estonians' Russian, but in general it is conventional and mythological. The conventions are already quite loose in spoken jokes, but become especially strange and fuzzy in Internet jokes, where Estonians' pseudo-Russian must be conveyed in a purely graphical way.

The bulk of Russian joke tellers and writers have most likely never heard real Estonian speech. For example, in the Tallinn tube (sic!), the train driver is unable to announce the next station before the train has reached it. Here are a couple of formulae with miraculously prolonged sounds (= repeated letters), which in normal language would mean something like "Caution, the doors are closing! The next stop ... Oh, here it is, the next stop!":

- Слеэээээээдууууующааааяааа остааааановка... АААА вот в прооочееэм иии онааа!
- Остороооооожнооо, двери закрываааайуууутся, сле-ду-ща-я стааанцийааа, ОУ! А воооот и следущааайаааа сттаанцийааа...!
- Осторошшно, дферри сакрыфаааются!... Осторошшно, дферри сакрыфаааются!... Слетущая стантсия... Слетущая стантсия... О! А вот и слетушая стантсия!
- Осттарошно, тверри... закррифайутся Уфажаемые... пассаширы, не... ссабыфайте... сфои весчи... пошалуйста... Слетгующая стансия... А фот и она!
- Оосторошш-но дверрри закрываюуутся... следууюющааая стаанцияаа... О! Следуующааая стаанцияаа!
- Астарошна, тверри сакрыфаются... Слетующая останофка... ООО! Слетующая останофка...

### *Language: misunderstandings and puns*

Estonians' or Balts' linguistic incapacity can result in a number of puns or other linguistic jokes. For some reason, dialogues between Russian travellers and Estonian customs officers have been especially prone to inspire such confusions. Sometimes the outcome is obscene.

Some examples:

- An Estonian says: Russians are odd people, everything is 'sapor' for them, church is sapor, fence is sapor and when they're constipated, that's also sapor [this refers to the Russian words *собор*, *забор* and *занор* respectively)

- A Russian customs official asks an Estonian truck driver: What are you hauling? – "Труппы!" (i.e. he means to say *truby* = pipes, but the Russian hears *trupy* = corpses) and asks: "Are they in coffins?" – "No, in piles."
- A female Russian taxi driver asks an Estonian customs official to do the paperwork for her cargo as fast as possible. The customs official says that things don't go that quickly, and adds in broken Russian: "Ну-у, если хот-тите, мо-ожете взя-ать у меня-я ра-ас-пи-иску." The woman says she is not satisfied with that. The Estonian answers: "Ну-у, возмит-те два-а-ра-аса!" [The woman understands: *можете взять у меня расписку* = you can get a receipt; the Estonian apparently thought: *можете взять у меня раз письку* = you can suck my dick]
- Kalev complains to Ilya Muromets that his horse does not want to walk. Muromets recommends shoeing it (*подкуй*) [sounds a little like *pod hui*, which would mean 'under the dick']. The Estonian does not understand what Ilya said and answers: I've already hit it "под куй и под яйцца" (very literally: 'under its dick and under its balls'), but it still won't move.
- A Latvian tells a Russian that his name is Vilis Skuja [sounds a little like *vylez s huja*, which would mean 'climbed out from the dick']. The Russian answers: "Я не спрашиваю, откуда ты вылез, фамилия твоя как?" [I am not asking what hole you climbed out of, I asked you your name!"]
- The Latvian asks Russian about someone: "Kur viņš?" (Where is he/she?). The Russian answers: "But we do not have anyone called Kurvinsh on our staff!"
- The mail address of the Estonian Institute of Experimental Biology is really and truly **ebi@ebi.ee** – which, spelled in Russian computer slang, sounds like "**fuck, doggie, fuck, point, ye-ye**"

### *Political matters*

Surprisingly enough, the strained political relations between Russia and the Baltic states are only quite modestly represented, mainly through Estonians' and Latvians' painful attitude to Russians' poor knowledge of Estonian.

The restoration of Estonian independence, as mentioned by Shmelyova and Shmelyov (2002: 78), the dissatisfied Russian diaspora, the entry of Estonia and the other Baltic States into the European Union and NATO, problems with the implementation of the language law, border treaties and the 'Bronze Man', the Russian media, politicians, state institutions' reactions to them – all of this has definitely created a favourable background for political-ethnic humour towards Estonia. Yet all of these circumstances have, nevertheless, yielded relatively few direct anecdote motifs.

There are only a few jokes on the Russian Internet that refer to Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania gaining national independence.

For instance:

★ An Estonian child asks his mother to buy a tin of Baltic sprats, and his mother agrees to buy even two tins, because we are now sovereign and can afford it. Or, for instance, 'pribalts' ask a Russian who has hoarded toilet paper when Russians began using toilet paper, and the Russian answers 'ever since pribalts stopped licking our asses'.

There are more jokes that criticise 'pribalts' for being painfully sensitive about language matters, and demanding that Russians living in their countries speak in their languages.

★ The joke in which the stubborn 'pribalt' refuses to communicate his three wishes to a Russian-speaking goldfish seems to be one of the most widespread of all jokes involving Estonians.

One can also find some genuinely evil nostalgia for earlier times, clear references to deportation, imprisonment and invasion.

★ In response to Estonians' request to spell the name "Таллин" (*Tallin*) with two 'n's, Russians recommend spelling "Колыма" (*Kolyma*) with two 'a's. In answer to an Estonian's question how long it takes a Russian to pack up his things, the Russian answers that he doesn't know, but it takes him about 45 seconds to assemble a Kalashnikov machine gun.

The joke about the colours of the Estonian flag is particularly cruel, but "objectively" witty and well-structured. Here Vovochka is obviously a positive character.

- Teacher: What does the blue on the Estonian flag symbolise? – An Estonian student (Peeter): ... the blue Estonian sky that before was polluted by Russian fighter planes, but is now clean once again. – And what does the black symbolise? – An Estonian student (Aino): the sacred soil of Estonia, which was once trampled by the boots of Russian soldiers, but is now clean once again. – And what does the white in the Estonian flag symbolise? – A Russian student (Vovochka): It symbolises the white snow of the steppes of Siberia, which for decades was trampled by the feet of the ancestors of the present Estonians ... and they'll trample it again, just as soon we return here.!

In the next two examples the 'pribalt' is an obviously negative (cruel, unjust) character:

- A Russian asks an Estonian or Lithuanian for directions to get to a particular street. The response: left, right, straight, left again and you'll be at the railway station.
- A young man saves an Estonian child from a pool of crocodiles. The journalist writing about the event considers this to be a genuine Estonian heroic deed, but hears that the young man is Russian, and writes a news item entitled "Russian steals crocodile's breakfast".



I have not yet found any reflection in Russian ethnic humour of the events that took place in April and May of this year in Tallinn in connection with the so-called Bronze Man, at the Estonian Consulate in Moscow, and elsewhere unless the sign NO ESTONIANS AND DOGS that truly hung on the door of a restaurant in Yaroslavl for a while can be considered humour.



Only very rarely are Estonians, Latvians or other inhabitants of the former Soviet camp allowed to be positive (clever, witty, victorious) characters in Russian jokes, but almost never against a Russian antagonist. The examples below actually represent the Soviet and not the contemporary stratum of jokes.

- As an experiment, the Soviet Union decides to grant Estonia national sovereignty from 6 o'clock in the evening to 6 o'clock in the morning. At 7:00, Estonia declares war on Finland. At 8:00 the Finns capture Tallinn. At 9:00 Estonia signs an act of complete and unconditional surrender.
- Members of three nationalities throw out of an airplane everything they have enough of. The Frenchman throws a bottle of wine, the Russian a case of vodka, but the Estonian throws the Russian out of the plane – we truly have enough of them.

(See also the quoted above joke above about making condoms out of chewing gum)

**Note:** This study was supported by the Estonian Science Foundation Grant No. 6759

## References

- Attardo, Salvatore & Raskin, Victor 1991. Script theory revis(it)ed: joke similarity and joke representation model. *HUMOR: International Journal of Humor Research*, 4-3/4.
- Davies, Christie 1990. *Ethnic Humor Around the World: A Comparative Analysis*. Bloomington–Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Davies, Christie 2002. *The Mirth of Nations*. New Brunswick–London: Transaction Publishers.
- Krikmann, Arvo 2006. Jokes in Soviet Estonia: A paper presented to the 18th ISH Conference at the Danish University of Education. Copenhagen July 2006  
[http://www.folklore.ee/~kriku/HUUMOR/Nlj\\_sovpol.pdf](http://www.folklore.ee/~kriku/HUUMOR/Nlj_sovpol.pdf)
- Laineste, Liisi 2004. *Tegelased eesti etnilises huumoris*. Magistritöö. Käsikiri. Tartu: TÜ  
<http://hdl.handle.net/10062/754>
- Laineste, Liisi 2005. Targets of Estonian Ethnic Jokes Within the Theory of Ethnic Humour (Ch. Davies). *Folklore*, vol. 10, issue 29.
- Raskin, Victor 1985. *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor*. Dordrecht–Boston–Lancaster: D. Reidel Publishing Company.
- Shmeleva, Elena & Shmelev, Aleksei 2002. *Русский анекдот: Текст и речевой жанр*. Москва: Языки славянской культуры.

## APPENDIX

EST	FIN	LAT	LIT	Σ	PLOT
1	1	1	1	4	Quarrelling about unimportant trifles (the possible "prototype narrative" of the now globally known expression [ <i>Don't fight,</i> ] <i>hot Xian guys</i> ~ ... <i>горячие Хские парни</i> )
1	1	1	1	4	At first, a hitch-hiker is told that Tallinn ~ Helsinki ~ ... is not too far, and, after several hours of driving, that it is now far indeed
1	1	1	1	4	<i>Пустатый паспорт</i> (obscene-sounding dialog between Xian and Russian customs officials)
1	1	1	1	4	Xian parachutists hovered above the town for three days
1	1	1	1	4	Russians went into space? – Really, all of them?
1	1	1	0	3	Sex is better than Christmas, but Christmas happens more often
1	1	1	0	3	An Xian suffering from heat or a hangover asks a friend to bring him some beer or lemonade. The friend returns and says: "There wasn't any lemonade, but I brought you some cookies."
1	1	1	0	3	Two Xian guys in a brothel are told that for \$5 they can fuck each other – they do so and ask whom they should give the \$5
1	0	1	1	3	An Estonian refuses a goldfish's offer to fulfil three of his wishes, because the offer was made in Russian
1	1	1	0	3	On the day after telling jokes about Estonians' slowness, the Russian who told them is beaten up by two Estonians
1	1	1	0	3	A whole village has come to observe how silently and invisibly a group of Estonian scouts is crawling towards enemy positions.
1	1	1	0	3	Enjoying the romping sloths in Tallinn Zoo is the favourite pastime of Estonians
1	1	1	0	3	An Estonian picks up a dead crow "just in case"; a year later he takes it back to the same place, because he has discovered that he does not need it
1	1	1	0	3	The secret of the Matrix's bullets disclosed: the bullets were Xian

1	1	1	0	3	In an Xian casino, roulette stakes are taken for tomorrow
1	1	1	0	3	Xians have invented slowly soluble coffee
1	1	1	0	3	Estonian policemen. One of them asks the other to check whether the strobe lights of their car are working. The other looks up and says: "It's working... it's not working... "
1	1	1	0	3	The Xian border guard thinks that the names Audi Quattro and Fiat Uno refer to the number of seats in the respective cars
1	1	1	0	3	Verbal contest between Xian and Yian: the first round – about eating an entire loaf of bread vs. making muslix of it; the second – about eating jam vs. making it from fruit rejects; the third – about throwing used condoms away vs. making bubble gum out of them and then selling them to Y-land
1	1	0	1	3	A pale untanned Xian explains: I just had to be at work on the Wednesday when summer happened
1	1	1	0	3	One of the oldest barber's shops was discovered in Xland. Instruments, mirrors and a queue of three people were well preserved
1	1	1	0	3	If in Latvia you are overtaken by an Estonian, you must be a Finn
1	1	1	0	3	Mom, do we have Finnish ancestors? – No. – How about Estonians? – No, sonny. – But why the hell then am I such a stick-in-the-mud?
1	1	1	0	3	Text on Xian ambulance: 'Time heals all wounds'
1	1	1	0	3	The Xian Urmas ~ Kaarlis ~ Hekka stands in a queue, repeatedly reacts when the names "Toomas!" ~ "Valdis!" ~ "Mikka!" are shouted, repeatedly abandons the queue and finally shouts desperately: "I am not Toomas, I'm Urmas! ~ ... ~ ..."
1	1	1	0	3	Eczema does not stop an Xian kissing the Queen's hand: Clinton ~ Bush even had haemorrhoids
1	0	1	1	3	The devil caught representatives of different nationalities and put them in a sack. When they escaped, they behaved differently: e.g. the Estonian did not understand what was going on, the Latvian held a political protest, etc.
1	1	1	0	3	How can one make a Xian laugh on Monday ~ ... - Tell him a joke on Friday ~ ...
1	0	1	1	3	Gorbachev orders that his stolen wife be returned immediately, or else the whole of Siberia will soon speak Xian
1	1	0	1	3	Пень 4 (i.e. Pentium 4, literally: Stump 4): assembled in Estonia, with Finnish video card, for viewing Lithuanian DVDs