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LAUGHTER AND ANTI-BEHAVIOR IN RUSSIA: HUMAN UNIVERSALS VERSUS NATIONAL SPECIFICITY

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Ever since Dostoyevsky, the Russian national character, as compared with that of Western Europeans, has been traditionally regarded as an inconceivable and deeply irrational combination of contrasting features, such as humility and lack of restraint; piety and willingness to blaspheme; chastity and adherence to swearing. Russian Orthodoxy, contrary to Western Christianity, has considered laughter to be a sin. Francis of Assisi, the Joculator Domini, could joke and laugh without losing his sanctity; however, this was something utterly unthinkable for a Russian saint unless he was insane like St. Basil. The Russian church tended to associate laughter with Hell and Devil, who was euphemistically called jester. Also, while European medieval and Renaissance laughter brought liberation from fear, it for some reason failed to do this in Russia.

Although these or similar descriptions of national specificity have become almost commonplace, their interpretation is a matter of debate. According to Lotman and Uspensky (1977, p.154), Western European laughter (carnival) shattered the world of Christian beliefs, whereas laughter in medieval Russia could not do this because Devil, with whom laughter was firmly associated here, was not believed to oppose the world; rather, he occupied a "legal", albeit the lowest, position in the divine hierarchy. Because laughing was one of Devil's prerogatives, people who laughed did commit a sin but did not encroach on God's realm; they merely entered its prohibited part.

The interpretation suggested by Averintsev (1993, p.342-343) is entirely different. In Western Europe, according to his view, laughter was tamed and
incorporated in a system; if even the saints laughed, ordinary people could afford this a fortiori. In Russia, however, laughing was so dangerous that all the authority of the church was needed to oppose it. The asceticism of Russian Orthodoxy, according to Averintsev (1992, p.18), was a reaction against the lack of restraint inherent in Russian national character. Once again, Dostoyevsky's stereotype is being brought to the foreground.

The matter, then, does seem confused. To disentangle the truth, it would be best to try and incorporate these phenomena in a broader context. For that purpose, relationships between culture and personality will be described by means of a tripartite model based on ethnographic and historical data from many human cultures, both archaic and modern. Such models have been proposed by a number of writers (see, e.g., Stanner, 1960, pp.104-105; Leach 1961, pp.132-136; Babcock 1978, pp.13-36, 276-292; Turner 1969, pp.47, 167-172; Lotman 1970, 1994, p.385). The one outlined below is nothing more than an attempt at a compromise between several similar theories.

The model includes three strata: personality, ideal, and anti-ideal. PERSONALITY is the central area, where the individual's behavior is a matter of his/her free choice. Above this area, the IDEAL is situated, which is the sum total of cultural norms and prohibitions forced upon the individual. Positive knowledge and common sense based on it do not belong here. The larger the ideal, the smaller the domain of personality and free choice. The ideal can be propagated by the state

or by the church. However, although neither of these exist in archaic societies, the ideal is very strong there, most spheres of life are subjected to a stringent regulation, and the area of personality is quite restricted. Norms and prohibitions comprising the ideal must be interiorized. The individual who rejects them is situated outside the model. The ideal corresponds to Freudian superego and, in keeping with Freud's ideas, it is perceived more or less as a burden by the individual (who does not know that freedom is an even greater burden, see below).

The lower stratum is the ANTI-IDEAL, or the negativistic component of culture. This is the area where "thou shalt not" is automatically converted into "thou shalt". The anti-ideal has nothing to do with Freudian id which is based on biological and precultural drives. On the contrary, the anti-ideal is the product of culture. While the ideal is a burden, the principal function of the anti-ideal is to make this burden less onerous for the individual. Its other function is to provide an antithesis, a contrasting background for the ideal.

Negativism is neither anti-social nor immoral. Anti-social and immoral behavior has its own motives, whereas negativism has no motives of its own, or rather it has a single motive: a pure and disinterested negation of the ideal. Negation for the sake of negation. The anti-ideal is just a shadow of the ideal. The negation inherent in it is usually symbolic. It is not merely safe for the system, but is a prerequisite of the system's stability. Schurtz compared negativistic rites with safety valves. Durkheim and Mauss were among the first to pay attention to cultural negativism, and in later decades the phenomenon was thoroughly examined by van Gennep, Stanner, Turner, and others. While English-speaking anthropologists usually describe human activities concerned with the anti-ideal as reverse behavior, Russian writers use the term "anti-behavior" (Lotman and Uspensky 1977; Uspensky 1985, 1993). Barbara Babcock (1978) termed the negativistic stratum of culture "symbolic inversion".

The main principle underlying of relationships between the ideal and the anti-ideal is that the latter must counterbalance the former. The heavier the ideal and the more diligently it is assimilated by people, the greater the need for a weighty anti-ideal. The anti-ideal can be restrained and suppressed by the ideal; however, this is dangerous for the system, because as soon as the pressure of the ideal decreases a little, the anti-ideal can react with an abrupt expansion.

The forms of anti-behavior are manifold, yet all of them are united by the same basic motive. In archaic societies, festive rites were held where people collectively demonstrated to each other "the way things should not be" and violated social order in a most practical and coarse way without forgetting that it was just make-believe. The scenario for anti-behavior was provided by the trickster myths. Medieval Western European carnival, Russian Christmastide and Shrovetide rites, Byzantine and Russian tradition of God's fools, the ritual use of profane language, and ultimately the entire culture of gelos, are basically similar manifestations of anti-behavior. In Western Europe, the world of anti-ideal was called "Mundus inversus", and its Russian equivalent was "iznanochny mir", meaning "the inside-out world", or "kromeshny mir ("outer world", alluding to Biblical outer darkness by way of reminding where laughter should belong). According to Likhachev et al. (1984, p.17-19), the Russian topsy-turvy world was opposed, not to reality, but to the ideal; Devil was opposed, not to man, but to God. This made the system stable, robust, and highly conservative, as in any traditional society.

Because we did not include common sense in the ideal, the anti-behavior aimed at negating it (modern clowning and similar "liminoid" activities, to use Turner's term) will not concern us here.

We will focus on disinterestedly-negativistic intrusions on the sphere of the ideologically prohibited. Here is one example of an almost ritual anti-behavior in modern society: Soviet boys reacted against anti-fascist, anti-American, and anti- Zionist propaganda by drawing swastikas, signs of dollar, and stars of David on the walls (for obvious reasons, the latter two are no longer seen nowadays, but swastikas continue to appear). Why? Children had learned perfectly well that fascism, imperialism, and Zionism are the worst things in the world. They scarcely knew why they did that. Anti-behavior is largely subconscious. If they were asked, they would laugh.

Laughter, as any other manifestation of anti-behavior, is a sign of violation of a self-imposed prohibition (Kozintsev and Butovskaya 1996). In this case, too, the violation is disinterested and committed for the sake of violation, not because of some precultural bestiality, in sharp contrast to what Freud believed. The essence of laughter is best expressed by a famous maxim of the Soviet era: "I have an idea, but I disagree with it" (Bakhtin, who described laughter as an inner form apparently meant precisely that). Laughter differs from other manifestations of negativism (or rather self-negation) only by its playful nature, by having its own value, and by being extremely contagious. The stronger the self-imposed ban on laughter, the more irresistible the urge to laugh. This is only true up to a certain limit, however; if the strength of the internal prohibition exceeds this limit, violation is no longer possible, and the balance is disrupted. When the prohibition is either too weak or too strong, one does not laugh.

The system has two states of equilibrium: primary (early) and secondary (late). PRIMARY EQUILIBRIUM is a condition where the central stratum, that of freedom and personality, is small whereas both the upper and the lower strata (the ideal and the anti-ideal) are large. This is the equilibrium with which a child enters conscious life. The heavier the ideological load which the educators hoist onto it, the stronger the child's urge to throw this load off, at least symbolically, by saying or doing something with which the child itself would disagree. This equilibrium is typical of archaic cultures.

SECONDARY EQUILIBRIUM is a condition where the area of freedom and personality is expanded while those of the ideal and the anti-ideal are reduced. This equilibrium is typical of adult people in modern Western society. By having made their ideal much lighter, they have, without being aware of this, hoisted onto their shoulders an even heavier load: freedom.

Our theory is based on three postulates.

1. The system is stable if, and only if, the ideal and the anti-ideal are commensurate. Lack of proportionality means lack of stability.
2. Any system tends toward equilibrium, either primary or secondary.
3. The most natural way in which a system can develop is from primary equilibrium to secondary equilibrium.

What can these postulates tell us about the alleged specifics of Russian laughter?

First and foremost, it is easy to see that the traditional Russian attitude to anti-behavior in general and to laughter in particular corresponds to the model of primary equilibrium with all its inherent traits, such as collectivism, huge ideal and an accordingly huge anti-ideal. We might call this

system "Russian" if we like, but we might also call it "Australian aboriginal", "African", or "American Indian" with the same right. Indeed, the inside-out world of Australian, African, or American natives strikingly resembled that of archaic Russians. Not just its general layout, but its details, too, were similar. Both here and there the arrival of ritual clowns was accompanied by fear and hysterical laughter of the onlookers, especially women and children (Russia: Ivleva 1994, pp.84,127,192; Africa: Babcock 1978, p.283); both here and there people imitated animals (Russia: Ivleva 1994, p.50; Australia: Stanner 1959, p.114); both here and there excrements were used as "anti-materials" (Meletinsky's term), or "cheerful substance" (Bakhtin's term) (Russia: Propp 1963, p.122; America: Bourke 1888). The latter feature is even more typical of the Western European carnival (Bakhtin 1968; see Butovskaya and Kozintsev 1996 for more references).

Swearing, blasphemous folklore, and political jokes, all these are typical manifestations of adult Russian anti-behavior, which subverted the system not in the least more than did swastikas, signs of dollar, or stars of David drawn by children on the walls. The first impression one might get after reading "Zavetnye skazki" ("Prohibited tales", a collection of Russian folk erotic jokes anonymously published by Afanasyev in Geneva in 1872, see Uspensky 1993), is that Russian peasants detested the clergy. This, in fact, is what Belinsky (who must have been familiar with this sort of folklore) wrote Gogol in his famous letter, for the dissemination of which Dostoyevsky received a death sentence replaced by four years of hard labor. Indeed, the tales are incredibly dirty, and many, if not most, of them feature the priests and their wives. The conclusion, however, would be quite erroneous. All evidence available at present suggests that Russian peasants were highly pious. The same applies to political jokes, which should by no means be regarded as rebellion, nor even as satire, because the prerequisite of satire is inner freedom. The realm of satire is not anti-ideal, but personality.

Why did St. Francis laugh? Because his cheerful and light-minded laughter heralded Renaissance. In the early 13th century, Western Europe had already begun to move toward the secondary equilibrium: from collectivism to individuality, from repression to freedom. The Inquisition was admittedly yet ahead, the agony of the Middle Ages was a long one, but the last thing that might occur to the executioners was to laugh. Paradoxically, it were the potential victims who laughed. Fire consumed the heretics, but those who evaded it kept laughing since laughter was the only means of defeating fear. As the future developments showed, this was an efficient means: both time and laughter were not on the executioners' side but on the side of something that we, overoptimistically maybe, call progress.

Indeed, as time was passing, the ideal in Europe was becoming less and less repressive, whereas the anti-ideal that counterbalanced it was less and less necessary, was perceived less and less "seriously" (the oxymoron is inevitable here) until it eventually turned into a bagatelle. In the early 18th century, Montesquieu observed that everyone in France indulged in a boudoir-type wittiness, and elegant (but superficial) joking was heard on all levels of society. This marked the final stage of degeneration of Western European laughter, a process brilliantly described by Bakhtin (1968).

In Russia, nothing of that kind was seen. Rather than being a vigorous call of a humanistic future, Russian medieval laughter sounded like a dangerous echo of the pagan past which was still so near and alive despite being repressed by the Christian present. Because in all social strata paganism was commonly associated with Hell, it is no wonder that the guffaw of Ivan the Terrible, a crowned hangman and clown (a figure unthinkable in Western Europe!), had definitely infernal

overtones.

I do not in the least mean to say that cruelty was less characteristic of medieval Western Europe than of medieval Russia. My point is that in Russia, in contrast to Western Europe, laughter was in no way associated with progress. Although in many important features Peter the Great's era resembled Renaissance, historical inertia proved more powerful. Time went by, but the ideal did not even think of retreating. Rather, the opposite was true. The more devoutly the Russian people believed in God, the more they needed to blaspheme and laugh. This urge was as serious as was their faith; unconscious, but not light-minded. The stereotypical Russian behavior, idealized by Dostoyevsky, Nekrasov, and Blok, and consisting of intermittent periods of festive indulgence followed by repentance, can not be explained by any rational motives. But does this mean that the explanations, too, must be irrational: either the fight of God with Devil for the human soul or the so-called "national character"?

Indeed, as one reads Dostoyevsky time and again, one eventually comes to the conclusion that lack of restraint so typical of his characters such as Dmitry Karamazov, was motivated not so much by personal "biological" urges as by deeply embedded culturally symbolical, even ritual needs. It looks as though with all their bouts of unrestrained indulgence they performed some ancient rite the meaning of which they did not understand. Suffice it to recollect that at Christmastide and Shrovetide it was not merely permitted but, in a sense, recommended, to commit (symbolically or even actually) certain sins, mostly concerned with drinking, gluttony, and sex. It might be argued that all these trespasses were related to biology. But what biological motive could ever be found for an utterly crazy action of a Russian peasant boy described by Dostoyevsky in his essay "Vlas"? This boy, who was very pious, like all Russian peasants of that time, was incited by his friend to commit a horrible sacrilege: shoot at the Eucharist. As soon as he aimed his gun, he saw that his target was Christ. The boy collapsed in a dead faint, and all his further life was dedicated to devout repentance.

Is Averintsev right, then, saying that Russian Orthodoxy was ascetic because Russian character lacked restraint? Could it not be the other way round: the urge for the anti-ideal is a reaction against the ascetic ideal? More likely, however, causes and effects are intertwined here. Elements of a system are coadapted. People with a childish, archaic, collectivistic, and servile mentality can only be ruled by authoritarian methods which include the propagation of a powerful ideal; but on the other hand, if the church and the state have absolute power, people tend to have precisely this mentality. The circle is thereby closed. Why were the Russians humble and unrestrained, chaste and foul-mouthed? The answer is self-evident: because the Russian consciousness (and, to an even greater degree, the Russian unconscious) still fully conformed to the model of primary equilibrium. This spurious contradiction is typical of the archaic mind which tends to make both the ideal and the anti-ideal visible and tangible.

We will now try and apply this theory to certain landmarks in the history of Russian laughter. First at the individual level.

Korolenko wrote: "Gogol, Uspensky, Shchedrin, and now Chekhov. These names almost exhaust the list of outstanding Russian writers with a strongly expressed humorous temperament. Two of them died in acute melancholy, two others in chronic depression. (...) Does Russian laughter really have something fatal to it?" (Korolenko 1954, p.109; written in 1904). If Uspensky, who should rather be compared with Garshin, is omitted, three figures remain, whose world importance is indisputable. It turns out, however, that behind the outward similarity noted by

Korolenko, profoundly different conflicts are seen.

Was Gogol a satirist? In no way! Satire (the castigation of evils) is only possible under the condition of inner freedom inherent in secondary equilibrium. Under primary equilibrium, when inner freedom is minimal, there is no satire, there is only anti-behavior. As Freidenberg (1978, pp.291-297) has demonstrated, Aristophanes had no intention to castigate any vices; rather, he simply besmeared Socrates, Euripides, and democracy with dirt. He did this for no apparent reason, "just so", in fun. As Bakhtin (1968) has shown, Rabelais, too, did not castigate public evils, he simply threw dirt at everyone, and this was also done in good fun (Bakhtin would have corrected me by saying that it was certainly not dirt but "cheerful substance"; see Butovskaya and Kozintsev 1996 for some information concerning the biological roots of this custom). As also shown by Bakhtin (1990), Gogol's works were no more satirical then were those of Aristophanes or Rabelais. Gogol was far from detesting his characters. Nicolas I, who split his sides at the performance of "The Inspector", understood this obviously better than did Belinsky. Gogol's laughter fully conforms to the model of primary equilibrium. There was little if any satire or moralizing in it; far more likely, it was pure anti-behavior. Gogol simply followed the Christmastide and Shrovetide custom of besmearing people with dirt. Culturally, he belonged to the ancient dynasty of ritual clowns, strange double beings, half-contemptible, half-sacred (Willeford 1969; Makarius 1970). Being an Orthodox Christian with a deeply archaic mentality, he possessed an inner ban on laughter. Until this ban had become too strong, Gogol laughed and made others laugh, since he disagreed with most of his ideas. However, after a certain limit was reached, the crisis set in. The disproportionally expanded ideal was no longer counterbalanced by the anti-ideal, and the system went out of equilibrium.

Shchedrin's fate was quite different. His works are a true satire, and his mentality fully conforms to the model of secondary equilibrium. There was nothing archaic about Shchedrin. On the contrary, he was a full-fledged progressist whose political ideas were far ahead of the mainstream. Describing in a private letter his design of "Studies in the History of Bryukhov", a bitter satire on Russian history, he wrote: "Even vulgarity itself must have something human to it; but here there is nothing except dung." (quoted after Eikhenbaum 1969, p.467). Gogol would never have written anything of this kind, and the difference is that of quality. If someone believes that everything around is dung, then he can no longer regard dung as "cheerful substance". Laughter for him is not anti-behavior, but proper behavior. However, we know that laughter IS anti-behavior and can be nothing else! Shchedrin agreed with all his ideas. He actually loathed his characters, and he wanted to castigate evil; predictably, the result was anything but funny. A figure fully analogous to Schedrin is Swift, a born misanthrope and satirist, who also wanted, but could not, write funny, and also ended up in melancholy.

The third name is Chekhov. Here again we see something different. In his early period, Chekhov indulged in traditional anti-behavior which had little to do with satire. Then a shift toward secondary equilibrium occurred. The principal reason was that Chekhov, according to his own expression, "squeezed the slave out of himself drop by drop" until he eventually attained the state of complete inner freedom. Laughter, however, is the sign of temporary liberation under permanent lack of freedom. A fully liberated person does not need laughter any longer, although the parting from it must be bitter. This, it appears, was the reason of Chekhov's drama. The bitterness of his late works is the price of freedom. When one has squeezed the last drop of slave out of himself, one does not laugh anymore.

What we see, then, are three entirely different dramas. Gogol, in his late period, wanted to laugh but could not, and the reason was lack of inner freedom. Shchedrin, too, wanted to laugh but could not, the reason being too much inner freedom. And Chekhov, having acquired inner freedom, lost the urge to laugh. None of these dramas, it appears, has anything specifically national to it; or rather, the national is present, but only in details. The principal factors are universal.

However, speaking of Russian intelligentsia as a whole, its distinctive feature is the combination of a large ideal, manifested in traditional principles of self-sacrifice, love for simple people, readiness to serve lofty aims, etc., and an accordingly large but unconscious anti-ideal which occasionally splashes out in the form of declarative or actual opportunism, philistinism, and cowardice. Suffice it to recollect what Chekhov said or wrote with regard to this social group to which he himself belonged. The most striking thing about these dicta is not that they are diametrically opposite, but that they all are apparently correct. In this case, too, one can't help thinking about primary equilibrium. No matter whether we speak about inconceivable peaks and abysses on the life track of a single Russian intellectual, about the historical path of Russian intelligentsia as a whole, or about the polarization of roles within this group, the crux of the matter remains the same: for a single person as well as for the entire group, the ideal sometimes proves too heavy, so one must occasionally throw it off the shoulders (at least symbolically), then hoist it back and walk on.

One might venture to suggest that Chekhov's connection (in his late, agelastic period) with the reactionary journalism was, in cultural and psychological terms, a phenomenon of the same order as was his laughter in the early period. It will be impossible to understand this declarative lack of political scruples in a man of incontestably high moral principles, unless the negativistic element in Chekhov's behavior is taken into account.

Negativism is even more apparent in the behavior of Rozanov who, like Chekhov, was associated with the right-wing newspaper "Novoye vremya", but, in marked contrast to Chekhov, was an arrant reactionary himself. His talented and witty but politically loathsome writings were apparently motivated not so much by his sincere love for tsarism and the Russian church as by his urge to outrage public opinion by symbolically defiling things that were sacred for the intelligentsia. It should be kept in mind that in early 20th-century Russia both the tsarist government and the clergy were rapidly losing power, and the major source of ideological pressure was the left-wing intelligentsia, whose near victory was beyond doubt for Rosanov. In some oblique way, Rozanov's behavior resembled that of God's fool, a very notable figure in Byzantine and Russian history. God's fools, who bore features of ritual clowns, Greek cynics, and Biblical prophets, and who were, or pretended to be, insane, were allowed to do all sorts of shocking and sacrilegious things because everyone knew that they did this for the sake of God.

Now we can try and rise from the individual level to the group level to see what happened with Russian laughter over the recent 70 years.

STALIN ERA. Strongest external, and respectively internal, ban on anti- behavior; maximum of collectivism, minimum of freedom. To convince us that we were the happiest and freest people in the world proved very easy. Anti-behavior? Why on earth? The overwhelming feeling was that of enormous enthusiasm, and there was a great deal of laughter which, however, signaled joy and vigor rather than any sort of negativism. Satire helped eradicate the few vices that still remained. In other

words, the ideal held complete sway whereas the anti-ideal was hidden deeply in the subconscious without having any chance to materialize. This imbalance alone would suffice to predict that the system was endangered. Of course, this does not in the least imply that people hated the regime; on the contrary, most of them loved it with all their hearts. But it is precisely under these conditions that a substantial anti-ideal is needed. If none is available, too much enthusiasm and love may result in something that may be described as historical tiredness. This is what actually happened.

POST-STALIN ERA FROM KHRUSHCHEV TO GORBACHEV. During the period of "thaw", the ideal melted to a considerable extent, and for the first time people could see a gleam of freedom. The result was that the anti-ideal, which lurked under the ice, suddenly broke out like a stream of spring mud: political jokes and swearing. One might recollect the 1917 Revolution, when the succession of events was the same: first the collapse of power (and of the ideal) and then the outbreak of the "outer world". This historical oddity was noted already by Tyutchev, who was referring not to Russia but to Western Europe: for some reason, mass discontent increases not when the arbitrariness of the government is maximal but, on the contrary, when the rulers try to make the regime less oppressive. This is the time when monarchs like Louis XVI have to pay the debts of their forerunners. In 1953, however, the Soviet ideal did not collapse, it only became smaller, and this was sufficient for the anti-ideal to appear in all its beauty. We were not on the threshold of a revolution; rather, we suddenly discovered that we had many ideas with which we ourselves could not agree. The imbalance disappeared. With regard to the proportion of freedom, ideal, and anti-ideal, we were somewhere halfway between the primary and the secondary equilibrium. And if Gorbachev had not decided to offer an even greater freedom to the people, this stage could have lasted for long.

POST-PERESTROIKA ERA. Thanks to the activities of Gorbachev and Yeltsin, the present situation with laughter in Russia is typologically similar to that in post-Renaissance Western Europe. Bakhtin (1968, 1990), who gave a brilliant analysis of the European case, spared no harsh words to describe it. Indeed, the period was marked by a decline of carnivalesque folk laughter and the onset of the individualistic bourgeois age. In our terms, this was the transition from primary to secondary equilibrium. This, in fact, is what happened in Russia during the last decade. The ideal has become as small as it never was before; freedom has attained incredible dimensions. Swearing and political jokes are heard less and less often; what one mostly hears nowadays is humorless rhetoric. Anti-behavior has given way to personality and free choice. Both the external and the internal prohibition to laugh has disappeared completely; as a result, laughter itself has almost vanished. The system has made a huge leap and has finally attained secondary equilibrium which is rather close to that typical of the Western countries (and even appears to be exaggerated with respect to the Western standards). This promises some stability.

A small ideal is commensurate with a small anti-ideal. As Annenesky has put it, "No Kremlins, no wonders, no sacred places, no mirages, no tears, no smiles..." Because humor is needed less and less, its normal doses, let alone homeopathic ones, have no effect. While the single wink of Raikin (the great comic of the Soviet era, whose art, cropped by censorship, was not enough to constitute a weighty counterpoise to the Soviet ideal) produced bursts of uproarious laughter in the audience, the present-day Russian political humor has become so cynical and coarse that it almost borders on violence, and yet we react with a wry smile at best. This is not anti-behavior but pure

satire, and, like any satire, ours is not in the least funny, but angry and gloomy. Well, we have squeezed the slaves out of ourselves, we are free at last. We have come of age, and now we agree with all our thoughts. Isn't this the condition which we strove to achieve?

It is time to conclude. There is no such thing as Russian attitude to laughter. The regularities we have examined are systemic and universal.

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