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## Metabolic publics: a pandemic comedy?

'We eat the virus! It runs away when it sees us because it is so scared of us', Karmatullo told me jokingly, when I asked him how he and other Central Asian workers were doing in Moscow. How to understand such humorous displays of perseverance in the face of adversity? The scholarship of comedy can provide a helpful lens. Comedy, understood as a social practice as well as an artistic genre, may yield polyvalent and poly-affective scenes. Such scenes often intermingle or encompass other genres and moods, be they tragic, horrifying or many others. In addition to these, the humorous pathos in the idea of ingesting the virus reproduces or extends solidarities. Meanwhile, other jokes may also intensify an earlier existing distrust of the state. The following WhatsApp interactive meme exchanged among a heterogeneous group of Central Asian workers exemplifies how comedic media mediates solidaristic moods and generates such scenes and their publics. The meme begins with an eye catching announcement: 'The government gives 1200 roubles per day to adults for staying at home for ten days. Fill in the ...'

When one clicks the link, the picture of a gorilla showing a middle finger suddenly flies into the viewer's face (Figure 1). The animal appears to impersonate the unruly power of the state that greets with a mocking smile everyone who might have naively believed receiving a *halyava* (a freebie) at its expense. While big and powerful, the meme also ridicules the state's authority by comparing it to an ape gesticulating obscenities. Of course, this metaphor is part of a vernacular vocabulary widespread among working 'migrants' in Russia as well as those who aren't marked as such. The imaginary here affirms the predicament of living in a social Darwinist 'jungle', where 'only the fittest survive', and where the state is just the most dominant protection racket (*krysha*).

The circulations of such tragicomic humour may make conditions of the multiple unfolding crises somewhat habitable. It does so discursively, but also through a type of 'metabolic' media practice such as those involved in making the viral micro-pranks and memes. As any meme, the state-gorilla prank is based on being a bricolage of various elements – the supposedly formal language of the initial announcement and the found image. This disassembling and reassembling of signs into a new configuration of surprise enacts the digestion of uncertainty into a new playful form. The message appears to be: for those sections of the populations who must by all costs avoid isolation and social detachment for survival, a credible moto may be not bodily and social distancing, or unaffordable fits of panic hoarding, but practices of reassembling risks into fragile relations often mediated by (tragi) comic scenes and their publics.



**Figure 1** Meme circulated on WhatsApp. Personal communication, Moscow, 2020

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