

Laughter Through Tears: The Democratizing Power of Irony and Sarcasm in the Commentaries of Samuel (Samo) Marec and Tomáš Hudák

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Abstract

Laughter Through Tears: The Democratizing Power of Irony and Sarcasm in the Commentaries of Samuel (Samo) Marec and Tomáš Hudák. *Indirect forms of communication, such as irony and sarcasm, initially seem to convey clear messages, yet they often conceal deeper meanings. Their primary purpose is to deliver sharp, malicious mockery of ideas, their proponents, and supporters by contrasting semantic extremes. Typically, an author designs these as positive, humorous messages, expecting the reader to interpret them as negative ridicule. However, the gap between the literal and actual meanings of ironic and sarcastic statements can enlighten — not only when the receiver recognises the underlying intention but also when they misinterpret it. This pragmatic analysis of language, as used in the comments of Samuel (Samo) Marec (Denník Sme) and Tomáš Hudák (Denník N), aims to highlight the democratising power of irony and sarcasm, regardless of whether their meanings are understood literally or figuratively.*

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Introduction: Irony and sarcasm in the lens of science – a brief literature review

Irony can be defined as a figure of speech in which the speaker intentionally expresses the opposite of what is said, creating a contradiction between the literal statement and the intended meaning (Grice, 1975: 53). Burgers, van Mulken, and Schellens define irony as “an utterance with a literal evaluation that is implicitly contrary to its intended evaluation” (2011: 190). Ironic statements are characterised by the difference between the literal

(conventional) and the unspoken intended meaning, meaning the speaker knowingly and intentionally flouts the Maxim of Quality: “Try to make your contribution one that is true” (Grice, 1975: 46). Czech linguist Marek Nekulil corrected this view, stating that irony is a partial breach of the cooperative principle¹ or a temporary disruption of cooperation, as sincerity is its fundamental prerequisite (1990). The analysis used textual methods to identify irony. The interpretation of pragmatic aspects was also considered to determine their possible effects on readers, including the text's relationship to the context.

Christian Burgers and Gerard J. Steen (2017) examine the concepts of ironic praise and blame. They describe an essential aspect of irony as the reversal of valence at the conceptual level. While all ironic utterances involve such a reversal, its direction may vary. Some ironic utterances are forms of ironic praise, meaning they carry a positive propositional meaning but a negative intended meaning. Conversely, other ironic utterances are forms of ironic blame, involving a shift from a negative propositional meaning to a positive intended meaning.

Sarcasm, on the other hand, is typically defined as irony directed at a victim or as the most critical form of irony. Slovak media theorist and publicist Emil Kadnár (1985) agrees that sarcasm is the sharpest form of ridicule, but also notes that within journalism, sarcasm is used solely against political or ideological enemies to morally or politically damage them (Kadnár, 1985: 9). A similar method of distinguishing irony and sarcasm is found in the work of Christopher J. Lee and Albert N. Katz (1998). They argue that sarcasm is not simply a form of irony; instead, there is a clear clinical distinction between the two. This difference centres around victimisation: sarcasm consistently targets a specific victim of ridicule, whereas irony is not necessarily directed at a particular individual; it tends to be more general and less focused. The presence of a direct victim also explains why audiences find and react to the same utterance as more offensive (sarcastic ridicule) compared to milder, more playful forms of ridicule that lack a specific target (ironic ridicule). These findings by Lee and Katz support the idea that ridiculing a particular victim is what sets sarcasm apart from irony (Lee & Katz, 1998).

Results from Julia Jorgensen's experiments (1996) on the use of sarcastic irony in everyday discourse showed that “sarcastic irony saves face for the speaker [...], and that such face-saving is needed because direct

¹ “Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged. conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange” (Grice, 1975: 45).

criticism of a trivial mistake makes a speaker appear unfair, thoughtless, insulting, and rude" (Jorgensen, 1996: 627). A different situation arises when it involves a clear criticism of the hearer's grave mistake. In such cases, indirect speech is "expected to save face for the hearer, whose reputation is on the line (a positive face threat) and who owes the speaker reparation (a negative face threat)" (Jorgensen, 1996: 628). One of Jorgensen's findings also includes reports of 'negative feelings' and 'some pre-existing hostility' among speakers towards those they criticise (1996: 628). "For trivial complaints, sarcasm should primarily save face for the speaker, whereas for more serious complaints it should save face for the victim/hearer" (Jorgensen, 1996: 623).

Regarding these theoretical starting points, this study will distinguish between irony and sarcasm as distinct forms of ridicule, with sarcasm representing the most extreme form, typically aimed at a political or ideological opponent. Specifically, the ridicule by commentators Samuel (Samo) Marec and Tomáš Hudák is directed at the Prime Minister and the President of the Slovak Republic, respectively, Robert Fico and Peter Pellegrini. This study aims to assess whether ironic and/or sarcastic ridicule can democratise a polarised society.

Methodology

To explore the irony and sarcasm in Slovak journalistic commentaries, a research sample was assembled comprising three pairs of commentaries—three by Samuel (Samo) Marec and three by Tomáš Hudák. Tomáš Hudák, a screenwriter and stand-up comedian, writes for 'Denník N' (N Daily). Samuel (Samo) Marec, a writer and journalist, publishes in the daily 'Sme' (We Are) and in 'Denník N' (N Daily). Both newspapers are seen as liberal and critical, sometimes even openly hostile, towards Slovakia's current national-conservative populist government. The texts were chosen to identify relevant pairs tied to key moments in Slovak politics during winter, spring, and summer 2025, emphasising the significance of context for both journalistic commentary and irony/sarcasm.

The first, 'winter topic,' is 'The Coup,' announced by Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico in late January 2025. The second, 'spring topic,' named 'Prime Ministers treat,' concerns the Slovak Prime Minister's journey to Moscow to celebrate victory over fascism and the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II. The third, 'summer topic,' named 'President's Sister,' involves the financial support provided by the President of the Slovak Republic, Peter Pellegrini's sister, for his presidential

campaign through the Hlas (Voice) political party, of which he was the leader before becoming President.

Research sample of commentaries:

1) Winter 2025: ‘THE COUP’

- a) Samuel Marec: *Geniálny stratég Fico zasahuje (piše Samo Marec)* [The brilliant strategist Fico steps in (written by Samo Marec)], published on 26 January 2025 (Marec, 2025a).
- b) Tomáš Hudák: *Ako Smer vyhostil zo svojej strany zdravý rozum* [How Smer Expelled Common Sense from Its Party], published on 30 January 2025 (Hudák 2025a).

2) Spring 2025: ‘THE FICO’S TREASON’

- a) Samuel Marec: *Fico bol v Moskve. Máme sa báť?* (piše Samo Marec) [Fico was in Moscow. Should we be concerned? (writes Samo Marec)], published on 11 May 2025 (Marec, 2025b).
- b) Tomáš Hudák: *Fico nás bez opýtania podhodil Rusku* [Fico undercut us to Russia without asking], published on 8 May 2025 (Hudák 2025b).

3) Summer 2025: ‘THE PRESIDENT’S SISTER’

- a) Samuel Marec: *Petrovi Pellegrinimu dlhujeme ospravedlnenie (piše Samo Marec)* [We owe Peter Pellegrini an apology (written by Samo Marec)], published on 10 August 2025 (Marec, 2025c).
- b) Tomáš Hudák: *Ked' žartuje sestra prezidenta, treba spozorniť* [When the president's sister makes jokes, you must be cautious], published on 11 August 2025, (Hudák, 2025c).

Both journalists commented on these three topics and, in all cases, employed similar approaches, motifs, and ironic/sarcastic devices. Consequently, the analysed sample is suitable for an in-depth examination of the linguistic devices used to characterise irony/sarcasm. The texts are marked by a considerable presence of irony, sarcasm, and critical

hyperbole, which serve as the primary rhetorical devices in commenting on political events and politicians' behaviour.

Findings

1. 'THE COUP'

At the start of 2025, during a press conference, Robert Fico informed attendees of a serious coup plot to overthrow the government and seize control of the country (Dlhopolec 2025, Taylor-Braće, Silenská 2025), referring to it as the 'Slovak Maidan.' Both commentators, Samuel (Samo) Marec (2025a) and Tomáš Hudák (2025a), addressed this situation in their commentaries. From a communication perspective, they both concluded with the same point: a critique of the prime minister's perceived foolishness. Hudák wrapped up his piece by returning to the theme of expulsion from the country, writing that the only thing being expelled is common sense, and that R. Fico was the first to experience its absence (Hudák, 2025a). Similarly, Marec ends his article with an ironic piece of advice: "But if you want to establish an autocracy, you must not be foolish."² (Marec, 2025a).

Although the texts differ significantly in length, both commentaries employ a very similar approach and serve comparable functions. Both Hudák and Marec use irony to refer to other members of the government and to their relationships with Ukraine and Russia. Marec constructs his critique around the motif of the "that brilliant strategist," which illustrates irony: he quotes ideas and words from those he criticises and Fico's followers, contrasting them sharply. He also organises the text by beginning three paragraphs with the exact phrase ("that brilliant strategist") to underline his point and intensify the criticism and sarcasm. Conversely, Hudák uses irony to criticise the government as a whole when he writes, "If we were guided solely by his feelings, there would have been a highway to Košice for the last 15 years. Moreover, he has not been involved in politics for at least 11 years."³ (Hudák, 2025a) He also draws a historical parallel – carefully considered – when he states, "If President Beneš had known this

² Original text in Slovak language: „Ak však chcete nastolíť autokraciu, nesmiete byť veľmi hlúpy“ (Marec, 2025a).

³ Original text in Slovak language: „Pretože ak by sme sa riadili len jeho pocitmi, už 15 rokov máme diaľnicu do Košíc a minimálne 11 rokov už on sám nie je v politike“ (Hudák, 2025a).

in February 1948, everything could have been different.”⁴ (Hudák, 2025a). This seemingly minor remark carries considerable depth and significance because the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia seized power in a February 1948 coup. It also hints at Fico's communist past and his connections with the former political regime.

2. ‘PRIME MINISTER'S TREASON’

Both journalists regard R. Fico's trip to Moscow for the May celebrations marking the end of the Second World War as an act of treason, drawing parallels between the prime minister's actions and holding Slovak citizens hostage (Marec. 2025b; Hudák, 2025b). Understandably, given the context, both commentaries are severe, with irony operating more implicitly than explicitly. However, Hudák and Marec both emphasise the significant fact that Robert Fico has entered the history books. Moreover, they both say ‘no’ to ‘yes’: he will be remembered in the history books, just not in the way he expected or hoped. Additionally, within this context, the vital motif of Ukraine also emerges. Hudák wrote: “We will soon discover that the Ukrainians could also be blamed for the expulsion of Cyril and Methodius from Great Moravia and the death of Ľudovít Štúr. While Kaliňák is cynically and inaccurately linking Ukraine to the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 to appeal to his electorate, Fico is deliberately spreading the narrative that Ukraine is to blame for the current military conflict”⁵ (Hudák, 2025b) In his text, he highlights the absurd tendency of some Slovak politicians to turn the aggressor into the victim and vice versa.

Samuel (Samo) Marec (2025b) places Fico's celebrations in Moscow within a broader context. He tries to inspire hope in his readers by depicting Slovak society more positively than we are usually accustomed to these days (particularly from liberal journalists). He argues that most Slovaks are not pro-Russian. Marec uses irony in this commentary, although not when discussing the main topics. He mentions the number of so-called guesthouses⁶ in Slovakia: “In recent weeks, it has become apparent that Slovakia is dotted with an abundance of obscure guesthouses. These are not

⁴ Original text in Slovak language: „Keby toto bol vedel prezident Beneš vo februári 1948, všetko mohlo byť inak“ (Hudák, 2025a).

⁵ Original text in Slovak language: „O chvíľu sa dozvieme, že Ukrajinci mohli ešte aj za vyhnanie Cyrila a Metoda z Veľkej Moravy a smrť Ľudovíta Štúra. Kým Kaliňák spájaním Ukrajiny s inváziou do Československa v roku 1968 hľadá len cynické a historicky mylné výhovorky pre svoje voličské publikum, Fico cielene šíri naratív, že za súčasný vojenský konflikt môže Ukrajina.“ (Hudák, 2025b).

⁶ For more information see e.g., Dömeová & Sabo 2025; Prušová, 2025.

your typical guesthouses, however. They are located in areas that tourists rarely visit and are even camouflaged to the point that casual tourists cannot find them.⁷ (Marec, 2025b), when attempting to explain the arrogance of power present in the current Slovak political scene.

3. ‘PRESIDENT’S SISTER’

While the second pair of analysed commentaries was notably more courteous and less ironic, the two texts concerning Peter Pellegrini’s sister were the most sarcastic and ironic. These texts refer to the situation in which information about the president’s sister’s financial involvement in his campaign and other activities of his former political party, Hlas (Voice), came to light in the summer of 2025. (See e.g., Slovak Media Monitor 2025).

Tomáš Hudák (2025c) mainly draws on pop culture for his ironic and sarcastic notes. He frames the text using the well-known fictional detective Columbo to emphasise the absurdity of the situation, with quotes like “Just one more thing” or “There is something not quite right here.” The beginning of Hudák’s text references a Slovak pop song: “When the band No Name released the song ‘Ty a twoja sestra’ [You and Your Sister] in 2000, they could not have imagined that, twenty-five years later, this hit would gain unexpected relevance and become the unofficial anthem of the presidential office. Employees there have had to hum it often in recent days.”⁸ (Hudák, 2025c) The main idea of the criticism remains consistent for both journalists, as they responded to Eva Pellegrini’s quote about her brother’s integrity (“If everyone were as honest as my brother, the world and this country would be very different places.”⁹, Benedikovičová 2025). Hudák uses this sentence to produce a ‘double-ironic’ effect, questioning whether she was joking. Samuel (Samo) Marec also used the president’s sister’s statement as a second headline, in the form of a question: “What would

⁷ Original text in Slovak language: „V posledných týždňoch vychádza najavo, že Slovensko je pomerne štedro posiate obskúrnymi penziónmi, ktoré žiadnymi penziónmi nie sú, nachádzajú sa tam, kde žiadni turisti neprídu, a ešte sú aj zamaskované tak, aby ich ani tí náhodní turisti neobjavili“ (Marec, 2025b).

⁸ Original text in Slovak language: „Ked‘ v roku 2000 kapela No Name pustila do sveta pesničku Ty a twoja sestra, nemohla ani len tušiť, ako o štvrtstoročie neskôr naberie tento hit zrazu nečakaný aktuálny význam a stane sa neoficiálnou hymnou prezidentskej kancelárie. V posledných dňoch si ho tam zamestnanci museli pohmkávať často“ (Hudák 2025c).

⁹ Original text in Slovak language: „Keby boli všetci takí čestní, ako je môj brat, to by bolo trošku iné na tomto svete a v tejto krajine“ (Benedikovičová, 2025).

Slovakia look like if everyone were as honest as the president?”¹⁰ (Marec, 2025c). Clearly, the rhetorical question employs irony to imply an answer, much as Hudák does in his own writing.

Marec navigates a seemingly intricate web of information to prepare his audience for the absurdity of the situations he discusses. He does this by using sentences that are either very short or very long. Both types are filled with absurd details about Slovak politics. The text employs layered irony to critique political misconduct and public reactions to it. Despite stating that the president broke the law again, Marec sarcastically refers to him as an “honest man”, highlighting the contradiction between his claimed integrity and repeated wrongdoing. The sister’s surprise at being questioned and the public’s surprise at her reaction add to the absurdity, suggesting a lack of accountability or awareness.¹¹ Finally, the statement that “she does the accounting for Hlas [Voice], and no one is surprised by that anymore”¹² (Marec, 2025c) implies that such practices have become normalised, reflecting public cynicism and resignation. Overall, the irony underscores the absurdity and moral fatigue surrounding political scandals. Marec revisits the quote on the president’s honesty when he states: “Yes, times require not only great heroes and deeds, but also great words. As if on cue, the President’s sister has stated that if everyone were as honest as her brother, things would be different in this country. Beautiful words — one can sense the tremendous moral authority of the president, which goes unappreciated. Unfortunately, the opposite is true: if everyone were as honest as her brother, Slovakia would be the same”¹³ (Marec, 2025c).

The final part of Marec’s commentary employs irony to mock the gap between public statements and reality. The praise for the president’s “tremendous moral authority” is clearly sarcastic, as it is claimed to go

¹⁰ Original text in Slovak language: „Ako by vyzeralo Slovensko, keby boli všetci takí čestní ako prezent?“ (Marec, 2025c).

¹¹ “The president’s sister was then asked where he had got the money from. She was surprised by the question, and people were surprised by her surprise.” / Original text in Slovak language: „Prezidentovej sestry sa potom pýtali, odkiaľ má peniaze, ona bola prekvapená, že sa jej na to pýtajú, a ľudia boli zas prekvapení, že je prekvapená“ (Marec, 2025c).

¹² Original text in Slovak language: „Hlasu však robí účtovníctvo a z toho už nie je prekvapený vôbec nikto“ (Marec, 2025c).

¹³ Original text in Slovak language: „Áno, časy si okrem veľkých hrdinov a veľkých činov vyzadujú aj veľké slová a ako na zavolanie prichádza prezidentova sestra, ktorá skonštatovala, že keby boli všetci takí čestní ako jej brat, bolo by to v tejto krajine iné. Krásne slová, človek až cíti, akou ohromnou a nedocenenou morálou autoritou prezident je. Škoda, že platia presne naopak: keby boli všetci takí čestní ako jej brat, vyzeralo by to na Slovensku presne takto“ (Marec, 2025c).

“unappreciated”, despite it likely not existing in the first place. Considering the final line, which refers to a legal technicality — that he did not exceed the campaign limit — the suggestion that the public should apologise to the president is ironic, as if that alone absolves him of broader misconduct. Overall, this irony highlights the hypocrisy and misplaced loyalty involved in defending questionable behaviour with empty rhetoric.

Discussion: Irony or sarcasm in analysed journalistic commentaries?

The brief interpretation of irony in the selected commentaries confirms the insights from Grice (1975) and Nekulil (1990). However, in our context, it is essential to consider it within the framework of mass media communication, especially in the commentary genre. When critical or ridiculing texts rely on statements and information from the criticised/ridiculed party (in our case, politicians), they can be seen as a relatively polite way to inform the public. Using implicit meaning in journalistic commentaries is also an effective method for avoiding offence to the subject of criticism or ridicule. Journalists employ the same ideas in the same form as the criticised/ridiculed individuals, as shown in the research sample. This strategy can be effective and protective: people on the other side of the political spectrum and their followers do not need to be offended by insults; instead, they read the words they themselves use. For instance, in the research sample of analysed commentaries, Samuel (Samo) Marec repeatedly uses the collocation “that brilliant strategist” when referring to the Prime Minister of the Slovak Republic.

The denotation of “that brilliant strategist”, used by both commentators, also exemplifies Christian Burgers and Gerard J. Steen’s conceptualisation of ironic praise and blame (2017). It illustrates how “that brilliant strategist” can be understood in both senses of valence reversal — as ironic praise, where the positive propositional meaning is contradicted by a negative intended meaning, and as ironic blame, which involves shifting from a negative propositional meaning to a positive intended meaning.

Similarly, ironic and sarcastic tools of ridicule used by both commentators align with Jorgensen’s (1996) experiment results. We could conclude that neither Marec nor Hudák attempts to save their own face, as they do not consider their criticism and ridicule of the Prime Minister and President to be merely trivial failures on the part of these politicians. On the contrary, Marec’s and Hudák’s sarcasm offer the opportunity to save the face of their victims and/or the face of the audience, since in the case of direct criticism and ridicule, the authors’ expressions could be too

expressive, vulgar, or aggressive to be present in the legacy media environment.

Moreover, as has been shown, a commentator's intent does not necessarily guarantee the audience's understanding of the message. In this context, we cannot draw definitive conclusions without speculating on how the audience interprets it. Nevertheless, Jorgensen (1996) demonstrated that if the act being criticised or denigrated is considered trivial by the audience, it elicits a different reaction than when it is viewed as an insult. When the audience perceives the victim's ridicule or criticism as related to a minor failure, sarcasm helps to protect the commentator's face in the eyes of readers; however, the more the audience regards the criticised or offending act as serious, the more sarcasm appears to shield either the victim or the audience's perception from potential rudeness and vulgarity. In such cases, if the commentator had used direct criticism and ridicule instead of sarcastic remarks, he might have been criticised by the very audience he was addressing.

Finally, all the analysed commentaries can be considered sarcastic, as they targeted the specific victim (Lee & Katz, 1998), particularly political and ideological opponents (Kadnár, 1985), to ridicule, humiliate, and damage them (Kadnár, 1985; Lee & Katz, 1998).

Conclusion

This comparative pragmatic analysis of commentaries by Samuel (Samo) Marec and Tomáš Hudák uncovers their consistent and intentional use of ridicule as a rhetorical strategy to criticise political figures and events in contemporary Slovakia. Despite their differing tones and structures, both authors utilise irony, sarcasm, and hyperbole to emphasise contradictions, absurdities, and moral inconsistencies in political discourse. Their commentaries showcase how irony and sarcasm can serve as both stylistic devices and potent tools of resistance and social critique, especially in contexts characterised by political tension and public disillusionment. Through pop-cultural references, rhetorical questions, and ironic or sarcastic praise, both journalists effectively challenge official narratives, highlighting the gap between public statements and political reality. The recurring motifs—such as the depiction of the Prime Minister as a “brilliant strategist” or the ironic framing of the President’s “honesty”—underline the authors’ shared communicative aim: to provoke critical reflection and engage readers in questioning the legitimacy of political authority.

Ultimately, the analysis shows that irony and sarcasm in journalistic commentary are not just decorative wordplay or a form of ‘genre play’ with the audience. Instead, they play an essential role in shaping public perception and contributing to the broader debate on accountability and truth in Slovak politics. Whether the ridicule is ironic or sarcastic, whether the author’s intent or the audience’s perception aims to protect the author’s face, the victim’s face, or the audience’s face, or whether the audience interprets the ridicule literally or figuratively, irony and sarcasm can enrich society’s range of opinions. From this perspective, journalistic ridicule has the potential to serve as a vital and constructive tool for democratising the currently polarised Slovak society. Furthermore, as Natalia Knoblock (2016) notes, although irony and sarcasm are indirect modes of communication, they are often more persuasive than direct messages.

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