Not-Russians on TV

Class, Comedy, and the Peculiarities of East European Otherness on 2 Broke Girls

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Abstract • This article discusses portrayals of a Ukrainian and a Polish character on the US sitcom 2 Broke Girls (2011–2017). The pilot episode reveals that the showrunners used stereotypes of Russian characters to establish different national origins for Oleg and Sophie. The show perpetuates offensive stereotypes of Slavic and postsocialist characters to elide differences from Russians but with notable distinctions—stemming from Oleg and Sophie’s economic backgrounds in the struggling postsocialist economies of the 1990s.

American television has produced many comedic characters from the European margins (Greek, Czech, Ukrainian, Polish, Latvian, or from invented but East European-coded lands) who were understood as chaotic but loveable. Crucially, however, they were not Russian. From the late Cold War through the 2010s, Russianness onscreen seems to consistently signal dishonesty, danger, or hopelessness for Western audiences. This suggests that while stereotypes persist, in comedy, at least, showrunners use East Europeans to support, not threaten, American characters, further othering Russianness.

Keywords • American comedy history, economic precarity on television, financial crisis, Polish representation on television, postsocialism on television, Ukrainian representation on television

2 Broke Girls, a US sitcom that ran from 2011 to 2017 and produced 138 episodes over six seasons, established a negative characterization of Russians right from its first episode. In the cold open, Oleg Golishevsky, a Brooklyn diner cook (played by American actor Jonathan Kite), rings the bell to demand an order pick up. Max Black, a waitress and one of the titular Girls (Kat Dennings), grabs the plates and tells him, “Hey, when you get a second? Stop looking at my boobs.” The studio audience roars, Oleg smirks, and Max heads out to the dining room where a patron complains, “The other waitress disappeared. The Russian one. We need horseradish.” The Russian one. We need horseradish.” Max returns to the kitchen calling, “Paulina!” She opens the walk-in fridge to reveal the sounds of sex. Paulina—she has no surname and is never shown—hands Max the horseradish while the shelves shake. Max delivers it and another diner asks, “Where’s my waitress?” just as orgasm sounds emanate from the kitchen.
“She’s coming!” Max announces. Cue the title credits. When we return to the diner, Earl Washington, the septuagenarian cashier (Garrett Morris), tells Max the big news: “The new boss fired that Russian waitress, Paulina. Turns out Chesty Kournikova was Vladimir Putin it out!”1

There is more. The pilot episode is packed with jokes about Russian sexual impropriety, workplace harassment, poor hygiene, low work ethic, and outright criminality: when Paulina is fired and her uniform given to the new waitress, Caroline Channing (the second Broke Girl, played by Beth Behrs), it is covered in semen; Max complains to their boss, Han Lee (Matthew Moy), “Where do you even find these people? The Russian hooker, the one before that was a meth addict. . . .” trailing off to audience laughter; and Han, for his part, bought the diner eight months ago from “the Russian mob.” Max tells Caroline, “The clientele used to be all Eastern Bloc criminals and crack whores, but then [Han] took it over and ruined it.” Finally, a grimy Oleg leers at Max in the kitchen and says in a thick accent, “Hey, sexy woman, you look so beautiful, I forgot how bad your personality is.” He calls the blonde Caroline “Barbie,” as Max tells her, “That’s Oleg. He will hit on you aggressively and relentlessly. He doesn’t realize he looks like that, and I don’t have the heart to tell him.”2

This article does not chronicle six seasons of crude anti-Russian sentiment on a middling sitcom notorious for its offensive stereotypes—including of Earl, a “jive-talking” Black man, and Han, a diminutive Korean immigrant.3 In fact, after the pilot, Russianness is almost never mentioned again. Instead, the presence of other Slavic, postsocialist émigré characters opens a space for a fuller understanding of and sympathy toward East Europeans, but only because they are understood in contrast to absent Russians. Although his accent cues the American audience to believe he is Russian like Paulina, Oleg identifies himself as Ukrainian soon after. Sophie Kachinsky (played by Jennifer Coolidge) joins the ensemble late in season 1 as a full-figured fortysomething Polish woman who moves into the apartment above Max and Caroline and becomes not only a zany side character but the Girls’ business mentor, deepening and complicating the show’s portrayal of East Europeans.4

On the one hand, Oleg and Sophie, who end up in a relationship, elide differences in East European identities for American viewers. Both speak with heavy accents played for laughs and are largely defined by their sex lives, with the recurring jokes that East Europeans have abnormal sex drives, enthusiasm for public sexual display, and fashion taste associated with sex workers. For example, when Max and Caroline first meet Sophie, they assume from her clothing and parties that she is either a sex worker or madam. In fact, as she corrects them with annoyance, she owns her own cleaning company and the young women at her parties work for her as cleaners, all above-board. On the other hand, the show is keen to make its audience aware that Paulina is Russian, Oleg is Ukrainian, and Sophie is Polish. The distinctions matter in that Paulina is never seen, either in that
first episode or afterward, and never speaks except in breathy moans. The shadows of the “Russian hooker” and “Russian mob” prove formative as they establish and maintain an empty, silent space against which Oleg and Sophie—visible, speaking agents in the diner’s multicultural milieu—are positioned. With Russians set up to be the unsympathetic, unspoken Other for understanding Sophie and Oleg, 2 Broke Girls has its proverbial cake and eats it too. The couple are shown to be a comedic whirlwind of extremes: they are the most sexual characters, the most bombastic and inappropriate, the most physically imposing—all traits that can characterize Russians on TV as well. But they are portrayed sympathetically, as financially savvy, hard-working, honest, supportive, generous, and openly loving despite the sexual innuendo. Ultimately, they are trustworthy.

This duality associated with East Europeanness in the show intersects with class in historically meaningful ways. It is openly set in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, as Caroline is the daughter of a Bernie Madoff figure who was imprisoned, before the pilot episode, when authorities uncovered his swindle. Needing to support herself, Caroline takes a job at the diner and enters an Odd Couple type of friendship with Max, who grew up in poverty and continues to barely scrape by in modern America. I find that a second financial crisis hovers over the show: with two of the six ensemble characters openly hailing from Eastern Europe and of an age to have emigrated in the 1990s, the show implicitly draws on context from the struggling post-socialist economies of Ukraine and Poland. Oleg and Sophie’s economic resilience is valorized; they are the proverbial American/capitalist heroes who are pulling themselves up by their bootstraps, something the show implies Max and Caroline must also do to get out of poverty. The comedy genre of 2 Broke Girls allows the show to explore a more complex portrayal of its East European characters in a way that drama or espionage genres do not. But crucially, Oleg and Sophie’s sympathetic qualities are only possible because, given the range of stereotypes about Russians already alive in American televsual discourse, they are not Russian. I argue that while there is much to critique in 2 Broke Girls’ portrayal of East European stereotypes, and while it relies in some ways on older Cold War codes of what East Europeanness looks like for American viewers, its intersecting paths of gender, class, and the permissions of the comedy genre allow it to present Oleg and Sophie as more complex and ultimately positive characters than would have been possible in a strictly “Cold War II” spy genre with Russian characters.

2 Broke Girls

The show is overtly oriented around feminism and class issues. A sitcom that featured two women leads and regularly passed the Bechdel test with flying colors was not an automatic sell in 2011. While the diner setting draws on shows iconic in American sitcom history like Alice (1976–1985,
CBS), and the duo of comedic working-class women mirrors *Laverne and Shirley* (1976–1983, ABC), co-creator and writer Whitney Cummings has said that “the feedback from Fox was, ‘Can it be two broke boys?’” Indeed, the top US sitcom when the show debuted in 2011 was *Two and a Half Men* (2003–2015, CBS), a show known for its conservative gender roles. *2 Broke Girls* aimed to match that male-dominated show’s sexualized language, but with women. Critics at the time panned it, pointing in particular to the prevalence of the word “vagina” in most episodes. As a flawed feminist text, it immediately disrupted sitcom boundaries even in a genre known to encourage such transgressions.

As Cummings and co-creator Michael Patrick King came under fire for the show’s shock humor, including jokes about rape, sexual abuse, forced sex work, drug abuse, and LGBTQ+ stereotypes, they also faced fierce criticism for the racist portrayal of Han and, to a lesser extent, Earl. Critic Tim Goodman characterized Han’s treatment in the premier as “one of the most regressive and stunning racist devices a network has produced in five or more seasons,” adding, “Han’s head-shaking caricature almost lets you forget that there’s also Oleg [Jonathan Kite] the Eastern European cook whose only role is to be lecherous and onerous.” For his part, actor Matthew Moy, who played Han, defended the character and writers. “The comedy on ‘2 Broke Girls’ always comes from a place of love—it’s never mean.” Garrett Morris, the first Black performer on *Saturday Night Live* in 1975, has also defended Earl, claiming he shares several traits with the character.

As I will argue about Oleg and Sophie, while criticisms of the stereotypes these ensemble characters represent are warranted, deeper readings reveal more complexity. In addition to centering two women in their twenties who muddle through together, the show also focuses on class issues and economic precarity. American sitcoms have long featured working-class settings, but this one deliberatly focuses on the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2008. The realism is a stretch: as a well-connected Wharton graduate even without her father’s money, Caroline surely had options beyond working in the diner and squatting with Max in a rent-controlled apartment. The two perky leads, always made up and with fresh blowouts, do not exhibit the kind of weariness of *Roseanne* (1988–1997, ABC), which brought a more realistic view of working-class financial anxiety to American television viewers. Through Caroline, and later Sophie and Oleg, the show also highlights entrepreneurialism as the only way out of poverty: when Caroline finds out Max bakes cupcakes, she sets to saving enough between them to open their own shop. The show’s six seasons chronicle their pursuit of this goal; each episode ends with a dollar amount depending on what they gained or lost that week, complete with a cash register sound effect. It is a conservative view of the working class that avoids leftist politics altogether. As characters who grew up under state socialism, albeit a collapsing version of it, Oleg and Sophie might have been used as mouthpieces for addressing inequality in ways that do not involve more capitalism, but they do not fill this role.
Oleg and Sophie: Stereotypes and Subversions

Oleg Golishevsky, the diner’s grubby cook, appears at first to be a two-dimensional caricature who can only talk about sex. (See Figure 1). Focusing on the show’s first three seasons, his quips encompass four main categories: sexual innuendo or harassment; economic and social resourcefulness; an unexpectedly softer masculinity, especially where Sophie is concerned; and his differentiation of Ukraine from Russia. The first includes more examples than I have space for, as we saw in the pilot episode. He endlessly propositions Max and Caroline, comments on their bodies, and offers advice about sex and relationships. This side of Oleg might best be summed up in an episode from season 2 when he hires Max and Caroline to clean his apartment before Sophie visits. A counter on the wall claims he has slept with 1,685 women; the decorations scream 1980s glam/disco; and he has a life-size sex doll, sex swing, and stuffed full-size goat in one corner.11

Oleg also proves himself to be resourceful, and to both economically and socially help himself and his friends whenever possible, including Max and Caroline. When Max is heartbroken, Oleg tells her, “I would like to offer myself for rebound sex. Or if not, I can just beat the crap out of him.”12 After Sophie tells him he lacks ambition, he scrapes together the money to buy a limousine and opens a chauffeuring business. On one of the many occasions
that Max and Caroline are actively looking for extra work, Oleg tells them he can offer them a spot on a twin bed with two other girls and a camera, for $4.99 a minute. In a St. Patrick’s Day episode, Oleg sets off for the New York City parade with cases of “Kiss Me, I’m Irish” T-shirts to sell (with an arrow pointing toward his crotch, of course). He always has a cousin who knows a guy who can help with something Max and Caroline need, and he always has access to money somehow and is happy to loan or even give it to them. (They always decline, wary of his insistence of no-strings.)

For all his hegemonic masculinized bravado as a sexual conqueror, Oleg demonstrates security in his own masculinity and even feminism, of sorts. After he begins dating Sophie, who lives above Max and Caroline, they regularly see him in the hallway wearing her ultra-feminine dressing gown. As Max and Caroline try to convince Han not to raise the price of tampons in the diner, the men’s opinions are contrasted: Earl declares that that is business best left to women; Han refuses to speak the word; but Oleg is an active ally. “Just say it: tampon, tampon, tampon,” he calls from the kitchen. “What’s the big deal? In Ukraine, there are pop songs about it.”

Oleg does not talk about Ukraine as often as Sophie mentions Poland, but he does delineate it as a separate space from Russia or the former USSR. A blue and yellow Ukrainian flag is clearly visible in the diner kitchen, and he references harsh living conditions. When the diner is used as a setting for a television show, Oleg tells Max, “I was on Ukraine’s version of Big Brother once . . . better known as just living in Ukraine.” Another time, Oleg offers to get rid of a man bothering Max and Caroline: “I can put some ground glass in his Salisbury steak. It’s called a Ukrainian divorce.” How consciously the showrunners made these choices remains unclear. Actor Jonathan Kite has said that the role was originally written as “a forty-five-year-old bald Russian,” but the writers changed the character to be Ukrainian when they realized “Ukrainian rhymes with so much stuff.” Other times, Oleg talks about deliberately misleading people who assume he is Russian. Overhearing Max and Caroline talking about a married man, Oleg tells them knowingly, “He’s not leaving his wife for you. It’s just a thing you say to pretty women to get them into bed. Like, ‘I’m a Russian prince,’ or ‘That was a good story.’” Or, in a cab to the St. Patrick’s Day parade with his T-shirts, Oleg fights with the driver, who turns out to be Russian and chastises him for selling out the car window. “That’s illegal! You need a permit!” “Just drive, Grandma,” Oleg retorts. “I can’t believe you call yourself Russian.” The driver is livid. “You say that again, and I’ll cut your tongue out!” Oleg matches his fury: “Oh, now you’re gonna cut out my tongue? Why do you want to punish all the women in the Tri-state area?!” The show both elides distinctions between Ukraine and Russia, such as recalling a surveillance state under socialism, and highlights them, like declaring Oleg a lover not a fighter vis-à-vis the cab driver.

Other characters do not always differentiate between Oleg or Sophie and Russianness. After borrowing a fur coat from Oleg, Caroline describes
it to Max as a “toxic Russian cologne-soaked rent-a-fur.” Earl’s son visits the diner and overhears Oleg’s accent. “You sound Russian,” he says. “That’s funny because you’re not rushin’ to make my soup. No, no, no. I’m kidding there, man. I get it. You’re just too busy back there not putting on deodorant.” Kite made the case in an interview for the deliberately non-Russian representation of East Europeans on the show. “We’ve seen a lot of Russians, but it’s cool that Jennifer Coolidge is Polish, and I’m Ukrainian. . . . We haven’t really seen that type.” The interviewer interrupts: “We haven’t really seen that represented.” Kite nods. “That’s right, that’s right.”

Throughout the show, however, Oleg remains the less developed character in comparison to Sophie. Like Oleg, Sophie’s character both supports stereotypes of East Europeans and subverts them. We can consider three main categories for her, again focusing on the first three seasons: sexual assertiveness; financial savvy; and her Polish identity. (See Figure 2.) Scholar Sonia Caputa has chronicled examples of the first category in demonstrating how Polish American women have been sexualized onscreen. She writes that Sophie is “a true Polish American sex bomb, always lush and willing. She constantly tries to emphasize her untamed sexuality by wearing mini-skirts and tight dresses that barely cover her body and huge breasts.” Her sexual appetite seems endless, and she regularly tells Max and Caroline about new sexual partners. She rejects Oleg at first but eventually allows

Figure 2. Left-right: Caroline (Beth Behrs), Max (Kat Dennings), and Sophie (Jennifer Coolidge), in Sophie’s apartment.
him to get close to her, as Caroline discovers when she comes home in the middle of the night from her own tryst to find Oleg sneaking out of Sophie’s apartment. Confronted the next day at the diner, Sophie panics. “No, it wasn’t sex! Just hand stuff. Nothing above the waist. I’m a lady!”

To only look at her sexualization, however, is to miss a more central characteristic: Sophie is, above all, an entrepreneur who has worked her way up from poverty. She owns her own thriving cleaning company and spends money at will, including investing twenty thousand dollars in Max and Caroline’s first cupcake shop. She is openly disdainful of the bourgeois Caroline and intimates a strong bond with Max that transcends generation or nationality: she identifies with Max as a hardworking woman trying to make ends meet, although she does sometimes include Max in her chastising. In one episode she accuses them of always waiting passively for their big break, like Americans do.

The show also makes it clear that Sophie could not have become a successful businesswoman in communist Poland; it was only since then, and in America, that she began to make money. Scholars have shown how the postsocialist transitions in Eastern Europe proved particularly devastating to women, reducing them from near-parity in the workforce to more than half of unemployed workers in the 1990s, depending on the country. Sophie’s “new money” aesthetic is contrasted to the old money of Manhattan, including Caroline’s circles. When Sophie treats Max and Caroline to a high-end shopping spree, she flashes wads of cash at the judgmental shop assistants. During the ensuing montage that openly references the film *Pretty Woman*, Sophie, wearing a bright, tacky outfit asks for champagne, and Oleg, in a formal uniform—maybe from his new chauffeur business—brings them bags of fast food, ignoring glares from the assistants. Other characters interpret Sophie’s lack of taste as proof that she is financially corrupt or at least inept: she installs a chandelier in the cupcake shop only to have Caroline insult it as overly gaudy (“Is this the Polish version of home invasion—they break in and leave something tacky?”); she deducts five thousand dollars on her tax returns for mascara for her employees (“Just because you’re scrubbing toilets doesn’t mean your eyes can’t pop!”); and she disrupts the quiet at an elite spa by loudly demanding fancy flavored water. But Sophie repeatedly proves that while she might dress in bright colors and enjoy sex, she is a smart, legitimate businesswoman who works tirelessly. Moreover, she openly sponsors young women from Poland to come to the United States to work for her cleaning company. Max and Caroline joke that this is a front for sex work, but Sophie consistently proves that it is not. Relying on kinship networks for labor support instead of collapsed government benefits was also a hallmark of women’s economic transition in 1990s Eastern Europe.

Sophie talks about Poland much more than Oleg mentions Ukraine; it becomes a central part of her character. The jokes confuse elements of her past, though: some reference the shortages of life under communism and
others the superstitions of an ancestral village; it is not always clear that the showrunners know the difference. It all becomes a mythical past version of Eastern Europe. After their break-up, Sophie enters the diner and Oleg asks whether she “misses the sex.” She gazes wistfully. “I miss summers in Minsk. I miss smoking in hospitals. But I don’t miss the sex.”31 (Minsk, of course, is in Belarus, and would not have been a popular vacation destination.) Another time, contradicting the real-world achievements of health care under socialism, she says she was a nurse in Poland. “You’ve heard of Doctors without Borders? Well, we were nurses without credentials.”32 Using hardship in Poland to frame her rocky relationship with Oleg, Sophie tells Caroline, “Where I come from, you never throw anything away.”33 When she visits Max’s boyfriend in his tiny apartment and he advises taking her heels off so as not to hit her head, she’s incredulous. “Take my heels off? Communist Russia couldn’t get me to take my heels off!”34 She also peppers her speech with village anecdotes. When Caroline worries about being robbed at home, Sophie tells her, “You know, in Poland, when the Cossacks came, we would boil water and throw it in their faces and then make soup.”35 She also plays up her rural background against the backdrop of the city; when Caroline tries to bond with her by saying she loved visiting Warsaw, Sophie sneers, “I hate it. Rats and pimps.”36 But the show can also be curiously accurate about these characters’ heritage: Oleg consoles Sophie with homemade kapusniak when she gets bad (financial) news from Poland, for example, a real cabbage soup with both Ukrainian and Polish versions.37

Finally, Sophie’s speech also regularly contains antisemitic and anti-Roma sentiments, playing into a stereotype of East European intolerance that is both harmful and based in historical events, from the Nazi occupation as well as earlier centuries. When Sophie offers to buy Max and Caroline new dresses, they suggest their neighborhood shop: “A consignment store?” Sophie complains. “Come on, what are we, Gypsies?”38 When they ask for a loan, Sophie says, “Sorry, girls. I have two rules in life: never drink from the same well as a Gypsy, and never lend money to friends.”39 In a particularly dark example, Caroline asks if Sophie believes in psychics. “No, that’s all fake. You know, I knew a family of Gypsy psychics who couldn’t even predict that they would all die in a barn fire.”40 Referring to a meowing cat outside their building one night, Sophie tells Max and Caroline, “Be careful, a cat is not always a cat. In Poland, we believe if you die outside, you’re reincarnated as a cat. . . . So never let a cat in, because it’s just a person that’s been reincarnated, and it will bring in all the bad [indistinct, but sounds like ‘Jews’].” Caroline: “I think you mean ‘juju’.” Sophie gives her a look. “Do I?”41 Sophie’s characterization here instantly brings to mind a contemporaneous persona, comedian Sacha Baron Cohen’s East European/post-Soviet hybrid character, Borat. In shocking American audiences with Borat’s open antisemitism, Baron Cohen drew attention to Eastern Europe’s long history of anti-Jewish violence while also highlighting how easily many Americans agreed with Borat’s remarks when interacting with him.42
Kite rightly points out that Oleg and Sophie provide visibility to rarely seen representations of Ukrainian and Polish characters on American television. They cannot escape an implicit comparison with Russianness, though; at different times, they both embody broader stereotypes of Slavic postsocialist folks and subvert them, finding their own voices as not-Russian.

**Antecedents and Contemporaries**

Oleg and Sophie might be products of the postsocialist economic landscape, but their antecedents in American comedy, especially for Oleg’s East European masculinity, go further back. For example, the iconic comedian and performance artist Andy Kaufman developed an alter ego onstage, beginning in 1974, who was simply called “Foreign Man.” Kaufman never specified where Foreign Man was from, but coded into the performance were challenges to hegemonic American masculinity that were, one could argue, informed by Cold War binaries. Foreign Man was high-voiced and meek, spoke with a heavy accent and seemed shy, uncomfortable, even dim-witted and confused at times. Many volumes have been produced in cultural studies analyzing Kaufman’s comedy. For my purposes, Foreign Man offers a certain antecedent of othered Eastern/Southern European masculinity in American television comedy. Kaufman sometimes called his home “Caspian,” a fictional island either in the Caspian or Baltic Seas and invented a full alt-European language for him. He read as white, but that privilege intersected with a troubling gender presentation. To me, part of the joke was to present the audience with a tall, well-dressed white man onstage but to disenfranchise him, playing up his timidity and borderline incompetence. That clash created the laughter. His nationality did not need to be announced, in that sense: Cold War American culture had already created a space for him on the margins of Europeanness.

Sitcoms openly and implicitly drawing from Foreign Man followed. Kaufman extended that character into Latka Gravas for *Taxi* (1978–1983, ABC and NBC), a show about a dispatch garage. Fellow American comedian Carol Kane played Latka’s wife, Simka, who spoke with a matching unrecognizable accent and also hailed from Latka’s mystery Caspian/Baltic country. Latka and Simka were perhaps the original Oleg and Sophie, a couple from the fringes of Europe who could understand only each other and whose hijinks confounded their American coworkers. The sitcom *Perfect Strangers* (1986–1993, ABC) also surely drew on Foreign Man and Latka in creating one of the most recognizable characters of that era, Balki Bartokomous (Bronson Pinchot). Balki’s place of origin was named but still invented: Mypos, an imaginary Greek island where sheep reigned and peasant traditions informed Balki’s naïve but kind-hearted view of the world. He came to Chicago to live with his unsuspecting distant cousin, who learned from Balki’s childlike optimism to see the world with less cynical eyes. Both
Foreign Man/Latka and Balki drew not on communist Eastern Europe for comedy but on Greece—or, rather, a stereotyped version of contemporary Greece that has been represented in American popular culture as either a hedonistic getaway for the rich and famous or, as with Balki, a peasant backwater.\textsuperscript{46}

An episode of a more recent show that spoofed \textit{Perfect Strangers}, however, demonstrates that the Balki character does not work if he is Russian. \textit{The Goldbergs} (2013–2023, ABC), created by television and film producer Adam F. Goldberg, is loosely based on his upbringing in a Jewish family in suburban Philadelphia in the 1980s. Young Adam’s grandfather, Albert “Pops” Solomon, played by veteran actor George Segal, often referenced the family’s heritage in “the old country”—Russia. In an episode called “Our Perfect Strangers,” Pops tells the three teenage Goldberg children that their distant cousin Gleb (Joey Slotnick) is coming to visit from Russia.

“Wait, he’s Russian?” Adam’s brother Barry asks, narrowing his eyes at Pops. “That means he’s been bred since birth in a KGB lab to destroy our wonderful democracy.” “He’s not a spy, Barry,” Pops replies. “He comes from a tiny village that barely has running water.” After watching Balki’s antics on an episode of \textit{Perfect Strangers} in the alt-1980s timeline of \textit{The Goldbergs}, the scheming kids get the idea to haze the middle-aged, dreary Gleb by preying on his ignorance of America to make him do their bidding. After having him buy them beer, the kids show him movies and a Yakov Smirnoff comedy show. Finally, Gleb puts his foot down and complains to Pops in a thick accent. “First they show me \textit{Rocky IV}, then they force me to listen to man who make fun of horrors of the past. . . . Is no humor! Albert, your children’s children are people of garbage.” Pops agrees, lamenting that his new world grandchildren have become cruel, spoiled Americans.\textsuperscript{47} The kids, meanwhile, learn nothing from this interaction, unlike Balki’s cousin on the original show. Gleb turns out to be more pessimistic than untrustworthy, in terms of common traits of Russian characters; perhaps, as a Soviet Jew in this alt-1980s universe, the showrunners imagined more hardship for him. Still, he tells on the kids and instructs Pops to punish them. This episode highlights how the loveable “Balki”—a stand-in for everything zany about cousins from the underprivileged European fringes—loses all charm and humor if he is Russian.

Another path from the 1970s provides a more lascivious East European masculinity onscreen that is more Oleg-like than the mild-mannered Greek/Caspian/Baltic imagined lands: original \textit{Saturday Night Live} performers Steve Martin and Dan Aykroyd’s portrayal of the “Wild and Crazy Guys,” aka the two Czech brothers. With exaggerated accents and loud patterned shirts open to the waist, the pair declared that they had come to America to find “swinging foxes.” (In a meta connection to \textit{2 Broke Girls}, Garrett Morris appeared with the pair in one famous 1978 sketch to offer dating advice.)\textsuperscript{48} Martin’s 1978 live comedy album included a joke, in his exaggerated Czech-brothers accent, about placing tuna fish sandwiches under each arm
to attain his desired masculine odor. Oleg’s hygiene is similarly a regular joke on *2 Broke Girls*, and his fashion aesthetic is reminiscent of the Czech brothers. Moreover, their cringeworthy sexual innuendo masked genuine chivalry and romantic success, as does Oleg’s. Morris tried to break it to the brothers in that 1978 sketch that the women who promised to meet them were not coming, only for the doorbell to ring.

One can find more examples of East European characters with adjacent Russianness in sitcoms from the 1990s through to today. A 1993 *Seinfeld* episode featured the Latvian Orthodox Church and gave US pop culture the Russian-sounding but nonsense term *kavorka*, which a priest in the show claimed was Latvian for “the lure of the animal.” *Brooklyn 99* (2013–2021, NBC) included a running joke about the always-incorrect pronunciation of the Latvian name “Nikolaj.” On *Jane the Virgin* (2014–2019, the CW), a show heralded at the time for its complex portrayal of a women-led Latina family in Miami, Jane’s chief rival is Petra, a Czech émigré (played by Israeli actress Yael Grobglas). Petra remembers her childhood as a violin prodigy forced to play for coins on the streets of Prague—a hardship based in reality for many in Eastern Europe and Russia after the end of communism, but not nearly as common by 2009 in the show’s timeline. She escaped an abusive relationship with a Czech thug, and Grobglas also portrays Petra’s scheming, long-lost twin sister, Anežka. The show openly indulges in and mocks soap opera/telenovela tropes like this, but using East European characters as the foils to Jane’s family, the moral center, draws on older Cold War motifs. Further, Petra, for all her scheming in the first few seasons, eventually becomes Jane’s ally and co-parent; her days on the streets of Prague taught her about not only grift but also resilience, trust, and the importance of family. That kind of redemption arc might not have been possible with a Russian character.

Perhaps the most salient final comparison comes from the sitcom *New Girl* (2011–2018, Fox), a contemporary of *2 Broke Girls*. It chronicles the hijinks of a group of twentysomething roommates when an offbeat teacher, Jess (Zooey Deschanel) moves in with three “bros.” An ongoing side story features the men’s attempts to impress Jess’ model friends, including the Russian Nadia (Rebecca Ballantine Reid). Nadia is pure chaos, with a heavily inflected Russian accent and diction. Her lines are mainly shockingly anti-Semitic comments. (After one such remark, her American housemate chastises her. “Nadia! *American* manners!” but Nadia’s correction is not much better.) When one of Jess’ roommates takes Nadia to dinner and asks what she likes about America, she gives an inscrutable list: “I like salad bar. I like *Despicable Me*. *Tosh 2.0*. I like Connect Four, freedom of speech, David Fincher, sidewalk. I like 1-800-SLIM, ‘your mama’ jokes, Wilmer Valderrama, strawberry, Leon J. Panetta. Ice skating for fun, not to save life.” The exchange ends with the pair of them in a screaming match about the pronunciation of “Mickey Mouse.” No matter how many times she says it, he cannot understand her. Later in their date, her bedroom antics are so extreme that
she breaks his penis.52 Although played for laughs, it is also made clear that Nadia as a Russian is unknowable, unteachable, and even dangerous.

Conclusion

Critics have rightly pointed to the harmful stereotypes that Oleg and Sophie embody. They exhibit an American vision of Eastern Europe that in many ways has changed little from the Cold War and can include Russians: as overly sexualized, loud, tacky, unhygienic, and suffering the effects of both life under communism and in unnamed backward villages. Sophie in particular engages in the kind of casual antisemitism and anti-Roma talk that comedian Sacha Baron Cohen’s Borat brought to the American mainstream in 2006—both perpetuating and critiquing that stereotype of East Europeans. Postsocialist Russia and Eastern Europe on American television is often a hodgepodge of stereotypes where distinct places and cultures merge into a vaguely knowable Other.

But in other ways, 2 Broke Girls demonstrates a peculiar savvy in American sitcoms to use characteristics of East Europeaness—both real and imagined—to reinforce ongoing negative views of Russianess. It carries over from Cold War portrayals in American comedy of the 1970s and 1980s, but the chaos of the postsocialist economic and social transitions in the 1990s also seems to inform sitcoms like 2 Broke Girls. Oleg, Sophie, and the vanquished Russians from the pilot are affected; after all, the “Russian hooker” and “Russian mob” are post-Soviet, not Cold War-era, stereotypes. Eastern Europe need not always be understood in comparison with Russia, of course, but for American audiences conditioned by decades of Cold War culture, the space that Paulina opens and holds in the show’s pilot proves formative. Oleg and Sophie become sympathetic and trustworthy in comparison.

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Notes

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1. 2 Broke Girls, season 1, episode 1, “Pilot,” dir. James Burrows, 19 September 2011. Paulina’s partner remains unnamed. The show was filmed in front of a
live studio audience that provided the audible laughter, although it was likely augmented with a laugh track. See Jasmin Humburg, Television and Precarity: Naturalist Narratives of Poor America (Berlin: J.B. Metzler, 2020), 279.


43. In terms of 1970s comedy by Russians or East Europeans, one should also consider Yakov Smirnoff, a comedian from the USSR who emigrated to the United States in 1977 and continued his stand-up comedy career by poking fun at life under communism and the excesses of American capitalism. Smirnoff warrants further analysis than he has received in cultural studies.

44. For example, see Bill Zehme, *Lost in the Funhouse: The Life and Mind of Andy Kaufman* (New York: Delacorte, 1999).

45. See *Late Night with David Letterman*, interview with Carol Kane, 22 November 1982, originally aired on NBC, accessed via YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PqZdjhKLV5U.


52. *New Girl*, season 1, episode 22, “Tomatoes,” dir. Michael Spiller, 24 April 2012. Panetta’s middle initial is actually “E”; it is not clear whether this mistake is meaningful.