

### **Editors' Introduction to the *Folklorica* Special Issue “Vernacular Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic”**

The exponential spread of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) through the Hubei province of China in December of 2019 had the world watching and fearing a repeat of the 2002-2004 pandemic of its predecessor, the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 1 (SARS-CoV). Those fears were realized on 30 January 2020 when 7,818 cases across 19 countries prompted the World Health Organization to declare a public health emergency of international concern. That status was upgraded to a global pandemic on 11 March [WHO 2020] due to rising cases in Iran, Japan, South Korea, and particularly in Italy, the primary entry point of the virus into Europe. A newly discovered zoonotic virus, SARS-CoV-2 is closely related to the first SARS Coronavirus as well as to a number of viruses found in bats and pangolins [Sun et al. 2020]; it is believed to have passed to humans through the processing of bats for traditional Chinese medicine. The initial virus outbreak has been tentatively traced to a wet market in the city of Wuhan, although contact tracing in search of an index case, or patient zero, has thrown this source into question [Aredy 2020. See also Bodner et al. 2021: 32-34, 185-86], and scientific investigation has not ruled-out the possibility that the virus escaped from the Wuhan Institute of Virology [Kramer 2021].

As the virus spread, nations across the globe scrambled to prepare their medical systems for a wave of infection based on highly variable projection models. Rushed attempts to obtain and distribute necessary supplies and to establish channels of national and international communication coincided with an assortment of lockdown measures implemented in highly divergent fashions and with varying timelines. Anthropologist Jeremy Walton [2020] has compared this jarring institution of state power to Foucault's well-known description of the disciplinary projects introduced as anti-plague measures in early modern France [Foucault 1995: 195-98]. Walton stresses how surveillance, curtailment of movement, and the coercive power of government bodies have been rapidly imposed in the pandemic upon a wide swathe of society that has been heretofore largely or completely sheltered from these aspects of state power. The adjustments precipitated by this have been neither simple, nor heterogeneous.

A year and a half out from the initial spread of the disease, the disruptive realities of the pandemic have become, for many of us, routinized. While commentators in the earliest months were quick to draw parallels between COVID-19 and past epidemics (the Swine Flu, SARS, the 1918 Flu, or even the Black Death), the true response to this pandemic has been historic in its own right. As Yuval Noah Harari [2021] writes in his recap of a year with COVID, modern science, digital infrastructure, and global linkages have turned what were once uncontrollable forces of nature into manageable challenges. Global connections have allowed us to monitor chains of infection and trace the spread of the virus



*Image 1. A matrioshka doll wearing a face mask and surrounded by COVID-19 germs. Painted by Tamara Koryova in a factory in Semenov, Russia [Euronews 2020]*

like none before, while digital technologies have allowed large sections of society to work from home, assuaging some of the prohibitive economic costs of extended lockdowns. That same digital infrastructure has also provided scientists and doctors throughout the world the ability to share information in real-time, leading to fast-tracked sequencing of the virus and production of vaccines. With a highly uneven roll-out of COVID-19 vaccines and new strains of the virus being discovered, we have yet to reach a clear certainty of where the future of the pandemic will lead. The benefits of modern technology, though, have allowed for a response that has no parallel in human history, suggesting a prompt exit from pandemic conditions in the near future.

Yet, as Einstein once noted, our technology often outpaces our humanity. Indeed, it has been our cultural and specific legacies that have most resembled past manifestations in other epidemics and have shown both their best and worst sides in the responses to this pandemic. Global flows of wealth have created a hierarchy of nations based on access to life-saving medical supplies and technologies, making some countries' pandemic experience much more similar to past plagues. Political leaders—drawn between sometimes opposing national and global concerns and presented with a rapidly evolving understanding of the virus—have had to shoulder serious burdens through the pandemic and many deadly mistakes have been made navigating those positions. Digital surveillance, which allowed for precise and controlled monitoring of disease vectors, has also set some very dangerous precedents regarding government overreach into

personal privacy and data collection on citizen populations. The hope that currently unfolding vaccination regimens will prove successful is also bringing with it the perceived threat of “vaccine passports” and other digital and bureaucratic tracking technologies. While such policies may positively curtail viral spread, they may also simultaneously divide societies in harmful ways and infringe on constitutional and human rights.

Among regular citizens, discrepancies in our work forces between those who could and could not make the move to online functioning and work from home has laid bare clear disparities in socio-economic class. It has also produced a cadre of front-line workers whose proximity to heightened danger has been largely compulsory. Strict capacity and masking rules, as well as imposed closures of small and large businesses that rely on in-person attendance (arts venues, cinemas, and restaurants to name a few), will pose an economic toll that we have not yet fully grasped and is already revealing still greater economic disparities [Davis 2020]. At the very outset of the pandemic, too, we saw the fear of broken supply chains leading to panic buying of supplies in many countries, which created the very shortages that were, in most cases, never a credible threat.

In this environment of uncertainty and stress, our unique position as the story-telling species has led to an explosion of expressive culture and artistic production, the vast majority of which has been digitally mediated. It has, in fact, been difficult to avoid both positive and pernicious folklore throughout the pandemic. Ritualized communal cheers have been orchestrated to support medical practitioners [Booth et al. 2020], who have responded with TikTok videos of elaborate dance routines [Jennings 2020]. Pandemic jokes, songs, memes, and anecdotes have been shared across numerous online networks [see Images 1, 2, 3, and 4], and folk genres such as sea shanties have seen modern-day revivals in viral online form [Smyth 2021]. As people receded into their homes and sheltered in place, many expanded their horizons for digital connection or used the Internet to project vernacular messages of support to the world (an overview of the trajectory of English-language folklore over the first months of the pandemic can be found in Pennesi [2021]).

There has been an antagonistic side to pandemic folklore too. Widespread distribution of conspiracy theories and rumors across social media platforms has disseminated misinformation, fear, and mistrust regarding government measure, scientific findings, medical practices and the nature of the coronavirus itself. This material has also spawned an expansive proliferation of critical and often hostile ostensive practices—the ways in which people act out legend narratives or rumors in real life [see Fine and Ellis 2010: 112]. Protests against lockdowns, masking rules, and other facets of government pandemic responses have been organized in numerous cities across the globe, while active campaigns to “reveal the pandemic as a fallacy” (for instance, the #filmyourhospital movement [Bodner et al. 2021: 57]) have obstructed the functioning of medical systems and imperiled doctors and nurses. Various ethnic and racial groups, especially Asians, perceived to have played a disproportionate role in the spread of the virus, have the victims of racist

verbal and physical attacks [Human Rights Watch 2020]. Politicians and public figures like Bill Gates [Greenspan 2021] have had elaborate webs of conspiracy

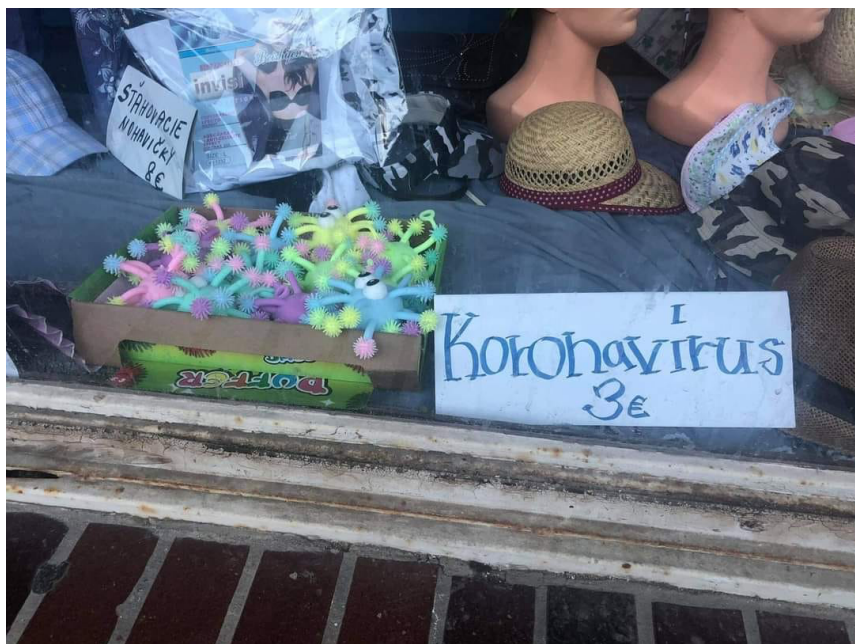


Image 2. Coronaviruses for sale in a Slovakian shop window [Radio 101 2020]

theory woven around their intentions and actions in responding to the pandemic. Everywhere, government measures for mitigating the spread of the virus have been met with suspicion and distrust, and the ever-present messaging of anti-vaccination proponents has been taken to their bullhorns, finding a new and receptive audience.

From the outset of the pandemic, various commentators began drawing parallels between folk responses to this and past epidemics [Foss 2020; Klein 2020]. Echoes in contemporary lockdown conditions of the plague circumstances which prompted the 100 tales in Boccaccio's *Decameron* became a clichéd topic of academic focus in popular print [CBC 2020; Findlen 2020; Kungel 2020; Marcus 2020; Spicer 2020] and even prompted *The New York Times* to produce a short-story collection called The Decameron Project [New York Times 2020]. But it has fallen to folklorists to engage systematically and comprehensively with the vernacular productions that have both responded to and shaped the character and course of this pandemic. We are engaged in this work even as our normal research toolbox has been upended, and many have been forced to navigate the world of exclusively online research [OHA 2020]. The intrinsic role that folklore serves in

alleviating stress and offering individual and communal vantages to claim a sense of control in times of uncertainty means that its production and dissemination is exponentially increased in conditions like the current pandemic. As Maribel Alvarez [2020] has so succinctly stated “folklorists are the archivists of the art of coping.” Now, more than ever, it has become critical for folklorists to take part in the public and professional dialogues surrounding vernacular production and cultural movements vis-à-vis the pandemic, and we have had our hands full.

At the time of this writing (in the early months of 2021) there have already been numerous online and print efforts to document this folklore in its nascence,



*Image 3. Romanian cucii mummified distributing metaphorical vaccines in Brănești, Ilfov County [Cucii din Branesti 2021]*

to capture some essence of the scope and form of these manifestations, to trace the traditional aspects that have been re-packaged, re-invigorated, or completely remade in this novel pandemic, and to respond to the function and importance of these expressions. A series of university departments, institutes, and archives, as well as folklore associations and centers, have established collection projects to gather submissions of vernacular responses to the pandemic or to present academic analyses of such collected material. These include the University of

Aberdeen's Elphinstone Institute Archive's "Lockdown Lore Collection

Project" [University of Aberdeen 2020], Cork Folklore Project's "Chronicles of COVID-19" [Cork Folklore Project 2021], The Digital Archives of Latvian Folklore's "Diaries in the Time of Pandemic 2020-2021" [Garamantas 2020], and

UNESCO's "Call for Submissions about Experiences Related to Intangible Cultural Heritage during the Pandemic" [UNESCO 2020]. Sites aimed at critical professional analysis, collection and tracking of pandemic folklore have also been created, including the *Encyclopedia of Coronavirus Rumors and Fakes* created by The Laboratory for Theoretical Folkloristics at The Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration's [RPANEP 2020. See Kononenko's report in this issue].

Numerous folklorists have been active in public outreach during the pandemic, penning articles for various online and print publications aimed at non-academic audiences. Examples of these have been too numerous to cite [see, for example, Bock 2020; Deutsch 2020]. However, special attention should be drawn to the range of materials disseminated by long-time anti-vaxx, conspiracy theory, and rumor scholar Andrea Kitta [East Carolina University 2020; Kitta 2020; Thurston 2019], whose latest book, *The Kiss of Death: Contamination, Contagion, and Folklore* [2019], was published at a surprisingly opportune moment. This serendipity allowed for a normal book publicity plan to serve as an opportunity for critical public outreach. Though her book is not focused directly on COVID-19, it deals with a number of topics regarding social responses to disease that have become exceedingly salient in the pandemic. Given current circumstances, the book's author and publisher, Utah State University Press, have offered a digital version of the text for free download on the press' website for a limited time [UPC/USUP 2020]. Eliot Borenstein's *The Plots Against Russia: Conspiracy and Fantasy after Socialism* [2019] and two other texts spearheaded by Anastasiya Astapova, *Conspiracy Theories in Eastern Europe: Tropes and Trends* [Astapova et al. 2021a] and *Conspiracy Theories and the Nordic Countries* [Astapova et al. 2021b], also center on conspiracy theories and feature a regional focus of particular interest to *Folklorica's* readers. All three of these books provide an impressive breadth of analysis regarding past and current conspiracy thinking in Eastern and Northern Europe. These volumes, too, went to press before COVID-19's arrival, but much of the vernacular background against which coronavirus lore is currently being integrated in Europe is explored by the books' authors.

Finally, a series of important folklore publications that emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic itself have already begun to hit presses or wend their way through peer review. Most notable to date has been a series of works specifically targeting the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories through, predominantly, online channels of social media. The *Misinformation Review* at Harvard's Kennedy School published a special issue on the pandemic in the summer of 2020 [McGinty and Gyenes 2020], offering a series of articles tracing the development of a diverse range of phenomena surrounding the spread of conspiracy theories and online misinformation in the pandemic. Topics covered include the psychology that informs most online sharing and the unique role served by news and social media in spreading misinformation about COVID-19. Elsewhere, Timothy Tangherlini and his computational folkloristics team at University of California, Berkeley have continued their work into the generative

modeling of contemporary legends, conspiracy theories and other lore during the pandemic. They have produced some exceptional recent works that explore the transmission patterns and structural make-up of legends, conspiracy theories, and other pandemic, and pre-pandemic lore [Tangherlini et al. 2020; Tangherlini and Roychowdhury 2020].



Image 4. “Healthy and Happy Easter” by Polish cartoonist Waldemar Rukść. This cartoon of the Easter spirit driving away COVID-19 circulated widely on Eastern European Facebook pages in Spring 2021. [Rukść 2021]

The final months of 2020 brought us *Covid-19 Conspiracy Theories: QAnon, 5G, the New World Order and Other Viral Ideas*, a book penned by a team of scholars including folklorists Jon Bodner, Wendy Welch, and Ian Brodie [Bodner et al. 2021]. From QAnon and Pizzagate to 5G towers and the political art of Ben Garrison, the book provides an exhaustive explanation of the way that pandemic lore has settled into, built upon, and developed existing North American vernacular conspiracy culture. The book will stand as a hallmark folklore text of this pandemic. More recently, the Bulgarian Academy of Science has produced an edited volume, *Етнология и епидемии Социокултурни измерения на пандемията от COVID-19* [Ethnology and Epidemics: Sociocultural Dimensions of the COVID-19 Pandemic] [Baeva and Ilieva 2021]. This text presents a wide sweep of the social and cultural implications of the pandemic in Bulgaria, including important contributions from ethnologists, musicologists, and

folklorists, and is available for free digital download [PMDPHoBAS 2021]. We also soon expect to see additions to this research, including Ben Bridges, Ross Brillhard, and Diane E. Goldstein's edited volume *Behind the Mask: Vernacular Culture in the Time of COVID-19* [Bridges et al., forthcoming] and a multidisciplinary volume on COVID play edited by Anna Beresin and Julia Bishop [*Anthropology of Children* 2021]. In addition, folklore collectives and journals such as *Journal of the American Folklore Society*, *Contemporary Legend*, *City Lore*, and *Cultural Analysis* have all issued calls for submissions on pandemic lore for special issues or other publications.

Into this mix we submit this special edition of our journal. From the earliest months of the pandemic, we at *Folklorica* followed the dramatic and abundant production of COVID-19 related memes, songs, jokes, conspiracy theories, legends, and other lore that was issuing from the areas of the world under our purview. Discussions in May of 2020 among SEEFA's Executive Board produced a call for papers in July that has engendered the present volume. With our special issue, we wanted to gather submissions from scholars who were tracking the inchoate and tumultuous early vernacular responses to the pandemic in Eastern Europe and Eurasia. We welcomed experimental, tentative, and in-progress research in the form of both articles and reports. Our goal was to take an early scholarly snap-shot of how Eastern Europe and related and neighboring areas were experiencing and reacting to the pandemic from the initial spread on European shores in early March until the late summer, when pandemic measures had reached their most stringent form in many countries. We hope that this volume will add to the discussions currently being held in folklore circles about manifestations of pandemic folklore by representing a specific region of the world with a unique history influenced by its geographic location at the border between Europe and Asia and its largely post-imperial and post-socialist heritages.

Moreover, the most notable works assessing COVID-19 folklore produced to date have concentrated heavily on the pernicious, antagonistic, or anti-authority positions taken by people in various parts of the world, particularly in North America. The discussions surrounding those movements are of critical importance to understanding the climate of the pandemic and recent trends in global politics. Most assuredly, those currents of expressive culture are explored by many of the submissions presented in this special issue. However, many of our authors have also explored the positive, supportive, generative, and beneficent aspects of COVID-19 folklore—vernacular attempts to support public health services, calm nervous populations, and entertain the common people in both lockdown and frontline work environments.

The articles in this issue have emerged from research on the folklore of the pandemic in East Slavic traditions (Russia, Rusyns in Carpathia, and Ukraine), in South Slavic traditions (Bulgaria, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, and Serbia), as well as in diaspora among many peoples from Eastern Europe and Eurasia. They represent all the major areas of our discipline: material culture, oral lore, and practices. We have organized the articles to capture these disciplinary

relationships, beginning with two pieces on material culture, followed by two on narrative and song, and finally by two on practices as endorsed by charismatic leaders. As we have discussed, folklorists faced challenges as well as benefits from the forced curtailment of planned fieldwork. Many of the authors had their research plans change suddenly but were able to pivot when a serendipitous topic related to coronavirus lore fell into their laps. We can relate to this dilemma. Jeanmarie's three planned trips to Russia to wrap up research for a book manuscript on holy springs were put on hold, while Dorian was forced to forgo two planned trips to Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina to begin his postdoctoral fieldwork on the migrant crisis. Jeanmarie responded by shifting her attention to two projects on North American folklore of the pandemic: one on the vernacular response to the Kentucky governor as a legendary hero of the pandemic (forthcoming in the *Contemporary Legend* special issue on pandemic folklore) and another on pandemic pet adoption. Dorian took another tack; he relied on "remote" fieldwork, gathering new songs from the Internet and followed up by online interviews with the bards who sang them to produce his article for this volume.

Sarah Craycraft was in the field when the lockdown was imposed in Bulgaria. Her planned trips to study village-based projects that foster intergenerational connections among the urban and rural populace were cancelled. However, her previous work on this topic allowed her to proceed with a virtual ethnography project on how these organizations themselves retooled to serve another purpose entirely during the early months of the pandemic: to provide solace and support to fellow citizens. Drawing on established networks and their existing online presence, two of these groups made a point of using the Internet to connect with the village elderly to check in on them virtually after physical visits had been curtailed. These villagers, in turn, responded by sharing their folklife, as they would have with the visitors, but with a goal to assuage concerns about the pandemic. They shared secrets of medicinal plants and how to make traditional Bulgarian dishes or crafts (as well as songs and stories). As Craycraft demonstrates, these folk practices, having been preserved (in part as a result of these groups' efforts), came to the fore during the pandemic to provide much needed solace. We have seen many similar examples of foodways serving this purpose in the North American context, but the villagers' efforts went beyond perfecting bread baking while stuck at home. These women represent fortitude in the face of a crisis, living as they do in remote villages, and they conveyed care through the power of vernacular knowledge about objects and practices to their fellow (largely urban) Bulgarians.

Katya Chomitzky presents a similar picture in her study of facemasks with traditional Ukrainian embroidery techniques both in Ukraine and among the Ukrainian diaspora. Certainly, the masks themselves are designed for protection from the virus, but, as she documents, the addition of motifs from traditional embroidery gave them added benefit as a "protective talisman." Just as the Bulgarian women shared their secrets about healing plants, these women used

natural elements, such as flowers, in their decorations to access the restorative power of the plants themselves. As in the Bulgarian situation, the masks, like other embroidered items, convey an important sense of identity about being Ukrainian, a pride in the cultural heritage and its preservation. Buying the masks also supported the community financially in a difficult time. Chomitzky's data from both mask producers and wearers demonstrates the power of folklore to tap into various resonances of identity, often simultaneously: from politics to heritage (be it national, ethnic, or regional) to folk healing practices. Recognizing the performative function of material culture, whether Bulgarian food videos online or Ukrainian masks, is key to understanding the power of these messages to group members.

Elena Boudovskaia's material also centers on the intersection of politics—local, national, and, in some cases, international—and local identity among Rusyns in Ukraine. The narratives she collected from this region reveal first the persistence of pattern in narrative. COVID-19 stories were not novel or unique, but rather conform to established story types about death and illness in the village tradition. While Bulgarian and Ukrainian material culture served as protection from the virus, these narrators relied on protective language by avoiding speaking about the afterlife or about death itself. More importantly, as Boudovskaia shows, the stories convey an understanding of proper behavior in the village and in the family. The narratives serve as a means of negotiation for the tellers, who are coping with shifting village demographics, the vagaries of national politics—including the lack of concern for the average person, especially those in rural parts of the country—and personal and communal loss as a result of the pandemic. The stories allow a space both to criticize improper behavior and to reaffirm the power of local values and ways of life. Stories then open a window onto family and village practices, but Boudovskaia's work also reveals how storytelling can reframe the conversation and create reality in and of itself.

Dorian Jurić's bards similarly have the power to establish a state of affairs in the world. In their chronicle songs about the pandemic, produced between March and May 2020, they presented a united front: conveying solidarity in the face of crisis. Despite holding different political views, these bards urged people to come together and join with the government and medical authorities to defeat the virus. They drew on the martial characteristics of a rich epic tradition to describe the battle against the coronavirus. However, in interviews with the author, they revealed the complexity of their opinions, many of which were not conveyed in the songs themselves. Unlike Boudovskaia's interlocutors, these men are in the public eye and, as the voice of the people, they walk a fine line. The bard, as a result, is bound to take the authorities to task for failing the people. However, expressing critical opinions about government actions during a pandemic may result in harm to others and threaten their social standing as defenders of the folk in the long run. Jurić demonstrates how these singers strove to balance these contradictory roles at a time of crisis in an effort to protect fellow citizens.

Iryna Voloshyna studies another sort of “defender of the folk” entirely. In the context of New York City, among the diaspora, she discovered that the popular alternative physician Anatoly Kashpirovsky had reemerged during the pandemic. In the context of a revival of the “Cold War” and a nostalgia for a lost socialist “golden age,” the 90s cult figure was once again receiving a great deal of attention in an online environment. He purported to have a cure for the virus and was willing to sell it. Voloshyna demonstrates how Kashpirovsky, despite his claims to be a scientist and medical doctor, draws upon the traditions of folk healing. His patients respond in kind, ascribing to him a kind of mystical power that goes well beyond that of the typical physician. A doctor who draws on both medical and vernacular expertise, as Ekaterina Belousova [1998] has shown, is particularly powerful in the post-socialist East Slavic cultural context. Kashpirovsky’s defense of the common folk, unlike the South Slavic bards, did not include defending them from possible harm from conspiracy theories about the virus. Rather, he tapped into rhetoric about the West’s goal to destroy Russia by creating the virus itself. While such rumors spread about China in the North American context, in the view of this “cold warrior” at least, the true enemy was America. He simultaneously capitalized on anxiety and dissatisfaction about the Russian government by challenging the safety of the Sputnik V vaccine. In other words, only he could be trusted to defend the people from the nefarious plans of the authorities.

While alternative medicine may be the solution for Kashpirovsky’s adherents, J. Eugene Clay offers up another option for those facing the pandemic crisis: Russian Orthodoxy. In a profile of the apostate monk Sergii (Romanov), former abbot of the *Ganina Iama* monastery near Ekaterinburg, Clay explores how Sergii has used his extraordinary social standing to support anti-Western conspiracy theories supposedly intended to destroy Russia as well as the belief that Stalin was a secret Christian. Ultimately, his insubordination against church authorities in the face of COVID-19 restrictions on religious services resulted in his arrest by special forces and excommunication by the Russian Orthodox Church. While the pandemic is but a brief chapter in Sergii’s biography, Clay illustrates how a chain of conspiracy beliefs espoused by this conservative cleric parallels developments in Russia broadly and in the conservative wing of the Russian Orthodox Church in particular. Sergii’s path from a convicted murderer to a charismatic church leader (the subject of two popular documentaries with his own YouTube channel) and back to prisoner illustrates the power of folk narrative and vernacular belief. Legends served as the hallmark of Sergii’s personal philosophy, and he relied on them to capitalize on disaffection with the current state of affairs in Russia to enhance his own position. He ties those beliefs to faith in Russian Orthodoxy, encouraging both (secular) belief and ostensive behaviors on the part of the laity to engage in practices consonant with these stories, e.g., to persist in celebrating mass and taking communion throughout the pandemic. Despite his popularity, he finally overstepped in his conspiratorial response to the pandemic. This article reveals striking parallels to the development of conspiracy theories espoused by QAnon [cf. Bodner et al. 2020] and reminds us that the crisis

of faith in institutions and the culture wars are far from restricted to North America.

In that vein, the issue rounds out with a report by Natalie Kononenko on a web database compiled by members of the Laboratory for Theoretical Folklore Studies at the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration in Moscow. She presents an overview of the materials on the site, both the texts themselves and the analyses offered by the team. This piece will be especially useful for those without Russian-language skills, but who want to trace textual variants of particular narratives in non-English contexts.

While we have organized the articles based primarily on the genre of folklore they study (although, in some cases, the pieces are not limited to only one genre), there are several recurring themes that cross these genre (or, indeed, national) boundaries. Not surprisingly, in a pandemic context, questions of vernacular medicine come to the fore in several of the pieces. While Craycraft discusses how women shared knowledge of natural remedies with fellow citizens in Bulgaria, Voloshyna highlights the interaction of biomedicine and vernacular healing in her study of Anatoly Kashpirovsky. Although Kashpirovsky may have discovered an actual treatment for the virus, the aim of vernacular medicine is not always cure, but prevention and protection, a theme explored by Craycraft, Boudovskaia and Chomitzky. Kononenko provides examples of both treatments and prevention attested in the web database of the Laboratory for Theoretical Folklore Studies. Prevention, of course, is not always against physical illness, but against spiritual threats or curses. Boudovskaia, in her discussion of euphemisms, and Clay, in his mention of the belief that communion could not infect the faithful, touch on this topic as well.

Protection indeed is the common factor of the charismatic figures profiled in the articles by Clay, Jurić, and Voloshyna. These powerful men, despite their vastly distinct social roles, tap into the human desire for security in the wake of a crisis through vernacular practice and oral folklore. In that vein, these men also reveal why citizens of these various nations feel so precarious in the first place. Certainly, the pandemic plays a role in the fear, but the underlying concerns center on institutional failures—be they the failures of governmental, medical, or religious institutions. These same themes are echoed in the village narratives and material culture that Boudovskaia, Craycraft and Chomitzky discuss.

This issue demonstrates clearly what folklorists already know and struggle to convey to those outside the field: the power of vernacular culture to provide solace and make sense of the world. In some cases, folklore holds the answer for us, be it in the form of a talismanic face mask or of a traditional song. Engaging with the material is enough to give people hope and restore a sense of order. In other cases, folklore gives voice to human concerns but provides little relief. Legends, rumors and conspiracy theories, in particular, grapple with the nature of reality and our anxiety about it. In many cases, though, they only exacerbate our concerns, rather than assuage them. Nevertheless, these narratives do not disappear, because they offer a space to debate these (often taboo) fears about our

daily lives and social ills. All too clearly 2020 has revealed the power of folklore to those outside our field. While unfortunately many may not realize that fake news and bread baking are the purview of the discipline, they have paid much more attention to core material in folkloristics, both to bring comfort and to destabilize social order. Folklorists have long studied both aspects of vernacular culture and recognize both its power to harm and to heal. In that vein, this issue adds the voice of the Slavic, East European, and Eurasian nations to the conversation. We hope it likewise demonstrates the importance of folk studies to an understanding of the COVID-19 pandemic not only in this region of the world, but across the globe.

Jeanmarie Rouhier-Willoughby, Editor  
Dorian Jurić, Guest Co-Editor

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