

The Heralds at the Bells: Messages of Hope from West Balkan Bards During the Coronavirus Pandemic

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Abstract

Between March and May of 2020, a number of *guslars* (bards) and other traditional singers from Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, and Serbia flooded YouTube with songs about the COVID-19 pandemic. Though the musicians chose divergent vantage points from which to approach the topic of the pandemic, all settled on a similar goal. They sought to deliver a message of solidarity and hope to those struggling with the realities of life under lockdown measures and to allay the fears and uncertainties that spread with the virus. This article provides a critical overview of the *guslars*' songs to explore their shared and divergent tropes, themes, and tones, and to highlight the goals of their singers in disseminating their messages in traditional form. Here I comment on what the high degree of convergence in the songs' final messages reveals about vernacular responses to the pandemic and folk views on the measures taken to halt the virus's spread. Finally, the article places these songs into a wider historical context of contemporary singing to the *gusle*, remarking on the vagaries of navigating authority when one sings subjective opinion in the name of a collective.

Introduction

When the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) first arrived in the Western Balkans in the early spring of 2020, a number of vernacular artists published musical responses to the pandemic on the online video sharing platform YouTube. Between March and May, these musicians released a range of songs—spanning at least five folk genres and ranging in tone from humorous and jocular to serious and didactic—that approached the event from a number of stylistic, generic, and personal positions. This article focuses critically on songs produced by the traditional bards of the region, *guslars*, who, despite their various approaches, all converged on messages of solidarity and hope aimed at supporting the populace as they headed into a series of strict lockdowns and government-imposed restrictions to curb the spread of the virus.

The modern iterations of an ancient tradition, these folk singers hold important positions in the culture of Bosniaks, Croats, Montenegrins, and Serbs as retainers of cultural memory and chroniclers of modern events for folk consumption. Acting, in a sense, as folk-journalists, the *guslars* “routinize the unexpected” [Žanić 2007: 17], processing novel events through collective and individual aesthetic filters to produce communal discursive products that offer an interpretive framework for listeners. The *guslars* provide their audience with ways

to think about and respond to external events, creating “order and continuity from the disorder of experience” [Cruikshank 1998: 118]. By generating songs that are codified in stylistic and aesthetic patterns with ancient cultural pedigrees, the *guslars*’ works are largely accepted by a subset of these nations as both, and simultaneously, individual artistic creations and communal/collective products [see Žanić 2007: 47].

In this article, I explore the shared and divergent tropes, themes, and tones of three songs produced by *guslars* in response to the COVID-19 pandemic as well as how their messages reflect upon the artists’ own personal repertoires and the wider response of vernacular musicians in the region. I investigate the various approaches that the songs take, while noting the high degree of convergence in their overall messages. In the second half of the article, I explore the figure of the *guslar* in the novel context of a global pandemic to reveal some insights into the processes that inform the bards’ navigation of their position in society as individuals who speak for, to, and in the name of a collective. By targeting a notable shift away from the *guslars*’ common antagonistic stance toward government imposition, these conclusions also provide opportunity for some cross-cultural comparison. (1)

Folk Singers Respond to the COVID-19 Pandemic

In March, when the pandemic was declared and lockdown measures began, social life in the Western Balkans, as elsewhere, was pervaded with a chaotic air of uncertainty. As public health officers began imposing new measures to curtail the spread of the virus—social distancing, curfews, mask wearing, school closures—people began to fear and prepare for the worst. Shoppers emptied grocery store shelves of necessities they worried might vanish due to closed borders and severed supply chains. Questions began to arise about the source of the virus, the guidance informing government responses, and the true nature and severity of the rapidly spreading disease. At the height of this uncertainty, a large number of vernacular singers published songs on YouTube to comment on the pandemonium. This song production took two major forms: humorous songs, which attempted to lighten the mood and encourage people to take a moment to laugh at the chaos, and more serious songs, which sought to define the moment, relay singers’ perceptions of the events unfolding, and offer a message of hope and support to listeners.

The market on comedic songs was monopolized by a folk genre, the *Bećarac*, a predominantly humorous genre of singing accompanied by tambura orchestras or accordion, which is performed at and associated with weddings in the Slavonian region of Croatia [see Barišić 2014, 2016; Rončević 2013]. These songs poked fun at the mass buying of toilet paper, flour, soap, and masks [Stapić 2020; Štrkalj 2020], the heightened stress placed on frequent hand washing by public health officials, people’s increasing fear of interaction, and the ubiquity of folk remedies touted as protection from COVID-19 [Stapić 2020]. Other songs parodied physical distancing, the problems associated with quarantining in homes,

people “letting themselves go” in isolation [Lončarić et al. 2020], and the vagaries of distance education and social interaction performed online [Lončarić et al. 2020; Štrkalj 2020]. While the *bećarci* were giving listeners a chuckle about the more absurd side of the pandemic chaos, the traditional bards of the region, the *guslars*, came to the fore between March and May to assume their common duty of folk reportage. They chronicled in song the events unfolding in a serious and concerned manner, contextualizing the growing pandemic for their listeners. (2)

Guslar Songs in Contemporary Contexts

Named after their instrument, the *gusle*, a single-stringed fiddle, the *guslars* of the Western Balkans are best known in a historical context as the purveyors of traditional oral epics. A series of changes, starting in the final half of the nineteenth century and concluding in the second half of the twentieth, found the art form shifting from one based on an oral transmission model to a written one. (3) The craft became increasingly dependent on various media as a bridge between performer and audience—starting with published song books, through to vinyl records, cassette tapes, CDs, and into modern digital technologies—in place of traditional models of exclusively live performance. The modern *guslars*, like their traditional forebears, are still elective artists, drawn from all walks of life but predominantly with rural, working-class backgrounds. He, and more rarely she [see Đorđević-Belić 2013; 2017: 225-243; Jurić 2019: 40-41], does not perform for a living, but carries on the tradition in his spare time. Dressed in traditional folk costume (complete with decorative weapons from the early-modern period), or else in formal western attire, the *guslar* performs at various gatherings, including weddings, fairs, and church events, as well as at special *guslar* concerts where multiple artists perform throughout an evening. The majority of *guslars* learn their art from family members or through training with elder artists in various *guslar* clubs, and more recently public school music programs.

The topics of their songs are diverse: ranging from traditional epics learned from nineteenth-century academic collections to modern epics outlining the exploits of various twentieth-century war heroes, from comedic songs (known as *lakrdije* [lit. farce/burlesque/jape, but with the implicit sense of humorous song in folk circles. See Golemović 2008: 86-92]) to tragic accounts of rapes and car crashes, from folk reportage of current events to private reminiscences of personal family history. Disparate and often highly personal in content, the songs all coalesce in style and structure: They are all voiced in the traditional format of the stichic decasyllable—although the modern influence of popular music has brought end-rhyme and other once-foreign poetic-tendencies into the genre—and they are united in a general subject matter aimed at translating contemporary information into stylistic patterns acceptable to the sensibilities of “the folk.” These articulations are always figured in terms of speaking to and for a collective, often constituted in various social and historical figurations and largely subsumed under generic titles such as *narod* [people, folk], but predominantly manifested in nationalist terms. Despite shifting and idiosyncratic figurations of

perceived/intended and accepted/received audience, the often highly personalized narratives focus on a generalized symbolic inventory that demarcates clear boundaries on binary poles—“us / them,” “rural / urban,” “friend / foe,” “hero / villain”—while celebrating “the heroic” at all levels.

Modern *guslar* songs are sometimes written by the bard, but are also often written by vernacular poets for the *guslar* to memorize and perform [Golemović 2012: 140-1; Primorac and Čaleta 2012: 181]. While long-format epics, similar to those once propagated by the traditional oral-formulaic model of transmission [Foley 1991, 1995; Lord 2000], are still produced, they are usually committed only to CD and cassette recordings to be purchased at performance events. Shorter songs, covering a much wider range of topics, are cultivated for public performance to avoid trying the limited attention spans of modern audiences and in order to allow for a series of singers to be showcased within the time frame of contemporary folk concerts.

Through the dramatic social re-organizations experienced in the region under the influence of competing national and supranational state projects over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the political affiliations and sensibilities of modern *guslars* have become quite varied and sometimes conflict. However, the predominant political crystallization of ethno-national sentiments leading up to the wars of secession in the 1990s has had a drastic effect on the bards, solidifying their current common image as fundamentally traditionalist and conservative ethno-nationalists [Čolović 2008: 162-66, 171-78; Golemović 2008; 2012; Primorac and Čaleta 2012: 159-67]. (4)

A Note Regarding the Transcription of Songs

While *guslars* will often memorize the songs that they regularly perform, songs regarding events such as the outbreak of the novel coronavirus are usually written (by the *guslar* or another poet) in rapid response and then quickly performed for recording, with the bard reading the lyrics from a written text. If the song proves popular, it may be committed to memory, but many are not. As a result, there are often variations between the written text and the performed versions. These variations do not represent innovation in performance as described by the Oral-Formulaic Theory of Milman Parry and Albert Lord [Lord 2000]; rather, they generally represent an assortment of misreadings and undesired slips-of-tongue in the heat of delivery. The way that these variations manifest in performance, however, can bear some relationship to Parry and Lord’s basic innovative principle inasmuch as the singer may, in misreading a verse line, defer to a syntax, phrasing, or dialect form that is more comfortable to his singing style or native vernacular and that is based on a heightened familiarity with the natural syntax of decasyllabic meter as well as a stock of common, learned and practiced formulae [see Primorac and Čaleta 2012: 181].

Given the root of this variation, differentiating slips of tongue from misreadings in these recordings often proves impossible. For the songs in this article whose written and performed texts have differed, I have deferred to

transcribing the versions as recorded in performance. Divergence is noted in endnotes which convey and compare the written form of the text. Sources of variation are noted when certain from context; in all other cases I have used the abbreviation “LL” to denote those variations which might either be *lapsus linguae*, *lapsus lectionis*, or some combination of the two.

Regarding English-language translations, many *guslars* make heavy use of folk idioms in their song-writing process. I have used equivalent English expressions when easy parallels are possible, with necessary context added in footnotes appended to the initial Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin, or Serbian [hereafter, BCMS] phrase. When these equivalences are more difficult, I have chosen to translate the text literally and to explain the saying in footnotes appended to the English verse line.

Guslar Songs about the COVID-19 Pandemic

Two *guslars*, Mirko Crljen from the village of Ruda in Croatia and Života Jevremović from the village of Igrište in southern Serbia, took the clearest and most concise approach to the task of chronicling the pandemic. Both had their songs recorded by local television stations that later uploaded them to YouTube channels (respectively published on 28 March and 17 May). The songs they produced are short and simple, outlining the arrival of the virus before urging listeners to stay at home and place their faith in the recommendations of public health officials. At 12 verse lines, Mirko Crljen’s song, “*Oj korona*” [Hey, Corona] [2020a] is the shortest *guslar*’s song produced in response to the pandemic. In a simple and concise structure, the song acts as a message of support to listeners facing growing uncertainty.

Oj Korona, zarazo prokleta, šta učini (5) od cijelog sv’jeta?!	Hey, Corona, damned contagion, what is it doing to the whole world?!
Truješ ljude, i djecu i žene, bez milosti i bez opomene, i napade domovinu moju.	You poison people, both children and women, without mercy and without warning; and you assault my homeland.
Al’ češ zube izgubit’ u boju; mi smo narod nikad pokoreni; sa Stožerom svi ujedinjeni.	5 But you shall lose your teeth in the battle. We’re a nation never subjugated; all are united with our Headquarters.
Moli Boga i doma ostani; zaštiti se, ne izlazi vani; i vedro čelo i rumeno lice.	10 Pray to God and stay at home; protect yourselves, don’t go outside. A clear forehead and a rosy face. (6)
Pozdravlja vas guslar s Kamešnice.	Your bard from Kamešnica sends his regards.

Filmed in a natural location and dressed in the traditional garb of his birth region, the Cetinska krajina, Crljen starts the video with a charming and knowing wink to the audience as he begins to play his *gusle* [Image 1]. The song then opens with the bard invoking and cursing the virus in a model that has a long heritage in the traditional folk songs of the region [cf. Pavlinović 1876]. This same trend is reflected in other novel songs in traditional registers uploaded to YouTube at the time, particularly a COVID-themed *sevdalinka*—a traditional urban genre of lyric song from Bosnia—from an anonymous Western Balkan truck driver working in

Belgium [Unknown b 2020]. (7) Crljen outlines the damage that the virus is doing and likens the task of facing the threat to that of a battle between the nation of Croatia and the virus. He implores his listeners to keep faith, reminding them that in the “battle” against COVID-19, Croatians are united with their health officials at the *Stožer civilne zaštite* [Headquarters for Civil Protection], the body of medical experts created to advise and lead the country through the pandemic.

It is also no surprise to find Crljen reflecting on the threat of the pandemic in terms of battle and assault [ll. 5-7]. A veteran of the Croatian War of Independence, Crljen has dedicated a large part of his career as a *guslar* to songs recounting events of the war [Crljen 2020b]. Moreover, despite this song presenting as a generic form of short-format folk news reportage, all decasyllabic songs sung to the *gusle* bring with them strong, inherent linkages to the genre of oral epic, which is intrinsically martial in tone and content. Thus, we see the same tenor repeated in a second *guslar* song, *Pesma o Koroni* [A Song about Corona], written and performed by the Serbian bard Života Jevremović [2020]:



Image 1. Screen capture of Mirko Crljen performing “Oj korono” [Crljen 2020a]

Еј, (8) кад је Господ стварао чудеса,
створио је земљу и небеса.
Откада (9) нама дарива планету,
није било на овоме свету
такве бољке што напада људе;
тој болести сви се редом чуде.
Нарочито што напада старе;
ту никоме не помажу паре.
Не помаже НАТО алијанса.
Пред Коронам, свима иста (10) шанса.
Па у таквом непријатном стању,
Србија се приклони сазнању;
да Србију воде умни људи,
јер ту живот са њима се буди.
Телали смо тада на сва звона:
„Мора да се победи Корона.“
Са љутим чекамо је даром:
Еј, бели (12) луком и ракијом старом.
Еј, да би ову болест победили
и у мирну луку упловили,
па да после не буде кајања,
потребни су витези од знања. (13)
Србија их на 'иљаде има
па на челу тог витешког тима

Hey, when the Lord worked wonders,
he made the earth and the heavens.
Since [the time when] he gave the planet to us
there has never been on Earth
5 this kind of illness which [now] afflicts people.
All, in turn, wonder at that illness,
particularly since it attacks the elderly.
In this, money is help to no one,
nor can the NATO alliance help.
10 Before Corona, all have the same chance.
Well, in such unpleasant conditions
Serbia defers to knowledge,
that intelligent people might lead Serbia.
And your hope for life awakens. (11)
15 We heralds are then at all the bells,
“Corona must be defeated!”
We await it with a deadly [lit. angry] gift:
With garlic and with aged *rakija* [fruit brandy].
Hey, to overcome this illness
20 and [so we can] sail into a peaceful harbor,
so that there will be no contrition afterwards,
knights of knowledge are required.
Serbia has thousands of them;
and at the head of that knightly team

изабрасмо Дарију и Кона;
Србији се предаде Корона!

25 we have chosen Darija and Kon.
Corona surrenders to Serbia!

Here the martial character is voiced in neo-medieval trappings and associative expressions that draw the listener into a historical frame of reference connected to the vast precedent of the traditional epic songs and their many medieval heroes and subjects. Just as Crljen invokes the Croatian health officials uniting the nation in defense against the virus, Jevremović presents Serbia's *Križni štab za suzbijanje zarazne bolesti COVID-19* [Crisis Headquarters for the Suppression of the Infectious Disease COVID-19] as scientists transformed into knights and lead by the heroic (and most visible) public health officials in Serbia, Predrag Kon and Darija Kisić Tepavčević. (14) This epic conflict plays-out to conclusion in the song: the public health knights head into battle against the virus while the *guslars* spread the word as heralds—the Turkish loan *telal* [herald] harkens more clearly to the register of traditional epic and its reservoir of expressive devices and so is chosen over the native *glasnik*, which is used exclusively in the modern language. Armed with scientific knowledge and folk remedies, the scientists prevail; the virus surrenders to Serbia and the nation “sails into a peaceful harbor.”

Filed sitting on a chair outside his rural home, the retired taxi driver Jevremović [Image 3] casts the figure of a comfortable “physical-distancer.” Dressed predominantly in typical rural casual wear, the *guslar*'s outfit is accented by two items: a piece of traditional Serbian headgear, a *šajkača*, and a simple, blue disposable face mask which hangs about his neck. This charming visual is complimented by the song's inclusion of folk remedies, garlic and aged *rakija* in the nation's arsenal, a wink and a nod to an older generation in the Balkans who believe in the efficacy of these and similar items in boosting the immune system and warding off illness. At 74 years of age, the jocular Jevremović is keenly aware that his listeners do not derive from young generations “who have Coca-Cola in their bloodstream and hamburgers in their brains” (15), but to an older demographic who might get a chuckle out of the tools deployed against the virus. Mention of folk-remedies also draws the song into the discourse of digital folklore—both songs [Stapić 2020 ll. 9-10] and memes [see Image 1; cf. *Russia Beyond* 2020]—that proved popular at this time and played humorously with Slavic and Balkan folk medicines employed against the virus.

A similar wide sphere of folklore is engaged with the symbolism of ringing “all the bells” [cf. Čolak and Mikulić-Jukić 2020; Nemanja Harmonikaš 2020; Stapić 2020]. This imagery belongs to a number of variations on a common phrase: *udarati/stavljati/zvoniti na sva zvona* [to strike/put [a message to]/ring all the bells], which denotes making something exceedingly (or excessively) public or known far and wide. The phrase has seen steady usage in news and other media during the pandemic, assuming a stock role in regional conventional discourse that was only superseded by our new global repertoire of catch phrases—flatten the curve, new normal, social distancing, unprecedented times, etc. While one might see this phrase in metaphoric linkages to the well of poetic resonances

linking church bells to funerary ceremonies and systems of news transmission during historical plagues, Mikulić-Jukić and Jevremović (the two writers interviewed who employed this phrase [respectively on 4 November and 30 October]) were quick to disabuse me of digging too deeply into the symbolism.



Both Crljen's and Jevremović's songs offer a similar model of commentary on the COVID-19 pandemic through the traditional form of *guslar* chronicles, or songs written in response to current events. Both lead listeners through three experiential frames: the arrival of the virus; the fraught conditions in pandemic (lockdown); and the projected positive communal exit that will inevitably be accomplished after public health

Image 2. Folk medicine meme. [Meme 2020]

figures conclude their battle. This is a common frame and

story-arc for the *guslars'* pandemic songs, but is followed most succinctly in Jevremović's piece. In Crljen and Jevremović's songs, the message is clear: the people, united with their government's health officials in battle against the virus shall overcome it. The final *guslar's* song (examined below), however, used the opportunity of the pandemic to trace a second argument based on a morally didactic message delivered in a contrasting tone.

The final song in this group, uploaded to YouTube on 22 March, was produced by a duo whose work I have highlighted elsewhere [Jurić 2020a], the Herzegovinian Croat team of folk poet Frano Mikulić-Jukić and *guslar* Marko Čolak. Beyond a popular wartime epic centered on commander Blago Zadro, the two are known in traditional music circles for producing inflammatory political songs that rail against perceived injustices and the hypocrisy of political elites, church figures, and other authorities [Jurić 2020a: 672-73]. As citizens of Bosnia-Herzegovina, the pair are subject to the difficult sociopolitical realities and bleak economic opportunities that typify the nation post-Dayton Accords. Anthropologist Larisa Kurtović [2016] has described the transformative political actions of grassroots activists in the 2014 protests in Bosnia in terms of the "politics of indignation." Though Čolak and Mikulić-Jukić inhabit a very different social milieu than most of Kurtović's collaborators, I find this provocative phrase apposite for describing the tone and ethic of their work, which could easily be defined as "songs of indignation" [cf. Rihtman-Auguštin 1972: 149-50]. As Čolak

conveyed succinctly in an October 2020 interview, “Frano and I can’t tolerate injustice, so we sing about all that through our songs”. This imperative is in full display in their song, “*Virus korona 2020.g.*” [Coronavirus 2020], that discusses the pandemic in moralizing discourse as a deadly but, ultimately, useful reset for a nation beleaguered by corrupt politicians, social leeches, and globalist agendas [Čolak and Mikulić-Jukić 2020].

<p>Ej! Svi mediji na sva zvona zvone, (16) a svijetom hara virus od Korone. Živoga smo istirali (17) vraga pa nam stigô do kućnoga praga. Nekom sprijeda nekom od pozadi pa računaj o čemu se radi. Čudan virus iz Kine dolazi; neozbiljno njemu se prilazi, neposlušnost kô i samovolja, za virus je podloga najbolja. Na brzinu okolo se sije po Evropi (19) preko Italije. Rasprostro se za nekol'ko dana zbog nemara samih Talijana; pa zbog stila nihovog života u crno se Europa mota; voda je se zalila za uši, ali treba priznati po duši; što sijasma sada nam je žeti; svako zlo se na koncu osveti. Godinama punili nam glave zbog fotelja, novaca i slave; radile se (22) kô na kakvoj traci; samozvani nekakvi mudraci. Od naroda pravili su ovce da bi tuđe pokupili novce. Radi sitnog interesa svoga, otudili svakog od svakoga. Razbijali obitelj i slogu, i narode što su vjerni Bogu. Svim silama oni udarali, a slugama debelo plaćali. Svijet pravili po vlastitoj mjeri; prekoseći (23) prirodi i vjeri, i htjeli su dogurat' do toga; sami sebe zamjenit' za Boga. Bez krčmara račun se radio; očito se krivo nasadio. Jedan virus čovječanstvo buđi da konačno postanemo ljudi. U krivome krenuli smo smjeru i svakom (25) smo prevršili mjeru: Mladost nam je loše odgojena; politika krivo usmjerena; dok živote mediji nam kroje, svi vragovi na tronu nam stoje; sjeme siju mržnje i razdora; ta skupina opakih zlotvora. Sada bježe u mišije (26) rupe. Svi stratezi politike glupe.</p>	<p>5 10 15 20 25 30 35 40 45 50</p>	<p>Hey, all the media are ringing all the bells while the world’s harried by Corona’s virus. We drove out the devil alive only to have him reach our home’s threshold, (18) for some, at the front and for some, at the back. Well, reckon what it’s all about. A strange virus arrived from China; it’s not taken seriously; disobedience and contrariness, the best foundation for the virus. Rapidly it is sown about throughout Europe by way of Italy. It spread out in a few days because of the negligence of those very Italians. Well, because of their lifestyle Europe was laid low; (20) water up to our ears. (21) But one must admit from one’s soul; that which we have sown, we must now reap. Every evil in the end is avenged. For years they filled our heads because of cushy seats, money, and fame. Lined up like on some assembly line. Some kind of self-proclaimed wise-men, they made sheep of the people so that they could collect others’ money because of their petty interests. They alienated everyone from each other, shattering the family and harmony. And the people who are faithful to God, they struck them with full force and fatly paid their servants, creating a world of their own devising, spiting nature and faith, and they wished to drive it to that, to replace God with themselves. With an absent publican, a tab was started; (24) obviously, it was seeded incorrectly. A single virus has woken mankind, that we finally become people. We set off in the wrong direction and went too far on every count; our youths are brought up poorly; our politics incorrectly oriented; while our media tailors our lives, all the devils sit on our throne. They sow seeds of hatred and discord, that group of malefic evildoers, now they flee into mouse-holes. All strategists of stupid politics,</p>
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<p>Sve udruge što maglu prodaju sa svih scena odjednom nestaju. Di ste sada silne junačine, razne B.a.B.e. i druge skupine? Čim zagusti, svi se u bjeg date; kad se smiri, novac nam sisate. Za sve ovo vi ste nama krivi i bit ćete dok budete živi. Kreirali sve ste naopačke; okrenuli narod naglavačke; a na trku ste čitav život sveli, a narodu dušu ste oteli. Otudjenje zatim uništenje, to je bilo vaše određenje. Jedan virus, sve u vodu pada (27) jer panika na Zemlji nastada. (28) Sada bježe u domove svoje; drugačije (29) sada gaće kroje. Di su sada silni globalisti? Napokon su svi računi čisti. Svak u svoje, torove se gradi; nitko glavu na polje ne vadi. Globalizam sada funkcionira; svatko svoju sviralu dok svira; stigla kazna odozgo sa neba; neka, neka, tako nam i treba; sad se narod mora resetirat'; il' je živjet' ili je umirat'; (31) u obitelj život se povraća; c'jeli svijet na temelja (32) vraća. Svako zlo će nešto dobro dati ako narod tu poruku shvati: (33) U oblaku kule se ne grade; na temelju to pametni rade. Čuvajte se, mislite na druge, bez panike i velike tuge. I gore smo preživjeli dane. Uv'jek zora iza noći svane. Samo hrabro i uz pomoć Boga; izat (34) ćemo jači iz ovoga.</p>	<p>55</p> <p>60</p> <p>65</p> <p>70</p> <p>75</p> <p>80</p> <p>85</p> <p>90</p>	<p>all associations which sell snake oil disappear from every scene. Where are you now, you powerful heroes, various B.a.B.e. and other groups? When the going gets tough, all take flight, when things calm down, you suck out money. You are at fault for all of this and you shall be while you remain alive. You designed everything inside out; you turned the people upside down; and made all of life into a race; and abducted the nation's soul. Alienation and after that annihilation, that was your plan. A single virus, everything falls to the ground since panic on earth ensued. Now they flee to their homes; now the underwear is tailored differently. (30) Where now are the powerful globalists? Finally, all accounts are clean; each to his own, cotes are built; no one sticks his head outside; now globalism functions; each to his own while he plays his pipe; the penalty has arrived from the heavens above; let it, let it, we need it thus; now the nation must reset; either we live or die; life returns to the family; the whole world returns to its foundations. Every evil will contribute something good. If the people comprehend this message: Towers are not built in the sky; the intelligent do that on foundations. Take care of yourselves, think of others, without panic and without great sorrow. We have survived worse days [than these]. The dawn always breaks after the night. Just be brave and with God's aid we shall come out stronger after this.</p>
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Čolak and Mikulić-Jukić's song uses the pandemic as a jumping-off point for a sharp critique of perceived moral decay in the modern, globalized world, and particularly of social and political conditions in the contemporary Balkans. The poet's "disease surveillance" allows us to follow the journey of the virus as it spread, complete with critical commentary on the habits that allowed it to proliferate. From its mysterious source in China through transmission to Italy, where irresponsible Italians acted with impunity and disregard for others, (35) thence to the Balkans and to the rest of Europe. The virus itself, though, largely takes a backseat in the critical considerations of the song. The real targets are crooked politicians, vampiric aid groups leeching off of tax dollars, and a wide range of political and cultural snake-oil salesmen charged with undermining stable society, poisoning peoples' minds, and leading them away from a moral and Christian life of family values and faith in God.

COVID-19, in this regard, is an unfortunate mishap brought on by the failings of the very globalist system that fostered its creation, an act of God that quickly undermined culpable nations and laid bare their shortcomings. Society has come to a stand-still; all the political “heroes” have fled from public view into their “mouse-holes;” and a frightened populace, now relegated to its homes, is placed in a beneficial position from which to see the liars for who they really are while rediscovering the foundations of a proper and honest life.

Čolak and Mikulić-Jukić’s most critical songs tend to highlight a range of political actors by name, publicly denouncing them in conservative circles [see Jurić 2020a: 673-75] as antithetical actors working against a traditional ethical and moral system. It is interesting in this light to note that no politicians or public figures are named in this song. At a time when COVID-19 was spreading through the Balkans, and online message boards were full of banter condemning politicians for not closing borders [e.g., *Prokhorov* 2020], Mikulić-Jukić is notably silent on Croatian and Bosnian officials. Instead, he saves his ire for a single group, B.a.B.e. (*Budi aktivna. Budi emancipiran.* [Be active. Be emancipated]), a feminist rights organization based in Zagreb. (36) The poet targets them as a typical example of a social welfare group based on hypocritical principles. To him, they are a body that devours state funds when there are no problems to be solved, but disappears when the wrath of God falls on the country. As he explained to me in an October 2020 interview:

B.a.b.e. je udruga u Hrvatskoj koja živi na proračunu (sve bivše komunističke žene), koje kritiziraju sve u društvu, dociraju svima, glume dobrotvore, itd., a kad je došlo do frke sa kovidom, uskočile su u mišije rupe. Usput, bio je potres u Zagrebu, pa umjesto da pomažu u nesreći, za što sisaju novac od države, niti jedna nije makla prstom... to se odnosi i na druge slične udruge džabalebarošā koji su glasni samo na tv.

[B.a.B.e. is an association in Croatia that lives off the state coffers (they’re all former communist women). They criticize everything in society, they talk down to everyone, act like fancy benefactors, etc. but then when we got into this mess with COVID, they jumped into their mouse-holes. There was an earthquake in Zagreb at the same time. Rather than help in that crisis—the whole reason they bleed money from the state—not one of them raised a finger... That goes too for other similar associations of jobless layabouts who are only loud when they’re on TV.]

Stylistically, the song boasts a menagerie of folk idioms and proverbs or novel recombinations of these phrases that set a lexical tone meant to position the song clearly in folk discourse. By peppering his piece with “folk wisdom,”—a common practice among vernacular poets—Mikulić-Jukić engages with a series of metonymic markers and coded integers aimed at drawing an audience of receptive listeners into the idiom of the genre, what John Miles Foley called the *immanence* of the art [Foley 1991; 1995: 6-7]. In many of Mikulić-Jukić’s songs,

and particularly in this piece, the language is especially dense for the genre. The choice may simply be an aesthetic one, but it hints at a higher functional purpose. While considering himself, first and foremost, a poet in the belletristic sense, in a November 2020 interview Mikulić-Jukić explained that he enjoys writing for *guslars* because of the deep roots the tradition has in the culture, the apposite nature of this format for delivering current events, and the utility of the *guslar*'s social role, which can serve as the most direct channel to deliver messages effectively to a particular audience. (37) These comments coupled with the highly ideological/didactic tone of his pieces often makes me wonder if this dense language and idiomatic coding also serves as a poetic cypher to exclude etic listeners. As the poet conveyed to me in an earlier conversation regarding another piece, his songs, “speak volumes... to those who can think or have a mind to think with” [Jurić 2020a: 673]. In this song, too, listeners are encouraged that Mikulić-Jukić's hopes for the nation can be attained only “If the people comprehend this message” [l. 82]. If the song does not exclude those who do not “have the mind” to decipher it, it might at least signal to them that they are not the intended recipient of its message.

Given their repertoire, this duo can hardly be expected to offer the same positive message as Jevremović and Crljen—to follow heroic health officials as they lead the country into and out of battle with the virus. It is notable, however, that Čolak and Mikulić-Jukić's song converges with the others on a general sentiment of support. While these two artists use their platform to critique the over-arching social and political realities of life in Western Balkan nations, theirs is more a moralizing message than a political one. They significantly forgo an opportunity to call out singular politicians, instead converging with the other two bards on a positive message: Stay inside; wait out the pandemic; be strong; have faith in your resilience; your *guslars* are experiencing this with you and sending their support. The pair do, of course, combine this message with a general critique of moral norms and political corruption, but it is, nonetheless, present and prominent, reflecting a high degree of convergence with the other vernacular songs produced at the time. These facts, combined with a notable absence in these songs opens a window to some provocative, though quite possibly subjective, cultural and cross-cultural observations, both about the pandemic as received by “the folk” and about how the social role of the *guslar* might impose certain parameters onto his artistic expression.

“We are the opposition to all governments”: Public Perceptions and *Guslar* Politics

The processes employed for the successful performance and transmission of novel messages in modern *guslar* songs were highlighted during the wars of secession in the 1990s that divided Yugoslavia. It has never escaped the notice of scholars, literati, and the *guslars* themselves that the bards' public role ebbs and flows, but always emerges to prominence in times of war [Mažuranić 2019: 104-09; Murko 1951: 66, 70, 236-37, 302-18, 376, 516, 527; Žanić 2007: 46, 74, 86-

108]. When political upheaval brings violence to the forefront of society, it is natural for those in peril to connect their lived experience to historical chronicles of similar events. In the context of a war fought over nationalist divisions, the cultural currency of “us and them” narratives increases, and songs that celebrate “our soldiers/heroes” find positive reception among traditionalist and nationalist audiences, particularly those whose brothers, sons, and fathers constitute those heroic ranks. Even in rare conditions where particular campaigns prove disappointing, shameful, or regrettable, a singer may still tap into popular sentiment by shifting tone and content from panegyric to tragedy and lament. In many ways, narratives figured in terms of speaking for a collective and based on traditional moral dictates regarding heroism are easy to produce and submit for collective adoption in times of war.

Now, twenty-five years after the cessation of fighting in the Balkans, much of the fervor around the *gusle* has diminished; many *guslars* who were popular in war-time have receded from the limelight, and most have reverted to, or adopted for the first time, repertoires composed of classical material and songs of a journalistic nature. Scholars are now posed to follow the art as it resettles into peacetime, albeit in a particularly novel manifestation that has been drastically affected by the advent of the Internet and media sharing websites. It is interesting under these circumstances to explore the social dictates that may surround choices in content, theme and tone, both in times of peace and in unique crisis conditions such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

The active participation of *guslars* in the wars of the 1990s—in military action, in ideological roles of support to both soldiers and nationalist politicians, and as a channel of vernacular journalism—had a drastic effect on their image in popular opinion [Čolović 2008: 142-45; Žanić 2007]. In the aftermath of the wars, as the newly formed nations attempted to stabilize their economies and re-integrate into global systems and markets, educated and urban public discourse began to regularly cast the *guslar* in a markedly unflattering light. Often speaking and singing publicly against policies defined as “liberal” or “modernist,” *guslars* celebrated war criminals tried in the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) at The Hague as national heroes betrayed by the international community and their own people [Čolović 2008: 163;171-78; Jurić 2020a; Trubarac Matić 2019]. While lauded in particular geographic and cultural zones where the art form still thrives, the *guslar* is elsewhere regularly derided as an antagonistic figure: a bellicose anti-intellectual, anti-elite, backward-looking nativist, a war-monger and a supporter of the extreme right [Čolović 2008: 157-66; Primorac and Čaleta 2012: 155-59, 171-72]. (38)

This position should suggest some comparisons to a North American audience which has borne witness in the pandemic to a deluge of renewed public engagement from anti-vaccination movements and an upsurge in novel conspiracy theories among a similarly maligned population concerned with government overreach and the true nature of the pandemic [Bodner et al. 2021: 95-116; Kitta 2012; 2018]. Small-scale news outlets and independent users have flooded the Internet with articles, memes, and other media declaring the nefarious intents that

undergird many aspects of the pandemic or government responses to it. The outcome of these information currents have ranged from more benign attempts to set boundaries on both real and perceived infringements on civil liberties—such as personal and communal protests to wearing masks in public—to some isolated but extreme examples of racist attacks, obstructions of the functioning of medical professionals and institutions, and other forms of dangerous ostension [Bodner et al. 2021; Brown 2021; *Canadian Report* 2020; *GMI Reporter* 2020; Lilley 2020; *True Pundit* 2020; Watson 2020c]. We might then ask why singers, who seem from afar to represent a parallel social group in the Balkans, and who have a history of antagonism towards government officials and infringements on personal freedoms, found themselves producing songs encouraging people to follow lockdown orders and listen to health officials. Anti-lockdown songs have been produced by commercial and independent musicians in the West [Kreps 2020; MacDonald 2020] and found a following there, but, among the *guslars*, no such songs exist.

There are hints of parallels between the two populations. On message boards and Facebook groups devoted to *guslar* songs, whose members include aficionados as well as singers and poets, there are three common post types: Songs conveyed in textual or video formats; tirades by members stating that their nation is the true genitor of the art form [Čolović 2008: 166-71; cf. Jurić 2020b:14-20]; and posts which peddle victimization narratives about the inordinate suffering of certain nations in past wars. Among these common materials, one also finds today an irregular smattering of posts expressing antagonistic responses to government lockdown measures and relaying conspiracy theories about COVID-19, chemtrails, and other popular themes [e.g., *My Gusle, the Dearest Music*].

In private conversation, many of the singers who produced songs about the COVID-19 pandemic revealed some engagement with these stances: Mirko Crljen wrote and recorded a song that voices support for health officials but, in conversation in November 2020, he suggested that government officials have overblown the severity of the virus and admitted to not wearing masks unless stores demand it for entry. Mikulić-Jukić also believes that the government has overstepped in the pandemic. In two discussions in October and November, he suggested that a sensible approach would have focused on isolating and financially supporting vulnerable populations while allowing healthy individuals to remain working and acquire natural herd immunity. He also firmly supports the theory that COVID-19 was created in a Chinese laboratory, the product of experimentation with the SARS virus [see Bodner et al. 2021: 35-49]. In later discussions (in the early months of 2021) he has become even more critical of the pandemic saying he neither fears nor worries about the virus and will only receive a vaccine if it is forced upon him. In the song he wrote, though, the pandemic is.

figured only as an act of God, an existential threat producing moral imperatives (39) The song hints at the conflict between national and international policies that undergird many of the stresses and fears behind modern conspiracy theories, but stops short of making more pernicious or specific claims. It is decidedly anti-government, anti-globalist, and anti-elite, and yet, its criticism is generalized and toned down compared to some of his other work.

Such personal views do not perforce reveal that *guslars* wish to write anti-mask or anti-lockdown songs. Like any large population drawn from a wide range of locations and personal backgrounds, their views are varied, often conflicting and drawn from myriad private beliefs, histories, and positions. Jevremović, for instance, is sober about his chances of surviving the virus, confiding to me in October: “No one’s going to save me if I get ill. I won’t be getting that respirator. I’m over seventy years old... There’s no saving me. If this thing gets hold of me, that’s the end.” He has isolated himself in his rural mountain home [Image 3],



Image 3. Screen capture of Života Jevremović performing “Pesma o koroni” outside his rural mountain home [Jevremović 2020]

declaring it his own “independent republic” with a sign at the end of his driveway that reads “Corona, STOP!” to discourage visitors.

I would be remiss if I were to characterize *guslars* *a priori* as a generalized group rather than individuals of varying and often competing views, loyalties, goals, and impulses. The fact remains, however, that many of the (equally broad and varied) sentiments held by “anti-maskers” reflect currents of thought found amongst the *guslars* and a portion of their audience. The tone and sentiment of these beliefs also echo a common stance among *guslars* vis-à-vis the state. In this regard, the quandary is not so much a question of presence as one of absence. *Guslars* must not necessarily be conspiracy theorists or anti-vaccine proponents, but some of them likely are. With four *guslars* producing songs about the pandemic and hundreds of others in the region and in diaspora sitting out the topic, one wonders how not a single bard came forward to take any of these positions in song—positions that would likely find support from a sizeable portion of their audience. At the risk of creating prescriptive and leading hypotheses, I suggest a series of considerations that might explain this absence, factors that may also

reveal unique aspects of vernacular culture in the Western Balkans and provide some insightful cross-cultural comparisons.

“Well, reckon what it’s all about”

One fairly prosaic answer lies in the timing of events. In the earliest months of the pandemic, many of these conspiracy theories simply had not yet reached the region. There was widespread discussion about the true danger of the virus, or lack thereof, and fear of government overstep in enforcing lockdowns, but the virus was still new, and, while spreading quickly, its true nature was obscure. The first reactions by politicians in the region were also often well measured and reasonable (much to the surprise of many *guslars*). It was in mid-April when conspiracy theories imported wholesale from North America, such as those regarding philanthropist and business magnate Bill Gates, began to take hold on BCMS-language Facebook pages aimed at translating memes and news stories [e.g. *Conspiracy Against Humanity; Balkaners Rise Up*], as well as in online videos and local fringe media [Koprivica 2020; Zona 2020]. By late summer those trends had picked up velocity. At that point, with death-counts falling short of early projections [Hoft 2020a, 2020b], and examples from nations like Sweden that forewent strict measures without significant spikes in infections or deaths [Freiburger 2020; Irwin 2020], other data began to be weaponized as counter-narratives that spoke to a wider swathe of people in the area. These factors were coupled with a series of blunders and over-steps by politicians and a range of confusing and contradictory public health messaging [Mazzocco 2020] that raised the ire of the population and promoted broad diffusion of social media folklore questioning government measures.

In discussion, Mirko Crljen cited the early fear regarding the unknown nature of the virus as his greatest motivating factor in producing a song about the pandemic: “...*kad se pojavila, bili smo svi zatečeni i krenula je medijska hajka tako da je narod bio prestrašen u samom početku*” [When it first appeared, we were all caught off guard and then the media brouhaha began, really terrifying the folk in the beginning]. To allay their fears, reporters in Split approached Crljen with the idea that he join other public figures in addressing local citizens. Perhaps the unknown nature of the virus caused the bards to converge on an important message of support, but then one might ask why in later months no critical response arose from others. It is not unknown for *guslars* to return to important topics when new information or turns-of-events can motivate novel perspectives; it is unlikely that other singers felt their opportunity had passed. Moreover, Jevremović’s song was published in May, two months after the first *guslars* chimed in with no apparent qualms from the artists or audience. Various government decisions and pandemic events throughout the year could have served as fodder for another COVID song, so that their absence must be the result of other factors.

A second answer is likely that vernacular culture in the region does not have as strong an anti-science bent as in North America and Western Europe. Most popular “dark web” forums for the Balkans show poor support for anti-science narratives and Facebook pages devoted to these topics have significantly smaller followings than their Western counterparts. Even online meme culture and trolls on message boards regularly insult anti-vaxxers and ridicule those who question established science rather than supporting them. (40) This is not to say that there is no organized anti-vaccination movement; a small community does exist and appears to be growing in the pandemic [Barberá et al. 2021], but it has neither the numbers nor the history of those in the West [Bodner et al. 2021: 95-97; Radovanović 2017; Trifunović 2019]. Individual adherents exist as well, but they largely belong to a younger cohort than the majority demographic, middle-aged and older, who comprise the core audience of *guslar* songs. Vesna Trifunović [2019] has discussed the paternalistic models employed by the socialist state medical system in Yugoslavia and the legacy of that relationship in modern Serbia. Even in post-socialist contexts where government corruption remains high and political decisions are highly scrutinized, default acceptance of the decisions of medical officials may remain the norm for the *guslars*, their song writers, and their core audience who were raised in an older system built on different values.

This tendency, however, does not preclude the creation of an anti-vaccination-inspired song from a bard who ascribes to these views. Any singer might also ignore the anti-vaccine and conspiracy arguments and focus instead on government response to the pandemic, discussing it as overstep and infringement on personal and statutory rights. I believe that the primary answer instead lies in a humble observation regarding the role of the *guslar* and the limitations he faces in negotiating his position. This simple fact is often taken for granted or overlooked by the audience, by scholars of the art, and even by the singers and writers themselves: simply put, a *guslar* must motivate popular consensus towards his refined, but ultimately subjective, opinions and there are implicit limits, as a result, that may set boundaries on the attitudes he can express for communal adoption and consumption.

Much attention has been drawn to the “adjustments” made by artists in performance to cater songs to the needs of their audience; and yet, very often these discussions treat the content of the songs as immutable products, leaving the *guslars* a limited range of options: shorten the song for an impatient audience or stop it altogether and shift to another piece [Golemović 2008: 24; Lord 2000: 17; Murko 1951: 371-72]. When discussing the steps taken by an artist to prepare for a performance, stress remains on selection of pieces from an established repertoire. Factors affecting these decisions often include efforts to accommodate apposite themes that support audience tastes [Golemović 2008:21-30], suit notable events like commemorations of public figures, weddings, etc. [Primorac and Čaleta 2012: 146, 186], or that do not offend ethnically mixed audiences [Murko 1951: 241, 371-72; Žanić 2007: 51-53, 83-84]. Here, again, the adaptation of the length of pieces for various performance circumstances is also regularly a topic of concern [Golemović 2008: 24 n.37]. I believe that the COVID-19 songs

provide a window into the thematic production of songs from their nascence to go beyond discussions of limited alterations to established poetic products. I suggest that they reveal some of the choices (whether conscious or not) that go into producing songs that appeal to intended audiences while allowing the *guslar* to retain his position of authority.

The *Guslar* as *Vox Populi*: Negotiating Authority and Antagonism as the Voice of the People

As a cultivated nexus of traditional patterns and novel insights that is regularly embraced, tacitly, as meaningful by their audience, the songs produced by *guslars* often provide an avenue for social scientists to access a distilled essence of “folk” attitudes and perceptions. And yet, singing to the *gusle* has always been an elective art, one assumed and never assigned. Common wisdom ascribes the signified role of *vox populi* to the signifier of the *guslar* singing decasyllabic songs accompanied by the drone of the maple-wood instrument [Čolović 2008: 142-43; Golemović 2012: 134; Primorac and Čaleta 2012: 185; Trubarac Matić 2019: 103; Žanić 2007: 45, 54]. However, an analytical framework that vests sole power in a traditional symbol (even the symbol *par excellence*) serves to obscure the ways, even if they be minor, by which artists must obtain, retain, and negotiate the right to represent collective thought through the constant maintenance of their art form.

While traditional oral epic included the production of novel songs to convey emerging circumstances, the practice was more intensively focused on communal sharing of known standards, albeit continually re-worked through transmission and the improvisational technique specific to performance. Conversely, the repertoires of modern *guslars* have nearly inverted the ratios of traditional and novel songs, with unique and modern productions often forming the core of many singers’ catalogues. This slow transition to novel production and an appreciation of it among their audience occurred over a series of decades as older songs became calcified in national culture as historical documents and literature [Bošković-Stulli 1975: 148; Lord 2000: 124-38 cf. Đorđević-Belić 2016: 173-74] and as the method of artistic transmission shifted to its modern form. The shift brought the authority of communal tradition into a contemporary, literary-based system that provides heightened freedom to bards to draw personal experience and outlook into public view with near *de jure* approval as collective consensus. (41)

The majority of this authority is, indeed, tacit and assumed, vested *ab antique* through the symbolic resonance of the role of the *guslar*. Marko Čolak revealed the recursive nature of this authority in conversation when asked if *guslars* represent the voice of the people. He responded by simply citing two verse lines that open a *guslar*’s song as an axiomatic proof in and of themselves “*Gusle moje, glas naroda moga / Ja vas molim kô dragoga Boga...*” [My *gusle*, voice of my people / I pray to thee as to dear God...]. (42) For many, the symbol justifies itself through the repetition of its position which, in turn, becomes the justification of its position.

A number of scholars have highlighted this very privilege of the modern *guslar*. So long as the bard carries his symbolic trappings (*gusle*, folk costume, weapons, etc.), sings traditional songs recognized as the collective patrimony of the nation, and remains devoted to a celebration of integral ideals—heroism over cowardice, justice over injustice, faith over disbelief—promoted by the value system, his choice of subject and opinion in novel songs can remain surprisingly open. In fact, it can even include the celebration of entirely contradictory political actors and movements [Bošković-Stulli 1983: 181; Colović 2008: 142-66; Primorac and Čaleta 2012: 163-64; Žanić 2007: 45, 50, 54-56, 78]. The *guslar* and *gusle* act as the sort of open symbols that Roland Barthes discussed, constituted by a “floating chain of signifieds” [1977: 39]. If the *guslar* sings of heroism, his heroes can be ancient medieval knights, pre-modern bandits, socialist-era apparatchiks, or today’s celebrities. Similarly, a wide range of personal opinion can be accepted as representative of “folk opinion,” so long as the final narrative object is marshalled in the accoutrements of a recognizable *weltanschauung* that responds to the communal and aesthetic concerns of the intended, largely hermetic, audience [Medenica 1939: 60-61].

Thus, a *guslar* has to negotiate his position as *vox populi*, recognizing that by electing himself to the position he must balance a sense of freedom to speak his mind with having his opinion accepted by his community. A certain responsibility comes with that power. The role of the people’s voice and retainer of collective memory imposes a converse restriction on the bard to follow a noble ethic, supporting his collective as a protector and defender at all times. Normal circumstances allow for that defense to be voiced in various forms of critique. When political figures make contested decisions, *guslars* usually find themselves in a safe position to rail against the perceived injustice and mobilize public opinion. Even in war time, when such songs sometimes fueled violence, song production was often removed from the political machinations that relied on the sentiments of that thought-world to legitimate hostility. A political figure in war time might employ a *guslar* to rally popular support, but battlefield decisions are not left to the bards, beyond, of course, those rare politicians, war lords, and high-ranking soldiers who were themselves *guslars* [Žanić 2007: 26-33].

The only pitfall by which a bard’s legitimacy might be revoked is to produce songs that are very clearly rejected by the population or that cause them to question the privileged voice assumed by and assigned to the singer [cf. Golemović 2008: 22-30]. It is here where the responsibility of the *guslar* can curtail his ability to voice certain opinions. In the context of a pandemic, if a bard spreads misinformation, that act could endanger lives. It would be remembered, undermine his authority, rest on his conscience, and potentially alter the very public opinion that validates his voice. Those *guslars* that may wish to use their platform to condemn government overreach in the pandemic, or to vent frustrations with government mandates, find themselves in a double-bind. Whether consciously or not, I believe that they are aware of these dangers and that awareness forces them to voice support for healthcare professionals or, at bare minimum, to suggest that people stay at home and wait out the storm.

In conversation in October, Jevremović conveyed this sentiment well. Even though he was not speaking about *guslars* in particular, the logic of his approach to personal responsibility can be carried over from those who might get infected to those artists who might hypothetically foment further suspicion and lead others into peril.

Е, сад што људи 'оће да пркосе, то је у њиховој природи. Како год да направите, неће им ваљати. Ако им забраните и заведете полицијски час, и мени не одговара, али они кажу: „ооови к'о фашисти!“... Ниједна власт никоме никад није ваљала, па не ваља ни ова... не верујем ни да је тамо, да су људи тамо задовољни [...] не знам, не ваља им председник, не ваља им градоначелник, не ваља им шеф полиције, не ваља им, не знам ко им све не ваља... Али, ако би променили власт, да променимо фигуративно рецимо, онда, она опет не би ваљала некоме. Значи, постоји једна код нас што каже: „народу није нико ручак посолио.“

И сад то је, рецимо, кад он неће да носи маску ил' да се повинује, е [...] нечему што је [...] дато од стожера, како ви то кажете [...] од власти... то је његов јавни пркос. То он на тај начин обструира оно што власт хоће да спроведе. У реду. Ја се са тим слажем али би рек'о овако: Ако се ти, душо моја, будеш заразио вирусом, онда ти си сâм крив за то, онда сâм и сноси трошкове лећења. Ако би то било тако него: „ја 'оћу да идем како ја хоћу а кад ми се деси, онда ми треба да легнем у болницу да ми држава обезбеди кревет и аспиратор [sic] (не дај... Боже). А ако нема довољно лежајева онда је *власт* крива а нисам крив *ја* што сам иш'о тамо негде где не треба да буде“... Сви су пркосни док неко којег знају не буде болестан... Овде има једна реклама [...] каже један тамо проматер [sic] за неку пољопривреду: „ја вам кажем како треба, а ви радите како 'оћете.“

[The fact that people are defiant, that's in their nature. However, you do it, it won't be good enough for them. If you ban them and implement a curfew... I don't like it either, but they say, “Theeey're fascists!”... No government has ever been good enough for anyone ever; so, of course, this government is no good either... I doubt that people over there [in Canada] are satisfied [...] I dunno... the President is worthless, the Mayor is worthless, the Chief of Police is worthless, I don't know who else is worthless... But if they changed the government, let's just say... then *they'd* be worthless to someone else. I mean... there's this one [saw] over here that says, “No one has ever salted the folk's lunch.”

And so, let's say, when someone won't wear a mask or won't submit to [...] whatever is [...] suggested by the [health officials] [...] from the government... that's his public defiance. In that way, he obstructs what

the government is trying to implement. Okay. I'm okay with that, but I would say this: "If you, my friend, catch the virus, then you alone are at fault, so you take care of the hospital bill." If it were like that instead of, "I want to go where I please, but if it happens to me, then I need to lay in a bed in the hospital and the state has to ensure I have a bed and a respirator (God forbid). And if there aren't enough beds then *the government* is at fault, not *I* who went where I shouldn't have been..." Everyone is defiant until someone they know gets sick... There's an advertisement here [...] some promoter for some farmer [supply company] says, "I tell you how it needs to be done, you do whatever you like."

Jevremović recognizes a human need to fear and defy oppression, viewing it in an understandable, if not positive, light, but he also stresses an ethic of personal responsibility that must keep defiance at bay. Here, the collective is reformulated as those in a small country who must communally pay for the foolish mistakes of their co-nationals. That the government is the arbiter of these funds and dictates how others may act is subservient to the harm that an individual (and by extension, a bard) can do to his/her nation.

One must also remember that even in their modern iteration, *guslars* retain a praxis of artistry that is more attuned to public performance. They navigate the waters of mediated performance with some liberties but with no impunity, and often have very little engagement with or control over the digital afterlives of their song uploads. Many are recorded in studios run by professional or lay audio technicians that perform the necessary mixing; others are recorded by local news channels who choose where and how to air their songs; yet others are recorded on cell phones by younger family, peers, or the *guslars* themselves who then enlist aid in uploading to digital platforms. Beyond the upload, songs enter the ether of the Internet and take on a life, or at least a digital journey, of their own. While the bard in recorded performance may speak to an imaginary/distant audience [Đorđević-Belić 2016: 105-07, 112] in the same way that he engages with a live one, he lacks the critical and real-time feedback that a live audience provides.

Richard Bauman [1992: 44] wrote generally of the act of performance that it "makes one communicatively accountable; it assigns to an audience the responsibility of evaluating the relative skill and effectiveness of the performer's accomplishment." This definition carries beyond the act of performance and into the message conveyed by performance artists. Much like stand-up comedians [Quirk 2015: 78], *guslars* will often test and refine their songs on live audiences. They will judge, from reactions and post-performance discussion, how suitable the song and its component verses are for public consumption [Medenica 1939: 60-61; Primorac and Čaleta 2012: 185]. These evaluations can lead to alterations and refinements of verse lines as well as the wholesale abandonment of entire songs, and in this way open the "immutable" voice of the bard to a process of refinement subject to reflection, evaluation, re-evaluation, contention, and dispute [Đorđević-Belić 2016: 168, 171-73, 206]. In pandemic circumstances, live

performances have been postponed, and test audiences have become limited to close family and friends. The songs produced under these conditions must perforce be tempered by conservative considerations to ensure that a receptive audience is guaranteed. A hypothetical *guslar*'s song that covers anti-mask, anti-lockdown, or conspiracy theory topics regarding the COVID-19 pandemic would likely find a receptive audience. However, I believe that, due to the very aspects of social legitimacy that give authority to the role of the *guslar*, the bards are in many ways inhibited from making such songs in the current context. (43)

“We heralds are then at all the bells”: A Conclusion

When the COVID-19 pandemic reached the shores of the Western Balkans, the chaos that ensued prompted a series of vernacular artists to pen songs and take to YouTube to disseminate them. Of the wide range of material shared at that time, notable were three songs by three *guslars*, Marko Čolak from Ledinac (Donji Mamići), Bosnia-Herzegovina, Mirko Crljen from Ruda, Croatia, and Života Jevremović from Igrišće, Serbia. Each came to the task with a different goal: Crljen wanted to calm the people whom he believed the media was frightening with their incessant and panicked focus on the pandemic. Čolak and his regular writing partner, the vernacular poet Frano Mikulić-Jukić, saw injustices playing out in the pandemic and were once again called to speak out with one of their “songs of indignation.” Jevremović admits that, more than anything else, he wanted to demonstrate how great his home of Igrišće is by producing a traditional response to the virus that would exhibit his poetic skills and draw attention to his home town.

These songs also differ in their delivery and their approaches to the topic: Crljen and Jevremović chronicle the events of the pandemic in simple terms highlighted by war metaphors that pit their nations’ public health officials in a battle against the virus. Čolak and Mikulić-Jukić use their typical inflammatory approach to take on globalist politics and those they deem corrupt: politicians and vampiric NGOs and aid groups. Crljen and Jevremović paint the virus as an “enemy at the gates” about to meet its match, while Čolak and Mikulić-Jukić portray it as the hand of God sent to punish the evil and to return the good to their foundations. The divergent aims of all three songs converge on a strong message of support for the people, asking them to stay at home and to wait out the storm that must surely end.

Many *guslars* and members of their regular audience currently see a danger in the government’s response to the pandemic. An anti-government stance is also quite common among *guslars* and is certainly a common ethic that informs their songs. Despite these facts, many antagonistic sentiments regarding the pandemic, including a number of conspiracy theories that are found in currents of thought shared amongst and believed by *guslars* and their audience, are notably absent from these songs. I contend that the very public support that allows *guslars* to claim a position of authority among their audience as “the voice of the people” reciprocally confers upon them a duty to serve as figurative defenders of that

population (or at least their interests) and thus must inevitably restrain their ethic of revolt and critique which, in a global pandemic, might lead their listeners into harm and thereby undermine the *guslar*'s authority.

NOTES

1 As is the case for many of us, the global pandemic upended my fieldwork travel plans. The research for this paper was conducted from abroad and relies largely upon online material collected and interviews conducted over social media platforms between October 2020 and April 2021. I owe a great deal of thanks to Mirko Crljen, Marko Čolak, Života Jevremović, and Frano Mikulić-Jukić for generously providing their time and thoughts to co-create this work with me. *Dužan sam vam na mislima i pomoći. Hvala lijepa, gospodo.* Thanks also to Marina Jurić, Drs. Naomi McPherson and Jeanmarie Rouhier Willoughby, and my anonymous reviewers for their input on the article.

2 While this article focuses on three songs with a serious tone, there was a fourth, humorous song produced by an unnamed *guslar* (likely the Montenegrin Vaso Đondović) in April of 2020. The song, *Šta se mala s'tobom desi* [Babe, what is going on with you?] [Unknown a 2020], paints a sentimentalized and jocular account of a village man frightened that his love interest has waited until a pandemic to requite his affections. Unlike the *bećarac* songs that targeted the many novel, humorous, and absurd conditions of the pandemic, this song imagines an amusing scenario within those conditions.

3 Đorđević-Belić [2016; 2017] uses Nekliudov's [1995] concept of "postfolklore" to describe this shift.

4 For more on the traditional art form of oral epic singing to the *gusle*, see Foley 1995; Jurić 2019: 37-42; Lord 2000; Murko 1951. On the contemporary form of the art see Đorđević-Belić 2016, 2017; Golemović 2008, 2012; Primorac and Čaleta 2012.

5 This presumably should read "*učiniš*" "*What are you doing...*" and may represent an error in performance. Crljen did not provide me with a written text.

6 A clear forehead means one's brow is not furrowed with stress or worry; a rosy/ruddy face is used as a sign of good health. The line could best be translated as: "Stay positive and healthy." This verse is hendecasyllabic with the initial "*P*" acting, though not actually functioning, as a hypermetric exclamation.

7 The song is a COVID-themed update to the traditional Mostar *sevdalinka*, "*Čudna jada od Mostara grada*" [A Strange Affliction from Mostar City], best known from the 1990 recording by Meho Puzić and made popular in recent times by the Band Mostar Sevdah Reunion [2003]. For more on *sevdalinka*, see Efenđić 2015.

8 Anacrusis in verses one and 19 is caused by the insertion of hypermetric shouts. Verse 18 is begun with such an exclamation, but it is devolved and abandoned part way through. Verse three is hypermetric, extended to a hendecasyllable by the substitution in performance of "*Omkaða*" [since] for its variant form "*omkað*" in the written text. Verse 17 is hypometric (nonasyllabic).

9 LL. Original text reads “Откад” which better conforms to meter.

10 LL. Original text reads “свим је уста шанса”

11 *Lapsus lectionis*. The original line reads “Јер ти нада за живот се буди” [Since your hope for life awakens] but is sung in performance as “Јер ту живот са њима се буди” [With them, life here awakens]. A substantial variation; translation reflects the intended meaning.

12 *Lapsus linguae*. “белм.”

13 LL. The original text reads “вitezови знања,” which offers the correct plural and lacks the superfluous preposition. The variation in performance, however, does not detract from the meaning and remains unambiguous to listeners.

14 Predrag Kon is Head of the Department for immunization at the Institute of Public Health in Belgrade. Darija Kisić Tepavčević is an associate professor at the Department of Medicine at Belgrade University and Deputy Director of the Milan Jovanović Batut Institute for Public Health in Serbia.

15 He also regularly differentiates those who do and do not listen to folk music (a distinction he often conflates with age) with a great touch of folk witticism as those whose music is above the belt (traditional) and those whose music is below the belt (modern).

16 Verses one and two begin with hypermetric shouts. Verses two, five, 33, and 61 are performed as hypermetric hendecasyllabic lines, possibly due to Čolak filling out words that were elided in the original text (five, 33) or inserting an extra conjunction in performance (two, 61). Some or all of these may have been in the original text when written for the performance.

17 LL. Original texts reads “*istjerali*.” Both forms are common in the region.

18 I am unaware of this as a folk idiom, though it may be. Mikulić-Jukić explains these two lines to mean that “one gets what they are asking for.” Here it is meant to represent those working in a Chinese laboratory who played God with the original Coronavirus and created something outside of their control (see below).

19 LL. “*Europi*.” The original, as written, would require elision and the singer has (intentionally or unintentionally) shifted to (or simply performed) a variant pronunciation which, today, is more associated with standard Bosnian and Serbian but still open to bards of all denominations for metrical imperatives.

20 To wrap oneself/someone in black [*zamotati/zaviti (se) u crno*] is an ancient metaphor linked to the imagery of widow’s weeds. It means to aggrieve oneself or another because of someone’s death which is extended to a broader sense of drawing someone into or finding oneself in a difficult situation.

21 This is drawn from a folk expression: *Kad se magarcu voda zalije za uši, tek tad propliva* [When the water reaches the ass’s ears, only then does it begin to swim]. Here it is meant to suggest that the people of Croatia only recognized and understood how far they had strayed from a righteous/sensible path when they were debilitated by a pandemic.

22 *Lapsus linguae*. The text reads “*redali se*” [lined up, aligned] while Čolak sings “*radile*” [they worked, f. pl.]. I have translated the intended meaning in English.

23 LL. “*prkoseći*.” English translation reflects intended meaning.

24 “*Praviti račun bez krčmara*” [to start a tab without the publican (present)] is to count on something which is not assured.

25 LL. “*Svaku*.” The meaning is retained.

26 In standard language “*mišje*.” The inclusion of an extra syllable to fill out meter carries from the text as this variant form is common in the spoken language of Čolak and Mikulić-Jukić’s region of Herzegovina.

27 LL. “*pade*.” Meaning is retained.

28 LL. “*nastade*.” Meaning is retained.

29 LL. “*Drukčije se*.” The English translation conveys the intended meaning.

30 *Krojiti gaće (kome)*” [to tailor (someone’s) underwear] is an idiom implying that someone is performing work for others but in their own way or for their own benefit.

31 LL. “*Il’ nam je umirat’*.” Meaning is retained.

32 LL. “*C’jeli svijet se temeljima vraća*.” This verse illustrates the remnants of an oral-formulaic, improvisatory tendency. While no longer based on an oral-derived model of training, prolonged experience to versification in decasyllabic meter has Čolak naturally converting Mikulić-Jukić’s hendecasyllabic line into a sensible (albeit grammatically imperfect) decasyllabic line in the heat of performance.

33 *Lapsus linguae*. “*s’vati*.” This is likely an intentional shift from Mikulić-Jukić’s dialectical/idiolectical phrasing to a more comfortable standard.

34 LL. “*Izić’*.” This, too, might represent a somewhat conscious shift to a preferred form.

35 These comments are aimed broadly at Italian social interactions (seen as warm and casual in opposition to Northern European practices) and, more specifically, at certain events that occurred in March. In a December conversation, Mikulić-Jukić particularly noted a series of mass festivities in Lombardy that were linked to a soccer victory by the team Atalanta B. C. that turned into a super-spreader event [Azzoni and Dampf 2020]. Italy was also criticized for its slow reaction time in closing its borders as well as for some early efforts to combat anti-Chinese racism such as the “Hug a Chinese” campaign launched in Florence, which received backlash from various groups as an act of “virtue signalling” that increased the spread of the virus [Malloy 2020; Watson 2020a, 2020b; Yahoo!news 2020].

36 A Zagreb-based, non-government organization founded in 1994, the group fights for gender equality and women’s rights, largely by offering legal and psychological assistance as well as shelter to victims of rights abuses and gender-based violence. The adjectives in the group’s name alternate from feminine to masculine to reflect their intended mission of gender equality; the acronym, too is intentional, as it mirrors the word “*babe*” [old women].

37 He also notes external forces that dictate this relationship, namely that there is a dearth of writers in the region and that many *guslars* come to him when they want a song written about a particular event.

38 This stance is not entirely a product of contemporary circumstances, but a current of anti-authority posturing that finds echoes in the *guslars* of former eras. See, for instance, Primorac and Čaleta 2012: 160-63; Rihman-Auguštin 1972: 149-50; Žanić 2007: 45-46. Mirko Crljen says of *guslars*, "...[mi] *smo opozicija svim vlastima*" [We are the opposition to all governments]. See also the critical responses of *guslars* regarding the practices of bards who propagandize for governments and their opinions of their poor reputation in certain elite circles in Đorđević-Belić 2016: 193-200 and Primorac and Čaleta 2012: 171-73.

39 The only vernacular song that hinted at conspiracy theories was the "*Korona Bečarac*" [Grubešić and Grubešić 2020]. The second stanza begins: "*Političari, znanstvenici bruje / Nitko ne zna što se iza kuje / Mudri vele zavjeru nam kroje / moćne sile iza svega stoje / Drugi opet da smo kraja blizu / Nevjera je izazvala krizu / Na rubu smo posljednji vremena / Nešto nam se uveliko sprema*" [Politicians and scientists are buzzing / No one knows what they're plotting behind [closed doors/the scenes, etc.] / The wise say they're plotting a conspiracy / Great powers are behind it all / Others say that we're near the end / Lack of faith has caused a crisis / We're on the verge of the end times / Something big is being prepared for us] [ll. 9-16]. Here, too, the concept is barely pursued before the singers re-route the message, preferring a moralizing Christian narrative. Formulations of the pandemic as divine retribution seem to have found a unique purchase among Croatian Catholics. Some explanation of this may be found in the fact that the arrival of COVID-19 corresponded with the worst earthquake (5.5 magnitude, centered on Zagreb) to hit the region in 140 years [Markušić et al. 2020]). That quake was followed by a series through the year as well as drastic flooding in July, a conglomerate of events that might have the most steadfast atheist questioning whether some deity was angry.

40 See, for instance, the aspersions cast upon tennis star Novak Đoković in online circles after he contracted COVID-19. A prominent vegan anti-vaxxer whose wife, Jelena, is an alternative-health and lifestyle blogger, Đoković held an exhibition charity tennis tour, the Adria Tour, in June. The tour's first match in Belgrade was highly criticized for its full crowds and lack of physical distancing and mask requirements. After the second match in Zadar, Đoković, his wife, and three other contestants tested positive for the virus. Local internet message boards soon exploded with witty criticisms, e.g., "Quickly, vaccinate him... oh wait," "He should take Jelena's mother's-milk soap [as a cure]" [iguana775 2020].

41 This situation should not be understood as a transition of technique, but rather as a slow replacement of singers working on the older model with those working on the newer and a concomitant shift in audience expectations.

42 Unfortunately, Čolak could not remember whence these lines derived. I am unable to find this particular song in collections or online media. The first line, however, mirrors a number of similar multiforms found elsewhere in initial contextual formulae [Đorđević-Belić 2017:90-104] that open *guslar*'s songs. E.g.

“Gusle moje, diko roda moga” [My gusle, pride of my people] [Momčilo 2016], “Gusle moje od javora suva” [My gusle of dry maple[wood]] [Opačić-Čanica 1987:95], “Gusle moje drvo javorovo” [My gusle [of] maple wood].

43 A reviewer for this article has perceptively asked a pointed question that I too have pondered in this research: whether or not contemporary *guslars* might also be actively trying to repair their public image. I will be exploring that question in a future publication.

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