

Editor's Introduction to the *Folklorica* Special Issue "Folklore and Protest II"

The theme of folklore and protest in Belarus and Russia merits special comment at this juncture in history. The constitutions of both countries guarantee the right to free assembly (see Article 31 [Constitution of the Russian Federation 2022] and Article 35 [Constitution of the Republic of Belarus 2022]). However, since their ratification (in 1993 and 1994 respectively), the right to free assembly and thus, to protest, has been severely curtailed in both nations. In effect, the act of assembly itself is often perceived by these states as an illegal act designed to undermine social norms and foster extremist views. This attitude may have curtailed protest, but it has not eliminated it completely in either country, as we know. Nevertheless, to establish the context for protest today, particularly in light of the war in Ukraine, we will begin this special issue on Folklore and Protest with an overview of the legal changes regarding assembly in Belarus and Russia since the 2000s.

Beginning in 2005, Belarus took steps to limit citizen rights of assembly with the enactment of Law 193-1, the first step toward the criminalization of protest. It held protestors responsible for organizing or participating in activities of "unregistered" organizations as well as required them to reimburse court costs for "violating the order of organizing and holding mass events" [Belarusian National Youth Council 2022]. In effect, by sanctioning protests only for "registered" organizations and, likewise, requiring all protests to be approved by state authorities, "legal" protest became nearly impossible. The state controlled both registration and permitting processes and refused (or made untenable) protests they deemed objectionable. Opposition groups often lost their status as registered organizations, thereby making any of their public actions subject to legal penalties [Satsunkevich et al 2020].

The law was repealed in 2019 but was restored in 2022 in the wake of the spate of protests against Lukashenka's fraudulent election in summer 2020 [CSO Meter 2022; *Slavic Review* 2021]. In addition, a new set of laws designed to combat extremism in the country have been enacted since April 2021 [*Euronews* 2021]. Individual activists and organizations, including political parties, trade unions, religious or other public groups, and international organizations, may be charged with extremism for protesting (e.g., by "inciting discord" as described in the law). Of particular note, considering one of Putin's justifications for the war in Ukraine, is the law on Preventing the Rehabilitation of Nazism. The Ministry of Justice and Office for Religious and Ethnic Affairs are charged with monitoring groups to "counteract the rehabilitation of Nazism...by banning activities and eliminating extremist organizations" [Legal Transformation Center 2021]. Under the auspices of this law, restrictions on journalists as well as on Internet access have increased, and websites critical of the government have been fined or shuttered [*Meduza* 2021].

The Russian legislative crackdown on assembly likewise emerged in response to protests about a fraudulent election, in this case, 2011 elections for

the *Duma*. Alexei Navalny, Boris Nemstov, and other opposition activists organized the so-called “Snow Revolution,” a series of mass protests that continued into 2012 in the lead up to Putin’s reelection as president [Global Nonviolent Action Database 2012; Goncharenko 2012]. The 2012 law increased fines for participants involved in protests that cause property damage or harm people, with civil servants receiving double fines; businesses could also be fined if they support or helped to organize the protests. Two years later, Russia passed a law that notification of all protests must be sent to state officials. While official permission was not required by this law, officials could restrict the activities in response to the notification. If activists persisted with the original plan, the protest would be deemed “unauthorized.” Participants in an “unauthorized public gathering can be punished by administrative arrest,” and repeat offenders were subject to up to five years in prison [Human Rights Watch 2014]. As in Belarus, restrictions on organizations deemed to be a threat by state authorities (per the foreign agent law passed in 2012) limited dissenting voices on the web and across the country under the guise of protecting the country from “foreign influences” (namely organizations supported by money from outside the country) [Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2017]. The most prominent victim of the law was the human rights organization Memorial in 2021 [Gavin 2021]. My own research on Russian legends since 2001 has shown a consistent and growing concern with attempts by the United States to undermine Russia since the fall of the USSR, a trend which Eliot Borenstein [2019] has also documented. Legend texts I have collected focus on American threats to the Russian populace, particularly to children and youth, in the guise of unhealthy food, deadly diseases, drug addiction, environmental destruction, and corrupt moral and social values. Putin has astutely capitalized on the general concerns expressed by the populace in these legends about the West in the lead up to the Ukrainian invasion. Lesiv demonstrates in her article, “Not All Quiet on the Culinary Front: The Battle Over Borshch in Ukraine,” how a seemingly mundane, even humorous, disagreement over the origins of beet soup can reflect a much more dire and critical message than one might expect [Lesiv 2021: 72]. She argues that Ukrainians have perceived borshch through the lens of the Russian threat to their nation. Similarly, these legends convey the message that the United States is a threat to Russia and its populace. The stories are not just conspiracy theories worthy of dismissal by “right-thinking” people but convey serious fears. They also demonstrate the potential harm a legend text may do, as Bodner et al [Bodner et al 2021] have likewise documented in their study of COVID-19 and QAnon conspiracies. People who believe these stories may take ostensive action to thwart the “enemy” as they understand it, leading, in extreme cases, to violence. In daily life, the legends exacerbate mistrust and greater acceptance of Putin’s narrative about the war in Ukraine as caused by the West’s desire for Russia’s downfall.

Despite efforts on the part of the state to curtail dissent, protests have continued in both countries. We cannot document all the events that have provoked demonstrations here, but the Laboratory for Theoretical Folklore Studies has been actively collecting material on Russian protest (from one-person

pickets to mass gatherings) since 2015. Their database of vernacular responses to the Russian state includes material on over 400 protests in that time, largely in Saint Petersburg and Moscow, but also in some regional cities (for more information their scholarship in this area, see [Arkhipova et al 2016; Arkhipova et al 2018]).

The most recent legislation to curb public protest came in response to demonstrations against Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In March 2022, anti-war protests, in particular, were criminalized. Protesters have been charged for "discrediting the Russian armed forces," a core component of the law, which is punishable by up to 15 years in prison. [Human Rights Watch 2022]. Simultaneously, the *Duma* passed legislation that severely limits freedom of the press when reporting on the war [Harding 2022]. In March, they also banned or limited access to many "extremist" social media platforms, including Facebook and Instagram (which are currently inaccessible without a virtual private network), apparently in an effort to limit access to alternative information on the war [Bond and Allyn 2022]. This designation means that even scholars cannot cite material from these social media platforms without potential legal consequences. While anti-war protests erupted in February in Belarus and Russia, since that time the laws have truly resulted in a chilling effect on public dissent, more so than previous laws have done. Over 15,000 arrests have been reported in Russia alone between February and June 2022, including those of prominent opposition activists, such as Vladimir Kara-Murza [Simon 2022]. Certainly, some protests continue, but they are much smaller than they were in the first month after the war began. My co-editor Mariya Lesiv observes, in her introduction to the companion volume to this issue, that Ukrainians perceive this paucity of dissent as tacit acceptance of the war, at least on the part of the Russians [Lesiv 2021: ix].

Dissent, however, has not disappeared. Out of fear of arrest, many protesters have taken alternative approaches to convey their concerns about the war. From the perspective of Ukrainians facing death and the destruction of their homeland, these tactics seem insulting. However, from the perspective of folklore studies, they represent a creative vernacular expression of dissent in an oppressive context. Small (often anonymous) acts of rebellion give voice and some degree of agency to those who cannot speak out more publicly without legal repercussions. See, for instance, Image 1 below of graffiti ("Say War Aloud") on a Saint Petersburg building in response to the Russian law that fines anyone calling the "special operation" in Ukraine a war [Facebook 2022]. The words themselves are taboo, of course, and thus subversive. The fact that the slogan is painted in blue to represent the Ukrainian flag reinforces both support for Ukrainians and disagreement with Russia's hyper-nationalist war.

The holiday of Victory Day in Russia likewise produced a series of vernacular anti-war responses across the country. On a day when Putin likened the soldiers fighting in Ukraine to World War II veterans, there was a backlash from committed activists. The Instagrammer philippenzo painted rows of coffins with the slogan Цінк наш! [Zinc (used in the metal containers to transport dead

soldiers) is ours!] on a wall in Volgograd (Image 2) [philippenzo 2022]. Two reporters from the Lenta.ru news site posted anti-war articles (since removed)



Image 1: Say War Aloud on Saint Petersburg building [Facebook 2022]



Image 2: Zinc is Ours! Graffiti in Volgograd posted on Instagram on Victory Day 2022 by its creator philippenzo

and were fired as a result [Lenta.ru 2022]. Individuals were also arrested for marching with anti-war placards in the Immortal Regiment, designed to remember one's relatives who had participated in combat [Moscow Times 2022].

Victory Day also produced a rumor panic of sorts; people believed that Putin intended to begin general conscription of men of fighting age on May 9. In response, many young men who left the country to avoid the draft (e.g., a colleague's son-in-law went to Armenia). In fact, many dissenters, particularly in the Internet technology field, had already departed [Kanchev et al 2022; Boutsko 2022]. According to a friend, a web designer who has worked in the United States for the last three years, her former Saint Petersburg coworkers all departed within a week of the war's onset. Intending to work remotely, they headed for Turkey, Thailand, Central Asian or southeastern European countries. Belarus is no exception, with activists and artists often leaving for their own protection [Demytrie 2022].

Artists, musicians, and writers, whether in Belarus or Russia, have been among the most vocal in their opposition to the war thus far [Sherwood 2022; Zitser 2022; Pinson and Talmazan 2022; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2022; Erizano 2022]. As Lesiv discusses in her overview, the arts have long been the source of protest and dissent in the regions of world that *Folklorica* studies [Lesiv 2022: iii]. Against the backdrop of this cultural history, the articles in this volume bring to the fore how the creative class has responded with resistance and protest in their works. Most importantly, these creators draw on the folk tradition to convey their message of dissent. In other words, they rely on informal and traditional cultural practices, often as expressed by marginalized voices, to resist and protest the status quo. All four pieces demonstrate how folk genres have been incorporated into elite cultural forms (art, literature, and medicine) to express

dissent with institutional practices. This phenomenon illustrates not only the power of folk tradition, but an important fact about the permeability of cultural forms, be they defined as pop, folk, or elite. They are part of an ongoing conversation for members of any culture, who may extract and employ elements, in this case, folk materials, that best suit the purpose at hand.

It may seem odd to consider perinatal specialists as part of the creative class. However, Tatiana Kuksa presents a persuasive case for just such a classification in her piece “Activism and Patient Vulnerability: Resistance to Medical Authority and Regulation in Russia.” The midwives and doulas she interviewed repeatedly stress applying humane values and approaches to the medical system surrounding pregnancy, labor, and delivery. They have used their medical training to resist the “conveyor” system characteristic of medicine in Soviet and post-socialist Russia (for a discussion, see [Belousova 2003; Rouhier-Willoughby 2008]). Kuksa examines how these women have brought a new vernacular model of birth to the fore that has altered what some women expect from pregnancy and delivery. This model allows these women to reframe the rite of childbirth according to their own creative vision, challenging official medical protocols with their one-size-fits-all approach. In addition, women also rely on established folk genres to describe their (usually negative) experiences with medical professionals. Ultimately, folk material, be it ritual or text, is a creative means to express dissent, resist, and protest and, as noted above, crosses among levels of culture, even into the bureaucratic realm of legal prose.

Izabela Zdun shifts the focus to perhaps the most well-known and beloved folk genre: the tale. In her article, “Hoping against Hope? On Transformation in Liudmila Petrushevskaja’s Fairy Tales,” she explores how the author draws on the tropes of the fairy tale in particular to express her concerns and resistance to contemporary values. Petrushevskaja has written dozens of fairy tales, but Zdun focuses on two stories, “Happy New Year, Law-Breaker!” and “The Mirrors’ Fairy Tale.” They bring to the fore the author’s concern about social values that isolate urban Russian citizens. In both stories, the author offers a ray of hope in a bleak existence: the chance to build community. Zdun argues that the fairy tale, with its focus on the creation of families and solidarity among disparate (and often antagonistic) actors, is an especially apt choice for Petrushevskaja’s call for social change in Russia today.

Svetlana Yefimenko takes us back to the 19th century in her article “Listen Then, Avars, to What I Tell You:” The Unification of Chechen and Avar Oral Culture in Tolstoy’s *The Cossacks* and *Hadji Murat*.” This contribution is particularly timely, because Tolstoy expresses his dissent with Russia’s war in the Caucasus. Tolstoy, who served in the Russian army during the war, incorporates Chechen and Avar folk song (and their performance) into these works to convey his disagreement with the imperialist conflict. Yefimenko argues that these works, by highlighting the song texts themselves, force the reader to bear witness to the crimes of the tsarist army in the region. Tolstoy is renowned as a champion of the marginalized, and these two pieces are no exception. Tolstoy recognizes the power of (native) oral texts that allow the Chechens and Avars to articulate their

own history and culture and to reject the imperialist narrative that they were barbarians.

This issue concludes with a report by Sasha Razor that showcases how the visual arts have served as a means to protest the current political situation in Belarus. These artists have drawn on the rich folk traditions of Belarusian embroidery to express their dissent with Lukashenka's election. As Razor outlines in "The Code of Presence: Belarusian Protest Embroideries and Textile Patterns," the exhibit she organized at the University of Michigan Library conveys how and why these women artists have chosen this medium. The traditional forms challenge difficulties with defining Belarusian identity and also highlight the seminal role of women's voices in dissent in Belarus today.

I want to thank Mariya Lesiv, my co-editor of the companion volume on Folklore and Protest, for her dedication and perseverance at a horrific time in her native country of Ukraine. Thanks also to *Folklorica*'s editorial assistants for their hard work on both special volumes on Folklore and Protest, Isabella Palange and Johnna Warkentine. My gratitude goes to the contributors for their thought-provoking pieces and their patience with an editing process delayed by my own grief and shock over the war. The careful and detailed readings by external reviewers make my work as editor much smoother and are most appreciated. After 10 years, I am stepping down as editor as of this issue. I offer my profound thanks to the SEEFA members who have steadfastly supported folklore scholarship and the journal during my tenure. Special thanks go to Rick Spencer, my editorial assistant for many years. He developed an invaluable formatting template for the journal, and his willingness to troubleshoot technical issues, even after he had left the position, merits special mention. I am pleased to welcome Benjamin Gatling as the new editor of *Folklorica* as of January 2023. I am sure the journal will continue to thrive in his capable hands.

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