

NEWS IN BRIEF

JOINT ESTONIAN-BELARUSIAN WEBINAR “MISSION POSSIBLE V: ADAPTATIONS, TRANSFORMATIONS, AND FUNDAMENTAL ASPECTS OF VERNACULAR CULTURE”

Academic cooperation between the Estonian Literary Museum and the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus has lasted for more than five years and has resulted in a number of academic events: conferences, seminars, workshops, etc. Previously these events took place either in Estonia or in Belarus, giving all the participants an opportunity to meet face-to-face and discuss their research during the conference sessions and social events. This year's extraordinary circumstances have affected the format of the academic meeting. As international travelling was restricted, the fifth seminar in the “Mission possible” project was held online in MS TEAMS environment. While limiting the possibilities of informal socializing, such a format has nevertheless proved to be a convenient means to bring together scholars with different backgrounds and discuss the important issues of folk culture.

The topic of the seminar “Adaptations, transformations, and fundamental aspects of vernacular culture”¹ implied that folklore is deeply embedded in everyday life and swiftly reflects any changes in social, political, economic, and cultural spheres. While these transformations might be subtle and less noticeable than the particular events that stimulate them, the adaptive strategy of folklore is crucial for our understanding of how society functions on a grassroots level. The papers presented at the seminar discussed both recent phenomena and the fundamental aspects of Estonian, Belarusian, and world folklore.

The seminar consisted of three panels which ran in a single track, giving everyone an opportunity to listen to all the presentations. The first panel titled “**Vernacular replies to contemporary challenges**” reflected on digital and real-life adaptations of folklore to the changes in our everyday life. The panel consisted of three presentations. Mare Kalda's presentation “Fake events as a part of internet folklore” analysed dozens of humorous Facebook events that became popular among Estonian young people in 2018, and placed them into the framework of folk genres classification. The focus on humorousness was also prominent in the subsequent presentation by Piret Voolaid and Anastasiya Fiadotava. In their paper “Comparing virtual activities of Estonian and Belarusian football fans during COVID-19 pandemic” they emphasized the positive aspect of communication between football clubs and their fans. The impact of COVID-19 pandemic on folk culture was also explored in Dzianis Filipchyk's paper “Wearing the *namitka*² amidst the pandemic”. The presentation illustrated the dynamic adaptations of an old ritual to the new circumstances.

The presenters of the second panel titled “**Temporal and spatial dimensions of folklore**” combined folkloristic, ethnographic, and semiotic methods to interpret verbal narratives and folk practices. The panel started with Mare Kõiva and Alena Bohaneva's paper titled “The Pied Piper. The amazing life of a medieval event: Estonian

and Belarusian parallels”. The authors underscored that the motif of the Pied Piper of Hamelin was recurrent not only in Western European, but also in Slavic and Finno-Ugric folklore. Ilya Butov’s presentation, “The miracle of icons renewal / myrrh-streaming as a sign of the Great Patriotic War” compared the records of miraculous icons in the 1940s and similar events in contemporary Belarus. Yuri Unukovich in his presentation “(De)constructing an ethnographic region: The case of the Vilnius region” provided an extensive overview of ethnographers’ efforts to define the boundaries of cultural areas that become particularly crucial in the border regions. The paper “On the semiotics of memory and presence in the folk culture of Belarusians” by Siarhei Hruntoŭ uncovered the deep layers of memorial practices and illustrated how memory is actualized via everyday practices and objects.

The final session titled “**Folklore as a form of protest**” covered some of the most recent and popular examples of Belarusian and world folklore. Much of the session was dedicated to the use of folklore in the Belarusian protests of 2020 against the falsifications at the elections and the police brutality. Tatsiana Valodzina in her presentation “Rites of passage and modern forms of protest” interpreted the posters, slogans, costumes, and installations created by the protesters within the framework of the rites of passage. She showed how the carnivalesque nature of Belarusian protests and the use of sexual and chthonic symbols point to the transition between the old and the new. Similar datasets were discussed by Nastassia Hulak, whose presentation “Folk art as a form of public protest presentation” focused on the messages of Belarusian protest folklore and the democratic values behind them. Yanina Hrynevich’s paper “*Kupalinka*

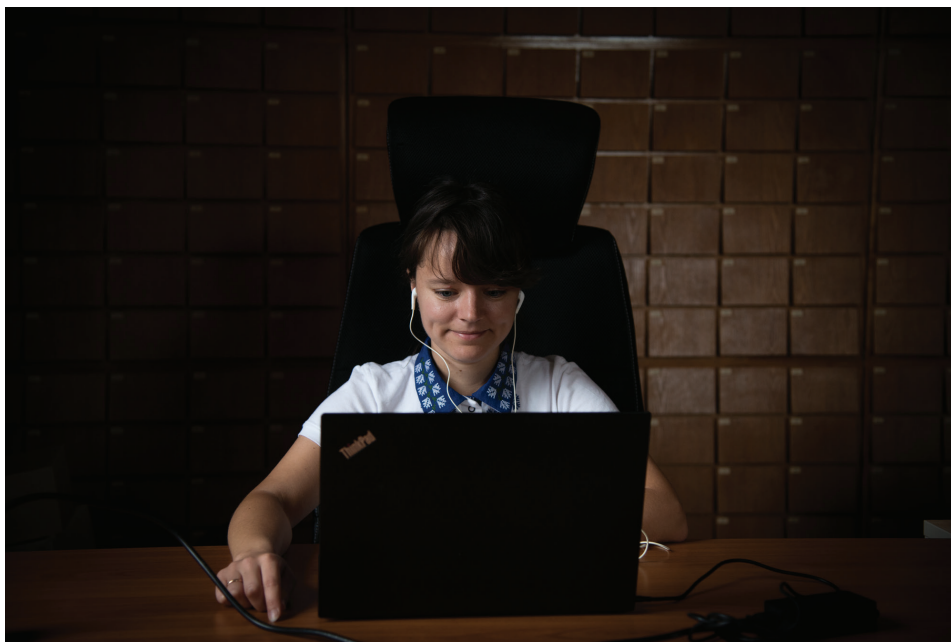


*Maris Kuperjanov and Jüri Rui, who took responsibility for the technical side of the seminar.
Photograph by Alar Madisson 2020.*

as a work of protest folklore: The story of one song” revolved around the use of popular “Kupalinka” song in Belarusian protests both inside the country and by Belarusian diaspora in other countries. Hrynevich also reflected on the ambiguous status of the song on the borderline between folk and authored work of art. The final paper of the session titled “‘Protest games’ as digital folklore and a form of civil activism” was presented by Mikhail Fiadotau. The author provided a historical overview of mainstream and amateur video games that belong to the field of political discourse, and of the role of these games in civil activism.

The seminar panels were followed by a discussion and reflections on the multifaceted nature of folk narratives and practices. The presenters and listeners mentioned the rich variety of topics and theoretical concepts covered by the participants, and agreed on the future collaborative research activities. Tatsiana Valodzina, one of the seminar co-conveners, announced the publication of the edited volume of *Фольклор и фольклористика: Взгляд из Беларуси и Эстонии* (Folklore and folkloristics: Belarusian and Estonian perspectives), which is due in November 2020. The volume features the papers by Estonian and Belarusian scholars that were discussed during the previous “Mission Possible” seminars and conferences. The seminar concluded with the hope that alongside online meetings it will be possible to organize face-to-face academic events in the coming months.

Anastasiya Fiadotava



Anastasiya Fiadotava, one of the seminar organizers. Photograph by Alar Madisson 2020.

Notes

- ¹ The seminar was supported by the research project EKM 8-2/20/3, the joint project of the Department of Folkloristics of the ELM and the Centre of Studies of Belarusian Culture, Language and Literature of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus, “Folklore, Religiosity, Language: Transcultural and vernacular aspects”, and the Centre of Excellence in Estonian Studies (TK 145).
- ² *Namitka* is a long piece of fabric that East Slavic women used to wrap around their heads.