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## Scholarship – Engagement – Activism

The topic of the 22nd volume of *Slavia Meridionalis* journal is SCHOLARSHIP – ENGAGEMENT – ACTIVISM. This volume is in fact testimony to how our life and work can be dynamic and unpredictable, which we would like to emphasize as we think it is important in order to better understand changes within the academic milieu. Although the main subject of the volume was carefully selected according to the current situation in Academia and South-Eastern Europe, our plan was to extend its thematic scope and include a few papers that present the results of a joint research project that was conducted by scholars from the Polish Academy of Sciences and the Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts in the short and indeed complicated period of 2020–2022. We even came to a preliminary agreement with the project coordinator from the Polish side and our colleague from the Institute of Slavic Studies, PAS, prof. Lilla Moroz-Grzelak, who said that she would support us in this endeavour. Unfortunately, for personal reasons, she had to withdraw. This was indeed a great loss for us; nevertheless, we chose to carry on with the plan and sent submission invitations to our colleagues from the Republic of North Macedonia.

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As a result, the 22nd volume of *Slavia Meridionalis* consists of two general thematic parts: the first one, which is also the leading one, is devoted to the question of SCHOLARSHIP – ENGAGEMENT – ACTIVISM, with particular focus on social changes during the COVID-19 pandemic; the second part is devoted to the issue of neighbourhood under the dynamic conditions of national cultures in the Balkans, with particular focus on the North Macedonian point of view. However, the dynamics of life and work has affected not only our editorial work, but also the general conditions of conducting research and disseminating expert knowledge. So, in this year's volume we decided to include more book reviews than usual as we feel the popularization of our scientific work, especially in the Central and South-Eastern European area, is crucial yet still underdeveloped. Since our intention is to explain the concept and structure of the volume as clearly as possible, while emphasising the aforementioned dynamism of life, we have divided the introduction according to the research interest and editorial responsibility. We hope that, by giving a voice to each of us, the issue of various interceptions between scholarship, engagement, and activism will be addressed in one more dimension, namely individual and personal experience.

## **Doing scholarship, be(com)ing an activist during the COVID-19 pandemic, by Ana Kolarić and Katarzyna Taczyńska**

At the beginning of the 2021, we accepted a kind invitation to serve as editors in charge of the 22nd volume of the *Slavia Meridionalis* journal. We each have our own research interests, but they intersect in many respects, most visibly in our commitment to teaching and feminism. During our long and intense conversations, we contemplated the most relevant topic for the main section. After 2020, which was entirely marked by the COVID-19 pandemic, we felt that we needed to and ought to say something about our own experience in such challenging and turbulent times.

However, we did not know in early 2021 that the COVID-19 pandemic would not be the most important news in 2022. When Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the pandemic almost immediately disappeared from

the headlines. On September 14, 2022, the head of the World Health Organization said that the world had never been in a better position to end the COVID-19 pandemic: “We are not there yet. But the end is in sight” (Adhanom Ghebreyesus, 2022). If there were no war in Ukraine, this announcement would have given people in Europe and around the world much to celebrate. However, with the Russia–Ukraine war, there seem to be bigger and more urgent problems to think about than the long-term changes in education triggered by the pandemic, the somewhat worrisome post-COVID conditions regarding physical and mental health, or the broader social, political, economic consequences of the pandemic. Having this in mind, we now see these articles devoted to different problems during the COVID-19 pandemic, as 1) a testament to times that affected our lives, both privately and professionally; 2) a useful resource of terms and tools for understanding and coping with crises; 3) reminders about what we value most – people’s lives.

The keywords *SCHOLARSHIP – ENGAGEMENT – ACTIVISM* refer to issues that are related to, caused by, or revealed by various phenomena which occurred during the pandemic, like social activism via the internet, scholars’ engagement in political protests, (ir)rational processes of decision-making (mask-wearing, vaccinations, lockdowns/curfews), social inequality or exclusion due to lack of internet access (especially in education), and “teaching the moment” outside classrooms, i.e., in a digital environment. In other words, the pandemic has been considered as a context for further reflection.

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed all aspects of our lives. In a short period, it initiated responses from many scholars, either through conferences, roundtables, workshops, or via articles in academic journals, online magazines, websites and blogs. Some scholars explored the social and political dimensions of the pandemic, focusing on a range of issues such as personal liberty, collective interests and the various responsibilities of the state; others compared the social democratic and neoliberal visions of society, focusing on the significance of public health (see, for example, Delanty, 2020, 2021). Many academic journals published special issues on the COVID-19 pandemic, discussing it from their own theoretical/methodological/political perspectives.<sup>1</sup> The humanities and social sciences (history and literature in particular) can also help us make some sense of a world which has changed drastically.<sup>2</sup> Both disciplines tell stories

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, timely reactions in Tambe, 2020; Stanistreet et al., 2020.

<sup>2</sup> See pandemic and post-pandemic fiction.

about people's personal and social lives through the centuries, including periods of different health, social and political crises. Such narratives have been examined in several articles and edited volumes in the last two years.<sup>3</sup> This is where we envision the potential contribution of this issue of *Slavia Meridionalis* to the discussion, as the articles in it have been written by scholars from the fields of language and literary studies, linguistics and philosophy.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many political and social protests took place all around the world. In Central and South-Eastern Europe, it is worth mentioning the Women's Strike in Poland, which was a reaction to the fact that the ruling of the Constitutional Tribunal made almost all cases of abortion illegal; a series of mass political protests in Belarus against the Belorussian government and President Alexander Lukashenko; the peaceful Slovenian protests against Janez Janša's government; the protests in Bulgaria against corruption associated with Prime Minister Boyko Borisov's government(s); in Serbia, a series of protests triggered by the government's announcement of the reintroduction of curfew, poor handling of the COVID-19 situation and, more generally, the crisis of democratic institutions since 2012. All these protests reveal a more complicated image of the relationship between local traditions and practices in the fields of education and scholarship, social activism and crisis-oriented politics.

The timeline of these protests indicates that some were organized during – and in spite of – strict pandemic measures, such as public gatherings being restricted to a maximum of 5 people. Even in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, citizens objected when basic rights and freedoms were endangered, e.g., women's right to choose or citizens' right to be properly informed by the media about the pandemic or state budgets. All these protests, despite differing in their causes, show that political and social problems didn't stop despite the pandemic. In some cases, the pandemic became an excuse for authorities to introduce controversial laws, but at the same time it was a reason to remodel social activism and create new ways of protesting.

In this volume, we are primarily interested in the relation between education and the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, we asked ourselves if education

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<sup>3</sup> See #coronavirussyllabus at the Social Science Research Council's webpage: <https://covid19research.ssrc.org/coronavirussyllabus/> (#coronavirussyllabus, n.d.). There are plenty of sources, both from the past and present, which may be useful for thinking about the relationship between education (knowledge and pedagogy), social and political crises, and social movements, e.g., periodicals, archives, special collections, as well as literary works.

can help us to better understand and cope with these crises. In other words, has Academia's mission always been to create and spread knowledge that is relevant for communities/societies? What do scholars (teachers and researchers), especially those working in the humanities and social sciences, have to say about the political and social protests in 2020 and 2021? How can scholars use their scientific authority to “teach the moment” and “write the moment”? More specifically, how can scholars use the knowledge from their respective disciplines to discuss the moment in which we live, both in classrooms and in public?

Of course, when we raised these and similar questions, we had to keep in mind several important points. 1) In early 2020, when the pandemic started and most countries around the world enforced some form of lockdown, information about the coronavirus disease and vaccines was insufficient. This lack of information often led to suspicion, reluctance to follow the rules, or, in the worst cases, conspiracy theories. 2) Furthermore, people got confused, upset, or very angry when they were instructed to socially distance from each other. Soon enough, it was clarified that this actually meant keeping physical distance, i.e., staying at least 6 feet, or almost 2 meters, away from others to avoid spreading the disease. The outcome of this instruction was clear: all social relationships were meant to be virtual instead “face-to-face”. 3) This affected education, too. Remote teaching and learning occurred outside of traditional, physical classrooms. In order to provide high-quality teaching in the new circumstances, teachers needed time, planning, and know-how regarding how to use these digital platforms. Institutions, i.e., schools and universities, were supposed to provide the conditions for remote teaching and advise teachers how to do it. In 2020, no one had time to prepare or plan, neither institutions, nor teachers and students. We all learned from this new experience. Most of all, we learned to consciously act responsibly, to collaborate more with each other, and to care more openly for each other.

The subject matter of the volume covers a broad range of issues and topics, focusing closely on education: education and political and social crises; education and social movements; teaching/researching/writing in the time of COVID-19; remote teaching and social inequality and exclusion; remote teaching and personal lives; “Teach the Moment” and the “Pandemic Syllabus”. However, this volume also deals with broader issues, such as human rights in social and political crises; “social distancing” and lack of community; institutional trust and distrust; society in crisis – lessons from the past.

There are ten articles in the SCHOLARSHIP – ENGAGEMENT – ACTIVISM section. They are divided into three sections: 1) Education; 2) Democracy in crisis and mass social and political protests; 3) Lessons from the past.

The five articles in the “Education” section focus on different aspects of education during the COVID-19 pandemic. The opening article, “Pedagogy of care: Building a teaching and learning community”, is written by two of us (Ana Kolarić, Katarzyna Taczyńska) and explores the unexpected move to digital teaching and learning, which rendered “in-person” interaction impossible and forced those who work in education to reconsider what responsible pedagogy should look like during a crisis. In the article, we first elaborate the main ideas of the pedagogy of care. Then, we offer examples of teaching and learning during the pandemic from our personal experience of literary and language scholars, based in Serbia and Poland, respectively.

In “The humanities at a crossroads: Challenges and prospects in the (post-) COVID-19 world”, Teodora Todorović Milićević examines the much-debated crisis in the humanities and poses questions on its course in the light of the global COVID-19 pandemic crisis. She looks closely at the example of the Faculty of Philology at the University of Belgrade – a prominent place for language, culture, and literature research in Serbia – as an institution that faces many challenges, the first of which is the decline in enrolment in certain programs.

Yuliya Stodolinska and Halyna Zaporozhets offer a valuable case study regarding the communication strategies American universities used in order to avoid social crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic. The article “From campus closure to campus reopening: Strategies of American universities to avoid social crisis in COVID-19 communication” explores institutional websites as one of the key channels of COVID-19 communication and engagement of participants of the educational process; it investigates which communication strategies and tactics were implemented by university administrations during the pandemic, and what the verbal and nonverbal markers of the communication strategies and tactics were.

Stodolinska and Zaporozhets’ article focuses mostly on communication strategies and less on content/messages (physical and social distancing, strongly suggested vaccination, etc.) and recipients’ (employees and students) reactions; in contrast, Rastislav Dinić’s article “Not buying it: Opting-out, vaccination and morality” starts from his personal experience in the classroom, describing the problem of “naïve” or “freshman” relativism that is typically

encountered by ethics teachers in introductory ethics classes. He then shows that this well-known problem might have obscured the emergence of a new and different problem, namely opting-out, which became particularly obvious during the COVID-19 pandemic. Dinić argues that this new phenomenon is best thought of as a symptom of neoliberal rationality “colonizing” the domain of morality, and he suggests some possible ways of dealing with the problem of opting-out of morality.

The last paper in the “Education” section, “*The Lexicon of Migrating Ideas in the Slavic Balkans* and the risk of knowledge: Some considerations regarding two promotional events for this book” by Ewelina Drzewiecka, appears at first glance to be thematically different from the other texts. Devoted to the online promotion of the ten-volume monograph *Lexicon of Migrating Ideas in the Slavic Balkans (18th–21st centuries)*, it offers the author’s comments on both the research project at the root of this open access publication and the course of the discussion which emerged during the online meetings that were designed for the purposes of popularising the *Lexicon* within the (virtual) Academic milieu under the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic, and also in the social and educational context. As a result, it addresses important issues of the dissemination of knowledge and the functioning of the academic community in the context of the deeply fragmented and hierarchical time-space of academia, which seems to also have an impact on its social significance.

The second section, “Democracy in crisis and mass social and political protests”, comprises three articles: while the first article generally speaks of several social aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the other two are focused on concrete events and the subsequent protests. In “A panoptic vision of the world: Can a state of emergency become a regular one?”, Katica Kulavkova examines some of the problems which dominated political and public discourse in 2020, such as the state of emergency/crisis, the emergency measures, civil and human rights and restrictions to them, and freedom/limitation of freedom. With the aim of demonstrating the danger of prolonging and legalizing emergency measures in circumstances when there is no state of emergency, she argues that the pandemic was seen as an excuse to renew the panoptic vision of the world.

Following the results of the rigged presidential election in Belarus in August 2020, mass protests broke out in the country. In the article “Some linguistic phenomena in Belarusian cities during the 2020 mass protests in Belarus”, Julia Mazurkiewicz-Sułkowska pays particular attention to the prestige of

the Belarusian language in cities, where protesters introduced new toponyms and displayed a positive attitude to regionalisms and so-called *trasianka*.

With similar intention, but focusing more on visual than on verbal messages, Małgorzata Stepnik, in the article “‘Let the sirens roar’. The women’s protests in Poland and the artistic response to the backlash”, examines the artistic works that accompanied the protests that ensued after the ruling of the Constitutional Tribunal of 22 October 2020 that tightened the restrictions on reproductive rights in Poland. Such artistic works provide a kind of visual commentary to protests. The article explores the most characteristic iconographic materials, mainly posters, which were uploaded and shared by (mostly young) artists on their social media profiles and specially created websites (such as *Graphic Emergency*). The author proposes that the discussed posters be interpreted as a generational counterreply to the “backlash”, understood in accordance with the meaning given to that word by Susan Faludi in her classic study from 1991.

Finally, the third section, “Lessons from the past”, consists of two articles, both dealing with narratives from the past. Jelena Milinković highlights the fact that real crises, like the COVID-19 pandemic, can sometimes be abused to limit human rights. She reminds readers of the current situation in several countries regarding abortion rights and prohibition. She argues that with the COVID-19 crisis there was also a crisis of women’s rights and freedoms. Within the previously won rights and freedoms, and as a consequence of the traditionalization of state policies, the right to abortion was the most endangered during the crisis. To show what the struggle for women’s rights might look like, in “Lessons from the Past: The right to abortion in three pictures”, Milinković takes the example of the struggle of Yugoslav women for the right to abortion in the 1920s and 1930s.

Stanislava Barać explores *The open window* (1954), a novel by the critically acclaimed and renowned poet Desanka Maksimović. She argues that Maksimović – by choosing the ‘thesis novel’ genre and shaping the ‘*der Arztroman*’ or ‘medical novel’ genre – takes part in the tradition of popular genres which hybridize enlightenment with entertainment. The article “Desanka Maksimović’s engaged medical novel *The open window* (1954): Tuberculosis as a social(ist) issue” aims to define the given genres and places *The open window* in the aforementioned traditions. Barać analyses the novel’s representation of tuberculosis, explains how the author placed the subject of the tuberculosis epidemic in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia into the frame of the debate between conservative and emancipatory social movements, and



suggests how this particular form of literary engagement and activism coincides with the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Neighbourhood – national identities – stereotypes, by Ewelina Drzewiecka**

The section “Neighbourhood – national identities – stereotypes” consists of four papers, all of which are the results of a bilateral scientific research project and cooperation between the Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts and the Polish Academy of Sciences: “The neighbourhood in the context of stereotypes and realities in contemporary Europe”. The aim of this project was to combine research on literature, language and visual culture in order to capture the multifaceted ways in which issues of neighbourhood manifest themselves in the complex context of Balkan cultural heritage. The question that was in the focus of the researchers was how created images of neighbours are related to existing local stereotypes, and “to what extent they result from the realities of the word”. The project coordinators were the aforementioned prof. Lilla Moroz-Grzelak and prof. Katica Kulavkova (from the Macedonian side).

The first paper in the section is “The narcissism of minor differences in the context of post-imperial Macedonian neighbouring” by Katica Kulavkova. This author not only argues that the conflicting relations among neighbouring nations in the Balkans may be explained by S. Freud’s theory of the narcissism of minor differences; she also points out that whenever the discourse of identities is radicalized, cultural and political hegemony comes to life, which results in conflictual mutual misrecognition. The text aims to demystify such installations of hegemony in the (North) Macedonian neighbouring region, which indeed seems thought-provoking in the context of the current disputes between the authorities of the Republic of North Macedonia and the Republic of Bulgaria over the notion of national identity and membership of the European Union.

The way in which the question of nation(al)ity is understood is also central in the next paper in this section. In her paper “Reflections on Krste Misirkov’s theory: From ethnocultural entity to politically legitimate nation”, Ganka Cvetanova focuses on a well-known and particularly important figure within the intellectual and academic milieu of North Macedonian culture. In order to address the crucial issue of the preconditions for the Macedonian nation-building

process and its political legitimacy, she comments on some of Misirkov's conceptions through the lens of modernist theories of nation and nationalism; this has the potential to reveal a productive way of problematizing established modes of categorizing collective identities in Balkan studies.

In this context, the next paper, "The portrayal of the neighbour and the neighbourhood in Macedonian graphic literature and comic book culture", by Boshko Karadjov, may be seen as an example of broadening scientific perspectives. Devoted to the case of Macedonian graphic stories of the *Nikad robom* (*Never a Slave*) comic book edition, it raises the fundamental issue of (re)creating stereotypical images of neighbours under the conditions of the communist regime (in Yugoslavia). Commenting on selected representations and images of the neighbour, the author points out that the actual subject of these series was the Macedonian self-portrait, which had been shaped by various political and ideological factors.

The last paper, "The role of literature in the processes of destereotyping (through examples from Macedonian literature)" by Marija Gjorgjieva Dimova, reminds us that the power of art cannot be overestimated. The author analyses the role of literature in the deconstruction of stereotypes that circulate in communication between Balkan neighbours by focusing on three contemporary Macedonian novels which refer to historical events and figures. She confirms that history is the basic mechanism for the argumentation of stereotypical images. It is shown, however, that the texts promote more-universal values that are situated beyond the narrow national(istic) perspective.

In the "Imponderabilia" section, this year's volume brings three papers: "Reflections of the anti-occidentalism idea in Serbian cultural texts in the 20th century", by Dorota Gil; "The dead female body and necropolitics: The topos of a walled-up woman in Bulgarian modernist plays", by Grażyna Szwat-Gyłybowa, and "Violence and sex and violence again: The sexual revolution in the films of the Yugoslav Black Wave", by Patrycjusz Pająk. All these texts raise important matters of South Slavic national cultures, in particular the functioning of (anti) western stereotypes and prejudices in modernization processes.

Gil's paper presents the most representative cultural texts and opinions of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century Serbian intellectuals that formed the anti-Occidentalism trend. It is focused mainly on the mid-war period and the opinions that strengthened the Serbia – (Slavia) – Europe antithesis, which were mostly rooted in a version of Russian Slavophile thought; as such, it offers not only an important synthesis but also a kind of introduction to the latest ideological and political conflicts in the region.

Szwat-Gylybowa's paper shows how investigating the well-known topos of a woman entombed in a wall has a rich folk genealogy, and investigating this in Bulgarian modernist literature may reveal the process of 'wrestling' with archaic cosmological imagery and persistently durable mental structures that has been undertaken by the creators of modern Bulgarian culture. This author also suggests some interesting equivalences from the standpoint of contemporary neo-materialism and post-humanistic ethics.

Pająk's paper is devoted to analysis of four Serbian films belonging to the Yugoslav Black Wave. The context is the notion of sexual freedom as a fundamental manifestation of the individual freedom for which the revolutionaries of 1968 fought, resisting the violence resulting from the current political and cultural tradition. However, there is also the broader context of the ambiguous coexistence of the various meanings of 'revolutionary', 'modern', 'avant-garde', 'anti-communist', 'dogmatic', 'Marxist', etc. within (Yugoslav) modernity, which seems significant in regard to the Yugoslav experience of the communist regime.

As mentioned above, the "Reviews" section is particularly rich this year as it contains nine book reviews. Three of them more or less directly refer to the topic of the SCHOLARSHIP – ENGAGEMENT – ACTIVISM section. Authors review 1) a book by Slavoj Žižek, in which he examines the first few weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic and calls for a new global order (Radojka Jevtić); 2) an edited volume by Adrianna Zabrzewska and Joshua K. Dubrow, who offer an account of the Polish struggle for reproductive rights, with special focus on the mass women's protests during the pandemic (Milica Pupavac); 3) a monograph by Milena Angelova, who researches the tuberculosis epidemic in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Bulgaria (Elena Azmanova-Rudarska).

Other book reviews concern several recent publications in the field of literary studies: 4) Anna Boguska's analysis of Croatian writers' own literary examinations of life and living on islands (Kenneth Hanshaw); 5) Dunja Dušanić's exploration of the relationship between poetry and testimonial discourse in the work of three Serbian Modernist poets, Rastko Petrović, Milan Dedinac and Oskar Davičo (Vladimir Zorić); 6) Magdalena Koch's systematic overview of the women's/feminist essay genre in Serbian language, starting with the first published female writer, Eustahija Arsić (Jelena Veselinović); 7) Tijana Matijević's analysis of post-Yugoslav literature from a gendered perspective (Dara Šljukić). While 8) the review of a pioneering volume about women's scholars and scientists, edited by Lada Stevanović, Mladena Prelić and Miroslava Lukić Krstanović, pays particular attention to the advantages of multidisciplinary

and interdisciplinarity in research (Zorana Simić), the closing review 9) looks at Agnieszka Aysen Kaim's book, which explores cases of cultural transgression of Poles in the Ottoman Empire (17th–19th c.) (Paulina Dominik).

We hope you will enjoy reading our volume. You are very welcome to share your research and thoughts with us in the future!

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Katarzyna Taczyńska  
Ewelina Drzewiecka

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