

პლენარული სხდომა  
Plenary Session

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**The Covid Pandemic and the Slovenian Poetry**

**Summary**

My contribution will present something that could be defined as an »insider research method«, as I start from analysing my own poem in order to proceed to the main topic, i.e. the discourse and the representation of the Covid pandemic in Slovenian poetry during the years 2020-2021. As such it is temporary research, firstly, since the pandemic still continues and has – in Slovenia – just drastically worsened, and secondly, since we might expect a bigger output of poetical works thematising Covid in the future months and years. There is another process that has to come to a resolution. In the contribution it becomes clear that the discourse and the representation of Covid was heavily indebted to the current Slovenian political situation. The (supposedly) totalitarian tendencies of the government measures not exclusively aimed at Covid, the corruption affairs related to Covid and the ensuing protests against the government are all present in the Slovenian »Covid poetry«; yet the tensions between civil society and the government seem far from being at an end. I find the politicisation of poetry the basic and perhaps specific feature of the Slovenian poetry on Covid.

**Key words:** contemporary Slovenian literature, Covid pandemic, political repression, Covid poetry.

## Introduction

come on, *prendi le borse*, now that you already understand some of the new language,

in intervals of love and exhaustion, and love again, we are counting the dead,

*mommy, is it true that grandmas and grandpas aren't this old yet?*,

now that you're looking into the space on the other side, *protezione civile: 4.401 nuovi casi*,

*589 guariti*, you understand the impossibility of the land of the past / ... /

how strange the virtual world is, mom and dad are looking into the screen at their students,

and then you are looking into the screen too, and this strange excitement, when I return from the shop

loaded with seven full shopping bags, take off the gloves and *mascherina*,

and you ask: daddy, did Italian police stop you today?,

over there is the Socerb castle, over there the world of the past, up here there is a balcony, home

and the world strangely suspended, I don't know if grandparents aren't

old and if the shutters will last this bora / ... /

I don't know because I don't understand much of the new, that you are asymptomatic, what

is a symptom, in this world, and what an a-symptom?, at night there are still

lights outside, above the masks there are still eyes, when the bodies are pulling away,

the dark night is the dark night – and the words: Darwinism, hedonism, freedom,

still words, even if you put them on a forum, on twitter, on instagram.

To my knowledge, my poem chosen as an introduction to this contribution was the first »Covid« poem published in any Slovenian literary media. It was issued on August 14, 2020, half a year after the beginning of the crisis in Italy in the literary e-zine LUD Literatura (Potocco 2021). The poem assumes the point-of-view of an Italian resident describing the lockdown, but not opposing it. Instead, the main idea is hidden in the last four verses: the poem questions the possibility of humanism; by putting Darwinism, hedonism and freedom in the context of social media, it questions the validity of the ideological base of these beliefs when shared over these media, and this doubt is implicitly extended to the whole debate over Covid during the first few months of the pandemic. Putting aside that it was first published in an e-zine, I have to point out that it is due to this main idea that the lyrical narrator in the poem does not assume what I shall later describe as »the Slovenian perspective«. Thus the poem can be hardly seen as a representative of the mainstream Slovenian poetry. But it can be taken as a reference – actually as a contrast – to the mainstream Slovenian Covid poetry.

At around the same time – as a member of a jury – I came across a manuscript of the poetry collection by Iztok Osojnik *Attempt at a Coup D'état Under the Disguise of the Epidemic (Third Attempt)*. Osojnik's book, although published as late as in mid-October 2020, seems to be the first poetic statement on the subject of the pandemic assuming the Slovenian perspective. The literary market in Slovenia – especially in the segment of e-journals – was not drastically affected by the pandemic, which means that the magazines were published rather regularly.\* So one might be in the temptation to reflect on the question of what might have been the reason for such a late and – up to this date – a rather meager response. As for the latter, at least, it has to be pointed out that the Spanish flu, as well, did not produce a vast number of literary texts representing it, presumably because the flu could not lend itself to the literary description of a

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\* It has to be added that due to constant diminishing of the funds the journals were downsizing the costs resulting in a lesser issues of the journals per year. It is also due to this fact that during Covid there weren't any serious delays perceived. At the level of financing though, the Covid and the measures of the new government undoubtedly worsened the situation.

heroic death (e.g. Scerri & Grech 2020: 200-201). Yet, the very difference in the perspectives of my poem and Osojnik's poems might give us a clue to what was also happening in a significant part of the Slovenian literary field during the pandemic.

### **Freedom, individualism ... and politics**

While my poem might be the first poem on the subject, it was by no means the first text on the subject of Covid to be published. In the very same e-zine, LUD Literatura, starting with March 25<sup>th</sup> 2020, two consecutive texts by Urška Zabukovec were issued, intertwining the pandemic with political critique, especially on behalf of the Spanish government, as Zabukovec currently lives in Spain. In the first text, *Španska kuga* (Spanish Plague), she seems to be most radical in expressing her doubts on the media representation of Covid. She assumes the sceptical position often used on the Slovenian social networks, writing out that »nobody here knows anyone who got infected by Covid« (Zabukovec 2020a), and she concludes the article with a forced true/false dichotomy expressed as: maybe the danger exists but maybe »the virus isn't that dangerous and the government knows it« (ibid).

In my opinion, Zabukovec's texts failed to represent the complexity of the Covid situation, because she assumes the position of overt skepticism. In the second text, *Plevel, kače in pepel* (Weed, Snakes and Ashes), e.g., she degrades the virus and the issue of face-masks to a set of phobias, asking rhetorically: »to what extent do we have to adapt to the phobias of others?« (Zabukovec 2020b). It should be stressed that both of her articles are primarily discussed here as an example of the critique of the presumed attempt by governments to abolish democracy and the standards of democratic Europe. Precisely due to this feature the texts should also, if not predominantly, be read within the context of the Slovenian political situation, as the latter offered a rich basis for the appearance of the critical discourse aimed against the perceived totalitarianism of the forces in power. For this reason it is necessary to take a closer look at the political

developments in Slovenia during the years 2020 and 2021.

In mid-February 2020, the Slovenian left-wing government resigned and was unexpectedly superseded by the right-wing government under the leadership of the current prime minister Janez Janša. Undoubtedly, Janša is a controversial figure. In 1988, he was a journalist for the weekly *Mladina*, »and was arrested in 1988 and court-martialled on suspicion of leaking military secrets. The protests that accompanied the trial of Janša and three other co-defendants are seen« as one of the symbolic milestones in Slovenia's path to independence (Of *STA* 2020). Later, in the role of the minister of defense, he was in charge of organising resistance against the Yugoslavian army. Nevertheless, his orientation during the next 30 years led him to the extreme Right, since 2015 with strong elements of nationalist populism. Janša has led the Slovenian government already twice, in 2012 he had to resign due to a corruption scandal (cf. Of *STA* 2020).

Due to Janša's personal history, as well as the history of his party, the formation of his government was instantly met with strong opposition in the political sphere as well as in civil movements. In the European Union, concerns were raised, too; in the European *Parliament*, *Politics, Policy and People Magazine*, Andreas Rogal wrote: »Janša's social media strategy, his fondness of conspiracy theories, his right-wing populism and his constant drive to polarise Slovenian society have, in fact, earned him / ... / the nickname of "Mini-Trump"« (Rogal 2021). The government's modus operandi intensified and enlarged the opposition in civil movements, to the extent that already at the end of March 2020 the first protests against the government were organised (see e.g. Of BBC). To summarise the points that resonate in the activities of the protesters:

1. The government under the leadership of Janez Janša changed the orientation of the Slovenian foreign policy from being positioned in the French-German political line in the EU to supporting the so-called Vishegrad group. Slovenia as the only member country also started to openly support the politics of the Hungarian and Polish governments.

2. The Slovenian government was and still is actively exerting pressure on the press (Of *Council of Europe* 2021) by forcefully or indirectly changing the managing editors of the National Radio and Television broadcaster (e.g. Eržen 2021, Of *Public Media* 2021, Of *Today In 24* 2021); furthermore, violating the legislation, it withdrew the financing of the National Press Agency (e.g. Of *Deutsche Welle* 2021) claiming that the Agency was politically »imbalanced«. In the cultural sphere, some of the artists were put under pressure, e.g. the rapper Zlatko, the painter Arjan Pregl, and the poets Boris A. Novak and Dejan Koban, the latter was also harassed by the police during one of the protests (Zupan 2021).\*

3. Soon after the formation of the government, the Minister of Economy Zdravko Počivalšek, along with Janša, got involved in a major corruption scandal which is still investigated by the police. The government's response to the scandal was: 1. the whistleblower providing the alleged proofs for the scandal lost his job (Vladislavljevič 2021), 2. the government replaced the police commissioner Tatjana Bobnar (Of *RS Ministry* 2021) and the director of the National Investigative Office for organised crime (Of *RTV Slovenija* 2021).

The above description might seem tendentious, in the sense that it omits any possible positive side of the government led by Janša. Yet it is confirmed by the foreign media, e.g. the German newspaper *Deutsche Welle* (in the article quoted above), and also in a meticulous analysis by the Croatian newspaper *Nacional* (Of *Nacional* 2021); it is certainly confirmed by the fact that the Democracy, Rule of Law and Fundamental Rights Monitoring Group of the European Parliament has expressed serious concern over the state of law and democracy in Slovenia, opening a detailed monitoring process which ended in a major scandal with Janša attacking both the Monitoring Group and the Dutch president Mark Rutte: »A meeting of the delegation with the prime minister was first refused, then scheduled, and then cancelled again. /Instead/ Janša tweeted on Thursday afternoon: "How many times have you visited the German chancellor,

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\* I should point out that the photos accompanying the article show how the police harasses Koban.

the Dutch PM or the French president? By the way, it's Netherlands where the last journalist was killed in the #EU. / ... / Shortly afterwards, Janša managed to compound the effect by tweeting a bizarre picture of 13 portraits of MEPs / ... / with a picture of billionaire philanthropist and democracy activist George Soros, labelling them "Soros' puppets in the EP« (Rogal 2021). The overview of the political situation in Slovenia may also give a better understanding of why the spread of protests against the government was inevitable, as well as why artists and agents in the cultural field became one of the driving forces of civil protests.

### **Freedom, politics ... and poetry**

In the article of the Croatian magazine *Nacional*, the opposition between the political discourse of the government and the prevailing anti-discourse of the Slovenian poetry is aptly described: »Boris A. Novak, one of Slovenia's greatest poets, who was denounced publicly alongside three other Slovenian intellectuals as a patient infected with the „covid-marx/lenin“ virus by the government's Crisis Headquarters, has written a public letter to warn about what is actually happening in Slovenia: "The new government is exploiting the pandemic as a smokescreen while it imposes a political dictatorship".« (Of *Nacional* 2021). As we shall see, this was also the main idea of the majority of Slovenian poetry on the subject of Covid – however scarce the output might be. It is understandable that for poets in the mainland Slovenia, the features seen in my opening poem – the acceptance of the Covid measures, the mere description of the shocking reality or mere lamentation over the dead – would be perceived as a taciturn acceptance of the perceived autocratic and corruptive methods of the government. It is here that the perspective of my poem drastically differs from the perspective of the »mainland« Slovenian poets. Thus the »Slovenian perspective« in the poetry had to search for another formula to express the Covid crisis.

The first possible formula was given by the aforementioned poetry collection by Iztok Osojnik. The title of his book is telltale. Nevertheless, the book is far less concerned with the Covid crisis as the title would suggest.

It is rather in line with Osojnik's previous poetry, and therefore it can be described as a critique of the sources of power and the discourses prevailing in society. To paraphrase a review of the book, Osojnik describes the »time governed by capital and technocracy« (Hancock 2021). In Osojnik's view, »fascism which perhaps already governs us« is not triggered by the Covid crisis, it is an inherent state of the »world where wealth and calculus have become a value *per se*« (ibid.). In his previous poetry collections, such as *Globalni sistem za pozicioniranje* (Global Positioning System), Osojnik is exposing the globalist and neoliberal discourses and the enmeshment of an individual in the net they are creating. Yet, the anti-humanist, all-tracing and digitalising forces, while all-pervasive, also tend to be perceived as invisible. But in the case of Janša's government and its role in the Corona-crisis, Osojnik's charges have become precise, even if rather rare, given the title of the book.

In the most explicit poem, the government is described as being led by »a former dealer with arms« and »self-interested hard-core communist« (Osojnik 2020: 68); the members of the government »squander our money under the disguise of healthcare« and Osojnik ironically calls to them: »oh, let's hide behind masks, / let's put the blame for our suspicious deals on / ... the Chinese and the experts on epidemic (Osojnik 2020: 69).«

In line with Osojnik, in her later poem »Falling«, a young poet Zala Vidic resonates:

except that this time the government isn't prone to falling  
because the capitalists on the throne smell money /... /  
and even if critique falls on them, and accusations and reprimanding,  
well they fall on empty ears,  
for masks do not fall.

(Flisar 2021: 40)

However, Osojnik makes a step further to imply that the government uses Covid for its own totalitarian purposes. The charge expressed in an open letter by Boris A. Novak at about the same time (see above) finds its way into Osojnik's poetical discourse:



health /... /  
is in their interest only as a disguise for  
social blockade, the incapacitating  
of the collective protest against the regime and violence.  
(Osojnik 2020: 68)

What I have earlier described as a *modus operandi* of the Slovenian government concurs with the claims given in Osojnik's book. A particularly interesting detail came months after the publication of Osojnik's poetry collection. After the 3<sup>rd</sup> wave of Covid, the government allowed gatherings in the open for up to 100 people. At the same time, violating the judgment of the Constitutional Court, a special restriction was given if the purpose of the gathering was civil protest (10 people were allowed to gather) (Rus 2021). It was difficult not to interpret this rule as an attempt to ban protests »under the disguise« of the Covid rules and it is not surprising to see Osojnik attacking the government, in a way, in advance: »let us not be blind to the fact: / this is an attempt to take possession of the state / for the purpose of terror« (Osojnik 2020: 68).

### **Poetry and inadequacy of measures taken by the government**

The other possible formula to poetically handle the Covid crisis came during the second wave of the pandemic. Even this formula was strangely prophetically predicted in Osojnik's book:

the criminals from the government /... /  
accompanied by the police are driving to collect the provisions  
and the samaritan of our prime minister will move his old father  
from the nursing home  
to his own house.  
(Osojnik 2020: 58)

Slovenia handled the first wave of the pandemic rather well resulting in a minimal death toll. But at the onset of the 2<sup>nd</sup> wave, the government

made several crucial mistakes. Apart from closing the borders with Croatia too late, the most crucial mistake seems to have been that the government failed to reinforce the infrastructure and the security protocols in nursing homes. The result was that Slovenia overtook Italy in the number of Covid deaths per capita, partly because the Italian government had managed to reinforce their healthcare system in between the first and the second wave.

This inadequate response of the Slovenian government enabled the poetic formula, not totally dissimilar to the path taken by Osojnik, of mourning the dead while at the same time expressing critique against the government. A splendid example of this formula is a poem by Boris A. Novak *Psalm 4097* published also on the panels in front the Ljubljana Faculty of Arts. Again, in line with his previous poetry, Novak's poem is rooted in a deep humanist tradition. Novak is renowned not only for some of the most widely celebrated poems on the genocide and war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also for his humanitarian aid to the country. This humanistic feature also became the center of his poetry during the Covid crisis. The title of the poem alludes to the number of victims taken by Covid on the date when the poem was published on the panel (actually it was published several times, changing the title, as the number of victims was increasing):

4.097 names /.../  
exact sum to this day,  
killed by Covid  
as if they were its prey.

(Novak 2021a)

At the beginning of the poem, the charges on behalf of the government are implicit, the *j'accuse* is to be perceived in the description of children left by the parents who died in what he calls »the nursery for the elderly, those dustpan homes, those dust-deadly homes«; there the elderly were hermetically closed by the government parties (Novak 2021). Yet the condemnation of the government in the poem becomes clear after the insertion of statistical data, which concludes with the following verses:

statistics is a whip  
for the hearts of ice,  
for the greedy nought  
of the governing polit-capitalist dice.

(Novak 2021a)

Following a long, moving description of how people were dying during Covid, the main condemnation comes in the last three italicised verses of the poem:

I would like to cry,  
not certain that all these had to die  
in the Nought of our time.

(Novak 2021a)

Since it was also published on the public panels and then reprinted by some Slovenian newspapers, Novak's poem became political *par excellence* and consequently turned out to be the best Slovenian example of government critique while retaining the humanist tradition, i.e. not denying the dangers of the virus or minimising it under the excuse that it strikes at mostly the elderly. In another poem published on the panels, *How Much Does a Human Life Cost?*, the condemnation of the government is much more direct: Novak accuses the government of bargaining for the price of vaccines, buying the vaccine which was then thought to be less effective (Astra-Zeneca) (Novak 2021b).

## **Conclusion and another example**

We have seen that the central point of both poets, Osojnik and Novak – and also a point briefly made by Vidic – is the critique of the corruption affair in the Slovenian government. But, more importantly, Novak and Osojnik, in particular, use the description of the Covid crisis to express a direct critique of the parties and politicians in power. The Covid crisis is used to formulate the counter-discourse to the official discourse of

the government, in order to reveal both the government's concealment of corruption and the government's inadequacy. In Osojnik's book, the counter-discourse also reveals the complex (and hidden) structure of power in the globalisation processes; thus he is also able to show a more complex point of view on the Covid crisis that cannot be reduced to a mere *believe/deny* dichotomy.

Despite some common points, Osojnik and Novak show two distinct ways – two formulas – in which the Covid crisis has been (may be) treated in contemporary Slovenian poetry and in the current Slovenian political situation. In the scarce production on the subject of Covid, another poet has to be mentioned. A few weeks ago Aleš Mustar issued his third poetry collection, *K(o)ronika* (Annals of Corona). As the title suggests, it thematises the Covid crisis. Mustar's poetry is also hard to define within the *believe/deny* dichotomy, not so much because he would be transcending it, but because he is softly oscillating between the two oppositions. Nevertheless, many of the common points encountered in the poetry by Novak and Osojnik are also present in Mustar's poetry. The critique of the structures of power is not present only in the critique of the government measures. In fact, in the critique of the government measures, despite the (self-)ironic tone, one can sometimes trace the resound of the kind of simplified critique found on the social networks, e.g. in the poem ironically describing the trees which would – if given the opportunity to speak – make an appeal to the Constitutional Court »to make a verdict / on the police curfew« (Mustar 2021: 11). But Mustar's critique is broader, firstly, when it targets the control over our privacy (Mustar 2021: 33), and secondly, when it is also aimed at the structures in power in the city of Ljubljana where during the Covid crisis Janša's opponent, mayor Zoran Jankovič, ordered the dismantling of the alternative culture centre *Rog* (Mustar 2021: 10). On the other hand, Mustar comes close to the formula adopted by Novak. One of the most moving poems in the book links humanism with nursing homes, albeit the topos of the situation here is North Macedonia where one of the speaker's relatives is dying isolated in a nursing home (Mustar 2021: 54).

To conclude, we have seen that even in the poetry of Mustar, elements from both formulas were adopted with the common ground of government critique. Thus we can argue that in all the cases we have analysed, poetry adopts the counter-discourse to the official governmental discourse of handling the Covid crisis. The poetic discourse – as one can expect – does not always show easy solutions as it puts the Covid crisis into a broader context and brings up oppositions between the global structures of power and primary humanism in regard to the value of (human) life.

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## Road and Contact: 19th Century Prose and Pandemics

### Summary

In 1829, A. Pushkin traveled around the South Caucasus and wrote “A Journey to Erzurum”(1836). Two years after Pushkin’s journey, Georgian Romanticist poet G. Orbeliani detailed his travel to Russia in “My travel from Tbilisi to Peterburg” (1831–1839). The poets traveled through the road, had physical as well as cultural “contact” on the road as Platt and Bakhtin note, and depicted their own experiences in their travelogues including the plague epidemic in the region. Because the Russian empire