INTRODUCTION:
THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL DYNAMIC
OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES, RUMOURS,
FAKE NEWS, AND BELIEF NARRATIVES

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This special issue of journal *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore* focuses on the research of conspiracy theories, contemporary legends, and rumours – sets of ideas and practices, their spread, consistence, and models, spreading as newslore, fake news, and communication styles – which strongly influence today's society and often create insecurity. The potential of this material as an influencer of human thinking and history, of political and cultural values and illusions, is big. Rumours and their related genre, legends, have a significant role in today's social and everyday communication. Articles presented here proceed from these two genres as cultural matrixes, by means of which folkloristics and its neighbouring fields can study creativity and the complexity of human speech acts throughout history, cultures, and numerous determined and undetermined circumstances (Harris-Lopes 2003; Fine 1997).

Rumours have been defined as transmitters of suspicious information or beliefs, which represent society's peripheral side and the prejudices hidden therein (Allport & Postman 1947; Anderson 1926; Shibutani 1966; Kapferer 1990; Neubauer 1999; etc.). The study of some rumours and legends in Estonia allows us to realise the potential of folklore to influence people's thinking, behaviour, memories, and even history. These legends and rumours represent different political and cultural values, illusions, and hopes on personal and community levels (Kalmre 2013a, 2013b; see also Turner 1993; Fine & Turner 2001; etc.). Rumours and legends can be part of a person's or even nation's identity creation process (Kalmre 2005, 2013b; Møllegaard 2005), and they can be used as mechanisms of attack, offense or subjective protection.

One of the important features of rumours and legends is that "they are told as true, factual, or plausible and therefore assume a level of authority; they provoke dialogue about the narrative events, their interpretation, and their plausibility; they both articulate and influence beliefs and attitudes towards the subject matter; and they have the capability of affecting the actions and behaviour of the listening audience" (Goldstein 2004: 28). Indeed, the majority of these traditional texts affect us one way or another and call us to express our opinion, discuss and debate, and thus inevitably have an impact on our collective consciousness.

By reflecting the community's collective values, these narratives interpret reality in their own way, and often have political nature. They are based on transmitting dialectical tensions of the community, focusing on the norms, values, and expectations of concrete cultural groups. On the other hand, there is nothing static in the prejudices and beliefs in these narratives. Transmitting the truth inherent in these narratives should be viewed as a process character-ised by a constant discussion about different cultural ideologies (Tangherlini 2007; Valk 2008, etc.).

Today beliefs and ideas often spread in the form of negatory rumours, result-ing in various conspiracy theories (Barkun 2003; Madisson 2014). A character-istic feature of negatory rumours and legends is hypercritical thinking, which is expressed in strong suspicion, in considering real-life events as rumours, and in exposing them as another reality. It means that each negatory rumour is coupled with an assertive rumour, replacing the denied reality with a new reality. Yet, it is difficult to provide evidence for this other reality, and this is not because this other reality is an illusion, but because proofs are systematically suppressed or hidden, as adherents of negatory ideas claim (cf. Renard 2005). Sketching an immoral, malignant, and very powerful enemy, acting undercover, makes it possible to present the interpreter's own views as something ethical, transparent, and justified (Madisson 2016).

In today's social life, the influence of written and spoken text on human thinking and opinions is stronger than in the pre-Internet era. Therefore, the present study of fake news, rumours, legends, and conspiracy theories also involves the study of the media in its original performance. Researchers have often struggled with how to record short-lived rumours that are passed on by word of mouth, and have found it even more difficult to trace the origin and development of the hearsay; today the Internet with its social media, digital journalism, and search engines greatly facilitates the process (Blank 2007, 2009; Shifman 2007). The internet communication environment where rumours, belief messages or longer belief narratives (legends) multiply and spread like

lightening across many channels validates this belief and expands the circle of believers (Barkun 2003). The newslore assuming different forms around a concrete alarming rumour or a scandal – jokes, urban legends, parodies, fake news, digitally processed photographs, political and commercial announcements, etc. – allows for observing the whole similar discourse in the operational practices of today's media (Frank 2011).

The dynamic of rumours, fake news, and belief stories in oral communication, on the Internet, in the media, and in today's culture in a wider sense is related not only to the truth and power on the personal and collective level, but also to propaganda and politics on the state level (Astapova 2015; Regamey 2011; Kalmre 2013a).

Power plays a crucial role in written discourse because it controls the social beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours of people of any society or group (Nycyk 2015; van Dijk 2001). These can occur in any documents, but particularly so on the Internet. Power is a complex strategically driven phenomenon produced through social interaction from many directions and by human actors, often resulting in the maintenance of inequitable social relations (Foucault 1980, 1981). People use it in specific ways in social situations to control outcomes, and as a persuasive device through the use of language to cause the inequality and marginalisation of others. Gossiping and spreading rumours are types of power tactics used on the Internet, particularly social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, to persuade others to believe information about themselves or others.

The idea of a special issue of journal *Folklore* dedicated to rumours, contemporary legends, and conspiracy theories was born at the end of 2015, half a year before the conference of the International Society of Contemporary Legend Research in Tallinn. This society, established in 1988 and dedicated to the study of contemporary legends and rumours, today unites folklorists, social scientists, journalists, and psychologist from all over the world, and organises annual conferences. Unfortunately, the idea of a special issue was not realised before the conference in the summer of 2016. But I am glad to say that two articles of this issue were written on the basis of presentations made at the Tallinn conference.

The first one is **Anastasiya Astapova's** article about presidential election folklore in Belarus. Belarus is a non-democratic country and the results of the elections are known in advance. But at the same time, the election rumours and jokes circulating in the oral communication and on the Internet question the existing hegemony. Anastasiya Astapova shows, based on her fieldwork examples, how the genres of rumours and jokes are interconnected, sometimes

to the point of being indiscernible. Belarusian elections folklore has become so widespread and creative that its genres intermingle to the extent that it is impossible to tell one from another; they move from one election to the next whether through oral communication, news, or the Internet.

Another participant in the Tallinn conference, **Zuzana Panczová**, presents in her article one of the typical features of conspiracy theories – a dualistic worldview, which explains important events as a consequence of a hidden struggle between 'Us' and the dark forces. An example of this characteristic also presents the dichotomous terms 'West' and 'East'. As a political and moral concept, the 'West' is very much used in the conspiratorial discourse in Slovakia. The author points out the functions of this concept as an 'enemy' in rumours and conspiracy theories. Her sources of research include the mass media, internet discussions, and social networks. The author shows that in Slovakia the negative image of the West is based on historical memory, which has been passed on from one generation to another, used by the propaganda of different political regimes, and supported by the authority of important personalities in the Slovak national history.

Alexander Panchenko's article deals with the role of conspiratorial motifs and themes in the formation and transmission of what is known as 'contemporary legend'. The discussion of empirical data focuses on apocalyptic narratives about 'the Beast of Brussels'. The author shows how and why the present-day conspiracy theories and practices of 'conspiratorial hermeneutics' are inspired by particular combinations of emotional, moral, and epistemological expectations.

Eda Kalmre and **Liisi Laineste** write about the cult of president Putin and the media behaviour related to the recent rumours concerning Putin's disappearance from the public eye during a ten-day period in March 2015. The data analysed here consist of two equally important sources: global news coverage of Putin's disappearance, and the information spread in social media via Twitter hashtags #WhereIsPutin and #PutinUmer. The authors describe how the news spread on the global arena, what the differences are between English- and Russian-language social media sources; what the reoccurring and more influential belief motives are in the stories told about the political leaders in Russia, and how they reappear in present-day internet folklore, especially humour. The analysis sheds light on the inner workings of rumour and humour in social media and its effect on the dissemination and content of folklore.

Amandine Regamey writes about a very influential story, a rumour and contemporary legend, which accompanies all military conflicts provoked by Russia. The rumour surfaces once again in Ukraine. It talks about women-snipers, former biathlon champions from the Baltic states, who allegedly fought

alongside Chechen militants or in the military forces of Ukraine more than ten years later. The article explores the different aspects of a war legend that was born among soldiers, was embodied in fiction and popular culture, and was used in Russian official propaganda. It shows that the focus on Baltic mercenaries allows for presenting Russia simultaneously as the successor of the Soviet Union fighting against fascism, and as a state besieged by Islamic terrorism and American expansionism.

Mari-Liis Madisson in her article "Representation of Snowden's scandal in the Estonian media: The construction of threats and fear" explicates how the leakages concerning the details of the top-secret United States government mass surveillance programme PRISM were contextualised in the Estonian public information space. The Snowden affair received strong public feedback because this topic addressed even those people who had normally kept their distance from politics. It touched the cornerstone of contemporary identities – the right for free Internet. The Internet is frequently associated with the freedom of expression, horizontal relations between citizens and state authorities, transparent governing, etc., and those characteristics are often interpreted as signs of the progressive and democratic nature of the medium. This study tries to explain how such positive connotations start to resonate with cultural fears of unregulated surveillance and non-transparent control.

In conclusion it could be mentioned that, although not planned in the beginning, this issue became more focused on the Eastern material. I sincerely hope that it offers the readers excitement and new ideas as well as thoughts for further discussions, as similar studies on the connections between rumours, legends, and conspiracy theories as well as humour and belief stories in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe have not been published extensively. Finally, I would like to thank all the authors for their contributions and good collaboration.

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