

THE GENERAL, HIS FANDOM, AND A PARTICIPATORY PANDEMIC

Angelina Ilieva

Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic Museum

Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Bulgaria

angelina.ilieva@iefem.bas.bg

Abstract: In February 2020, the Bulgarian government established the National Operational Headquarters for Combating the COVID-19 Pandemic in Bulgaria. General Ventsislav Mutafchiyski, a military doctor, professor at the Military Medical Academy in Sofia, was appointed as its chairman. This paper presents a case study on the public image of Ventsislav Mutafchiyski, its readings and interpretations by the audience, and the specific fan culture that emerged around his media persona during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Bulgaria. Placed in the spotlight of the media at the very beginning of the crisis, Mutafchiyski became extremely popular as the public figure most strongly associated with the fight against the spread of the disease in the country. Around his media persona, shaped in the public imagination as a wartime leader, a fan culture has grown with all its characteristic features and dimensions: *fans* and *anti-fans*, *affirmative* and *transformative* fandom. As a fictional character, Mutafchiyski has appeared in numerous forms of vernacular creativity: poems, songs, material objects, jokes, fake news, conspiracy theories, and memes. In this way, *the General* has become the main character of Bulgarian pandemic folklore and the focal point of a participatory pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, fandom, General Mutafchiyski, participatory pandemic

INTRODUCTION

On February 24, 2020, after an emergency meeting of the Consultative Council on National Security, the Bulgarian government announced the formation of the National Operational Headquarters (NOH) for Combating the COVID-19 Pandemic in Bulgaria. Major General Ventsislav Mutafchiyski, D.Sc., a military doctor, professor of surgery, and head of the Military Medical Academy in Sofia, was appointed chairman of the new body. The NOH was officially established on February 26 by a special order signed by Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov. Among its main responsibilities was “to collect, summarize and analyze all information on the development of the situation related to the spread

of COVID-19, and to inform the media and the public”.¹ The NOH held its first media briefing on February 25, a day before its formal establishment and two weeks before the first confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Bulgaria. For the next one hundred days, the NOH delivered 129 information briefings, not counting emergency briefings and the various media appearances of its members.

The first cases of COVID-19 in Bulgaria were confirmed on March 8. On March 13, despite the small number of confirmed cases – only 23 at the time, the Bulgarian Parliament unanimously voted to declare *a state of emergency*, which remained in force for two months. On the same day, the Minister of Health issued an ordinance introducing the main preventive measures against the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in accordance with the social distancing recommendations. Restrictions were imposed mainly on indoor gatherings: all public halls, bars, restaurants, coffee shops, and shopping centers were temporarily closed; all sports, cultural, entertainment, and academic events were canceled; schools and universities adopted distance learning; employers were urged to provide opportunities for remote work. Only a week later, on March 21, the measures were tightened with certain limitations on outdoor activities and movement: walks in public parks and gardens were banned; sports and children’s playgrounds were made inaccessible; in supermarkets and pharmacies special shopping hours were reserved for senior citizens; checkpoints were set up at the entrances and exits of the main regional cities. The necessity for greater and stricter restrictions, the details of their implementation, and the penalties for violating them were always explained by the NOH during the regular briefings. At that time, briefings took place twice a day, and a few emergency briefings were called late at night.

In the communication model chosen by the Bulgarian government, the official information about the development of the pandemic crisis and the anti-epidemic measures was announced and elaborated on by members of the National Operational Headquarters, most often by its chairman Ventsislav Mutafchiyski. In a situation of increased social anxiety and a higher demand for legitimate information, the attention of both the media and the public was focused on one person and his public appearances. Placed at the center of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis management and in the spotlight of media attention, the NOH chairman gained immense popularity; he became a celebrity and an object of fandom.

In this paper, I will examine the public image of Ventsislav Mutafchiyski, its readings and interpretations by the audience, and the specific fan culture that emerged around his media persona during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Bulgaria. The purpose of my study is to shed light on a hitherto underexplored issue: how fandom and participatory culture operate during the

pandemic and how the key figures of the crisis management are affected. In a recent publication Penny Andrews briefly mentions “multiple fan groups on Facebook and works of productive fandom” to which the UK’s Chief Medical Officer Chris Whitty became the subject (Andrews 2020: 904). Dr. Anthony Fauci, the leading member of the US President Donald Trump’s Coronavirus Task Force, inspired a large fan following² and was named “a pop culture icon” by the media.³ In my study I aim to explore in depth the Bulgarian variation of this cultural phenomenon.

I prefer the research strategies of the case study method, which is relevant when we seek to examine *how* or *why* a contemporary phenomenon works within a real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not entirely clear (see Yin 2003). The time scope of my research is limited to the first one hundred days of the work of the NOH and focuses on the period of the state of emergency. As I am going to explain, after that period the main features of both the case and its context significantly changed. I used exclusively qualitative research methods, such as (participant) observation, collection, textual or discourse analysis. My primary field of observations and data collecting was Facebook, although I also occasionally reviewed the commentary sections of news publications and of YouTube videos. However, before presenting the case itself, I would like to elaborate on the key concepts of the theoretical framework of my study: fandom, anti-fandom, and participatory culture.

FANDOM, ANTI-FANDOM, AND PARTICIPATORY CULTURE

Once described in terms of pathology and deviance, imagined in the negative stereotypes of “the obsessed individual” and “the hysterical crowd” (see Jenson 1992) or envisioned with the romantic aura of subcultural resistance (Fiske 1992), fans and fandom are nowadays mundane phenomena of the media world. Modern fan studies still feature debates on the definition of fan, since the concept has become increasingly malleable and marketable (see Click & Scott 2018). Despite the ongoing disputes over definitions in contemporary academic discourse, fandom is primarily understood as and through *participation*.

The terms ‘fandom’ and ‘participatory culture’ are tightly interconnected by the work of media scholar Henry Jenkins. In his seminal book *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* (1992), Jenkins presents fans of science fiction and other television programs not as passive spectators but as a creative community. According to Jenkins, fandom encompasses five levels of activity: as a particular mode of reception, which involves sharing, enunciating, and debating meanings with other fans; as a particular form of criticism, which

is “playful, speculative, subjective”; as a base of consumer activism in defense of fans’ cultural preferences; as a particular art world with its own aesthetic traditions and practices; and as an alternative social community. As he specified later, in *Textual Poachers* Jenkins coined the phrase ‘participatory culture’ to contrast participation with spectatorship and to make descriptive claims about “the cultural logic of fandom” (Jenkins & Ito & Boyd 2016: 1). Jenkins and his followers have further broadened and developed the concept to refer to every culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement; strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations with others; a certain type of informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices; and members who believe that their contributions matter and feel some degree of social connection with one another (Jenkins et al. 2009).

Jenkins builds his understanding of fandom within the classic “encoding/decoding” paradigm in media and cultural studies, introduced by Stuart Hall’s eponymous essay (Hall 1980). Hall conceptualized media consumption as part of an abstract communication model: producers construct messages by ‘encoding’ preferred or ‘dominant’ meanings into them; audience members read or ‘decode’ the messages according to their social positioning and subjective experiences. Every audience performs interpretative work, in which some read the messages mostly within the terms of the dominant ideology; others resist or fully reject them; but the majority *negotiates* meanings in a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements (ibid.: 126–127). Henry Jenkins understands negotiated readings “not in terms of how an individual negotiates their relationship with a text but rather how community members negotiate interpretations (and rules for forming interpretations) among each other” (Jenkins 2018: 16).

Understanding fandom as “negotiated readings” has many conceptual limitations but it allows researchers to step beyond the idea of fans as an “adoring audience” and to enter the realm of anti-fans: “the realm not necessarily of those who are against fandom per se, but of those who strongly dislike a given text or genre, considering it inane, stupid, morally bankrupt and/or aesthetic drivel” (Gray 2003: 70). The emotions that motivate and drive active engagement with media or cultural texts are not necessarily positive, nor are they necessarily extreme. Scholars distinguish between ‘affirmative’ and ‘transformative’ fans, for example:

Affirmative fans tend to collect, view, and play, to discuss, analyze, and critique. Transformative fans, however, take a creative step to make the worlds and characters their own, be it by telling stories, cosplaying the characters, creating artworks, or engaging in any of the many other forms active fan participation can take. (Hellekson & Busse 2014: 3–4)

Henry Jenkins explains:

Embodying Hall's concept of reading as negotiation, fan culture is often motivated by a complex balance between fascination and frustration, affirmation and transformation. Because cultural materials fascinate fans, they sustain their interests. Because they are also frustrating, fans actively rework them. ... Understanding fandom, then, as a form of negotiation suggests a continuum of possible relations to popular texts, as well as an ongoing process of negotiation with changing meanings that reflect changing times, rather than fixed positions and binary oppositions between fans and antifans. (Jenkins 2018: 16; emphasis added)

Among the most interesting developments of the notion of 'fandom' is one in the field of political participation (see Sandvoss 2013). Fan subcultures, grassroots activism and participatory practices have been retrospectively interconnected as sharing common roots (Delwiche 2013). Fans of a given cause, of given politicians, or of a certain type of political performance utilize the same forms of practices, emotive attachments, interpretive communities, and collective actions displayed by popular media fans. The 'fanization' is as evident in politics as in other cultural spaces such as entertainment, arts, and commerce (Sandvoss & Gray & Harrington 2017). Cornel Sandvoss convincingly argues for the conceptualization of emotive, partisan, and regular engagement in political discourses as fandom and anti-fandom. According to Sandvoss, fanlike activism in politics usually constructs an imagined Other – or an *anti-fan object*: a text or textual field (such as a politician, political party, or political cause) with which to engage through strongly negative emotions.

A strong identification with a given political party or course, much like fan affiliations in different forms of popular culture, becomes part of fans' identity positions, which in turn are reinforced through fan practices and performances ... including the articulation of differences and distinctions to other (fan) groups. (Sandvoss 2019: 131–132)

Over the almost thirty years since the publication of *Textual Poachers*, the idea of 'participatory culture' has evolved from a concept describing a peculiar cultural phenomenon to a key term explaining the common everyday attitudes and behaviors of millions of Web 2.0 users. It no longer describes the cultural production and social interactions of fan communities, but "now refers to a range of different groups deploying media production and distribution to serve their collective interests, as various scholars have linked considerations of fandom into a broader discourse about participation in and through media"

(Jenkins & Ford & Green 2013: 2). The technological platforms of Web 2.0 enable a major shift from the “distribution” to “circulation” of media content and an even more participatory model of culture, “one which sees the public not as simply consumers of preconstructed messages but as people who are shaping, sharing, reframing, and remixing media content in ways which might not have been previously imagined” (ibid.). The contemporary world is defined by the technological possibilities for creating and sharing knowledge and artistry, ideas and causes, and media participation can take place through countless individual or collective actions: from the simple exchange of recipes or opinions about books in Facebook groups to large-scale projects and collaborations in knowledge, creativity, science, education, civic activism, and democracy (see Delwiche & Henderson 2013).

THE GENERAL AND HIS FANDOM

Prior to February 2020, Ventsislav Mutafchiyski’s media appearances occurred in a strictly official professional context. Most often, his name appeared in the news related to his appointment as head of the Military Medical Academy – one of the largest hospitals in Sofia.⁴ Articles in the mainstream media, covering his public activities, usually describe him rather as a medical person – either a surgeon or a manager – than as a military one.⁵ Even a special presentation on the information website of the Ministry of Defense, published in May 2017, introduced him mainly as a (military) doctor, surveyed his professional path as a surgeon, and referred to two of his military missions primarily as an inspiration for his two academic dissertations. It also mentioned several details of his private life: for example, his hobbies of skiing and riding a Vespa, his passion for good wine, his twin sons.⁶

At the time of his nomination as the chairman of the National Operational Headquarters for Combating the COVID-19 Pandemic in Bulgaria, Ventsislav Mutafchiyski was vastly unknown to the general public. In the commentary sections of news outlets and on social media, his patients would speak of him as a good doctor and an excellent surgeon. However, the focus in his media presentation shifted after his nomination. Mutafchiyski’s other public roles – those of a doctor, professor of surgery, and hospital manager – were left in the background, and replaced by a strong emphasis on the features of a high-ranking military officer: Mutafchiyski would always appear in a uniform, his voice and gestures were firm and unwavering, his statements and answers during media briefings were organized around the key ideas of *discipline* and *responsibility*. Both journalists and his NOH colleagues would address him as General Mutafchiyski, and soon most of the public started referring to him likewise.

The metaphor of war was not uncommon in the political discourses surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. As a rhetorical figure justifying the restrictions, which were unprecedented in peacetime, and the imposition of anti-epidemic measures, it appeared in the public statements of leading European politicians: for example, the six repetitions of the phrase “nous sommes en guerre” (‘we are at war’) in the address by French President Emmanuel Macron on March 16,⁷ or the declaration of the COVID-19 crisis as the greatest challenge for Germany since World War Two, requiring wartime solidarity, in a speech by German Chancellor Angela Merkel on March 18.⁸ The Bulgarian government probably expected the ideas of wartime discipline, solidarity, and sacrifice to be more convincing if suggested by a wartime leader, and shaped Ventsislav Mutafchiyski’s media persona accordingly. As some media critics have observed, during that period Mutafchiyski seemed to be “the most qualified person in charge”; he appeared as “a stern, concerned general who has acquired the status of ‘the Voice of Fate’”.⁹

On March 14, during an evening emergency briefing, he delivered an extremely emotional public address in defense of tightening the anti-epidemic measures; that speech could be considered the birth moment of his fandom. “An epidemic is coming our way, whose fury is unheard-of in human history,” said Mutafchiyski, and that statement became one of his most popular catchphrases. And he added:

*We are facing times of trial ... Human lives will be lost. The lives of those we love very much. Those who gave us life. Those who raised us. Those who doted on us when we were young and watched us grow. Those who are proud of our successes. We should not disappoint them with our carelessness.*¹⁰

Like all the previous updates from the briefings, the speech was widely circulated in the media, complete or in segments, and provoked hundreds of reactions and comments. However, the public responded not only to the newly imposed restrictions but also to the emotional appeal and dramatic discourse. For the first time, its attention became intensely focused on Mutafchiyski himself.

In the following days, many websites republished the already known facts of his official biography,¹¹ and the tabloids started digging for private photographs and personal details. On Facebook, dozens of groups¹² were created with distinct goals and motivations, as is evident from their titles: “Mutafchiyski Rules”;¹³ “I Support General Mutafchiyski”;¹⁴ “I Trust in Major General Mutafchiyski”;¹⁵ “General Mutafchiyski for PRESIDENT!”;¹⁶ etc. The largest and most active Facebook group, “The General Said!”,¹⁷ reached nearly one hundred thousand members. In the comment sections of online newspapers and on social media,¹⁸

a flurry of interpretive work began where every fragment of Mutafchiyski's CV, personality or public appearances was loaded with controversial meanings. Fans and anti-fans utilized the same facts, messages, or gestures to construct various – and often oppositional – readings; e.g., his professional achievements were used as proof of both his supreme competence in medicine and his absolute incompetence in pandemic crisis management (what could an army doctor and a surgeon possibly know about infectious diseases?); his emotive, figurative rhetoric was appraised both as perfectly adequate to inspire solidarity and as ill-suited, triggering panic; his public appeals were seen either as signs of genuine concern, or as poorly disguised aspirations for a political career. The spreading rumors of Mutafchiyski's running for president in the upcoming elections would frequently push the negotiated readings into an entirely political context, would modify and adjust them to existent political narratives, and would mobilize partisan supporters of the main Bulgarian political parties in heated online disputes over his persona.

At the end of the same memorable briefing of March 14, Mutafchiyski made a spontaneous reference to one of the allegedly first internet memes, featuring him as a character: a two-part photo collage with a shot from the official video of the song “We’re Going to a Party” by young pop singer Djordjano, and a picture of Mutafchiyski saying, “You are not going...” (Fig. 1). “This is not the time for parties!”, he emphatically concluded, and that inadvertent endorsement led to an unprecedented boom of meme creation in the next weeks. The primary type of the General's memes followed the same idea and pattern: two-part photo collages featuring Mutafchiyski in a dialogue with a popular song or a movie/cartoon character. For the second part of the collages, a specific set of photographs were used, accompanied by repetitive phrases, such as: “You are not going (out)!”, “Don’t go out!”, “Where (are you going)???””, “Stay at home!”, i.e., *memetic images* along with *memetic phrases* (as per Milner 2016: 17–18). The traditional media “discovered” the growing meme culture and promptly reported on it, thereby providing it with more visibility among the mainstream public. The memes crossed the boundaries of the digital world and entered the physical one: images of Mutafchiyski asking “Where are you going?” started to appear on exit doors and in building elevators; others were spotted on cars along with the warning “Keep your distance!”¹⁹ A complex mixture of fascination with the memetic practices, creative engagement, and seeking of publicity resulted in further spreading them into the realm of commerce: the well-known images and phrases were used as decoration of T-shirts, socks, towels, masks, cakes,²⁰ haircut,²¹ manicure,²² and Easter eggs.²³

A fan culture was growing around Ventsislav Mutafchiyski in both its characteristic aspects: *affirmative* and *transformative*. The regular briefings and

other media appearances of the NOH chairman were closely watched, and parts of them were cut and reposted on social media as invitations to in-depth scrutiny. The preferred place for both humorous and serious discussions was the Facebook group “The General Said!”. It was also the usual space for sharing all kinds of COVID-19-related creative works: photo manipulations and collages, cartoons, poems, jokes, etc. Many of them featured the General as a character. On Facebook, several declarations of romantic love were made to him semi-ironically, semi-melodramatically, and a few love poems went viral, e.g. “To Him with Love” (by Rositsa Dyulgerova) and “That Man” (unknown author). The folk singer Smilyana Zaharieva, who is listed in the Guinness Book of Records as “the person with the most powerful voice”,²⁴ dedicated to him a special performance from her balcony.²⁵ Mutafchiyski himself was made into a rap singer, when parts of his media briefings and interviews were remixed as the rap pieces “We’re Going to a Party”²⁶ (in a duet with Djordjano) and “Stay Home”²⁷ by the mock label Misirki Records. In the two remixes, he “raps” key anti-epidemic restrictions and recommendations: “no, you are not going [to a party]”, “it’s not time for parties”, “isolation, quarantine”, “personal hygiene”, “disinfection”, “stay at home”, “this is a state of emergency, it must be obeyed”, and so on. One self-proclaimed “unemployed programmer in quarantine” created the video game *Coronyo vs the General*, in which the player-controlled character of the General walks the streets of major Bulgarian cities and tries to put all undisciplined disobedient citizens in isolation before the villain virus arrives.²⁸

Along with the fandom, the anti-fandom was also growing and gaining strength. In an interview for *Deutsche Welle* at the end of April, Mutafchiyski said that he had been receiving death threats.²⁹ Anonymous or signed, the threats would arrive by email or a text message, and then he would report them to the police. However, the most noticeable public peak of anti-fandom occurred after an interview with journalist Miroljuba Benatova, aired on May 14, which Mutafchiyski interrupted angrily with the phrase: “I expect many people to die, and die mightily!” The phrase became proverbial and caused a fierce controversy. One of the smaller political formations in Bulgaria even appealed to the Supreme Cassation Prosecutor’s Office with a request to bring criminal charges against Mutafchiyski for “communicating deceptive signs of alarm in the form of misleading information that many people will die and die mightily”.³⁰ The interview provoked heated online disputes, where both parties were accused of being “too arrogant, unmannered, unprofessional”.³¹ Mutafchiyski was mainly reproached for not being kind, caring and comforting – that is, for failing to behave like a “proper doctor”.

THE GENERAL AS A FOLKLORE CHARACTER

As the public figure most strongly associated with the pandemic crisis management in Bulgaria, Ventsislav Mutafchiyski appeared in the majority of COVID-19-related artistic production circulated in the media during the spring of 2020. I will focus my analysis on the cultural forms that could be defined as belonging to the genres of (digital) folklore, mainly on *memes*. First, because memes “actually reflect deep social and cultural structures”; shared norms and values are constructed through them, therefore researchers define internet memes as “(post)modern folklore” (Shifman 2014: 15). Second, because the genre relies on collective creation, circulation, and transformation, its fundamental logic is “textual poaching” (see Milner 2016: 26–29), and in this sense it fully embodies the principles and mechanisms of participatory culture. As proved by Anastasia Denisova’s latest research, memes are also the most popular contemporary genre for political engagement and political resistance (Denisova 2019: 32–38). It is important to distinguish the fictional character who exists in many forms of vernacular creativity from the real person Mutafchiyski, so in the following part of this paper I will refer to the former by the colloquially used sobriquet “the General”. Like many other folklore characters, the General is *ambivalent*: his features are fully dependent on the functions and roles he performs in given narratives or contexts.

The majority of the cultural forms I analyze in this part of my paper have been collected from Facebook, principally from the group “The General Said!” During a brief interview via Messenger, the group’s administrator Stanish Rangelov explained to me that the group had been created by him and one of his friends mostly to gather collages featuring Mutafchiyski. The group was originally dedicated to humor and the alternative names, discussed by its two creators, had been “Laughter against coronavirus” and “Laughter during a state of emergency”.³² Created on March 20, the group grew quickly and reached nearly one hundred thousand members from one hundred countries around the globe.³³ The group was deleted by Facebook on September 2. Stanish Rangelov suggested that the published content had been systematically reported as violating the rules and “Facebook community standards”.

With the group’s erasure I faced one of the greatest challenges of internet ethnography: the disappearance of studied materials, thoroughly collected and organized in bookmark folders. I had downloaded many memes, jokes and other textual forms to my personal archive.³⁴ However, they were all deprived of their immediate context of reactions, comments, and interpretations. As Anna Haverinen points out, it “felt like a natural catastrophe had wiped out ‘the village of my fieldwork’” (Haverinen 2015: 86). Apart from my personal collection,

the following analysis is also based on numerous YouTube videos, designed as slideshows of memes and jokes.³⁵



Figure 1. Presumably, one of the earliest photo collages which set a pattern of memetic creativity. It features Djordjano singing “We’re going to a party!!” and Mutafchiyski responding “You are not going...”³⁶

The General’s original and most common function was to personify the anti-epidemic restrictions and recommendations. In this interpretation, the character appears in hundreds of two-part collages, in which the first part illustrates a refrain in a popular song, a line or a frame from a movie, or a quote from a book, and the second part is an image of the General responding with a prohibition, encouragement, or (dis)approval. Here are a few examples of interaction with popular movie franchises:

A frame from *The Lord of the Rings*: *Frodo, we are going to the greatest adventure!*

The General: *You are not going!*³⁷

A frame from *Avengers: Infinity War*: *I’m sorry, Earth is closed today.*

The General: *That’s right, excellent!*³⁸

A frame from *Home Alone: I'm thinking of staying home...*

The General: *Attaboy!*³⁹

The fictional role of imposing interdicts or sanctions on every attempt at movement, association, or entertainment is an analogy to Ventsislav Mutafchiyski's actual public role as head of the NOH. The part played by the General in the fictional worlds of movies, songs, books, and cartoons (Fig. 2) reflected the duties performed by Mutafchiyski in the real-life context. The imagined situations and the character himself serve as allegories of the pandemic reality.



Figure 2. The General asks Little Red Riding Hood, “Where are you going???”⁴⁰

The character's authority and powers were then hyperbolized to the point of absurdity, and the General started issuing sanctions on or interdicts against natural processes, scientific laws, and sacred religious events: e.g., he would forbid babies' teeth to *come in*, he would ban the spring from *coming*, and he would ask Jesus when getting out of the tomb, “Where are you going???”⁴¹ On the one hand, the character's development was subjected to language games and puns; on the other, it reflected the progressive tightening of the measures. The public perceptions of totality of the NOH powers and the excessive restrictiveness of the anti-epidemic measures were articulated through various

textual forms and genres. They were expressed in jokes (e.g., This snow has been ordered by General Mutafchiyski so he can tell if anyone's been out by the footsteps⁴²), in satirical fake news (e.g., New checkpoints to be introduced between our living rooms and bathrooms⁴³), or in a thematic subgroup of memes in which the General would (dis)approve of movements during sexual intercourse. A presumably real story went viral on Facebook about a woman with an overdue pregnancy, who wrote a personal email to Ventsislav Mutafchiyski on behalf of her unborn daughter, asking for permission to get out. Mutafchiyski played along and granted it.⁴⁴

The character, already shaped as an ultimate authority, was further utilized to asseverate diverse and long-standing political positions and attitudes. The General confronted major Bulgarian and European politicians and opposed significant political agendas, such as:

Prime Minister Boyko Borisov: *I'm going for a fourth term.*
The General: *No, you are not going.*⁴⁵

President Rumen Radev: *On May 9, I'm going to Moscow.*
The General: *You are not going anywhere!*⁴⁶

UK Prime Minister Boris Jonson: *We are leaving the EU.*
The General: *No, you are not leaving!!!*⁴⁷

In numerous subsequent incarnations, the character was adopted as a tool for expressing common opinions, preferences or wishes; he started giving orders, such as “Drink BEER!”⁴⁸ and “Cheers! This is an order!”⁴⁹; telling jokes (e.g., “What is the most unused object during a quarantine? Bras!”⁵⁰); absorbing previously existing memetic trends (e.g., the meme “There are two types of people. Avoid both.”⁵¹) or speaking on behalf of disappointed soccer fans (Fig. 3).

Figure 3. The goalkeeper of the Bulgarian national soccer team Nikolay Mihaylov: “I have a headache, General. Did I catch the virus?” The General: “I don't think so, Nicky. You can't catch a ball, let alone the virus.”⁵²



The media coverage of the pandemic crisis and the questions asked during the information briefings by journalists, especially from the tabloids, were subjected to constant public criticism, which was articulated through different humorous genres. In memes, some journalists would appear as secondary characters asking silly questions, such as: “General Mutafchiyski, is self-infection possible if a person spits on themselves while coughing?”⁵³ In jokes, witty situations would be played out:

*The General gets admitted to a hospital with a head trauma. The doctor examines the patient and concludes, “He was hit by something heavy and dull. Perhaps by a real dumb question.”*⁵⁴

Ne!Novinite, a website for satirical fake news, published a list of 10 stupid questions that had not yet been addressed to Prof. Mutafchiyski⁵⁵ to help journalists with suggestions; e.g. “Which zodiac sign is most vulnerable to the infection according to mathematical models?” or “What would you say to yourself if you were God?” In a mock interview on Bazikileaks – a blog parodying the news leaks website WikiLeaks – the General complains how his daily interactions with journalists make him “feel duller and duller” and speak nonsense himself.⁵⁶ As is evident from the examples, this thematic subgroup of textual



Figure 4. The General having an argument with himself: “Starting from tomorrow, everybody with a mask!” – “Without masks!” – “With masks!” – “Without masks!” – “With or without masks?” – “Why are you listening to this guy at all?”⁵⁷

forms constitutes a separate field of interpretations of the character in a very distinct manner: the General here is no longer seen as the powerful person in charge but rather as a victim of aggressive incompetence and stupidity. His function is to embody the public's irritation with the inaccuracies and failures in the media coverage of the pandemic crisis; to suffer symbolically the social afflictions caused by bad journalism.

Last but not least is the character's function as a manifestation of resistance against the anti-epidemic restrictions and measures. In a more specific and direct manner, objections would be raised by reversing the memetic structure so that the General himself would be subjected to sanctions or prohibitions. Public dissatisfaction with certain undefined or frequently changed recommendations would be expressed by portraying the character arguing against himself (Fig. 4).

In a more abstract, symbolic manner, the idea of rebellion would be conveyed by transforming the General into a fictional emblem of evil (e.g., the Night King from the TV series *Game of Thrones*⁵⁸) or a historical emblem of dictatorship (Fig. 5). The idea was reinforced by inserting the character into varying complex conspiracy narratives, already circulating on social media. These plots present the General either as the original source of evil, or as an accomplice in a global coronavirus hoax, or even as a puppet ruled by ubiquitous and omnipotent extraterrestrials.



Figure 5. *The General as the epitome of dictatorship.*⁵⁹

ASPECTS AND EFFECTS OF A PARTICIPATORY PANDEMIC

As the case of Ventsislav Mutafchiyski proves, fandom could be considered not only a common phenomenon of the contemporary mediated world but, under given circumstances, inevitable. Placed at the center of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis management and in the spotlight of media attention, the NOH chairman inspired a distinct fan following. The growing fan culture around his media persona was fueled in a particular cycle of media coverage: fan works and practices were covered in mainstream news and spread into thus far unexploited channels and spaces.

The interpretive process of Mutafchiyski's media image, or its 'negotiated readings' by the audience, developed on at least three levels, each with a specific time and dynamics. In the beginning, it depended on whether the public accepted the "wartime leader" persona that Mutafchiyski was role-playing and the messages of discipline and restrictions he was enunciating. Some read those messages with the preferred 'encoded' meanings, but in others they triggered resistance and "psychological reactance" (Steindl et al. 2015). Then, when Mutafchiyski became better known, the contradicting readings were oddly bound to his different public roles, shaped by radically different stereotypes of behavior. The same actions and discourses would be judged either as too soft and tolerant for a general or as too harsh and aggressive for a doctor; thus, interpretations diverged into separate narratives and agendas. And finally, each different reading served as a reference point or context for subsequent ethical assessment of Mutafchiyski's words and gestures, i.e., for his further readings as a "moral text" (as per Gray 2005). On a more abstract level, Mutafchiyski's media image and its interpretations by the audience became a crossroads for many conflicting interests, an area of political confrontation: between the government and the public, between approval of the imposed measures and dissatisfaction with them, between different groups in Bulgarian society.

The negative effects of anti-fandom affected mostly Ventsislav Mutafchiyski and his colleagues at the NOH. As researchers of anti-fandom have noted, in cases where hostility and aggression are directed at a person or a group of people and not at a text or genre, the expressed negative emotions, insults, threats and hate have a real negative impact (see Jane 2014). During the morning briefing of April 29, Ventsislav Mutafchiyski expressed the wish of the National Operational Headquarters that the established information model be changed, as it had become extremely stressful for both the NOH members and the public. "Bearers of bad news are usually killed," he said. "We are about to be killed." In the previously mentioned interview for *Deutsche Welle*, published on April 28,⁶⁰

he pointed out that his image had been “too often satanized”, and even quoted a rather striking example of the hateful messages he was receiving: “I want you to smile when I shoot you dead.”

On May 2, the briefing was chaired by the NOH secretary. Along with the usual updates, it announced that regular briefings would be discontinued since they were evaluated to be no longer needed. A storm of response followed immediately; hundreds of emotional statuses were published on social media: “Stop, don’t go!”, “We’ll miss you, General”, “This is the end of an era”, “Bring back the General to the people!”, “They killed the General”, etc. On the morning of the next day, a Sunday, Prime Minister Boyko Borisov called a special press conference to refute the speculations about the disbandment of the NOH and to show everyone that the General is alive and well. Mutafchiyski attended the press conference wearing a suit, not a uniform. Information briefings switched from a daily to a hebdomadal schedule, and on June 4 – one hundred days after the formation of the NOH – their termination was proclaimed. During the following summer months, Ventsislav Mutafchiyski almost entirely disappeared from the media.

The positive effects of fandom, however, were much broader and more visible. During a difficult and stressful time, which many members of society endured in physical isolation, fandom and other shared interests motivated connections, communication, and joint creativity. The Facebook group “The General Said!” functioned as a place for escape and lifting people’s spirits and these effects were openly stated by members of the group: “Thank you for this group. Definitely helps maintain the mood in the whole situation we are in” (T.T.); “The truth is that I am also entertaining with these collages my mother, who is 70 years old and is currently isolated in her apartment” (V.V.).⁶¹ The abundance of transformative works, the numerous incarnations of the General – as Superman,⁶² as Napoleon⁶³ or Hitler, as a sexy Australian firefighter (Fig. 6), as Mr. Bean,⁶⁴ as John McClane from *Die Hard*,⁶⁵ as Maleficent,⁶⁶ as Morpheus from *The Matrix*,⁶⁷ as Lord Stark or the Night King from *Game of Thrones*, and as many other popular characters – are not merely reflections of different attitudes, points of view, or ‘readings’. To a large extent, they are the results of a collective creative play of imagination and interpretation; they emanate from the shared pleasure of producing new cultural forms, by the fans and for the fans. The active engagement with the cultural practices of fandom – and not only transformative, but also affirmative practices, such as gathering memes in collections, curating them in YouTube videos, circulating and discussing them on social media, etc. – has indisputably positive socio-psychological effects.



Figure 6. *The General as a sexy Australian firefighter, posing with a kitten. The appeal reads “Keep your distance!”⁶⁸*

In Jenkins’s seminal book *Textual Poachers*, the cultural production of fandom has been defined as “a contemporary folk culture” (Jenkins 1992: 279). The majority of COVID-19 related works featuring the General belong to the genres of vernacular creativity. The General is undoubtedly the main character of Bulgarian pandemic folklore. The fan culture that appeared around his media persona remained alive long after

Ventsislav Mutafchiyski had left the public scene. The new reaction, added on Facebook at that time, “Even Apart We’re in This Together”, represented by a *care* emoji hugging a red love heart, has been transformed into an emoji embracing the General (Fig. 7), a beautiful symbol of both the relationship between the General and his fans, and the connecting role of fandom.



Figure 7.⁶⁹

As the character himself, the fandom of Ventsislav Mutafchiyski was an *ambivalent* sociocultural phenomenon. One part of it was rather serious and genuinely political fandom / anti-fandom (as per Sandvoss 2019). In the fan (or anti-fan) object, constructed through “the dual strategy of *interpretation* and *selection*” (Sandvoss 2013: 277), the political cause of COVID-19 pandemic management and the public figure most strongly associated with it could not be clearly separated. Another part was openly humorous or ironic fandom, emanating from the attitudes and pleasures of mockery and shared laughter (as per Ang 1985: 96–102). One part of the affective engagement with the media image of Ventsislav Mutafchiyski was public and very productive in both affirmative and transformative practices. Another was hidden and determinedly destructive and led to the deletion of the Facebook group “The General Said!” The emotions that motivated the engagement and the practices they were realized through, ranged from casual liking and sharing (or reporting) Facebook content to passionate zealotry and purposeful harassment. On a more abstract level, people utilized the cultural logic and mechanisms of fandom in a similar manner as textually productive fans utilized the General – to serve their specific needs, attitudes, opinions or agendas. Building my analysis on Henry Jenkins’ understanding of fandom as “a continuum of possible relations to popular texts” (Jenkins 2018: 16) allows me not to exclude any forms or aspects of the studied phenomenon. With all its facets and manifestations that phenomenon comprised a significant segment of the public response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Bulgaria during the spring of 2020; hence, I suggest the notion *participatory pandemic* to describe it as a whole. Participatory culture during a time of crisis has been rationalized in terms of globally emergent collaboration, remote assistance and “crowdsourced” information which help save lives (see Liu & Ziemke 2013). In my study I have employed the concept to explore how media fandom and participatory practices affect the key figures of a health crisis management.

After a few months of complete absence from the media – meaningful in its contrast with the previous over-presence – Ventsislav Mutafchiyski returned to the public scene in the autumn of 2020, along with the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. On September 25, the renewal of the regular briefings of the National Operational Headquarters was announced, however, on a hebdomadal schedule. Despite retaining his position as a chairman of the NOS, Mutafchiyski was no longer leading the briefings, ceding his place in the spotlight to the Minister of Health. During the last months of 2020, his public activities and appearances in the media were primarily related to the pro-vaccination campaign and on December 27, his name day, Mutafchiyski was the first person who took the COVID-19 vaccine in the Military Medical Academy in Sofia. On the hospital’s Facebook page, the news gathered hundreds of positive reactions

and comments.⁷⁰ It is plausible to claim that in many ways Mutafchiyski has returned to his rather “medical self”. It is also worth noting that in the national media coverage (i.e., on Bulgarian National Television and Bulgarian National Radio) he has been currently addressed or referred to as “Prof. Mutafchiyski”.⁷¹

The still active Facebook groups, created by his supporters, such as “I Support General Mutafchiyski” and “I Trust in Major General Mutafchiyski”, have been transformed into places for sharing and discussing COVID-19-related information. The groups and pages dedicated to memes and humor, e.g., “Mutafchiyski Rules”, have remained like small islands of once ubiquitous culture. Although rarely, new memes and jokes are being published in reaction to current affairs⁷² as if to indicate the fandom is still alive. Attention should be paid to the fact they all feature the General, exactly as the character was originally created, and no adjustments have been made to reflect the current, more “medical”, public image of Ventsislav Mutafchiyski. The General has now become an independent cultural phenomenon.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the participants in the online conference “COVID-19: Management Strategies and Communication Models”, organized by the Estonian Literary Museum on August 18, 2020, for their useful questions and comments on an early draft of this paper.

NOTES

¹ A quote from the establishing order of the National Operational Headquarters. Available in Bulgarian at <https://coronavirus.bg/bg/231>, last accessed on 15 March 2021.

² See <https://www.theverge.com/2020/4/3/21206011/anthony-fauci-coronavirus-pandemic-stan-fandom-hero-donald-trump-white-house-task-force>, last accessed on 15 March 2021.

³ See <https://www.nbcwashington.com/news/local/cocktails-sexiest-man-alive-and-shirts-dr-anthony-fauci-on-becoming-a-pop-culture-icon/2326166/>, last accessed on 15 March 2021.

⁴ See <https://www.mediapool.bg/hirurgat-ventsislav-mutafchiyski-e-noviyat-vremen-en-nachalnik-na-vma-news263441.html>; https://www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2018/01/31/3121678_sled_vremennia_post_polk_vencislav_mutafchiyski/; <https://bntnews.bg/bg/a/prezidentt-naznachi-prof-ventsislav-mutafchiyski-za-shef-na-vma>. In Bulgarian. All last accessed on 15 March 2021.

⁵ See https://www.capital.bg/specialni_izdaniia/zdrave/2018/05/18/3386492_prof_d-r_vencislav_mutafchiyski_dmn_izplatihme/; <https://clinica.bg/9759-VMA-razshiri-transplantacionnite-ekipi>. In Bulgarian. Both last accessed on 15 March 2021.

- ⁶ In Bulgarian at <https://armymedia.bg/archives/88923>, last accessed on 15 March 2021.
- ⁷ In French at <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2020/03/16/adresse-aux-francais-covid19>, last accessed on 15 March 2021.
- ⁸ See <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-germany/merkel-tells-germans-fighting-virus-demands-war-time-solidarity-idUSKBN2153GX>, last accessed on 15 March 2021.
- ⁹ Quotes from Yassen Boyadzhiev and Georgi Lozanov's analyses for Deutsche Welle (DW). In Bulgarian. Available at <https://www.dw.com/bg/мутафчийски-да-поеме-държавата-как-се-справя-българия-с-коронавируса/a-52805286>; <https://www.dw.com/bg/коронавирус-и-медии-мутафчийски-на-върха-на-пирамидата/a-53056298>, last accessed on 15 March 2021.
- ¹⁰ The full text of the speech in Bulgarian is available at <https://www.monitor.bg/bg/a/view/mutafchijski-kym-nas-se-zadava-epidemija-s-nevidjana-jarost-v-choveshkata-istorija-c-ja-lata-re-ch-191613>, last accessed on 15 March 2021.
- ¹¹ It is worth noting how many publications in that moment shared a similar title: *Who is Ventsislav Mutafchiyski?* See <http://wars.bg/кой-е-венцислав-мутафчийски-биографи/>; https://www.actualno.com/curious/кой-е-general-mutafchijski-video-news_1442598.html; <https://bulletin.bg/koy-e-gen-mayor-ventsislav-mutafchiyski-chovekat-koyto-vpechatli-s-plamennata-si-rech/>; <https://hubavajena.bg/koy-e-general-mutafchiyski/>, all last accessed on 15 March 2021.
- ¹² At the time of writing of this paper, eighteen Facebook groups and pages dedicated to Mutafchiyski were still active, their members ranging from a few to many thousands.
- ¹³ In Bulgarian: “Мутафчийски Рулз”. A public group, created on March 21, 2020, with 3,666 members (see <https://www.facebook.com/groups/629456334504004>, last accessed on 15 March 2021).
- ¹⁴ In Bulgarian: “АЗ ПОДКРЕПЯМ ГЕНЕРАЛ МУТАФЧИЙСКИ”. A private group, created on March 14, 2020, with 17,081 members (see <https://www.facebook.com/groups/519134345645398>, last accessed on 15 March 2021).
- ¹⁵ In Bulgarian: “Аз вярвам на Генерал-майор Мутафчийски”. A public group, created on March 14, 2020, with 5,333 members (see <https://www.facebook.com/groups/649744365809580>, last accessed on 15 March 2021).
- ¹⁶ In Bulgarian: “Генерал Мутафчийски ПРЕЗИДЕНТ!”. A public group, created on March 17, 2020, with 3,883 members (see <https://www.facebook.com/groups/561505638125376>, last accessed on 15 March 2021).
- ¹⁷ In Bulgarian: “Генералът каза!”. A public group, created on March 20, 2020. The group was deleted by Facebook on September 2, 2020. I would like to thank the group's administrator Stanish Rangelov for providing to me his personal archive of the group's statistics and screenshots to which I reference in this paper. Also, he was kind to answer a few questions via Messenger.
- ¹⁸ For example in discussions, provoked by the emergency briefing on March 14, on Facebook pages of mainstream Bulgarian media, such as bTV (<https://www.facebook.com/btvnews/videos/216426003061071>); “Свободна Европа” (<https://www.facebook.com/svobodnaevropa.bg/posts/2267111230252236>); “Капитал” (<https://www.facebook.com/capitalbg/posts/10157381296721032>), all last accessed on 15 March 2021.

- ¹⁹ See <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=3349232791776540&set=g.629456334504004>, last accessed on 15 March 2021.
- ²⁰ See <https://www.bgdnes.bg/Article/8403113>. In Bulgarian. Last accessed on 15 March 2021.
- ²¹ See <https://btvnovinite.bg/bulgaria/obrazat-na-vencislav-mutafchijski-se-prevarna-v-pricheska-video.html>. In Bulgarian. Last accessed on 15 March 2021.
- ²² See <https://www.standartnews.com/lifestyle-lyubopitno/zashcho-manikyuristkite-obo-zhavat-gen-mutafchijski-420062.html>. In Bulgarian. Last accessed on 15 March 2021.
- ²³ See <https://www.24chasa.bg/region/article/8473896>. In Bulgarian. Last accessed on 15 March 2021.
- ²⁴ See <https://offnews.bg/kultura/balgarka-s-rekord-v-gines-smiliana-zaharieva-e-chovekat-s-naj-mosht-706381.html>. In Bulgarian. Last accessed on 15 March 2021.
- ²⁵ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tHVlPc0oX7I>, last accessed on 15 March 2021.
- ²⁶ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a66LfI6bTvc>, last accessed on 15 March 2021.
- ²⁷ See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3rOJ_zurlMQ, last accessed on 15 March 2021.
- ²⁸ The game is still available to play at <https://koronio-vs-general.com/>, last accessed on 15 March 2021.
- ²⁹ In Bulgarian: <https://www.dw.com/bg/коронавирус-в-българия-ексклузивно-интервю-с-ген-мутафчийски/a-53265618>, last accessed on 15 March 2021.
- ³⁰ The full text of the appeal in Bulgarian is available at <http://www.boec-bg.com/archives/3254>, last accessed on 15 March 2021.
- ³¹ See <https://www.facebook.com/dnevnik/posts/10157413814628310>; <https://www.facebook.com/OFFNews.bg/posts/2991675274221152>; <https://www.facebook.com/eurocom.bg/posts/1608886985956336>. In Bulgarian. All last accessed on 15 March 2021.
- ³² Screenshots of private text messages. Courtesy of S. Rangelov.
- ³³ According to group's archives the group members were 96,676 in total, 90,669 of them from Bulgaria, 1,564 from the UK, 1,195 from Germany, 458 from Spain, 314 from the USA, etc. The lowest number of 1 member was registered from 21 places, e.g., Angola, Greenland, New Zealand, Thailand, etc.
- ³⁴ The materials collected by me are now available in the National Center for Intangible Cultural Heritage (NCICH) at the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic Museum – Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, under the archive numbers FtAIF 1856 (462 items collected from March 20, 2020 to August 24, 2020) and FtAIF 1869 (61 items related to the General, collected from October 8, 2020 to November 29, 2020).
- ³⁵ I would like to express my special thanks to Snezhana Tasheva (Janie Fallout) for her eight 5-minutes-long YouTube videos with memes and jokes featuring the General, many of which I failed to add to my collection. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rWjWgZai1rI>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r3c2SUURdFk>; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AyxUUD_ONEo; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p59i4vw1gsQ>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pLaP9UkeB0k>; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i-OBj1pDA_s; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H8UyyKAUnTA>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xlh35QBm6Kk>, all last accessed on 15 March 2021.

- ³⁶ NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 010. Collected on August 16, 2020. Although in some media publications it is claimed to be “the first meme featuring General Mutafchiyski” (see <https://bpost.bg/generalat-kaza/>; <https://btvnovinite.bg/lifestyle/liubopitno/generalat-kaza-koronavajral-senzacijata-u-nas-v-15-kartinki.html>, both last accessed on 15 March 2021), that claim could not be verified. An early publication of the meme, still available on Facebook, is from March 13, 2020, however, slightly altered: <https://www.facebook.com/Д-р-Коронов-104895457804189/photos/106985177595217/>, last accessed on 15 March 2021.
- ³⁷ NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 091. Collected on March 23, 2020.
- ³⁸ NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 098. Collected on August 21, 2020.
- ³⁹ NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 101. Collected on August 21, 2020.
- ⁴⁰ NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 116. Collected on March 20, 2020. Also available at <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=225108715357267&set=g.629456334504004>, last accessed on 15 March 2021.
- ⁴¹ NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 370, 371. Collected on August 12, 2020. Also available at <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=2928597763900692&set=g.629456334504004>; <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=662635664526340&set=g.629456334504004>, both last accessed on 15 March 2021.
- ⁴² NCICH archive, FtAIF 1869: 107. Collected on October 23, 2020.
- ⁴³ In Bulgarian available at <https://www.nenovinite.com/ne/politika/kpp-mezhdu-hola-i-toaletnata>, last accessed on 15 March 2021.
- ⁴⁴ NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 440. Collected on March 29, 2020. The story was told in the Facebook group “The General Said!” by the woman’s mother and supported with a screenshot of the messages. The email address, displayed on the screenshot, is an actual contact of Ventsislav Mutafchiyski (see <https://bestdoctors.bg/doctor/id/320>). The story has also been reported in the media at <https://www.bgonair.bg/a/163-lyubopitno/189745-humor-pri-pandemiya-bremenna-zhena-poiska-razreshenie-ot-gen-mayor-mutafchiyski-da-rodii>, last accessed on 15 March 2021.
- ⁴⁵ NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 154. Collected on August 21, 2020.
- ⁴⁶ NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 177. Collected on April 29, 2020.
- ⁴⁷ NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 180. Collected on March 24, 2020.
- ⁴⁸ NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 321. Collected on August 12, 2020. Also available at <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=2880164582065290&set=g.629456334504004>, last accessed on 15 March 2021.
- ⁴⁹ NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 332. Collected on August 13, 2020.
- ⁵⁰ NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 427. Collected on August 20, 2020.
- ⁵¹ NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 325. Collected on April 3, 2020.
- ⁵² NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 199. Collected on August 16, 2020. Another version is available at <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=3157731560926665&set=g.629456334504004>, last accessed on 15 March 2021.

- ⁵³ NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 222. Collected on August 12, 2020. Also available at <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=2949516025142199&set=g.629456334504004>, last accessed on 15 March 2021.
- ⁵⁴ Collected on August 17, 2020, from a post in the Facebook group “The General Said!”. Personal archive.
- ⁵⁵ In Bulgarian at <https://www.nenovinite.com/ne/rubriki/10-maloumni-vuproasa-koitovse-oshe-ne-sa-zadadeni-na-prof-mutafchijski>, last accessed on 15 March 2021.
- ⁵⁶ In Bulgarian at <https://neverojatno.wordpress.com/2020/04/09/general-3/>, last accessed on 15 March 2021.
- ⁵⁷ NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 333. Collected on August 12, 2020. Also available at <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=3253216458044841&set=g.629456334504004>, last accessed on 15 March 2021.
- ⁵⁸ NCICH archive, FtAIF 1869: 065. Collected on October 23, 2020.
- ⁵⁹ NCICH archive, FtAIF 1869: 061. Collected on October 13, 2020.
- ⁶⁰ See <https://www.dw.com/bg/коронавирус-в-българия-ексклюзивно-интервю-с-ген-мутафчийски/a-53265618>. In Bulgarian. Last accessed on 15 March 2021.
- ⁶¹ Screenshots taken on March 22, 2020. Courtesy of S. Rangelov.
- ⁶² NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 387. Collected on August 13, 2020. Also available at <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=3182710378428783&set=g.629456334504004>, last accessed on 15 March 2021.
- ⁶³ NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 393. Collected on August 13, 2020.
- ⁶⁴ NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 392. Collected on August 12, 2020. Also available at <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=2876980255731415&set=g.629456334504004>, last accessed on 15 March 2021.
- ⁶⁵ NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 379. Collected on May 29, 2020. Also available at <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=876076856223970&set=g.629456334504004>, last accessed on 15 March 2021.
- ⁶⁶ NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 388. Collected on August 12, 2020. Also available at <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=3203470153019472&set=g.629456334504004>, last accessed on 15 March 2021.
- ⁶⁷ NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 390. Collected on June 9, 2020. Also available at <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=700323977424175&set=g.629456334504004>, last accessed on 15 March 2021.
- ⁶⁸ NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 404. Collected on March 20, 2020. Also available at <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=10218278375964227&set=g.629456334504004>, last accessed on 15 March 2021.
- ⁶⁹ NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 386. Collected on May 2, 2020. Also available at <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1676306285845517&set=g.629456334504004>, last accessed on 15 March 2021.

⁷⁰ See <https://www.facebook.com/mma.vma/posts/4065518406805473>. In Bulgarian. Last accessed on 15 March 2021.

⁷¹ See <https://bntnews.bg/news/prof-mutafchiyski-e-parviyat-vaksiniran-sreshtu-covid-19-medik-ot-vma-1088855news.html>; <https://bnr.bg/post/101413709/prof-vencislav-mutafchiyski>. In Bulgarian. Both last accessed on 15 March 2021.

⁷² See <https://www.facebook.com/groups/629456334504004/permalink/827941997988769/>; <https://www.facebook.com/groups/629456334504004/permalink/839473253502310/>; <https://www.facebook.com/groups/629456334504004/permalink/860041664778802/>, all last accessed on 15 March 2021.

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Angelina Ilieva is Assistant Professor (PhD) at the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic Museum, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Bulgaria. Her main research areas are popular culture, media anthropology, fan & game cultures, and digital folklore.

angelina.ilieva@iefem.bas.bg