

FRIENDSHIP AND SPENDING TIME WITH FRIENDS IN THE CITY IN LITHUANIA AND BULGARIA

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Abstract: This article seeks to compare friendship bonds formed and maintained in two EU capital cities. There is an analysis of how people of various ages in Vilnius and Sofia perceive friendship, their assessments of friendship between people of different genders and how friendly bonds are maintained during leisure time and celebrations. The research revealed a similar concept of friendship in both cities. People in Sofia are more inclined to spend their leisure time with friends in the outdoors, while relatively more Vilnius-residents complain about having too little free time, which limits their opportunities to meet with friends after work, on weekends, or even during the holidays. When analysing how friends spend time together during celebrations, the greatest differences were observed in mass celebrations. State and traditional celebrations are marked in Vilnius, while in Sofia public traditional celebrations are rarely marked. In Sofia, unlike Vilnius, they are celebrated by going to the hometowns of parents or grandparents (or to villages and towns not far from Sofia if there are no older-generation family members), in this way forming and maintaining friendly relations with people originating from those places.

Keywords: friendship, gender, holiday, leisure, regional identity, Sofia, Vilnius

Introduction

In recent decades, increasingly more attention has been paid to the analysis of friendship in the social sciences and humanities. Friendship is an informal social relationship. Contrary to kinship, it is based on choice and voluntariness: friends are sought and must be won. Friendship is an acquired not an ascribed status (Beer 2001: 5805). Friendship rests on long-term and stable communication (Desai & Killick 2010: 1). The object of this article is the leisure time and celebrations spent in the company of friends, during which friendly relations are formed and maintained. Leisure time, like friendship, can be defined in various ways. There is consensus that free time and leisure time are not the same things. Leisure time with friends is usually understood as that part of free time which one does not associate with work, the satisfaction of vital needs or family obligations. Karlheiz Wöhler has distinguished “pure leisure” (from the Latin *purus*) category, understood as time free from various “impurities” associated with work activities (including housework) and obligations to one’s family or partner. Resting on the theoretical legacy of A. Van Gennep and V. Turner, the author states that pure leisure is a special, ritualised liminal space that lies outside of the boundaries of regular, regulated social life (Wöhler 2006: 187–193). On the other hand, even a celebration that is made an official holiday (no working day) is not always celebrated, instead being set aside for work around the house or the satisfaction of other obligations. That is why even non-holiday leisure time with a friend can be compared to a celebration. This has prompted the ethnological research of friendship and leisure time spent among friends. The aim of this article is to answer questions about how people from two different countries understand and maintain friendly relations. To meet this aim, it shall be revealed how people of various ages from Vilnius and Sofia: 1) understand friendship; 2) how they view friendship between different genders; and 3) maintain friendly relations during leisure time and celebrations.

The main source of information for this article was the author’s fieldwork material¹. A comparative study was done based on observation and semi-structured interviews. During the research, 22 respondents aged 17–82 were interviewed in Sofia. They were all Bulgarians, 21 were Orthodox believers (there was 1 Evangelical Baptist). In Vilnius however, a more representative study was carried out. It spanned 115 respondents aged 13–83, most of whom were Lithuanians and Catholics. Many of the respondents (and all older

respondents) originally came from various locations around Bulgaria. We see the same situation among the residents of Vilnius. Respondents of various ages were interviewed during both studies, during which they described their situation in the second half of the 20th century and the early 21st century (up to 2015).

This is the first ethnological research on this topic. In some aspects, the article by Dalia Senvaitytė “The collective identity characteristics of Bulgarians and Lithuanians: a comparative analysis of students’ attitudes” is important to this research, where based on empirical research data from 2010, the collective identity characteristics (national, cultural and religious) of Bulgarians and Lithuanians were discussed, as well as their expression among students. The most important celebrations mentioned by Lithuanian and Bulgarian students were described as part of the study. During the research, university students both from Sofia and Plovdiv were interviewed, and likewise in Lithuania, students attending universities in Kaunas were also surveyed (Senvaitytė 2011: 476–487). Marianka Borisova compared the features of the Shrovetide dress-up tradition kept alive among Bulgarians and Lithuanians. According to the ethnologist, despite the geographical distance between two countries, their belonging to a different climate and relief, and their different history, one can find plenty of similarities in their traditional customs and rituals (Borisova 2013: 85–93). In her analysis of family celebrations in Vilnius and Sofia, Rasa Paukštytė-Šaknienė dedicated particular attention to gatherings amongst friends over Christmas and Easter (Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2018: 58–72).

The Concept of Friendship

I agree with Amit Desai and Evan Killick, who say that the concept of friendship is rather hard to define, and the ways in which friendship is constructed in different social worlds is difficult to understand both among the friends themselves, and among scientists studying this phenomenon (cf. Desai & Killick 2010: 1–20). Both in Sofia and Vilnius, not everyone could answer the question of what friendship was. It was mostly women who could answer this question.

We shall discuss the cases from Sofia. For example, older residents of Sofia associate friendship with obligations to one another and mutual assistance. A 67-year-old woman identified friendship as the time spent between close people, and help offered to one another. In responses from the younger genera-

tion, friendship is based more often on emotions. A 44-year-old respondent identified friendship as the feeling of love and understanding, common interests and a similar world view. Friendship as a bond bound by love was another definition given by a 23-year-old male. A 37-year-old woman meanwhile said a friend was like a mirror in which one can recognise features they liked. For a 25-year-old woman, the word “friendship” itself was associated with pleasure. According to others her age, it was time spent together and for her, it was related to hiking in the mountains. A 21-year-old woman said that friendship was the most important thing in life.

A similar situation presented itself in the experiences of respondents from Vilnius. A 72-year-old woman said that friendship was the idea of mutual duty, and that friends had to share similar ideas and hobbies. In the words of another woman of a similar age, friends were “people you share your experiences with, people you trust”. Men gave similar definitions of friendship. A 50-year-old man stated that “friendship is when you get up at three o'clock and drive to your friend's place to solve a problem”, or “friendship is a commitment”, said another 41-year-old man. Among women in their twenties however, “friendship is when you can tell someone your secrets, you can spend time enjoyably with them, share your worries and troubles with them and expect their support”, “a mutual bond, trust and love”. A 22-year-old woman said: “Friendship is when people communicate warmly among one another covering all sorts of topics, they help one another and do not betray one another”. According to a 20-year-old man, it was mutual consensus between people who were not relatives, or warm, close relations between people.

This shows that in both cities, friendship was understood similarly. The differences depended on people's ages. While older people usually highlighted mutual assistance and commitment when defining friendship, then among the younger generation emotions and spending time with one another were of greater importance.

When respondents in Vilnius were asked whether they had friends of the opposite gender and whether friendship between a man and a woman was possible, different answers were received. The absolute majority of younger respondents acknowledged that friendship between a man and a woman was possible, and added they had friends of the opposite gender themselves. Most of the elder respondents who related their experiences from the Soviet period stated that they did not have friends of the opposite gender, however some of them believed that this kind of friendship was possible. Nonetheless, some

of the middle-aged respondents claimed that friendship between a man and a woman was impossible. In the words of a 45-year-old woman, “a friendship between a man and woman without sex is impossible, because it still ends in the same thing, even with your girlfriends’ husbands it will eventually end the same way. That’s just nature. If there are feelings of mutual admiration, it is even dangerous to be friends as couples. This has been proven, and consciously, it’s the same thing”. A man of a similar age was of the same opinion: “A man and a woman cannot be friends. They can only be colleagues. However, spending time together as couples is not allowed”. Many could justify friendship among married couples, but individual friendships between opposite genders were often seen as a threat to married family life. On the other hand, there was also this response from a single woman about the friendship between a man and a woman. “A [male] friend is someone you can count on for help, who cares for you and is interested in you. And that kind of friendship is a bonus, because your best [male] friend, unlike your best [girl] friend, would never sleep with your *boyfriend* [who you are intimately involved with, Ž. Š] who you’re living with” (Šaknys 2017: 14).

An analogous situation was observed in Sofia, however there were fewer respondents denying the existence of sexual bonds between men and women. According to an 82-year-old woman, “friendship between a man and a woman was very rare”, meanwhile a 25-year-old single woman said that “friendship with the opposite gender was possible, however the friendship between women was more genuine”. A 23-year-old man stated that “it is more difficult for a man to be friends with a woman, but it is possible”. There were more responses which identified the advantages of friendship between different genders. For example, according to a 37-year-old woman, “friendship between a man and a woman could be better than that among women, as you can exchange different views of the world. Women are more emotional, while men are more logical”. A 60-year-old woman said that “friendship with men is better than with women. [Between the opposite genders] everything is open”. Residents of Sofia and Vilnius alike justified friendships shared among married couples and agreed that they had gained new friends from their spouse’s side after marriage. Single women also did not dismiss the possibility of non-intimate friendships with young men.

Even though the research conducted in Sofia was of a relatively smaller scale than in Vilnius, in Sofia there were more respondents who acknowledged the advantages of friendships between opposite genders. People’s upbringing and life experiences had an influence on the formation of this attitude.

Regular Days and Holidays Spent Together with Friends

In many cases, spending time with friends depends on obligation-free resources for leisure time and the desire to spend this time with friends. Young people often spend a large part of their time together that is left over from school, university lectures or work, on weekends, during calendar celebrations and holidays. Once couples have children though, the amount of free time that can be dedicated to friends decreases significantly. More time must be spent with the family. People who had already raised their children and who might be retired were also found to have different opportunities for dedicating time to their friends.

When we analyse how leisure time is spent with friends in Sofia, time spent outdoors is significantly prioritised. For example, a 23-year-old woman said she would often meet with her friends after lectures at a park, at someone's garden, spend weekends in the mountains or go camping for part of her holidays. According to another university student who was two years older, she would meet with her friends after lectures at a park or a cafe, but said she had no free time on the weekends, because that time was set aside for studying. During her holidays she would go to the seaside (in Bulgaria) or the mountains. A 23-year-old male also said he spent weekends at the park, played sport or drank beer with his friends, and went with his friends to the mountains, the lakes or in the forest on holidays. A 44-year-old woman stated she usually spent time with friends during the weekends in the outdoors, and would mark calendar celebrations at home with friends. The oldest respondent, an 82-year-old woman, also distinguished weekends and calendar celebrations. On weekends she would go visiting her friends, to the theatre or take excursions.

The study of leisure time among the residents of Vilnius revealed different priorities. Even though some young people stated they go for walks after work, the most popular way of spending time with friends was meeting at a cafe, beer bar, restaurant or club. Young people prioritised going to the theatre or a concert over hiking trips or nature outings. Trips to the seaside or the lakes were more common during their holidays. This depended on the different geographical surroundings, and different leisure time traditions.

Of course, there are no high mountains around Vilnius, but it is a green city. There are numerous parks, forests and river and lake beaches for relaxation and spending time with friends. On the other hand, compared to the residents

of Sofia, relatively more residents of Vilnius complain about having too little free time which limits their opportunities to meet with friends after work, on weekends or even during the holidays.

The research material shows that these days, city-dwellers spend quite a lot of time with their friends during calendar celebrations. In both countries, Christmas and Easter stood out from the other celebrations for their duration. This means that in Vilnius and Sofia, friends would meet on the second days of Easter and Christmas. For example, the younger generation would sometimes get together at a restaurant, club or at a party organised at someone's home even in the evening of the actual Christmas or Easter day. Traditionally however, these first days of Christmas and Easter are usually spent with the family. People rarely went to the Orthodox Church with their friends. A 37-year-old woman said that she went there with her friends during the New Year, on Christmas day and on Easter Monday. In her opinion, young people these days were not very religious and did not bring "the right awareness" if they did go to the Orthodox Church. Going to church with friends in Lithuania during calendar celebrations was also uncommon. However, according to my field research data, these celebrations were not popular occasions for friends to meet anyway. In Bulgaria, as in Lithuania, the most important celebrations among friends were the New Year and birthdays². In both cities, young people would usually meet with a group of friends on New Year's Eve at a restaurant or disco (sometimes they would go to the disco after midnight) or at someone's house. A necessary attribute of this celebration was champagne and salutations. A 44-year-old respondent from Sofia said that for New Year's Eve, her family and another one they were friends with would get together; the children in both families were of similar ages. They would see in the New Year by listening to the president's speech, pop a bottle of champagne at midnight and shoot fireworks off their balcony. The residents of Vilnius celebrated the New Year in a similar way (Šaknys 2014: 105–117). Birthdays were another similarly important celebration. For example, a 73-year-old woman from Sofia said how on her birthday, she would invite many friends over to her place, as well as the neighbours from her stairwell, and the most important guest was someone she had been friends with for over 50 years. According to a 41-year-old woman, birthdays were spent with family friends. Such family friends would also mark children's celebrations together, while a 25-year-old woman said she celebrated birthdays with another five friends at a restaurant, spending around four hours there. As in Lithuania, in Bulgaria the person celebrating their birthday would be lifted

with their chair into the air as many times as their age required (i.e., 21 times on a 21st birthday; for more about this custom in Lithuania, see Šaknys 2008: 21–27). According to a 16-year-old resident of Sofia, birthdays were the most important celebrations and as many as ten friends would gather at a restaurant to celebrate. Birthdays with friends were celebrated quite similarly in Vilnius and Sofia. The only feature that was noticed, was that in Sofia people very often gave books as gifts on this occasion.

The celebration of name days was somewhat more popular in Sofia than in Vilnius. The name days for Dmitrii and Georgii often coincided with popular celebrations and served as a pretext to mark them with friends. A smaller group of friends would meet at the person's home or at a restaurant for a name day celebration. For example, a 25-year-old woman said that three friends gathered to celebrate her name day, where they chipped in to get her a book and some flowers. A 75-year-old man meanwhile explained how the celebration of name days was not tolerated during the socialist years. In Lithuania, even though celebrating name days was not encouraged, it was not strictly banned either. When describing birthday and name day celebrations in 1967, ethnologist Angelė Vyšniauskaitė highlighted that the name day had no connection to religion and even had some advantages over birthdays, as everyone knew when to congratulate someone (Vyšniauskaitė 1967: 66). However, in modern Vilnius name days are celebrated less frequently than in Sofia. Even now in Sofia, certain first names are kept within particular families, thereby encouraging the tradition of celebrating name days. Yet in Bulgaria name days are not as important as birthdays. This is evident from the gifts given on such occasions. For example, a 37-year-old-woman explained how common birthday gifts were books, bijouterie and flowers, while only flowers would be given on name days. Nonetheless, some of the youngest respondents I interviewed in Sofia mentioned that they no longer had a name day, as such, there was no way of celebrating it.

The Feast of Cyril and Methodius (May 24, Day of Slavonic Education and Culture) is very important among Bulgarians (Anastasova 2011: 159–169). Such situation we can find in our fieldwork material. For example, each year six friends meet in Svilengrad at a restaurant where they share their memories. People who have graduated from gymnasium (secondary) schools in Sofia gather in this city. It is a good opportunity for people of various ages to come together – both those who have just graduated from secondary school and those who last sat at a school desk 50 years ago. The celebration is also very

important among education workers. According to a 73-year-old teacher, this was her favourite day as on that day, she and her friends would sing in a choir. In Lithuania, school teachers were more inclined to mark the first day of the academic year with their colleagues – September 1.

In Lithuania and in Bulgaria alike, occasions for friends to get together are more commonly celebrations adapted from the West – Halloween and St. Valentine's Day. According to one 37-year-old woman, Halloween is now being celebrated in Sofia. People dress up as zombies, vampires and witches. Yet St. Valentine's Day has a Bulgarian aspect to it. February 14 is also Wine Day (Трифон Зарезан), which serves as an opportunity for friends to get together over a glass of wine. In the words of a 44-year-old respondent, on this day her father would trim the grape vine leaves, make wine and treat his neighbours. Later that day, he and his friends would gather at a restaurant or at someone's home to enjoy some wine together. Yet not all respondents prioritised wine. A 25-year-old woman stated she did not celebrate this occasion as she did not have a boyfriend. Other spring festivals can also form friendly relations. In recent years, on Baba Marta Day – March 1, people wish one another well, and friends give each other *martenitsa*.

However, a distinction should be made for mass celebrations in the construction of friendly relations. In Sofia, it is only state celebrations that are marked. On the occasion of other celebrations, people usually return to the towns of their birth, to their relatives or to rural locations outside of Sofia. Quite unlike Lithuania, a complex custom called Lazaurvanstvo (*Лазаруванство*) which is performed by young women in the northwestern Bulgaria on the Saturday before Palm Sunday is still being practiced (Koleva 1977: 284). In the past, it was a very important ritual among young women³. In the social sense, it is still important today. For example, according to a 17-year-old respondent, she has already celebrated Lazarus Saturday three times, going back to her parent's birthplace for this occasion. The town lies 35 km outside of Sofia and is where her grandparents live. She and her friends visit farmsteads, dance and sing, and in return for providing this kind of entertainment, they are given eggs, money, sweets and other small gifts. The respondent recalls how worried she was the first time, and how her group of girlfriends encouraged one another. Whilst learning the ritual songs and dances, she made some new friends whose parents or grandparents came from this location. A 60-year-old woman noted the importance of the costumes and jewellery used in this ritual, that were passed down from one generation to the next. It also strengthened the teenage

girl's bond with the culture of her parents and grandparents. A similar situation exists with the dress-up kukeri (*кукери*) processions. Respondents of various ages stated how they would return to their native (or their parent's native) village or town, while those who did not have relatives in rural areas would go to a town or village near Sofia for this occasion.

The residents of Vilnius celebrate most of their public celebrations in the towns of their birth. These occasions are also a time for old friends to catch up. Many people celebrate Shrovetide (*Užgavėnės*) at the Lithuanian folk outdoor museum in Rumšiškės, which is often titled the Shrovetide capital of Lithuania (Šaknys 2015: 106). Mass events organised by cultural institutions are also held in Vilnius. Children and young women also sometimes form unorganised dress-up groups, as per the Lithuanian custom (traditionally, however, this was a custom reserved for single men). Dressing up as the traditional characters for this celebration, they call on bars and cafes, and in return for a small gift (sweets or money), they promise to drive the winter away. Children sometimes even go door-to-door in apartment buildings coveting sweets, pancakes and money, all as part of the tradition (Šaknys 2013: 103–104). Friends also gather on the state holiday marking the coronation of King Mindaugas, going to Kernavė, the historic capital of Lithuania. Midsummer, or St. John's Day is also celebrated at various locations, with special events being organised in districts around Vilnius. Also popular among residents of Vilnius are the Procession of the Three Kings (January 6) organised by the Vilnius Ethnic Culture Centre, "pagan" spring and autumn equinoxes, Song Festivals and St Casimir's Fair, specific to Vilnius, having been held there since 1827 (Klimka 2009). They sometimes serve as a reason for friends to gather, yet not based on common origins, as is the case in Bulgaria.

Final Conclusions

The Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Lithuania titled 2013 as the Year of Dialects, 2015 was the Year of Ethnographic Regions, and 2017 was the Year of National Costumes. The cultural events planned for various celebrations were meant to form feelings of national and ethnic identity, encouraging people to maintain closer links with the places of their birth. A similar mission in Bulgaria is being implemented through calendar celebrations, during which rituals that are performed help form communities of friends based on their origins. On the other hand, this helps hold back the extinction of customs, which is unavoid-

able when celebrations are marked in large cities or museums. This is the most important difference I found during the fieldwork when analysing friendships and how friends spend time together in Vilnius and Sofia. The celebration of mass traditional celebrations in the birthplaces of parents and grandparents is an example that could well be followed among the residents of Vilnius.

Notes

1 Fieldwork material collected in Vilnius in 2012–2016 within the framework of the projects “Social Interaction and Cultural Manifestations in the City: Leisure Time, Festivals, and Rituals in 2012–2016” and “Contemporary Festivals in the Families of Vilnius Citizens in 2014–2016” and in Sofia in 2015 conducting the project “Contemporary Festivity in Bulgaria and Lithuania – from Traditional Culture to Post-Modern Transformations in 2014–2016”.

2 The most popular Bulgarian student celebrations, according to Senvaitytė’s research material from 2010, were Christmas (15%), Easter (14%) and the *Kukeri* (Shrovetide) celebration (17%) (Senvaitytė 2011: 484), while Lithuanian students celebrated Christmas (58%), Easter (42%), Midsummer (31%) and the New Year (23%) (Senvaitytė 2011: 485).

3 We do know of certain kinds of gatherings of young women from the early 20th century in eastern Lithuania, where they would summon the spring. However, the ritual acts performed for this custom were considerably less complex (Šaknys 2001: 60).

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