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Comparative analysis of traditional and modern pilgrimage practices in the mountains or hills in Bulgaria and Lithuania

Rasa Račiūnaitė-Paužuolienė
Vytautas Magnus University, Department of Cultural Studies
rasa.raciunaite-pauzuoliene@vdu.lt

Abstract: The paper examines the traditional and contemporary Roman Catholic pilgrimage practices and folk piety rituals in Lithuania and Bulgaria. It focuses on three cases of pilgrimage: Žemaičių Kalvarija (Samogitian Calvary), the Hill of Crosses in Lithuania, and the Way of the Cross on Vitosha Mountains in Bulgaria.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork collected by the author in 2010– 2025 in Bulgaria and Lithuania, as well as the research analyses of previous scholars, the article investigates the interplay between sacred spaces, pilgrimage, and the ritual practices of folk piety. The main issue of the article is to reveal pilgrims' motivations for performing religious practices and the significance of pilgrimage in their lives. The empirical data were collected applying ethnographic research methodology and comparative analysis. The results of this study reveal that participation in pilgrimage practices helps Christians strengthen social ties, a sense of communitas, religious identity, spiritual resilience and well-being.

Keywords: pilgrimage practices, religious practices, mountains, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Roman Catholics.

Introduction

Pilgrimage is a multifaceted phenomenon which incorporates geographical, social, cultural, religious, historical, literary, architectural, artistic, political, economic, environmental and other dimensions (Morinis, Crumrine 1991; Di Giovine & Choe 2019). Religious pilgrimages may be defined as religious actions and travels to locations, considered sacred, which make it simpler to communicate with the divinity, performed by spiritual or religious motives.

Destinations of pilgrimages may be objects of nature (mounds, forests, stones, and water bodies), places of appearances of St. Mary (such as Fatima in Portugal, Lourdes in France, Medjugorje in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Šiluva in Lithuania), some saints' locations or relics (such as Rome, the city of the martyrdom of Peter and Paul (Italy), The Tomb of Saint James in Santiago de Compostela (Spain), the Cave of Saint Mary Magdalene (*Grotte de Sainte-Marie-Madeleine*) in Sainte-Baume (France) (Amaro et al. 2018; Thomas et al. 2018; Liutikas 2005; 2025; Kairaitytė 2021; Račiūnaitė-Paužuolienė 2009).

Many scholars define pilgrimage as an essentially religious journey (Coleman and Eade 2004; Turner & Turner 2011; Vukonić, 1996), while others emphasize the transformative significance of such journey for the pilgrim. Such journeys can also be secular or non-religious (Dubisch and Winkelman 2022; Gammon 2004; Margry 2008; Morinis 1992; Reader and Walter 1993). Individuals who identify as pilgrims may travel to heritage sites, parks and natural landscapes, to memorials and other sites of loss, and to other locations that hold particular importance to the individual (Di Giovine & Choe 2019).

There are some works dedicated to the phenomenon of "non-confessional pilgrimage" and the issue of religious pilgrimage versus secular pilgrimage (Margry 2008; Preston 2020). Contemporary researchers try to define the distinction between secular and religious pilgrimage (Margry 2008). Victoria Preston defines secular pilgrimage as a ritual journey with a personal driving purpose, to a place of shared spiritual meaning (2020). The motives for secular pilgrimages can be quite varied – spiritual, nationalistic, family and kinship pilgrimage, friendship and travel motives, as well as the existential insecurity of individual, sickness, support, protection, survival, faith, eternal salvation, wonder, solace, redemption, hope, levels of happiness, meaning of life,

gratitude, liberation, and enlightenment (Hyde, Harman 2011; Margry 2008; Preston 2021).

Some contemporary scientists argue that modern pilgrimage can take place within a post-postmodern duality: it acknowledges individual freedom while simultaneously recognizing the individual's need to experience something grounded in social and historical "truth" (Thomas et al. 2018). Simon Coleman and John Eade (2004) in his book *Reframing Pilgrimage: Cultures in Motion* argue that sacred travel is just one of the 21st century's many forms of cultural mobility. They consider the meanings of pilgrimage in sacred and secular contexts. The authors develop a theory of pilgrimage as a form of voluntary displacement, which helps to constitute cultural meaning in the world. Pilgrimage is recognized as a highly creative and politically significant force, closely linked to economic and cultural systems.

Contemporary studies seek to understand the primary motivations driving pilgrims to embark on the Camino de Santiago, one of Europe's most popular routes. Four groups of motivations emerge: "well-being and pleasure; spirituality and avoidance; socialization and entertainment", as well as religious motives (Andrade Surez, Caamaño et al. 2024: 4293).

Lithuanian ethnologists, sociologists, historians, and theologists (Motuzas 2010; 2005; 2003; Mardosa 2009; Liutikas 2005; 2025; Račiūnaitė-Paužuolienė 2012; Urbonienė 2021; Vaišnora 1958) emphasize the peculiarities of folk devotional rites in the context of pilgrimages in Lithuania. The historical and ecclesiastical art context of the Samogitian Calvary in the 17th–19th centuries is analyzed by Dalia Vasiliūnienė (2010), the musical aspects of folk piety are discussed in detail in the works of Alfonsas Motuzas (2010, 2005, 2003) and Saulius Stumbra (2007).

Previous researchers have found out that participation in religious rituals and pilgrimages can strengthen social connections and a sense of community which is essential for comprehensive health and well-being. A group of Orthodox religious researchers, analyzing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on religious expressions and the spiritual health of believers, revealed that bans on attending services and participating in pilgrimages during the pandemic had a negative impact on the spiritual health of believers who experience strong faith and strong attachment to Church tradition (Papazoglou et al. 2021: 3224).

On the other hand, a study conducted by Oliwia Kowalczyk, Montane Roszkowski et al. (2020) in Poland showed that the pandemic experience served

as a catalyst for spiritual renewal among young people; consequently, an emerging spirituality and faith maturity can be observed in the young "coronavirus generation" (Kowalczyk et al. 2020: 2676).

The newest study about the spiritual resilience and religious practices of Bulgarian and Lithuanian youth during the COVID-19 pandemic reveal that social distancing and adaptation to the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic have increased the need for religious practices and changed the expression of these practices. Faced with the threat posed by the pandemic, the youth have resorted to various survival strategies in the form of both traditional religious and alternative spiritual practices that allow them to maintain hope, meaning, emotional stability and spiritual resilience (Račiūnaitė-Paužuolienė 2025: 194).

Although pilgrimage may seem an antiquated religious ritual, it remains a vibrant activity in the modern world as pilgrims combine traditional motives such as seeking a cure for physical or spiritual problems with contemporary searches for identity or interpersonal connection.

This article raises two questions: 1) Which religious pilgrimage sites in the mountains of Bulgaria and the hills of Lithuania have been the most popular among Roman Catholics over the past two decades? 2) What are the popular Christian devotional practices during pilgrimages, viewed from both historical and contemporary perspectives?

Bulgaria is a country crisscrossed by low, medium, and high mountains and plateaus. Its territory encompasses four major mountain ranges: the Rila, Pirin, Rhodope, and Stara Planina mountains. The natural landscapes, cultures and traditions of the people inhabiting these regions vary significantly. The Rila and Pirin ranges are the highest mountains in the entire Balkan Peninsula (with the highest peak being Musala, at 2,924 m). Unlike Bulgaria, Lithuania has no mountains. The Lithuanian landscape consists of plains (with the exception of hilly plains in the east and west) that do not exceed 300 meters above sea level.

In recent years, anthropologists have interpreted mountains in a wide variety of ways - for instance, as "expressions of spatial and social proximity and distance" (Watanabe 1992: 77; Kapusta 2022). They emphasize that the mountains have both indigenous and nonindigenous attributes (Kapusta 2022), also their nature is contradictory. Some researchers interpret the mountain in the symbolic context of an *axis mundi* that connects the three spheres of the universe: the underworld, the world, and the heavens (cit. from Kapusta

2022: 182–198), others interpret the mountains as particular bodily-souled and immanent-transcendent beings, and full subjects, as far as relations with people, with whom they share and shape a single world, are concerned. (Kapusta 2022: 182–198).

Žemaičių Kalvarija (Samogitian Calvary)

The first part of the article focuses on the tradition of devoutness of the Stations of the Cross whose established in Europe since the 15th century. It is one of the forms of the cult of Christ's passion, which reflects people's devotedness to Christ's suffering he experienced carrying the cross to Golgotha, the site of crucifixion. The form of devotedness is based on the reflection of Christ's passion and empathizing with it while walking the symbolic route marked by crosses. The believers have perpetuated the memory of Christ's passion building complexes of the Stations of the Cross. Starting with the first rituals of the Way of the Cross in Christian Jerusalem these were formed willing to underline "the most important moments of the Saviour's passion road and arrange them in a certain order" (Vasiliūnienė 2010: 45). The Stations of the Cross which appeared in Poland and Lithuania in the 17th century were part of the common European religious process with deep-rooted traditions. (Vasiliūnienė 2010: 465).

In the course of ages the worship of Jesus passion and its perception has changed – the changes determined the variety of liturgical acts and the artistic expression of the cult. At the beginning of the 18th c. the cycle of 14 passion stations was very popular at all the Franciscan monasteries – they used to walk it once a month together with the believers gaining the same indulgencies as the pilgrims in Jerusalem.

Since the 19th century the most widely practiced Way of the Cross included 14 stations – meanwhile another cult form was gaining popularity – the practice of worshiping Christ's passion in local Calvaries. Nowadays the most favoured expression of the cult of the Way of the Cross includes liturgical acts by 14 stations in churches or churchyards. This practice of the Way of the Cross developed quite late – it is closely related to the prehistory of the tradition of Christian culture in Jerusalem.

As much as it concerns the tradition of devotion related to the Stations of the Cross, the phenomenon of Calvaries is of major importance – in German countries it is called *Kalvarienberg*, and in the region of the Mediterranean –

Sacro Monte (Vasiliūnienė 2010: 46). The secular Christian tradition perceives Calvary as a special sacral space, dedicated to the cult of Christ's suffering, reminding the landscape of Jerusalem, encompasing sacral objects: churches, chapels, towers, gates, crosses, sculptures.

The idea of "transferring" the historical city of Jerusalem and historical locations related to Jesus' passion to Europe was developed in the late Middle ages. The contribution of bishops and monasteries establishing Calvaries has left unerasable traces all around Europe – in the 17th century they became religious centers. In the midle of the17th century two bishops – Jurgis Tiškevičius and Jurgis Bialozaras – initiated the establishment of two major Lithuanian Calvaries. In 1638 Samogitian bishop Jurgis Tiškevičius started the works of Samogitian Calvary (Žemaičių Kalvarija) in Gardai. In 1662, when the war with Moscow was over, willing to thank God for the liberation of the country Jurgis Bialozaras, the bishop of Vilnius, started establishing the Stations of the Calvary nearby Vilnius (Vasiliūnienė 2010: 53). The major focus was on the landscape, its conformity to the authentic Jerusalem topography – it served as an important characteristic of Via Crucis which encompassed the distance of 7 km. They localized the mount of Olives in the East at the foot of which there had to be the Cedron stream, and the Mount of Calvary had to be situated in the West.

Even at the beginning of 20th century legends were told in Samogitia notifying that in ancient times they used to baptise Samogitian people on the mound in the settlement of Gardai, at the confluence of the rivulets Varduva and Cedron. People were given baptismal names – thus the rivulet was called Varduva ("vardas" means "name"), and the mound was named after st. John the Baptist (Vaišnora 1958: 375). The historical information indicates that the first Lithuanian churches and chapels were most often built on the sites of pagan sanctuaries, located in visibly higher places, such as mounds. Thus, the chapels depicting the Stations of the Cross that stand on the hillforts at the Gardai settlement – later renamed Samogitian Calvary (Žemaičių Kalvarija) – may have been erected on the sites of pagan temples.

Žemaičių Kalvarija (Samogitian Calvary) was the first Calvary in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. It's a small historic town and major Catholic pilgrimage centre located in the Plungė district of northwestern Lithuania. In 1637 Jurgis Tiškevičius, the bishop of Samogitian diocese, established the Calvary – the Way of the Cross in Gardai and had 19 chapels built, and in 1642 the construction of the Dominican monastery was finished. The bishop iniciated establishing

the Stations of the Cross in Gardai, obtained the indulgence privileges from the Pope, devised the liturgy, special Via Crucis prayers and hymns.

In 1648 the bishop of Samogitian diocese struggled to obtain the relic of the cross, on which Jesus was crucified, and acquired the miraculous painting of the Madonna and Child. The relic of the Cross became the inherent part of Via Crucis liturgy, which was worshiped during solemn processions.

In the midle of the 17th century on the initiative of the Dominican monks the confraternity of the Rosary was established – it propagated the Rosary of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Name of Jesus. Crowds of pilgrims flocked to Samogitian Calvary not only from the region and the whole Lithuania, but from foreign countries as well. Participating in solemn processions during religious feasts they carried Church banners, chanted, and used to flog themselves in sign of repentance while taking part in the procession of Good Friday. The most massive processions were arranged at Easter, the Holy week and the first Sunday of July when celebrating the feast of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Despite various trials, wars and occupation the tradition of devoutness has survived in Samogitian Calvary for 400 years. Via Crucis of the Calvary was not destroyed either in Soviet times. The feast of the Visitation has been celebrated on the first Sunday of July until nowadays with crowds of people carrying the banners and the relic of the Cross in solemn processions, chanting traditional Žemaičių Kalvarija (Samogitian Calvary) chants, accompanied by brass bands. An ancient devotional folk tradition also has persisted to this day: those attending the festival for the first time, seeking to atone for their sins, prostrate.

The Hill of Crosses in Lithuania

Another unique site of modern pilgrimage is the Hill of Crosses, situated 12 km away from Šiauliai, nearby Jurgaičiai village. The first crosses on Jurgaičiai mound were erected after the 1831 uprising against tsarist Russia. The Russian authorities prohibited visiting the graves of the killed rebels, thus people used to come here secretly, at night. Called after the closest Jurgaičiai village the mound had other names: the mound of the castle, the Hill of Crosses, the Holy mound. In the beginning of the 20th century the Hill of Crosses became a heavily visited sacral site; here the sacred service was held, church feasts celebrated, people used to erect crosses in a sign of gratitude or a vow made.

During the Soviet era, when religion was banned, religious pilgrimages to holy sites helped people preserve and revive their religious devotion and religious identity. Especially during the Cold War, religious pilgrimages were used as social and political instrument against atheistic political ideologies and secularization (Margry 2008: 15).

In the Soviet time the Hill of Crosses gained significance as the place of anonymous resistance to the Soviet regime – the believers used to erect crosses at night. In the years 1958–1988 the Soviet authorities tried to destroy the Hill of Crosses: in 1958 the gravel was dug there, in 1961 they started destroying the crosses (wooden ones were burnt, those made of metal taken to a scrap metal wrecking yard, made of stone or concrete broken and drowned in Kulpės rivulet) (VLE). In 1961 about 5000 crosses and a small chapel were destroyed, in the period until the year 1975 the number amounted to approximately 1200. Although the mound was guarded by the soldiers of the Soviet army, people never ceased erecting crosses there secretely. In 1978–1979 the soviet authorities planned to flood the territory of the mound, but it did not happen.

After the Movement for National Rebirth started in 1988, erecting crosses on the mound was no longer prohibited. There are more than 200 000 crosses (lots of them with rosaries and small crosses hanging on them), roadside poles, statuettes and pictures of the saints covering the mound and its slopes. More than 50 crosses are included into the Lithuanian Register of Cultural Property. The Hill of Crosses has been adapted to visitors since 1989 – lots of pious people belonging to different confessions and tourists come there from various foreign countries. In 1997 the local bishop Eugenijus Bartulis revived the tradition of the feast of the Hill of Crosses, which takes place the last weekend of July. In 2000 a Franciscan monastery was built by the Hill of Crosses. The Franciscan friars serve as the guardians of the Hill of Crosses.

A. Motuzas, the investigator of the practices of the popular piety in Lithuania, observed that crosses and other signs (small chapels, roadside poles, pictures, rosaries, etc.) erected in certain places in the past with the tradition retained nowadays, have the meaning of votive offerings – they are brought to a certain place in a sign of gratitude or plea (praying for good health, success, sobriety, happy marriage). Memorials are dedicated to those who perished, the lost ones, the deportees, political convicts, also preceding they commemorate historical events and mark certain jubilees (Motuzas 2005: 100).

Every cross erected on the Hill of Crosses has its own history: the inscriptions and dedications on the crosses indicate the intentions and motives of those who initiated them. The dedications of the inscriptions allow us to distinguish between two groups of crosses: 1) erected with a personal intention or conveying the family need: asking for health, happiness, success in life and thanking for the graces received; 2) those erected asking for a certain social problem to be solved, having in mind the fate of the nation or the state.

The dedications of the Soviet time resort to the usage of the Aesopian language: the real meaning of the sentence is hidden in between the lines resorting to allusions and symbols. The pilgrim practices of the Hill of Crosses include the manifestations of public piety: erecting religious monuments on one's own initiative, chanting various prayers and chants, walking around the hill on one's knees. When celebrating the Church feast some pilgrims who had made a vow walk around the mound praying the rosary and chanting *O Holy Cross*, others walk the Road of 14 stations.

To sum up, the Hill of Crosses is a unique site of pilgrimages and religious cult, where popular piety practices of devotion to Christ's cross have been preserved. The spiritual resistance of believers against the ideology of the Soviet authorities and atheist propaganda strengthened the religious identity and psychological resilience of pilgrims. During the Soviet era, religious practices and pilgrimages to holy sites, such us the Hill of Crosses, helped people preserve and revive their religious devotion and religious identity.

The Way of the Cross on the Vitosha Mountain

In the last part of the article, I provide an ethnography of the Way of the Cross's pilgrimage on the Vitosha Montain, in which a delicate relatedness between people and animate mountains is expressed. I will illustrate my point by referring to the pilgrimage on the hill of Vitosha in Sofia which I personally experienced and which expresses the relationships humans have with landscape, especially mountains.

Vitosha is a beautiful mountain massif, located between Stara Planina and Rila-Rhodope massif. It is a part the Sredna Gora Mountain and the fourth highest mountain in Bulgaria, situated next to Sofia. The territory of the Vitosha Mountain includes Vitosha Nature Park, the oldest park in the Balkans. This

mountain massif is distinguished by its unique nature: it is home to ten peaks, the Boyana Waterfall, the "Golden Bridges," stone rivers, Bulgaria's longest cave – Duhlata, and the distinctive Vitosha tulip.

In April 2017, during Lent, I conducted participant observation at the Way of the Cross organized by St. Joseph's Roman Catholic parish members on the Vitosha Mountain. St. Joseph's parish organizes pilgrimages to various sacred places of Bulgaria, including the Vitosha Mountain. The pilgrimage was led by three Polish Capuchins from St. Joseph parish, accompanied by parish community members from seven European countries (Bulgarians, Poles, Croats, Romanians, Italians, Lithuanians, Russians).

St. Joseph's parish in Sofia can be described as the religious, pastoral and cultural center of the Roman Catholic community in Bulgarian capital. The parish is very active, composed of Catholics belonging to different ethnic groups (Bulgarians, Croats, Poles, Italians, French, Romanians, and others) (Račiūnaitė-Paužuolienė 2018). Its multicultural and multilingual character singles the Roman Catholic parish out among other Bulgarian Catholic parishes.

The Way of the Cross devotion in which I participated on the Vitosha Montain is a familiar Lent practice well known to many Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and Lutherans. Since Lent is a penitential season of preparation for Easter, the Way of the Cross, which follow the path of Christ from Pontius Pilate's praetorium to Christ's tomb is a popular devotion in Roman Catholic parishes. In the 16th century, this pathway was officially entitled the "Via Dolorosa" (Saunders 1994). These folk devotional rites help Christians recall Christ's Passion through prayer and meditation.

In this context, it is worth remembering that this ancient tradition is linked to Franciscan spirituality. In 1342, Franciscans were appointed as guardians of the shrines and the Via Crucis in Jerusalem. At the turn of the 18th century, St. Leonard of Port Maurice, an Italian friar, began promoting the Stations of the Cross and erected them across Italy. This popularity led the Pope Clement XII to propagate the prayer practice in all churches as 14 official stations in 1731. (Solan 2024; Saunders 1994).

Although pilgrimage is often performed within the social context involving the performance of religious rituals, the phenomenon of pilgrimage is individual practice. Thus, both traditional and modern pilgrimage reflect the human effort to give meaning and direction to one's personal life.

According to Victor and Edith Turners, pilgrimage or journey itself offers an opportunity for social and/or psychological transformation (1978). The

phenomenon of pilgrimage is characterized by an initiatory nature. V. and E. Turners argue (1978: 3) that it may be about 'potentiality' as well as 'transition', providing a testing ground for new ideas. A pilgrim traveling to a pilgrimage site not only escapes everyday life but also "cuts across the boundaries of provinces, realms, and even empires" (Turner and Turner 1978: 6). Furthermore, upon returning to their former daily life, it is commonly believed that "he has made a spiritual step forward" (Turner and Turner 1978:15; cit. from Coleman, Eade 2004: 2).

A good example illustrating the moral and religious transformation of the pilgrims was the experience gained during this religious journey. During the pilgrimage to Mount Vitosha, pilgrims walked the Way of the Cross, reciting prayers dedicated to the Stations of the Cross and reflecting on the Passion of Christ. As they climbed Mount Vitosha, each pilgrim carried a cross symbolizing the Passion of Christ.

The Capuchins leading the pilgrimage suggested that each pilgrim take a small stone along on their pilgrimage to Mount Vitosha as a symbol of their sin and leave it on the mountain. In a metaphorical sense, the leaving of the stone on Mount Vitosha symbolized each pilgrim's renunciation of a certain sin in their real life. This ritual can be interpreted as a new tradition in the pilgrimage of the Way of the Cross, giving meaning to the pilgrimage of modern people. Although the ritual performed is significant in this specific case on Mount Vitosha, the rituals are not necessarily applicable or universal at other pilgrimage sites.

In sum, participation in this religious pilgrimage helped to create a sense of community through traditional rituals – "praying together", reciting the rosary, "also creating new rituals". Moreover, this pilgrimage, grounded in Christian values, helped modern pilgrims to express and strengthen their individual and collective religious identity.

Conclusion

This article examines the traditional and contemporary Roman Catholic pilgrimage practices and folk piety rituals in Lithuania and Bulgaria. It focuses on three cases of pilgrimage: Žemaičių Kalvarija (Samogitian Calvary), the Hill of Crosses in Lithuania, and the Way of the Cross on Vitosha Mountains in Bulgaria.

The first one represents "for the 400–year–old" tradition of devoutness of the Way of the Cross in Žemaičių Kalvarija.

The second case of the Hill of Crosses presents a unique site of pilgrimage and religious devotion where folk piety practices honoring the Cross of Christ have been preserved. During the Soviet era, the erection of crosses on the Hill of Crosses became a form of spiritual resistance for believers, strengthening the pilgrims' religious identity and psychological resilience while helping them sustain their religious devotion.

The third case study – an international pilgrim group on Mount Vitosha in Bulgaria – reveals that participation in the pilgrimage helped foster a sense of community through both traditional and newly created rituals. Furthermore, this pilgrimage enabled contemporary pilgrims to express and strengthen their individual and collective religious identities.

The results of this study reveal that participation in pilgrimage practices helps Christians strengthen social ties, a sense of *communitas*, spiritual resilience and well-being. Participation in the pilgrimage helped strengthen social ties between people of different nationalities, but of the same denomination. The study reveals that traditional rituals in the Way of the Cross are preserved pilgrimage, but new ritual forms and their interpretations are emerging. Although religious pilgrimage is typically a collective process involving a social context, it is also closely linked to the individual's inner, spiritual dimension. It reflects the pilgrim's efforts to give meaning and direction to their personal life.

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Rasa Račiūnaitė-Paužuolienė is Professor of Ethnology and a chief researcher at Vytautas Magnus University, in the Department of Cultural Studies. Her research interests focus on family, youth and gender studies, public and spiritual resilience, religious identity and migration studies, urban anthropology. She is currently leading the project "Public Resilience and Co-creation in the Context of Global Challenges" (S-LISm 26–5), funded by the Research Council of Lithuania. The author conducted field research in Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Belarus, Bulgaria, and England.

E-mail: rasa.raciunaite-pauzuoliene@vdu.lt

ORCID: 0000-0001-8744-6301