

# NATIONAL AND CONFESSIONAL FEATURES OF FESTIVALS AND HOLIDAYS: STRUCTURE OF THE RITUAL YEAR IN MODERN LITHUANIA AND BULGARIA

*Žilvytis Šaknys*

*Senior Researcher at the Department of Ethnology and Anthropology, Lithuanian  
Institute of History, Vilnius, Lithuania*

*e-mail: shaknys@gmail.com*

**Abstract:** The article aims to answer the question of whether different confessions and nationalities are an important factor in structuring a nation's ritual year. People's attitude towards state holidays (non-work days) is analysed based on research carried out by the author in 2012-2019 in Sofia (Bulgaria), Vilnius (Lithuania) and the towns and villages of Vilnius County. The study revealed that citizens of both states hold similar of state holidays. More popular are traditional holidays spent mostly with the family than modern holidays, which are often related to the nation's history and are celebrated with friends. The study also showed that there was little correlation between a holiday being a day off and its popularity. The ethnic and confessional structures of the two states do not constitute significant discrepancies differences with regard to the popularity of traditional and modern holidays.

**Keywords:** Festivals, holidays, ritual years, Lithuania, Bulgaria

## Introduction

In 1994, the ethnologist Juozas Kudirka described Christmas Eve as celebrated in Lithuania (Kudirka 1994: 19-42), thus becoming the first scholar to take into consideration the confessional and national particularities of holidays in Lithuania. However, more thorough comparative research on holidays observed by Lithuanian confessional and ethnic communities did not start until the 21st century. The most recent studies have revealed that the way a holiday or festival (e.g. New Year, Shrove Tuesday or Assumption) is celebrated by different ethnic and confessional groups within the same state may create symbolic boundaries of otherness or in some cases merge such groups (Šaknys 2014: 105-17; Šaknys 2015a: 105-28; Šaknys 2016: 258-70; Šaknys 2020: 35-50). On the other hand, different confessional and ethnic groups may have different attitudes towards national holidays (Mardosa 2013: 58; Mardosa 2016: 105-122). Hence the question of how these phenomena manifested themselves in different countries and how nationality and confession influence the structure of the ritual year.

Research by the ethnologist Rasa Paukštytė Šaknienė comparing Lithuanian and Bulgarian Christmas traditions revealed that over the late 20th and early 21st centuries Christmas Eve became the most important celebration bringing the family together in the cities she was investigating. Moreover, the research showed that Christmas as observed by Orthodox Bulgarians in Sofia was more akin to the festival observed by Catholic Lithuanians and Poles in Vilnius than to that celebrated by Orthodox Russians (Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2018: 58-72; Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2019: 57-70). This suggests that attribution to one or other confession may not be the main factor in determining the popularity of religious festivals. These findings led to a comparison of the ritual year in Lithuania and Bulgaria by juxtaposing people's attitudes towards this state holiday and by posing the question of whether different confessions and nationalities are an important factor in framing the ritual year. In pursuit of this goal, sights were set on the following objectives: 1) revealing the interaction between the ritual year of a state and the holidays and festivals observed by its citizens; 2) comparing traditional state holidays in Lithuania and Bulgaria; and 3) comparing modern state holidays in Lithuania and Bulgaria.

The main source for this paper is fieldwork material (semi-structured interviews) collected in Vilnius and the Vilnius area in 2012–2018 within the framework of the projects 'Social Interaction and Cultural Expression in the City: Leisure Time, Holidays and Rituals', 'Contemporary Festivals and Holi-

days in the Families of Vilnius citizens' and 'Leisure, Holidays and Rituals in the Vilnius Area: Social and Cultural Aspects'. Other material was collected in Sofia in the course of the project 'Contemporary Festivity in Bulgaria and Lithuania: from Traditional Culture to Post-Modern Transformations' in 2015 and 'Festival and Everyday Culture in Bulgaria and Lithuania: Tradition and Modernity' in 2019.

Alongside the field research mentioned above, ethnographic material collected by other authors and their research was also used in the analysis. Maria Znamierowska-Prüfferowa's research on the traditions of various ethnic and confessional groups in Vilnius (Znamierowska-Prüfferowa 1997, 2009) and Angel Jankov's study of Bulgarian Catholic calendar holidays and customs (Jankov 2003) are among the most valuable and comprehensive works on this theme. In addition, Rasa Račiūnaitė-Paužuolienė's study of Bulgarian Catholic religiosity is worth mentioning: the findings of her field research, carried out in 2015-2017, helped to determine that Catholic religious identity had been preserved in the Plovdiv area (Račiūnaitė-Paužuolienė 2018: 31-44).

The first research comparing Lithuanian and Bulgarian calendar festivals and holidays was Dalia Senvaitytė's article 'The collective identity characteristics of Bulgarians and Lithuanians: a comparative analysis of students' attitudes', which was based on empirical research data from 2010. The characteristics of collective identity (national, cultural and religious) of Bulgarians and Lithuanians were discussed, as well as their expression among students from Sofia, Plovdiv and Kaunas universities. According to her data, the most popular celebrations for Bulgarian students 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 New Year (23%). The author concluded that national holidays are much less important for Lithuanian than for Bulgarian students (ibid.: 485).

My research covers not only the culture of young people. In Sofia, on from 18 to 27 September 2019, twenty respondents born between 1933 and 1997 were interviewed, eighteen Bulgarians, one Turkish and one Russian. In Vilnius and Vilnius district I administered 40 and 45 semi-structured interviews. In addition to thirty Lithuanians, six Poles, two Russians, one Belarusian and one Jew born from 1965 to 1999 were interviewed in Vilnius. Research in Vilnius district research covered not only 23 Lithuanians, but also eleven Poles, three Russians, one Byelorussian, five Tartars and two Karaims born from 1925 to

1999. In terms of religion, the absolute majority of respondents in Lithuania were Catholics, in Bulgaria Orthodox. During my fieldwork I tried to gather information about state holidays, by asking respondents with whom those celebrations were celebrated last year (family, relatives, friends, neighbours, co-workers, etc.). Respondents were also asked to indicate their favourite holiday.

In Sofia, field research was usually carried out in parks, yards, cafés and other public spaces. When choosing respondents, their age, sex, nationality and beliefs were not taken into consideration – the main criterion was their willingness to talk and their ability to answer questions in English or Russian. In Lithuania the languages were Lithuanian and Russian, and the respondents from villages and small towns were interviewed in their homes.

### **The interaction between public holidays and personal festivals**

According to Katarína Popelková, ‘The term holiday means the interruption of ... daily routine, a moment commemorated on a cyclical basis or a period accompanied by normative or ritual acts and with an ascribed symbolic meaning’ (Popelková 2017: 171). Certainly state holidays have an impact on people’s leisure time by turning an ordinary day into a day off. Such days have the potential to shape feelings of ethnic, civic or religious identity. In the words of Gabriella Elgenius, ‘the formalization of ... European national days is often the result of negotiations between the people and the elites, a process that may be interpreted as an attempt by the latter to establish continuity with a living past through repeated and formalized ritual/symbolic complexes aiming to enhance the collective experience’ (Elgenius 2007: 68). On the other hand, as Ekaterina Anastasova stated, the ‘national festive system (as a part of the nation-building process) plays a major role in the formation and maintenance of national identity, outlining the border between “we-they”, [being] the main symbols of the nation and the main consolidating factors (and mechanisms) to integrate the national community’ (Anastasova 2011: 159-60). However, some holidays are related to a common Christian culture or are global in character (New Year, the First of May) and are observed in several countries. People in Lithuania and Bulgaria celebrate New Year (on the 1st of January; bulg. Нова година, lith. Nauji metai), Labour Day (on the 1st of May; bulg. Ден на труда и на международната работническа солидарност, lith. Tarptautinė darbo diena), Christmas Eve (bulg. Бъдни вечер, lith. Kūčios), two days of Christmas (bulg. Рождество Христово, Коляда, lith. Kalėdos) and the first and second

days of Easter (bulg. Великден, lith. Velykos; their dates in Lithuania and Bulgaria usually differ). In Bulgaria the Friday and Saturday before Easter are also festive days (Велики петък, Велика събота). On 24th June Lithuanians celebrate St. John's Day (Joninės, Rasos), on 15th August the Assumption of Mary (Žolinė) and on 1st November All Saints' Day (Visų Šventųjų diena). In Bulgaria, 6th May is celebrated as St. George's Day, which is also the Day of the Bulgarian Army (celebrated since 1880; Гергьовден, Ден на храбростта и Българската армия). 6th July, which marks the coronation of the first king of Lithuania, Mindaugas, in 1253, is the State Day in Lithuania (Valstybės diena). On 16th February the citizens of the country celebrate the Restoration of the State Day, which commemorates the proclamation of Lithuania's independence in 1918 (Lietuvos valstybės atkūrimo diena), while 11th March is Restoration of Independence Day (Lietuvos nepriklausomybės atkūrimo diena), which marks the restoration of Lithuania's independence in 1990. On 3rd March Bulgarians celebrate Liberation Day, which commemorates the liberation of Bulgaria from the Ottoman Empire after the war of 1877-1878 (Ден на Освобождението на България от османско иго). 22nd September is Bulgaria's Independence Day, referring to the proclamation of the country's independence in 1908 (Ден на Независимостта на България), while 6th September is celebrated as Unification Day (Ден на Съединението), which marks the unification of Eastern Rumelia with the Principality of Bulgaria in 1885. In addition, on 1st November, the country celebrates Bulgarian National Awakening Day or the Day of Bulgarian Enlighteners (Ден на народните будители), commemorating the Bulgarian national revival movement and honouring the memory and work of scholars, enlighteners, and national liberation fighters who helped preserve Bulgarian self-awareness and the nation's spiritual values and morals for centuries. 24th May is the Day of Culture and Literacy or the Day of Bulgarian Education and Culture, including Slavonic Literature and marking the educational activities of Saints Cyril and Methodius in the ninth century (Ден на българската просвета и култура и на славянската писменост). In Lithuania people also observe Mother's Day (first Sunday in May, Motinos diena) and Father's Day (first Sunday in June, Tėvo diena).

However, when in the course of the recent field survey respondents in Sofia were asked what the most important holiday was, only some emphasized the significance of state holidays. Fifteen percent of respondents stated that the most important festivals were their birthdays or those of their family members.

For example, a woman born in 1983 stated that her birthday is a 'personal holiday', which she celebrates over several days, at different times, with different people. However, name days are much less popular than birthdays. Only one representative of the younger generation (born in 1983) singled out Nikulden (Saint Nicholas Day), celebrated on 6th December, as a names day. Equally important are religious festivals. A Turkish man born in 1960 indicated that Qurban Bayram was the most important holiday, as it was fun and included a family get-together. Other people might feel nostalgic about the past. For a Bulgarian woman born in 1934 the most important holiday is 9th May, Victory Day. She prepares a fancy dinner and watches Russian television on that occasion. Young people like festivals that came from the West. A student born in 1997 singled out Halloween, as for her this is the merriest celebration. Only 60 percent of respondents consider state holidays to be important. 25 percent mentioned Christmas, 20 percent New Year, 10 percent Easter, and only one woman, a former scholar (born in 1949), singled out 24th May, the Day of Culture and Literacy, which she now celebrates with her granddaughters outside the National Library.

When asked about the most important modern holidays in Vilnius, most respondents highlighted New Year (27 percent) and birthdays (20 percent). 13 percent considered Christmas to be the most important celebration, 9 percent mentioned St. John's Day and the Restoration of Independence Day (11th March), 7 percent voted for Halloween (31st October), 4 percent for the Restoration of the State Day (16th February) and Valentine's Day (14th February), and 2 percent indicated the State Day (6th July), All Saints' Day (1st November) and the Assumption (15th August). Thus, only 69 percent of the respondents in Vilnius mentioned state holidays (Šaknys 2019: 242).

The situation in the two countries is therefore very similar: just over a half of all the respondents in Sofia and two thirds in Vilnius indicated that state holidays were the most important to them. The research suggests that ordinary people sometimes view state holidays as ordinary days off, as an opportunity to have a few extra hours sleep, to tidy up the house, do other work or meet with friends. On the other hand, a festival that is considered truly important is celebrated after hours or postponed until the nearest weekend and sometimes even celebrated several times with different people (family members, co-workers and friends). This applies not only to state holidays but also to festivals observed by each country's ethnic minorities. Most ethnic groups

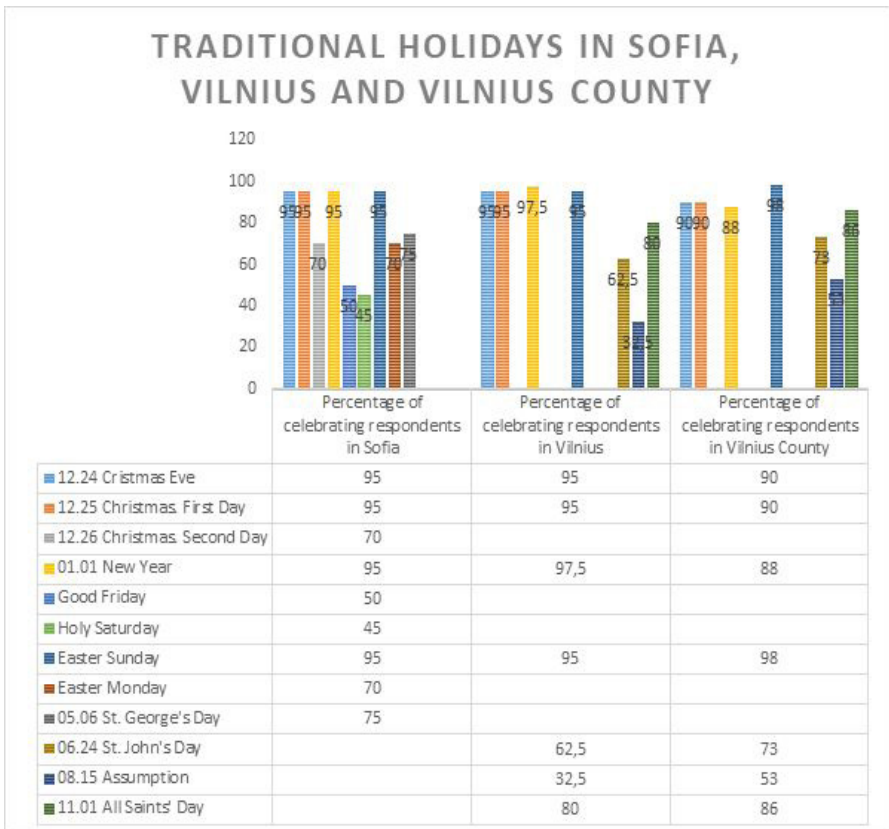
have their own holidays that do not coincide with the official state holidays, therefore those who work or study have to celebrate them after hours or take paid or unpaid leave (Šaknys 2015b: 100).

### **Traditional state holidays**

In the scientific literature, holidays are often separated into religious and secular groups. Lately, however, the divide between religious and secular holidays has been disappearing, with the recreational function of the holiday gaining in importance (Kalnius 2003: 186; Mardosa 2013: 58), so that this dichotomy is ceasing to be objective. In order to compare state holidays as observed by residents of Vilnius, the Vilnius area and Sofia, a slightly different classification was employed, with holidays being grouped into traditional and modern. Traditional state holidays (without disclaiming their religious origin) are those that were celebrated prior to the nineteenth century in both countries. The figure below shows nine traditional holidays in Bulgaria and eight in Lithuania. In Bulgaria, however, unlike Lithuania, holidays that fall on a weekend are compensated by an additional day off, whereas in Lithuania the first day of Easter is always celebrated on a Sunday, which is a non-work day. The number of holidays also differs, with six traditional holidays in Lithuania and only four in Bulgaria. Bulgarians have four days off for Easter, Lithuanians only two. In both countries three days are allocated for Christmas. 1st January is celebrated in both Lithuania and Bulgaria. In addition, Lithuanians have the Assumption, All Saints' Day and St. John's Day, whereas Bulgarians celebrate St. George's Day, which is not only a religious family festival, but also the Day of the Bulgarian Army.

In order to understand better the popularity of holidays, data on the percentage of respondents who observed one or another holiday in the past few years will be presented. The number of people surveyed is not representative, therefore only the most general trends can be identified. As can be seen, Christmas Eve and Christmas were celebrated in all Christian families in both countries with the exception of a Turkish Muslim in Bulgaria, and Tartar Muslims, a Jew and representatives of the Karaite ethno-confessional group in Lithuania. The percentage of the population that is non-Christian in Lithuania and Bulgaria is very small. Based on data 2001, Muslims make up 13 percent of Bulgaria's population, and Jews account for 0.8 percent. In Lithuania, these numbers are even smaller. According to the 2011 census, Muslims make up 0.09 percent of the country's population, Jews 0.04 percent and Karaites 0.01

percent. Thus, there is no doubt that the majority of the population in both countries celebrate Christmas. The festival was also observed by non-religious respondents. For example, a student from Sofia (born in 1997) who identified herself as a half-Orthodox representative of the Goth subculture and was rather critical of religion, claimed that she celebrated Christmas and Easter. On the other hand, a woman born in 1995 said that, although not pious, she nonetheless celebrated Christmas to suit other members of her family. This example suggests that religious festivals also be celebrated by those who lack a religion.



\*The survey in Vilnius and Vilnius County made no distinction between the first and second days of Christmas and Easter.

Figure 1. Traditional Holidays in Sofia, Vilnius and Vilnius County



The figures for the first day of Easter are comparable. The festival was observed by all the surveyed Christians, Lithuanian Karaites indicated the equivalent of Easter, called *Tymbyl Chydžy*, and the Jewish woman pointed out *Pesah* as being celebrated at a similar time. However, fewer Bulgarians celebrate the second day of Easter. About half of the respondents in Bulgaria celebrate Good Friday and Holy Saturday (in Lithuania, data regarding these days were not collected). The lesser popularity of the Friday and Saturday before Easter can be explained by the fact that these days are dedicated to the preparation for the festival and are thus not identified with the festival itself. The Bulgarian Orthodox Church, however, still uses the Julian calendar. In 1968, together with the Romanian and Greek Orthodox Churches, it adopted the Gregorian calendar, but the Easter cycle and church holidays are still observed in accordance with the introduction of the Gregorian calendar in Bulgaria. The Julian calendar is still used by the Russian Orthodox Church, therefore, people of the Orthodox faith in Lithuania still celebrate Christmas on 7th January. This leads to an emphasis on the official New Year on 1st January and more ritual prominence given to Easter as compared to Christmas. Of course, Bulgarians have more Easter- and spring-related holidays than Lithuanians. For example, very important festivals in Bulgaria are *Lazarovden* and *Baba Marta*. According to Jankov, these holidays are considered important not only by the Orthodox but also by Catholics (Jankov 2003). In Lithuania, these festivals are not observed by either Catholics or the Orthodox.

The third most important festival in both countries is New Year. In the socialist period, this was considered the most important holiday in both countries (Ivanova 2005: 335-6; Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2018: 64-5). During that period, some families did not celebrate Christmas but transferred certain of its ceremonial elements to New Year. According to the respondents, Bulgarians, like Lithuanians, would decorate the Christmas tree and wait for Father Frost (*Дядо мраз* in Bulgaria; *Senis šaltis* in Lithuania), or today Santa Claus (bulg. *Дядо Коледа*; lith. *Kalėdų senis*), to bring presents. Recently Christmas has regained its status, though young people also indicate that Christmas as the most important celebration of the year. A most unexpected reason why New Year should be considered an important celebration was offered by a student from Sofia born in 1985: she liked the festival as it was not associated with religion. New Year in Lithuania and Bulgaria is celebrated in a similar manner: people prepare a fancy dinner, listen to the president's speech, open a bottle of

champagne at midnight and go out to watch the fireworks (Paukštytė-Šakniene 2018: 67). In both countries, young people sometimes celebrate New Year's Eve together with their parents and after midnight go out with friends. Older people, conversely, tend to celebrate with friends rather than families. Analysis of New Year celebrations revealed that respondents from Vilnius County spend the holiday with their families more often than with friends (73 percent and 44 percent respectively). In Sofia, 50 percent of the respondents celebrate New Year with their families and 70 percent with friends; in Vilnius these figures are 30 percent and 77.5 percent respectively. Although respondents in Lithuania were not asked how they observe the second days of Christmas and of Easter, their comments suggest that these festive days are often spent with friends. In Sofia, 20 percent of the respondents celebrated the second day of Christmas with their families and 45 percent – with friends; the figures for the second day of Easter are 35 percent and 30 percent respectively.

In 2015, I had the opportunity to observe the celebration of St. George's Day in Sofia. A huge military parade and other events on public spaces attracted crowds. Fewer people could be seen in churches. The research data suggest that this holiday is celebrated by 75 percent of the respondents, twice as many celebrating it with friends rather than with family members. Although the majority of the respondents knew and spoke about the family traditions observed on St. George's Day (roast lamb, baking a special pie), only 30 percent of them spent the holiday with their families. Some respondents celebrated it as a names day. This is indicative of the rapid transformation of a family festival into a public holiday.



Figure 2. St. George's Day is the Day of the Bulgarian Army. Sofia, 6th May 2015. Photo by Žilvytis Šaknys.

A popular festival in Lithuania is St. John's Day. Usually people gather around bonfires, which are set up in public spaces, or privately celebrate the names day of a member of their family or a friend. In Vilnius, St. John's Day is more often celebrated with friends, whereas in Vilnius County people tend to spend it with their families. This celebration is more secular in character, though is very important to those who profess the old Baltic faith. On the other hand, this festival is closely related to the Lithuanian national revival in Lithuania Minor at the end of the nineteenth century. Today, it is widely celebrated in Lithuania's Baltic neighbours, Latvia and Estonia.



Figure 3. St. John's Day, Vilnius, 23th June 2011. Photo by Žilvytis Šaknys.

A highly popular holiday is All Saints' Day, the eve of All Souls. On this day people visit the graves of their loved ones and meet with relatives in their home towns and villages. All Saints Day is normally spent with the extended family. As of 2020, All Souls Day is also a holiday and a day off in Lithuania. Only one third of the respondents in Vilnius and less than half in Vilnius County admitted celebrating the Assumption. In the city, the percentage of those who celebrate it with their families and friends was more or less equal, whereas in the Vilnius area the majority of those who observe the festival spend it with family members. In the urban environment it is sometimes difficult to grasp the meaning of a religious holiday packed with numerous agrarian rituals. Some respondents stated that they did not understand its meaning (for more details, see Šaknys 2020: 35–50).

The research of traditional holidays revealed that the source behind the popularity of a holiday is usually its family-related nature. Other important factors are traditions kept alive for centuries and the perceived meaning of a festival. As for the festivals observed in the city, my previous research had already revealed certain differences between Lithuania and Bulgaria (Šaknys 2018a: 119-30). This study also highlighted the trend to visit one's home town on holidays. For example, at Easter, a woman born in 1948 goes to the city of Pernik, which she left some fifty years ago but is where her parents' house has been preserved. Another woman born in 1973 likes Christmas as there are several days off and she can visit her relatives in Montana (her native area), or else her family comes to visit her in Sofia. In Lithuania, a similar holiday in this respect is the All Saints' Day; however, if people from Vilnius want to visit the graves of their loved ones around Lithuania, they have little time left to meet with their relatives and friends.

In summary, it should be noted that, in the structure of the ritual year, traditional holidays in Lithuania receive more attention. In fact, in Bulgaria people have more traditional holidays, but some of them are ordinary working days.

## **Modern state holidays**

Another type of state holiday is modern holidays. Most of them originate in the country's history, and as they are not related to religion, they should seemingly importance to all religious and ethnic groups. However, in their content these festivals do not differ much from religious celebrations. According to Gabriella Elgenius, the national day is in many ways treated like a 'sacred' activity, and

symbols such as the flag attain the status of sacred objects. As central components of national worship they have, in other words, been raised above everyday life (Elgenius 2007: 78). On the other hand, on these holidays solemn services are held at churches of various denominations. Paradoxically, a smaller group of the surveyed respondents celebrates these holidays.

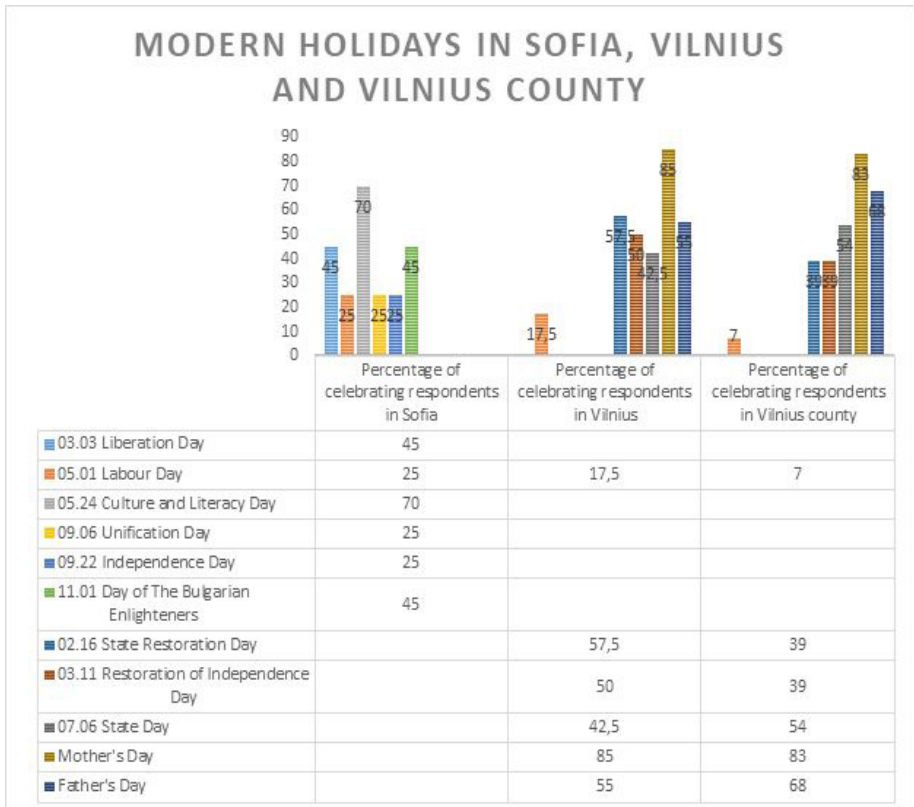


Figure 4. Modern Holidays in Sofia, Vilnius and Vilnius County

Both Lithuanians and Bulgarians have six modern state holidays. However, in Lithuania Mother's Day and Father's Day fall on a Sunday, which is a non-work day. The two states have one holiday in common, Labour Day, though in neither country is it particularly popular. In Bulgaria only a quarter of the respondents admitted celebrating it, whereas in Lithuania this number was even smaller. On 14th July 1889, the Second International Congress in Paris declared 1st May International Workers' Solidarity Day. In Bulgaria, this day has been a holiday since 1939, but it acquired particular popularity during socialist rule. In Lithuania, this festival has a rather long history. It was declared state holiday back in 1919, but in 1930 1st May was removed from the list. The celebration was revived in 1940, following Lithuania's occupation by the USSR, and it was observed during both the Nazi (1941-1944) and Soviet (1945-1989) occupations. After Lithuania regained its independence in 1990, the festival was demoted to an ordinary work day, but it was reinstated by the Social Democrats, who came to power in 1996. On 1st May 2004, Lithuania joined the European Union. Bonfires were lit in towns and cities, but this tradition did not last. The celebration of Lithuania's accession to the European Union did not take root, therefore this occasion is only included in the list of memorable days, and 1st May is mainly celebrated as Labour Day. In both Bulgaria and Lithuania, 1st May had no folk traditions associated with the first day of May (as, for example, in Germany and neighbouring Germanic countries, where there are long-standing traditions of the May festival). Some respondents in both countries referred to this holiday as socialist or Soviet.

In Bulgaria, a quarter of the respondents celebrate Unification Day. When asked about this festival, several respondents claimed that it was most solemnly celebrated in Plovdiv, where the unification of Eastern Rumelia with the Principality of Bulgaria was proclaimed in 1885. Their responses gave the impression of it being more of a local than an all-Bulgarian holiday. The field research was carried out in September, so most of the respondents had the chance to remember what they were doing on that particular day. However, the majority stated that they did not celebrate it.

No more than a quarter of the respondents admitted celebrating Bulgaria's Independence Day. The respondents had an even better opportunity to remember it, as the field research was conducted just before the holiday and immediately after it. Several representatives of the older generation even said that they had forgotten about the festival, though it was celebrated a day or

two before the interview. After being reminded of the date, the respondents admitted not celebrating the festival. One respondent even said that there were too many of those independence days for him to remember to celebrate each of them. Younger respondents seemed to be more eager to celebrate the holiday. Sofia Heritage Days were held in the city on the eve and day of the celebration, a colourful and entertaining event designed to appeal to both young and older people. However, just as in Vilnius, only a meagre number of the residents of the city attends such events.



Figure 5. Sofia Heritage Days. Sofia, 21st September 2018. Photo by Žilvytis Šaknys.

Significantly more, almost half of the respondents focused on Liberation Day. Sometimes this was called the most important holiday, the National Day. The holiday may be popular due to the fact that it is the first of the three dates marking the formation of the Bulgarian state and has been celebrated since 1888 (with a break in 1944-1989) (Gergova 2016: 94-7). The popularity of the festival could be a matter of seasonality: it is celebrated on 3rd March and is close to the popular festival of Baba Marta (1st March). As for the first three holidays, Ekaterina Anastasova argues that political reasons and present-day historical associations with Russia and the socialist period might be the main reason for their unpopularity (Anastasova 2011: 163). However, just as few respondents admitted celebrating the Day of the Bulgarian Enlighteners, which falls on 1st November and is a day off only for education professionals.

Meanwhile in Bulgaria the most popular of all modern holidays is Culture and Literacy Day, observed by two thirds of all the respondents. This day is also officially celebrated in North Macedonia and commemorated in Russia and Serbia. According to Anastasova, 'this festival was the most loved Bulgarian holiday in the period of socialism: in all towns and villages in Bulgaria long processions of university and schoolteachers, students and schoolteachers, children and their relatives dressed in special clothes were organised and a special program was performed. Streets were overcrowded with joyful people' (Anastasova 2011: 165). It has certain features of a national holiday (anthem sung, flag raised, images of Cyril and Methodius carried by processions), a strong element of national pride (books to read handed out to everyone) and the potential for nostalgia (every Bulgarian was a schoolchild once). However, this festival, though an official celebration, is not considered a national holiday in Bulgaria, due to the absence of its most important quality – a uniqueness that distinguishes 'ours' from 'theirs' (Anastasova 2011: 165-6). Dalia Senvaitytė also mentions this holiday as a popular celebration among students, indicating that it is compulsory in schools (Senvaitytė 2011: 485). According to this ethnologist, state holidays are much less important to Lithuanian than to Bulgarian students. The most important state holiday for students in Lithuania is the Restoration of Lithuania's Independence (11th March), whereas the State Day (6th July) is given less prominence (*ibid.*). My data shows a different situation. In Vilnius most popular is Restoration of the State Day. The birthday of the modern state of Lithuania is the only festival that retained the status of a public holiday and non-work day both in 1919-1940 and after 1990, and it



surpasses other national holidays in popularity. State Day, declared in 1990, is the least frequently celebrated. Meanwhile, in Vilnius County it is celebrated most often of all other national holidays. Only 39 percent of my respondents celebrated the other two national holidays. In summary, it can be said that in Vilnius and its area these holidays were observed by about a half of all the respondents, though numerous entertainment events are organized on these dates (for more information see Šaknys 2021). This figure is comparable to the research results in Bulgaria.

According to Elgenius, national ceremonies create awareness and may as a result reinforce and sustain the values of the community. National days can be powerful tools that bind past, present and future generations together (Elgenius 2007: 77). In Bulgaria, there is a recent debate regarding the most important state holiday, namely National Day, though Anastasova argues that ‘the discussion about which feast has to be the national one continues, and is renewed every year’ (Anastasova 2011: 164). In Lithuania, this issue was intensely discussed in 1920-1940. The expression ‘National Day’, which denotes the most important state holiday in Lithuania, was often used in the Lithuanian press between 1918 and 1940. However, it refers not to just one but a number of different holidays, such as the Day of the Restoration of the State of Lithuania (16th February), the Day of the Constituent Assembly of Lithuania (15th May), the Assumption (15th August), or the Day of the Coronation of Vytautas the Great (8th September). The need to emphasize one or another holiday was associated with the most suitable season to celebrate it (15th May, later 8th September) or financial reasons were cited, as a celebration that coincides with a religious festival would not require an additional day off (the Assumption and Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary). The patriotic motif was in the third place in 1930 when celebrating the 500th anniversary of Vytautas’ coronation (which in fact never happened). After the restoration of independence in 1990, only 16th February became a public holiday. The Assumption is considered a religious celebration (Šaknys 2018b: 129–154). Thus, neither Lithuania nor Bulgaria is able to focus on just one National Day: instead they celebrate several of such, which makes it difficult to determine a clearer perception of the value-based hierarchy of events.



Figure 6. Restoration of the State Day. Vilnius, 16th February 2018. Photo by Žilvytis Šaknys.

All national holidays in Sofia are usually spent with friends rather than family. In Vilnius and Vilnius County, the most popular modern holidays are Mother's Day and Father's Day. Unlike the majority of other modern holidays, these two are mostly family celebrations. Mother's Day dates back to 1928, though in 1940, following the Soviet occupation, it was banned and revived shortly before the collapse of the USSR, mostly by the efforts of ethnologist Juozas Kudirka (Kudirka 1989); in 1990 the holiday was reinstated (Šidiškienė 2016a: 234-5). The celebration includes visiting mothers and giving them presents. Father's Day was declared a holiday in the last years of the Republic of Lithuania and was celebrated for no longer than a couple of years until the Soviet occupation. It was also promoted in the publication dedicated to Mother's Day. In 2008 Father's Day became a state holiday (Šidiškienė 2016b: 249), but neither before the war nor now has it been on the scale of the Mother's Day celebration.

In summary, it should be noted that, in the structure of the ritual year in Bulgaria, national holidays are given more prominence than in Lithuania. In

most cases modern state holidays are spent with friends (less often in Vilnius County), with the exception of Father's Day and Mother's Day in Lithuania, which are celebrated within the family, but these festivals always fall on a Sunday, so there are no additional days off.

## Conclusions

This comparison of the ritual year in the Baltic nation of Lithuania, where most people are Catholics, and in the Slavonic nation of Bulgaria, where most residents are of the Orthodox faith, has revealed that in both countries a decline in the influence of the church on festivals can be observed, leading to their being grouped into traditional and modern.

Analysis of the most important traditional celebration of Catholic Lithuanians and Orthodox Bulgarians, namely Christmas, suggests that not only the predominant confession, but also the calendar (Julian or Gregorian) used for the festival has an impact on the value structure of the ritual year and the associated holidays. This might be the reason why, among different Christian confessions and in different states, one or another holiday may acquire identical value. The emphasis on Christmas Eve in both Bulgaria and Lithuania may be associated with the fact that in both countries Christmas is celebrated in accordance with the Gregorian calendar. On the other hand, comparing the number of traditional and modern holidays, we see that in Lithuania the state puts emphasis on traditional holidays, in Bulgaria on modern holidays. However, the attitude of people towards state holidays in both countries is similar. Traditional celebrations originating in religious festivals that are usually celebrated within the family are more popular in Vilnius and Sofia compared to modern holidays, which are mostly related to the history of the state and celebrated with friends. In this respect, the situation in smaller towns and villages in Lithuania is a little different, as here modern holidays are more often celebrated within the family circle.

The research also revealed that, when analysing modern holidays, both young and old in both Bulgaria and Lithuania at times find it difficult to explain the historical value of a particular celebration. On the days linked with the history of the state, both countries offer a great variety of events, though they are attended by less than a half of the respondents. Festive events on such occasions are usually designed to attract young people, while older residents have no entertainment that would suit their age. The holiday that the respondents in

both countries find most difficult to understand and describe is International Labour Day. Neither country has a single National Day that would stand out in the hierarchy of the ritual year. This complicates the association of holidays with the formation of national and civic identity in both countries.

Analysis of the structure of the ritual year in Lithuania and Bulgaria revealed more similarities than differences. The research findings suggest that a day off on a particular holiday does not guarantee its popularity. The ethnic and confessional structure of different states does not form any differences when comparing the popularity of religion- and history-based holidays.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> As holiday-related terms vary even in the scientific literature, and although there are discrepancies when translating them from other languages into English, the definitions of these concepts used in this paper are as follows. The state's ritual year is the legally established structure of public holidays (days off). A state holiday is a calendrical date designated by the government as a holiday (a day off). A festival is a holiday observed by a national, ethnic or confessional group, family or other communities (a work day). A national holiday is a holiday associated with historical events (a day off). A National Day is the state's most important holiday.

<sup>2</sup> In 2020, another holiday – All Souls' Day (Vėlinės) celebrated on 2nd November – was introduced. As these changes came after the completion of the field research, this holiday is not covered in this article.

<sup>3</sup> Cyril and Methodius are best known as the creators of the Slavonic alphabet. Cyril first created the Glagolitic script – the old Slavonic church script – and later the Cyrillic alphabet, which is still used in Russia, Bulgaria, Serbia and Ukraine, as well as by the Russian and Greek Orthodox Churches. It is thanks to Cyril and Methodius that the Gospel and other Christian books were translated into Old Slavonic. In 1980, Pope John Paul II proclaimed Cyril and Methodius the patron saints of Europe.

<sup>4</sup> Due to a lack of space, Christmas and Easter will not be discussed in detail here. However, they are the most important Christian as well as family celebrations both in Lithuania and Bulgaria, and have many traditions in common (Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2018: 58-72; Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2019: 57-70).

<sup>5</sup> In fact, certain similarities between New Year and Christmas Eve customs in Lithuania and Bulgaria could be observed already at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century (Slaveikov 2012: 32; Kudirka 1993: 243-254), therefore it was not a

difficult task to elevate New Year to the status of the most important festival of the year by attributing certain Christmas traditions to it.

<sup>6</sup> In Bulgaria, unlike in Lithuania, All Soul's Days (*Zadushnitsa*) are several. There are usually three *Zadushnitsa* days in a calendar year: on Saturdays before *Mesni Zagovezni* (eight weeks before Easter, Meat Fast Sunday), before *Petdesetnitsa* (50 Days after Easter) and before *Arhangelovden* (8th November, *Michelmas*). In some regions of Bulgaria there are also three All Soul's days around other major holidays: *Todorovden* (Saturday after *Sirni Zagovezni* (Cheese-Fast Sunday), St. Theodore's Feast Day (seven weeks before Easter), *Lazarovden* (the last but on Saturday before Easter, St. Lazarus Feast Day) and *Petkovden* (14th October, St. Petka's Day) (Benina-Marinkova Dimitrova, Tsanova Antonova and Assenova Paprikova-Krutilin 2019: 95).

<sup>7</sup> Bulgaria joined the European Union on 1st January 2007.

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**Žilvytis Šaknys**, PhD, Senior Researcher at the Department of Ethnology and Anthropology, Lithuanian Institute of History, Vilnius, Lithuania. He has field works in Lithuania, Byelorussia, Poland, Latvia and Bulgaria. His research interests are in the field of traditional and modern culture, ethnology of youth, ethnology of city, ethnology of friendship, ethnology of tourism, history of ethnology, ethnicity, ethnic and confessional tolerance, ritual year.