

Kyustendil Spring Day: Post-Socialist Re-inventions and Transformations of a Socialist Festival

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Abstract: The article presents a case study of Kyustendil Spring Day, a traditional local holiday associated with the spring equinox, (re)invented as a socialist festival in the late 1960s, which has continued to take place uninterrupted to date. It traces the transformations that the festival has gone through in the years of post-socialist transition in Bulgaria looking into the challenges posed to both the (ritual) form and the (semantic) content of the festival after the collapse of the Bulgarian socialist state in 1989.

As the analysis shows, the imperatives of global popular culture and the new economic and political realities have brought about new actors, symbols, rituals and venues in the old festive scenario of Kyustendil Spring Day. Two distinct periods in its post-socialist development are distinguished: the early post-socialist years of the 1990s when the holiday was radically privatised by local businessmen (i.e. sponsors), commercialised (i.e. patented as a festival), and spectacularised; and the most recent years, when it was re-claimed by the local municipality, re-traditionalised, and instrumentalised in local town branding strategies. In spite of the seemingly undisputed success of Kyustendil Spring Day as a town holiday today, the critical voices raised about the festival's exhausted social function and its commercialisation in the present suggest that it might have reached a critical point in its life course, and that new re-inventions, i.e. new re-semantisation, would be needed to save its relevance for the local community in the future.

Keywords: spring equinox, Kyustendil Spring Day, socialist festival, post-socialist transition, commercialisation, festivalisation, traditionalisation

Introduction

Festivalisation as a contemporary phenomenon is usually theoretically conceived of as originating in the context of Western capitalist consumer society. It emerged in the 1960s, flourished in the 1970s and in the following decades, and proliferated even further in the new millennium, as testified by both the surge in the number and the diversification of the types of festival registered in the recent years. It might then appear paradoxical that at about the same time as festivalisation was making its way in the West – in the late 1960s and early 1970s – socialist Bulgaria also experienced a festival boom, even if not on the same scale, but still rather conspicuous. Although often not labelled festivals per se, these newly invented festivities clearly made use of the festival format and typically included a miscellaneous mix of elements: a carnival, a procession, a fair, and various cultural events such as music concerts, art exhibitions, dance and theatre performances, etc.

The growing number and types of festival, both national and local, and town holidays in socialist Bulgaria from the late 1960s onwards, however, were conditioned by different factors. First and foremost, by the socialist authorities' attempt to radically reshape the festive calendar by discarding the old religious holidays and supplanting them with new ideologically sanctioned ones, thus structuring social time in a novel way. Furthermore, the authorities sought to maintain tight control over working people's everyday lives and use of free time¹ by cultivating a new socialist culture of leisure and recreation. Not only did these efforts leave an imprint on the structure and rhythm of social time, but they also affected public space inasmuch as they modified the functions of the old cult sites and festive venues and created new places specifically designed to suit the needs of the socialist politics of culture. Last but not least, the introduction of a socialist festive calendar was strongly tied to the authorities' aspirations to inculcate socialist ideology in all spheres of social life, thus having a bearing upon the collective notions of history, memory and identity.

This paper traces the transformations that Kyustendil Spring Day, a traditional local holiday, (re)invented as a socialist festival in the late 1960s, has gone through in the years of post-socialist transition in Bulgaria. It looks into the challenges posed to both the (ritual) form and the (semantic) content of the festival after the collapse of the Bulgarian socialist state in 1989. Taking into account the generally observed trends in the transformation of the festive cultures of the former socialist countries, the paper examines the changing functions of Kyustendil Spring Day and the involvement of various social actors (municipal officers, local businessmen, politicians, local elites, and others) in its adaptation, modification and instrumentalisation in the context of the post-socialist politics and economics of culture.

The study is situated within the emerging interdisciplinary field of festive studies² at its intersection with ritual studies and the anthropology of socialism and post-socialism. The analysis takes as a point of departure the findings of anthropological studies on the transformations of the festive cultures of former socialist states, customarily focusing on single case studies rather than undertaking a comprehensive, comparative transnational approach³. A fairly broad consensus has been reached, however, around the proposition that “the festive culture in the ex-socialist countries represents a mixture of the legacy of socialist celebrations, holidays introduced slightly before or after the 1989–1991, and religious revivals in the form of both pagan/ancestral and Church festivities” (Cojocaru, Cash 2013: 8; cf. also Sedakova 2011). Furthermore, the analysis takes into account the outcomes of studies of the relationship of ritual and economy in the post-socialist context (e.g. Gudeman, Hann 2015; Hann 2018; Creed 2011), oscillating between the hypothesis of ritual decline, contingent on the economic crisis in the 1990s (e.g. Creed 2002), and the hypothesis of ritual revitalisation and re-enchantment (e.g. Fosztó 2009; Creed 2011). Last but not least, it deals critically with the conventional perspective on the commercialisation and commodification of holidays, celebrations, festivals, rituals, and traditions as implying a moral opposition between culture and commerce (cf. Frost 2016: 576). As has been widely acknowledged by anthropologists, the role of festivals is far more complex and manifold. Apart from being sites of economic activity and cultural consumption, festivals can also serve as political platforms, and more importantly, as means for promoting social integration and cohesion and strengthening local identity.

In terms of methodology, the analysis is based on a productive mix of primary and secondary sources: fieldwork and interviews conducted by the author; archive documents; articles in the local press; posts, photographs, and comments in social media. The author observed in person the 2021 and 2022 editions of Kyustendil Spring Day although the festival took place only virtually in 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. For the same reason the number of interviews conducted was rather limited at seven in total, four of which were carried out online. The respondents included three former and current municipal officers, two teachers, an engineer and a journalist, all within the age group of 50 to 70. The analysis was therefore supplemented with secondary data collected through the social media such as discussions and comments on posts and photographs published in the Old Photos from Kyustendil Facebook group⁴, as well as on the Kyustendil Spring Day in the Past and Today Facebook page⁵ administered by the Culture Department of the municipality (unfortunately, no longer accessible). Another set of materials, which proved useful in the reconstruction of the public discourse on Kyustendil Spring Day, included: publications in local newspapers (*Zvezda*, *Kyustendil*, *Nova Bulgaria*, *Pautalia*, *Vyara*, and others), and particularly in the eponymous news-

paper *Kyustendil Spring* published on an annual basis from 1996 to 2008; the Kyustendil Spring Girl in the Local Press documentary exhibition (2021) arranged by the Regional Library in Kyustendil; press releases from the Municipality of Kyustendil, as well as archive documents deposited in the regional branch of the Archives State Agency.

The paper starts with brief introductory notes on the town of Kyustendil and a historical detour to the invention of Kyustendil Spring Day as a socialist festival in the 1960s, thus setting the context for the analysis that follows. The study's main lines of enquiry concern the adaptation of the festival to the new political, social and cultural realities that conditioned its privatisation and commercialisation, festivalisation and spectacularisation, (re)traditionalisation and folklorisation. Based on the assumption that cultural identities are articulated, enacted and negotiated through festive culture, among other things, the paper further explores Kyustendil Spring Day's embeddedness in the local identity discourse and its inherent political implications.

The town of Kyustendil

Kyustendil, the administrative centre of Kyustendil District, is a middle-sized town of about 40,000 inhabitants⁶, located in the southwestern part of Bulgaria, about 90 km southwest of Sofia close to the border with the Republic of North Macedonia, and Serbia.

It has been referred to as “the town of springs” as there are about 40 hot mineral water springs on its territory. It was the healing qualities of the mineral water that attracted the Thracians to settle there in the 5th to 4th century BC. The settlement further developed as a market town and as a Roman resort under the name Pautalia in the mid-1st century AD. Ulpia Pautalia was conferred the status of a town in the early 2nd century during the rule of emperor Marcus Ulpius Traianus (98–117 AD). It was noted for its temple of Asclepius, the god of medicine in ancient Greek mythology and patron of the town⁷. In the 2nd and 3rd centuries Ulpia Pautalia minted its own coins with Asclepius engraved on their tails. A fortress was built on the top of the hill in the 4th century, which was in continuous use until the 15th century. In the Middle Ages Kyustendil switched hands between the Byzantine Empire, the Bulgarian, and the Serbian kingdoms before it fell under Ottoman rule at the end of the 14th century. After five centuries of Ottoman domination it became part of the newly re-established Bulgarian state in 1878.

In addition to its mineral springs and mild climate offering excellent potential for wellness and spa tourism, the town is well known for its fruit growing traditions, apple, plum and cherry in particular, but also pears, apricots, peaches, almonds and

walnuts. It is for that reason that Kyustendil has been labelled “the fruit tree garden of Bulgaria” and “the motherland of Bulgarian fruit growing” in popular discourse.⁸

Kyustendil Spring Day as an invented tradition⁹

Since time immemorial, or so the local saying goes, the residents of Kyustendil have greeted the coming of spring on March 21st, the day of the spring equinox, by climbing up the Hisarlaka hill above the town with their families, sitting on a blanket spread on the ground (should the weather allow), feasting together with homemade round loaves of bread, *banitsa*, cheese, honey or halvah, raki and wine¹⁰, singing and dancing.

The local tradition of welcoming spring is usually interpreted as syncretically integrating pre-Christian rituals related to the day of the spring equinox, and the solar cult in particular¹¹, the Day of the Holy Forty in the Eastern Orthodox calendar¹², the Kirkklar (Nevruz) feast in the Alevi Islam tradition, and the feast of *Mladentsi* in the folk calendar (e.g. Spasova 2004; Kotev 2016; Farkov 1990). Irrespective of which of these hypotheses holds true, it is more important that the tradition of celebrating the first day of spring up on the hill was still pretty much alive in the 1940s and 1950s, hence the local authorities had to rearrange work shifts so that the workers would be able to take part in the festivities in the afternoon of March 21st when it happened to be a working day (Stankov 1965: 25).

In the 1950s and 1960s, the holiday was gradually ‘domesticated’¹³ by the socialist authorities, purged of its religious elements and re-invented, i.e. loaded with new, socialist, content. In addition to the traditional public celebration up on Hisarlaka hill with improvised family meal gatherings and folk dances, it included three new elements: a beauty contest, a crowning ceremony, and a carnival procession¹⁴. In the beauty contest (inaccurately presented by the municipality as the “first beauty contest” in the country) three girls were selected, a Kyustendil Spring Girl¹⁵ titleholder along with two assistants. The crowning ceremony was a ritualised act in which the Old Spring (the girl selected the previous year) would hand over her crown and sceptre to the New Spring along with the symbols of the town: a symbolic town key and an apple (Fig. 1.)



Fig. 1. Kyustendil Spring Day, 1967. State Archives, Kyustendil, Private Fund, 1898.

The carnival (Fig. 2), one of the most spectacular elements of the festival, included various performances such as a procession of children dressed up as fruit, flowers and migratory birds; folk ritual reenactments (mummers, traditional wedding, etc.); acrobatic stunts; and amateur theatrical acts performing an ideologically sanctioned critique of the social vices blemishing the socialist way of life. In addition, there was also a rich accompanying program of cultural and sports events. Despite the significant changes it has undergone since its inception in 1967, Kyustendil Spring Day has taken place without interruption to date, with the only exception being 2020, when the festival was cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic.



Fig. 2. Kyustendil Spring Day, 1967. State Archives, Kyustendil, Private Fund, 1898.

Privatisation and commercialisation

The vitality and social importance of Kyustendil Spring Day for the local community is evidenced by the fact that it was not swept away as socialist legacy in the aftermath of 1989. In fact, it was even pronounced an official holiday in the municipality and a non-working day in 1992. A few years later, in 1998, in the spirit of the time, Kyustendil Spring Day was patented as a festival by the municipality, i.e. registered as a trademark in the Bulgarian Patent Office. As I have argued elsewhere (Kazalarska 2022a; 2022b), the success of the holiday in the years of socialism was to a large extent conditioned by its seemingly less ideologised content and its alleged continuity with local traditions. At the same time, however, it was precisely the well-suitedness and universality of spring as a metaphor for the socialist ideological project that contributed to its resonance with the local community. In fact, the hopes for “a bright socialist future”, which used to be associated with the coming of spring were easily substituted with the newly grown hopes for well-being and prosperity in a democratic society in the wake of 1989. “The first spring in a reviving post-November¹⁶ Bulgaria carries along unprecedented concerns and anxieties, along with traditional and new hopes”, wrote the local newspaper *Zvezda* in 1990¹⁷.

In the turbulent 1990s, marked by sweeping economic and political reforms which eventually re-arranged the distribution of economic capital and reshuffled social hierarchies in the country, the local municipality ended up financially vulnerable and unable to support Kyustendil Spring Day in its full-fledged format¹⁸. For that reason, the scope of the holiday was reduced to the beauty contest to the extent that the two became nearly synonymous, whereas the accompanying cultural program was significantly curtailed¹⁹ and the carnival, its most ideologically charged element, was altogether discarded from the program. In the early 1990s, the crowning ceremony continued to follow the scenario established in the years of socialism, most likely out of institutional inertia. In the late 1990s, however, slight changes were already to be noticed. In 1997, the crowning ceremony took place in the theatre hall, thus becoming a closed event with limited public attendance. Although the public procession from the town centre to Hisarlaka hill, headed by the newly selected Kyustendil Spring girls, lingered on throughout most of the 1990s, it would eventually drop off the program.

In the early years of the post-socialist transition the organisation and management of the holiday was gradually taken over by a handful of local businessmen who provided the necessary funding. In return, as could be expected, the sponsors of the event not only used it to advertise their business and gain social prestige from associating their names with it, but also served as members and heads of the jury of the beauty contest. Such practices gave grounds for the popular belief, still shared by many today, that the selection of the Kyustendil Spring titleholders is

genuinely corrupt. “Well, it’s going to be a put-up job, as always”, “It goes without saying – he who pays the piper calls the tune” and other comments of this kind are commonplace when discussing the beauty contest in social media.

Among the event’s sponsors, as the popular rumour goes, was Vassil Iliev, a former Kyustendil-born wrestler and boss of one of the most powerful organised crime groups in the country in the 1990s²⁰. Apart from respectable local business enterprises, occasionally individuals and political parties too, the sponsors of the show in the 1990s regularly included three of the most prominent local businessmen, Yordan Chipev, Alexander Tasev, and Valeri Nenov, all three of them enjoying somewhat dubious reputations. Chipev served as chair of the local Chamber of Commerce in the early 1990s, and later on his name was associated with a range of criminal acts such as drug trafficking, smuggling cigarettes, and forging documents, as well as with his aspirations for a political career: he ran three times for mayor in the local elections and twice for member of parliament, albeit unsuccessfully. Tasev owned several factories and petrol stations in the town, but became particularly infamous for his involvement in the so-called local cherry wars. Eventually he became the largest cherry exporter in the country, until his assassination in 2007. Tasev was also politically implicated. He stood as a candidate for the Bulgarian Business Bloc in the parliamentary elections in 1997, and had sponsored several political parties. Furthermore, Tasev was linked to Kyustendil Spring Day in yet another way as he was married to a former titleholder, the winner of the 1986 beauty contest. Nenov, a lawyer and a businessman, leader of the local organisation of the nationalist political party VMRO²¹, former municipal councillor and former president of the local football club, served a three-year prison sentence for real estate fraud in 2011, and a couple of years later, in 2014, had part of his property confiscated by the *Commission for Anti-Corruption and Illegal Assets Forfeiture*.

This slight digression, calling to mind the crime section in the tabloid press, provides compelling evidence for the intricate interweaving of semi-criminal business, politics, and culture in the first post-socialist decade. The profile of Kyustendil Spring Day’s sponsors, however, would gradually change after the turn of the century with local shady businessmen replaced by the municipality, and, unsurprisingly, by one of the largest mobile network operators in the country²².

The ‘privatisation’ of Kyustendil Spring Day in the 1990s went hand in hand with its commercialisation, as the burgeoning capitalist system was rapidly permeating all spheres of social life, including culture and entertainment. In addition to a modest sum of money granted by the municipality²³, winners of the beauty contest were also conferred various material awards by the sponsors. Throughout the years, these awards, being the most conspicuous form of advertising, have included: a travel excursion to an exotic tourist destination; a modelling course; a driving course; higher education vouchers; and sportswear, swimsuits, shoes and

other goods from local firms, among which some rather peculiar items such as skeins of yarn produced by Velbazhd, a former socialist enterprise. In 1996, one of the major sponsors, Alexander Tasev, started bestowing gold and silver medallions engraved with the festival's emblem on the winners, a tradition which was continued by his widow after his death. In comparison, during the socialist period, apart from the symbolic prestige and popularity gained, Kyustendil Spring girls would be awarded free public transport and use of the public baths for a full year. In recent years, winners would also keep the formal dresses and the shoes provided by the municipality for the contest, a shift away from the early practice in the 1990s when contestants had to finance their outfits either themselves or through a personal sponsor, which not only meant unfair competition but was also detrimental to the overall aesthetic impact of the show.

The format of the contest also changed in the 1990s. In addition to the traditional round in evening gowns, a round in swimsuits (with an extra round in evening gowns provided by one of the sponsors) and a round in folk costumes were introduced in 1994 and 1997 respectively. Thus, for the first time, the physical appearance of the contestants was openly brought to the fore in the contest, and detailed information about their height, weight, and other body measurements (along with their astral sign) was announced. In fact, in its socialist version, the contest was formally never advertised as a beauty contest as such, a label that was ideologically unacceptable. It nevertheless took place under the guise of cultivating socialist virtues and a refined aesthetic taste in young women. The winners were thus typically described as exemplary shock-workers and outstanding members of the Komsomol organisation. Remnants of this view are still recognisable in the public discourse, as indicated by the following social media comments: "This contest dates back to 1966 and is not like the other beauty contests in Bulgaria attended by illiterate dolls"²⁴ and "it is natural beauty that we are looking for in this contest, not spiffed up hair and vampire-like makeup"²⁵. Such an understanding defies the widespread view that beauty contests of this kind serve as a breeding-place for *mutresi*²⁶ (for example "these contests help *mutri* not to waste time picking out beauties in the crowd, but to get them on a silver platter and carry on with their business"²⁷). One could further speculate that the Kyustendil Spring contest serves as a symbolic battlefield, i.e. that when discussing the social relevance of the contest and the qualities of one contestant or another, Kyustendil residents are in fact engaged in the negotiation of post-socialist moral values.

The jury of the beauty contest has been rather diverse throughout the years: local businessmen (i.e. the sponsors) and political figures seem to have prevailed in the 1990s (with the deputy mayor and local parliament members having a 'reserved' place); later on the jury would also include representatives of various occupations, predominantly the arts and culture sphere, for example prominent journalists,

artists, writers, musicians, etc. Whereas in the early 1990s the jury often consisted of male members only ("so as to highlight Kyustendil women's beauty against the background of the strongest possible male presence"²⁸), a more balanced jury in terms of gender composition was seen in the late 1990s. In recent years, former Kyustendil Spring titleholders have been invited to serve as members of the jury, thus making an exclusively female jury. Although interpreting this radical shift in the jury's gender composition as a sign of raised public awareness and a critical stance towards gendered social hierarchy and hegemonic masculinity seems to be far-fetched, it was nevertheless a step toward clearing the contest's somewhat tarnished past reputation.

All in all, the economic impact of the festival appears to be rather moderate. It is limited to the revenues generated by street vendors (as in any town fair, one of the main streets is lined with stalls selling souvenirs and petty merchandise) and by local restaurants and cafes in the town centre which are habitually full to the brim on that day. Neither does it have a significant impact on local cultural heritage tourism as it takes place out of the high tourist season (as opposed to the other two newly launched festivals, the Cherry Festival in June and the Harvest Festival in September, which attract much larger tourist crowds). Its significance still lies predominantly with the locals, as it is an occasion for those who have left their hometown to come back and re-unite with their families and friends, even if only for a day.

Spectacularisation and festivalisation

Not only did the emphasis in organising Kyustendil Spring Day in the 1990s lie primarily on the beauty contest at the expense of the other elements in the festival program, but special efforts were also made to turn the event into a genuine spectacle. Professional producers and script writers were engaged, the most celebrated TV stars, singers and actors were invited as hosts of the show, and the top performers on the Bulgarian music scene were attracted. In line with popular music taste, the musical program of the show mixed pop-folk (*chalga*), which was in its heyday in the 1990s, socialist Estrada, folklore, and contemporary pop and rock music. Local performers were also regularly featured, particularly the folklore dance ensemble Pautalia and the children's choir Srebarnite zvancheta (The Silver Bells). The high status of the event is confirmed by the number of high-ranking officials who attended throughout the years, including the Bulgarian president and prime minister, ministers, political leaders, foreign ambassadors and diplomats, mayors of nearby towns in Greece and Macedonia, etc.²⁹

For about ten years in the 1990s and early 2000s, the production of the show was in the hands of Niki Aprilov, an actor and theatre director who gained popu-

larity as the host of a TV show for gifted children, and his brother Vladi Aprilov, a DJ and rapper. The two brothers' long-term engagement with the show has visibly raised it to a higher professional level, although at the same time it has left a strong personal imprint on its aesthetics. The professionalisation of the show was advanced further by other prominent figures who had been engaged in directing the show such as Hacho Boyadzhiev, well known as the director of numerous New Year's eve TV shows broadcast by Bulgarian national television.

Unlike in the 1990s, when it was not that uncommon to have contestants stumbling and blundering on stage, as the spectators would point out (for example "the public was dumbfounded when the beauties struggled to reproduce their poorly memorised lines"³⁰; "there were girls who walked rather sluggishly and unsteadily on the stage"³¹), in the last decade or so the candidates selected at the preliminary casting undergo training on how to behave and perform on stage and attend numerous rehearsals so as to make a good show³².

The impulse for spectacularisation of the contest is also observed in the introduction of a swimsuit round in the early 1990s, an innovation that the local media unequivocally applauded as it supposedly "illuminated the beauty and youthfulness of the candidates at their best"³³. Although director Niki Aprilov tried to make the appearance of the girls in swimsuits on stage more discreet by having them wear voile scarves around their waists and by using theatrical effects such as smoke and fog (thus allegedly recreating the atmosphere of the Roman baths), the swimsuit round was nevertheless symptomatic of the invasion of global popular culture in the post-socialist world in the 1990s, promoting notions of beauty, eroticism and sexuality, commodified and objectified through products such as beauty pageants. The swimsuit round remained an indispensable element of the contest until 2008 when it was replaced with a round in sports outfit (wearing high heels nonetheless), and later on with a choreographed dance performance that varied each year³⁴. For the sake of spectacularity, notwithstanding the typically cold weather in March (there was 60 cm of snow on that day in 2009, for instance), the contestants invariably wear long, open shoulder sleeveless formal dresses (even at the outdoor ceremony) and are visibly freezing most of the time.

The year 2008, shortly after a new mayor took office, was a watershed year for the festival and for the municipality's festive calendar as a whole. Among the changes introduced was a new ritual scenario for the crowning ceremony including a specially choreographed dance, conceived by the newly installed head of the Culture Department Dima Ukalska, a choreographer herself. In this "mystical" (as the hostess of the 2022 ceremony called it) ritual dance the Old Spring contestants would hand over the symbols of the town to the New Spring contestants. At the sound of spiritual instrumental music, the girls would raise their arms and lift the symbolic objects into the air in slow, solemn, and exaggerated moves, calling

to mind priestesses performing an ancient ritual (Fig. 3). The symbols themselves were changed: the town key, the sceptre and the apple were replaced with a round loaf of bread, an 'antique' Roman vessel filled with local mineral water, and a bowl of fruit, in line with the overall re-branding of the town, placing a strong emphasis on the town's Roman heritage and spa tourism potential in addition to its fruit growing traditions³⁵.



Fig. 3. The ritual ceremony of crowning the newly selected Kyustendil Spring Girl performed in the town centre, 2022. Photo: Svetla Kazalarska.

As Dima Ukalska said, the guiding idea of the new festivals in Kyustendil was “to express gratitude to nature, to Mother Earth, to the universe, to God for all that has been bestowed upon us here, all that our eyes don’t see, but our souls feel”³⁶. This implicit call to reinstate spirituality, restore the primal link to nature, preserve local traditions and pass them on to the younger generations, somewhat resonant with New Age spirituality and Neopaganism, goes hand in hand with Kyustendil Spring Day’s overriding concerns with producing a spectacular effect. A case at hand is the recently introduced practice of performing the crowning ceremony twice, first in the town centre, and once again up on the Hisarlaka hill, so that more people can watch and appreciate it. Repeating a ritual ceremony might appear questionable in terms of ritual efficacy but it is justifiable in as much as it attracts a much larger spectatorship. Furthermore, the ritual of giving away bread and fruit (the symbols of local abundance and fertility) to the public after the ceremony (Fig. 4), although aesthetically effective and appealing to the public, seems somewhat problematic. As the festival takes place in March, when there are no local grapes and apples

available, it can only be presumed that the fruit given away is probably imported from abroad.



Fig. 4. A Kyustendil Spring contestant giving away bread to the audience after the crowing ceremony at the stage in Hisarlaka, 2022. Photo: Svetla Kazalarska.

Re-traditionalisation and folklorisation

In addition to the recurrent and omnipresent references to the uniqueness and ancient origin of the tradition of welcoming spring in Kyustendil in the official discourse, a number of recent innovations in the festive scenario provide further evidence for its ongoing (re-)traditionalisation and folklorisation.

An outdoor public prayer for the health, well-being and prosperity of Kyustendil and its residents was held by the local priests on March 21st for the first time, in 1996, and since then it has become a permanent element in the Kyustendil Spring Day program. Furthermore, in an attempt to restore the association of the holiday with the Eastern Orthodox tradition a new ritual has been invented recently. After the repeated performance of the crowning ceremony on Hisarlaka hill, the small party of old and new Kyustendil Spring girls would walk down the pathway to the sanctuary of the Holy Forty, situated right below the ruins of the fortress. In an almost private ceremony they would light candles, place a piece of the bread and some fruit as an offering on the stone (a fragment of an ancient aedicule), and give a libation of water on the ground in a highly ritualistic manner, allegedly re-enacting a tradition dating back to the pre-socialist times (Fig. 5). Indeed, in their accounts

of the holiday, going back to the 1960s and earlier, my respondents recall lighting candles at the sanctuary on their way up the hill to welcome spring on March 21st. As clarified above, after the Bulgarian Orthodox Church adopted the revised Julian calendar in 1968, the Day of the Holy Forty was no longer observed on March 21st, but 12 days earlier on March 9th. Thus, apart from making a conspicuous display of Orthodox revivalism, this ‘re-enactment’ clearly appears unjustifiable today. In fact, the sanctuary seems nearly forgotten by the local community, regardless of the fact that a new chapel dedicated to the Holy Forty was built next to it with European funds in 2005³⁷.



Fig. 5. Kyustendil Spring Girl titleholders at the sanctuary of the Holy Forty, 2023.

Source: Kyustendil Municipality, Department of Culture and Spiritual Development. Available at <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=599902092183061&set=pb.100064898252141.-2207520000> (accessed 10/01/2025).

The other major innovation in the festive scenario, the 1997 introduction of a round in authentic folk costumes³⁸ from the region of Kyustendil, eventually became rather emblematic of the beauty contest. For a couple of years, the swimsuit round and the folk costume round co-existed, but with the new mayor coming to power at the end of 2007 the balance was tipped in favour of folk costumes, the erotic spectacular of the early post-socialist years thus giving way to the ethno-spectacular.

A slight digression here might offer an explanation of why this formula turned out to be so successful. Often referred to as “the town of painters”, Kyustendil is strongly associated with the name of Vladimir Dimitrov ‘the Master’ (1882–1960), a renowned Bulgarian painter born in a nearby village³⁹. Although he had worked in a number of genres (portraits, landscape, still life, war paintings), it is his colour-

ful paintings of peasant women and young girls in folk costume against the background of fruit trees and flowers that have become deeply embedded in the national imagination. Although these paintings were meant to allude to the universal link between man and nature, between the spiritual and the material (in accord with the ideas of Tolstoyism, which had influenced Dimitrov), their popular meaning has been reduced to an essentialisation of the beauty of Bulgarian women, and more generally of Bulgarianness. References to the beauty of Bulgarian women, and to the beauty of Kyustendil women in particular, are, in fact, among the most common comments on photos of Kyustendil Spring contestants in folk costumes posted in social media (for example, “Our national folk costumes highlight the beauty and spirituality of Bulgarian woman”, “Beautiful girls wearing beautiful Kyustendil folk costumes, worthy of the paintbrush of Vladimir Dimitrov 'the Master'”, or “They didn’t need any makeup because they all looked as if they’ve come out of the Master’s paintings”). Whether deliberately or not, the beauty contest has recently started re-creating ‘living pictures’ inspired by the Master’s emblematic works, thus fostering strong ethno-cultural nationalist sentiments. The image of attractive young girls posing in folk costumes against the background of flowers, fruit, blossoming trees and folk embroidery patterns has thus become the iconic visual representation of Kyustendil Spring Day today (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6. Kyustendil Spring Girl contestants with a painting by Vladimir Dimitrov in the background, 2012. Kyustendil Municipality, Department of Culture and Spiritual Development. Available at <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Кюстендилска-пролет-в-миналото-и-днес> (accessed 22/11/2021), no longer available.

Political implications

As already suggested, the form and the content of the festival were contingent on political factors such as changes in the local government: a new mayor would inevitably come up with innovations in the festive scenario. Nevertheless, the festival was openly politicised only in single cases, for example in 2004 one of the candidates for mayor, Lyudmil Stoyanov, won the elections leading a campaign under the motto “Let there be Kyustendil Spring”, Kyustendil Spring thus serving as a metaphor for the region’s prosperity. More often than not, the political implications of the holiday have been rather subtle. For instance, some of the criticism raised at Kyustendil Spring Day – as concerns, for example, the non-transparency of the festival’s funding, the concentration of its management in the hands of the same people for years, its outdated aesthetics, etc. – has actually implied criticism of the overall politics of the mayor currently in power.

The issue of the public accessibility of the festival also has an implicit political dimension. In line with the gradual privatisation of the event in the early years of post-socialist transition, public access to the beauty contest in particular became restricted in the 1990s and 2000s, even if the event was broadcasted live on the local cable TV. Free passes and paid tickets for the beauty contest, which in this period took place in the theatre hall, were limited in number and their distribution was largely in the hands of the municipality and the sponsors. In 2008, for instance, 300 free passes were distributed by the mayor, 229 tickets were sold as donations to the festival, 78 seats were offered to the sponsors, and 41 seats reserved for media representatives⁴⁰, meaning that only one third of the theatre seats were available for sale to the public. The situation changed in 2009, when the local government decided to move the contest outdoors to the town square (despite the heavy snowfall that year), thus making it truly public again, free and accessible to all.

The crowning ceremony, on the other hand, has mainly been performed outdoors with some variations in its venue. It took place in the town square in the 1960s and 1970s, then due to the festival’s growing ambitions and popularity it moved to the town stadium in the late 1980s, afterwards it was staged either in the town square or in the area in front of the art gallery, which provides sufficient space for an open-air event. The newly built open-air stage, called the Bazilikata, up on Hisarlaka hill, built after the reconstruction of the fortress in 2015, has become the venue for the crowning ceremony in recent years.

The availability of new communication technologies in the new century, which allowed voting by SMS, for instance, further facilitated the participation of the public in the beauty contest, i.e. in its democratisation. The selection of the public’s favourite contestant, an allegedly new democratic practice had, however, already been introduced in the late socialist years.

In terms of social inclusivity, however, the Kyustendil Spring beauty contest appears to have been pronouncedly ethnically monocultural throughout the years. Although there is a considerable Roma minority living in the town, I have only come upon a single case of a Roma entrant listed among the final contestants, in 2010. In fact, an alternative Miss Roma Spring contest was organised on March 22nd by a local NGO called Roma Centre for Regional Development for a couple of years, from 2010 to 2017.

When it comes to the instrumentalisation of Kyustendil Spring Girl titleholders as town ambassadors, their function has been rather limited, i.e. it is mainly 'decorative'. Apart from advertising the town's cultural and natural heritage sites, they are expected, occasionally, to welcome official guests, take part in charity initiatives organised by the municipality, participate in town celebrations (for example, to give away national flags to town residents and guests on March 3rd, Bulgaria's Liberation Day holiday), and attend some of the newly introduced town festivals. None of the titleholders, however, has taken advantage of her status to raise awareness of a given social or political cause that she is personally committed to⁴¹.

Kyustendil Spring Day in local identity discourse

That Kyustendil Spring Day is emblematic for the town, is indisputable in the public discourse. Perceived as an ancient tradition that has been passed down from generation to generation, its significance for the local community lies in the fact that it offers an opportunity not only for social gathering, but also for self-representation. Even if the socialist version of the festival had already been strongly committed to constructing and promoting images of local identity – the fruit-growing traditions, the mineral water, the ancient Roman heritage⁴² were frequently alluded to in the carnival – it was only recently that Kyustendil Spring Day has been deliberately and strategically used for town branding and the promotion of cultural tourism. Once again, it appears that this change was contingent on the new local government which came to power at the end of 2007 and, among other things, applied a more integral approach to the management of the festival.

In recent years, Kyustendil Spring contestants have been actively engaged in advertising the local historic and cultural sites, in particular the local Orthodox churches and Hisarlaka fortress. Needless to say the Ottoman heritage of Kyustendil (i.e. two mosques, a Turkish bath, Pirgova kula (an Ottoman medieval tower house)) was altogether excluded from these representations⁴³. Promoting local art heritage has also been on the agenda, as the largest event in the cultural program of the festival is the opening of an eponymous fine arts exhibition in the local art gallery (named after Vladimir Dimitrov the Master). Furthermore, the contestants have been involved in the promotion of natural heritage sites, for example, in 2018,

they took part in a photo session advertising the adjacent Osogovo mountain and its potential for skiing and winter tourism; they also supported the nomination of the gigantic sequoias in nearby Yuchbunar for the annual European Tree of the Year contest.

Conclusion

The imperatives of global popular culture and the new economic and political realities after the collapse of the socialist regime in Bulgaria have brought about the introduction of new actors, symbols, rituals and venues in the old festive scenario of Kyustendil Spring Day. As the analysis has shown, two distinct periods in its development in the post-socialist period can be distinguished. In the tumultuous 1990s, in the context of severe economic and political crises, the holiday was radically “privatised” by local businessmen (i.e. sponsors), commercialised (i.e. patented as a festival), and spectacularised (i.e. professionally produced as a show). In recent years, however, after a new mayor took office at the end of 2007, the year Bulgaria became a member of the European Union, the festival was re-claimed by the local municipality, re-traditionalised, and instrumentalised in local town branding strategies. In a sense, these two periods could be interpreted along the lines of ritual decline in the 1990s, and ritual revitalisation and re-enchantment in the past two decades or so.

The major changes the festival underwent since 1989 could be summarised as follows: the traditional family picnic up on the hill was once and for all left behind in the past and replaced with fast-food snacking or dining downtown; the carnival was discontinued and overshadowed by the beauty contest; swimsuits were introduced in the contest and later substituted with folk costumes; the venue of the contest changed from an indoor hall to an outdoor stage in the town square (implying a shift from restricted to free public access); the sponsorship of the festival was transferred from local semi-criminal businessmen to the municipality and large corporate sponsors. In other words, from a traditional community holiday (i.e. a *feast*), a spontaneous, participatory outburst of public joy with dominant social functions, Kyustendil Spring Day has gradually become a professionally produced cultural event (i.e. a *festival*), meant for passive spectatorship and consumption of local patriotism and identity with a national ethno-cultural twist. Paradoxically, this shift from a feast to a festival predates 1989, as these processes were already underway in the socialist years.

The post-socialist attempts at re-semanticising Kyustendil Spring Day seem coherent with the ongoing processes of reconfiguring tradition(s) in Europe in general, grasped through notions such as re-enchantment, ritualisation, and heritage-making (cf. Isnart, Testa 2020). The newly re-invented aesthetic form and symbolic

content of Kyustendil Spring Day – borrowing from the ‘ancient traditions’ of the Romans and Thracians, integrating both Orthodox religious ceremonies and ritualised performances evoking neo-pagan spirituality, and reproducing the imagery of ethno-cultural nationalism – appear to be in sync with the observations of other scholars studying the post-socialist transformations of festive cultures in Central and Eastern Europe.

In my interpretation, in spite of its subtle political implications and entanglement with local business dynamics, the festival’s significance remains largely centred on its meaning for the local community and its embeddedness in the local identity discourse. Kyustendil Spring Day has failed, however, to move beyond the ‘carnavalesque’ and become ‘ritualesque’ (in Jack Santino’s terms)⁴⁴, i.e. to achieve “a permanent social impact beyond the space and time of the event itself” through its performative use of symbolic actions and objects (Santino 2016: 90).

The seemingly undisputed success of Kyustendil Spring Day as a town holiday today, in fact, has been challenged by some of my respondents, who raise critical voices about its exhausted social function and commercialisation in the present: “it has been running round in circles”; “it has become suspended in time”; “these are pseudo-images of pseudo-symbols of fertility”; “it needs more artistry and more spontaneity”; “it has become a sugary, bland, overused provincial chewing gum for local patriotic showiness, without an adequate, meaningful, and useful content, relevant to the changing reality”. As marginal as these voices may seem, they indicate that the holiday might have reached a critical point in its ‘life course’, and that new re-inventions, i.e. new re-semantisation, would be needed to save its relevance for the local community in the future.

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Notes

¹ On December 30th, 1967, the Presidium of the National Assembly issued a decree on the gradual introduction of a five-day work week, a process completed in mid-1970s that eventually brought about substantial changes in the structure of the free time of the working people.

² On the emergence of anthropology of festivals and festive studies, see, for example, Svoboda 2011, Frost 2016, Rusu and Kantola 2016, Fournier 2017, 2019, Testa 2014, 2019.

³ The present paper, admittedly, adds yet another case study to this expanding body of scholarship, as undertaking a comprehensive, comparative transnational approach is well beyond the scope of any single paper, neither is making an exhaustive survey of the existing literature on the post-socialist transformations of the festive cultures and festive calendars of Eastern and Central Europe.

⁴ Old photos from Kyustendil Facebook group. Available: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/924100421037224/> (accessed 15/01/2023).

⁵ Kyustendil Spring Day in the Past and Today Facebook page. No longer available: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Кюстендилска-пролет-в-миналото-и-днес>.

⁶ Similarly to most small and middle-sized towns in Bulgaria, Kyustendil has a shrinking population. It reached a peak of 54,000 residents in 1985 and has been gradually declining since then. As per the Civil Registration and Administrative Services General Directorate it had around 43,000 residents in 2024.

⁷ The Pautalian Asclepeion (built 1st to 2nd century AD) was situated at the foot of the hill, known today as Hisarlaka, and was the second largest on the Balkan peninsula comparable in size to the temple in Pergamum. It included not only baths but also a number of public buildings such as temples to other deities, a gymnasium, a stadium, a theatre and a park.

⁸ As early as 1896 the first national fruit-growing trade exhibition was organized in Kyustendil with over 130 exhibitors from the region (Entsiklopedichen rechnik Kyustendil 1988: 455).

⁹ The relatively recent “birth date” of the festival, its explicit authorship, as well as its presumed rootedness in “ancient traditions” all provide grounds for employing Hobsbawm and Ranger’s well-established term (1983).

¹⁰ On the symbolism of the food brought to the feast, see Kotev 2016: 65-66.

¹¹ Other interpretations associate the local tradition of welcoming spring on March 21st also with the Dionysian mysteries, the cult of the Thracian/Phrygian god Sabazios, the cult of ancient Phrygian mother-goddess Cybele and her consort Attis, and the cult of the patrons of Pautalia’s mineral springs – Asclepius, his daughter Hygeia, her brother Telesphorus and the three graces (Spasova 2004; Kotev 2016; Farkov 1990).

¹² The day of spring equinox used to coincide with the day on which the Orthodox Church honored the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste (the Holy Forty) but after the revised Julian calendar was adopted by the Bulgarian Orthodox Church in 1968, the Day of the Holy Forty was no longer observed on March 21st, but 12 days earlier – on March 9th.

¹³ I have borrowed Gerald Creed’s fitting metaphor (Creed 1998).

¹⁴ The first edition of the festival took place in 1967 when, for the first time, it followed a specially developed scenario written by Kiril Poromanski – head of the local culture department at the time.

¹⁵ The actual name of the contest in Bulgarian is Devoyka Kyustendilska Prolet, i.e. Kyustendil Spring Maiden. However, it is usually referred to as Miss Kyustendil Spring in popular discourse.

¹⁶ It was on November 10th, 1989, that Todor Zhivkov, Bulgaria’s long-standing communist leader, was forced to resign all his posts after an internal party coup.

¹⁷ Chavdarov, Nikola 1990. “Dobre doshla, prolet zhivotvorna” (Welcome, Life-Giving Spring). *Zvezda*, No. 23, 23 March.

¹⁸ Numerous letters signed by the mayor of Kyustendil seeking funding from prospective sponsors in the 1990s testify to the festival’s precarious financial situation (cf. State Archives – Kyustendil, Fond 562, Inventory 8, File 142).

¹⁹ An indispensable element in the cultural program, however, is the eponymous fine arts exhibition, launched in 1978.

²⁰ After Vasil Iliev’s assassination in 1995, his brother – Georgi Iliev (assassinated ten years later – in 2005), took over his sponsorship “duties”.

²¹ VMRO is an acronym for “Vatreshna makedonska revolyutsionna organizatsia” [Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization].

²² Telecommunication companies and mobile network operators, along with banks, retail chains, cosmetics, and food and beverage companies, emerged as major advertisers and sponsors in the years of post-socialist transition.

²³ As of 2023, the Kyustendil Spring titleholder receives a monetary award of only 1,500 leva, i.e. about the size of the average monthly salary.

²⁴ Unknown 2018. 16-godishnata Militsa stana Devoyka Kyustendilska prolet (16-year-old Militsa became Miss Kyustendil Spring). *Dnes.bg*, 18 March. Available: <https://m.dnes.bg/comments.php?id=371065&cp=1> (accessed 15/01/2023.)

²⁵ A quote from comments to a photo from 2012, posted in the Kyustendil Spring Day in the Past and Today Facebook group (no longer available). The photo features the contestants wearing folk costumes, standing in front of paintings by Vladimir Dimitrov ‘the Master’, exhibited in the town’s art gallery.

²⁶ *Mutresa* is a slang word for the wife or mistress of a *mutra* (literally meaning mug-face), a Bulgarian gangster, typically a former athlete in sports such as weightlifting, wrestling, boxing, etc., involved in organised crime groups; also implying a specific post-socialist subculture and lifestyle.

²⁷ Unknown 2018. 16-godishnata Militsa stana Devoyka Kyustendilska prolet [16-year-old Militsa became Miss Kyustendil Spring]. *Dnes.bg*, 18 March. Available: <https://m.dnes.bg/comments.php?id=371065&cp=1> [Accessed 15.01.2023.]

²⁸ Nikov, Detelin 1995. Shou spektakal, po-dobar ot vseki [A show spectacle better than the rest]. *Pautalia*, No. 20, 14 March.

²⁹ In 2011, even the United States ambassador to Bulgaria, James Warlick, served as a member of the jury.

³⁰ Unknown 1995. Kyustendil izbra simvola na proletta (Kyustendil has chosen its spring symbol). *Nova Balgaria*, No. 310, 13 March.

³¹ Kirilova, Dimitrinka 2003. Vesela Stoyanova e devoyka ‘Kyustendilska prolet 2003’ (Vesela Stoyanova is Miss Kyustendil Spring 2003). *Nova Balgaria*, No. 2723, 17 March 2003.

³² Not much attention was paid to their intellectual qualities or personal aspirations. Their hobbies, as shared with the public during the contest or in interviews published in the local press, were most often rather predictable: hanging out with friends, travelling, listening to music, watching movies, dancing, and occasionally reading.

³³ Atanasova, Kornelia 1995. Parvoto proletno taynstvo sabra 13 krasivi momicheta (The first spring mystery brought together 13 beautiful girls). *Kyustendil*, No. 11, 16–22 March.

³⁴ For example, a dance with umbrellas in 2012, a Brazilian dance in 2013, a Spanish dance in 2014, a folk dance and a review in Roman gowns in 2015, a dance with hoops in 2016, etc.

³⁵ The new festive calendar of the town also corresponded with these re-branding efforts: the newly introduced and re-introduced festivals (the Cherry Festival in June, the Panagia Cultural Forum on August 15th, the Day of the Assumption of Virgin Mary (essentially a festival dedicated to bread), the Ulpia Pautalia: Awakening of the Town of Springs Antique Festival in August, and the Harvest Festival in September) were all designed to highlight Kyustendil's cultural and economic assets.

³⁶ Interview with Dima Ukalska conducted on July 14th, 2021.

³⁷ The chapel, however, was not consecrated because of violations of the iconographic canon and was sealed off by the authorities in 2010. When I visited it in 2021 and 2022, although visibly neglected, it was open and an improvised place for lighting candles was arranged inside.

³⁸ The costumes were provided by the local historical museum.

³⁹ Vladimir Dimitrov 'the Master' (1882–1960) is among the most prominent representatives of the Rodno izkustvo (National Art) movement in Bulgarian art and literature of the 1920s.

⁴⁰ Unknown 2008. *Shto mi e milo i drago, che se e prolet puknala!* (How sweet and nice it feels that spring has set in). *Kyustendilska prolet*, No. 12, p. 4.

⁴¹ The only exception I have come across is Aleksandra Decheva – Miss Kyustendil Spring 2004 – who made a commitment to visit local orphanages along with her assistants at least once a month throughout the year.

⁴² On the local appropriation and re-valorisation of ancient Roman heritage in Bulgaria (as a “proof of belonging to the European civilization”), and its incorporation into the national past, both in the socialist period and today, see Strahilov 2021.

⁴³ On the problematic ‘heritagisation’ of the Ottoman legacy in Bulgaria, see Karakusheva, Strahilov 2015, 2018.

⁴⁴ On Jack Santino's notion of ‘ritualesque’, see also Santino 2009, 2011.

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