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Annual Fairs and Town Holidays in Haskovo and Byala, Bulgaria

Lina Gergova

The Department of Comparative Folklore Studies at the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic Museum, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia

lina.gergova@gmail.com

Abstract: Markets held annually were once part of Ottoman heritage in the Balkans. However, after the empire's collapse between the 1890s and 1910s, they eventually lost their importance due to border changes and development of a new market system. The presence of annual and weekly markets in numerous towns in Bulgaria is relatively recent. Some of these markets were inherited from livestock or craft seasonal markets while some emerged as side event for traditional festivals. At the start of the 20th century, annual and weekly markets in Bulgaria were regulated at a national level to avoid clashing because many merchants and even customers travel from place to place buying livestock and household products or just for enjoyment.

Following the centralisation of the products market in the years after 1944, and especially after 1950, the local markets were no longer able to carry out their role as trading venues and instead mainly became entertainment events that attracted people to return to their hometowns. Consequently, these trading activities were transformed into local cultural events and town holidays. Despite being suspended or even banned during the 1970s and 1980s, in the 1990s they were recognised as official holidays in many towns.

This research is made up of a few examples, but two of them will be the focus of the presentation: the city of Haskovo and the town of Byala. Haskovo, a main provincial city, a former open-air market day – now celebrated as a holiday despite the disappearance of the market itself – illustrates the transformations that traditional fairs have undergone over time. Byala is a smaller town where the fair was transformed into a humorous parade staged along with a funfair.

Keywords: fairs, livestock markets, town holiday, church patron saint

Fairs and town holidays in Bulgaria

The roots of fairs can be traced back to antiquity, with their peak prosperity in Europe during the Middle Ages. Functioning as marketplaces, fairs fulfilled a variety of roles: economic, social, religious, and entertainment-related. In the Balkans under Ottoman rule, many fairs were established and maintained, acquiring great significance for the Empire's economy in the 17th and 18th centuries. Within the Ottoman context, fairs served two main purposes: commercial and social. The commercial aim was primary and dominant, while the social aspect, often initiated by religious groups in Ottoman lands, centred on rites and festivities. With the onset of the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century, however, traditional fairs gradually began to decline (Çalişkan et al. 2018: 237–240).

Traditional town fairs[1] – that is, those originating before the 19th century and regulated by Ottoman authorities (cf. Gramatikov 2014; Markov 2010; Nedkov 1997; Silyanova 2013) –differed considerably in form from the fairs introduced in numerous Bulgarian towns and villages during the interwar period. Nonetheless, both types fulfilled comparable functions, whether on the macroeconomic level or within the household as an economic unit. They acted as catalysts for the transition away from a subsistence economy, providing rare opportunities to acquire cash (Braudel 1992: 58). At the same time, they served as central spaces for interaction among diverse ethnic, religious, and economic groups, as well as for the exchange of cultural practices and influences (Ruzhdavichka 2006: 125–126).

Equally important, fairs offered a distinct time and place for entertainment. They were forms of amusement radically different from everyday life and unavailable at any other point in the year. As Peter Burke observes, town holidays were "places for young people to meet away from family supervision, and places for everyone to watch travelling entertainers or dance or hear the latest news" (Burke 1978: 112).

The town fair itself is a celebration due to the exclusivity of what becomes accessible, i.e. goods, entertainment, fashion, adventure, art (Braudel 1992). Popular forms of entertainment offered by town fairs in Bulgaria from the Revival to the present day include pre-arranged fights, travelling minstrels, sale of delicacies such as the once-popular damson cheese[2], spun sugar, candied apples, ice cream and pudding, lemonade, etc., organised wagering games, games of chance, and others such as mock rifle target hitting, raffles, or the semi-legal or illegal games such as the cup and ball conjuring trick, dice games, and gambling. In 1667, Evliya Çelebi was exuberant in his description of the Dolyan town fair, elaborating on the volume of the commercial exchange, the myriad of goods offered ("bird's milk, lion's milk, and man's milk"), and the spectacles that could be enjoyed:

> Whatever street entertainers there are on the face of the earth, playing in town squares or tents, be they conjurors, fakirs, jugglers, gamblers, mimics, players with glasses; dwarfs, keepers of betting shops, strongmen, tumblers, firebreathers, puppeteers; copulating with apparitions, sword swallowers, tricksters; trainers of dancing bears, monkeys, goats, donkeys; wrestlers, lassoers, snake charmers, bird fanciers; tightrope walkers, card players, jugglers with mirrors or plates, grimacers…. They come from all corners of the world – wandering lute-players, dancers, and singers; clowns and comics; reciters of epic or lyrical poems; muscular wrestlers and archers; daredevils, fascinating beauties of the age, singers of love songs, righteous story tellers and even daughters of Eve – all of that is available in all the tents and the bazaars.… I have seen much more than just a thing or two. I would not dare say that, but even the nights at that tall gathering place are like the days of the lucky Khwarazm-shah's New Year's Day (Evliya Çelebi 1972: 279–280).

In 1914 Yordan Yovkov depicted another town fair:

> The Dobrich fair is not one of those weak-blooded gatherings which only tradition and curiosity keep alive. Indeed, this is a big market, a major exhibition, and a kind of a symbolic everyday-life celebration…. When fairs take place in Dobrich, they are attended by many thousands. The entire vicinity is transformed into quite a camp!… The clamour and bustle remain intense for almost a whole month. But, apart from entertainment, work is in full swing at that very place. Every day is a market day; entire herds of sheep, cattle, and horses are passed from one pair of hands into another…. Going back and forth without stopping, oxen in line haul new harvesting machines, heavy locomobiles, and threshing machines with enormous red bodies. Numerous organised groups of workers flock here from far away.… As if a colossal army is being summoned, preparing for an important crusade[3].

The market – that is, the economic exchange itself – was not simply an element accompanying the celebration; it was the celebration in its very essence. The regular need for commercial exchange and economic relations fostered a festive atmosphere, generating subsequent socio-cultural encounters, experiences, and interactions. In Bulgaria, a number of town fairs evolved out of weekly markets, often continuing to exist alongside them (for example, the Eski Cuma[4], Uzundzhovo[5], Hacıoğlu Pazarcık, and Byala fairs). The fair calendar was planned in a manner

organised from the top down and remained under control both during the Ottoman period and after Liberation. Its purpose was to ensure that traders – livestock and agricultural producers, itinerant salesmen (cf. Lesichkov 1939), merchants of manufactured and imported goods as well as organisers of entertainment – could attend all markets in turn.

However, not all of the fairs were commensurate in size; some of them, such as the Targovishte (Eski Cuma), Uzundzhov(o), Dobrich (Hacıoğlu Pazarcık), and the Dolyan market which ceased to exist around the 19th century, were colossal and extended over the course of weeks, even a month. From a macroeconomic perspective, they were key marketplaces which realised high-volume bargains with cattle and other goods. Most town fairs, including the one in Haskovo up until the middle of the 20th century, were of local significance as they drew together customers from the vicinity and mainly attracted travelling salesmen. The importance of these town fairs as forms of celebration was revealed in the availability of rare household goods, hygiene items, and entertainment organised for all ages and social strata.

The origin of the word '*panair*' (fair) connects Byzantine and Ottoman heritage with local traditions in the Balkans and in Bulgaria particularly. It comes from the Greek word 'πανήγυρις' (*panēgyris*) meaning general assembly. In the 19th and 20th centuries both words remained but with different meanings. While fairs (*panair*, from Ottoman Turkish) historically served as nodes of regional commerce and craft exchange, panagyrs (*panagir, panagyur*) function as loci of cultural memory and religious celebrations. Their non-commercial ethos is evident in the absence of merchant stalls and the emphasis on ritual participation (for example, shared meals, processions) in contrast to the monetised transactions of fairs. Similar to many European regions, however, the fairs in Bulgaria were organised in temporal proximity to holidays of significance to the local community (Burke 1997: 178). While this relationship may be inconspicuous right at the start, for instance, a town holiday could follow the calendar by being matched to a non-existent religious object, or conversely, one such object could be constructed with reference to the town fair to relate the traditional holiday to a religious one[6].

During the Ottoman period lists of licensed markets were issued annually (Silyanova 2013). In the first decades of the 20th century, the Bulgarian Ministry of Trade and Industry published an annual list of licensed town fairs, markets, and daily and seasonal trading grounds in Bulgaria with both normative and informative functions[7]. In Bulgarian legislation of the period, the terms 'fair' (*panair*) and 'market' (*pazar*) were used to distinguish between annual and weekly events.[8] The assumption that fairs necessarily lasted more than one day is not confirmed: they could extend over one, three, or several days, sometimes even up to seventeen. The state determined the exact dates of fairs in relation to others; for example, the fair in Kazanlak always began one week after that in Stara Zagora, which was the

main fair in the region. In contrast, for markets the state regulated the specific weekday on which they were to be held. It is assumed that the scale was different in each respect, and in most cases the venues did not coincide. Due to their different periodicity, fairs certainly attracted more entertainment business than the weekly markets.

According to Vakarelski, some calendar holidays that were traditionally related to town holidays are the days of St. George and St. Panteleimon, and the Assumption and Nativity of the Virgin Mary (Rozhen) (Vakarelski 1943: 64, 91, 95, 98). Initially, a number of town holidays were related to a particular calendar holiday, but over time the exact dates shifted due to organisational constraints. There are also the occasional fairs organised by religious institutions rather than the local authorities, the most prominent of these being the Troyan town holiday held around the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which has been transformed into a crafts fair. It is important to note that these are different from traditional fairs which are often spontaneously organised by religious institutions on the eve and on the day of their patron saint's holiday (for instance, fairs held around the Klisurski, Kuklenski, and Petropavlovski Monasteries, among others).

During the decades of socialism, centralisation of trade in goods and the gradual denouncement of the religious calendar caused town fairs to turn into peripheral events for purely entertainment purposes. Today, the word 'fair' (*panair*) means, on the one hand, large-scale organised international trade exhibitions (such as the Plovdiv Fair, see also Çalişkan et al. 2018: 238–239), and on the other, amusement rides such as Ferris wheels as well as shooting games, stalls with treats, etc. Local authorities have attempted to transform the traditional fair in several ways, i.e. by spatially separating the commercial from the entertainment zone, by banning trade in meat and live animals, by transforming the fair into a town holiday by replacing commercial and entertainment activities with representative and traditional activities.

The concepts of town holiday (*praznik na grada*)[9] and village holiday (*sabor*)[10] were not originally linked to fairs. Over the course of the 20th century, however, they gradually became synonymous, as fairs lost their commercial role and increasingly came to be defined by their entertainment and social functions. The town holiday is not a Bulgarian phenomenon, but in Bulgaria it has become particularly widespread (there is only one town that does not celebrate a holiday). This developed mainly between the 1990s and first decade of the 21st century. Today, the town holiday and the town fair fulfil identical functions, resulting in the elimination of the root necessity for a town holiday or a large annual town market. This article[11] examines how the traditional fairs in Haskovo and Byala evolved over the 20th and 21st centuries under the influence of economic, political, and social transformation, eventually taking on the form of town holidays. These cases were selected for their potential

to illuminate different trajectories leading to the same outcome: the decline of the traditional fair and rise of the town holiday as a modern celebration, marked by ceremonial rituals and recreational activities open to all.

This study was inspired by two works: Seán Moraghan's history of the Irish Puck Fair (2013) and Chris Rasmussen's essay on the transformation of Iowa's county fairs (1999). Like these examples, fairs and markets in Bulgaria illustrate the intersection of social dynamics, political debates, economic developments, and cultural practices. In the two towns examined here, the town holiday and the traditional fair have long been intertwined through complex historical interactions involving culture, economy, symbols, and politics. The research draws on archive records, newspapers and other media, as well as conversations with experts and cultural administrators in Haskovo and Byala, conducted between 2020 and 2022. Methodologically, it applies a historical approach, situating the development of fairs, markets, and holidays in the wider context of change.

Haskovo case study

Haskovo is a middle-sized Bulgarian town, a regional centre in the south of the country with a population of around 70,000. The town's history dates back to antiquity, undergoing a more marked development in the period after the Middle Ages. It is interesting to note that during the 18th and 19th centuries the town was known as Haskyoy by Uzandzha, with one of the largest Ottoman Empire fairs previously held in today's village of Uzundzhovo. The population of Haskovo increased dramatically following World War I and the acceptance of over 10,000 refugees from East Thrace; yet, its greatest growth was during socialism when the town was industrialised and a large military establishment was built there.

Perhaps between the 18th century and World War II a town holiday was organised in the Kara Mahmutli locality 7 km northwest of Haskovo to mark the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. It was held at the beginning of September, not strictly observing the exact date of the holiday. The event also had commercial functions, involving the sale of agricultural produce, but it predominantly served the purpose of entertainment through picnics and horo dances. There is neither photographic material nor visitor accounts of this town holiday, but the event is believed to be the forerunner to the town's cult of St. Mary, as the Mother of God church was built in 1837. Haskovo's calendar reveals systematic conflation of the Assumption of the Virgin and the Nativity of the Virgin, also known as Big Virgin Mary and Little Virgin Mary (*Golyama Bogoroditsa* and *Malka Bogoroditsa*). Despite the church being named after the more significant holiday, the city's calendar focuses on the less prominent one.

The town fair did not take place during World War II and the ensuing two to three years, and later it was permanently moved away from the location of Kara Mahmutli and into the city. Initially, it was held in the centre of Haskovo, and later in various neighbourhoods on the outskirts of town, for instance to the east of by the river, south in the Ovcharski neighbourhood, in Kenana park, etc. Its commercial functions were completely overtaken by entertainment; today's town residents remember it with the circus, Ferris wheels, barbecue, and spun sugar.

In the 1980s, the second weekend of October was declared the Days of Haskovo, with the change of date being an approach typical of socialist calendar management, setting apart the town holiday from the calendar date so as to destroy the connection to the Christian calendar. Even though the town holiday remains linked with the urban festivity, the connection to the cult of the Virgin Mary has been interrupted. The 11th October 1985 is an interesting choice of date as it marks the start of the Music Days under the aegis of violinist Nedyalka Simeonova, which have been held continuously since 1971. It seems likely that this move aimed to re-think the holiday's patron by moving it away from the religious figure of the Virgin to the artistic personality of the world-famous musician. In the mid-1980s, the establishment of a town holiday in Haskovo was part of the grand celebrations marking the town's millennium (Uzunova, Uzunova 2023: 434–435).



Fig. 1. Fashion show during the town holiday, Haskovo, 1987.
Photo: DA – Haskovo, f. 591, op. 4, a.e. 9823, l. 38.[12]

During socialism, and the 1970s and 1980s in particular, an organised programme was added to the entertainment activities offered during the town holiday with a view to ritualising it and filling it with different content. Events included exhibitions of drawings, children's contests, and fashion shows by Bulgarian clothing

manufacturers. The official opening of the celebration was attended by members of the local party elite. The formal events took place in the central part of town, while the entertainment fair was moved to the outskirts, causing it to be marginalised by other socialist and more contemporary events. Photos dating back to 1987 show mass attendance and numerous diverse events, even though local researchers claim that due to the feeble interest in this town holiday, it was not retained in local memory (Uzunova 2021). The holiday has not been systematically documented, so our merely fragmentary accounts lead us to assume only isolated instances of excess lavishness.

Changing a town holiday's date, symbolic essence, venue and rituals during socialism was typical of a number of holidays from the local and national calendars. Equally typical, albeit of the post-socialist period, is the decisive restoration of the holiday and its unambiguous positioning in the calendar. It was on 8th September 1993 that the Nativity of the Virgin was proclaimed the Day of Haskovo. The town's mayor, together with the vicar of Haskovo, the municipal administration and historians from the local museum initiated the process, which was affirmed by a decision of the Municipal Council. In order to strengthen the ties between Haskovo and the cult of the Virgin Mary, the following 10 years saw fundraising efforts and preparation for a project to erect the world's tallest monument of Mother Mary holding her son Jesus. It was inaugurated on one of the town's hills in 2003, and has featured in the Guinness Book of Records since 2005. Interestingly, the monument to the Virgin was erected on a pre-existing memorial structure originally dedicated to the Heart of Danko. After the fall of socialism, this earlier monument became ideologically inconvenient, yet its pedestal – designed as a small enclosed space – was retained and repurposed. Today, it functions as a chapel, where a stained-glass depiction of a flaming heart, the Heart of Danko, remains visible in its upper section.



Fig. 2. Handicrafts fair in the town square.
Photo: L. Gergova, Haskovo, 7 September 2020.

In recent years, including 2020 and 2021, which were affected by the coronavirus pandemic, the holiday took place alongside a craft fair that was held over several days in the town square. The activities organised included children's performances on an open stage at the square as well as concerts for adult audience at the large sports centre. As to 8th September, the day begins with a solemn mass at the Assumption of the Virgin Mary church, attended by officials such as the district governor, the mayor, the chairperson of the Municipal Council, etc. Over the years additional events such as exhibitions at the museum, sports tournaments and a vintage car parade have been held. A compulsory part of the holiday is a ceremonial meeting of the Municipal Council to select an honorary citizen for the town; prior to lockdown restrictions, the award ceremony was held in public on the same day. Again prior to the pandemic, the entertainment fair with various rides, a Ferris wheel, and spun sugar would be held in Yamacha neighbourhood, at or around the stadium there. This fair was the first element to be dropped from the town holiday programme.

Byala case study

Byala is a relatively small city with a population of around 8,000. When thinking about its history, economy and geography it can be split into two distinct sections, Byala and Gara Byala. Byala is the historical core, while Gara Byala is the settlement that was established close to the town's railway station (*gara*), at a distance of 7 km from the original town. Prior to the 19th century, a few small settlements had been established in the area, but were ultimately abandoned due to plague epidemics. The Russian Tsar Alexander III had his headquarters in the town, demonstrating the significance of its strategic positioning, being situated at the centrally between Svishtov, Targovishte, Veliko Tarnovo, Pleven and Ruse.

Moreover, the area is highly favourable for animal husbandry due to its proximity to the Yantra river, which provides excellent grazing grounds for sheep and cows. Thus, the fair at Byala, which was probably established at the end of the 19th century, became very successful in facilitating cattle trade over the years. Despite attempts, the fair was unable to become a noteworthy event at either a regional or national level. The primary cause was the proximity of the well-known Eski Cuma Fair (see e.g. Tsareva 1990)[13], which generally occurs in mid-May and is devoted to livestock. To illustrate the importance of the fair over the years, May 14th in 2015 was declared Targovishte's holiday[14]. This is a customary practice for many places in Bulgaria, such as Pleven, Kula, Silistra, Sevlievo, and Lyubimets demonstrating the ongoing significance of the fair in the local calendar, regardless of the changes in scope and magnitude that have occurred over time.

In 1914, the Municipal Council revealed that the fair was not a draw for livestock dealers, but instead was "attended only by dealers in manufacture, haberdashery, etc."[15] Prior to World War II, the words 'fair' and 'gathering' (*sabor*) were frequently used interchangeably. "Because in the town of Byala, every year on April 23 – St. George's Day – a fair gathering takes place, various merchants, photographers, shopkeepers, etc., visit the town."[16]

Due to the uncertain socio-political situation and reduced economic activity interest in the market decreased and almost no livestock traders appeared during World War I [17].We have no information about what happened before the end of the war, since there are no minutes of Municipal Council meetings until the beginning of 1920, when the fair was mentioned as if it had not stopped[18].

During the 1920s, the livestock trading area of the fair had become stagnant and the *intizap*[19] auctions had failed, although there were still people attempting to acquire stall rights, which serves as evidence that the fair was ongoing. Byala fair then started running into issues in the early 1930s due to the overall economic downturn. An in-depth account of the fair in the *Belensky Podem* newspaper displays a vivid image of people enjoying themselves, even if their commercial gains were rather small:

> This year in Byala, the fair festival (on St. George's Day) is too big and noisy. Early on, traders came and opened a cinema, a circus and a beer hall …, which, with its distinguished orchestra, attracts the public, as well as many stallholders with various goods. Large groups of guests from the villages and neighbouring towns have arrived and continue to arrive. The city has a festive look, an almost unprecedented bustle, but trade is weak due to the acute financial crisis[20].

To combat the crisis, the Bulgarian state railways offered discounts for those who attended the fair in Byala. A local newspaper advertised these benefits, including free grazing for livestock, a 1 % *intizap*, and a 50 % reduction in sergeant fees. Additionally, travellers could transport their belongings from the station to the city free of charge. This demonstrated the amount of effort that went into organising a fair, as was evidenced in the Ottoman Empire when guards were posted to keep robbers away and facilities were built to accommodate merchants and customers (*kadia*, *serdar*,[21] etc.).

Apart from the persistent economic downturn that was the result of the Great Depression of the late 1920s in the United States and Western Europe, another reason for the decline of the Byala fair is its location in time and space. Fairs are also held in May in the nearby towns of Ruse, Dve Mogili and Trastenik (now the municipality of Ivanovo), as well as in Targovishte which is a bit further away. Merchants take part in all the fairs, but customers tend to go to the nearer ones or

the largest and most famous. This crisis was also reported in 1936, when for the first time we find information about the combination of the local and state holiday St. George's Day as "the town holiday, holiday of the order of bravery and victories, and it was celebrated in our city with the proper solemnity"[22]. Apart from the fair, a church service and a speech before a crowd consisting of officials, students, citizens and representatives of organisations stand out as elements of the celebration. The fair is not mentioned, which can be interpreted as the beginning of the market element of the fair dying out and its transformation into an entertainment event accompanying the celebration.

The church in Byala has a well-studied history, described in various local history works and in a separate book. It is believed that until 1841 services were held in homes and in 1843 a small building was built near the cemetery, which does not outwardly resemble a church. It is not typical for people to name their old churches after a patron saint, so we cannot be sure that the church in Byala was dedicated to St. George. Many 20th century writers, however, assumed that it was the same name as the new church, which was constructed in 1910 after the old church was destroyed. It was finished in 1924, with the town going without a church for over a decade. This history is essential for determining if St. George's Day was a church holiday to start with, or if the fair chose St. George as the patron of the new church. Unfortunately, without concrete evidence of the name of the old church, the best that can be done is to think it was the same, but I will refrain from drawing any conclusions about the fair due to the uncertainty.



Fig. 3. The May Rain of Laughter Donkey race, Byala, 1976. Photo: Lybomir Spiridonov, FB group "The town of Byala in the recent and far past" Facebook group.

When the need for fairs is no longer present – because of centralised state production, the end of subsistence farming, an increase of offered goods or constant availability in smaller settlements – they become purely recreational activities, keeping their form but lacking any of their original economic objectives. Since they do not support the state-sanctioned models of leisure adopted by socialist (and post-socialist) governments, they are slowly pushed aside and become a subsidiary of the major event, which is now cultural days. In Byala in the 1970s and 1980s an attempt was made to develop the fair into a cultural event. In this period, an amateur theatre group in the town, led by humorous writers and playwrights, started activities aimed at attracting a wider audience to the plays, even inviting famous Bulgarian theatrical groups. In unison with the socialist concept of involving the democratic masses in high culture, they joined forces with the local authorities to turn the fair into a theatrical procession and a festival of the arts and commerce. During this time, every establishment, factory and enterprise in the town was asked to showcase a brief humorous act in the parade. Initially, the procession took place in the town centre, later it was moved to the stadium. The fair, which included a miniature market for toys and confectionery, has never ceased. The event was called the May Rain of Laughter and was part of the trend of spring cultural celebrations honouring May 1st and 9th, as well as the Day of the Bulgarian Alphabet and Culture on the 24th. This custom, which began during the socialist era, is still practiced and celebrated in many cities and towns across the country today.

After the political transformation in 1989, activities that had been held in the lead-up to St. George's Day on May 6 were reduced to the single holiday itself. Today, generally only children's and folk music performances are held in the town square, and a church service has been included in the festivities. As in every town in Bulgaria, an official ritual is also performed by the town mayor. The only remnant of past celebration models is the fair.

Conclusions

Comparative analysis of the fairs in Haskovo and Byala reveals a shared trajectory of transformation, yet one marked by distinct local inflections, ultimately leading to the modern phenomenon of the town holiday (*praznik na grada*). This evolution, spanning the 20th and early 21st centuries, was not a linear process but a complex negotiation driven by profound economic, political, and social forces.

Fundamentally, the traditional fair, with its Ottoman-era roots as a node of regional commerce and a unique socio-cultural space, was rendered economically obsolete. The centralisation of trade and production during socialism, coupled with the end of subsistence farming and the constant availability of goods in shops, stripped the fair of its primary economic purpose. The vibrant, multiday market-

place described by Evliya Çelebi and Yordan Yovkov, which served as a critical catalyst in the transition from a subsistence economy, gradually lost its commercial vitality. As the article demonstrates through analysis of both cases, the livestock trade in Byala stagnated as early as the 1920s, and in Haskovo, the fair's commercial functions had been entirely overtaken by entertainment by the mid-20th century.

In response, both the socialist and post-socialist states, along with local cultural managers, actively repurposed these events. The strategy was two-fold: first, sever the event's connection with the religious calendar and its historical identity, and second, fill the resulting void with new, state-sanctioned, content. This process of filling with meaning, as noted, reflects the changing attitudes of local authorities toward urban festivity. In Haskovo, this meant a deliberate shift from the Nativity of the Virgin Mary to the secular Day of Haskovo on October 11th, linked to a cultural event (the Music Days), and later a post-socialist reclamation of the religious date paired with the construction of a monumental, record-breaking statue to reforge a new, touristic, identity. In Byala, the socialist era saw the fair's transformation into the theatrical and humorous May Rain of Laughter, aligning it with the secular spring holidays of the state calendar (May 1st and 9th).

The outcome of this decades-long process is the contemporary town holiday. This new form represents a clear break from the past. The integrated experience of the traditional fair – where economic transaction, religious observance, and popular entertainment were inextricably linked in a single time and space – has been disaggregated. Today, these elements exist separately: a solemn church service, official municipal ceremonies bestowing honorary citizenship, curated 'high culture' performances on a central stage, and a marginalised traditional fairground attractions with Ferris wheels and candy floss, often physically distanced from the town centre, as in Haskovo's Yamacha neighbourhood.

The commercial element persists only in its most sanitised and symbolic form: the craft fair selling souvenirs, which serves as a mere echo of the once-vital market, materialising a connection to the past without its original economic function. The research confirms that the measures to disconnect the religious elements and conceal the original economic objectives have largely been successful. The traditional beliefs that once intrinsically linked the folk calendar to economic activity have faded, replaced by a calendar of representative rituals.

In conclusion, the cases of Haskovo and Byala illustrate a broader Balkan and European pattern where traditional fairs have succumbed to modern economic and political structures. However, the Bulgarian manifestation of this change is particularly distinct in its comprehensive erasure and subsequent reinvention. The town holiday has not merely evolved from the fair; it has systematically replaced it, becoming a ubiquitous but homogenised feature of the Bulgarian urban landscape, where the memory of the fair's chaotic, vibrant, and commercially vital past lives on only in fragments and symbols.

Notes

[1] For contemporary fairs in Bulgaria, refer to Neuburger 2017.

[2] Damson cheese (pestil) is a preserve made of damson plums peeled, stoned, and cooked with sugar to the consistency of soft cheese.

[3] Yordan Yovkov. Dobrich. – In: They won. Sofia: Bulgarian History, 2018, 115–118.

[4] Cf. Dzhafer, Salim 2018; Dzhafer, Salim 2021 for further details about the Eski Cuma fair.

[5] About the Uzundzhov fair, cf. Gramatikov 2014.

[6] Cf. for example the case of the Puck Fair in Ireland, which turns out to coincide temporally with St. Lawrence's Day, even though the namesake church in the town of Killorglin, where the fair was held, had been destroyed before the fair was inaugurated in the 17th century (Moraghan 2013: 16). Dolyan fair was organised at the beginning of May, which linked it with St. George's Day.

[7] Cf. for example List of the town fairs and markets in Tsarstvo Balgariya in 1914. Sofia: Ministry of Trade, Industry and Labour, 1914; List of the town fairs and markets licensed in the Bulgarian tsarstvo until 1 July 1923. Sofia: Ministry of Trade, Industry and Labour, 1923.

[8] See the lists of fairs and markets in Bulgaria for specific years, published in the State Newspaper each March after 1901.

[9] For town holiday in Bulgaria, refer to Gergova, Gergova 2020.

[10] For village holidays, refer to Hristov 2004.

[11] The fieldwork was done and the publication is a part of the author's work on the project titled "The Civil Festive Calendar: National and Local Dimensions" funded by the National Science Fund at the Bulgarian Ministry of Education and Science (Contract No KP-06-N40/3).

[12] Here and hereafter: DA Archive State Agency (Darzhaven arhiv), Haskovo branch, fund (fond) No. 591, inventory (opis) 4, archival unit (archivna edinitsa) 9823, sheet (list) 38.

[13] In Turkish, eski cuma means 'old market'. Since 1934, the name of the town has been Targovishte. The new name was also derived from 'market' and 'trade' through the Slavic word targ.

[14] See https://targovishte.tv/targovishte/obshtestvo-targovishte/item/1495-14-mai-ofitzialen-praznik-na-targovishte-sabitiyata-na-tozi-den (accessed 08/05/2021).

[15] Minutes No. 16 from March 23, 1914 from a meeting of the City Municipal Administration – Byala (DA – Ruse, f. 167K, op. 1, a.e. 11, l. 16). Almost the same text is repeated in Protocol No. 11 from March 19, 1915 (DA – Ruse, f. 167K, op. 1, a.e. 14, l. 33).

[16] Minutes No. 10 of April 18, 1904 from a meeting of the City Municipal Administration – Byala (DA – Ruse, f. 167K, op. 1, a.e. 5, l. 100). An almost identical text with the same motivation and statement can also be found in Minutes No. 8 from April 17, 1901 from a meeting of the City Municipal Administration – Byala (167K, op. 1, a.e. 3, l. 49 back – 50).

[17] Minutes No. 14 of March 18, 1916 from a meeting of the Municipal Council – Byala (DA – Ruse, f. 167K, op. 1, a.e. 15, l. 24).

[18] Minutes No. 10 of April 5, 1916 from a meeting of the Municipal Council – Byala (DA – Ruse, f. 167K, op. 1, a.e. 17, l. 26 c.).

[19] The Cattle and Livestock Transactions Levy in the Ottoman Empire. In Bulgaria, the same word was in use until the mid-1940s.

[20] Belenski Podem newspaper, Byala, May 7, 1930, no. 36, p. 2.

[21] Kadia, kadı 'judge' in Turkish. Serdar, a military rank in the Ottoman Empire, within the fair guards' commander.

[22] Niva newspaper, Byala, no. 80, May 15, 1936, p. 2.

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Bibliographical Note

Lina Gergova has a BA in ethnology, an MA in intercultural communications, and a PhD in folklore studies. She is assistant professor at the Department of Comparative Folklore Studies at the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic Museum, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. Her research interests are in the field of ethnic stereotypes, migration and cultural heritage, the urban calendar, festivity and ritual, and national commemorative traditions.