

## Introduction

Unlike the previous volume, the eighth volume of the Yearbook of Balkan and Baltic Studies is organised by geographical region rather than theme. This year it consists of articles from Lithuania.

The year 2024 was marked in Lithuanian ethnology by losses. Almost on the same day, we lost our esteemed colleagues ethnologist Irena Regina Merkienė (October 31, 2024) and folklorist Bronislava Kerbelytė (November 5, 2024). In this volume their scientific activities are presented by their students Žilvytis Šaknys and Jūratė Šlekonytė. In his article “An Ethnologist in Two Historical Epochs: Irena Regina Merkienė”, Šaknys concludes that the period of Lithuanian independence created career opportunities for ethnologist Merkienė, as well as the chance to establish and manage ethnological institutions. It also gave her the freedom to expand the boundaries of ethnological research and examine the nation’s culture (not just folk culture) from various ethnological perspectives. Jūratė Šlekonytė’s article “Bronislava Kerbelytė: Innovator of Folktale Research” describes the unique methodology, structural-semantic text analysis, developed by Kerbelytė and how it redefined the classification of Lithuanian folktales, beliefs, local legends and anecdotes.

In addition to the articles about prominent Lithuanian ethnologists Merkienė and Kerbelytė, Irma Šidiškienė’s article is dedicated to émigré ethnologist Antanas Mažiulis (1914–2007), focusing on the experience of the Lithuanian diaspora in the mid-twentieth century. The article, which is based on an analysis of Mažiulis’s letters, explores the challenges of forced migration and how it affects community formation and the preservation of personal identity. The theme of text as a source of ethnology is continued by Lina Petrošienė’s article which examines the cultural significance of Ludwig J. Rhesa’s *Dainos*,

*oder Litthauische Volkslieder* (1825), the earliest systematic collection of Lithuanian folk songs. Two articles analyse the theme of intangible cultural heritage. The article by Skaidrė Urbonienė is dedicated to the peculiarities of the cross-crafting tradition during the period of Lithuanian National Revival (1988–1991). It shows that the cross-crafting tradition reflected the most significant issue of that period, reclaiming historical memory and the nation's aspirations for freedom and independence. In his article, Vytautas Tumėnas explores the challenges of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage in Lithuania. He focuses particularly on the role of heritage communities and how enthusiasm, the economy and socio-cultural policy affect decisions when these communities interact with the state.

The interaction of tradition and innovation is analysed in Vita Džekčioriūtė's article, which compares belief narratives related to mushrooms and mushroom picking practices in Lithuania at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with these narratives as practiced in recent decades. Two articles are dedicated to the COVID-19 pandemic, using comparisons of the specificities of Lithuanian and Bulgarian culture. Rasa Račiūnaitė-Paužuolienė's article examines the spiritual resilience and religious practices of Bulgarian and Lithuanian youth during the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. In her article "Family and Crisis: The Christmas Eve Dinner in Lithuania and Bulgaria", Rasa Paukštytė-Šaknienė analyses the specific features of Christmas Eve dinners in Vilnius and Sofia during the period of the pandemic, concluding that the deviation from culinary traditions on this day in both countries was slight.

Several other articles are devoted to traditional Lithuanian religions. Gintarė Lukoševičiūtė's article "Between Ethnic and Cultural Identity: The Effect of Turkish Religious Literature on the Lifestyle of the Lithuanian Muslim Community" is dedicated to the spread of Muslim religious literature. Dalia Senvaitytė's article "Modern Pagan Traditions in Lithuania: Navigating Romantic Nostalgia and Creativity in Ritual Year Celebrations" examines annual celebrations among Native Faith communities in Lithuania today.

Unfortunately, this issue is marked by loss. As soon as we had agreed on the contents of this volume, we received the sad news of the unexpected death of this publication's editor Ekaterina Anastasova. In Memoriam dedicated to her is written by Lina Gergova.

Skaidrė Urbonienė and Žilvytis Šaknys

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