

# Family and Crisis: The Christmas Eve Dinner in Lithuania and Bulgaria

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**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to compare the specific features of the Christmas Eve dinner celebrated in Vilnius and Sofia during the COVID-19 period. In order to reveal and compare the changes in the culinary traditions in the two capitals, my objectives are the following: (1) to explore the cultural specificities of Christmas Eve in Lithuania and Bulgaria, (2) to reveal the social aspects of pandemic 2020 Christmas Eve dinners in Sofia and Vilnius, (3) to analyse the specificities of cooking and the dishes of the 2020 Christmas Eve dinner, and (4) to compare the dishes of the 2020 Christmas Eve dinner and their correspondence with the cultural tradition of Lithuania and Bulgaria.

In this paper I conclude that the deviation from the Christmas Eve culinary tradition in both countries is slight. The tradition developed in Lithuania and Bulgaria during the socialist period and was not a consequence of COVID-19. It can therefore be concluded that the culinary tradition of Christmas Eve remains stable in times of crises, both in Bulgaria and Lithuania.

**Keywords:** Christmas Eve dinner, culinary traditions, Bulgarians, Lithuanians, COVID-19

## Introduction. Regional and denominational Christmas Eve traditions

“COVID-19 challenged the entire population of the world, affected everyone, and all spheres of life, changing the content and ways of communication, cultural habits” (Kõiva 2024: 350). The pandemic has not only affected everyday life, but also important holidays, limiting people’s sense of community. In both Bulgaria and Lithuania, holidays play an important role in maintaining relationships with friends (Šaknys 2018: 119–130), neighbours (Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2021: 175–198) and colleagues (Šidiškienė 2018: 131–144), as well as with family and relatives (Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2019: 57–70). “Ritual connects past, present, and future, abrogating history and time. Ritual always links participants to one another and often to wider collectivities that may be absent, even to the ancestors and those yet unborn.” This is how John R. Gillis described the social essence of a holiday (Gillis 2004: 99). Perhaps the most striking features of harmony with the ancestors can be seen in the customs of Christmas Eve. Since ancient times, the people of Lithuania and Bulgaria would never leave the table after Christmas Eve dinner without hope that the souls of the dead would gather at the table (Dundulienė 1979: 18–19; Kudirka 1993: 119–122; Būlgarski tsŭrkoven i etnokalendar 2018: 378; Dimitrova, Antonova, Paprikova-Krutilin 2019: 15). In Racho Slaveïkov’s book *Bulgarian Folk Customs and Beliefs* first published in 1924, Christmas Eve, also called Small Christmas (Малка Коледа), is described in greater detail than Christmas itself (Slaveïkov 2012: 9–20, 158–160). In the first monograph devoted exclusively to Christmas (Kudirka 1993), the same can be seen in Lithuania.

When people talk about Christmas in Lithuania, they usually focus on the day before, i.e., Christmas Eve dinner. It is not even a separate holiday and was not called a holiday in the past. Ethnographic material shows that in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, Christmas Eve was seen only as the eve of Christmas and was traditionally perceived as a ritual fasting dinner without meat, milk, or eggs (Kudirka 1993: 64–85). The 1925 and 1930 laws on holidays and rest for the Republic of Lithuania did not designate Christmas Eve as a holiday, although it did distinguish it as a non-working day for public and local municipal institutions (Švenčią ir poilsio... 1925; Švenčią ir

poilsio... 1930). In Soviet Lithuania, Christmas, just like other religious festivals, was not tolerated. Ethnological research shows that a considerable number of people were forced to have their Christmas Eve dinner secretly at that time (Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2016: 10–11). When Lithuania regained its independence in 1990, Christmas was restored to the status of public holiday: the two days of Christmas were declared public holidays, and in 2012 Christmas Eve was also declared a non-working day, i.e., a public holiday included in the Labour Code of the Republic of Lithuania. Since all non-working days in Lithuania have been called public holidays since 1990, Christmas Eve also became a standalone holiday.

The majority of the population of Lithuania are Catholic, but other denominations have also lived here since ancient times.<sup>1</sup> The Christmas Eve of the Lithuanian Evangelical Lutherans and Reformed Evangelicals, neither of whom observe fasting, differs from that of the Catholics (for example Kudirka 1994: 20–22; Kavaliauskienė 2024: 368–369); meanwhile, according to ethnologist Juozas Kudirka, Orthodox Christmas Eve is similar to that of the Catholics although celebrated according to the Julian calendar (Kudirka 1994: 22). As for Bulgarians, the majority of the population are Orthodox, although they celebrate Christmas according to the Gregorian calendar as Catholics do. Christmas Eve is defined as “the evening before Christmas when the whole family gathers for a festive dinner” (Benina-Marinkova Dimitrova 2019: 15). In Bulgaria, as in Lithuania, Christmas Eve is recognised as a standalone holiday separate from Christmas (*Bŭlgarski ofitsialni praznitsi*).

Some Orthodox countries in Europe celebrate Christmas at the same time as Catholics. Christmas Eve is celebrated on 24<sup>th</sup> December, but is a public holiday in only a limited number of countries. In addition to Lithuania and Bulgaria, Christmas Eve is a public holiday in Czechia, Iceland, Portugal, Slovakia, Hungary, Finland, and Estonia. On the one hand, the fact that Christmas Eve was given the status of public holiday shows its significance in the calendar year. On the other hand, an official day off provides one with an opportunity to prepare for Christmas Eve dinner and for the family and relatives to gather in preparation for Christmas. This is especially true for families whose members live in another city or abroad.

As I have already mentioned, Christmas Eve is celebrated not only in the countries dominated by Catholic and Orthodox religions, but also by Evangelical Lutheran religions. Yet as a celebration that consolidates the family as

a whole, Christmas Eve dinner can vary from country to country in terms of the dishes eaten. According to Helene Henderson, meat dishes are eaten at Christmas Eve dinner in Denmark, Finland, France, Latvia, Estonia, and even Italy (Henderson 2005: 110–111). On the other hand, Henderson argues that despite its Christian significance, Christmas Eve is associated with quite a few pagan and supernatural beliefs (Henderson 2009: 138). In this perspective, Lithuania was one of the last countries in Europe to adopt Christianity, while Bulgaria is one of the oldest Christian nations. Despite these differences, Lithuania and Bulgaria are among the few nations that celebrate Christmas Eve at a national level and uphold the tradition of the Christmas Eve dinner, which includes fasting.

The common aspects of Christmas Eve celebrations led to the extension of comparative studies in Lithuania (Vilnius) and Bulgaria (Sofia) in 2023. The starting point was the period of the COVID-19 crisis, during which the issue of how the tradition of the Christmas Eve dinner was upheld in Lithuanian and Bulgarian urban families during the pandemic period became relevant, with a focus on 2020.

In 2023, an ethnographic field study in Lithuania sought to find how Christmas Eve was celebrated 2020 during the 2020 lockdown period, a time when there was a nationwide ban on gatherings of groups larger than a single household. The study therefore aimed to find out whether Christmas Eve was celebrated at all that year and who attended the Christmas Eve dinner. Much attention was paid to the preparation of festive dishes and the specification of their range. Respondents were asked about other features of the lockdown Christmas Eve dinner and were asked to compare it with the pre-lockdown period. Forty-one respondents born between 1940 and 2001 were interviewed in Lithuania by means of a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. By nationality, two were Poles (Catholics), one was Russian (Old Believer), and the rest were Lithuanians (all Catholics except for one Lutheran).

A similar study was carried out in Sofia in 2023, also after the pandemic had ended. Semi-structured interviews (with similar questions to those used for the residents of Vilnius) was conducted in Sofia with 20 respondents, all Bulgarians by nationality, born between 1945 and 1996. All were baptised in an Orthodox church, but only 16 were believers. To make my research as comprehensive as possible, I will draw on the work of earlier ethnologists and reference publications. I must note that the level of exploration of holidays

in Lithuania and Bulgaria is not equal: while in Bulgaria detailed studies of calendar holidays were carried out in the first half of the twentieth century, in Lithuania this happened as late as the 1980s. Among the Bulgarian studies, I would single out Racho Slaveïkov's 1924 book *Bulgarian Folk Traditions and Beliefs* (cited from Slaveïkov 2012), Christo Vakarelski's *Bulgarian Holiday Customs* (Vakarelski 1943), and Mikhail Arnaudov's *Bulgarian folk holidays: Customs, Beliefs, Songs and Entertainment throughout the Year* (Arnaudov 1943).

In Lithuania, the first ethnological book on calendar customs, *Lietuvių kalendoriniai ir agrariniai papročiai* (Lithuanian Calendar and Agrarian Customs), appeared as late as 1979 (Dundulienė 1979). More extensive research into Christmas Eve began after the restoration of Lithuania's independence in 1990 (Kudirka 1993; Kudirka 1994). The author of this paper conducted a study on Christmas Eve in Vilnius in 2012 and 2013 (Lithuanians, Poles and Russians were interviewed). The study identified the dominant Christmas Eve dishes in all three ethnic groups. Other aspects of Christmas Eve celebrations were also analysed. A survey of the residents of Vilnius revealed the continuity of the Christmas Eve tradition (Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2016: 29–74). The article by ethnologist Dalia Senvaitytė is also relevant for a comparison of the situation in Lithuania and Bulgaria, in which, based on an empirical study conducted in 2010, she discusses the features of the collective (national, cultural and religious) identity of Bulgarian and Lithuanian students and the expression of those features. Senvaitytė's comparative study showed that in the early twentieth century, Christmas was the most widely observed holiday both in Lithuania and Bulgaria (Senvaitytė 2011: 476–487). I devoted two more articles to the analysis of the festivals celebrated by families in Vilnius and Sofia (Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2018: 58–72, Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2019: 57–70). In my research, I examined Christmas Eve alongside other calendar holidays. Based on field research conducted in Vilnius from 2012 to 2016 and Sofia in 2015, I found many common features in the celebration of Christmas Eve (Lith. *Kūčios*, Bul. *Бъдни вечер*) and Christmas (Lith. *Kalėdos*, Bul. *Коледа*). For example, similar attitudes towards festive traditions were revealed among the residents of both Vilnius and Sofia. My fieldwork showed that among the respondents in both countries there were those who said that today's urban residents had hardly any traditions, and those who stated the opposite, that their families celebrated the way their parents and grandparents did (Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2018: 58). It should be stressed that both countries were affected by the policy of atheisation during

the period of socialism, when some families had to celebrate Christmas Eve and Christmas Day in secret. Yet in both countries, the Christmas Eve dinner made up of fasting dishes (in line with different Catholic and Orthodox traditions) has survived, the only difference being the traditionally dominant number of the dishes: an even number among Lithuanians (most often twelve), and an odd number among Bulgarians (seven, nine, eleven).<sup>2</sup> It is also significant that my fieldwork shows that denominational affiliation is not important for the Christmas Eve dinner because Orthodox Christians in Sofia attach as much importance to Christmas Eve dinner as the Catholics in Vilnius. At the same time Orthodox and Old Believers in Vilnius do not attach significance to this holiday and give priority only to Christmas, which is celebrated according to the Julian calendar (Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2018: 58–72). In another article devoted exclusively to the Christmas holiday, I also present research conclusions to the effect that both Lithuanians and Bulgarians place too much importance on the Christmas Eve dinner and have preserved strong traditional features of the celebration, while analysis of ancient Lithuanian and Bulgarian festivals possibly reveals certain similarities that were preserved irrespective of geographic environment, history, ethnic (Baltic or Slavic) and religious (Catholic or Orthodox) background (Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2019: 57–70).

The aim of this paper is to compare the specific features of the Christmas Eve dinner celebrated in Vilnius and Sofia during the COVID-19 period. In order to reveal and compare the changes in the culinary traditions of the Christmas Eve table in the two capitals during the COVID-19 pandemic, my objectives are the following: (1) to explore the cultural specificities of Christmas Eve in Lithuania and Bulgaria, (2) to reveal the social aspects of pandemic 2020 Christmas Eve dinners in Sofia and Vilnius, (3) to analyse the specificities of cooking and the dishes of the 2020 Christmas Eve dinner, and (4) to compare the dishes of the 2020 Christmas Eve dinner and their correspondence with the cultural tradition of Lithuania and Bulgaria.

## **The 2020 Pandemic Christmas Eve in Bulgaria and Lithuania: Mobility and participation in the celebration**

In 2020, the Lithuanian public, just like people all over the world, encountered an unprecedented situation for the first time. During the pandemic and especially during the lockdown, the ‘relocation’ of workplaces, schools, and kindergartens to home settings became a challenge for many. We can only imagine how difficult family life must have become in trying to define the boundaries between parents’ work, children’s schooling, holidays, and leisure time. I agree with the ethnologist Mila Maeva’s argument that the impact of the pandemic was important not only for different types of local community and group, but above all for the family. Although the pandemic had created a crisis, families and family structures were able to adopt different coping mechanisms to deal with it. On the one hand, one can see the mobilisation of social support in this process; on the other hand, the creation of a sense of security and harmony through various rituals is observed (Maeva 2022: 128). One of the strongest factors consolidating families were the celebrations that took place in the family. The introduction of various restrictions, bans and lockdowns in everyday life to deal with the crisis situation caused by COVID-19 naturally raised the question of how holidays would be celebrated. In Bulgaria and Lithuania, as in many other countries at the time, the lockdowns and restrictions that were imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on the spatial mobility of family members and relatives. This brought certain adjustments to family and calendar celebrations at home by changing the number of participants, the food prepared, and socialising traditions during the holidays. For example, as shown in the study by Bulgarian ethnologists Ivailo Markov and Desislava Pileva, at the Easter celebrations of 2020 (during the first lockdown), there was a decrease in family members being able to celebrate together and also meet up with friends (Markov, Pileva 2021: 68).

On 28 November 2020, a second lockdown was declared in Bulgaria, which was described as partial because it was not as strict as the first (13 March–13 May 2020). The lockdown was to last until almost Christmas, i.e., 18 December 2020, but was extended until 31 January 2021 (COVID-19 pandemic in Bulgaria). However, the field research data shows that Christmas Eve in Bulgaria was less socially restricted than Easter.

How was Christmas Eve 2020 celebrated in Sofia? While many things retained the traditional aspects of the Christmas Eve dinner, this time it was different. According to a Bulgarian woman born in 1972,

... although the food did not differ, Christmas Eve became more memorable. The pandemic made it holier. Many turned to prayer that night wishing for the pandemic to end and people not to die. There was more serenity, concentration, prayers. It was a difficult time, and it is not pleasant to remember it now.

A woman born in 1979 said that the dinner was

the same as every year, but the pandemic added an extra layer of stress, and it was harder to shop for food and gifts. If one got sick, one was quarantined for two weeks and couldn't leave the house. In the shops, there were time slots for older people to shop, and the rest for everyone. It was a difficult time.

According to the study, Christmas Eve 2020 was celebrated by all respondents in Sofia, both believers and non-believers. According to a man born in 1953 (baptised Orthodox but currently a non-believer), "Christmas Eve is a family celebration. Believer or not, everyone celebrates. Such is the tradition. The religious go to Orthodox church to pray on Christmas Eve, others keep it as a family tradition. And no matter, pandemic or not."

The study showed that in Sofia, the majority of respondents celebrated pandemic Christmas Eve as before, without any inconvenience. According to the respondents, 'it was just as always'. A male respondent (b. 1988) said that Christmas Eve was celebrated as it was every year, and, in his opinion, there was no lockdown at the time. After all, people could visit each other. A female respondent (b. 1984) said that she had celebrated Christmas Eve with her parents and relatives, nine people came together to celebrate, as always.

Thus, in the absence of the ban on contact in the home environment with those who did not share that household, some respondents said they were not even aware of the lockdown at the time. The lockdown became obvious when demands were voiced to restrict socialising in larger groups, something that happened at Easter. According to a female respondent (b. 1945), "there was no lockdown on Christmas Eve. The lockdown was enforced for two months in spring [2020]. The authorities allowed Easter to be celebrated in only one



house, in only one family. Hadn't seen her children for two months, even though they live next door."

One male respondent (b. 1987) made a similar claim, saying that there was no lockdown on Christmas Eve and anyone who was not sick could celebrate. This shows that despite the official lockdown, the celebration of Christmas Eve in 2020 was not strictly regulated inside the country. However, some respondents claimed that because of the pandemic, Christmas Eve celebration was restricted to only immediate family or to only five or six people. Visiting public spaces such as restaurants was forbidden during this lockdown. This restriction hardly affected the lockdown Christmas Eve of 2020, as Christmas Eve is seen as a family celebration; thus, according to the respondents, there was no need to invite friends or celebrate in a restaurant. However, the respondents whose family members lived in different countries or other cities in Bulgaria experienced more lockdown restrictions and mobility inconveniences. A Bulgarian female respondent born in 1981 and living in Switzerland (she was visiting Sofia at the time of the survey) said that she usually celebrated Christmas Eve in Sofia with her parents, or her parents visited her in Switzerland. On Christmas Eve 2020, she had to celebrate Christmas Eve separately, where she and her family lived at the time. Another Bulgarian woman (b. 1972) had a similar experience: her children were studying abroad at the time, they could not come home for Christmas Eve, and she was very sad about this. Those living in other parts of Bulgaria also encountered some restrictions. Another female respondent (b. 1977) said that her family and her parents celebrated Christmas Eve separately:

Yes, I was scared for my parents, they live in Burgas. I celebrated Christmas Eve with my sister's family, they live in Sofia. They were not afraid of getting infected. The lockdown was in effect on Christmas Eve, but it didn't restrict social life too much. We lived as usual.

Even in the absence of restrictions, even people living in the same city were not always able to celebrate Christmas Eve as usual because of the spread of COVID-19. A female respondent (b. 1950) said that she had contracted coronavirus at that time, so she stayed with her husband, their children could not visit them as they usually did. Another female respondent (b. 1979) said that her family was also in a difficult situation. Both of her children contracted

coronavirus over the Christmas period. Her mother was also sick at the time, and her brother had to come over to look after her.

To sum up, accounts from those interviewed in Sofia indicate that although Christmas Eve in 2020 was celebrated “as usual”, some families did so in a smaller social circle than before the pandemic. Of all the respondents, 40% claimed to have celebrated Christmas Eve not only with their own family but also with their parents’ families (in two cases, with the families of their and their spouse’s parents), while 15% mentioned that their immediate family and the family of a sibling had been present. Only in a couple of cases did close relatives and friends celebrate together. The biggest problem was travelling to or from another city (or country). We can therefore assert that in almost a third of families, Christmas Eve during the pandemic brought fewer close people together than in previous years.

Meanwhile, in Lithuania, compared to Bulgaria, lockdowns were longer and people experienced more social restrictions, which also affected holidays. On 14 March 2020, the Lithuanian government issued Decree No. 207 on the declaration of a lockdown in the territory of the Republic of Lithuania, which entered into force on 16 March 2020 for two weeks and was subsequently extended until 17 June. On 4 November 2020, a general quarantine was re-imposed until 1 July 2021. The application of restrictions and bans was not uniform throughout the period, with the cultural and entertainment sphere suffering most. Travel bans were further intensified during the festive periods, at Easter 2000, in late 2020 and early 2021 (restricting Christmas and New Year celebrations), and at Easter 2021, when inter-municipality travel was banned. The authorities ordered that Christmas Eve and Christmas 2020 should only be celebrated in the company of one household, i.e., one’s own family, and that contact with other households was forbidden. Such households included both large families and single people (Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2023: 122). As the 2023 study in Vilnius showed, this also determined the composition of the participants in the Christmas Eve celebration. For most residents of Vilnius, Christmas Eve 2020 was different from pre-quarantine in several respects. First of all, because of the lockdown restrictions, they celebrated Christmas Eve in a smaller circle of relatives than before the lockdown. In the vast majority of cases, the Christmas Eve dinner was eaten only by people living in one family, i.e., in one household. As many as five out of 41 Vilniansites spent Christmas Eve alone, i.e., in a single-person household. Another ten respondents reported

celebrating with two people (because that was how many people were in one household). For many, the loss of face-to-face interaction on Christmas Eve was painful. To protect their elderly parents from possible infection, people left them to celebrate Christmas Eve by themselves. A female respondent (b. 1968) said she had to celebrate alone because her daughter could not come over because of lockdown travel bans. Another aspect that emerged came from the respondents who had lost physical contact with their next of kin (even if they did not practice such interaction before the pandemic) and compensated by choosing virtual methods of communication. A woman born in 1973 said that she had been in virtual contact with relatives that evening who were not only in Vilnius but also in Vilnius district and London. For many, the lack of communication was replaced by a phone call, Skype, Messenger, or a short meeting with children or relatives in the garden or at the door of a flat. Yet there were also some families, just a few, admittedly, who came together, as they had been doing every year, disregarding the bans and the fear of being infected (Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2023: 122–123).

Summing up the experience of the residents of Sofia and Vilnius, the 2020 lockdown in Lithuania was much stricter and brought more noticeable changes to the Christmas Eve tradition than in Bulgaria. Restricting the celebrations to one household forced almost all Vilniusites to celebrate in a much smaller circle than under normal circumstances. In contrast, in Sofia similar restrictions were more common among those whose relatives lived abroad or in another city in Bulgaria. In Sofia, a third of the families surveyed had fewer people for the Christmas Eve dinner than before the pandemic. In Lithuania, the strict lockdown created a demand for virtual communication, which was used by many a family. Respondents in Sofia did not accentuate this mode of interaction.

## **Christmas Eve 2020 in Bulgaria and Lithuania: The food and the place of celebration**

All twenty respondents interviewed in Sofia claimed that their families followed the tradition of entrusting the cooking to the women and, in some families, keeping the tradition of the oldest woman in the family cooking Christmas Eve dishes. The role of men also remains significant, mainly in various supporting activities. For example, according to a female respondent born in 1950, a woman

had always cooked Christmas Eve meals in her family. Previously, when her parents were still alive, she used to celebrate Christmas Eve at her parents' house, and her mother would cook. In their family, bringing food when you come to another home to celebrate was not accepted. On Christmas Eve, all the food is provided exclusively by the hosts. She was already a widow at the time of the survey, so she took care of everything, including cooking. When her husband was still alive, he always helped her shop for food. A male respondent (b. 1963) also pointed out that although women always cooked the festive dishes, men also helped. For example, he helped with buying food and bringing it home. In his family, his mother cooked Christmas Eve dinner for as long as she was physically capable, now his wife had taken this over. The study showed that the Bulgarian tradition was also upheld when living abroad. According to the female respondent (b. 1981) living in Switzerland, when her mother came to visit, the Christmas Eve dinner would be cooked by all the women present, although sometimes men helped too. It is obvious that although women play a dominant role in the preparation of food in some families, men are also involved, and not only in the menial tasks but also in the preparation of the festive meal. A female respondent born in 1996 said that her father would also help make one dish or another. A male respondent (b. 1957) believes that while both women and men can cook, in Bulgaria it is traditionally women who do. According to a female respondent born in 1980, Christmas Eve dinner is cooked by all women: her mother, herself, her godmother, and her sister-in-law. A male respondent born in 1952 said that when Christmas Eve was celebrated at home, his wife cooked and their daughter helped. If the celebration took place at his parents-in-law, his mother-in-law did all the cooking, and his wife brought a dish to her parents' home. If, conversely, Christmas Eve was celebrated in their place, then his mother-in-law contributed a dish. Thus, in some families contributing to festive dishes is traditionally accepted. A female respondent (b. 1990) said that although all cooking was done by the woman in whose house the holiday was celebrated, other women could also contribute a dish each. No matter in whose house they celebrated, the tradition of her family was that the women of all the families who come for dinner brought food. Despite some variation the predominant answer was that the dishes were prepared by the oldest woman in the house where Christmas Eve was celebrated.

However, some respondents were forced to disrupt their routines and experience the inconvenience of the pandemic due to COVID-19. A female respondent

ent (b. 1979) said that during the pandemic on Christmas Eve, she had taken over the cooking of the festive dishes as her mother was ill and could neither attend the Christmas Eve dinner nor cook. According to a female respondent born in 1986, she had always celebrated Christmas Eve at her parents' place, but during the pandemic (although not because of COVID) she was forced to celebrate at home. In this case, as happened every year, her mother made all the traditional Christmas Eve dishes and brought them to the respondent's house. The respondent only baked bread, although this is the main dish of Christmas Eve.

This means that in Sofia the pandemic did not change the tradition of festive cooking: Christmas Eve meals were prepared by the oldest woman in the family or by the hostess of the house in which the celebration took place, although in some families the established routine was disrupted by the pandemic.

Although in Lithuania most of the dishes are made at home, 'God's bread', or *kalėdaitis* (Christmas wafer), is brought from church, unlike in Bulgaria. Theoretically, the restriction on the participation of members of other households during the lockdown period in Lithuania should have brought more changes than in Bulgaria. The distribution of food preparation between genders showed no significant variation. Both in Bulgaria and in Lithuania, the preparation of festive dishes is the responsibility of women. The study showed that despite the lockdown, cooking traditionally remained the domain of female competence, because only 29% of the respondents indicated that their husbands, children or family members contributed to the preparation of Christmas Eve dishes (Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2023: 123). In fact, some families even have a tradition of distributing the cooking of dishes among family members. For example, in the family of a woman born in 1974, her husband usually makes cranberry pudding and poppy seed milk, not because of lockdown but because of family tradition: she cooks some dishes, her husband prepares others, and the children also cook something (Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2023: 124). The Bulgarian tradition of entrusting the cooking of the festive dishes to the oldest woman in the family is also present in Lithuania. There has always been a tradition for children and grandchildren to gather at the parents' home for Christmas Eve dinner, which means that the oldest woman in the family would prepare the food. Recently, there has been a growing urban trend when families gathering for a shared dinner decide in advance which dishes they will cook, thus forming a potluck Christmas Eve table.

Adjustments were made to some celebrations during the lockdown period as sometimes just a single person celebrated Christmas Eve. According to a respondent born in 1996, “although I had Christmas Eve dinner alone, I still made twelve dishes, but in very small portions. I didn’t cook all the dishes; I bought some already made.” Unlike in Bulgaria, Lithuanian respondents tended to emphasise a stable number of Christmas Eve dishes: twelve. For example, a female respondent from Vilnius (b. 1966) said: “there were fewer people at the Christmas Eve table then, but there were still twelve dishes, as appropriate.” A woman born in 1963 said that she did not see any differences between the dishes, but “I had to cook them all myself, when in the past we used to decide between families celebrating together who would cook what”. Another female respondent said that “the only difference that year was that during the lockdown we couldn’t all gather at my mother’s and had to cook all the dishes separately”. A respondent born in 1994 was nostalgic:

During the lockdown, some of the foodstuffs for the Christmas Eve table were bought from a shop, because when we cooked dinner at my parents’ we used some products that we had grown on our farm. Most importantly, I didn’t have a *kalėdaitis* [Christmas wafer], which my parents used to take care of [i.e. bring from church].

On the other hand, to compensate for the change, they shared foodstuffs or ready-made dishes whenever possible. Most often the exchanges took place outside the house or even at the door of a flat. A female respondent from Vilnius (b. 1963) said that she had been handed *kūčiukai* (Christmas Eve biscuits) baked by her mother. A female respondent born in 1968 said that that year she also ate mushrooms and *kūčiukai* gifted to her by a friend. For some female respondents, the pandemic allowed them to recall the traditions of their parents’ family rather than those of their in-laws. A female respondent born in 1974 said that for her, the Christmas Eve of 2020 was some sort of a shift, a change: “it was great to celebrate with just my family, the way we wanted and imagined it”. After all, before the lockdown her family used to celebrate Christmas Eve with her husband’s family. Now she remembered her childhood and tried to prepare the dishes her mother used to make (Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2023: 129).

In both countries, the pandemic and the lockdown led to some adjustments in food preparation and the place of celebration. Yet as the cases of Sofia and Vilnius show, the preparation of Christmas Eve dishes remains women’s respon-

sibility, although men also contributed to the festive dinner. And the difficulties of the pandemic, according to some Bulgarian men, made their help even more significant. In Lithuania, a strict lockdown forced people to celebrate in smaller groups than usual, but it did not change the number of Christmas Eve dishes; it only reduced the quantity of food prepared. Meanwhile, Bulgarians had fewer restrictions on Christmas Eve 2020.

## Christmas Eve 2020 dishes in Bulgaria and Lithuania

Speaking of shopping difficulties during the pandemic, such as the need to wear masks and the limited time available for shopping, which led to more stress, all the respondents interviewed in Sofia said that Christmas Eve food remained unchanged. Some respondents confirmed that they were fasting as usual, with Christmas Eve dishes cooked without meat, fish, milk, or eggs. A female respondent (b. 1996) pointed out that both believers and non-believers follow this order as it is simply tradition. It is true that in some cases there had been slight departures from this tradition, but it is likely they were not pandemic-related. A male respondent born in 1980 said he sometimes used dairy produce. A female respondent born in 1986 also pointed to certain changes in the tradition of choosing the time of Christmas Eve dinner:

The Christmas Eve dinner should not be eaten until 8 pm – that’s what religion says one should do. But our family doesn’t follow this. But in line with religion, our family eats only fasting dishes that evening. Nothing with meat, only with oil.

Other respondents also reported not eating meat, fish, dairy or egg dishes.

As in Bulgaria, in Lithuania the fasting requirement for Catholics was observed in most cases (unlike the Orthodox, Catholics are allowed to eat fish). For example, according to a female respondent from Vilnius (b. 1954), “all Christmas Eve dishes are made with oil, there is no animal fat and no meat”. She said that dishes cooked in this way are served together only on Christmas Eve. A female respondent from Vilnius (b. 1968) said that the dishes of the Christmas Eve dinner are never seasoned with mayonnaise, nor are eggs added. Although some families use dairy products in cooking dishes, this is an exception rather

than the rule. No respondents in either Lithuania or Bulgaria mentioned meat among their Christmas Eve dishes.

Let us take a look at the dishes of Christmas Eve 2020 in families in Sofia and Vilnius. According to a male respondent (b. 1963), different traditions exist in different places in Bulgaria, meaning that the dishes can also differ. His family customs came with him from the place of his birth. Where he comes from, they would prepare spiced beans for Christmas Eve dinner, which they would spread on bread and eat. To identify the most popular Christmas Eve dishes, the respondents were asked to tick the dishes eaten in their families. They were also asked to name three most important dishes without which the Christmas Eve table is unthinkable. *Sarmi* (*Сарми*, cabbage or vine leaves stuffed with rice or groats) dominated among the answers with 80% of respondents choosing this, ritual bread (*питка за Бъдни вечер*) and pepper stuffed with rice or beans (*пълнени пиперки (чушки)*) were selected by 75% of the respondents, walnuts (*орехи*) by 70%, boiled sweetened dried fruit compote (*ошав*) by 65%, boiled beans (*варен фасул*) and pumpkin pie (*тиквеник за Бъдни вечер*) by 60% each, garlic (*чесън*) by 55%, honey (*мед*) by 50%, fortune bread (*питка с късмети*) by 45%, winter salad (*зимна салата*) by 35%, boiled wheat (*варено жито*) by 30%, sauerkraut with beans (*кисело зеле с боб*) by 25%, wine (*вино*) and rakia (*ракия*) 35% each, *banitsa* (*баница*) 25%, and in isolated cases baklava (*баклава*) 15% , fresh fruit (*пресни плодове*), and a potato dish (*ястие с картофи*) 5% each.

As we can see, Christmas Eve is dominated by cereals, fruit, and vegetables, as well as uncultured natural products such as nuts and honey. Orthodox fasting forbids consumption of fish, and this has shaped Bulgarian ritual Christmas Eve cuisine. Although *sarmi* was the most frequently mentioned dish, and stuffed pepper was mentioned as one of the three most important dishes, the responses that distinguished between ritual bread and fortune bread suggest that in the majority of cases respondents referred to the same product eaten at the start of the Christmas Eve dinner.

In Lithuania, the Christmas Eve dinner starts in a similar way with the breaking of the Christmas wafer (*kalėdaitis, plotkelė*), a dish made of fine flour. However, this ritual dish is apparently not listed as a separate dish by most respondents. *Kūčiukas* (Christmas Eve biscuit), another very important Christmas Eve dish, is also made of cereals (Paukštytė-Šaknienė 2023: 128).



Fish dishes dominated the Christmas Eve dinner among Vilnius residents in 2020. One or several herring dishes were mentioned by 97% of respondents, and 70% indicated they prepared fish in different ways. As many as 59% of Vilnians had mushroom dishes on their Christmas Eve table. Mushrooms were served as a separate dish, but even more often they were eaten with other dishes. Sixty-five per cent of the respondents reported they could not imagine the Christmas Eve table without *kūčiukai*. A third of them mentioned that at the Christmas Eve dinner, they only ate *kūčiukai* with poppy seed milk. Similarly, 68% of the respondents reported making *kisielis* (kissel), mainly from cranberries, and only once from oats, as a must-have at Christmas Eve dinner. Dried fruit compote, a cranberry drink, a bread drink (*gira*), sweetened water (without poppy seeds) to soak the *kūčiukai*, as well as coffee, tea, hot chocolate, juice, and red wine were also mentioned among the beverages served at the Christmas Eve dinner. Beverages are mentioned quite rarely and may not have been considered equivalent to dishes.

Traditionally, the Vilnians place nuts on the Christmas Eve table (30% of respondents). Dried fruit is mentioned several times, with occasional mentions of prunes and dried fruit compote, or as a topping on other dishes. Honey was served as a separate dish in 8% of the families surveyed, and a wheat mixture called *kūčia* was also common. Some respondents mentioned pearl barley soaked in honey (*grucė*). Slightly more often they reported that hemp seeds were placed on the Christmas Eve table. A common dish was small buns with such fillings as poppy seeds, bananas, raisins, apples, and cabbage.

Forty six percent of Vilnians mentioned mixed salads as one of the most frequent Christmas Eve dishes, something that was common during the Soviet period. In some instances a crossing of the boundaries of fasting is observed. For example, bread, cheese and apple salad, or white salad with mayonnaise were prepared. In most cases, however, mixed salads can be classified as fasting as they are often made from fresh or pickled (often home grown) vegetables, and vegetable oil is used to flavour them, for example, green cabbage, or sauerkraut, or a mixture of both. It turns out that Vilnians also like salads with other vegetables, with as many as 35% of respondents citing beetroot salad as a traditional Christmas Eve dinner dish in their families. Eleven percent of respondents made salads with beans (beans cooked separately were mentioned only once), 8% with cooked peas (with mashed peas in some cases), and 24% with potatoes. Carrots as an ingredient of a dish with herring or in a salad were

mentioned by three people, and cucumbers by only one person; apples were mentioned by 19% of the respondents, but only in less than half of the cases were they mentioned as a separate dish. Salads made of various fresh vegetables were mentioned sporadically, and as many as 27% put fruit on the Christmas Eve table. Traditionally, bread as a stand-alone product or used in the preparation of salads (22%) was given a prominent place on the Christmas Eve table. As with the residents of Sophia, the Vilniusites also occasionally put non-fasting foods on the table, including such items as chicken and cooked ham. On Christmas Eve, such dishes as *šakotis* (tree cake), vegan *žagarėliai* (angel wings), or fruit jelly, which are typical of other holidays, are rarely put on the table. Alcoholic beverages such as wine were mentioned only in few cases.

Among the three most important dishes, Vilniusites prioritised fish (74% of respondents mentioned fish dishes). Herring (71%) and other fish (28%) are the most frequently chosen dishes. In addition to mushroom dishes made with herring (15%), there were also mushroom buns (8%), occasionally dumplings with dried boletus filling, mushroom brine (*rasalas*), fried mushrooms with cabbage or scones with mushroom sauce, and, presumably, mushroom dishes, such as beetroot broth with mushroom-filled dumplings (*ausytės*). Dishes with mushrooms were mentioned by 31% of respondents. The importance of *kūčiukai* (Christmas Eve biscuits) is significant for Vilniusites, with 56% of respondents mentioning them as a separate dish. For 31% of the respondents, poppy seed milk remains significant; more than half (58%) indicated that it was eaten together with *kūčiukai*. A traditional dish that has retained its position on the Vilniusite table is *kisielius* (kissel), which was served in 28% of the respondents' families (half of these said that they cooked specifically cranberry kissel). Only one respondent mentioned nuts, which are often put on the Christmas Eve table in rural Lithuania. According to a Vilniusite, "they simply have to be on the table". Vegetable dishes such as cabbage buns or simply fried cabbage could be called traditional dishes, as could cereal dishes such as fried 'mild-tasting pancakes' and buns without filling, and hemp and pearl barley (*grucė*, which was also eaten on Christmas Eve in the past). Only 8% of respondents chose *kūčia* (grain mixed with honey) as an important cereal dish. Ten per cent of respondents identified *kalėdaitis*, the Christmas wafer, the breaking of which starts the celebration of Christmas Eve, as an important attribute of the Christmas Eve dinner. Salads were mentioned as a non-traditional dish, yet 18% of Vilniusites ranked them among one of the three most important dishes served

on a modern Christmas Eve table. However, the respondents who prioritised salads emphasised that in their families Christmas Eve dishes were never seasoned with mayonnaise, nor were eggs added to other dishes. They could therefore be called fasting dishes. A look at the three most important dishes for Christmas Eve dinner in 2020 confirms the assumption that traditional fasting Christmas Eve dishes still dominate among the residents of Vilnius.

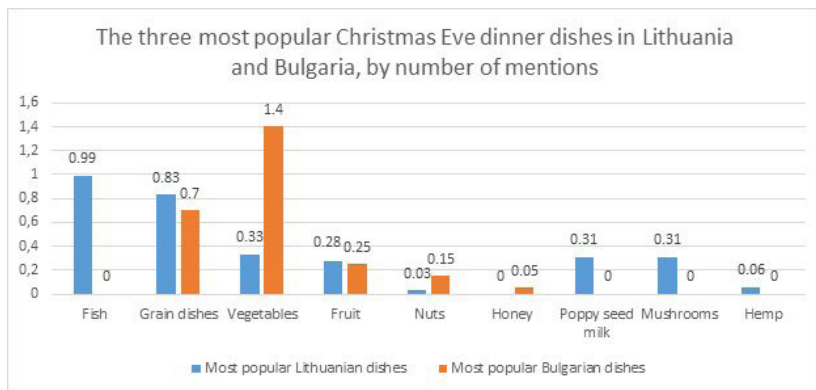
The study shows that despite the change in the number of participants in the celebration, traditional Christmas Eve dishes were still eaten during the COVID-19 pandemic both in Bulgaria and in Lithuania.

## **The uniqueness of Bulgarian and Lithuanian Christmas Eve dishes and their conformity with tradition**

The main differences between the structure of Bulgarian and Lithuanian Christmas Eve dishes are due to religion and natural conditions. The Catholic faith, unlike Orthodoxy, accepts fish as a fasting food. Nevertheless, Christmas Eve customs in both countries are united by bread. The main Bulgarian Christmas Eve dish is bread, which is eaten at the start of the Christmas Eve dinner. In Bulgaria, the beginning of the celebration is associated with the ritual breaking of bread that has an object or product baked or hidden in it, which is used to predict the success of the year ahead. For example, someone who finds a coin believes she or he will be rich. A man born in 1953, a non-believer, said that his wife baked the ritual bread, and all those who baked bread at home marked it with the sign of the cross. At the start of the Christmas Eve dinner, the oldest member of the family shares bread with others. Bread functions as a central food in many Bulgarian calendar and family celebrations (Mikov 2022).

Bread has had important ritual functions in Lithuania (Dundulienė 1989; Marcinkevičienė 2014). In Lithuania, we know of cases where the Christmas Eve dinner was started with bread and salt, although the popularity of *kalėdaičiai* (Christmas wafers) made from the finest flour and imprinted with biblical imagery spread under the influence of religion. These wafers used to be called Christ's bread (Dundulienė 1989: 60). Most families start Christmas Eve by eating *kalėdaičiai*, although the majority of respondents did not treat *kalėdaičiai* as food. The popular Lithuanian *kūčiukai*, made from yeast dough and poppy seeds, also symbolise small loaves of bread.

We also see certain Christian symbols in Bulgarian bread. The main loaf of Christmas Eve bread is decorated with various figures made of dough, such as two birds, a bunch of grapes, a sheaf of wheat, a lamb, a plough, a ploughman, or anything else related to the family or the family's economic activity in the hope for a rich and fertile year (Prodanova 2013: 202).



Vegetable dishes were less common in Lithuania, with the difference due to the climatic conditions as no peppers or grapes were grown in Lithuania. A dish typical of Lithuania is poppy seed milk<sup>3</sup> (a non-alcoholic drink made from poppy seeds, boiled chilled water, and sugar or honey), while the ritual cuisine of both countries is linked by the grain dish *kūčia* (Lith.) and *варено жумо* (Bul.). In both countries, ingredients for Christmas Eve dishes found in the wild, such as nuts and honey, are rare (cf. Marcinkevičienė, Šemetaitė, Vakarinienė 2019: 223–224, 238–240). Meanwhile, mushrooms used as a dish, a filling, a sauce, and even mushroom brine, are an ingredient that is only important only to Vilniusites. Small changes to Christmas Eve dinner dishes are found in both Lithuania and Bulgaria, although these changes are never to the three most important dishes. Alcoholic beverages such as wine and beer are not mentioned among the main dishes. It can therefore be argued that deviation from the Christmas Eve culinary tradition is slight and happened during the socialist period rather than as a consequence of COVID-19. Therefore, the stability of the culinary tradition in times of crisis points to the preservation of both Bulgarian and Lithuanian ethnic cultural traditions, even when the composition of the participants changes and the upholders of and successors to the tradition are not present.

## Conclusion

On a national level, Christmas Eve is celebrated in a small number of European countries, Lithuania and Bulgaria, where Christmas Eve is a public holiday, among them. Despite the atheist policies and restrictions of the socialist period, most people in Vilnius and Sofia still uphold the tradition of celebrating Christmas Eve with their family or the family of their next of kin (parents, grandparents, children), and of observing the fasts prescribed by the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. With the change in the possibility to celebrate Christmas Eve in 2020 with relatives in another city or country (in Lithuania, with those not living in the same household) and the decrease in the number of people celebrating, the culinary tradition of Christmas Eve remained stable in both countries. Although the importance of the dishes is different (fish dominates in Lithuania and vegetables in Bulgaria), a comparison of the culinary traditions of Lithuania and Bulgaria shows many archaic grain dishes manifesting themselves in different forms (ritual bread in Bulgaria and *kalėdaitis* and *kūčiukai* in Lithuania), along with foraged products such as nuts and honey in Bulgaria and mushrooms and poppy seeds in Lithuania. In both countries, some dishes made with ingredients of animal origin are occasionally mentioned, although in neither case are they listed among the top three. It can therefore be argued that deviation from the Christmas Eve culinary tradition is slight; it developed in Lithuania and Bulgaria during the socialist period and was not a consequence of COVID-19. It can therefore be concluded that the culinary tradition of Christmas Eve remains stable in times of crisis, both in Bulgaria and Lithuania.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> According to the 2021 census, Roman Catholics accounted for 74.2% of the country's total population, which was 2,810,761 (Results of the 2021 Population and Housing Census of the Republic of Lithuania). The second largest religious community was Orthodox, comprising 3.8% (105,600) of the population. Less than 1% of the Lithuanian population identified as belonging to other religions: Evangelical Lutheran 0.6%, Reformed Evangelicals 0.2% of the population (Results of the 2021 Population and Housing Census of the Republic of Lithuania).

<sup>2</sup> Although the Bulgarian ethnologist T. A. Koleva mentions nine or twelve dishes (Koleva 1977: 272), the number twelve, as is the case in Lithuania, can be interpreted by analogies with the number of apostles or the number of months in the year (Baeva, Toncheva 2019: 231). The numbers seven and nine are also known among Bulgarian Catholics (Yankov 2003: 85). According to Juozas Kudirka, five, six, nine, and thirteen dishes could also be eaten by Lithuanian Catholics (Kudirka 1993: 62–63).

<sup>3</sup> I do not classify poppies as fruit.

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