

The Religious Landscape in Bulgaria and Lithuania: Spiritual Resilience and Religious Practice among Academic Youth during COVID-19 and the War in Ukraine

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Abstract: This article examines the spiritual resilience and religious practices of Bulgarian and Lithuanian youth during the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis includes two periods of ethnographic fieldwork conducted by the author in Lithuania and Bulgaria between 2022 and 2024. The study aims to: analyse the manifestations of religiosity during the COVID-19 pandemic, using content analysis of scientific literature; and present the manifestations of religious and spiritual practices that emerged from an analysis of empirical ethnographic data. The results of empirical data reveal that social distancing and adaptation to the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic have increased the need for religious practices and changed the expression of these practices. In conclusion, faced with the threat posed by the pandemic, academic youth have resorted to various survival strategies in the form of both traditional religious practices and alternative spiritual practices that allow them to maintain hope, meaning, emotional stability and spiritual resilience.

Keywords: spiritual resilience, religious practices, academic youth, COVID-19, the war in Ukraine, Bulgaria, Lithuania.

***Habitus*, or the resonant disposition, as theoretical paradigm**

In the first part of this article, I would like to focus on the theoretical paradigm of *habitus*, i.e. the disposition of the collective resonant, a mode of listening and responding (Rosa 2024). The beginning of 21st century can be defined as a period marked by constant crises. Some of the main events that stuck in people's minds were September 11, 2001, when terrorists attacked the World Trade Centre in the USA, the global financial crisis of 2008, the 2015 European migrant crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, which tumbled over humanity in 2019, and the war which Russia started in Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The COVID-19 pandemic provoked a number of global changes: first of all a health crisis, followed by financial, political, cultural, moral and global crises (Fuchs 2021: 5).

The slowdown of real life in the physical world during the pandemic made individuals feel isolated and silenced, however, it served as the breakthrough for resonant relationships, i.e., “new forms of solidarity and friendship” with others and the world, where domination and control are surpassed by dialogue (Rosa 2020; Fuchs 2021: 27–28). On the one hand, people felt insecure having left the comfortable zone of interaction, on the other hand, they found a positive aspect to the situation: by spending time in their home environment they were able to reflect, observe the details of everyday life and fully experience every moment of their daily routine. The German sociologist Hartmut Rosa pointed out that the COVID-19 pandemic made us feel as if we were in “an experimental laboratory” with the situation serving as an incentive to rethink our lives.

The present social situation is sometimes referred to as ‘deadlock’. Rosa points out that our social system is permeated by the aspiration for perfection, growth and optimisation, which leads to estrangement and a lack of resonance. Such a social system lacks the ability to innovatively adapt to the challenges of the future, and is not predisposed to display ‘a listening heart’, which could find its response in religion, fostering the culture of dialogue, listening and reflection, enabling people to enter into relations with others and perceive the world as a place full of meaning. The potential for resonance in rituals, conscious actions and meetings is high as they enable citizens to nourish democratic sensitiveness, which might become a way out during times of instability. Rosa remarks that

if society loses this way out, “if it forgets this form of relationships, it would be lost forever” (Rosa 2022: 74).

Rosa goes on to ponder the problem of losing the experience of resonance in the context of the world gaining speed. He points out that “something new can evolve only in resonant relationships”, in the moment of collective resonance when all of us are able to listen to each other, “to open up to each other and the world and thus find the answers” (Rosa 2020). Thus, something new can evolve, defined by Rosa as society’s ability to invent itself anew, to experience new forms of existing in the world and interacting with each other (Rosa 2020). Rosa defines resonance as consisting of four factors: meeting; contact, or activity, which makes us active; the result of the action, i.e. transformation (when the world is perceived in a different perspective); and inaccessibility. Resonance cannot be planned: what mattered yesterday does not necessarily matter today (Rosa 2022). Rosa encourages us to look for alternative ways and forms of dwelling in the world. The most valuable relevant resources can be found in religious ideas and practices, even in the sacred spaces of cathedrals or the religious perception of time. He considers the fact that such spaces and practices are about to vanish in the Western world to be bad news (Rosa 2024). Rosa points out that the Church provides us with spaces, time, practices and ideas that enable us to form attitudes of consideration and receptivity, or *habitus* (Rosa 2024).

Research Design and Methodology

The article aims to investigate the spiritual resilience that young people developed during the COVID-19 pandemic and in light of the war Russia started in Ukraine, referring to the works of other investigators and the ethnographic data collected by the author in Kaunas and Sofia. The study aims to: analyse manifestations of religiosity and trends therein during the COVID-19 pandemic using content analysis of scientific literature; and present the manifestations of religious and spiritual practices that emerged from an analysis of empirical ethnographic data.

This article focuses on the problem of what factors have encouraged the manifestations and practices of religiosity and spirituality of young people as

they face the challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine.

The analysis includes two periods of ethnographic fieldwork conducted by the author as part of the bilateral international Ethnicity, Religiosity and National Identity in Bulgaria and Lithuania (Traditional Elements and New Transformations) project jointly organised by the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences (2022–2024). The research is new and relevant from a comparative perspective as it focuses on comparing the impact of the pandemic and the war in Ukraine on the spiritual resilience and religious practices of academic youth in two European Union countries, Lithuania and Bulgaria.

The ethnographic research was conducted in November to December 2022 in Kaunas and between April 14th and 22nd, 2024 in Sofia. The study involved 81 undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral students in humanities and social sciences who were studying during the COVID-19 pandemic in Bulgaria or Lithuania. Fifty students (from graduate and postgraduate study programs) of humanities at Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas participated in the study. These were divided by gender as follows: 38 females, 11 males and 1 other gender. The age of the students ranged from 18 to 29. The majority of students were Lithuanians, the minority had Ukrainian or Russian background. There were 31 respondents from graduate, postgraduate, and PhD study programs in Bulgaria, all from St Kliment Ohridsky University in Sofia. The majority were Bulgarians, with a minority of Ukrainians and Russians. The genders of respondents from Bulgaria were: 22 females, 8 males and 1 other gender; their ages ranged from 17 to 35.

Adopting ethnographic research methodology, I used a questionnaire survey; conversation; semi-structured in-depth interview; observation; comparative, interpretative methods; and content analysis of scientific articles.

The issue raised is the impact of the pandemic and the war in Ukraine on the spiritual resilience of young people. The questions to be answered are: what were the challenges young people faced during the pandemic and under the conditions of the war caused by Russia in Ukraine? What are the experiences of spiritual resilience developed in the two contexts and how does religion, as a source of resilience, affect the lives of young people today?

Religion as a Source of Resilience during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on people's everyday activities and lasting habits. Bulgarian ethnologist Stamen Kanev, who studied the ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic on people's lives, observed that "everyday habits and behaviour are oriented not only towards individual life strategies – they also reflect the development of society" (Kanev 2021: 15). Another Bulgarian scholar, Georgi Kapriev, mentions several negative consequences of the pandemic on academic life: the compromise of university education during the pandemic, radical changes in social life, the devaluation of the education process, and others (Kapriev 2023: 28). The pandemic had a negative effect on economics, social and political life, and on people's religious life. Scientific research has shown that social isolation and the requirement to adjust to restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic increased the need for religious traditions and determined a change in forms of expression.

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Its Sociocultural Dimensions (Baeva & Ilieva 2021), a collection of articles by Bulgarian ethnologists, deals with the challenges of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences for social and cultural life. The authors argue that the COVID-19 pandemic changed not only established habits and daily life, but also fundamental communication models, a fundamental idea that forms part of community (Ilieva & Baeva 2021: 12). The collection deals with the issue of "distant socialisation" using digital technologies, new forms of support for collective solidarity, and the preservation of social proximity and its common responsibilities (Ilieva & Baeva 2021: 12). Bulgarian ethnologist Nevena Dimitrova reveals the challenges faced by the Orthodox Church and its ritual practices during the COVID-19 period (Dimitrova 2021).

On the one hand, during the pandemic in 2020 the Bulgarian Orthodox Church faced challenges when celebrating Palm Sunday and Easter due to social restrictions. On the other hand the COVID-19 pandemic "has created an opportunity to return to traditional religious practices, rethink them, and for new traditions to emerge" (Dimitrova 2021: 83).

Unlike in Lithuania and other European countries, when the COVID-19 pandemic started in Bulgaria, the government decided to leave places of wor-

ship – churches and mosques – open. On March 13, 2020 it introduced special measures with the aim of impeding the spread of COVID-19 in the country, including the requirement to maintain physical distance between people. Religious communities, including the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, the most numerous Christian confessions in the country, were also obliged to fulfil the requirements: people had to maintain a distance of two metres during services and places of worship had to undergo regular disinfection. In addition, mourning family members had “to arrange funeral rituals strictly following the established order – the ceremony took place in the open, and could be attended by a minimal number of relatives” (Kalkandjieva 2020). Protestant pastors stopped holding services in churches and asked people to maintain physical distance when visiting them. Meanwhile “Catholic and Armenian Churches in Bulgaria started rendering services behind the closed door and broadcasting the service over the Internet” (Kalkandjieva 2020).

The restrictions introduced during the pandemic determined certain changes in Christian religious rituals, especially as concerns physical contact, singing in the choir and consuming the Eucharist (Baker et al. 2020), restrictions that persisted after the pandemic. Data shows the following consequences of these changes: 1) privatisation of religiosity; 2) asynchronic performance of religious rituals and participation in these rituals; 3) changes in the conditions of the religious environment, with the aim of using technological innovations for the dissemination of religious ideas; 4) the collaboration of religious organisations with local communities; and 5) conflicts arising between religious groups and the government including representatives of local administrations because of restrictions on social gatherings (Baker et al. 2020).

Lots of articles were written during COVID-19 analysing the significance of religion during the pandemic. They provided lots of information proving that religious and cultural beliefs have a major effect on people’s attitudes and behaviour and exert positive or negative influence on individuals, and likewise society’s, health (Sisti et al. 2022). The results of the investigation showed that religious institutions became both vectors for COVID-19 outbursts as well as information mediators overcoming resistance to the introduction of COVID-19 preventive measures. These studies recommended that politicians working in the field of healthcare be more sensitive and recognise the significance of religion and culture when solving complicated global health challenges (Sisti et al. 2022).

Researchers examined connections between religion, spirituality and resilience, making the conclusion that spirituality serves as a key factor in resilience, and that it is “an important resource for managing hardship” (Manning et al. 2019: 168). Several scholars have argued that resilience could be a valuable resource to help individuals “overcome adversity” and cope with complex situations (Clemons 2024: 567). Resilience could be defined as “a person’s ability to overcome, manage, experience and rebound when facing adversities” (Reivich and Shatté 2002), “the capacity for recovery and maintained adaptive behaviour” upon encountering a stressful event (Garmezy, 1991: 459; Shean 2015: 8) or as “a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation” despite major assaults on the developmental process. (Luthar et al. 2000: 543)

Religion could be said to be one of the sources of resilience that adds to a person’s emotional stability and value-based resilience. A religious or philosophical world outlook is an important part of human life that influences a person’s behaviour, emotional stability, the maturity of their personality, self-respect and satisfaction (Rahman et al. 2020: 1139). “Religion is the essential element nourishing and testifying to the person’s spiritual health” (Papazoglou et al. 2021: 3224). Investigations conducted in recent years have shown that religious beliefs and practices are closely related to aspects of health, for example, the ability to cope with illness, recover after an operation and view a complicated state of health in a positive light (Kowalczyk et al. 2020).

The majority of scientists agree that spiritual health is more than a system based on personal values and principles of faith: it brings the person closer to the essence of their faith. Spiritual health manifests itself as service to the community, sharing one’s beliefs and values, and the manner of worship (Papazoglou et al. 2021: 3224). It plays an important role while nourishing emotional and psychic well-being and even contributes to physical convalescence. Former investigations showed that participation in religious rituals and pilgrimages can reinforce social relations and foster a sense of belonging, which is an indispensable condition for ensuring one’s physical, mental and spiritual health and well-being (ibid.).

The group of Orthodox investigators who analysed the impact of COVID-19 on the ways in which religiosity manifests itself revealed that faithful believers strongly attached to Church tradition prohibited from attending services during the pandemic, or from going on pilgrimage, experienced negative effects on their spiritual health (Papazoglou et al. 2021: 3224). Research conducted

by Polish scientists showed that in spite of a sense of human fragility, social isolation, fear and helplessness, the experience of the pandemic served as an incentive to spiritual renewal for young people. Thus, we may presuppose that a new “Coronavirus generation” is being formed – nurturing their spirituality, they will have a mature view of faith (Kowalczyk et al. 2020: 2676).

The Results of Ethnographic Data

In the last part of this article, I would like to focus on the empirical results gained from the ethnographic data gained through my fieldwork in Bulgaria and Lithuania.

The results of my recent study in Bulgaria show that the pandemic had a negative effect on the well-being and spiritual health of young people. In response to stressful situations, young people used various defensive coping mechanisms: psychological resistance strategies, support from family and friends, as well as education, religious and health system institutions (Račiūnaitė-Paužuolienė 2025: 154). In this study, I am particularly interested in the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the religiosity of young people in Bulgaria and Lithuania.

The religious and ethnic identity of Bulgarian respondents. The data from the investigation conducted in Bulgaria in 2024 shows that the group of 31 respondents consisted of 17 Orthodox Bulgarians, six Romans Catholics (five Bulgarians and one Russian), 2 Ukrainian Orthodoxes, six non-believers, atheists or agnostics. Ninety-seven percent of respondents were Bulgarian, two percent Ukrainian and one percent Russian.

This ethnographic shows that some Roman Catholics came from Bulgarian Orthodox families that did not practice the same faith. They decided to attend Roman Catholic church on their own, familiarising themselves with the faith by reading Christian literature or when invited by friends. One young Bulgarian Catholic man maintained:

“My parents are non-practicing Bulgarian Orthodox Christians. My faith is my personal choice – I decided on the Catholic Church after reading books. I read Thomas Aquinas and *Russia and the Universal Church* by Vladimir Solovyev” (VMU ER, f.1, 2024/ 27).

The ethnographic investigation conducted in Bulgaria shows that young Orthodox Bulgarians and Roman Catholics treated the pandemic in somewhat different ways. During the critical period the resilience of Roman Catholics was nurtured by prayer, faith in God, family support, and Church community. They performed religious practices, which brought them peace and spiritual strength. Religious practices performed during the pandemic included going to church, and supporting the Church community with prayer and Bible reading (VMU ER, f. 1, 2024/23–28).

Some students, especially those with a clearly defined Christian religious identity, which is to be said about Roman Catholics in Bulgaria, singled out how “thinking rationally and acting in a moral way” were one positive aspect of the challenges of the quarantine period (VMU ER, f. 1, 2024/26). The answers of the Catholics confirmed the conclusion of previous research which stated that women were more persistent when declaring their faith or spiritual standpoint in the precarious situation of the COVID-19 pandemic (Kowalczyk et al. 2020: 2676).

Unlike Bulgarian Catholics, who used to observe traditional Catholic practices, when striving to overcome COVID-19 challenges young Orthodox Bulgarians prioritised alternative practices. Some of these respondents observed that their decision to join the Bulgarian Orthodox community was a conscious choice. One respondent openly shared his personal experience. He was baptised at the age of 21:

When I was a baby, my parents decided not to baptise me until I grew up. During the time of socialism my parents were not baptised because it was forbidden. I made my own decision concerning baptism. I decided to relate to the group. My parents were not traditional Christians; they had no faith in God. My parents taught me morals based on the teaching of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church.... My family upbringing was Orthodox. I am not a traditional Orthodox. I am neither a believer, nor an unbeliever. I think that the moral teaching of the Orthodox religion is a way of life. I don't go to church every Sunday. The church is a special place for community gatherings. I go to church on the days of great feasts: September 22, Christmas or Easter, but I am not a traditional believer who goes to church every day or on Sunday (VDU ER, f. 2024/1).

A woman shared a similar experience: her parents, Orthodox Bulgarians, did not practice their religion during the Soviet period and did not baptise their children. The woman was baptised an adult at the age of 22 or 23. At the time she was studying in a foreign country and was in search of religion and spirituality. She practiced yoga, did breathing exercises and unexpectedly converted to the Bulgarian Orthodox religion after spending some time in a Bulgarian monastery, where she was baptised.

During the period of the Covid pandemic both Bulgarian and Lithuanian Orthodox youth overcame stress by means of alternative spiritual practices, such as meditation, Reiki, fitness, sport, walking or engaging in long discussions which had a psycho-therapeutic effect. Research participants from both countries underlined the significance of support from their family and friends, saying that it helped them to overcome the challenges of the pandemic. Traditional religious practices such as attending services or reading religious philosophy books were observed by a very small group of Bulgarian Orthodox respondents (less than 1%).

The investigation showed that during the period of COVID-19 Lithuanian and Bulgarian Master's students, most of whom were Roman Catholic, were involved in traditional Catholic religious practices to a greater degree than those of the Bachelor's programme.

After Russia started the war in Ukraine, young Orthodox Bulgarians experienced strong polarisation and had conflicts with their friends and family members, who viewed the situation in a different light. Bulgarian youth took to heart the deaths of innocent people, some provided financial support for Ukrainians and volunteered with other aid, and some were worried because of political and financial instability.

Young Lithuanians were less polarised when evaluating Russia's war against Ukraine. Students in Lithuania were shocked to learn about the military activities in Ukraine and experienced lots of stress, fear and anxiety because of what was happening and might happen in Ukraine, and Lithuania. They felt anger towards the aggressors and were ashamed because of people in their environment who supported them. They were willing to overcome the challenges raised by the war, donated to support Ukraine, helped suffering Ukrainians, and engaged in voluntary philanthropic activities.

Based on ethnographic research data, after Russia started the war in Ukraine, young people gained new life experiences that enabled them to

maintain spiritual resilience. Ukrainians studying in Bulgaria who had left their country and had lost family members said that when living in Bulgaria they had completely changed their lifestyles and were preparing for anything that could happen to them by learning to relate and communicate with everyone (VMU ER, f. 1, 2024/22). One Ukrainian war refugee stated: “The war started in my country, thus I had to face all the problems of this period.” Roman Catholics maintained that the best practice was to pray and trust in God’s mercy even in the most difficult circumstances, disregard those who speak in support of the war and other such subjects that we cannot change, trust the power of prayer and the wisdom of the Bible, and perform small actions of charity and be grateful for peace in the country in which one lives (VMU ER, f. 1, 2024).

The pandemic taught the students to adjust to the new conditions of life, to advance in different fields, to be grateful for everything they have, to find meaning in their work, to keep real relationships with people around them, to seek help from others, to collaborate with different people, to look for alternative ways and forms of dwelling in the world, to contemplate the meaning of life and to reflect on the situation of the world, which, if nothing changes, will become an even worse place to live in.

One informant stated: “I feel that people intuit the approaching crisis (starting with mass migration finishing with climate change); however, people have not summoned up their strength in order to overcome old habits and acquire new ones” (VMU ER, f. 1, 2024/19).

Some Catholics said, for example:

I go to church every Sunday and, if it is possible, every day and try not to evade problems when they arise, but face them with courage and God’s grace (VMU ER, f. 1, 2024/23).

I try to be surrounded by people who share my beliefs and help me keep my faith. I am open-minded as much as concerns who I am, my religion and world outlook. Besides, I also try not to pay heed to new ideologies that strive to conquer the world (VMU ER, f. 1, 2024/24).

I often think about God and my friends and try to ponder less on problems hoping that God will take care of them (VMU ER, f. 1, 2024/25).

Every earthly thing dies out and is lost... The only thing that enables us to retain hope is faith, or to be more concrete God, through his only holy universal Church (VMU ER, f. 1, 2024/26).

Most often I apply philosophical means – self-reflection, ethical consideration of one's life, the practices of the Catholic faith (VMU ER, f. 1, 2024/27).

The ethnographic investigation conducted in Bulgaria and Lithuania showed that Orthodox youth were less engaged in traditional religious practices during the pandemic. The majority were inclined to swap Orthodox religious practices for alternative spiritual practices. Confronting the threat of the pandemic and the war in Ukraine, academic youth used different strategies of survival, for example traditional religious practices or alternative spiritual practices.



Figure 1. Sofia's St. Kliment Ohridski University, April 2024. Photo by Rasa Račiūnaitė-Paužuolienė.

Young Lithuanian respondents' expressions of religiosity. The ethnographic data revealed that academic Lithuanian youth were assisted in overcoming anxiety during the pandemic by both traditional religious and alternative spiritual practices such as prayer, meditation, “establishing a connection with the universe”, a philosophical worldview, psycho-therapeutic measures, communication with relatives and friends, positive thoughts, knowledge and understanding of matters related to the war.

One young woman stated: “Being an army volunteer, I referred to my knowledge, disposition and understanding of military actions” (VMU ER, f. 1, 2022/4).

The investigation conducted in Lithuania showed that students were enabled to overcome the problems by certain protective factors: a person's psychological qualities and the support of family members and social support structures such as the Church and institutions of education.

The results of the empirical data reveal that social distancing and adaptation to the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic increased the need for religious practices and changed the expression of these practices. The survey finds considerable diversity within religious groups. For instance, an ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Bulgaria showed that there were differences in the religiosity of Roman Catholic and Bulgarian Orthodox youth during the pandemic. Roman Catholics maintained stability during this period relying on such elements of spirituality as faith in and love for God, prayer, family support, and church community. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Catholics observed traditional religious practices (attending church, reading the Bible, praying with the community), which helped them maintain spiritual peace. Lower interest in religious practices prevailed among Orthodox Bulgarian youth during the pandemic. Most representatives of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church used alternative spiritual practices such as meditation, yoga and breathing exercises.

One more way to overcome the challenges related to the war in Ukraine was to contribute to funds supporting Ukraine, strive towards a concrete goal, for example to help Ukrainian people who were suffering the consequences of the war, or to volunteer to do something constructive. One respondent said: "I help those who ask and those who ask silently or are waiting for help" (VMU ER f. 1, 2022/21).

The research conducted in Lithuania showed that some students acquired new values: they became more empathic with those who suffer, undertook philanthropic activities that they continue to date, and donated money to support Ukraine every month. Thus, the philanthropic disposition of young people became stronger. However, students were enabled to overcome the problems because of certain protective factors: the person's psychological qualities, the assistance of family members and external support structures such as the institutions of education and religion.

Faced with the threat posed by the pandemic, academic youth have resorted to various survival strategies, for example traditional religious practices or alternative spiritual practices that allow them to maintain hope and meaning. Religion helped develop young people's emotional stability and spiritual

resilience during the pandemic, which enabled them to form an attitude of consideration and receptivity, or *habitus* (Rosa 2024).

Former investigations showed that in times of disturbance and crisis humanity tends to seek comfort in prayer and look for answers to existential questions in religion. This is confirmed by the investigation conducted by Jeanet Sinding Bentzen in 2020 using Google search data from 95 countries (Bentzen 2021). The word “prayer” served as a keyword for observing the intensity of prayer during the COVID-19 pandemic across the world. The data from Google showed that the pandemic increased searches for prayer and related topics reaching a peak in March, 2020. More than half of the world population prayed with the intention of ending the pandemic. The increased interest in prayer was noted on the internet on all continents and included all religious denominations (Christian (especially Catholic), Hindu and other traditional religions, except Buddhism) (Bentzen 2021: 559). Previous investigations, which were used to supplement the data of this research, concluded that natural disasters have a long-lasting effect on religiosity, which is transmitted from generation to generation despite the education of the people (Bentzen 2019).

Thus, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the religiosity of future populations and their spiritual resilience will only become apparent in some time, after investigators have analysed various levels and sources of resilience including demographic and personal development, and including sources from the fields of culture, social life, religion and economy.



Figure 2. Kaunas, Graduation ceremony at Vytautas Magnus University 2021. Photo by Jonas Petronis.

Conclusions

This investigation dealt with the spiritual resilience and religious practice of young people during the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, based on analysis of the data presented in scientific articles and gathered during ethnographic investigation in Bulgaria and Lithuania. The results revealed some similarities between the two countries.

Firstly, the ethnographic data showed that Bulgarian and Lithuanian Orthodox youth were less engaged in traditional religious practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. Asked about religious practices and developing their philosophical world outlooks they indicated such means as reading the philosophical works of the stoics and performing the religious practices of the Orthodox Church. The majority of Orthodox youth were inclined to swap Orthodox religious practices for alternative spiritual practices such as meditation, relaxation, yoga, fitness, and breathing exercises.

Secondly, during the period of COVID-19 Lithuanian and Bulgarian Master's students programme, most of whom were Roman Catholics, were involved in traditional Catholics religious practices to a greater degree than those of the Bachelor's programme.

Thirdly, confronting the threat of the pandemic, Lithuanian and Bulgarian academic youth used some strategies of survival, for example traditional religious practices, alternative spiritual practices, and psycho-therapeutic measures, allowing them to sustain hope and helping to give meaning to life. They also kept in close contact with their parents and friends through social media or by phone, nurturing positive thoughts and engagement; they used external support structures such as the Church and psychological support services.

Fourthly, with the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, Bulgarian academic youth experienced significant social polarisation and had conflicts with their relatives and friends who had different opinions. Bulgarian youth were concerned about the deaths of innocent people. Some provided financial support to Ukrainians or volunteered, others were concerned about political and financial instability. Lithuanian young people were less polarised in their evaluation the war Russia started against Ukraine. They experienced lots of stress, fear and anxiety, and felt anger towards the aggressors. Lithuanian academic youth tried to overcome the challenges caused by the war through concrete action such as donating to

the Ukraine Support Fund, helping suffering Ukrainians, volunteering, and engaging in philanthropic activities.

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