

HOLIDAYS – THE MIRROR OF SOCIETY. THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXTS OF PRESENT-DAY HOLIDAYS IN THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

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After 2010, the study of present-day holidays established itself as an original tool for the study of society in Slovak ethnology. In the first stage, the research team of the Institute of Ethnology SAS focused on the empirical research of the specific contexts of the term holiday in Slovakia and mapped the range of situations which are designated by people as holidays today. The term holiday means the interruption of the daily routine, a moment commemorated on a cyclical basis or a period accompanied by normative or ritual acts and with an ascribed symbolic meaning. Our research showed that apart from identification, ritual and spiritual functions which are important for individuals or communities, as commonly studied by ethnology, holidays also fulfil a number of practical functions at present. After the discovery of the manifold overlaps of this phenomenon with the on-going social processes, the focus of ethnology has shifted to society as such and on its reflection in the mirror of holidays. Through an analysis of empirical materials from the observation and ethnographic description of the events in the public space during holidays, the study of the holiday legislation, the activities of various institutions, the production of printed and electronic media, business and advertising, which create the current content and the ways of celebrating holidays, it was possible to obtain a basis for a specific testimony about the present-day social processes in the Slovak Republic. In this context, this study is dedicated to the following relations: holidays and politics, holidays and economy, and holidays and citizens.

Key words: public holiday, commemorative day, holiday, present-day holidays, celebration of holidays, festivity, ritualisation, ritual practice, ritualised behaviour, social functions of holidays, national holiday, laws on holidays/holiday legislation, Slovakia

INTRODUCTION

The study of present-day holidays has proven to be an original tool for the study of society in Slovak ethnology at the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century. There were two motives for elaborating on this research direction. The first one arose directly from the internal cognitional needs of the discipline, which has dynamically

developed over the past decades towards anthropology and has focused on the present social phenomena. The second motive was the growing recurrent calls by journalists on ethnologists to make the public familiar, via the mass media, with the traditional, yet no longer known, picture of present-day holidays or reconstruct archaic elements in their current forms. They also asked for an explanation of the links between various imported and new holidays as well as domestic cultural tradition.

The need to understand these processes raised a challenge for ethnologists to study present-day holidays which were previously insufficiently reflected, and obtain an authentic, realistic view of the content, functions and development trends of this broad and dynamic phenomenon. After discovering the manifold overlaps of the holidays' phenomenon with current social processes, the focus has shifted to society as such and on its reflection in the mirror of holidays.

In the first stage of their work, they intensively mapped the range of situations which people commemorate on a cyclical basis today, on which occasions they choose non-daily – ritual or ritualised – behaviour, and designate them as holidays. They subsequently concentrated on their formal and organisational framework and on the study of each holiday, an analysis of their contents, the ways of celebrating them and the factors of their acceptance.¹

This paper describes the context and the working methods, and also presents some of the results achieved throughout a six-year period that has lapsed since the launch of this research project.

THE TERM HOLIDAY

During the mapping of the range of cyclically recurring festivities, feasts and important moments each year, most commonly designated as holidays [*sviatky* in Slovak], their list turned out to be relatively broad. It ranges from those which are created, preserved, sanctioned and distributed by institutions, such as the State and the Church, through holidays which are considered by territorial, social and professional communities, subcultures and groups as an important part of their way of lives, up to the level of family. The life-cycle of holidays and the ways of celebrating them has been maintained for decades or even hundreds of years, with either preserved or updated elements. At the same time, new opportunities considered as holidays have been created and experienced. For people, they still represent an opportunity to recurrently break with their daily routine and live a certain period of time in an exceptional atmosphere. This guarantees relative immutability of holidays and their stable place in culture.

Through the empirical study of the specific daily contexts of the term *holiday* in the 21st century, ethnology takes advantage of the opportunity of obtaining an insight into society, and seeks to describe and get familiar with it. Based on the results of public discourse analysis in Slovakia today, the term holiday is used to designate an opportunity or a cyclically recurrent period of time of various duration, during which something important or exceptional happens or is remembered, specific and to

1 The ethnological study of present-day holidays within the Institute of Ethnology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences in Bratislava was covered by two consecutive basic research projects with the grant support by VEGA: *What Is a Holiday in the 21st Century in Slovakia? On the Social Context of Rituals* (VEGA No. 2/0069/11; 2011–2013), and *Ritual Behaviour as a Strategic Tool for Group Identification: the Social and Cultural Contexts of Contemporary Holidays in Slovakia* (VEGA No. 2/0088/14; 2014–2016).

a certain extent normative ways of behaviour are assumed or invoked, and which are ascribed symbolic meanings in various intensity. The practice of designating certain moments as holidays, which presumes the same active categorisation function of this term in certain social spaces, can be observed as culturally conditioned, and therefore worthy of ethnological reflection. Nevertheless, holidays are not the subject of exact definition and terminological analysis, nor are they treated as a precisely defined analytical term. What is studied is their specific content and context as social phenomena (Popelková, 2012). Holiday means an interruption of the daily routine, a moment or period accompanied by normative or ritual acts along with an ascribed symbolic meaning. In the analysis of ethnographic data, it is used to designate the framework for carrying out rituals and a communication tool for the dissemination of messages with socially relevant content. It could also be said that the ethnological perspective is not directed through society “towards” holiday and does not end there, but vice versa, it is the study of society “through” holidays. It is not the intention to explain holidays by society, but society by holidays.

HOLIDAY AS A SOCIAL PHENOMENON

Ethnology in Slovakia began to reflect the unusual increase in the number and penetration of holidays, festivities and feasts in the public space, social events, culture and politics, accompanied by media, advertising and business attention, shortly after the political upheaval in 1989. In line with its research orientation based on ethnographic roots, ethnology had studied for decades the ways of behaviour of people during important moments with an emphasis on long-preserved rituals and habits with historic roots. It was almost until the 1980s that it focused mainly on holidays within the territorial communities of rural settlements which were linked with natural and agricultural cycles, and on their symbolic level. At the turn of the century, its field of interest dynamically expanded towards anthropological and social science disciplines and its attention focused on the study of present-day societal challenges. Hence, the process of discovery of the remains of archaic elements in holiday rituals and habits ceased to be effective. On the other hand, there was an increasing need to perceive holidays not as residues of the past, but as an element of the current way of life, post-modern mass culture, and the object and product of globally spread electronic communication.

The research probes confirmed the general assumptions according to which the development of the holiday phenomenon and the way of celebrating them at the end of the 20th century was largely affected by the social and economic transition processes that began with the fall of the Communist regime in 1989, including the spread of communication channels and technical means. The interpretation attempts to explain the transformations of the past forms of holidays, and the observation of their course in real time undermined the stereotypical picture of them as an invariable complex with primarily spiritual functions. They also revealed their organic links to several spheres of society – politics, advertising, business, etc.

The idea of conceptualising holidays as a scientific tool for the research of society also built on the assumption that they serve different social groups for the instrumentalisation of their plans, the achievement of their objectives, the presentation of their opinions and dissemination of ideologies, etc. The ways of experiencing holidays are individual or group-binding on one hand, and flexible and upgradable in

terms of content and form on the other. Thanks to this fact, holidays, due to their essence, can fulfil a wide range of social roles and social functions and be used as a practical tool by the most diverse social actors. The research showed that apart from the identification, ritual and spiritual functions which are important to an individual or communities, as commonly observed by ethnology, holidays also fulfil a number of practical roles today. The symbolic content and ritual practice successfully disguise the actual plan of their actors, whether it is the communication of an important message about the social order, the distribution of power, or the pursuit of ideological and economic objectives. These can be revealed and the functioning of small or larger social organisms can be understood by observing specific circumstances, the social environment or the context of events related to holidays, their content and course.

The broadly perceived public discourse on holidays became accepted as a space for the research of the holiday phenomenon, understood here as a framework, sum and way of using the terms, evaluations and opinions on holidays, i.e. what and how people talk about in connection with holidays.

This opened a number of opportunities for their study and analysis. One of them was the observation of the range of meanings and ways of experiencing occasions which are considered exceptional and important in Slovakia at present. At the level of each holiday, we observed the actual functions of holidays in society, what symbolic and practical roles they play, what activities are related to preserving them, why there are differences in their popularity, who produces the forms of experiencing them, or who guarantees their preservation. The opportunity arose to obtain knowledge about the ways of communicating factual or symbolic information in culture, about the mechanisms of collective and individual identifications and distributions of power, and about the existence and forms of manifestations of affiliations and hierarchies within society. By means of the research on holidays, we sought to get familiar with the mechanisms of the effects of economic, political and other factors that influence the social processes in the present-day society in Slovakia.

EMPIRICAL DATA

The research team of ethnologists resolved to empirically study holidays, conceived as a social phenomenon, by describing their authentic manifestations and by analysing the space and conditions in which holidays develop at present. During holidays, they observed the course of events in the public space and systematically mapped the content of articles in printed media, texts and speeches disseminated via advertising, TV, radio and internet communication. The research resulted in the gathering and processing of authentic data in the form of concise ethnographic descriptions of the field observation and research photo documentation of various events through extensive bodies of data from website research, thematic media desk research, records of parliamentary sessions, internet discussions and blogs, and findings from quantitative representative research.² Once the range was mapped, we tried to define

² The quantitative data was obtained by means of a representative questionnaire survey which, in addition to Halloween, also included All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day. The respondents answered questions about what they do during All Saints' Day and what their associations are with All Souls' Day and Halloween by choosing one or more answers from the options given. The survey was conducted by the FOCUS agency on 03-08 November 2011 based on a statistically representative sample of 1,041 inhabitants of the Slovak Republic aged 18 years and more.

the different categories of holidays (state, religious, national, political, etc.) as a tool to study society directly within the spheres in which they primarily work or which are considered to be such (e.g. religious holidays in relation to church or national holidays in relation to the State's policy). When talking about the ways of celebrating them, however, some assumed levels (for example, the attendance of religious rituals during the Easter holiday) did not show to be dominant, or links to many other social fields emerged (e.g. relaxation activities, tourism). It was found, that whatever approach we apply, the result is always groups with unclear and permeable limits, and shows that the attempt to strictly divide holidays into categories and study them in this manner is impractical and significantly narrows the perspective. It would be more effective to respect this apparent opacity, adapt the data collection and the asking of questions to the specific selected theoretical framework, and analyse the gathered specific material at all levels of the socially relevant context revealed by the research.

The analysis, therefore, included representatives of certain groups of holidays with the predominance of common features, e.g. Christmas as one of the holidays in Slovakia which is deeply rooted in the Christian tradition, or Halloween as a representative of new holidays introduced in Slovakia at the end of the 20th century. The observation of the attributes and content of holidays as ways of celebrating them resulted in their analysis as occasions during which people choose ritualised behaviour. We mapped the processes which stand "behind" the empirically captured and ethnographically described phenomenon, as well as the causes and practical reasons that influence the actors and their motivation and behaviour. As the nature of the studied phenomenon suggests, the case studies of the different holidays, while being connected to the most diverse elements of the social reality, revealed a large variety of new relationships on the basis of the analysis of empirical data, gradually leading to a more thorough elaboration on the multitude of levels of this phenomenon. Even though issues related to the specific empirical material often overlapped, the studied holidays can be presented as a part of several basic research segments.

The first group is formed by holidays sanctioned by law. In the Slovak Republic, this refers to dates enacted by law in one of the following three categories: national holidays, public holidays (both of them are non-working days) and commemorative days (working days). By studying this group of holidays, we sought to discover the mechanisms used by the State for the production and distribution of information about the symbolic meaning of enacted dates which are important from the State's perspective. We focused on the process of creation and functioning of the legislation, on holidays as the subject of politics, and the functions of economic arguments in the political debate on their enactment or cancellation. We also tried to find out the degree of effectiveness of the State's efforts to spread the specific ideas about the enacted holidays among Slovak citizens. The studied topics included the following issues: political interpretation of the symbolic content of holidays, the ritual practice of state representatives and the different political camps, the ways of commemorating historic events embedded in holidays, as well as parallel or antagonistic pictures of the past. In this segment, the case studies focused on the national holiday *Anniversary of the Slovak National Uprising* (29 August) and on one from the group of commemorative days – the *Holocaust and Racial Violence Remembrance Day* (9 September). *International Women's Day*, which is not enacted by law in Slovakia, was subject to a detailed analysis in a similar context. Another national holiday – *Labour Day* (1 May) – was analysed as part of the study on the acceptance of various

types of holidays (Popelková, 2014a; Vrzgulová, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2014a, 2017; Zajonc, 2016).

The other group – holidays rooted in Christian religion – was represented in the research sample by *Christmas*. This term designates almost a month-long period before and after the Christian holiday celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ. Some days of this period are legislated as public holidays. The research studied the main form and content elements of the present-day Christmas holiday by mapping the activities of the municipal sphere and civic associations, churches, advertising, business and many other institutions, seeking to learn about their social-integration, spiritual or economic functions, the ambivalence of traditional and new ways of experiencing the different stages of the Christmas holiday by people, and what meaning they attribute to Christmas (Beňušková, 2014).

The differentiated category, represented within the research corpus by urban holidays, Marian pilgrimages and student feasts, was the subject of the research on the processes of creation and preservation of group affiliation of professional (miners, wine-growers), territorial (municipality, town, neighbourhood), confessional (Catholic believers) and age (teenagers) groups. The analysis of the observations and descriptions of holidays and feasts as part of local development and integration strategies of urban and rural settlements focused on the relationship between the different forms of celebrating holidays and their social functions. Holidays were studied within this particular category (Bahna, 2016; Beňušková, 2013, 2016; Popelková, 2013, 2014a, 2016; Popelková, Zajonc, 2013).

St. Valentine's Day and *Halloween* represent in the research sample a group of holidays which are not formally embedded in Slovakia and, as a stereotype, are usually designated as new or foreign. However, they are generally well-known, and each year result in a wide range of various ritual activities on one hand, and marketing and advertising activities on the other. The confrontation of their elements with various domestic holidays and the analysis of the attributes, ideas, artefacts, the ways of celebrating them and related activities aim to explain their social functions and the degree of their acceptance or rejection (Zajonc, 2014, 2016).

ANALYTICAL CONCEPTS

The data analysis and interpretation applied several theoretical models and concepts. We mainly used the theory of the epidemiology of representations by anthropologist Dan Sperber (1996) and his concept of cultural representations as ideas, expressions, versions, images or explanations of some cultural phenomena which are common to the members of a certain group. The degree of effectiveness of state instruments manifested in the dissemination of certain representations of holidays by the State can be put in relation with the fact that its citizens face the same sources of their distribution and communication networks (in this case, for example, in the form of mass media in Slovakia) (Sperber, 1996: 26, 32 ff.; Ferencová, 2009: 336; Ferencová, Nosková, 2009: 23).

Another methodological inspiration was the possibility of dealing with holidays using the concept of ritual, which is one of the ways of looking at the organisation of the world in social sciences. Given the intention of studying contemporary society through various contents of the holiday phenomenon, i.e. the context in which holidays exist today, our attention did not focus on ritual as such. The interest was also in

phenomena which are studied in social sciences as rituals and acts commonly designated as rituals. The opinions of the religious studies scholar Catherine Bell (2009) served as a basis in this case. She elaborated on the criticism of the reflections on ritual as a universal category or a sign of human behaviour. With her proposal to define ritual practices as a situational strategic activity, which can only be understood in relation to other activities, she turned her attention to the surroundings of ritual, i.e. on its specific social context and the wider relationships between activities and social life. Instead of an attempt to discover a special logic and symbolic structure from the ethnographic descriptions of familiar genres of ritual practices, regarded as traditional rituals (transition, calendar, initiation, etc.), she proposed the study of those activities in modern societies which are not ritual in the traditional sense of the word, but are undoubtedly considered to have qualities similar to rituals. When we talk about rituals as a form of acting, Catherine Bell suggests using the term ritualisation. She defines it as a process, a flexible and strategic way of acting, typical for a number of diverse routine activities (Bell, 2009: 138 ff.). The concept of ritualisation became attractive for the interpretation of the discourse related to present-day holidays because of its flexibility when used in the analysis of human acts in experiencing moments designated as holidays.

The analysis of the present-day holiday discourse in Slovakia was also based on the elements of the approaches to the study of rituals in European ethnology. Some of them were further elaborated by Klaus Roth in 2008. Roth decided to use the vague and ambiguous social science concept of daily life, in line with Norbert Elias's criticism of 1978, in the ideologically least-burdened opposition of daily vs. festive. Roth managed to grasp the study of the process of adaptation of holidays and rituals by the population of European countries under the Communist regime in a very specific way and with ethnographically graspable economic and social characteristics of life (Roth, 2008: 14–18, 23 ff.).

The traditional theoretical concepts of transition rituals (“rite de passage”) by Arnold van Gennep (1997) and Victor Turner (2004) were used in the analysis of the festivities related to important stages of students' lives and to the period of reaching adulthood.

Relevant to the study of the segment of the social discourse related to national holidays are the points presented by Pierre Bourdieu in his essay *State Nobility* (1998: 87–89), in particular the analysis of the symbolic effectiveness of the state power embedded in the cognitive and evaluation structures of its citizens. On the other hand, the degree of their effectiveness or normativeness can be verified by an analysis of the ways citizens spend their national holidays. The sociological reflections by Jan Keller (2003: 77 ff.) also offered a tool in this regard, interpreting the symbolical logic of people's holiday behaviour in modern societies as an expression of collective ignorance of national holidays.

The specific type of depiction of the changing, highly complex and hard to define reality used by politics can be observed and analysed from the perspective of the concept of the political representation of reality. Politics place at the forefront some elements of the non-transparent complex of social relationships, while shifting others to the margin or leaving them unnoticed. It is able not only to confer the assumed contours on the changing subject, but to form it, as well. This type of representation aims to trace the essence of an object. Its quality is measured by the degree it convinces others, whether it reaches a social effect or brings social recognition to its producers (Schwarz, 1994).

In order to grasp such an important element of the holiday phenomenon as references to the past and its celebration, we applied the concept of invented traditions by Eric Hobsbawm (1983) as one of the tools in the analysis. He elaborated on it in the framework of his study of the phenomenon of nationalism in the history of modern European societies on the basis of his finding that many “traditions” which are present in the history of Europe’s nations and which are recurrently emphasised and commemorated are not as old as they seem to be on the outside. Many of them are more recent, though they often refer to the remote past. His invented tradition is the reaction of society to new situations and current challenges by referring to old situations, adapting ancient habits to the new conditions and by using old models for rather up-to-date aims.

SOCIETY IN THE MIRROR OF HOLIDAYS

In the final part of this paper, I will seek to present the potential and cognitive possibilities of the described ethnological approach to holidays as an instrument for the study of society. The results of the analysis of holidays from the perspective of legislation and politics in the Slovak Republic in the 21st century³ can be modelled as an intersection of three imaginary sets: the sphere of politics represented by state institutions, political parties and churches; the sphere of the economy; and the sphere of citizens or the community of Slovak inhabitants. Holidays are what connects these spheres in this working model and through what they communicate. Therefore, I will outline the mechanisms of this communication, as well as the picture of present-day Slovakia as it appears in the mirror of holidays.

a) Holidays and politics

Several years after the political upheaval in November 1989, which was followed by a complicated process of post-socialist transition in Czecho-Slovakia, the building of the liberal economy and a multi-party political system, the Czecho-Slovak federation broke up and two new independent states were established in Central Europe in January of 1993. One of them was the Slovak Republic.

The need to formally define the symbolic interpretation of certain dates by law – from the position of the State – continues to be on the social agenda in the 21st century as well. This is highlighted by the fact that the Slovak Republic proceeded to the interpretation of a group of selected dates and to their legislation immediately the first year of its existence. The process of amending Act No. 241/1993 Coll. on National Holidays, Public Holidays and Commemorative Days resulted in the Slovak Republic now having more than thirty legally sanctioned dates in its calendar: five national holidays, ten public holidays, and eighteen commemorative days. During fifteen of them, citizens are not required to work, since they are defined as non-working days.⁴

Even though citizens spend the non-working days identified by the State more-or-less freely and as they please, the State does not let them interpret all holidays legislated

3 The reference period for this segment were the years 1993–2013; the analysed data come from the monitoring of the legislative process in the Parliament and publicly available documents about the government activities from the mass media, internet news and blogs (Popelková, 2014a).

4 Includes the following national holidays: *Day of the Establishment of the Slovak Republic* (1 January); *St. Cyril and Methodius Day* (5 July); *Anniversary of the Slovak National Uprising* (29 August), *Day of the Constitution of the Slovak Republic* (1 September), *Struggle for Freedom and Democracy Day* (17

by law autonomously. It is a fact, though, that the State does not seek to openly interpret the meaning of those which are conceived as Christian (Christmas days, Easter holiday, All Saints' Day). For the dissemination of the interpretation of enacted dates falling into the category of national holidays and commemorative days, which were declared as important moments in the history of the Slovak Republic, the State constantly uses the public press agency and distributes it via the ritual practice of its representatives at public celebrations. The meanings of national holidays are communicated via the mass media towards citizens much less frequently than in the case of most commemorative days. It is the national holidays as such that create the space for state representatives to interpret their contents and present them to the public directly by organising celebrations or by accepting sponsorship, through their own holiday activity or by means of speeches from stages at symbolic places.

Paradoxically, even though we speak about legislated holidays, the interpretation of the content of national holidays is not stable. It depends on the political orientation and views of the government in power or on the dynamics expressed by repeated alternation of left-wing and right-wing governments and on the degree of their national orientation. The members of the parties which lead the State during a particular election term, as well as the members of other political camps, constantly strive to present their opinions on the nature of the State also through holidays. During periods when the spectrum of political parties is differentiated and when it becomes more antagonistic, the dynamics of the holiday discourse is also enhanced, and the efforts to change their list are intensified – their value as a political agenda within domestic political fights grows.

The content of the historic events is interpreted according to the current intentions and needs of politicians who use the massive symbolic potential of holidays as an effective tool. The different political groups disseminate their largely competing interpretations of historic events by means of holidays. As a result, we cannot speak about a comprehensive and stable political discourse on holidays in Slovakia that would prove the existence of a more general nationwide consensus with regard to the symbolic expression of the relationship to the past and to spiritual values and ideas. It rather seems that, even in the 21st century, there are several political holiday discourses that exist in Slovak society which are parallel or in temporary conflict. Such examples include the *Freedom and Democracy Fight Day* (17 November), the *Day of Victory over Fascism* (8 May) and the *Anniversary of the Slovak National Uprising* (29 August). The images of the past, as presented by politicians through holidays today, show the differentiation of the opinions on present-day Slovak society and the existence of symbolic borders between *different* population groups with different political convictions.⁵

November); and the following public holidays: *Epiphany (The Three Magi and Christmas Day of Orthodox Christians)* (6 January), *Good Friday, Easter Monday, Labour Day* (1 May), *Day of Victory over Fascism* (8 May), *Day of Our Lady of the Seven Sorrows* (15 September), *All Saints' Day* (1 November), *Christmas Eve* (24 December), *Christmas Day* (25 December), *St. Stephen's Day* (26 December). Refer to: Act No. 241/1993 Coll. on National Holidays, Public Holidays and Commemorative Days.

5 These holidays remind us of concrete historic events, but due to their different interpretation they have a polarising effect on society. This is caused by the different interpretation of the country's modern history in the key points – the orientation of the regime of the wartime Slovak Republic in 1939, the relationship between Czechs and Slovaks during their co-existence in the common state in 1918–1989 and the causes and circumstances of its split in 1989 within the different political groups. The analysis of the ritual practice and the speeches of politicians during the celebrations of the *Anniversary of the Slovak National Uprising* revealed that an irreconcilable political struggle is fought for the content and interpretation of the anniversary of this historic event (Vrzgulová, 2014a, 2017).

The monitoring of the legislative creation of and changes to the Holidays Act resulted in the finding that even though holidays are the subject of this process, it is not the main objective to find a consensus in the number of dates or in the meaning of the occasions to be recognised by the State as important and worth of commemorating. The turbulent parliamentary debates and the intentions presented publicly by politicians to reduce the number of holidays to the benefit of public finance savings do not pursue citizens' interest. In this case, politicians and their parties pursue mainly their own group objectives – the promotion of their own discourse on historic events, a broad political reaction to the creation of their own symbolic structures, or the cancellation of those holidays which are supported by their political opponents. Being aware of the effectiveness and universal character of holidays as an agenda that can be used in politics and by conducting discussions with a dead end, they seek to ensure that this agenda does not lose its topicality. They instrumentalise the general popularity of holidays among citizens as a means to accomplish their objectives irrespective of their actual economic impacts.

A special category in the political debates on holidays is the issue of legislated church holidays. Even though this term cannot be found in legislation, it is commonly used in political discussions. Eight out of ten public holidays and one national holiday (*St. Cyril and Methodius Day*) are thematised in this way in Slovakia. They prevail in political discussions on occasions when the number of holidays is compared to other European countries or when the influence of the Catholic Church on the political power in the Slovak Republic is judged. We could also observe in these discussions an informal assignment of Good Friday to the sphere of interests of the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession and the designation of January 6th – the *Three Magi* – as the holiday of the Orthodox Church. The research also showed that, with the exception of the September holiday of *Our Lady of Seven Sorrows* which – due to the ban on its public celebration during the Communist regime – is perceived as Catholic, but partly has a political connotation – the holidays in this category have a certain common feature, which raises the problem of manipulation with them in the political fight.⁶ A certain protective field above them is created by a combination of several factors. One of them can be the fact stated back during the presentation of the Holiday Act by the government in 1993, according to which these holidays “have a long tradition” in Slovakia as the effect of the centuries long, continuous work of both dominant Christian churches (Catholic and Protestant). This conditions the historic embeddedness of Christian holidays in Slovakia's culture and also relates to the current number of the members of these confessions. Another one is the form and degree of the legal position and symbolic or real influence of Christian churches and their representatives not only among believers, but also in the State's policy. Another influential factor with fundamental importance for the ethnological perspective of the study of these holidays seems to be the fact that they are perceived today not as strictly religious, but in a certain sense as more secular, broader and more general, rather as family holidays. During the Communist dictatorship in Slovakia in 1948–1989, the ruling ideology suppressed the public celebration of Christian holidays. Although many of them preserved their status

⁶ Besides the *St. Cyril and Methodius Day* in July, there are several non-working days during the Easter and Christmas holidays and *All Saints' Day*, which remain untouched by the current political struggle. According to our findings from printed media, electronic media and advertising, their inviolability is primarily due not to the fact that politics would not respect and recognise without objections and with consensus their religious content or the need for religious spirituality experienced by the population (Popelková, 2014a: 42).

of state recognised holidays or public holidays from the pre-war period, the totalitarian rule sought to eliminate their Christian content and the ways of experiencing them and replace them with profane holidays. The common ways of celebrating and experiencing them have been therefore preserved and handed over to the next generation in the intimacy of families, among relatives and friends. Paradoxically, it was the very ideology of the Communist period that contributed to the Christian holidays having acquired a unique position in the awareness of the post-war generations and among non-believers by mass dissemination of their profane interpretations (e.g. Christmas as a holiday of peace and tranquillity). The interpretations of the contents of holidays in connection with natural cycles (e.g. Easter as a spring holiday, which formed the basis of pre-Christian annual rituals) were disseminated among the public during this period as well. Their mass communication was suitably enhanced by the reconstructed or paraphrased forms of traditional culture and folklore. The information about the extinct peasant and shepherd customs, traditional symbolism or food pertaining to specific holidays based on ethnographic research, which were supposed to make holiday moments more special, contributed to the efforts to preserve or renew traditions. They gradually found a reflection in the generally spread ideas about the holiday atmosphere of these public holidays and became an integral part of people's lives.

Since the political change in 1989, these holidays have faced a certain renewal of their continuity and increased popularity in liberal society. It is not only about the return of groups of believers to a free celebration of these holidays with support from the church, but also about the dissemination of information about their religious meanings, contents, and about older or current ways of celebration by the mass media. Parallel to the efforts of the church, which are aimed at promoting their religious content, all population groups also receive information in forms supported by advertising and business within the public space. This is one more reason why religious holidays, legislated as public (non-working) holidays, have not only a spiritual, but also a profane dimension today. The profane dimension is represented not only by the idea of spending the time jointly within the intimacy of the closest ones, accompanied by visits to relatives and friends, strengthened feelings of family unity or affiliation to diverse social groups, but also rest and relaxation, shopping, entertainment and consumption. These and other factors jointly create the feeling that these holidays are something obvious, the awareness of their unique role in the kind of a natural phasing of the calendar year, in the interruption of the daily routine and the establishment of an exceptional, holiday atmosphere.

Holidays as a tool for the promotion of the interests of the different groups of Slovak society serve not only political parties and the State, but also Church institutions. On one hand, Churches are the authors and keepers of several historically rooted dates, interpreted by means of Christian symbolism, and the distributors of related ritual practices which form the fundamental element of celebrating these holidays by the members of the particular Church. On the other hand, the Catholic Church is an actor in the State's holiday legislation. In 2000, the Basic Treaty between the Slovak Republic and the Holy See⁷ created a specific legal framework for the dates legislated by the State. In this treaty, the Slovak Republic formalised ten dates from its own legislated holiday calendar as *de facto* Catholic religious holidays or festivities, having defined some of them differently compared

7 Regulation No. 326/2001 Coll. Notice of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic on the conclusion of the Basic Treaty between the Slovak Republic and the Holy See.

to the act from 1993 (for example, January 1st as the *Day of the Foundation of the Slovak Republic* as the Solemnity of Mary, the Holy Mother of God). This specifically suggests that the State as such does not fully respect its own Holiday Act as a legal norm binding for all its citizens. It also proves the presence of mechanisms by which a part of holidays which are proper to the Slovak Republic, including their symbolic and economic aspects, is controlled by another state. The fact that the Church plays a fundamental role in the legislative sanctioning of holidays in the 21st century is a demonstration of the close link between the State and Church institutions. In this context, it can be considered direct involvement of the Church in the State's political decisions.

For the dissemination of their opinions, Christian churches also use holidays which are not embedded in the cultural traditions of Slovakia's population, or have existed in the Slovak holiday calendar just for a short period of time, and are not sanctioned officially by any institution. This category of holidays includes St. Valentine's Day and Halloween. Given the fact that Valentine's Day is based on a Christian legend, its celebration, which is characterised by widespread profane forms, is tolerated by the Catholic Church. Around February 14th, St. Valentine's Day also appears in Christian media and, for almost a decade, a Valentine's Lovers' Pilgrimage has been regularly organised at an important place of pilgrimage in Slovakia – in the Basilica of the Virgin Mary of the Seven Sorrows in Šaštín. This event, dedicated to partners before or after engagement including married couples, has religious elements (holy mass, common prayers), and a cultural and an educational part (performances of music bands, lectures). One of its basic ideas is to encourage unmarried couples towards sexual abstinence (Zajonc, 2016). In this context, *Halloween*, which is added to other holidays mainly as a profane, fearful-entertaining holiday, is celebrated, tolerated or completely rejected with various explanations. The representatives of Christian Churches and their believers consider it a religious holiday – the celebration of Satan, the Antichrist or Devil, and of fear and death – and it is therefore rejected. In spite of this rejection, Halloween is a part of the activities of the Catholic Church which aim to eliminate it and promote its own ideology and world view. From the historical perspective, it is the continuation of the efforts to push aside the complex of pre-Christian rituals which returned to Europe in a new form. In the confrontation of the opinions about the content, origin or meaning of the Halloween, Churches as actors play the role of the institution involved in the polarisation of the community of the Slovak population. This is many times manifested already at the level of family (Zajonc, 2014).

b) Holidays and the economy

The links between the economy and holidays are specifically manifested in Slovakia's labour legislation. The fifteen dates legislated in the non-working days category have many economic consequences given the specific labour regime sanctioned by the Labour Code.⁸ It is a considerable item for the State in terms of public finance, and it

8 The functioning of the term holiday in colloquial speech differs from its use at the official website of the Government of the Slovak Republic. The part on the basic description of the country displays under the common entry *national holidays* a list of all three groups of enacted dates in hypertext form under the title. Contrary to the law provisions, the Government presents under this collective term not only the dates designated as national holidays, but also public holidays and commemorative days. In the popular terminology related to this issue, the term holiday in Slovakia in the 21st century designates the dates declared by the law in the category of national holidays and public holidays, which are guaranteed as non-working days. Empirically, this finding is based on the results of the analysis of internet discussions (Popelková, 2014a: 27).

means interruption of production for employers and entrepreneurs, the closing of operation facilities, costs of extra pay for work during holidays, or additional costs for employees related to non-working days, relaxation activities, planning of holidays, etc. This fact is a platform for using the economic impacts of holidays in political fights and parliamentary argumentation in debates on labour and holiday legislation. It also influences the perception of the meaning of holidays by citizens or actors in different social groups (entrepreneurs, employees working in non-stop facilities, employers, and trade unions).

The interactions and links between the symbolic and practical aspects of holidays influence the perception of their meaning and the ways of experiencing them in society. The impacts of these aspects are mutual: people incorporate economic activities into their ritual practice and, vice versa, the symbolic meanings of holidays are used in the economic sphere for achieving marketing objectives. Some of the examples include Christmas, Halloween or the St. Valentine's Day, visits to Christmas markets, shopping of thematic goods, travelling or parties. At first sight, commercial phenomena fulfil a wide range of social functions and also acquire a symbolic meaning just by becoming a traditional part of holiday celebrations. The commercial dimension of these elements, as perceived by people, can be reduced by the need to meet, give gifts, be attentive, and express sympathies. At the same time, business and services consider holidays as a period when people are willing to spend more money than ever. They therefore intensify their marketing campaigns and adapt them to the nature of the particular holiday. On one hand, they contribute to the atmosphere of holidays; on the other hand, they enter into their structure and modify it in a targeted way to a certain degree. Potential customers are offered goods or services on the basis of the particular holiday – either on the ground that they form part of celebrating that holiday, or through a targeted choice of the representations of the holiday as a means to promote the store or product which does not necessarily have anything in common with the holiday. In this regard, holidays represent an effective marketing tool (Beňušková, 2014; Zajonc, 2014, 2016).

c) Holidays and citizens

If we present holidays as a tool for the promotion of the interests of the State, Churches and the economic sphere citizens or the community of Slovak inhabitants can be perceived as the target group of the contents spread via holidays.

An analysis of the opinions of the readers of Slovak internet magazines, who presented their views on the possibility of cancellation and shifting of holidays, showed that the representations linked to certain holidays and the ways of celebrating them are not determined exclusively by the process of institutional formalisation. While from the legislator's perspective the different status of the dates was and is still determined by the ascribed symbolic value. From the perspective of the citizens the acceptance of the symbolic values can include their regime in the context of labour regulations, i.e. the fact whether it is a working or non-working day. For one group (entrepreneurs and employers), this relates to the organisation of work, including costs (e.g. compensation for work during holidays) and the planning of working holidays, for others (individuals or families) to the preparation of the ways of spending their spare time. Regardless of the ideological – political or spiritual – meanings, the number and information about the specific dates of legally defined non-working days in a given year are important for the citizens of the State. They form the basis for the

planning of trips, stays of several days, long weekends accompanied by relaxation, visiting relatives living in more distant places, household work (gardening, renovation of flats or houses), or for the coordination of taking holidays by different family members in regards to the school vacations of children, etc.

Individuals and groups build on various sources of the contents and forms of celebrating holidays and use them on the basis of their own needs and experience. In addition to the different degree of acceptance, there can therefore be many parallel representations of the same holiday. For example, Halloween as a holiday already established in Slovakia is either tolerated or rejected. It also has a wide range of representations as a fearful, funny, new, foreign (more specifically, Western or American), forced, commercial or pagan holiday (Zajonc, 2014). At the same time, citizens sort the holiday elements (for example, in terms of the ethical categories of sacral and profane) on the basis of their own classification principles. The example of the Christmas holiday showed that even though this holiday has long been institutionalised by the Church, its representation as a secular holiday is also widespread. The ways of celebrating it are related mainly to the reiteration of the unity of families, communities, partnerships and friendships, the manifestation of the meaning of solidary interpersonal relationships, accentuation of their positive aspects and the effort to bring joy to people. The rather profane elements can act as a sacred part of Christmas for some people or groups and, conversely, some religious elements, though not an ideological taboo in Slovakia anymore, are put aside or modified by commercial elements (Beňušková, 2014). The diversity of the representations that the different groups of Slovak inhabitants link to specific holidays forms the basis for the diverse manifestations or ways of celebrating them. Hence, the changed form of celebrating holidays also relates to the development of the social functions of holidays.

Holidays also represent a framework for expressing often ambivalent opinions on an almost unlimited number of topics. The alternative solutions related to holidays and offered by people in internet discussions prove citizens' awareness about the current political situation and the ability to justify these solutions. They also prove their readiness to openly admit their subjective interests as a motive for taking a specific view and unmask the politically presented reality. People are thus aware of the holiday discourse in Slovakia in the 21st century as an independent, developed and highly differentiated system of opinions. As an example, it proves the existence of a practical assessment of social events by people on the basis of their own experiences and knowledge without being submitted to political discourse on holidays and the ability to take their own – civil – perspective in this discussion.

For individuals as part of society, holidays represent a social tool that is proven by tradition and can be modernised in a flexible manner for the communication of opinions on the organisation of society and the world. At the same time, but from a different perspective, they are an opportunity for experiencing unique feelings, an irrational moment used rationally for achieving a realistic, quite practical objective. The answer to the question why holidays are not always equally effective in promoting certain opinions is the fact that it is individuals – citizens – who are the actors of the process of their acceptance. It is them who decide what content and what meaning of a holiday they would accept, with what content and function they would identify themselves, what form of celebration or commemoration they choose and whether they would actually use it. One of the tasks of ethnology can be to find out why and how this happens.

CONCLUSION

Holidays fulfil a unique function of regularly appearing, relatively stable points in the dynamic course of the life of society, its communities, family and each individual, also in Slovakia in the second decade of the 21st century. I have attempted to show that they can be considered a clearly defined research field, by the recurrent observation of which a perceptive observer can learn not only about holidays as such, but – through this prism – about society as a whole.

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