

# Transformations in Midsummer's Eve Celebrations in Soviet and Post-Soviet Latvia

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Celebrations are constantly exposed to gradual transformation processes promoted by diverse historical, political and social factors. This qualitative study is based on data from semi-structured interviews conducted in the southeastern region of Latvia, Latgale. It analyses transformations in the celebration of the summer solstice festival – Midsummer's Eve (*Jāņi*) – from the synchronic (at a specific point in time) and diachronic (through different periods in history) perspectives: during the Soviet period from the 1940s to 1980s, and from the late 1980s in the frame of “national awakening” and current trends of globalisation. A form of Latvian pagan heritage involving traditions such as singing, dancing, searching for a fern flower, fortune telling, lighting a bonfire and waiting for sunrise, the festival has remained functional throughout the Christian era. From the proclamation of the Republic of Latvia (1918) until 1940, it continued to be fundamental for the construction and preservation of Latvian national and ethnic identity. Under the Soviet occupation (1940–1941; 1944/45–1990), the festival underwent damaging transformations and was used as a political and ideological tool of Sovietisation and Russification. Midsummer's Eve is still widely celebrated today; however, the imprint of “new” Soviet traditions and modern-day commercialisation manifests itself as alienation from ancient traditions and results in simplified perceptions of celebration and kitsch performances.

**Keywords:** festivals, Midsummer's Eve, transformation, qualitative study

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## Introduction

In today's changeable world impacted by rapid globalisation processes and unexpected crises in which the very foundations of national security and independence are being undermined, the issues of maintaining national values, historical memory and integrity, as well as of ensuring cultural continuity, become of primary importance. One universal method for accumulating and transmitting social and cultural experience, as well as providing continuity in content (Tak, 2000) is through the preservation of cultural traditions and participation in festivals, including national ones (Bennett et al., 2014; Clarke-Ekong, 1997).

Festivals and holidays from the past represent an aggregate of essential knowledge and are reminiscent of the nation's "magical Golden Age" (Picard, 2016: 606); they include elements of ancient cults and rituals and the standards of domestic family life, morality and psychology. Throughout the centuries this knowledge has been carefully retained and passed down from generation to generation. At the same time, in the changeable socio-cultural space, festivals and festive traditions constantly undergo gradual transformation promoted by multiform historical, political and social changes (changes in state power, long dominance by and/or the direct impact of foreign cultures, the influence of mass culture and globalisation processes, etc.). In this way, as noted by Robert J. Shepherd (2008), the ambivalent nature of a festive culture manifests itself, through constant and intensive interaction between static and dynamic elements.

Within this context, this article examines the Latvian national holiday – Midsummer's Eve or Midsummer Festival (*Līgo svētki*, celebrated on the night of 23 June, and *Jāņi* celebrated on June 24).<sup>1</sup> It focuses on festivals and holidays as mediators of social transformation (Kreinath et al., 2004; Picard, 2016) and as "sensitive indexes" (Gierek, 2020: 6) of social and cultural change that reflect how the key issues determined by social, historical and political factors enter into the sphere of cultural heritage (Derrett, 2003). The study aims to identify and analyse the transformations that have taken place in Latvia's celebration of Midsummer's Eve – one of the folk-tradition treasures included in the Latvian Cultural Canon category "Traditional Culture" – over the last eight decades under the impact of historical and modern-day<sup>2</sup> external and internal factors.<sup>3</sup> During the transition which took place at the time of restoration of Latvia's independence, a new contemporary period of

- 1 The *Līgo* celebration, derived from the female name Līga, is also known as Grass Day/ Grass Day Eve/ *Līgo* Day/ *Līgo* evening, *Jānis* night. *Jāņi*, derived from the male name Jānis, is also known as *Jānis* Day (singular form of the name) or *Jāņi* Day (plural form of name). During the two days of the most widely celebrated public holiday, family members, relatives and friends all around the country come together and spend the night awake, performing ancient rituals to celebrate the longest period of sunlight and greet the rising sun.
- 2 The term "modern-day celebration" is employed here according to its definition in Latvian Cultural Canon as "the reconstruction of ancient tribal rituals performed on the territory that is now Latvia" (Gross, n.d.).
- 3 Similar research has been conducted by Žilvytis Šaknys, who, based on the example of such festivals as Shrove and Midsummer analysed how festivals were used to pursue political goals in Lithuania in various different periods: during the National Revival (late nineteenth century), the interwar period (1918–1940), Soviet Lithuania (1940–1941; 1944–1989) and in modern independent Lithuania (Šaknys, 2014).

festive culture was marked by the law “On Public Holidays, Commemoration Days, and Celebration Days” adopted by the Supreme Council of the Republic of Latvia in 1990, when *Līgo* Day and *Jāņi* Day or summer solstice were officially named among Latvia’s public holidays (Supreme Council of the Republic of Latvia, 1990).

The transformations of Midsummer’s Eve celebrations are explored in this article from the synchronic (at a specific point in time) and diachronic (through different periods in history) perspectives by comparing people’s subjective experiences in their cultural–historical context. Such transformations make holidays and festivals “exceptionally precious material” (Gierek, 2020: 6) as “a scientific tool for the research of society” (Popelková, 2017: 173). Studying the transformation of festivals enables us to draw vital conclusions about the peculiarities of a developmental model of a specific society and examine the decisive factors of these celebrations’ formation and existence.

## Methodology

This qualitative study is based on the results obtained from 107 in depth semi-structured interviews conducted in Latgale region, the southeastern part of Latvia, between January 2018 and June 2022. The opinions and experiences of 115 individuals (eighty-five females and thirty males<sup>4</sup> within the age range of fourteen<sup>5</sup> to eighty-eight) of the Midsummer’s Eve celebrations were collected during face-to-face meetings or via Skype, Zoom, telephone, and WhatsApp calls. The majority of the interviews, the average length of which was one hour, were conducted with each person separately; however, in isolated cases, they ran as conversations with several family members. For the multifaceted coverage of the analysed topic, interviewees were selected based on gender, generational and geographical diversity, ethnic background and different social historical reference points and culturally determined experiences. The interviews were coded manually to determine the main categories and subcategories; the theme for analysis was derived from the dataset. The research complies with ethical and legal requirements for research involving human participants as subjects of the study. The study follows international standards, the EU General Data Protection Regulation 2016/679, and national and institutional ethical conduct guidelines.

## Summer Solstice and Latvian Pagan Heritage: An Overview

Summer solstice – the longest day and the shortest night of the year – is, according to the perceptions of ancient Latvians, tightly related to maintaining and renewing

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4 According to a European Commission report published on 9 July 2021, Latvia has the highest ratio of women to men in the EU. For this reason, the opinion of women is more highly represented in this study (European Commission, 2021).

5 In case of minors, a parental consent form was signed.

the cosmic order (Čaklā, 1988). Perceived as a tribute to the sun involving multiform rituals to increase fertility, “the celebration of the summer solstice always involves reference to the pagan, magic, mythical world perspective” (Nagle, 2019: 126).

As Latvian folk songs (*dainas*) mention, one feature of the festival is timely and well-organised preparation for Midsummer's Eve: beer or mead was brewed; cheese was made; festive clothes were chosen; gardens were weeded; rooms, the barn, bee-hives and even the well were decorated; courtyards and roads were swept; firewood was prepared and birch boughs cut; hay was cut for horses and cows, wild flowers were plucked and festive wreaths were made (Olupe, 1992). The celebration prescribed the observance of traditions and rituals established by the ancestors such as singing *Līgo/Jāņi* songs,<sup>6</sup> teasing in *Līgo* songs,<sup>7</sup> building and lighting a bonfire and then jumping over it, ritual dances and games, looking for a fern flower, fortune telling, waiting for sunrise, bathing in the morning dew, and so on. Every ritual assumed a special symbolic significance. Cheeses made in the form of a circle, nonagon or tri-quadrangle were related to the cosmos and the sun; according to the perceptions of ancient Latvians this would promote fertility and productiveness (Kursīte, 1999a). It was believed that *Līgo* flowers and the wreaths made from them had healing powers. Wreaths were also made from oak branches as a symbol of strength (an analogue of the World Tree) and it was believed that their magic form (a circle) could deflect misfortune and illness and offer protection from the envious and from those who wished you ill (Olupe, 1992). Building and jumping over a bonfire were related to the sun cult; dances and games were traditionally performed around it in a circle.<sup>8</sup> The *Jāņi* bonfire was said to purify and promote fertility (Grīns, Grīna, 1992; Memelis, 1992; Olupe, 1992). Looking for a miraculous (non-existent) fern flower was linked with the cosmos (the appearance of the sun and light); gradually it acquired an additional nuance associated with romance (searching for one's love) (Kursīte, 1999b). These traditions were common across the Baltic countries (and Nordic region). For example, in Lithuania Joninės Day was also celebrated following mythological impulses and pagan elements such as “the lighting of a traditional bonfire, the floating of the floral wreaths, and the search for the legendary fern flower (*paparčio žiedas*) that was supposed to bring happiness and luck to those who find it” (Rudling, 2017: 92).

Latvian pagan heritage preserved its original traditions even after the arrival of Christianity. Although the Christian feast of St John's Day immediately follows *Līgo*

6 Midsummer singing manifests itself in *līgotnes* – folksongs with a traditional chant *līgo, līgo*, sometimes in specific regions – *rotā* or *rūto* (Senkēviča, 1969).

7 The tradition of singing and teasing in *Līgo* songs was perceived as expression of life's natural rhythm and associated with protection and fertility of the land – fields, gardens, orchards, cattle, a farmstead, etc. – and its owners, especially those named Jānis and their family members and relatives (Kursīte, 2007). This amusing ritual involved competition between several groups and required moving around one's own and one's neighbour's property – not only on the shortest night of the year but until Pēteris's day (29 June), which marks the end of celebration the Midsummer's Eve (Karaša, 1991).

8 “Typical static formations in Latvian folk dances include circles, circles with joined hands, punnets, lines, alleys, columns, and rows” (Brodie, Vidzemniece, Russ, Gavare, 2020: 6).



Figure 1. Riga. Daugavmala market. Grass Day, [192-]. Latvian National Library collection "The Lost Latvia", location code: R0221-1

Day, coinciding with the ancient Latvian *Jānis* Day, there is little material to connect the celebration of the Midsummer's Eve with John the Baptist, as the image of *Jānis* portrayed in Latvian folklore does not coincide with the image of John the Baptist depicted in the New Testament (Senkēviča, 1969).

As one of the ancient, lasting and "most Latvian" festivals (Senkēviča, 1969: 5) Midsummer's Eve has been fundamental for the construction and preservation of the Latvian national identity through the centuries. After the proclamation of the Republic of Latvia (1918), it was a widely celebrated holiday (Redakcija, 2020: 1) (see Figure 1). Its uniqueness as a part of Latvia's rural mode of life is described in the canonical prose poem *Straumēni* (subtitle: *Vecā Zemgales māja gada gaitās* [The Story of an Old Farm in Zemgale through the Changing Seasons]) by Edvarts Virza (2007) first published as a series in the literary monthly *Daugava* between 1929 and 1933.

In the 1930s, especially during the authoritarian regime of Kārlis Ulmanis (1934–1940), national holidays, including the festival under analysis, were celebrated widely and with the participation of huge numbers of people, everything in line with the national ideology, patriotism and cult of the leader which characterised those times (Kovzele, 2019). New forms of celebration appeared such as raising the national flag, as reported in the documentary "Latvia" (Nagle, 2019), and *zaļumballes*<sup>9</sup> – open-air dancing in the moonlight – flourished (Vītola, 2018).

9 The compound noun in Latvian is derived from *zaļumi* (greenery) and *balle* (ball, party).



## Results

The themes under discussion emerged from interviews with the participants and are divided into two periods of time – the Soviet era and post-Soviet times. A qualitative content analysis of people's experiences allowed us to trace changes in the celebrations of the summer solstice festival at significant turning points in Latvia's history since 1940 and assess their subsequent impact on festival culture in modern-day Latvia.

### *1. Transformations of the cultural tradition in the 1940s to 1980s and their impact on contemporary Latvian cultural landscape*

Safeguarding national holidays that symbolise belonging to the native land and culture is vital when that society is under the control of an alien power. Such festivals remain important after the country's liberation to lessen long-lasting negative effects of foreign domination and ideology. A particularly damaging period which deformed the national cultural tradition, including the Midsummer's Eve celebrations, began following the Soviet occupation of Latvia, which led to forced Sovietisation and Russification.

Under the Soviet occupation (1940–1941; 1944/45–1990), there were numerous attempts to denationalise and secularise Latvian festive culture. Policies implemented by the Soviet power radically transformed the Latvian festive calendar: “the authorities strove to introduce new customs and festivities, thus changing people's everyday life” (Eglāja-Kristsone, 2021: 226). From the outset, Midsummer's Eve was perceived ambiguously by the occupying power. On the one hand, it was viewed as a dangerous event due to its expression of the national spirit and inner freedom – and for this reason it was falsely accused of links with the church and religion, as well as idleness and alcohol. On the other hand, a mass festive activity was acknowledged as beneficial for the state power on the condition it complied with the ideological guidelines of the occupiers and was used to indoctrinate new Soviet values. Similar processes took place in other Soviet republics, where pagan traditions were combined with elements of Soviet holidays and used for ideological purposes, especially from the 1950s (Rudling, 2017). Christian forms of celebration were prohibited as the Soviet authorities strove to “demarcate the sterilised national identity from the Christian traditions or even to contrast them” (Šaknys, 2014: 140). Thus, depending on the decade and the current political leadership, celebrating Midsummer's Eve under the Soviets was either forbidden or allowed but only while encouraging new forms of the festival.

In May 1941, *Jāņi* (June 24) was proclaimed a public holiday. In this way, the Soviet power manifested a seemingly friendly position towards the Latvian holiday on the occupied territories (Eglāja-Kristsone, 2021; Kursīte, 2007). (See Figure 2)

On 19 June 1945, a decision adopted by the LSSR (Latvian Socialist Soviet Republic) Presidium of the Central Council of Trade Unions was published in the newspaper *Cīņa* [Fight] urging people to celebrate *Līgo*<sup>10</sup> in all cities and countryside

10 During the Soviet era, the designation *Līgo* festival was prioritised over *Jānis* Day by the state power; this



Figure 2. *Jugla paper factory. Factory employees at the Ligo festival, 1941*  
 Latvian National Library digital collection "The Lost Latvia", location code: 0911

of the LSSR by organising evening parties with official speeches, concerts and performances, as well as going on excursions to subsidiary farms and rural districts (Putniņš, 1945). Their message was conveyed through propaganda in the form of reports, radio transmissions and Soviet *Ligo* songs. Celebrations with orchestral accompaniment took place in urban gardens, parks and at the seaside (Ērglis, Žvinklis, 2017). The interviews revealed that in the early post-war years and even in subsequent decades, poverty-stricken Latvian families celebrated Midsummer's Eve quite modestly, as they were primarily focused on generating a little income and raising their children: "[We] did not celebrate [*Jāņi*] because there was not so much money. My father died when I was 11 years old, but only my mother worked. We were three children" (65, M, R, Latvian ethnic background<sup>11</sup>).

After the mass deportations of 1949, the first wave of attacks against Midsummer's Eve began, as a result of which the festival was crossed off the list of official holidays (Eglāja-Kristsone, 2021). From 1950 to 1952, the Latvian press did not touch upon the theme of the festival (Ērglis, Žvinklis, 2017). However, in 1953, after the death of Joseph Stalin, General Secretary of the Communist Party of the USSR, the public celebration of this festival gradually resumed (Eglāja-Kristsone, 2021). In 1954, following a decision of LSSR Council of Ministers, Midsummer's Eve was proclaimed

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signalled the break with traditions of the independent Latvia and was used to emphasise the idea that the Midsummer's Eve celebrated in the Latvian SSR differed from that celebrated in pre-Soviet times (Kursite, 2007).

11 Here and henceforth, the information after citations includes an interviewee's age, gender (male – M or female – F), location (urban – U, rural – R, or semi-urban – SU) and ethnic background.



Figure 3. *Jāņi* celebration in the home “Gulbiši”, 1958. Latvian National Library collection “The Lost Latvia”, original with Andris Rake

a holiday again; however, the time allowed for the holiday had to be compensated for by working on the nearest Sunday (Kursīte, 2007). During this period, the use of pseudo-national elements and the mass celebration of *Līgo* accompanied by Soviet visual propaganda continued. Changes were also seen in small private celebrations, concerning, for example, traditional foods and drinks: beer was often replaced by strong alcohol (e.g., vodka) (see Figure 3), contributing to increased consumption of alcohol, which was wrongly justified by tradition.

“After the national communists in the Latvian SSR were ousted from their posts in 1959, the festival came under heavy attack” (Eglāja-Kristone, 2021: 226). In 1960, under the initiative of Arvīds Pelše, First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Latvian Communist Party, Midsummer’s Eve was publicly attacked anew and was no longer proclaimed a holiday (Kruks, 2012). In the coming years, the festival was characterised as a harmful relic of the past, an “incorrect and useless” pagan tradition which was of no use for educating *Homo Sovieticus* (B.a., 1961: 1). Nevertheless, in the first decades after the Second World War, according to one interviewee, “We knew that there are Christmas, *Jāņi* and Easter, but all that was somehow less, only in the family circle and almost secretly” (75, F, R, Latvian ethnic background). In the following decades “despite all kinds of bans, (...) everything [was] celebrated” (50, F, U, Latvian ethnic background). The technique of surviving while preserving cultural heritage was to live “a surreal, double life” (Ansone, 2008: 7). By celebrating the festival in private, continuity of tradition was ensured; however, the restrictions had negative and far-reaching consequences on future generations.



At that time, celebrating Midsummer's Eve manifested itself as "a latent method of struggle and protest" (Viksna, 2003) against the occupying power and the policies it implemented.<sup>12</sup> In 1966, after Pelše moved to Moscow, the campaign of active repression of this festival stopped. Nevertheless, up to the end of the 1960s, presentation of Midsummer's Eve traditions was cautious in mass media, as well as in documentaries and advertisements on life in the Latvian SSR, and mainly focused on the cultural and historical heritage (Nagle, 2019).

In the 1970s, celebrating Midsummer's Eve "was officially neither allowed nor prohibited" (Kursīte, 2007: 162), however, its level of significance was lowered by various means. For example, encyclopaedic publications mentioned that most of its symbolic folk traditions and "religious-magical meaning" had been lost, and that it was preserved in Soviet Latvia only as a summer holiday (Sovetskaja enciklopedija, 1973). This official attitude indirectly encouraged the inhabitants of Latvia to celebrate the peak of summer without linking it to traditional Latvian rituals. Midsummer's Eve was still exploited for mass multi-ethnic celebrations and staged performances in which natural expression (of formerly ingrained traditions) was substituted by artificiality (new Soviet traditions), replacing Latvian ethnic identity with the construction of the new Soviet identity. This was ensured by various means. For example, in the frame of attention given to Soviet achievements, *stakhanovites* (exceptionally productive workers) were highly praised and awarded. Due to this effort, in *Latvijas Padomju enciklopēdija* [Latvia's Soviet Encyclopaedia], Midsummer's Eve was paradoxically defined as not only a traditional festival but also a labour day (Galvenā enciklopēdiju redakcija, 1985). In addition, a tradition associated with Latvian national identity which honoured holders of the name Jānis with wreaths, shifted to also honouring males named Ivan – presented as the equivalent of Jānis by the Soviet power. Strongly ideologized festive activities were held on open-air stages, merging Latvian traditional elements with those introduced by the Soviet power. Memories about such festive activities were recalled by interviewees:

It is like what the boss of our municipality says or the director of the House of Culture, that we will organise [Midsummer's Eve], and so this was done, but all people attended it, and with great joy, (...) drivers coming from somewhere, (...) making their runs, they brought here those branches, oak branches, and then I know that the office girls went to the park to make [wreaths], (...) they all moved like ants (...), made there these long garlands, (...) some decorated the stage, others made wreaths – both for Jānises [males named Jānis] and Līgas [females named Līga] (...). Someone recited a poem, someone still did something there (...). (44, F, R, Latvian ethnic background).

12 A similar tendency was described by Kononenko (2004) in relation to Ivan Kupalo, the Midsummer festival in Ukraine, that "began carving out a non-Soviet space and establishing a non-Soviet identity" (Viksna, 2003: 177).



Figure 4. Public Jāņi in Bulduri summer cottage, 1968. Latvian National Library digital collection "The Lost Latvia", original by Guna Kalniņa

This quotation illustrates how leaders of collective farms and culture houses engaged in organising such activities not only to entertain the audience but also as a way to demonstrate their power, thus progressing their personal ambitions. Some folklore groups and families in Latvia focused on the preservation and transmission of Latvian folklore traditions as a protest against the derogation of Latvian values and the authenticity of traditions.

The corruption of Midsummer's Eve traditions under the Soviet power has been noted by modern intellectuals, including Dace Rukšāne in her novel *Krieva āda* (Russian Skin) (2020) which, by focusing on the question of collective identity and memory, depicts how the propaganda was used as a tool for internationalisation and to erase the feeling of "knowing yourself". The main character of the novel observes, "We mingle among the celebrants of St John's Day – they are the Russians, Ukrainians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Belarussians. All celebrate, all together" (Rukšāne, 2020: 120). The transformation of Latvian festivals and identity under the impact of secularisation and Russification is vividly represented in both real life (see Figure 4) and content and book cover of the novel where the Latvian "jewelled" crown of Bārta district worn by a young girl appears to be a Russian *kokoshnik* [headdress] in her reflection in the mirror, emphasizing a double nature (see Figure 5) (Kovzele, Kacane, 2021).

The interviewees – who included both Latvian speakers and representatives of other ethnicities – considered Midsummer's Eve their own celebration. Although it

may be enthusiastically seen as a result of Latvia's integration policy, it is in fact also one of the consequences of Soviet heritage and the belief instilled by the occupying power that the core element of this festival is collectivism aimed at promoting "cross- regional communication and friendship" (Rudzītis, 1987: 132). In addition, although the festival has a unique, consolidating nature which unites people of different ages and ethnicities, the interviewees, especially non-Latvian speakers and those from mixed families, tended to perceive it as a simple midsummer get-together or picnic without attributing any significance to the Latvian ancestral code or symbolism, despite being aware of its significance for people with Latvian ethnic background. As

one said, *Jāņi* is celebrated by "my girlfriend and my friends who represent absolutely different denominations and ethnicities. This is a festival when in summer we simply come to their cottage all together" (49, F, U, mixed ethnic background). Moreover, the interviews also testify to the fact that, due to the impact of the Soviet era and generational change, the celebration of Midsummer's Eve and its former deeply symbolic meanings have been overshadowed by mistaken perceptions of the festival. Thus, activities such as singing *Līgo* songs, teasing in *Līgo* songs, dancing Latvian folk dances, decorating, etc. have been replaced by passive leisure activities (sitting, eating, drinking) and popular mass activities (disco dancing, etc.). Transformations of a celebration testify to a festival being reformed (Gierek, 2020).<sup>13</sup>

In the first ten years after the war (1945–1954), for the purpose of colonisation about 535 thousand people of other ethnicities from other republics of the USSR were sent to live permanently in Latvia. Later Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Tatars, Armenians, Georgians, Kazakhs and others<sup>14</sup> continued to move to Latvia en masse, which led to changes not only in festival rituals, but also in the gastronomic traditions of festivals, including Midsummer's Eve. One of the most vivid examples mentioned by the interviewees was the introduction of *shashlik* [skewered and grilled cubes of



Figure 5. Pencil on wood (2019) by Līga Ķempe on the book cover *Krieva āda*. <https://www.ligakempe.lv/pencilings/>

<sup>13</sup> For more about transformation of rituals in modern secular society, see Hall et. al., 2003, pp. 69–92.

<sup>14</sup> The inflow of Russian-speaking migrants is evidenced by the statistics: in 1935, one of independent Latvia's ethnic minorities – ethnic Russians – constituted about 9 % (168,266) of the total population; in contrast, in 1959, the number of Russian speakers increased to 27 % (556,448) and reached 34 % (905,515) of the total population (2,668,140) in 1990 (Statistical database).

meat] from the Russian Caucasus – widely popularised since the Soviet era and still favoured in contemporary consumer society. This came to be seen as one of the typical foods to consume on *Jāņi*:

[We] mark *Līgo* in the family [circle], too, well, in the open-air, next to our house [we grill] *shashlik*, somehow [we] want it. [We] always grill *shashlik*. (41, F, R, Russian ethnic background)

Some interviewees, especially Russian speakers, mistakenly consider *shashlik* a traditional dish for Midsummer Day, provoking indignation and irritation among some Latvian speakers, who see it as a symbol of Soviet domination and an alien tradition for summer solstice:

There is grilling *shashliks*, which isn't Latvian at all. (25, M, U, Latvian ethnic background)

For our children, celebrating *Līgo* is associated with a dish such as *shashlik*, it seems to them that *Līgo* and *shashlik* are both national dishes, but they are not national food of this festival. (48, F, R, Russian ethnic background)

Contrary to the middle and older generations, many youngsters simply attribute this trend to the weather conditions, seeing summer, and especially Midsummer's Eve, as the perfect time for enjoying grilled food, as during other seasons "it is cold outside. Nobody will want it" (16, F, R, mixed ethnic background). In general, however, Latvian speakers strive to include some traditional Latvian dishes in an attempt to preserve Latvian cultural heritage (e.g., "On all festivals and holidays, including *Līgo*, Easter and Christmas, our family will always have bacon pies. Mother always makes very tasty bacon pies" (34, F, U, mixed ethnic background), whereas Russian speakers emphasise that their families mostly have the so-called Soviet dishes, e.g., Olivier salad and foods that are common to all festivities.

## 2. Transformations of the cultural tradition under the impact of nationalism, globalisation and mass culture

Briefly before the restoration of Latvia's independence, during the *Atmoda* [Awakening]<sup>15</sup> movement in the second half of the 1980s, the official attitude towards manifestations of Latvianness, including Midsummer's Eve, changed. A gradual rehabilitation of Latvian cultural values began as the flowering of interest in and enthusiasm for rural customs and pagan traditions reached its apex (Strmiska, Ozoliņš, Rudling, Ūdre, 2023).

15 *Atmoda* or the Third Latvian National Awakening, also referred to as the Singing Revolution (1987–1991), was a peoples' movement aimed at restoring Latvia's national independence and cultural values.



On 15 April 1988, by a decision of Latvian SSR Supreme Soviet, the celebration of Midsummer's Eve was officially allowed, and from 24 June 1988 it became a public holiday. From this time, efforts were made to reintroduce ancient traditions, including via documentaries focusing on Latvian folk traditions (e.g., *Latviešu folklorā* [Latvian folklore], *Rūto saule, rūto bite* [Sing, the sun, sing, the bee], and *Likteņdziesma* [The Song of Destiny]). A new focus on folklore and ethnographic characteristics began (Nagle, 2019).

Immediately after the restoration of Latvia's independence (1990), in an environment of increased national self-awareness and national unity, official celebrations of Midsummer's Eve relied on folk traditions which were being constantly revived using a variety of methods, including increased participation of folklore and dance groups in *Līgo* concerts, theatrical performances, TV programmes and events showcasing authentic folk music and dance. Later, the Latvian Cultural Canon positioned Midsummer Eve as "one of the most ancient and yet (...) most widely-celebrated" festivals (Gross, n.d.).

According to interviewees, Midsummer's Eve is the best-preserved "ancient Latvian" celebration (14, M, U, Latvian ethnic background); it is "related to Latvian culture" and fundamentally "national" and "traditional" (44, F, R, Latvian ethnic background). Some see the celebration of the summer solstice as a national holiday mainly celebrated in Latvia: "I think that not everyone knows the *Jānis* festivities. I know that they are celebrated a little in Estonia. In other countries, I think, they are rarely celebrated" (16, M, R, mixed ethnic background).

However, when asked about the experience of celebrating and the deeper essence of the festival, its association with ancient traditions was not mentioned at all. Typical answers included spending time in the open air, in lively company with a great number of fellow celebrants – in other words, the focus was on leisure and recreation: "This is the procedure in fresh air and nice company" (32, M, U, Latvian ethnic background); "On *Līgo*, we come together; when it gets dark we make a bonfire, a table [is laid], we are sitting, communicating" (56, F, R, Latvian ethnic background); "*Līgo* party is usually [celebrated] on a large scale (...) well, there were a lot of people..." (42, F, R, Latvian ethnic background); "Very many vivacious people come to us, and the *Līgo* festival, yes, is celebrated here [on the open-air stage], on a wide scale" (43, F, R, mixed ethnic background); "To the *Jāņi* party in our rural municipality, we go all together" (45, F, R, Russian ethnic background). Although the overwhelming majority of interviewees considered this national festival extremely popular in the contemporary Latvian culture and believe it will be in great demand in the future,<sup>16</sup> transformations in how it is perceived and celebrated can be clearly observed.

16 "This is such only festival, perhaps, which has been preserved in Latvia, in Latvian culture in general, well, such an ethnic festival. Because there are a lot of festivities in our culture – *Metēņi* [Shrovetide], *Mīķeļi* [Michaelmas], but they are not so popular as *Līgo*" (18, M, R, Russian ethnic background). "[Among] my festivals, *Līgo*, *Jāņi* seem to be in the first place" (59, M, R, Latvian ethnic background). "Just as usual – Easter, Christmas, *Jāņi*. These are the greatest festivities" (16, M, R, mixed ethnic background).

The initial uplift of interest in the festival observed in the first decade after independence, when most ethnic Latvians expressed a strong sense of national identity, gradually decreased. And although the festival is still widely celebrated it is overshadowed by a relatively passive approach to observing folk traditions. One example mentioned by the interviewees concerns national costumes or elements of them, which are no longer worn during public celebrations unless people are performing in folk dance or music groups, which testifies to the increasing gap between active participants and observers, and cultural participation and orientation. The following two fragments from the interviews show the contrast between a participant and a non-participant in a folk group:

I have this inner feeling that just on this day I have to wear a national costume. (...) This festival has both church and secular sides. On June 24, there is always some activities which we join in, because there is dancing and singing. (53, F, R, Latvian ethnic background)

*Līgo* is considered to be a rural festival, on which we, well, usually [wear] jeans, t-shirts to feel warm, but before on such festivals [they] put on their best clothes. (18, F, U, Russian ethnic background)

Thanks to the development of folklore centres and the creative activities of various societies and enthusiasts, the issues of ethnic folklore, ancient traditions, and habits have been brought to the foreground:

All kinds of events are often held near us in the neighbouring parish (...). Recently, we have been participating. My sister sings in a folk group, I dance folk dances. We participate and hang out there. (19, M, R, Latvian ethnic background)

Symbolic decorations manifesting magic and mystery are among the most vivid elements:

Well, for instance, *Līgo*: I always make small wreaths from wild flowers precisely before 12 o'clock, and we always make one [wreath] from oak [branches] and keep it the whole year, then next year we burn it in the *Līgo* bonfire; we do so every year, and we observe and consider that all of them, all those wreaths, have some touch of magic, therefore they have to be kept. [...] Then there is some kind of fortune-telling on *Līgo*: you have to throw your wreath onto the oak, and count which time it hits the oak branch and stay there – how many times, so many years until you meet your bridegroom. (19, F, U, Latvian ethnic background)

Our tradition is to make wreaths. The whole house is filled with the aroma of birch boughs and wreaths. (53, F, R, Latvian ethnic background)

Researchers of festive culture have indicated that Midsummer Day is increasingly theatricalised as it adjusts to the conditions of urban environment (Memelis, 1992) and lifestyle (Kruks, 2012). Some argue that it thereby loses its “natural drift and former richness” (Grīns, Grīna, 1992: 78). Such transformations take place when a local and national identity fuses with European and cosmopolitan identity. As Viksna observes, in “overcoming different barriers, the meaning of celebrating *Jāņi* is lost and we rapidly move towards the situation of Europe where the summer solstice is seldom celebrated” (Viksna, 2003). As noted in the mass media, the contemporary Latvian lacks knowledge of the festival’s background, since he “has replaced the authentic *Līgo* songs with *schlagers* [from German: a popular music genre], which at best he sings himself, and at worst he allows the radio or CD player to sound” (Jonāne, 2006: 13). Interestingly, the interviewees were well aware of the fact that today’s Midsummer’s Eve has undergone transformations. Mostly they relate these transformations to their own passivity, a factor also noted by researchers as “the tradition of passive participation” (Kruks, 2012: 44) forming and developing in society. Older and middle-aged interviewees said that they do not attend big public celebrations (68, F, R, Russian ethnic background) or prefer celebrating silently at home (“we celebrate, but among a very close circle” – 47, F, R, Latvian ethnic background). Some, especially ethnic Latvians, prefer private celebrations within the circle of extended family members and friends, especially if there is someone called Jānis in the family:

We usually don’t go to that [cultural] house, but [go somewhere] in nature and light a [bon]fire. This is usually the end of the hay-making season. We finish work and then we all may go to the lake to relax or somewhere else. We can go to grandma or grandpa (...). The main thing is the feeling of family togetherness. (19, M, R, Latvian ethnic background)

However, some members of the older generations note that the scale of the Midsummer’s Eve celebrations in the family has decreased or it is not celebrated any longer due to family members moving, separating or dying: “Yes, we used to celebrate *Jānis* Day when Jānis still lived here” (74, F, R, Latvian ethnic background). Eventually, although the festival is still celebrated by the younger generation it is in a manner completely different from the previous generations, as observed in the case with a young interviewee, the granddaughter of the interviewee, whose father is called Jānis (the same person mentioned in the quote above):

We sit for a while and talk. It’s a simple feast. I don’t remember what we did last Midsummer. (...) when we toast, it is usually wine. (20, F, R, Latvian ethnic background)

Another change mentioned by the interviewees is the commercialisation of Midsummer’s Eve, which also reflects modern society’s lifestyles and the habit of obtaining things quickly instead of dedicating time to make them. This is manifested

in buying readymade items such as oak wreaths, food and drink, which is a sign not only of modernisation but of society's self-destructive addiction to faster living, which impacts the preservation of cultural heritage and ancient traditions:

Of course, the [summer] solstice and *Jāņi* will be preserved; however, *Jāņi* perhaps is getting more commercialised. (25, M, U, Latvian ethnic background)

On *Jāņi* – cheese and beer. We don't make [the Midsummer] cheese ourselves. [We] know some people who do it, and make very good cheese. We buy it from them. Beer or some *kvass* [traditional low alcohol beverage made from rye and barley malt]. We don't make also *kvass* at home. It is easier to buy than make it. (19, M, R, Latvian ethnic background)

This increasing tendency to give up the traditional attributes and rituals of Midsummer's Eve and to replace homemade dishes with readymade festive food available in shops was noted by the majority of the interviewees and considered to be the result of the commercialisation of festive culture:

Like *Jāņi* before – everything that was needed for the festival had to be prepared at home, for example, cheese or beer, all the traditions had to be observed and jobs done. Now it seems to be limited to one trip made by a driver to the shop. (40, F, R, Latvian ethnic background)

Earlier [ancestors of the family] brewed their own beer, now it is bought in the shop, but the idea has remained. [...] the cheese also used to be homemade, all had farms, now we buy it. (F, 36, U, Polish ethnic background)

However, as the interviews testified, some traditional dishes are still homemade in families which span three generations and still have their own farms. However, this is a small minority:

But my grandmother makes the cheese. She makes regular cottage cheese and cheese. For *Līgo*, we always have cheese and beer on the table. Most probably they buy beer. I don't know where they get it because I haven't asked. (16, F, R, mixed ethnic background)

Scholars have expressed the opinion that festivals which have an ethno-cultural basis gradually lose their topicality, and one of the reasons for this is that we live in an era overcrowded with festivals. The increasing number of festivals is considered a phenomenon of globalisation and mass culture, and the economic domination of Western countries (Fjell, 2007). However, the increasing number of festivals leads to challenges due to the feeling of crisis as recognised systems of continuity are impacted by new social, economic and political environments (Picard, Robinson, 2006).



The interviewees themselves are aware that “*Jāņi* now is quite a different festival than it used to be in the past. The traditions of the past have lost their value” (83, F, U, Latvian ethnic background). The population in Latgale maintain that they intuitively observe traditions of celebrating *Jāņi*, no longer delving into its initial meaning and context:

Earlier [we] celebrated festivals in honour of some gods (...). At present, this meaning is strongly felt to be missing somehow. Some people don’t even know why they celebrate this holiday and what meaning this festival actually has. (18, F, U, Russian ethnic background)

Today, according to interviewees, people “tear up” isolated traditions, “interpret them according to their free will”, and add new traditions, which they consider more “joyful”, more “understandable” and more “contemporary”:

Our traditions like *Jāņi* and *Līgo* – time passes, and perhaps the old things wear us out a bit. To be more cheerful and interesting, usually something new is added. (...) if it is said in the right words, that we’ll now have *Līgo* ‘in new sounds’ or something like that, and it is presented to people in a more comprehensible way, then it might be so, because the old thing is not always the best one. (19, M, R, Latvian ethnic background)

Some Midsummer’s Eve traditions have become “exotic” for the younger generation, even those who grew up in rural setting. For example, the following quote is from a farmer’s teenage granddaughter:

Once, looking through the photo album, when I was small, some 6 years old, [I saw that] my grandma had made wreaths also for cows on *Līgo*. [Now she doesn’t do that any longer] since there are too many cows! [laughing] And there aren’t so many flowers. (16, F, R, mixed family background)

Celebrating Midsummer’s Eve is a lasting family tradition, but she still learnt about some old rituals from her parents’ and grandparents’ stories as she found out about them by accident. Decades ago, the entire Latvian farmstead – seen as a spatial microcosm of a Latvian person – was cleaned and decorated; today people are less motivated to do this for a variety of reasons, such as urbanisation, increased focus on earning money and life–work imbalance. Among the lost rituals are *Līgo* songs used to tease people for having a disorderly yard, home, farm or meadow; for weeds in a garden, and for undecorated space around the farmstead. Today the ritual is seen as a relic of old days.

The ritual of Midsummer’s Eve, according to Sergejs Kruks (2012), “has lost many social functions because roles cultivated in it do not reflect the needs of a modern society” (p. 44). For some Latvians who have emigrated to western countries in recent years, Midsummer’s Eve is no longer associated with the solstice

festival but has become an analogue of a name day instead, i.e., the meaning of this festival has narrowed and its initial significance in the hierarchy of family festivals has decreased:

*Jāņi* has remained in the background (...), *Jāņi* is just a usual day and there is nothing special about it now. As my brother's name is Jānis, I only have to greet my brother and his daughter since her name is Līga. (46, F, SU, Latvian ethnic background)

Also, in recent years, the Midsummer's Eve festivities organised by urban and rural local authorities on open-air stages are often performance-parodies containing elements of folklore in the context of acute current-day events related to the region or state. Presenting a kitsch caricature, these performances are evidence of popular or lowbrow taste and represent a loss of the traditional essence of the festival. Performances based on the synthesis of genres, as noted by Fjell (2007) "are being used in a different way or at a different level" (p. 131). In addition, such programmes combine elements that have little relation with the central theme of Midsummer's Eve. According to the interviewees, natural expression is replaced by farce manifested in the shift towards the comic characters. This can be seen, for example, in one of the rural communities where some of the interviewees live or attend the public Midsummer celebrations, which include annual improvisations of the adventures of the Latgalian Kazimirs Adamovičs. This reflects the findings of other recent research on Baltic cultural heritage which reveal that "For most people, the solstice is mainly a fun and festive time to gather with family and friends, with the amount and degree of traditional activities being highly variable", as are the meanings attached to those activities (Strmiska et al., 2023).

The interviewees of Latvian background emphasised that Midsummer's Eve is a festival that enables them to strengthen ties with "customs from old times" (37, F, U, Latvian ethnic background) in both peaceful and turbulent times, and felt that this must not be lost under the conditions of crises. During the global pandemic in Latvia, festivals and festive culture in general acquired new nuances of meaning and new attitudes towards them: the quality of festivals related to otherworldliness decreased and celebration became a powerful practice for developing a sense of togetherness and experiencing joy. Festivals were perceived as a tool of socialisation and collective identification (Kovzele et al., 2022). The interviewees characterised Midsummer's Eve as an important event in the reality of everyday life affected by the global pandemic due to its ability to create a positive atmosphere and inspire people to undertake further activities:

This is a pleasant event, this is the same Christmas, New Year, Easter, *Līgo* festival, and therefore special sensations emerge – festive. (37, F, U, Latvian ethnic background)

However, the impacts of various factors (life–work imbalance, being too busy or exhausted, poverty or financial instability, facing a pandemic) mean that traditions cannot always be followed in full. Under the impact of the pandemic, new forms of celebration uncharacteristic of other periods emerged, such as remaining separated by both physical and symbolic boundaries when in proximity to others, according to COVID-19 rules:

Our family has very good neighbours here, in the house next to ours, and we celebrated together with them, but through, (...) the fence, (...) we were sitting having a two-meter distance between us, but as you see not through the Zoom, simply in the distance of two meters. (23, F, U, Russian ethnic background)

New forms of celebrating partially compensated for the lack of in-person communication and created the illusion of being together; however, participation in collective rituals, crucial for Midsummer's Eve, was prohibited. Nevertheless, while dwelling on the diverse limitations mentioned above, the interviewees shared the most vivid memories of celebrating Midsummer's Eve under COVID restrictions, which proves that the core of the festival was still preserved:

We went somewhere in the open air, yes, on *Līgo*. (64, F, U, Polish ethnic background)

You celebrate this festival in a family circle (...), by all means, we go to pluck wild flowers on *Jāņi*, my vases are always full of wildflowers. We make wreaths, we sing songs, dance and occasionally jump over the bonfire. (37, F, U, Latvian ethnic background)

## Conclusions

The Midsummer's Eve holidays have united the Latvians for centuries, remaining a central aspect of the construction and preservation of ethnic and national identity. This qualitative study, based on 107 in-depth semi-structured interviews, revealed that Midsummer's Eve is widely celebrated in contemporary Latvian cultural space; however, the impact of historical and modern-day crises has provoked multiple transformations in the perception and celebration of the festival as a part of Latvian pagan heritage.

During the Soviet epoch, when the Midsummer celebrations were seen as a means to reassert Latvian ethnonational identity, they were “repressed as potential sources of ethnonational rebellion” (Strmiska et al., 2023) and redeployed for the purposes of instilling new Soviet values. The processes affecting Midsummer's Eve celebrations and their consequences from the 1940s to the 1980s generally matched trends observed in the neighbouring states and other former Soviet republics, such as Ukraine. The impact of the changes imposed at that time can still be observed in the

contemporary Latvian cultural landscape: these days, the celebration is often perceived simply as a festive time to come together with family and friends, and involves fewer or no ancient Latvian traditions.

In addition, transformations of the festive culture have been provoked by the factors of globalisation and commercialisation, among them digitisation, integration, socio-cultural convergence, and crisis and post-crisis conditions (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic). In the Latvian cultural space, modern theatrical expressions impacted by Midsummer's Eve's presumed functions and meanings exist alongside celebrations which follow Latvian folk traditions. Finally, mindful performances and celebrations which follow the ancient traditions are still carried out among those with an interest in the revitalisation and heritagisation of traditional festivals. Interviewees' reported "unwillingness" to participate in the festivities testifies not to only a society where people are burnt out, unavailable, and have a poor work-life balance, but also to people's alienation from old customs and their perception of the festival as trivial. Thus, the symbolic meaning of Midsummer's Eve, as shown by the analysed data from Latgale region, is often neglected, however, the situation might be different though in other parts of the country.

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