

## Easter Holiday and the Pandemic – the Case of Slovakia in 2020

KATARÍNA POPELKOVÁ



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*Katarína Popelková, Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology, Slovak Academy of Sciences; Klemensova 19, Bratislava, Slovakia; e-mail: katarina.popelkova@savba.sk*

This article presents the results of an ethnological study on the current forms of the Christian Easter holiday celebration to recall the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is based on an analysis of data from an exploratory online questionnaire survey conducted in Slovakia in spring 2020. The date of the holiday overlapped with the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The research therefore aimed to explore whether and how preventative measures, physical distance, and social isolation influenced the holiday practice which, according to the author's previous findings, includes not only religious rituals but also profane elements that can be empirically documented at the family, community, and commercial levels. The 2020 pandemic closed the Easter holiday behind the doors of houses and flats, and the analysis thus focuses only the practices related to the family or private space. The research mapped the holiday preparations, common customs practiced at home as well as those that could not be practiced there, custom innovations, and the emergence of new celebration practices. The data analysis is based on the concept of eventisation (Gebhardt, 2000), according to which secularised and individualised ways of spending holiday time influence the pluralisation of contents and the forms of "traditional" holidays. Thus, the survey also aimed to find out how people who do not celebrate it spent the Easter holiday. In addition to particular findings about people's adaptation to the pandemic, the article also offers a wider ethnological perspective of the transformation of holidays as part of the cultural dimension of social processes in the late modernity period.

*Key words:* eventisation, holiday, pandemic, COVID-19, Easter, Slovakia, Christian holiday, Easter customs

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## Introduction

The way people spent the Easter holiday in Slovakia, which comprises four consecutive days off (a weekend surrounded by Easter Friday and Easter Monday), was affected by the first wave of the COVID-19 virus disease, which culminated in spring 2020, and by government measures aimed to prevent its spread. At the beginning of March, social events, as well as the operation of cultural, recreational, and restaurant facilities, were prohibited, and schools and pre-school facilities were closed. Where possible, people were ordered to work from home, avoid contact with people outside their family “bubble”, and leave their houses only when necessary.<sup>1</sup>

On the Wednesday before Easter, which fell on 10–13 April, the government introduced new restrictions, including with regard to the free movement of persons and the right to freedom of assembly, arguing that, in Slovakia, holidays “are an opportunity for entire families to meet and visit mainly parents and grandparents for whom the disease can have serious consequences”.<sup>2</sup> Social interactions among families and relatives, as well as spending time together with loved ones – the basic attributes of Easter in Slovakia – were thereby eliminated or limited to members of a single household. In addition, parents and grandparents who did not live with their children and grandchildren in one flat or house were indirectly designated by the government as needing to isolate during the holiday.

The health crisis soon began to affect the economy, social relationships, and mental health, which drew the attention of social disciplines, including anthropology and ethnology. According to anthropologist Annika Lems, “the empty streets and closed doors” and “the disappearance of daily life” from the public space became a complication for socio-anthropological research. Researchers were forced to temporarily replace direct observation and personal participation in social events with online research techniques (Lems, 2020).<sup>3</sup>

The statement of the Slovak government in spring 2020, announcing that the anti-pandemic measures and the lockdown would affect the usual course of Easter, corresponded to statements by the state representatives of other countries. Emphasis was placed on citizens’ responsibility and the need to exert caution and asked populations not to attend popular Easter mass events<sup>4</sup> and to “stay at home” instead of visiting their families or travelling to see their relatives.<sup>5</sup> The changes in how this

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1 See: *COVID-19: Slovensko zakazuje...*, 2020; *Na Slovensku platí mimoriadna situácia...*, 2020; *COVID-19 (koronavírus): Vláda prijala...*, 2020; *Opatrenie Ministerstva zdravotníctva Slovenskej republiky*, 2020.

2 *COVID-19: Buďme zodpovední*, 2020.

3 In March 2020, three Slovak anthropologists conducted an online questionnaire survey of the initial effects of the pandemic on society, which revealed an unprecedented radical change of daily life circumstances of the Slovak population (G. Lutherová, Hlinčíková, Voľanská, 2020a, b; Voľanská, Hlinčíková, G. Lutherová, 2020; Hlinčíková, G. Lutherová, Voľanská, 2020).

4 See, for example: Puente, 2020.

5 See, for example: Oö, 2020 or Lindner, 2020.

holiday could be spent were also signalled by adaptations to the restrictions by the Church. The Vatican issued a central regulation on Easter celebration rules which included a recommendation for parishes to ensure rituals were broadcast by means of the media, and advised cancelling or postponing processions and other public expressions of folk religiosity, among other restrictions.<sup>6</sup>

While direct testimonies on the individual ways of spending family feasts were brought mainly by the mass media,<sup>7</sup> the academic reflection on the relationship between holidays and the pandemic applied primarily the “empty streets” perspective and observed the consequences of the restrictions on public mass events. Scientists affirmed that the isolation had a negative effect on large festivals linked to commerce and tourism (Europa Nostra, 2020), and explored its impacts on traditional regional and local feasts (Roigé, Arrieta Urtizbera, Seguí, 2021) as well as on social communication in the public space of cities (*Nachtleben in der Krise*, 2020). A different perspective was applied by an ethnological survey of how Passover was spent within the Jewish community in Bratislava: through a description of the preparations and of the online form of the Seder family dinner it was shown what happens at the micro-level of society during a religious holiday when several people cannot meet freely other than through technical means (Salner, 2020a, b).

Social interaction within communities and families is also important for Slovak citizens who celebrate the Easter Christian holiday. The situation which forced people to celebrate it at home under the pressure of external circumstances created almost laboratory conditions for an empirical survey for the ethnological research of holidays.<sup>8</sup>

## Background

During my previous study of the Easter holiday practice in Slovakia, I noticed, based on my ethnographic observations within the public space and media search from the period from 2001 to 2015, an increased range of forms at the family, community, and commercial levels, as well as their dynamic qualitative transformations, which relate to the accelerating process of eventisation of the holiday culture. This process is documented by mass forms of celebration, stage presentation of customs as a source

6 E-kai, 2020; *Priame prenosi bohoslužieb...*, 2020.

7 See, for example: Toth, Axelson, 2020; Eckart, 2020; Joseph, 2020 and 2021; Koncius, 2021; Kravčák, 2020.

8 The term holiday is understood here as an occasion or cyclically recurrent period of various duration, in which something important or extraordinary takes place or is remembered. During holidays, specific and, to some extent, normative ways of behaving are anticipated or evoked, to which symbolic meanings are attributed to varying degrees (Popelková, 2012). The definition by sociologist Amitai Etzioni is also inspiring for an ethnological analysis of Easter which consists of four non-working days in Slovakia: “Holidays are defined as days on which custom or the law dictates a suspension of general business activity in order to commemorate or celebrate a particular event” (Etzioni, 2004: 6).

of experience for a socially differentiated audience or clients, the organisation of events and attractions that commodify the cultural heritage, and so on. The religious celebration of the holiday overlaps with or recedes from accentuating family values and the perception of the holiday as a celebration of spring (Popelková, 2019), which corresponds to developments in neighbouring countries (Dahm, 2000; Gierek, 2015; Barna, 2014).

Today, religious and also non-religious Easter celebrations at the private level in Europe are characterised by customs and symbolisms, many of which have a Christian origin and correspond to liturgical celebrations or are original church customs, albeit popularised and secularised, while others refer to pre-Christian ideas or are the result of mass popular culture. The ways they have spread and are ascribed meanings are closely related to mass media activities and commerce (Bieritz, 2012: 6). Nowadays, the majority of people do not realise their origin and primary meaning, or do not recognise it (Barna, 2014: 130; Gierek, 2015: 70, 77). Nevertheless, they keep these traditions alive and practice them, being aware of a certain meaning. They thus use a specific symbolic language (Dahm, 2000: 24) or continue to engage in these practices because they believe in continuing the tradition (Barna, 2014: 130).

Elements which remain an important part of Easter celebrations in this segment in twenty-first-century Slovakia include household decoration with fresh greenery, eggs, and figures of cubs; families coming together for dining and hospitality; visiting the cemetery; egg painting; meeting relatives, accompanied by giving treats to children; children looking for sweets hidden by the Easter bunny;<sup>9</sup> adult men and boys visiting their relatives and friends, accompanied by sprinkling women and girls with water and/or whipping them with a willow stick; and get-togethers with friends and neighbours. Regardless of their origin and parallel existence at the level of heritage or as a subject of commerce, these customs are maintained with a range of variants all over Slovakia.<sup>10</sup> They are usually tied not only to personal communication within nuclear and wider family groupings but also involve social interactions between friendship, community, and shared-interest groups.<sup>11</sup> For religious Christians, these events also provide a platform for contact with members of their own religious

9 In Slovakia, this custom is not as widespread as in Western Europe and the USA (Dahm, 2000: 20–21; Caplow, 2006: 114), even though, in urban environments, the figure of a bunny – as a profane Easter symbol that brings gifts and treats to children who must find them – was already widespread in the Socialist period (Botiková, Deáky, 2022: 267). A traditional custom in Slovakia is for adult relatives to give children chocolate eggs, figures of bunnies, lambs, chicken, and hens during visits during Easter Monday. Treats are the reward for “šibačka” – symbolic whipping with woven willow whips – or “oblievačka” or “kúpačka”, which means water pouring and reciting a verse containing a request for giving eggs, sweets, and money (for more details on Easter customs see, for example, Horváthová, 1986: 175–191; Feglová, 1990; *Encyklopédia ľudovej kultúry Slovenska* [Encyclopaedia of Slovakia's Folk Culture], 1995, and *Tradičná ľudová kultúra Slovenska slovom a obrazom – elektronická encyklopédia* [Slovakia's Traditional Folk Culture in Words and Pictures – Electronic Encyclopaedia], 2011, entry Easter and other thematically related entries).

10 For more details, see Feglová, 2007: 206; Popelková, 2019: 282.

11 For more details on the community contexts of traditional customs in Slovak villages today, see Beňušková, 2018.

group from a wide range of social backgrounds, through coming together to practice holiday rituals in churches as well as extra-liturgical activities.

Since my intention was to find out what forms the above-described holiday practice and customs acquired during the pandemic, my basic research questions were as follows: How did people prepare for Easter under the changed conditions? Which common customs did they practice? Which forms of celebration did they not practice, and for which ones did they find innovative ways to practice? Which Easter customs did people decide to replace with new ones?

While exploring the domestic forms of celebrating Easter, it was necessary to consider the fact that before the pandemic people exercised individual choice to also use their days off for activities that do not relate directly to the holiday but still take place in public spaces over the Easter period. These include private, state-sponsored and commercial leisure activities such as public entertainment and events organised to attract tourists (e.g., festivals, concerts, parades), and outdoor activities (e.g., hikes, fun runs, bike rides) (Popelková, 2019: 282). These extend or create an alternative to traditional forms of celebration and enable people to reject the religious aspects of Easter. At the turn of the twentieth century, Gábor Barna observed that along with religious and non-religious forms of celebration, there was a third, autonomous level of perception of Easter: people who fully rejected celebrating this holiday which, from the theological perspective, still remains the most important event in the Christian calendar (Barna, 2014: 131). The growth of more open, secular forms of holiday practice and the complete rejection of Easter celebrations can be interpreted as manifestations of the process of secularisation of Christian holidays, which began in the latter half of the twentieth century and has accelerated over recent decades (Barna, 2014: 133; 2017: 163). In Central and Eastern Europe (including Slovakia), this process was affected in the latter half of the twentieth century by the efforts of Communist regimes to eliminate any public religious expressions (Barna, 2014: 133; Botiková, Deáky, 2022: 241; Gierek, 2015: 77; Popelková, 2014: 42). The gradual loss of legitimacy of Christian interpretations of the world, the declining importance of European Christian identity, and the shift of emphasis from institutional religion to private belief (Kranemann, Sternberg, 2012: 1; Rückl, Štica, 2012: 162) can also be considered in the wider context of the social transformations taking place in the global society. In an increasingly open and reflective lifestyle, traditions lose their hidden power and are replaced by autonomy and freedom (Giddens, 2000: 59–60). The loss of the semantic relationship, binding nature, and commemorative dimension of Christian holidays (Bieritz, 2012: 5) was conceptualised by the cultural sociologist, W. Gebhardt, as de-institutionalisation and profanisation.<sup>12</sup> In his theory of eventisation,

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12 In the process of de-institutionalisation, non-binding targets, ideas, and semantic worlds are mixed into holidays along with a relaxed, free experience. The essence of the profanisation process is a change of expectations that people have for a successful holiday: everything objective, i.e., stable and ritual, is rejected, holidays are turned into poor events in terms of ideology and worldview, with a “nice experience” of a “super feeling” at the centre (Gebhardt, 2000: 25).

these processes (along with destructuring, multiplication, and commercialisation) are contained in five mutually corresponding trends which dynamically transform both the internal and external nature of holidays. The empirical observation of their expression sheds light on the cultural dimension of the social processes of individualisation and pluralisation during the late modern period (Gebhardt, 2000: 26–28). Building on Gebhardt's concept, the transformation of the forms of celebration of "traditional" holidays, including Easter, can be observed in connection with the declining acceptance and legitimacy of such traditional institutions as the Christian Church. Thus, the Easter holiday begins to be dominated by non-church elements, and the "predominance of elements of the consumer culture indicates the emphasis on outward show for prestige" (Barna, 2014: 131). What was once stable, referring to the past, prescribed, and ordered in a standard way is now questioned or refused. What has come to the fore to replace it is subjective freedom and the possibility of acting without obligations during the holiday, living in the present, and celebrating life in the here and now.

I use elements of the concept of eventisation in this work as a background for examining the assumption that transformations in the Easter holiday were also manifested at the micro-level of society in the context of the pandemic lockdown, either by people choosing alternative practices or rejecting the holiday altogether. In order to acquire specific findings that would enable reflection on these questions, I sought answers to the question: How did people who do not celebrate this holiday spend the four non-working Easter days in 2020?

## Methodology and Research Sample

On the evening of Easter Monday 2020, I launched an anonymous online questionnaire as the empirical part of an ethnological case study into individual ways people were spending the holiday during the pandemic. Applying an exploratory approach, without a pre-set hypothesis, my aim was to find out how people spent the Easter days which are normally characterised by the collective practice of religious rituals, family gatherings spanning several generations, mobility, relaxation and leisure activities, and social contact. By means of the questionnaire, which was available from 13 April to 30 April 2020,<sup>13</sup> I obtained 353 direct personal descriptions of the freshly experienced period of four non-working days and subjective comparisons with the previous year's Easter holiday.

In line with the chosen methodology, the questionnaire contained eleven questions allowing respondents to choose an answer from various options. The questions aimed

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13 The call to fill in the questionnaire was published on the website of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, on the website and social networks of the Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology SAS, and through the e-mail directory of the Ethnographic Society of Slovakia. I also asked my colleagues and friends to spread the information about the questionnaire.

at establishing respondents' personal characteristics and understanding their residential situation during Easter 2020 and 2019. These were followed by seven open-ended questions asking the respondents to describe their preparations for the holiday and the way they spent the individual feast days; they were also asked to identify the differences they felt compared to Easter 2019 and what they missed the most during Easter 2020. The diversity of answers and the addition of engaged attitudes to factual descriptions indicated that people saw their participation in the survey as an opportunity for personal reflection on this unique situation.

The research did not target a specific group of respondents. Rather, the sample was created randomly and is in no way representative. The collected data reflect the situation of the people who learnt about the research, were interested, and had the opportunity to fill in the questionnaire. Even though the survey results cannot be generalised with respect to the population of the Slovak Republic, the recorded practice and related attitudes indicated certain broader valid trends.

In the sample, 75% were women and 25% men; 53% of respondents were Christian believers, 40% were non-believers, and the remainder declined to respond this question. Regarding respondents' education, 17% had a postgraduate qualification, 61% had completed university education to undergraduate level, 20% completed their secondary education, and 2% had only primary education. In terms of age, respondents aged 18 to 69 years participated in the questionnaire, the most numerous being those in their thirties.

Quantitative analysis of the data on where people spent the holiday was used to interpret the responses to the open-ended questions. While in 2019, 11% of the respondents spent the holiday abroad (work, study, visiting relatives abroad, and recreation), this figure was only 6% in 2020. The number who spent the holiday in small Slovak towns was almost identical, with only small deviations. However, the number of people spending Easter in large Slovak cities increased from 21% in 2019 to 31% in 2020. The number of those who stayed in a village declined from 35% in 2019 to 31% in 2020. In 2019, 14% of the respondents spent the holiday at weekend houses, cottages, and chalets, while in 2020 it was only 6%. And the 2% who had stayed a hotel or a guest house in 2019 stayed at home in 2020.

There were also differences regarding cohabitation of family members across several generations during the holiday: while 44% of the respondents stayed with their parents during Easter 2019, only 23% did so in 2020; 10% of respondents spent the holiday with their grandparents in 2019, while in 2020 this figure was only 5%; and 28% of the respondents celebrated the feast day together with other relatives in 2019, whereas only 9% did so in 2020. The number of respondents who were alone during Easter increased from 6% in 2019 to 8% in 2020.

After the quantitative analysis, I conducted a qualitative content analysis of the gathered data. During the first reading, I sorted the answers into groups by categories featuring key words in the research questions. Over repeated readings, I encoded the categories using words and phrases used directly by the respondents when describing their particular practices, their attitudes, comparisons, and evaluations.

Since the sample was not representative, I did not attempt to quantify the captured practices or attitudes but concentrated instead on a concise qualitative description of the examined issues. This is presented in the following pages, organised thematically according to the research questions. An interpretation of the findings based on the above-mentioned background is offered in the final Summary section.

## Preparations

People adapted their preparations for the 2020 Easter celebration to allow for the expected decrease in the variety of festive events and to the changes in how people could spend their days off. Respondents cancelled plans to travel to see families and declined announced visits. Some people described continuing with their standard preparations for the celebration: they sent postcards by post, cleaned and decorated their flat, and did grocery shopping before Easter, including ingredients for preparing festive dishes. However, they had to contend with queues in front of shops, and older people had to fit into the morning shopping hours reserved for the elderly. Respondents reduced the amount of food they purchased, minimised time spent cleaning and decorating their homes because they were not expecting any guests, and eliminated all the packing and logistics related to travelling to visit relatives. Sweets for children, who could not visit their grandparents or great-grandparents and relatives, were either not bought at all or the quantity reduced to the number of children in the household. Respondents who were in quarantine in the period immediately before the holiday had to skip the preparations. Some of them simply gave up preparing for Easter, as did those whose idea of the “magic” of Easter was strongly associated with gatherings of family and friends. Another group who gave up on the festivities altogether was those experiencing intensely the uncertain atmosphere of threat, constantly accentuated by the mass media. Those taking care of sick relatives or parents living alone now also had to shop repeatedly, which involved more waiting in queues, as well as cook larger amounts of festive food, and deliver food to dependants. Single people in large cities who had not left to visit their parents for the holiday but instead stayed at the place of their permanent residence alone now had more duties when it came to shopping and food preparation, which in normal years they did not have to take care of at all.

Some respondents started to plan for holiday walks in nearby natural beauty spots, or included spring bike servicing in their preparations. Some who owned a holiday home had chosen, at the beginning of the pandemic or immediately before lockdown, to base themselves there and enjoy a safe and pleasant place outside their usual district of domicile, given the context of working from home and distance learning for their children. These individuals stayed together in their second homes during the Easter holiday, without receiving visitors. The daily routine combining working from home, learning, meal preparation, and cleaning influenced the course of the preparations and led to compromises regarding the regular Easter customs (for instance, due to



the prohibition against leaving one's home, these respondents were later unable to buy gifts for their children).

For religious Christians, preparing for Easter also includes personal spiritual cleansing – fasting and confession – and attending binding church rituals. These rituals, however, took place without believers during the lockdown. Problems with complying with the fast were mentioned by respondents who did not have time to buy suitable food. However, in order to avoid such complications, several of them decided to make an exception that year and not observe the fast. Some stated that, thanks to television broadcasting, they were not deprived of spiritual preparations and that their isolation had enabled them to still their minds better and achieve internal purification. This group considered the prohibition of public religious activities, and particularly the fact that confessions at church were not possible, to be the only difference in their preparations. For others, the impossibility of “tuning in” spiritually within the community of believers and observing religious customs (the blessing of branches on the Palm Sunday, confession, preparation of a basket with selected food to be blessed by the priest) deeply affected their expectations of the religious holiday and had a negative impact on the atmosphere when preparing for other customs. Other believers intentionally eliminated shopping, baking, and house cleaning before Easter. They were glad to avoid the rush of making preparations and getting ready for visits/visitors, having decided not to bother that year, and reported that this did not prevent them from enjoying a calm, spiritual experience of the holiday.

### What customs were observed and adapted?

On Good Friday, some respondents finished shopping and engaged in traditional activities such as cleaning and decorating their houses with greenery and Easter symbols. Those who had been in quarantine before the holiday or worked from home spent it as an ordinary working day with time in the late-afternoon to rest and prepare a meal. Many stated that they had simply “been at home”, resting and watching TV documentaries and fairy tales. Believers spent their time watching rituals broadcasted on TV or streamed from churches. Non-religious respondents who worked in the garden or around the house that day mentioned that out of respect for their religiously observant neighbours they avoided noisy activities.

Preparing festive dishes (potato salad, boiled smoked ham, meat roulades, sausages, horseradish, egg meals, etc.) and baking bread, pies, and cakes for the next two days kept people busy on White Saturday. Some engaged in spring gardening, which tradition permits on that day. Those who observed the custom of a festive dinner together said it was unusual to hold it only within the narrow family circle or as a couple. The religious customs of White Saturday include visiting the Holy Sepulchre and attending the evening resurrection rituals in church. In 2020, people had to take part in these practices virtually, and many reported feeling sad about that. A number of respondents affirmed that online rituals “were not the same”. Regarding

the first two days of the holiday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday, respondents mostly noted that they did not feel much difference in the way they spent them compared to the previous year.

On Easter Sunday, most people met at the breakfast table at home, prepared a festive lunch (fried meat and potato salad, roast duck) and dined together; in the evening they cooked and painted eggs. In addition, believers followed the liturgy on television or on the internet and observed the custom of watching the live apostolic blessing, *Urbi et orbi*. According to a few respondents, one of the positive effects of the pandemic was that they did not have to rush to church to get there early in order to ensure a seat. People reported using this time for other activities or for rest. Some communicated with loved ones and relatives by phone, chat, and video calls or through social networks. They greeted each other, described or shared pictures of their festive table, and, in particular, shared memories and described feelings of separation. In some families people even dressed formally for lunch because they felt the need to evoke a festive atmosphere.

On the morning of Easter Monday, families with children practiced the custom of whipping of and/or pouring water on women and girls. The reward was eggs and chocolates. In some places, children sought eggs hidden by the Easter bunny in their flat or garden. Grandchildren symbolically whipped their grandmothers or sprinkled them with water over the phone or by video chat – presenting traditional Easter verse wishes with a whip or a cup of water in their hand or showing drawings of them. Grandmothers promised them to give them sweets later, or sent money to their account as a reward. Some parents took their children to their grandparents' homes, staying at the doorway or under a balcony or window. In this way, they could see each other, have a short talk, and hand over gift boxes. Instead of visiting relatives and female friends, adult men and boys stayed at home and spent time with their families, which several wives and mothers described as a positive change. People living in residential houses did not meet their neighbours. People living in family houses greeted each other “at least through the fence”.

Owners of gardens organised garden parties during the holiday, some of them every day. Several thus completely replaced the preparation of traditional meals and festive dining at home. If any of their relatives decided to come as well, they could sit in the garden at a safe distance in a mask.

The activities most frequently mentioned by all respondents were walks around the city or village or in nature, going to places where there were few people. Spending time at home watching TV, listening to the radio or internet podcasts, playing board or computer games, reading books, and having conversations was supplemented by outdoor activities, though in some cases only in the form of “balcony tourism”, that is, sitting with a coffee or a book on the loggia or balcony of one's own flat. Individuals, co-habiting couples, and entire families also went on bicycle trips, camped in remote forest meadows, and played sports outside. Despite the prohibitions, single people who did not live together met for walks in nature, and entire families sometimes met in remote places, while maintaining social distancing, in order to see

each other live and wave to each other. Several respondents stated that overeating during Easter did not help them engage in physical activities, and they therefore limited or completely refused delicacies at home.

### What did people miss and what did they not miss?

Almost all respondents who celebrated Easter missed contact, spending time together, hugs with their parents and siblings, and meetings of the intergenerational family at the (great-)grandparents' place. Grandparents and great-grandparents wrote about their feelings of sadness at not being able to meet, talk with, and hug their grandchildren. Nevertheless, people avoided personal meetings with relatives. Even within a single location, visits were replaced with the delivery of cakes and food, minimising the length of contact. People communicated by phone or through the internet.

A number of single individuals and young families had no previous experience of preparing and celebrating the holiday alone, since everything had always been taken care of by their parents. Some of them thus began decorating their dwellings and preparing traditional dishes, without which they could not imagine their holiday, on their own. Due to the pandemic, some parents with small children planned to spend Easter "contactless" and in "Western style" by allowing their to children hunt for hidden eggs. In the end (in one case influenced by a grandmother who sent a traditional meal she had prepared), they chose a "traditional" celebration, that is, on Monday morning, men and boys whipped and sprinkled women with water at home and in the afternoon they left for the grandparents' garden where they whipped and/or poured water on their grandmother. Many respondents noted that, due to the restrictions, they had to improvise at home. For example, due to the difficulties with shopping, some simplified or modified traditional dishes or abandoned the custom altogether, opting out of a traditional home-cooked meal and ordering food from a delivery service instead.

One group of respondents was single young women who are members of folklore ensembles. They considered the Monday water pouring organised jointly by male members of the ensemble to be a key element of Easter. In anticipation of this event they dress in traditional clothing, and the water pouring is followed by a treat and entertainment, with dancing and folk songs. For this group of women, a holiday without this custom would completely lose its meaning. Several other women also regretted that they could not be whipped and/or sprinkled with water by fathers, brothers, brothers-in-law, and friends. Others welcomed this fact: they were spared this – according to them – "embarrassing" and "degrading" custom, and avoided the "surrendered waiting" for the visits of whippers and pourers (*šibači a oblievači*). Many reported that they "finally didn't have to leave home on Monday morning" and spend the day in an unknown place, which they described as a common strategy of single girls wanting to avoid the custom altogether.

Several respondents considered it a problem that they could not visit cemeteries and light candles during the holiday. Religious people were unable to experience the rituals within the dignified environment of churches, observe the custom of attending the Way of the Cross or the Passion procession, visit the Holy Sepulchre on White Saturday, or have their basket of Easter food blessed by the priest.

While one group of respondents was annoyed with the necessity to “sit at home” and not visit their families, others welcomed it: they did not have to travel, spend money on fuel, overeat cakes, or see people who show interest in their relatives “only on the occasion of the holiday”. Some observed that it made them realise how much “useless stuff” there is around family gatherings. They dedicated the saved time to “themselves” and to their “own family and partner”. Several of those who stated that they did not recognise the traditional customs of whipping and water pouring agreed within their households that since they could not visit anyone they would not even send postcards, while others agreed not to paint eggs, place forsythia in vase on the table, or cook any kind of Easter meal. As a result of the partial or full elimination of these customs, this group perceived the holiday to a lesser degree or did not perceive it at all; some just wrote “There was no Easter in 2020”.

### What was new in the celebration?

Young parents, in particular, wrote that they had to introduce new customs for their family in the new situation. For example, fathers learnt to weave willow whips on their own, mothers learnt to prepare traditional decoration and obtained traditional recipes. They attempted to explain the content of the holiday and the meaning of the customs to their children, something which had previously been the grandparents’ task or which arose during the course of family celebrations hosted by parents, parents-in-law, or other relatives. Many families in large cities leave to see their parents in the countryside over Easter and practice “their” customs there. These families realised in 2020 that they lacked a “reference model of the Bratislava Easter” and discovered a need to create one in order to have something to do and stave off boredom. Some religiously observant young parents decided to explain the religious content of the holiday to their small children “on their own”, while being aware that it was their “own interpretation”. Some read religious literature with their children, discussed crucifixion and resurrection, watched live streams of liturgies, or even prepared an improvised Holy Sepulchre at home at which they prayed with their children.

A novelty for some believers was that they blessed their food on their own, following the instructions published by priests on parish social networks. In some Slovak villages, priests drove through the streets and blessed baskets of food carried by people standing in front of their houses. Some respondents welcomed this novelty with joy, while others considered it absurd.

People did not describe virtual meetings as something unfamiliar because they had experienced them before. The difference was the amount of time people dedicated to

this kind of communication, and the recording and sending of videos every festive day. Some respondents said that they had never talked to their relatives as much as they were now. One thing considered a great novelty was the livestreaming of religious rituals and the virtual whipping and water pouring, which apparently brought a lot of joy to grandchildren and their grandparents. Some respondents noted that they had introduced Easter egg hunts as a novelty for their children, and invented puzzles and competitions. Several men and women wrote that the atmosphere “was more peaceful”, the “length and the intensity of time spent with family” and partners increased; and many single people even enjoyed their loneliness, since they could “finally” spend their free time “as they wished”.

### Non-celebration and rejection of the holiday

At the beginning of their description of Easter 2020, some respondents stated that they “do not celebrate it in a very traditional way”, that they “do not care much” about the customs or “don’t recognise” them. Others welcomed the restrictions, the need to stay at home, and the “elimination of the tradition” as an advantage, because they could dedicate all their time to spring jobs, renovating their house or flat, replacing windows, and so on. Nevertheless, most people’s answers mentioned observing at least some elements of the celebration, such as decorating the home, greeting relatives by phone, or giving gifts to children. These respondents can be regarded as representatives of a kind of a transitional variant between celebration and non-celebration of the holiday.

The random sample also included people who stated that they “do not prepare for Easter and do not celebrate it”, that they “do not celebrate the Christian aspects of Easter and equally ignore the pagan ones”, that they “do not deal at all” with this holiday or “ignore” it, or consider it “days off”, a “longer time off”, or a “long weekend”. They noted that they were not religious; two of them were married with a single child, others were married or living with a partner, or were single (including those temporarily working abroad). They did not explain their attitude specifically, although some women stated that their motive for giving up this holiday was that they became independent and left the parental house. One respondent criticised the customs, considering them “sexist and humiliating”. Another decided that she wanted to use “her time off” not by spending time with her family or visits, but “only to relax”. Members of this group spent the pandemic Easter holiday in nature, at work, or renovating their homes. Several noted that they had planned vacations, wellness stays, mountain hikes, sightseeing tours abroad, or skiing holidays at a glacier in the Alps, which they cancelled. Even though they considered it an advantage that they did not have to deal with plane tickets, accommodation, tourist guides, or car rental, they nevertheless stated that what they missed most was “travelling during the Easter period each year”. Among the major problems during the four non-working days, they listed the “lack of freedom”, “stupid prohibitions” about crossing district borders,

the prohibition against travelling, or the impossibility of spending their time off work as they wished.

## Summary

This exploratory empirical survey focused on Easter during the 2020 spring lockdown brought an entirely range of new findings on the concrete forms of holiday practice among Slovaks at home. From a methodological perspective, the questionnaire appeared to be effective not only in terms of revealing the scale of the individual variants of holiday practice; quantitative analysis of the sample and qualitative analysis of responses to open-end questions captured the recent changes in several aspects of this holiday as well as its semantic ambivalence with regard to people's individualising needs in today's society.<sup>14</sup> It also identified the practices people adopted to adapt to the conditions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which was the primary motive for conducting the research. Many respondents described strategies that aimed to preserve the usual Easter customs, albeit in a reduced or changed form, in order to maintain their communication and identification with the tradition.

As in other countries, in April 2020, Slovakia's inhabitants were forced to spend Easter in their homes, isolated from stable social networks and from their wider families.<sup>15</sup> Holidays, ski trips, sightseeing tours, and wellness stays, as well as visits to distant relatives during Easter were made impossible. Inhabitants of the two major cities (Košice and Bratislava) who usually spent their holidays in the countryside remained in the city; those who would normally go to their weekend homes or spend the holidays with relatives or friends stayed at home in 2020. Spending Easter in multi-generational family groups became impossible, thus the number who spent it alone or in a nuclear family, often with the feeling of sadness, increased.

The dominant aspect of Easter as an opportunity to interact beyond the circle of those closest (co-habitants) was very limited or eliminated during the pandemic. The findings of this study differed from those of Peter Salner (2020b), who studied how Jewish families practiced the religious ritual of the Seder dinner during Passover in 2020. Among the Jewish minority in Bratislava, people isolated at home still managed to share this ritual and its atmosphere "remotely" and across generations thanks to the internet and a great deal of improvisation (Salner, 2020b: 118, 121). On the contrary, many people from my sample spontaneously noted that, despite virtual contact (and, for believers, the live-streaming of religious rituals), they were unable

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14 The limited effectiveness of the questionnaire survey could be overcome using the in-depth interview method or by a repeated survey several years after the end of the pandemic.

15 For instance, according to the online survey conducted in Germany in April 2020, because of the pandemic, 47% of Germans had to cancel their family visits, 43% meetings with friends, 22% a planned trip or holiday, etc. For more details, see Davies, 2022.

to access the usual festive atmosphere and felt alone, as if there was no holiday. These findings also confirmed that the Easter celebration in Slovakia, marked by the process of profanisation, is dominated not by religious but by social contents. This expands on the findings of studies covering Central Europe which link the beginning of this process to the socialist period (Botiková, Deáky, 2022: 241) and date its acceleration to the turn of the millennium (Barna, 2014: 134).

The preparations for Easter 2020 celebrations reflected the impossibility of preserving the custom of mutual visits and hospitality, and led to a reduction in the amount of food purchased, as well as the range and quantity of home-made meals. However, the changes were not only quantitative in nature. Health threats and social isolation weakened the prevalence of the elements of consumer culture that, according to Gábor Barna, are indicators of how present-day Easter celebrations place emphasis on external expressions with the aim of securing prestige (2014: 131).<sup>16</sup>

Visiting and socialising with family and friends was replaced by watching TV, reading, and playing board games. Due to the quarantine, which necessitated home schooling and working from home, some people replaced their festive activities with work.

The length of time spent in the garden or in nature increased. These activities also form part of the holiday in normal years; however, during the pandemic, people sought them more, not only for health promotion reasons but also as a source of distraction, stress relief, and a way to interrupt routines and stave off boredom during periods of isolation at home. This strengthened another feature of the profanisation of Easter – using festive days for working in the garden and spending time immersed in nature.

Direct communication with relatives and friends now took place via technical mediation – telephone, email, messaging, and video calls. Even though, like spending time in nature, this kind of communication was nothing new, the time spent communicating online, and the range of media used, increased during Easter 2020. Those for whom Easter is mainly a family holiday used the internet to connect with their loved ones not just once but repeatedly, every day. People reported sharing the festive atmosphere, sharing memories, and conversations on topics that they normally had no time for. People came up with ways for their grandchildren to “virtually” whip and pour water on their grandparents, marking a new feature of Easter customs. Even though technology enabled people with an internet connection to communicate and to see the authentic reactions of their loved ones, it was no substitute natural forms of social interaction, nor replace the touches and hugs people said they missed the most. The absence of these in-person interactions weakened respondents’ experience of the holiday.

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16 According to ethnologists Marta Botiková and Zita Deáky, the abundance of food and drinks on the Easter table, by which visits of relatives, friends, and neighbours took place, was aimed to primarily represent family wellbeing in socialist countries such as Slovakia and Hungary back in the 1970s (Botiková, Deáky, 2022: 267).

Attending broadcast religious rituals was a novelty in people's normal holiday practice, and was flexibly incorporated by Christians on festive days. Some respondents welcomed saving the time that would usually be spent travelling to church. However, some reported that with no possibility of contact with other believers in the special atmosphere of the church, there was a feeling of incompleteness when it came to experiencing the spiritual aspects of the festival, and a sense of emptiness and loneliness while watching the streamed Easter rituals. Even those who had prepared a food basket for the traditional blessing and performed the ritual at home by praying alone stated that they missed being present in the mass blessing and conversing with their fellow believers. These findings confirm the importance of stable social networks as social support for individually coping with the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, as highlighted in the research conducted by Slovak psychologists in 2020 (Džunka, Klučárová, Babinčák, 2021: 218). They also reflect the findings of anthropological surveys on how people communicated during the pandemic of 2020, according to which people in Slovakia "from the qualitative perspective, consider their religious community ties to be of the same importance as relationships based on close blood ties" (Uhrin, Besedová, Mesíčková, Pavlíková, 2021: 102). These findings can be followed by stating that, despite the successful replacement of traditional practices with technical means, at the individual level, personal communication appears to be irreplaceable in both religious and secular ways of celebrating Easter.

With regard to the secularisation of Easter, in addition to describing particular practices declared by the respondents, I attempted to understand this by observing whether people chose a secular or religious model of home celebration. Within the analysed sample, this choice was primarily influenced by whether the persons that live together are religious or not. Where only one of the spouses or partners was religious, this translated into different kinds of preparations and diverse practices on the festive days. Nevertheless, the specific ways of celebrating the holiday were also influenced by the traditions observed by people's parents, as well as individual attitudes to the ordered nature of particular festive practices. In the context of home celebration, these models therefore cannot be clearly separated.

However, it was observed that people were less likely to observe the traditional Christian customs than usual, due to social isolation and logistical problems during the lockdown and, indirectly, due to the absence of joint celebration with grandparents or great-grandparents.

The transformations of the present-day holiday culture, which Winfried Gebhardt designates as eventisation, occur at various levels of society and affect both the internal and external forms of the festival. They do not simply disappear or disintegrate with the emergence of new types of events; rather, as a consequence of social individualisation and pluralisation, the form of traditional holidays qualitatively changes, shifting towards more diffuse and non-binding forms (Gebhardt, 2000: 27). The data analysed here suggest an increased number of, albeit subtle, manifestations of this transformation of the Christian holiday during the pandemic. Some religious



parents spent time explaining the spiritual meaning of Easter to their children, while others chose to use folk religious practices to create original domestic religious rituals that would be fun for children (e.g. creating a Holy Sepulchre to pray at together). Families with children, for the first time forced to create their own model of how to spend Easter without grandparents who typically reproduced the traditional religious model, decided to follow a secular approach. They invented, explained, and experienced their own customs with their children (Easter egg hunts, puzzles, gardening and other fun activities in the garden). These practices can be considered the consequence of the gradual loss of traditional forms of celebrating the holiday, accompanied by the emergence of new, individualised forms of celebration which are increasingly oriented, at least in the domestic environment, on an experience (Barna, 2014: 134, Bieritz, 2012: 10).

A proportion of the Slovak population does not celebrate Easter – either rejecting it or completely ignoring it. For this group, religious holidays are not meaningful, and many choose not to spend their time off visiting family and strengthening community ties. Since they are not religious Christians and do not observe the ritual traditions, many use their days off for practical purposes (renovating their homes) or relaxing (vacations abroad, sightseeing tours, wellness). They make individual free choices unrelated to the customs and the opinions of their surroundings or relatives, considering the holiday as a space “for one’s self”. Life in a liberal consumer society and the opportunities offered by the globalised tourist sphere cater to this alternative holiday culture.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

KATARÍNA POPELKOVÁ (ORCID ID: 0000-0002-8163-4800) – ethnologist, Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences in Bratislava. She studied ethnography at the Faculty of Philosophy of the Comenius University in Bratislava (1987) and defended her scientific dissertation on the topic of urban ethnology in 1997. She deals with issues of the history of ethnology, ethnic stereotypes on the border, regional development, and the post-socialist transformation of viticulture. Since 2011, she has led four research projects on the theme of the transformation of holiday culture in Slovakia in the twenty-first century. She is the author of over forty scientific studies, and editor of the publication *Čo je to sviatok v 21. storočí na Slovensku?* [What is a holiday in the twenty-first century in Slovakia?] (2014) and the author of the book *Vinohradnícke mesto v etnologickej perspektíve* [Wine-growing town in an ethnological perspective] (2021).