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## Perception of St. Valentine's Day in the Culture Space of Latvia

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**Abstract.** Under the contemporary social and economic conditions, no culture can stay “sterile”. Growth of Internet communication and globalization processes facilitates borrowing of new realia including festivities and festive traditions and their circulation in the global culture environment. One of such realia that has become extremely widespread in Europe and the whole world is St. Valentine's Day. Recent research literature regards it in various aspects (psychological, feminist, commercial, etc.); researchers are also interested in the experience of celebrating St. Valentine's Day in diverse regions and countries. The present paper aims at characterizing the specificity of perceiving St. Valentine's Day in Latvia on the basis of newspaper, magazine, almanac articles available to readers in the course of 70 years (since the 1950s till nowadays). On the basis of article content analysis, the paper marks the trends characteristic of Latvian society in treatment of St. Valentine's Day under different historical, political, and economic conditions, Latvians being in their homeland and/or in exile. The compiled materials show that St. Valentine's Day entered Latvian culture space and got rooted there only after regaining state independence – in the 1990s and especially in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Nowadays it is represented in various spheres of public life, yet the residents' reaction to this phenomenon that is still foreign to many is rather ambiguous. St. Valentine's Day is not only associated with love and romance but is treated as a tool that yields commercial profit for traders, whereas for others it causes needless expenses, depression, and disappointment.

**Keywords.** Festivity, festive culture, borrowing, adaptation, transformation, commerce

### Introduction and theoretical framework

Trends of globalization and cosmopolitanism facilitate borrowing of foreign culture realia, including active familiarization with previously unknown traditions and customs. People encounter new festivities and holidays mostly by way of migration or language learning, also very efficient means of spreading borrowings are advertisements, internet publications, and cinematography. The borrowed festivities (e.g. St. Valentine's Day, Father's Day, Halloween) constantly participate in transforming of local culture (Juško-Štekele, 2008, p. 55), that foregrounds the problem of national purity (Galenko, 2015, p. 3; Kacane 2018, p. 291).

In current scientific literature, St. Valentine's Day is mostly treated in three broader contexts:

1. *As related to commerce and consumers' conduct* – authors are interested in the attitude of St. Valentine's Day adherents and readiness to spend large sums of money for

purchasing thematic products, the role of males and females in this process and similar topics (Clarke et. al., 2005; Ogletree, 1993; Rugimbana et. al., 2003; Zayas et. al., 2017). The focus of attention is on diverse online publications (comments, blogs, diaries, reviews) as well as respondents' answers to survey questions (Close, 2012; Close, Zinkhan, 2006, 2009). The researchers who focus on the commercial aspect of St. Valentine's Day admit that, on the one hand, similar to Halloween, it testifies to the flourishing of materialism, most expressly manifested in intense exchange of postcards and gifts. On the other hand, this trend has grown to a certain cult and thus arouses rather sceptical and negative attitude (anti-consumerism, anti-commercialism sentiments), as many members of the society acknowledge being manipulated on account of their feelings and desires (Close, Zinkhan, 2006, p. 356);

2. *From the position of psychology and medicine* – recently there has been growth of research that provides statistical data to prove the impact of St. Valentine's Day on the time and procedure of childbirth – in the period before and during this festivity the number of women giving birth in maternity hospitals grows (Levy et. al., 2011); also on relations among people – St. Valentine's Day would draw partners closer to each other and simultaneously aggravate problems that imperil their further staying together (Morse, Neuberg, 2004), as well as other issues related to people's psychological wellbeing;

3. *Revealing the perception of St. Valentine's Day in various countries in Europe and worldwide* – the given aspect has been studied less, although interest in it has obviously been growing recently. Scholars from different countries and schools find it “interesting to note how a global festival is understood, interpreted, and celebrated” (Siddiqui, 2016, p. 172). In most publications, mechanisms of adapting St. Valentine's Day are revealed in connection with the standpoint of political and religious organizations (Biswas, 2013), ideas spread in mass media – mostly television, press, radio (Minowa et. al., 2011; Siddiqui, 2016) and advertising campaigns (Van Dyk, 2013). Such an approach leads to the conclusion that St. Valentine's Day, similar to any other novelty or borrowing, passes through strong indigenous filters resulting in constant transformation (Renshaw, 2011, p. 308). According to scholars, nowadays this festivity in various perceiving cultures “exists outside of its original religious context” (Minowa et al., 2011, p. 44; Schmidt, 1997, p. 43) and is not celebrated in a similar fashion (Siddiqui, 2016, p. 173), varies depending on temporary contextual influences (Helsloot, 2008, p. 115; Zayas et. al., 2017, p. 1). Transformations in the practice of celebrating St. Valentine's Day and its interpretation are most often related to changes in national economy, social value system, consumer ideology, gender roles and power distribution as well as other factors (Minowa et. al., 2011, p. 44).

### **Research topicality and factological base**

Studies of the reception of St. Valentine's Day in Latvian culture space up to the present have been rather fragmented. Attitude of residents of Latgale region towards this rather recently borrowed festivity, their participation in St. Valentine's Day activities, the amount of demand for its traditions and thematic attributes, judging from the data of the survey of 2018, have been regarded in the paper “St. Valentine's Day in Borderland: The Specificity of Perception in Latgale Region (Latvia)” (Kovzele, 2019) published in Vienna conference paper collection “Cultural Studies, Ethnology and Folklore, Literature and Poetry, History of Arts, Contemporary Arts, Performing and Visual Arts, Architecture and Design”. Yet, detailed reviews of the entrance, adaptation, and celebrating of the festivity under analysis in the context of the whole country is still lacking.

The present research investigates the specificity of perceiving St. Valentine's Day in Latvia based on newspaper, magazine, and almanac articles covering the time period from the

1950s till nowadays. All publications available from this period are regarded, without sorting them as to the amount or content explication. The content analysis of these diverse publications makes it possible to detect the trends characteristic of Latvian society in the interpretation of St. Valentine's Day under different historical, political, and economic conditions (Soviet regime, the period of independent Latvian state), Latvians residing in their native land and/or various lands of settlement, as the periodicals published in exile are also taken into consideration.

### **Obtained data analysis**

Latvians first encountered St. Valentine's Day traditions, similar to those of Halloween, in a foreign environment (mostly in the UK, USA, and Canada) where they had settled in 1940 and 1944 after the Soviet occupation of Latvia. This fact is approved of in press periodicals publications, for instance:

In Latvia, person name Valentīns first occurred in 1545 in Vidzeme (Livland), but soon it appeared also in Kurzeme (Courland). In Latvian calendars the name was first added in 1783. Neither St. Valentine's Day nor its traditions, customs, and celebration were familiar in Latvia; we encountered them only in foreign lands [...]. (Grīslītis, 2004, p. 15)

It's surprising that it (St. Valentine's Day – O. K.) had not reached our land when we were still living in Latvia. (-mr-, 2010, p. 88)

In the course of time, information on this festivity started appearing in various editions in exile: "Laiks" [Time], "Latvija Amerikā" [Latvia in America], "Mazputniņš" [Nestling], etc. First attempts at understanding the history of St. Valentine's Day were observed in the 1950s (N., 1953, p. 8), whereas in press periodicals of exile in the 1960–80s, broader and thematically more diverse publications occurred.

Materials of this period of time reveal various versions of the origin of St. Valentine's Day: Lupercalia festivity of ancient Romans (Grīslītis, 1965, p. 4), the life story of the bishop murdered during the reign of Claudius II (Straume, 1980, p. 8; V. A., 1973, p. 12), Medieval tradition of united heathen festivity (13 February) and the commemoration day of a saint of the church (15 February) (Nansija, 1978, p. 8; Nansija, 1985, p. 8), etc. There is also information about various social events organized by Latvians in exile testifying to the process of merging of festive traditions, e.g.: "Tables of the dining hall were decorated with hearts and folk song verses" (Toronto ziņas, 1988, p. 10). The above mentioned publications compensate for the lack of St. Valentine's Day topic in Soviet Latvian press that had other, mostly ideologically conditioned priorities of the publication content.

After the international recognition of the reconstruction of the independent Latvian state in 1991, the name of St. Valentine's Day gradually emerged in Latvian mass media. Authors of articles point out that this tradition was gradually taking roots in Latvia (Miķelsone, 1994, p. 1) that was "rapidly moving closer towards Western Europe" (Vaidakovs, 1996, p. 7).

Publications of the 1990s (in "Diena" [Day], "Neatkarīgā Rīta Avīze" [Independent Morning Paper], "Literatūra un Māksla" [Literature and Art], etc.) in most cases inform of the historical origin of this borrowed festivity (Rupenheite, 1996, p. 8) and its celebration experience in various European and world countries (*Dienas ārzemju..*, 1996, p. 4), provide information on charity campaigns during St. Valentine's Day (donations for specialized

children's home in the Latvian town Malta (Korporācija Septima..., 1996, p. 5), visits of officials to children's hospitals (Latvija Amerikā, 1995, p. 18; Miķelsone, 1994, p. 1)), broad student activities (50 partner weddings (Vaidakovs, 1996, p. 7)), theatre performances "with unusually great [...] number of tickets sold" (Kilevica, 1994, p. 3), special restaurant offers (Rītiņš, 1996, p. 7).

Notwithstanding the fact that in Latvia this day is not celebrated "as colourfully [...] as in St. Valentine's homeland [...]" (Seiga, 1996, p. 9), the fact of its defence and growing popularity provoked discussions on the question: "Shall we know how to play this foreign English game?" (Cālīte, 1992, p. 16).

Champions of St. Valentine's Day refer positively to its romantic air as well as try to draw parallels with Latvian national and other folk festivities that entail the component of love and passion:

And yet – why is this festivity celebrated, is its silent, unobtrusive, but persistent entrance in Latvia really needed? It turns out that in Anglo-Saxon lands this tradition is even older than England and has come from heathen traditions – similar to Līgo festivity, besides its idea is rather close to searching for a fern blossom on midsummer night or Jāņi. This festivity is equally heathen and related to Roman fertility festivities. (Cālīte, 1995, p. 5)

There is an opinion that St. Valentine's Day freshens up the cult of letters and, in opposition to the routine of life, offers a nontrivial game of love:

This is *another* game with its rules that are offered to make it possible (and even necessary) to address one's only beloved, expressing through light pseudo-romantic kitsch what daily routine makes trivial to utmost. [...] if we are able to capture a seed from foreign lands that gets rooted in a flower-bed by our home, let it bloom! (Cālīte, 1995, p. 5)

The sceptically minded part of the society would note that it is just another phenomenon foreign to Latvian culture space. There are sufficient number of our own national traditions and literary characters associated with love and devotion:

Who shall we now love? We need new objects of adoration and necessarily – imported ones. No sooner said than done. Got the crystal clear Lucia and St. Valentine. No blame on them, it's just so sad that we, Latvians, need nothing of our own. Neither the fabulous Rose of Turaida, nor Brigadere's Maija who overcame all evil with her love and clear heart. Why are we so shy of our loving, kindness, and selflessness? (Kreicmane, 1994, p. 5)

Let St. Valentine's Day be celebrated by those who wish to do it, but there is no need to make a fuss around the non-Latvian St. Valentine's Day. Let it be celebrated by the adherents of the faith that claims Valentine as its martyr and saint. [...] We Latvians have our Jāņi, Pēteri, Mārtiņi, Miķeļi and so forth. These names are not endowed with any aureoles of martyrs or saints. (Innuss, 1996, p. 2)

Opponents of St. Valentine's call it a pompous day with intrusively advertised attributes without deeper content:

Now in Latvia there has appeared the so-called day of all lovers, all hearts, or the feast of love. All around there are calls for sending cards, making presents of hearts, ribbons, angels, etc. [...]. Pompous day of innocent games. Nothing more. (Žogota, 1996, p. 2)

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, despite the fact that St. Valentine's Day in this country "has not yet gained an official status" (Berkina, 2004, p. 10), publications on it appear in a growing number both in the press periodicals published in lands of settlement and Latvia. Authors of foreign periodicals refer to St. Valentine's Day in various contexts mostly in a positive sense. Readers are offered new legends concerning the origin of this festivity and Valentine's personality: he would secretly wed lovers, release Christian prisoners, sign a letter addressed to a prisoner's daughter (Berkina, 2004, p. 10; Berzin-Birch, 2005, p. 2; Grīslītis, 2000, p. 12; R. P., 2001, p. 8); statements on the diversity and popularity of festive attributes (Berkina, 2004, p. 10; Delfi, 2006, p. 16; Latvijas Pasts, 2006, p. 11; Renāte, 2007, p. 11); descriptions of activities organized by Latvians (Bērziņa, 2003, p. 9; Liepiņš, 2007, p. 16), promoting their sublime goals, e.g. donating blood (TVNET, 2008, p. 13). Only a few articles mention problems of adapting St. Valentine's Day – banning it in Russian city of Belgorod (TVNET, 2011, p. 18) and similar facts.

Latvian magazines and newspapers (mostly "Diena", "Literatūra un Māksla Latvijā", etc.) offer information on events dedicated to St. Valentine's Day and their proceedings (Literatūra un Māksla Latvijā, 2001, p. 2; Vilkārese, 2002, p. 14; Studentu biedrība Šalkone, 2011, p. 140), as well as continue expressing opinions spread in the country, including those concerning the entertaining character of this borrowed festivity and its relatedness to commerce:

There is a certain part of community that cannot accept St. Valentine's Day due to the light-mindedness of young people because they think that festive celebrations need to proceed with greater dignity. However, it must be acknowledged that festivities – official, unofficial, recognized by some, denied by others – nowadays are undoubtedly related to commercial interests. The more festivities, the greater the traders' profit grows. (Kalniņa, 2004, p. 2)

Content analysis of recent publications in Latvian informational portals (e.g. Delfi.lv), newspapers and magazines ("Ieva", "Neatkarīgā Rīta Avīze Latvijai" [Independent Morning Paper for Latvia], "Praktiskā Astroloģija" [Practical Astrology], "Stars" [Ray], "Zintnieks" [Sage], etc.) leads to the conclusion that, in the course of time, St. Valentine's Day has grown into an intrinsic part of present-day consumer culture. On the one hand, it promises varied entertainment perspectives (thematic movies, music compositions, concerts, parties, shows, masquerades, etc.), whereas on the other, can make an essential impact on the family budget (requiring special manicure, hairdos, costumes, interior decorations, presents, menu, etc.) that actually is the purpose of St. Valentine's Day:

In early February, the world turns upside down. Nobody mentions the crisis or unemployment any more. Instead, many waste astronomical

sums of money for heart-shaped candles, pads and various other trinkets. Shops are full of objects that are regarded by the community as romantic and associated with St. Valentine's Day. [...]. (Marinska, 2010, p. 7)

[...] cruel and imposed festival [...]. In a sense, St. Valentine's Day cultivates in us a wrong way of looking at relationships. A narcissistic desire to get that on this day appears so insistently. (Asare, 2017, pp. 20–21)

The debatable status of the festivity under analysis in present-day Latvia as well as its permanence in the population's mind is reflected in literary works produced in large number in recent periodicals. In this respect it must be admitted that the phenomenon of St. Valentine's Day most often inspires poets – young beginning authors, members of various communities and circles, senior citizens. In young people's works, St. Valentine's Day is positioned as the time when “colourful dreams come true” and an there arises and opportunity “to love people joyfully” (Kļaviņa, 2013, p. 11), senior authors share their memories of their parents' faithful marriage (Aivars, 2007, p. 14), reflect on relationships with the beloved being “support and friend” (Čumakeviča, 2011, p. 28) and one can “love, hope, respect, and suffer” (Grasis, 2000, p. 2), like St. Valentine would advocate in his days (Zihmanis, 2000, p. 10). At the same time, there are poems with distinctly humorous and even sarcastic inclination. This is exemplified by a poem cycle by Ināra Šteinberga (1956) produced in stylistics of humorous periodical “Dadzis” [Thistle] (1957–1995; 2005–2009) about the lyrical hero Brencis' desperate search for St. Valentine's Day presents that each time ends in a catastrophe: the down pillow that he presents to his beloved wife is ripped and pours on her head (Šteinberga, 2005, p. 8), the posh Valentine cake is crushed on the way to the married couple's home (Šteinberga, 2004, p. 32), the bunch of roses packed according to the sales woman's advice gets frozen (Šteinberga, 2007, p. 32), etc.

### **Conclusions**

St. Valentine's Day is a phenomenon of foreign origin that was first encountered by Latvians in exile under the dire conditions of lands of settlement. This fact is approved by publications in periodicals in exile since the 1950s. In the culture space of Latvia, St. Valentine's Day appeared and got established only in the 1990s, and especially in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as a reaction provoked by Hollywood movies and advertising campaigns to the current fashion in the Western world.

Nowadays St. Valentine's Day is an extremely popular segment of festive culture represented in various spheres of public life in Latvia: entertainment, education, literature. A bright example of this is learning material “Gostūs pi Boņuka: stuosti bārnim par Latgolu” [Visiting Boņuks: stories for children about Latgola] (Rēzekne, 2017) compiled by Ilga Šuplinska, Līga Rundāne, and Aelita Andrejeva where St. Valentine's Day activities – preparing cards, visiting a party, celebrating both at home and at school – are included in the model of festivity planning designed for school learners.

Written materials testify that the attitude towards this festivity in the country is rather ambiguous. Despite the activities (handicraft, interior decorations, diverse artistic performance, contests, dancing parties, etc.) easily adjusted to the interests of various target groups, that make it possible to state that there exists a local tradition of St. Valentine's Day celebration, many residents of Latvia regard it as a tool of manipulation used for the sake of commercial profit for traders but for many it causes depression and disappointment.

In future this festivity may have many adherents, yet, with the aggravation of Covid-19 infection caused crisis, new opponents and sceptics will appear as well. For this reason, new research and surveys are needed for further detecting of the perception of St. Valentine's Day in Latvian culture space.

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