



Child Participants in Serbian Folk Tradition – Folk Customs in the Service of Socialization and Community Education

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Abstract:

This study examines the Serbian folk customs associated with children, with particular attention to their role in education, socialization, and the shaping of identity. The author presents how the rituals connected to religious and communal holidays – such as *Detinjci*, *Materice*, *Oci*, the burning of the *Badnjak*, *Korindanje*, the breaking of the *Česnica*, Easter egg-tapping, and the Saint Sava Day school celebrations – communicate communal values to children in playful and experiential ways. Special emphasis is placed on the Serbian community of Deszk, Hungary, where these traditions are still alive today, and where educational institutions consciously support the cultural integration of children. The author argues that traditions are not merely relics of the past but identity-shaping forces oriented towards the future, especially within minority communities.

Keywords:

Serbian, folklore, folk customs, religious holidays

Introduction

Serbian folk tradition is not merely a matter of folkloristic interest but constitutes a defining form of living cultural heritage, serving the intergenerational transmission of communal memory, identity, and moral values. According to UNESCO's definition, such living traditions provide identity and continuity, link the past with the present and the future, and contribute to strengthening social cohesion (UNESCO, 2003, Article 2, paragraph 1). This role is particularly important in the case of children, who are not only passive observers but also active participants and heirs of the community's world of traditions. Folk customs connected to children – practices linked to the Christian festive cycle, to family rituals, to seasonal changes in agri-

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culture, and to communal celebrations – contribute both symbolically and practically to socialization, upbringing, and identity formation.

The purpose of the present study is to demonstrate how Serbian folk customs serve the communal education and moral development of Serbian children in Hungary. It reviews those significant traditional rituals and festive customs in which children participate or have a prominent role, and which convey the values, world-view, and moral expectations of the community to them in a playful form.

Particular attention is given to the ways in which these traditions continue to live among the Serbian minority in Hungary. Krel (2004) emphasises that the traditional culture of the Vojvodina Serbs, compared to Serbian culture in other South Slavic regions, possesses many distinctive features, as the cultural model brought from the Balkans to the Pannonian Plain² was subject to constant socio-economic, cultural, and political influences in the multicultural milieu of the Austrian Empire and later the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. “The powerful impact of these factors led to numerous characteristic changes in the traditional culture of today’s Vojvodina. This is also the case with the village culture of the Serbs inhabited along the river Tisza,” Krel adds. This statement applies even more strongly to the culture of the Serbs living in Hungary. The study therefore pays particular attention to the example of the Serbian community of Deszk,³ which to this day preserves its religious, linguistic, and folk traditions. The village of Deszk – located in the immediate vicinity of Szeged – plays a special role in maintaining the cultural self-identity of the Serbs in Hungary. The Serbian kindergarten and primary school operating there, the active Orthodox church life, and the communal practices linked to holidays – especially those involving the participation of

² The Pannonian Plain (or Carpathian Basin) is a vast region in Central Europe that includes present-day Hungary and parts of its neighbors. During the Habsburg Empire and later the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy (18th–20th centuries), this area was a multiethnic frontier where Hungarians and South Slavs (including Serbs) lived under a common imperial administration. Significant Serbian communities settled in the southern Pannonian region (notably in today’s Vojvodina and southern Hungary) after the Ottoman retreat, often encouraged by Habsburg authorities. This historical convergence meant that Serbian cultural traditions in the Pannonian Plain evolved amidst continuous contact with Hungarian and other Central European cultures – a dynamic noted by scholars as leading to distinctive local adaptations of Serbian folk culture.

³ *Deszk’s significance in Hungarian Serb culture*: Deszk is a village near Szeged in southern Hungary that has long been a stronghold of Serbian cultural identity. Depopulated during the Ottoman period, it was re-established in 1746 by Serbian frontier guards settled under Habsburg rule. By the early 20th century, it was one of Hungary’s largest Serbian villages (Serbs constituted roughly half of Deszk’s 2,944 inhabitants in 1910). Although many Serbs left after World War I (when Vojvodina joined Yugoslavia), Deszk retained its Serbian Orthodox church and eventually opened a Serbian-language kindergarten and primary school – institutions that continue to operate today. As a result, Deszk remains crucial for preserving the Serbian language, religion, and folk traditions in Hungary, serving as a central hub for the community’s cultural life.

children – all attest to the fact that folk tradition can contribute, in a living form, to the preservation and transmission of identity.

Sanja Simulov, a kindergarten teacher who leads mixed-age groups in the Serbian kindergarten of Deszk, describes the institution's educational principles and daily practice as follows:

At this age, children get to know the world around them through their senses, through play, music, rhythm, and movement. Therefore, in our institution we organise cultural and religious holidays in ways that are close to them and understandable for them. Cooperation with the Serbian Self-Government of Deszk and with the Banat Cultural Association is an essential part of our educational work. They are the driving force behind our joint programmes, especially those that serve to preserve Serbian traditions, language, and folk customs. My role as a kindergarten teacher is to coordinate with community members in advance about which events we can take part in. This is the starting point for planning our programmes on a monthly, weekly, or daily basis. (Simulov, 2025)

Simulov also highlights the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church in local tradition-preservation and in the upbringing of young children:

Every Tuesday we hold a religious education class in the kindergarten with Father Svetomir Miličić, who covers the themes of the major holidays with the children. (...) This is a valuable complement to the work of the kindergarten teacher. (Simulov, 2025)

The example of Deszk also shows how important kindergarten and school are in the process of tradition preservation and identity formation. Klein (2024), in a study on the German children's culture in Hungary, points out that "most cultural programmes for children are organised by schools and kindergartens, rather than by families deciding to spend their free time visiting such events." As the above example from Deszk confirms, this statement is equally true for the Serbian community in Hungary.

Folk traditions can be divided according to the customs of the calendar year (spring, summer, autumn, winter festive cycles) and according to the customs of human life (Karsainé & Márkus, 2024). In this study, we classify the holidays based on the first approach. The chapters of the paper follow the thematic cycle of the ecclesiastical year and the logic of family and community rituals. The customs presented in detail include the pre-Christmas child-focused traditions (*Detinjci, Materice, Oci*), the Christmas and Easter customs (*Badnjak, Korindanje, Česnica, egg-tapping*), the dramatic games linked to communal festivities, school rituals (e.g., Saint Sava Day), as well as spring, summer, and specifically family ceremonies (e.g., *Ivandan, Pentecost home decoration, krsna slava*).

The child participants in Serbian folk traditions are not only bearers of festive joy but also active agents in the realisation of cultural continuity. The aim of this study is to shed light on the fact that these customs carry not only tradition-preserving or religious significance but also play educational, socializing, identity-forming, and community-building roles – especially in minority communities such as the Serbs in Hungary.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative case study approach focusing on the Serbian community of Deszk in Hungary. Data were gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and personal communications with community members, alongside participant observations of local traditions and educational activities. For example, an elder Deszk resident was interviewed to document personal recollections of mid-20th-century folk customs, and a local Serbian kindergarten teacher provided insights into current practice (via interview and written reflections). These first-hand accounts were complemented by field observations of community events (such as church celebrations and school programs) and by reviewing relevant documents and scholarly literature. Together, these methods allowed for a rich, triangulated understanding of how Serbian folk traditions are maintained and taught to children in the community. The empirical emphasis was on interpreting participants' experiences and observations – in their native cultural context – to reveal the pedagogical and social significance of the customs.

The Winter Festive Cycle and Children's Traditions

Detinjci, Materice, Oci, and Saint Nicholas Day

On the three Sundays preceding Christmas, a series of symbolic games and gift-giving takes place within the family: on *Detinjci* ("Children"), *Materice* ("Mothers"), and *Oci* ("Fathers"), parents and children "capture" one another and are released in exchange for a "ransom" – in other words, a self-made gift. The tying-up is not a punishment but a ritual act. According to some sources, such binding games "symbolise strong family ties, harmony, peace, respect, and mutual assistance" (Serbian Times, 2021). The "ransom" – usually a gift given in the form of sweets – is an expression of attentiveness and gratitude. These celebrations form part of the preparations for Christmas and, as such, carry a connecting, familial, and spiritual dimension.

Ethnographers point out that these pre-Christmas Sunday holidays also contain ancient, pre-Christian magical elements aimed at ensuring the family's well-being and prosperity. The *Detinjci*, *Materice*, and *Oci* customs – like the other notable days of the Advent season – all serve to protect and increase the household's health and wealth for the coming year (Lukić & Joksimović, 2018).

According to the personal recollections of Zorica Sztepanov (née Brcán), a resident of Deszk, in the 1950s numerous Serbian folk customs involving children were still alive in Deszk, a village near Szeged (personal communication, 14 June 2025). The tying-up traditions connected to the *Detinjci–Materice–Oci* cycle were well known in the village:

“We had that here in Deszk too – we tied each other up and gave each other gifts to be freed.”

Detinjci is held three weeks before Christmas. On this day, usually early in the morning, parents take a piece of string or a scarf and “tie up” their children, who can only “escape” in exchange for a gift they have made themselves. As ransom, the children give a present they have prepared in advance. This could be sweets, a drawing, a song, or some decorative item they have made in the days before. Children love this custom, which literally ties them to their siblings and parents. Orphaned children were, in many places, traditionally “tied up” on this day by childless couples.

The following Sunday – two weeks before Christmas – is *Materice*. On this day, the children tie up their mother. The search for the gift and the little “release drama” is a particularly beloved ritual, in which children play an active role in the family celebration. The search takes place with clues and instructions given by the mother, and is especially delightful for the children, who, after finding the gift, untie their mother laughing and squealing.

On the Sunday before Christmas, *Oci* is celebrated. This is an especially exciting day because it is the closest to Christmas Day, when the children will receive more presents. On *Oci*, the children prepare a rope or scarf and, while their father is still asleep, tie him up, demanding a ransom. Without a gift there is no release. Fathers must prepare in advance and hide the gifts as well as possible so that finding them becomes a challenge and great fun. As several authors point out, “in the case of children, it is important that the transmission of tradition be experiential, involving hands, head, and heart, in a multisensory way” (Karsainé & Márkus, 2024). The tradition described above instinctively “meets” these pedagogical requirements.

Saint Nicholas Day is also an important celebration in the preparation for Christmas. It is traditionally celebrated in Serbian schools and kindergartens. Sanja Simulov, a kindergarten teacher in Deszk, writes:

On Saint Nicholas Day we take the children to church, and the weekly themes in kindergarten extend to other winter holidays as well – Christmas, New Year, and the figure of the *Mikulás*. The children learn that in Serbia Saint Nicholas is the same as the *Mikulás* in Hungary, and that this is the feast of kindness and gift-giving. He is present in songs, poems, and creative activities. (Simulov, 2025)

“*Badnji Dan*”

One of the most important feast days in Serbia is *Badnji Dan*, the day before Christmas, which falls on 6 January (24 December according to the Julian calendar used in the Orthodox world). Numerous folk traditions and customs are linked to this day. On the morning of *Badnji Dan*, fathers go into the forest with their sons to cut an oak branch that still has dry leaves on it. This is the *Badnjak*. According to Serbian folk tradition, the oak branch must be felled in one stroke while standing in an east–west direction. Lighting the fire and burning the *Badnjak* take place after the evening liturgy.

In the Christian tradition, the *Badnjak* symbolises the Tree of Life, the same tree that the shepherds are said to have given to Joseph to light a fire for the shivering infant Jesus. Burning it symbolises sacrifice and purification, and in the Orthodox calendar it marks the approaching end of the year: leaving behind all its troubles and sorrows, making way for the hopes and expectations of the new one.

The ritual also preserves elements of pagan origin: according to the literature, the *Badnjak* embodies the ancient Slavic vegetation spirit – in essence, a deity who “dies” when burned in the fire in order to be reborn (Wikipedia, 2024). The cult of fire and oak, and the burning of the *Badnjak*, also serve to invoke the souls of the ancestors and ensure fertility (Sušić, 2022).

In earlier times, the embers of the *Badnjak* – “the vigil tree” – were kept alive by a member of the household until the following morning so they would not go out. The first visitor to arrive would rekindle it, wish the household good fortune, and predict the future from it.

Korindanje

Korindanje is a traditional Serbian folk custom, especially widespread in Vojvodina and in Serbia’s communities in Hungary, which takes place on Christmas Eve (*Badnji Dan*) and involves mainly children. At this time, children form groups and go from house to house in the village, singing Christmas songs and offering good wishes to the household in exchange for gifts: walnuts, apples, sweets, or small sums of money. Here is one such well-known little song:

**Ja sam mali korindaš,
daj mi, gazda, šta imaš,
vina ili rakije,
evo Božić ispred kapije!**

In Hungarian translation:

Én vagyok a korindás,
adjál, gazda, mire vársz,
bort vagy pálinkát akár –
Kisjézus áll a kapunál!

In English translation:

I am a little *korindaš*,
give me, master, what you have,
wine or rakija,
here is Christmas at your gate!

The best-known Christmas song is “Oj, Badnjače, Badnjače...”, sung both when bringing in the *Badnjak* and during *Korindanje*:

**Oj, Badnjače, Badnjače,
Ti naš stari rođače,
Dobro si nam došao,
I u kuću ušao!**

**Mili srpski Badnjače,
Ti naš stari rođače,
Badnjače, Badnjače,
Rođače, rođače!**

Hungarian translation:

Ó, Badnjak, ó, Badnjak,
ősi jó rokonunk,
jókor jöttél mihozzánk,
vár téged otthonunk!

Kedves szerb Badnjak,
ősi jó rokonunk,
ó, Badnjak, ó, Badnjak,
rokonunk, rokonunk!

English translation:

Oh, *Badnjak*, oh, *Badnjak*,
our ancient dear kinsman,
you have come to us in good time,
our home awaits you!

Beloved Serbian *Badnjak*,
our ancient dear kinsman,
oh, *Badnjak*, oh, *Badnjak*,
kinsman, kinsman!

This song also expresses the ancient Serbian belief – older than Christianity – that the *Badnjak*, the Christmas oak branch, serves to invoke the spirits of the ancestors. Bringing the *Badnjak* into the house and burning it helps to

“release” the ancestors’ souls, allowing them to be present at the celebration and to protect the family with their blessing.

The purpose of *Korindanje* is the communal sharing of festive joy, the strengthening of kinship and neighbourly relations, and ensuring that children, too, are active participants in the Christmas folk tradition.

This custom remained a living tradition in many Serbian settlements in the southern Pannonian region and in the Serbian communities of Hungary (for example, in Deszk). “We also cut the *Badnjak* in the forest and walked through the village singing the song ‘Badnjače, Badnjače..’” recalls Zorica Sztepanov. She also remembers other customs:

“On that day we brought straw into the house to evoke the birth of little Jesus in the manger. Often, we children would sleep on that straw that night” (Z. Sztepanov, personal communication, 14 June 2025).

Bringing straw into the home is a widespread custom on this day not only among the Serbian communities in Hungary but also in Serbia itself, and is clearly linked to the Christian tradition, reminding children of the Bethlehem manger.

In Deszk, there were also other Christmas customs connected to children that are not recorded in the literature, so they may be unique to the village or the region. One such tradition was the “Accompanying the Christ Child” (*Praćenje Božića*). Zorica Sztepanov recalls:

We could hardly wait to go sledding. We harnessed the horses to the sled and went out into the fields to ‘accompany’ the Christ Child.

The Česnica and the Christmas Bread

The *Česnica* is a special round loaf prepared before Christmas, into which the housewife bakes a coin. Breaking the *Česnica* and finding the coin is an act of fortune-telling for the family (Trajković, 2005). The *Česnica* – with its hidden coin – is the central element of the Christmas table. When it is cut or broken, the children watch eagerly to see who will get the slice “filled with luck.” This playful ritual symbolises the hoped-for abundance and prosperity of the New Year. While singing Christmas songs, the family turns the loaf, and the one who receives the coin can expect a lucky year. This custom is an active and exciting part of children’s Christmas experience.

In addition to the *Česnica*, housewives also baked Christmas bread. It was broken on Christmas Eve before dinner. The next day, gift-giving took place:

We sent decorated bread to relatives, godparents, and family members who had married into another household. Often it was we children who took the gifts. (Z. Sztepanov, personal communication, 14 June 2025)

Simulov (2025) describes the preservation of Christmas traditions, including the preparation of the *Česnica*, in the Serbian kindergarten and primary school of Deszk:

The theme of Christmas is familiar to most children, as they arrive at kindergarten with some prior knowledge. We expand this knowledge by reading stories, holding discussions, symbolic games, and creative activities. For example, every year we make a *Česnica* together, into which we hide a coin. The greatest joy is the moment when everyone searches for the coin in the finished *Česnica*, because they have already learned that whoever finds it will be lucky all year and will receive a gift.

The Child as a Figure of Fortune-Telling: The položajnik

On Christmas morning, a special guest arrives at the house. This person is called the spark-striker (*položajnik*). It is believed that the *položajnik* brings good fortune to the household for the entire coming year: the number of sparks flying up from the burning *Badnjak* symbolically foretells the prosperity of the year ahead (Sušić, 2022).

In Hungary, it is generally children who go to predict the future, either by stirring kernels of corn in a bowl or by stirring the embers of the *Badnjak*. In Mohács, during my childhood, we used the following chant:

**Колико зрнаца, толико среће и здравља,
Колико зрнаца, толико новца,
Колико зрнаца, толико јагањаца,
Колико зрнаца, толико грожђа,
Колико зрнаца, толико радости,
Колико зрнаца, толико чељади,
Колико зрнаца, толико среће и здравља.**

Free Hungarian translation:

Amennyi kukoricaszem, annyira boldog légy,
Amennyi kukoricaszem, annyi legyen a pénz,
Amennyi kukoricaszem, annyi báránynod szülessen,
Amennyi kukoricaszem, annyi szép szőlőd teremjen,
Amennyi kukoricaszem, oly sok szerencse érjen,
Amennyi kukoricaszem, házatokban
annyi vidám és jó ember éljen.

English free translation:

As many grains as there are, be that happy,
as many grains, have that much money,
as many grains, may that many lambs be born to you,

as many grains, may that much fine grape grow,
as many grains, may that much good fortune find you,
as many grains, may your house be filled
with that many cheerful and kind people.

When embers are stirred instead of corn, the spark-striker replaces the grains with sparks. One chant from Kotor goes as follows:

**Koliko varnica, toliko srećica,
Koliko varnica, toliko parica,
Koliko varnica, toliko u toru ovaca,
Koliko varnica, toliko prasadi i jaganjaca,
Koliko varnica, toliko gusadi i piladi,
A najviše zdravlja i veselja,
Amin, Bože daj!**

Free Hungarian translation:

Ahány szikra, annyi szerencse,
Ahány szikra, annyi pénzecske,
Ahány szikra, annyi juh az akolban,
Ahány szikra, annyi malac és bárány,
Ahány szikra, annyi liba és csibe,
De a legtöbb legyen az egészség és az öröm,
Ámen, Isten adja meg!

English free translation:

As many sparks, that much happiness,
as many sparks, that many little coins,
as many sparks, that many sheep in the fold,
as many sparks, that many piglets and lambs,
as many sparks, that many geese and chicks,
but most of all, may there be health and joy,
Amen, God grant it!

This custom practiced by children embodies good wishes, abundance, and the welcoming of good fortune at the beginning of the year. The *položajnik* is richly rewarded by the hosts, for there is a belief that the household will be blessed with good luck and prosperity all year if the first visitor arrives with good wishes (Sušić, 2022).

Similar customs also exist among other national communities in Hungary. For example, among the Germans of Hungary, adults would expect children as special bringers of luck on New Year's Day, and those who were the first to offer good wishes were rewarded more generously than those who came later (Gölcz, 2024).

Public Performances

On Christmas Day, the reading of the Apostle (*Apostol*) during the festive liturgy was also part of the celebration.

It was mostly read by boys, but girls from more prominent families also took part. I was allowed to read once too, which was a big thing – I was proud. (Z. Sztepanov, personal communication, 14 June 2025)

Involving children in church services on other feast days is also common, serving as a deliberate tool of community education among the Serbs of Hungary. This practice continues to this day, with children actively participating in church celebrations. From a pedagogical point of view, this is important because – as Karsainé and Márkus (2024) emphasise – “in early childhood the focus is not primarily on the transmission of knowledge, but much more on fostering a positive emotional connection and joyful spiritual attachment.”

On Christmas Day, the collection of offerings in church was also often entrusted to children. The children collected *tas* (offerings on a small collection plate), which were often slipped into their coats:

They also dropped coins into my coat, behind the collar. That was mine alone. I could hardly wait to get home and take off my coat to gather up the money. (Z. Sztepanov, personal communication, 14 June 2025)

The school-based aspect of tradition preservation also includes public performances before an audience. Simulov (2025) describes it as follows:

Every year at Christmas we organise a joint programme in the Community Hall. The kindergarten children, the schoolchildren, and all the members of the Banat Folk Dance Ensemble take part. This year they presented a playful scene in which even the youngest children had roles. Together with the oldest women of the Folk Dance Ensemble, they performed the red apple washing custom, chanting as they did so: ‘May I be healthy and rosy all year, like this apple.’ The programme continued with the children’s recitations and folk dances, followed by performances by older members of the ensemble. Every child who is interested takes part in the programme, not only of Serbian but often also of Hungarian background. These are children whose parents recognise the value of getting to know other cultures and want their children to gain richer life experience.

Saint Sava (Sveti Sava) Day: The Ceremony of Value Transmission in Schools

Saint Sava (*Свети Сава*), born Rastko Nemanjić (*Растко Немањич*) (1174–14 January 1236), was the youngest son of the Serbian Grand Prince Stefan Nemanja, the founder of the Nemanjić dynasty and creator of the Serbian state. Saint Sava was the founder of the autocephalous Serbian Orthodox Church, its first archbishop, a writer, translator, and lawgiver. In addition, he is regarded as the founder of the Serbian school system and is considered, in Serbian tradition, the patron saint of Serbian schools.

The celebration of Saint Sava Day on 27 January has a long-standing tradition in Serbian schools, first becoming established among the Serbs of Hungary and then spreading to other Serbian-inhabited areas. On this day, children honour the patron saint of the Orthodox Church and of education by performing poems, songs, and short plays. Active participation serves as an educational tool for communal remembrance and identity formation.

Researchers dealing with the subject emphasise that “the aim of nationality institutions is the experiential and action-based transmission of language, the teaching of nationality content and culture, and child-centered language education” (Karsainé & Márkus, 2024), and that “through heritage-preservation programmes and customs organised in schools, we can also practically reinforce in children the knowledge they have previously learned in folk culture lessons” (Gölcz, 2024). This school tradition, based on the active participation of children, combines learning with community performance, thereby having both an educational and a community-building function. Students are required to learn something new – usually a poem or a song, but sometimes, following the model of nativity plays, they also perform short dramatizations from the life of Saint Sava.

According to the research of Sabina Hadžibulić (2025), teachers and students involved in organising Saint Sava Day celebrations experience this holiday according to their own interpretations: for some, it is a religious event, while for others it is primarily a cultural and communal tradition.

In Deszk, this day is of course still celebrated, since – as mentioned earlier – it is one of the few Serbian villages in Hungary that still has a Serbian school and kindergarten. Simulov (2025) describes it as follows:

Although it is difficult to explain Saint Sava’s life and work to the youngest children, they are happy to hear that he was a prince. Therefore, our theme is often: princes and princesses. (...) On this day, the children go to church together with the school pupils, take part in the liturgy, and then an official programme follows in the Saint Sava Center. The programme always begins with the Saint Sava Hymn, and continues with recitations, music, and dramatized scenes.

In the 1950s, Saint Sava Day was also celebrated in Deszk. Zorica Sztepanov recalls one of the recitation ceremonies:

Saint Sava Day was a real children's holiday, when we recited poems. One year they put me on the table because I was small, and told me to shout, to recite loudly. I got big applause. (Z. Sztepanov, personal communication, 14 June 2025)

Easter Egg-Tapping (tucanje uskršnjih jaja)

Among Orthodox Easter customs, the breaking of red eggs (*tucanje jajima*) is the most popular among children. The hard-boiled eggs, usually dyed red, symbolise the Resurrection of Christ in Christian culture. In folk explanation, egg-tapping symbolizes the Resurrection: the hard shell of the egg stands for Christ's tomb, and its breaking signifies the Resurrection.

Children play egg-tapping contests: holding a boiled, painted egg in their hand, they try to break the eggs of others while keeping their own intact. The game continues until only one "strong egg" remains. The winner is often rewarded (for example, with a prize egg or a small gift).

According to Simulov's (2025) description, Easter is celebrated in the Serbian kindergarten in Deszk through activities that are close to the children's experiential world:

For them, this is undoubtedly the most joyful Christian holiday. Although at this age the spiritual dimension of the feast cannot yet be fully explained, the children take an active part in the preparations: they dye eggs in onion-skin water, make chicks and bunnies, decorate nests, and learn poems. Special significance is attached to dyeing the first egg red, which plays the role of the guardian of the house. On Easter Day, we organise a big 'Egg Battle' in the Saint Sava Center, where children tap eggs, play games, and take part in festive programs.

Pentecost Home Decoration, Ivandan, and the Celebration of Family and Church Patron Saints (krsna slava, crkvena slava)

Pentecost (*Duhovi*) is celebrated on the fiftieth day after Easter. In Serbian folk tradition, this day is associated with decorating the home. Fresh green branches – especially from birch or oak – are placed at the entrance to the house and in the courtyard, as well as in the church. This custom symbolises renewal, fertility, and the blessing of the household. For children, the gathering and arranging of branches is a playful, outdoor activity that connects them to nature and to the rhythm of the seasons.

The feast of Saint John the Baptist (*Ivandan*, 7 July / 24 June Julian calendar) is also marked by distinctive customs in Serbian folk life. It is considered a time of healing and purification, with traditions involving water, flowers, and herbs. In some regions, children collect medicinal plants or participate in processions to rivers and springs. According to ethnographic records, in certain villages children would bathe in running water at dawn on this day, believing it would protect them from illness throughout the year.

The *krsna slava* is the celebration of a family's patron saint, while the *crkvena slava* honours the patron saint of a church. These are among the most important identity markers for the Serbs, both in Serbia and in the diaspora. Each family observes its *slava* with a ritual meal that includes the *slavski kolač* (a decorated bread loaf), wheat porridge (*koljivo*), and wine. The bread is blessed and shared, often in the presence of a priest.

Although the religious and ceremonial parts are led by adults, children play a visible role: they help decorate the table, serve guests, and learn the songs and prayers associated with the patron saint. In this way, they absorb the customs through direct participation. Simulov (2025) notes that in Deszk's Serbian kindergarten and school, *slava* traditions are also integrated into the curriculum through storytelling, crafts, and small performances.

Analysis

The folk traditions described in this study play a pivotal role in children's identity development and early socialization within the Serbian minority community. These traditions and rituals symbolically reinforce strong family and community bonds, while giving children a sense of responsibility and belonging. Practices like the burning of the *Badnjak* (Yule log) and the sharing of the *Česnica* bread at Christmas, or reciting verses during St. Sava's Day celebrations, create joyful learning experiences that connect youngsters with their religious heritage and communal history. Such living traditions provide children with a tangible sense of identity and continuity, linking them to their community's past and strengthening social cohesion.

In early childhood, these experiences contribute to socialization not by formal instruction but by cultivating emotional attachment to the community's way of life. Children absorb the Serbian language, songs, and stories as they enact the customs, which fosters pride in their ethnic identity. Effective enculturation at this age happens through multi-sensory, hands-on involvement – “with hands, head, and heart” – rather than through abstract teaching. The Deszk example shows that even very young children become active tradition-bearers: by carrying ritual objects, singing folk songs, or performing in front of the community, they learn social roles and cultural norms through experience. This participatory immersion helps shape their moral development (e.g. learning generosity, devotion, and cooperation) and solidifies a positive sense of belonging to the Serbian community. In short, the

folk customs function as a form of early social education, transmitting group identity and values in a manner that is both engaging and developmentally appropriate.

Conclusion

The research presented here confirms that Serbian folk customs involving children remain an important element of cultural heritage preservation, both in Serbia and among Serbian communities in Hungary. These traditions – ranging from the pre-Christmas cycle, through Christmas and Easter customs, to the celebration of patron saints – serve multiple functions: they transmit cultural values, strengthen family and community ties, and provide opportunities for children to actively participate in meaningful, symbolic activities.

From a pedagogical perspective, these customs are significant because they combine experiential learning, multisensory engagement, and emotional involvement. They allow children to internalise cultural content through action, rather than passive reception. This aligns with contemporary approaches to heritage education, which emphasise the integration of tradition into everyday life, rather than treating it as a static or isolated subject.

The Deszk case highlights several key factors that other minority communities can learn from when it comes to transmitting traditions to the next generation. Foremost, it underscores the importance of institutional support and community collaboration. In Deszk, the presence of a Serbian-language kindergarten and primary school, in partnership with local cultural associations and the Orthodox Church, creates an integrated environment where traditions are a natural part of education. Other minority communities – even those with small populations or lacking formal minority schools – can seek to introduce cultural practices in youth programs, weekend schools, or through partnerships with community organizations. The Deszk example suggests that when educators, parents, religious leaders, and minority self-governments work together, they can successfully incorporate folk traditions into children's daily routines. This collaboration not only sustains the practices but also normalizes them in the eyes of the younger generation.

Educational policy and practice should therefore strive to create space for minority heritage within mainstream institutions. Supportive policies might include bilingual curriculum elements, celebration of minority feast days in schools, and teacher training in intercultural pedagogy. It is important to note that engaging the majority population is beneficial as well: in Deszk, many activities are open to non-Serb children, whose parents appreciate the cultural richness. Such inclusive approaches can reduce resistance and build broader respect for the minority's heritage. Finally, tradition transmission thrives under conditions that make it experiential and community-based – children need to feel the joy and value of the customs, not just hear about

them. Ensuring that cultural activities are hands-on (involving music, dance, food, and ritual participation) and that they are supported by local leadership will greatly enhance their sustainability. In summary, the Deszk experience shows that strong community institutions, intergenerational engagement, and supportive educational policies together create a vibrant context in which minority traditions can be preserved and passed on, enriching the socialization of future generations.

The continuation of these practices depends on conscious community effort and the integration of tradition into both formal and informal educational contexts. In this way, Serbian folk customs can continue to play their role as living carriers of cultural identity for future generations.

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