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# WHEN DO THE LEAVES FALL AND WHEN DO WE REAP? – SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF FOLK MONTH NAMES IN THE LANGUAGES OF EASTERN EUROPE

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## **Abstract**

The abundance of folk month names in different languages of Eastern Europe results in specific mental pictures in a speaker's mind. Translation usually fails to communicate the elaborate connotations implied, even in the case of closely related languages. The paper gives a comparative semantical analysis of folk month names in the Slavic languages, the Baltic languages, Finnish, Estonian, Hungarian, Romanian and Albanian, identifying the common features, the differences and possible reasons for both. The aim of the paper is to provide data for both linguistic and ethnological mapping of Eastern Europe, as an area that had been under less influence from the Latin-dominated culture and had in that way better preserved some original, less uniform linguistic features.

**Keywords:** Eastern European languages, meaning, month names, translation

## **1. Introduction**

What is the best month to sow rye? Provided one is not an agriculture specialist, this question would leave most people puzzled. Unless the question is asked among speakers of Lithuanian, in which case an answer would be straightforward – September. Namely, the Lithuanian name of September is *rugsėjis*, meaning „rye sower“. Thus, even for an urban dweller, or a diaspora Lithuanian living in Australia, a tie between rye sowing and September is firm and ingrained in the picture of the ninth month of the year.

When folk month names are concerned, it is impossible to strip denotative meaning of its cultural connotations. It means that in translation it inevitably fails to convey the complete picture a native speaker of a language using those names has when mentioning a particular month. In this paper we intend to give an overview of mental pictures present in languages of Eastern Europe, trying to make a broad cross-cultural analysis of them, in order to identify tendencies and the grade of similarity among both genetically related and unrelated languages in the area.

## 2. Concept of month

Although it is not exactly clear when the humankind started to precisely measure time, there are certain proofs that even the Paleolithic humans were familiar with the concept of month, based on observing the phases of the Moon. The similarity between the words for 'Moon' and 'month' remains in many languages as of today. In fact, a month is the longest period of time that can be measured in some cultures. Measuring time was somewhat important even for hunting-gathering communities living in the tropics (in order to know the life cycles of various plants and seasonal migrations of animals that were hunted), but it became crucially important after the development of agriculture and spread of humans into areas with a harsher climate, where clear differences between the seasons were present. The timing has suddenly become a matter of life and death, because the welfare of a whole community relied on active perception of the right timeframe for performing agricultural works and transforming harvested grains into food before the nature would become cold and bare. Since the changes of nature followed a cyclical principle, it was easy to establish a connection between a certain appearance of the full Moon and agricultural works needing to be done, or effects observed in nature around that period of time. Of course, different inhabited areas implied different climatic conditions and natural environment, but also different socio-cultural factors (customs, religion) that were all reflected in the names of the months across cultures.

## 3. Month naming customs in different cultures

Several principles can be observed regarding the practice of naming months. The most common are the names describing what goes on in the nature during that particular month. For instance, the weather phenomena (such as rain, fog, frost, dryness) mainly characterize the winter months, when there is not much going on regarding flora or fauna, and the only thing left to do is to observe the weather, looking for any signs of approaching spring. However, the names based on the weather (precisely, the heat) can sometimes occur in the middle of the summer as well, when the weather is too hot to work on land. As the spring approaches, different plants start to appear, as well as animals returning from hibernation. Since most calendars are based on needs of agricultural societies, it is no wonder that flora gets more attention in the names of the months than fauna, although this may also vary from culture to culture.

Astronomical observances, such as the lengthening of the daylight, may also serve as a basis for month names. Some calendars (such as the Sanskrit calendar and its derived systems across South and South-East Asia) base their month names completely on the signs of the zodiac.

Another principle is naming after the seasons, a custom stemming from the way the time is perceived by nomadic animal herders. Namely, nomads do not

need to perceive time on a precise month-to-month basis, instead they focus on the two main periods of the year, each spent in a different grazing area, with two intermittent periods for migration between them. If the language of such culture accepts a 12-month system, it would probably keep the old name of the season for the month considered to be the most typical representative of that season. The most prominent example of such model can be found among old Hungarian month names, that were divided into four groups of three, with the names simply meaning ‘beginning of X’, ‘month of X’ and ‘end of X’, where X was the name of the season. However, as we shall see, month names based on seasons may appear even in those languages that do not have a significant history of nomadic animal herding (such as the Sorbian languages).

The most significant criterion in naming months, and probably the very reason why calendar was invented, are the activities triggered by a specific time of the year. These activities are mostly agricultural – mowing, sowing, reaping, harvesting, winemaking – but can also be based on customs and cultural practices, especially on rituals concerning the end of the year, purifying, paying respect to the dead and the souls, or chasing the winter away. Hunting a specific animal can also be classified here.

Yet another type of activities are religious holidays and festivals, dedicated to various gods (in polytheistic societies) or saints (in Christian societies). Sometimes the whole month would be protected by a respective deity (and named after them), or the month would bear the name of the most significant feast celebrated during its course.

Finally, a month can sometimes be named based on folk beliefs or proverbial sayings. Some examples of such would be: the real spring does not start before May, even if vegetation says otherwise; August is the month when wounds do not heal; February is the best month to marry; and so on.

#### **4. Researched corpus**

This paper focuses on folk month names in the languages of Eastern Europe. Why exactly Eastern Europe? It is a region that had for a relatively long time remained remote from the cultural centres of Europe, with fewer influences from the Romance culture than in the West. Besides, the languages of the region were also fairly isolated between themselves due to political factors, thus not raising a need for a linguistically harmonized calendar with a unified set of month names. Among the languages of Western Europe, the Romance languages inherited their month names from Latin (except for marginal and isolated languages, such as Sardinian), the Germanic languages mostly took them over from the Romance ones through cultural influence, while the Celtic languages and Basque have a mixed system of folk and Latin names. In Eastern Europe, however, there is a huge cluster of the Slavic languages that, even though having a higher degree of similarity and mutual intelligibility than the Germanic and even Romance

languages, show significant differences regarding month names. Furthermore, there are other smaller language groups and families, such as the Baltic languages, the Uralic languages (neither of these families showing homogeneity within themselves), one isolated Indo-European language under heavy Romance influence (Albanian) and even one Romance language (Romanian) – the last two, although significantly more under Romance influence than the rest of the observed languages, still show particularities that set them apart from Western European languages.

## 5. Folk month names in the Slavic languages

The Slavic languages are the largest linguistic group spoken in Eastern Europe and itself display the biggest variety of folk month names. Among the modern Slavic languages, folk month names are preserved in Belarussian, Croatian, Czech, Polish, Kashubian and Ukrainian standard language. Slovene and both Sorbian languages use a double system – in everyday communication they tend to use international names, although folk names are present in dialects and sometimes used stylistically in standard language as well. In Bulgarian, Macedonian, Russian, Serbian and Slovak the old names have become obsolete and few speakers are familiar with them.

For the purpose of this paper, we shall ignore the standardological status of folk names in different languages and treat them all equally. However, due to a huge number of dialectal varieties throughout the Slavic language area, we shall try to reduce the number by giving advantage to the names not limited to one language – for instance, old Russian names for February include *сечень*, *лютый*, *вьюговой* and *бокореи*. The latter two are limited only to Russian, and are thus omitted from the analysis. While both of the former two do appear in the other Slavic languages, the first one can also mean ‘January’ in Russian, thus being at par with the other Slavic languages. Therefore, only the second name would be used as a representative of Russian in this analysis. One should however always keep in mind that it is only an approximation, and that a comprehensive analysis of the Slavic world regarding folk month names would require a separate work.<sup>1</sup>

Let us now take an overview of the situation in the Slavic languages by month.

### 5.1.1. January

Being in the middle of winter (LSor. *wezymski* ‘(month) in the winter’), it is not strange that the names for this month include references to its cold weather (Blr. *студзень* ‘freezing cold’, Cz. *leden*, Svk. *ladeň* ‘icy’), but in the most cases its name refers to cutting trees – Cr. *siječanj*, Russ. *сечень*, Ukr. *січень*, all meaning ‘cutting’,<sup>2</sup> Blg. *голям сечко*, Svk. dial. *vel'ký sečeň* ‘big cutter’; this etymology

<sup>1</sup> For those interested in such type of work, I may recommend Vejrosta (2013).

<sup>2</sup> Alternatively, it can mean the effect of freezing snowstorms to exposed skin.

also applies to Polish *styczeń* and Kashubian *stęcznik*, probably contaminated by the word *tyka* ‘stake’.<sup>3</sup> Serbian and Macedonian have *коложег*, approx. ‘round-burner’, probably from the pagan custom of burning round fires that symbolize the Sun during the winter solstice. For Slovene *prosinec* see etymology for December. For Upper Sorbian *wulki rózŕk*, approx. ‘great horn’ see German *Hornung* for February, alluding to the fact that deer shed their horns at that time.

### 5.1.2. February

In February the cold is still fierce (Blr. *люты*, Pol. *luty*, Russ. *лютой*, Ukr. *лютий*), although it gets a little bit warmer, so that the ice breaks (Cz. *únor*, from *nořit* ‘to dive’). For Serbs and Macedonians now is the time to start cutting trees (*сечко*), while Bulgarians and Slovaks continue to do it (*малък сечко*, *malý sečeň* ‘little cutter’). The same applies to Slovene *svečan* and Lower Sorbian *swěckowny*, where there is a possible contamination with the word *sveča/swěčka* ‘candle’, referring to the holiday of Candlemass, on February 2. Candlemass (*gromica*) is also present in Kashubian *gromicznik*. Croatian *veljača* has several explanations, either meaning that days become longer (i. e. bigger, *velji*), or from the pagan holiday of Great Night (*Velja Noć*) that was actually celebrated in mid-March. For Upper Sorbian *malý rózŕk* ‘little horn’ see January.

### 5.1.3. March

The most prominent feature of March are the birch trees that start growing leaves in that month (Cz. *březen*, Russ. *березозол*, Svk. *brezeň*, Ukr. *березень*). The nature generally starts to rejuvenate, with flowers reappearing in the meadows (Mac. *цутар* from *цвет* ‘flower’) and juices flowing in the trees (Blr. *сакавік* from *сок* ‘juice’). However, the weather is still mostly dry (Blg. *сух*, Svn. *sušec*), although it might change unpredictably (Cr. *ožuĵak* from *lažuĵak*, meaning ‘lying month’, as the weather is not always what it appears to be). In the Sorbian languages, winter is definitely over and spring has come (LSor. *pózymski* ‘(the month) after winter’, USor. *nalětnik* ‘spring month’). Serbian *дерикожа* means ‘skin tearer’ and the explanations for the name vary – either from the fact that at the end of the winter there was a lack of food, and the animals that could not be fed were slain and skinned; or because of the sudden warmth that made winter clothes unnecessary. Kashubian *strumiannik* means ‘month of streams’, referring to the thawed snow that enlarges rivers and streams. As for Polish, it now uses the Latin name *marzec*.<sup>4</sup>

### 5.1.4. April

<sup>3</sup> Vejrosta (2013) claims that those names may come from the word *styk* ‘meeting’, meaning meeting of an old and a new year.

<sup>4</sup> There is a folk etymology connecting this name with the verb *marznąć* ‘to freeze’, but it is not accepted.

April is already fully a spring month, with vegetation growing everywhere. It can be either grass (Cr. *travanj*, Mac. *травен*, Svn. *mali traven* ‘little grassy’), flowers (Pol. *kwiecień*, Russ. *цветень*, Ukr. *квітень*), oaks (Cz. *duben*, Svk. *dubeň*) or even birches one month later (Blg. *брязок*). The nature is in its full beauty (Blr. *красавік* ‘beautiful’). However, the weather is still unstable, so even the vegetation is not a certain sign of spring, as can be seen in Kashubian *lżėkwiōt* ‘lying flower’ and Serbian *лажитрава* ‘lying grass’. In the Sorbian languages it is the month of Easter (USor. *jutrownik*, LSor. *jatšownik* from *jutry/jatšy* ‘Easter’), see German *Ostermonat*.

#### 5.1.5. May

Where there was no grass in April, there is in May (Blr. *травень*, Blg. *травен*, Russ. and Ukr. *травень*), while in Slovene there is even more grass (*veliki traven* ‘big grassy’). With so much grass growing, it is already time to mow it (Mac. *косар* ‘month of scythes’). Flowers appear for the first time in Cz. *květen*, Svk. *kveteň* and Ser. *цветань*. In Croatian the month gets its name from the dogwood (*svib* – *svibanj*) flowering in May. In Upper Sorbian the same applies for roses (*różownik*). Lower Sorbian name probably comes from the prevalent green colour (*rozhelony* from *zelony* ‘green’, Vejrosta (2013)), whereas Polish and Kashubian use the Latin names (*maj*, *mōj*).

#### 5.1.6. June

The most frequent root (Blr. *чэрвень*, Blg. *червеник*, Cz. *červen*, Pol. *czerwiec*, Kash. *czervińc*, Russ. and Ukr. *червень*), although very similar to the word for ‘red’, comes in fact from the word for ‘maggot’, referring to the insect Polish cochineal, whose larvae were once used to produce red dye. The time to harvest the larvae was in the last ten days of June, thus implying the origin of the name. In some languages (Bulgarian, Russian) name *изок* appears dialectally, stemming from the old name for grasshoppers, which also appeared at that time. In other languages the month gets its name from different plants that bloom at the time: roses (Svn. *rožnik* from *roža*), lindens (Cr. *lipanj*, Svk. *lipeň* from *lipa*) and cherries (Ser. *треињар* from *треиња*). In Macedonia it is already time to start reaping (*жетвар* ‘month of harvest’). Sorbian names (LSor. *smažki*, USor. *smažnik*) mean ‘month of the fallow land’, translation of old German name *Brachmonat*.

#### 5.1.7. July

Since harvesting of larvae to obtain red dye had started in the end of June, it is no wonder that it dragged over to the beginning of the following month (Blg. *чръвень*, Cz. *červenec*). However, for the most Slavs now is the time when linden, the pan-Slavic tree, blossoms (Blr. *ліпень*, Pol. *lipiec*, Kash. *lëpinc*, Russ. *липец*, Ukr. *липень*). Others start reaping (Ser. *жетвар*, LSor. *žņjojski*) and in order to do that one needs a sickle (Cr. *srpanj*, Svn. *mali srpan* ‘little sickle month’) to tear

down the ears (Svk. *klaseň*, from *klas* ‘ear of a cereal’). It is the month when the Sun fries the ground (USor. *pražnik* ‘frying month’) and wheat gives fields a golden colour (Mac. *златеу* ‘golden one’).

#### 5.1.8. August

Those who have not reaped in the previous month, do it now (Blr. *жнівень*, USor. *žnjenc*), again with a sickle (Cz. *srpen*, Pol. *sierpień*, Russ. and Ukr. *серпень*, Svk. *srpeň*, but also Svn. *veliki srpan* ‘big sickle month’). In Croatia the harvested grain is already put on the wagons and driven away (*kolovoz*, lit. ‘cart driving’), while in Serbia it is threshed (*зумник* from *зумно* ‘threshing floor’). For Macedonians it is simply ‘the month of grains’ (*житар*), while in Lower Sorbian the main grain culture is the barley (*јасмјеński* ‘barley month’). Kashubian *zélńik* probably comes from the feast of Assumption of Mary (see Pol. *Matka Boska Zielna*), celebrated on August 15. Bulgarian *орач* ‘plower’ means that after the grain is harvested, the fields should be prepared for a new season.

#### 5.1.9. September

The two most common Slavic names for September come either from the fact that it is the month when heather flowers (Blr. *верасень*, Pol. *wrzesień*, Russ. and Ukr. *вересень*), or from the mating call of deer (Blg. *руен*, Cr. *rujan*)<sup>5</sup>. In the Sorbian languages it is the month after the harvest (LSor. *póžnjenc*, USor. *požnjenc*), and in Kashubian it means that the time is right for sowing new grains (*séwnik*). In Serbian and Macedonian it is the month of grape harvest (*гроздобер*), while Slovene *kimavec* ‘nodding month’ probably points out the fact that branches are full of heavy fruit and that they ‘nod’ while the wind blows.<sup>6</sup> Czech *září* comes from *za říje* ‘during the estrus’, the fact that it is the beginning of mating season for livestock. Slovak *jaseň* is probably connected to *jeseň* ‘autumn’.

#### 5.1.10. October

In October we can still hear the mating call of deer (Cz. *říjen*, Svk. *rujeň*), but the most observed change in the nature is that leaves turn yellow (Ukr. *жовтий* ‘yellow’) and then start falling down (Cr. *listopad*, Blg., Mac., Russ. and Ser. *листопад* ‘leaf fall’). In other places, it was the month when hemp or flax was hackled, yielding hurds (Blr. *кастрычнік*, from *кастра*; Pol. *październik* and Kash. *paźdzérznik*, from *paździerze/pazdzerzë*, both meaning ‘hemp hurds’). In the Sorbian languages, as well as Slovene, the name of the month refers to wine making, probably from German *Weinmonat* (LSor. *winski*, USor. *winowc*, Svn. *vinotok* ‘wine flow’).

<sup>5</sup> The connection with the adjective *rujan* ‘bright red’, alluding either to the colour of grapes, leaves or even wine, is considered folk etymology.

<sup>6</sup> Alternatively, Vejrosta (2013) argues that it might mean head movements of cattle trying to avoid insects.

### 5.1.11. November

In the most Slavic languages leaves start falling only in November (Blr. *лістапад*, Cz., Pol., Svk. and Svn. *listopad*, Kash. *lěstopadnik*, Ukr. *листопад*), while in those languages where leaves have already fallen it starts to get really cold (Cr. *studen*, Mac. and Ser. *студен* ‘freezing cold’). For Blg. *зруден* and Russ. *зрудень* see etymology for December. USor. *nazymnik* means simply ‘autumn month’, whereas LSor. *mlošny* means ‘month of threshing’, because threshing usually started at that period.

### 5.1.12. December

As we move into winter, the ground becomes lumped (Pol. *grudzień*, Svn. *gruden*, Ukr. *зрудень*; from *gruda* ‘lump’). In Russian this is the coldest month (*студень*), while Lower Sorbian stresses that it is the month in which it is already winter (*zymski*, ‘winter month’). There is snow (Blr. *снежань*, Mac. *снежник*) and frost (Svk. *mrazeň*), but since it is also the time of the winter solstice, the sun starts to shine through (Blg. *просинец*, Cz. *prosinec*, Cr. *prosinac*; all from *pro-sinuti* ‘shine through’<sup>7</sup>). In Serbia it is the month of the pagan Slavic festival of Koleda (*коледар*), while in Kashubian *gòdnik* and Upper Sorbian *hodownik* we have the fact that it is the month when the new year (*god*) begins.

## 5.2. Comparative overview of month names and meanings in the Slavic languages

We shall now systematize folk month names in the Slavic languages, according to their root elements and the languages where they are present. We shall exclude the international names that appear today in standard Polish for March and May, as well as those names that are *hapax legomena*, i. e., appearing only in one language.

The root *\*sěkti* ‘to cut’ gave name for January in Croatian, Russian and Ukrainian, as well as in Polish and Kashubian (under influence from word *tyka*); the name for February in Macedonian and Serbian, as well as in Lower Sorbian and Slovene (probably contaminated with the root *\*světja* ‘candle’); whereas Bulgarian and Slovakian have names for both months stemming from the same root (January being the ‘big’ one and February the ‘little’ one).

The root *\*ljutъ* ‘fierce’ appears in name for February in Belarussian, Polish, Russian and Ukrainian. The geographic proximity of the languages involved hints of innovation, however, no other root appears to be as widespread among the other Slavic languages to be considered the more appropriate candidate for the original Slavic naming of the month.

<sup>7</sup> Any connection with the verb *prositi* ‘ask, beg’, such as that it is the month when it is so cold that animals beg for food, or that it is the best time to propose marriage, is folk etymology. Similar applies to etymologies stemming from *proso* ‘millet’.

The root for birch tree, *\*berza*, figures as the main factor in names for March in Czech, Russian, Slovak and Ukrainian, and for April in Bulgarian.

Spring is the time of changing ('lying') weather, that is why the root for 'lie' (*\*lǝžb*) appears in several languages' names for spring months: in Croatian for March; and in Serbian and Kashubian for April.

The flowers (*\*kvěť*) and grass (*\*trava*) usually interchange in the names for April and May. Flowers in April and grass in May apply for Russian and Ukrainian, while exactly the opposite is the case for Serbian (although the grass in April is still 'lying'). In Macedonian, yet, flowers still come before grass, but a month earlier (flowers in March, grass in April). Slovene has only grass in both months (little – i. e. low – in April and big – that is, high – in May). Only grass appears in Croatian in April, and Belarussian and Bulgarian in May, while only flowers appear in Polish in April (as well as Kashubian, but they are 'lying'), and Czech and Slovak in May.

Worm (maggot, larva, *\*čbrvb*) yields its name mainly to the month of June, towards the end of which it was collected to make dye. Such is the situation in Belarussian, Polish, Kashubian, Russian and Ukrainian; while in Bulgarian and Czech the name applies to both June and July.

The pan-Slavic tree of linden (*\*lipa*) flowers mostly in July (in Belarussian, Polish, Kashubian, Russian and Ukrainian), although sometimes already in June (in Croatian and Slovak).

Summer is the time of reaping, which can be seen in the root for sickle (*\*sbrpb*), primarily in the name for August (in Czech, Polish, Russian, Slovak and Ukrainian), but sometimes already in July (Croatian), or both (Slovene, again the little one comes before the big one).

Another root is the verb *\*žęti* 'reap' that gave name to August in Belarussian and Upper Sorbian; to July in Serbian and Lower Sorbian; while Macedonian is again one month ahead, with the name used already for June.

Heather (*\*versb*) appears only in name for September in Belarussian, Polish, Russian and Ukrainian. Considering they are neighbouring languages, it could as well be a local innovation.

The mating call of deer (*\*rjuj*) is another sign of approaching autumn – in Bulgarian and Croatian it appears in September (in some Bulgarian dialects already in August, *zapęe*), in Slovak in October, whereas in Czech it marks both months.

*\*Kostra* or *\*pazder* 'hemp hurd' yielded its name to October in Belarussian, Polish and Kashubian, which is probably a local innovation (this assumption is based on the connection between Polish/Kashubian and Belarussian names being semantic rather than etymological).

*\*Vino* 'wine' is the root in the name of October in Slovene and the Sorbian languages, although German influence should not be excluded here.

The compound *\*listo-padb* 'leaf-fall' marks the mid-autumn, the month when leaves start to fall off seriously. For the most languages (Belarussian, Czech,

Polish, Kashubian, Slovak, Slovene and Ukrainian) it happens in November, while further south it occurs already in October (in Bulgarian, Croatian, Macedonian and Serbian). A notable exception is Russian, which also uses the name for October, despite Russian climate being colder than the one of the South Slavic lands. The explanation is probably an influence from Old Church Slavonic, which also followed the South Slavic model.

One month after the leaves have fallen, the ground becomes frozen and lumpy (*\*gruda*) – in December in Polish, Slovene and Ukrainian; in November in Bulgarian and Russian.

Winter is the time of bitter cold (*\*studъ*), starting already in November in Croatian, Macedonian and Serbian; in December in Russian; and only in January in Belarussian.

The winter solstice is the time after which the days become longer, meaning that the sun starts to shine through (*\*prosinъti*). It is the name for December in Bulgarian, Croatian and Czech, while in Slovene for January.

Some roots appear in only a few languages:

- *\*ledъ* ‘ice’ – for January in Czech and Slovak
- *\*suxъ* ‘dry’ – for March in Bulgarian and Slovene
- *\*dъbъ* ‘oak’ – for April in Czech and Slovak
- *\*ruža* ‘rose’ – for May in Upper Sorbian and June in Slovene
- *\*grozdo-ber* ‘grape harvesting’ – for September in Macedonian and Serbian
- *\*sněgъ* ‘snow’ – for December in Belarussian and Macedonian
- *\*godъ* ‘year’ – for December in Kashubian and Upper Sorbian

As we can see, almost all the names so far refer to processes happening in the nature during the annual cycle (the exception being *\*godъ*, that can refer either to astronomical or even social phenomenon). We do however find some names possibly referring to pagan beliefs and customs of the Slavic people: *koložeg* for January in Macedonian and Serbian, *koledar* for December in Serbian; and perhaps *veljača* for February in Croatian (if connected to the pagan festival of *Velja noć*, which is however not very plausible, given that the holiday was celebrated almost a month later).

As for Christian holidays, there is a possible influence of Candlemass on the name for February in Slovene and Lower Sorbian, as well as the full name in Kashubian (*gromicznik* from *gromica*); Easter in the name for April in the Sorbian languages (under German influence); and perhaps reference to the Assumption of Mary in Kashubian name for August.

### 5.3. Names based on Christian holidays

In Croatian and Slovene dialects there is an independent system of month names based on Christian holidays. Since we shall encounter similar systems in other

non-Slavic languages of Eastern Europe, a brief overview of the system is given here:

month	Croatian name	Slovene name
January	<b>malobožičnjak</b> 'little Christmas month' (little Christmas = Epiphany, Jan 6), <b>pavlovščak</b> 'Paul's month' (Conversion of St. Paul, Jan 25)	<b>mali božičnik</b>
February	<b>svečen</b> 'Candlemass month' (Candlemass, Feb 2)	( <b>svečan</b> )
March	<b>gregurjevščak</b> 'Gregory's month' (pope St. Gregory, Mar 12 OS)	<b>gregorščak</b>
April	<b>jurjevščak</b> 'George's month' (St. George, Apr 23)	<b>jurjevščak</b>
May	<b>filipovčak</b> 'Philip's month' (apostle St. Philip, May 3)	<b>risalščak</b> 'Pentecost month' (Pentecost is a moveable feast, falling 49 days after Easter, between May 10 and Jun 13)
June	<b>ivanščak</b> 'John's month' (St. John the Baptist, Jun 24)	<b>ivanjščak</b>
July	<b>jakopovščak</b> 'James's month' (apostle St. James the Elder, Jul 25)	<b>jakobščak</b>
August	<b>velikomešnjak</b> 'Big Mass month' (Big Mass = Assumption of Mary, Aug 15)	<b>mešnjek, velikomašnjak</b>
September	<b>malomešnjak</b> 'Little Mass month' (Little Mass = Nativity of Mary, Sep 8)	<b>miholščak</b> 'Michael's month' (St. Michael, Sep 29)
October	<b>miholjščak</b> 'Michael's month'	<b>lukovščak</b> 'Luke's month' (St. Luke, Oct 18)
November	<b>vsesvetčak</b> 'All Saints' month' (All Saints = Nov 1)	<b>vsesvečak</b> <b>martinščak</b> 'Martin's month' (St. Martin, Nov 11) <b>andrejšček</b> 'Andrew's month' (St. Andrew, Nov 30)
December	<b>velikobožičnjak</b> 'big Christmas month' (Christmas, Dec 25)	<b>veliki božičnjak</b>

## 6. Folk month names in the Baltic languages

The two surviving Baltic languages (Lithuanian and Latvian) differ in the treatment of folk month names in their standard varieties. The more conservative Lithuanian has retained the original names, while in Latvian they are substituted with the international names.

In Lithuanian, January is called *sausis* 'dry', probably referring to the weather in the middle of the winter, with low humidity and dry snowfall. Among other

dialectal names one can find *didysis ragutis* ‘great horn’ (from German, see USor.), as well as *siekis*, that might be related to the Slavic root. February is *vasaris* ‘summery’, alluding to the warmer, ‘more summery’ weather that starts to appear. March is *kovas*, probably from *kova* ‘battle’ (alluding to the battle between spring and winter reflected in the weather); see also dialectal name for February *kovinis*. Another theory, in the light of the names of the following two months, is that it comes from *kovas*, the name for rook, a bird that nests and mates at that time. April is *balandis*, which means ‘dove’, another bird that mates during that month. Dialectal names include *biržėtas*, related to the name for birch (see June), *žiedų* ‘(month) of blossoms’ (similar to some Slavic languages) and *Velykų* ‘(month) of Easter’, under German influence. The third and the final month called after a bird is May, bearing the name *gegužė*, from *gegutė* ‘cuckoo’, whose call is considered a symbol of the final arrival of spring. Dialectally it can also be called *žiedų*, reflecting the vacillation found in the Slavic languages as well. June is *birželis*, the month of birches, which start to flower three months later than in the most Slavic languages (although dialectally we can find traces of that since April). June is dialectally also called *kirmėlių* ‘(month) of worms’, the etymology we are familiar with from the Slavic languages. July is *liepa*, the name for ‘linden’, also familiar from the Slavic languages. August is *rugpjūtis* ‘rye cutter’ – again we have reaping, but this time of rye, the staple grain of Lithuania. After the rye is reaped in August, it is time to sow a new one, and that is done in September, *rugšėjis* ‘rye sower’. Dialectally, a name *rujos* can also be found, a probable borrowing from Slavic. The name for October, *spalis*, means ‘flax hurds’, i. e. the same as the name in Polish, Kashubian and Belarussian, the neighbouring languages of Lithuanian. *Lapkritis*, the name for November, derives from *lapas* ‘leaf’ and *kristi* ‘to fall’, giving the familiar concept of leaves falling in mid-autumn. Finally, December is *gruodis*, yet another name familiar from the Slavic languages, meaning ‘lump’. Dialectally, it can be called *Kalėdų* ‘(month) of Christmas’.

From this overview we can see that the Lithuanian system is somewhat parallel to the Slavic one, sometimes preceding it (*sausis* for January, while in the Slavic languages it is usually March), sometimes trailing after it (*birželis* for June; even dialectally this name appears only from April, while in the most Slavic languages it is used already for March). As for the months that comply (*liepa*, *spalis*, *lapkritis*, *gruodis* and even *rugpjūtis*, with only the grain substituted), it cannot be established for sure whether the parallelism is a consequence of a common ancestry or perhaps a Slavic influence on Lithuanian during the times of Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Lithuanian month names also focus mainly on the natural phenomena, while references to the feasts are only marginal. A specific feature is the use of names of animals (birds for the spring months, but also wolf – *vilkas* – in dialectal names for December and January), that is rare in the Slavic languages.

As already mentioned, unlike Lithuanian, the folk names are rarely used in modern Latvian, and they all appear in the form ‘*X mēnesis*’, where *mēnesis* means ‘month’, and ‘*X*’ is a noun in genitive case. We shall therefore omit *mēnesis* in the further text and focus on the first part. January is thus *ziemas* ‘winter’s’ or sometimes *svētku* ‘holidays’, feasts’, although the latter can also be used for December. Both names are self-explanatory. February is *sveču* ‘candles’ (see some Slavic languages) or *vilku* ‘wolves’. March is *sērsnu* ‘crust’s’ month, probably due to the fact that the ground is still frozen, so that it is impossible to work on. Other name is *baložu* ‘pigeons’, similar to the Lithuanian name for April. On the other hand, April in Latvian is *sulu* ‘sap’s’ month, similar to Belarussian *сакавік* ‘March’. May is *lapu* ‘leaves’ or *sējas* ‘sowing’ month, somewhat opposite of Lithuanian and the Slavic languages, which refer to the leaves only when they fall down and not when they grow; or to the sowing of winter and not summer grains (although *sētinis* and *sēmenis*, meaning ‘sowing’, appear in Lithuanian dialectal names for May). June is *ziedu* ‘blossom’ or simply *vasaras* ‘summer’ month, whereas July is *liepu* ‘lindens’ or *siena* ‘hay’s’ month. While *liepu* is parallel to the standard Lithuanian variety, in Lithuanian dialects we can find *šienpjūtis* ‘hay cutter’ for July as well. August is again the month of the main harvest – be it *rudzu* (rye), *labības* (grains in general) or even *plaujas* (mowing). In September we stumble upon heather again – *viršu*, but it can also be *silu* ‘(month) of pines’. October is the month of souls (*veļu*), of the food offerings given to evil spirits (*zemliku*), or simply of rain (*lietus*). November is the month of cold (*sala*) or frost (*salnas*), similar to its name in some Slavic languages. Finally, the names for December already seem familiar from the very same calendar – it is either the month of holidays (*svētku*), just as January; or month of wolves (*vilku*), just as February.

Although Lithuanian and Latvian are the sole surviving languages of the Baltic group, the relative distance of their vocabularies is reflected in calendar as well. Some parallels do exist, although mainly on the dialectal level at the Lithuanian side. The only true parallel is the ubiquitous concept of July as the month of linden trees, and of August as the month of harvest.

## 7. Folk month names in Finnish and Estonian language

Finnish is yet another language that retained the old folk names in the standard language, whereas its relative Estonian did not. So, the situation is somewhat similar to the one in the Baltic languages.

The Finnish calendar starts with *tammikuu*, that now literally means ‘oak month’, but in fact comes from the old word for ‘heart’, ‘core’ or even ‘axis’, now retained in dialects. January is thus the month that is the ‘heart’ of winter, or maybe the month that comprises the ‘axis’ of the year (i. e. New Year). February is *helmikuu*, the month of pearls (or beads), alluding to the frozen chunks of ice on twigs, resembling pearls. March is *maaliskuu*, originating probably in the

adjective *maallinen* ‘earthy’, pointing out the fact that it is the month when patches of bare ground start to appear after the snow has melted. According to another explanation, it might derive from *mahla* ‘tree sap’, that would be etymologically consistent with the names in Latvian (albeit for April) and Belarussian. April is *huhtikuu*, meaning ‘month of clearings’, since it was the time when woodland was cleared (usually by burning) to make room for new fields. May is *toukokuu* ‘seed month’, already seen in Latvian and Lithuanian dialects. June is *kesäkuu*, lit. ‘summer month’, which is not semantically wrong (unlike ‘oak month’ for January), but is more probably traced back to the adjective *kesanto* ‘fallow’. The first etymology is parallel to the one we find in Latvian, the second resembles the one from the Sorbian languages, which is of German origin. July is *heinäkuu*, ‘hay month’, again parallel with the Latvian name. August is *elokuu*, the month of crops, reflecting the tradition of harvest that spreads across languages and language families. The word for September, *syyskuu*, comes from the older word form meaning ‘autumn’. October is *lokakuu*, ‘mud month’, reflecting the heavy rainfall that starts at the time (see Latvian name), and its effects on the soil. November is *marraskuu* ‘month of death’, probably from the fact that all the plants have died, the leaves have fallen, there is no life in the nature whatsoever. That very fact is probably also the root of the tradition that festivals concerning dead are centered on this part of the year (such as Halloween and Christian feasts of All Saints and All Souls). Finally, December is *joulukuu*, now meaning ‘Christmas month’, but *joulu* is actually the name of an older pagan feast (Germanic *Yule*), similar to Balto-Slavic *koleda*.

Estonian, on the other hand, took over international names, although a plethora of folk names can be found dialectally, both referring to natural phenomena and to feasts. Let us first take a look at the names stemming from natural phenomena and social customs tied to them. Thus, January is *siidakuu* ‘heart month’ (semantically similar to Finnish), *helmekuu* ‘bead month’ (see Finnish name for February) or *algukuu* ‘beginning's month’. February is *hundikuu* ‘wolves' month’ (as in Latvian). March is *kevadkuu* ‘spring month’, *linnukuu* ‘birds' month’ (somewhat similar to the Baltic languages), *urbekuu* ‘catkins' month’ (probably referring to birch catkins), *hangekuu* ‘snow piles' month’ or *sulakuu* ‘thawing month’ (this name can also be used for April). April is *mahlakuu* (see alternative etymology for Finnish) or *naljakuu* ‘joke month’ (April Fools' day comes to mind, but it is unclear whether that is indeed the origin of the name). May is *lehekuu* ‘leaves' month’ (see Latvian), *õiekuu* ‘blossom's month’, *rõõmukuu* ‘month of joy’, *elukuu* ‘month of life’, *külvikuu* ‘sowing month’ (as in the Baltic languages), *suvikuu* ‘month of summer’. June is *pärnakuu* ‘linden month’ (after Croatian and Slovak, this is the first language that mentions linden a month earlier than the rest) or *kesakuu* ‘fallow month’ (already mentioned when talking about Finnish; the name is also sometimes applied to May). July is *heinakuu* ‘hay's month’ (as in Finnish), *niidukuu* ‘mowing month’ or *putkekuu* ‘grasshoppers' month’ (see Slavic *izok*). August is, quite expectedly, *lõikuskuu* ‘harvest month’, *viljakuu* ‘fruit

month', *rukkikuu* 'rye month', but also *mädakuu* 'rotten month' and *hallituskuu* 'mold month' (apparently from the fact that bread and meat easily mold at that time). September is *kanarbikukuu* 'heather's month' (as in the neighbouring Slavic languages and Latvian), *sügisekuu* 'autumn month' (as in Finnish; also used for October), *jahikuu* 'hunting month', *kaalukuu* 'weight month' (because harvested crops are weighed at that time) or *lõikamisekuu* 'cutting month'. October is *rehekuu* 'threshing month', *viinakuu* 'wine month' (although there is little wine or vineyards in Estonia, it is in fact a loanword from German), *lehevarisemiskuu* 'leaf-falling month' (as in some Slavic languages) or *porikuu* 'mud month' (as in Finnish). November is *kooljakuu* 'month of the dead' (see similar situation in Finnish) or *hingekuu* 'month of souls'. Other names allude to its bad weather: *talvekuu* 'winter month' (also used for December), *lumekuu* 'snowy month', *marukuu* 'month of tempests'. Finally, December is *mängukuu* 'month of games'.

The other set of names refers to the various feasts, mainly concerning Christian holidays. They are: *näärikuu* 'New Year's month' (*nääri* itself being borrowing from German, there is also an Estonian version *uue aasta kuu*) for January, *küünlakuu* 'candle month' (see several Slavic languages) for February, *vastlakuu* 'Shrove Tuesday month' for both February or March, *paastukuu* 'fasting month' (since it is Lent) for March, *jürikuu* 'George's month' for April, *jaanikuu* 'John's month' for June, *jaugupikuu* 'James's month' for July, *pärtlikuu* 'Bartholomew's month' for August (since August 24 is the feast of Saint Bartholomew), *mihklikuu* 'Michael's month' for September, *simunakuu* 'Simon's month' for October (the feast of St. Simon being on October 28), *mardikuu* 'Martin's month' and *kadrikuu* 'Catherine's month' for November (the feast of St. Catherine being on November 25), while for December there are names *jõulukuu* (as in Finnish) and *talvistepühakuu* 'winter holiday's month' (see similar name in Latvian). There is no particular name for May in this category. Several months (April, June, July, September, November) comply with Croatian and Slovene dialectal names, meaning that the feasts of the saints they were named upon were of equal importance across the regions.

## 8. Month names in Hungarian language

Although modern Hungarian language uses international names, there are several sets of folk names as well. Unlike in the majority of other languages surveyed, the predominant set is the one based on Christian holidays and traditions. A possible explanation is a relatively recent change of lifestyle that Hungarians undertook (from nomadic to agricultural), urging them to focus on completely different phenomena than before. This assumption is supported by two facts. First, almost all the agricultural terminology in Hungarian is of Slavic origin, implying that if Hungarians had had any previous knowledge of agricultural practices whatsoever, it would have been very limited. Second, most of the names for the days of the week in Hungarian are also Slavic in origin. It seems that the perception of time

gained more importance for Hungarians after settling in the Pannonian basin. Why were then the names of the months not borrowed from the Slavic languages as well? The answer probably lies in the diversity of month names in the surrounding Slavic languages. Even if there had been borrowings, it would have resulted in a confusing situation of having different names in different regions, with the only factor capable of unifying the system being the Church. As one would expect, it had based the calendar on the things it considered important for its needs and purposes.

The Christian set of names goes as follows: *Boldogasszony hava* ‘month of the Blessed Lady’ for January (from the feast of Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God, on January 1), *böjt előhava* ‘first month of Lent’ for February, *böjt máshava* ‘second month of Lent’ for March, *Szent György hava* ‘St. George's month’ for April, *Pünkösöd hava* ‘Pentecost month’ for May, *Szent Iván hava* ‘St. John's month’ for June, *Szent Jakab hava* ‘St. James's month’ for July, *Kisasszony hava* ‘Virgin's month’ for August (alluding to the feast of Assumption), *Szent Mihály hava* ‘St. Michael's month’ for September, *Mindszent hava* ‘All Saints' month’ for October, *Szent András hava* ‘St. Andrew's month’ for November and *Karácsony hava* ‘Christmas month’ for December. It bears a striking similarity with the other systems based on Christian feasts.

Before the settlement, the names of the months were based on a simple model where first the name of one of the four seasons (*tavas* ‘spring’, *nyár* ‘summer’, *ősz* ‘autumn’, *tél* ‘winter’) was used, followed by either *elő* ‘first part, beginning’, *hó* ‘month’ or *utó* ‘after’. Thus, December was *télelő* ‘beginning of winter’, January *télhó* ‘winter month’ and February *télutó* ‘after winter’. Then it would be followed by *tavaszelő*, *tavaszhó* and *tavaszutó*, and so on.

Dialectally, the following names are also mentioned: *erős hó* ‘strong month’, *évfő* ‘yearhead’ and *újév hó* ‘New year's month’ for January; *gyertyaszentelő hó* ‘candle consecrating month’ and *fagyhó* ‘frost month’ for February; *fűhegy* ‘grass tip’ and *változó* ‘inconstant’ for March; *kinyíló hó* ‘opening month’ for April (akin to Latin *aprilis* from *aperire* ‘to open’); *első gyümölcsű hó* ‘first fruit's month’ for May; *kaszálóhó* ‘mowing month’ and *félév* ‘half year’ for June; *hőhó* ‘heat month’ and *aratóhó* ‘reaping month’ for July; *szőlőérelő hó* ‘grape ripening month’ and *gyümölcsény*, approx. ‘fruitish’ for August; *előszüret* ‘pre-vintage’ or *szüret* ‘vintage’ for September; *borvetőhó* ‘wine putting month’ (i. e. the month when wine – although still a must - was put into barrels) or *utószüret* ‘after-vintage’ for October; *borlátogató hó* ‘wine visiting month’ (i. e. when the wine was controlled to see if it had finished fermenting), *szélhó* ‘wind month’ or *végelődőhó* ‘the month before the end (of the year)’ for November; and *vígán lakó hó* ‘cheerful eating month’ (probably from the festivities around the winter solstice) or *vég hó* ‘end month’ for December.

## 9. Month names in the other languages of Eastern Europe

Although it might be useful for a more complete picture, the lack of proper sources (and, to an extent, of language knowledge to be able to analyze the accessible sources), made us decide to omit the smaller Finno-Ugric languages (like Mordvin, Mari, Komi, Vepsian, Sámi...) from this paper. This leaves us with only two more languages to survey, Romanian and Albanian. The names of the months in both of them are mostly derived from Latin names, although there are several minor differences that should be pointed out.

In standard Romanian, the names of the months are fully of Latin origin, but a set of traditional names also exists. Some of them are also derived from Latin names, but have later been added folk etymologies. Those names are: *gerar* (from *ianuarius*, but folk etymology derives it from *ger* ‘bitter cold’) or *cărintar* ‘month of Kalendae’ (see also *Koleda*, a pagan Balto-Slavic festival incorporated into Christmas, whose name was also derived from *Kalendae*), *făurar* (from *februarius*, but folk etymology connects it to *a făuri* ‘to make, to create’), *mărțișor* ‘little March’, *prier* (from *aprilis*, but folk etymology derives it from *a prii* ‘to have a good omen’), *florar* ‘flowering month’ (see Slavic), *cireșar* ‘cherry month’, *cuptor* lit. ‘oven’ (alluding to the heat), *gustar* (from *augustus*, but folk etymology ties it to *a gusta* ‘to taste’) or *secerar* ‘sickle month’, *răpciune* (with an unclear etymology, could be from Latin *raptio* ‘reaping’), *brumărel* ‘little frosty’, *brumar* ‘frosty’ and *undrea* (from the feast of St. Andrew, which is actually at the last day of November).

In Albanian, the standard names of all months, except February, June and July, are derived from Latin, albeit Latin numbers have been substituted with Albanian ones in the last four months of the year (*shtator*, *tetor*, *nëntor*, *dhjetor*). February is simply called *shkurt* ‘short one’, June is *qershor* ‘cherry month’ (as in Romanian and Serbian) and July is *korrik* ‘harvest’. There are also old names for other months, unused in the standard language. Those are *kallnor* (derived from Latin *calendarium*, see Romanian) for January, *lagëtur* ‘moisty’ for March, *Shëngjergj* ‘St. George’ for May, *djegagur* ‘stone burning’ (alluding to the heat) or *dorza* (unclear, but maybe from *dorë* ‘hand’, implying harvesting by hand) for August, *britm* (unclear, probably a contraction and metathesis of *september*) for September, *Shmiter* ‘St. Demetrius’ (after the feast of St. Demetrius, October 26) and *vjeshtë* ‘autumn’ for October, *brymës* (from Latin *bruma* ‘mist’, see Romanian) for November; and *dimëror* ‘wintery’ for December. There is also *djegqerrë* ‘round burning’, a name used for both December and January, connected to Serbian and Macedonian *коложег*. No old name for April was found.

## 10. Conclusion

For speakers of languages retaining folk month names a calendar is not only a help of telling the time, it is also an insight into the local climate, the feasts, the annual

changes of the nature and the agricultural habits of the people.<sup>8</sup> Talking about a certain month implies – consciously or subconsciously – also producing a mnemotechnical device for a physical and cultural geography of a specific area. Even though some names have lost their transparency through loosening of linguistic or cultural ties (a Pole not knowing what *paździerze* is would be confused about what is October named after; similarly, an average Croat would not recognize the word *laž* ‘lie’ in *ožujak* ‘March’) or folk etymologies (a Finn would probably falsely think about oaks in January, whereas some Slavs would wonder why is December the month of begging or millet), such cases are not significant for altering the general picture.

While this situation might be advantageous for one's cultural identity, it presents a problem from the translational perspective. The mental picture formed by an English speaker talking about April – a word meaning nothing more than the month itself to them – is certainly different from the picture appearing in the mind of a Croatian talking about *travanj* or a Pole talking about *kwiecień*. Translation therefore urges us to either lose the shade of meaning completely (if translating to a language lacking folk month names), substitute it with something else (for instance, grass with flowers if translating April from Croatian to Polish), or, if possible, retain the wording on the expense of meaning (an example would be translating Croatian *srpanj* with Polish *sierpień*, despite the former meaning July and the latter August). Of course, one can always resort to lengthy footnotes explaining the intentions of the original text, which is never elegant, but sometimes unfortunately necessary.

We shall therefore end this paper with a question that has no right or wrong answer, and that everyone should answer for oneself: in the era of globalization, is it more important to retain local linguistic and cultural features even if they may hinder functionality, or should they be regarded simply as an annoying obstacle?

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<sup>8</sup> For a systematization of the memes used in the names of the months in studied languages see the Appendix.

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## Appendix – memes used in folk month names in languages

<b>January</b>	<p><b>Weather:</b> cold, ice, dry, strong</p> <p><b>Natural changes:</b> ice beads</p> <p><b>Astronomical phenomena:</b> sun shining through</p> <p><b>Time:</b> heart of the year, yearhead, beginning</p> <p><b>Season:</b> winter</p> <p><b>Fauna:</b> wolf, horn shedding</p> <p><b>Activities:</b> cutting</p> <p><b>Rituals:</b> fire burning</p> <p><b>Feasts:</b> Kalendae, New Year, Blessed Lady, Epiphany, Conversion of St. Paul, holidays</p>
<b>February</b>	<p><b>Weather:</b> fierce cold, frost, summery</p> <p><b>Natural changes:</b> ice submerging, ice beads</p> <p><b>Astronomical phenomena:</b> lengthening of days (?), short</p> <p><b>Fauna:</b> wolf, horn shedding</p> <p><b>Season:</b> after winter</p> <p><b>Activities:</b> cutting</p> <p><b>Rituals:</b> candles, candle consecration</p> <p><b>Feasts:</b> Candlemass, Shrove Tuesday, Lent, Great night (?)</p>