

From European 'Free-movers' to Circular Labourers: Bulgarian Migration Experiences to the UK and Back

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ABSTRACT

Bulgarian migration to the UK has been consistently increasing since the country's EU accession and removal of barriers to free movement and labour across the EU. The continued popularity of the UK as a migration destination despite the multiplicity of hurdles faced by Bulgarian immigrants poses a paradox that cannot be explained with the 'push-pull' and cost-benefit calculation models prevailing in migration research. In its attempts to provide a better understanding of people's decisions to migrate and different migration patterns this article challenges existing scholarly explanations by analysing ethnographic material dedicated to the pre- and post-migratory experiences of Bulgarian working class migrants. By exploring the effects of the informal institutional restrictions faced by Bulgarian newcomers after January 2014 the article reveals a mechanism through which permanent settlement has been limited in favour of circular labour mobility. The benefits of such regulating mechanisms for the capitalist state have come at the expense of migrants' longings for a 'normal' existence.

KEY WORDS: circular migration, working-class, free movement, illegality, Brexit.

Introduction

The accession of Bulgaria to the European Union in 2007 has initiated a period of intensive emigration¹. The so-called 'global economic crisis' of 2008 has led to another 'peak' of intra-European mobility, during which Bulgarians' movements shifted from 'traditional' destinations such as Spain, Italy and Greece to the United Kingdom and Germany.² In the past few years, the UK has turned from a country unknown, remote and relatively unattractive to Bulgarians³ into one of the most

preferred migration destinations.⁴ Since January 2014, when Bulgarians were given the full right to live and work in the UK, we have witnessed another period of relative upsurge in the number of newcomers.⁵

Meanwhile, migrants find themselves struggling in a world of proliferating symbolic and material borders⁶ and increasingly sophisticated forms of exploitation, violence, and subjugation. In the past years, Bulgarians have been

Bulgarian Emigration in the UK', in *European Dimensions of Culture and History on the Balkans*, ed. Margarita Karamihova (Sofia: Paradigma, 2010).

4 'Къде и какво искат да работят българите?', *Economy.bg*, Last modified November 21, 2016 <http://www.economy.bg/bulgaria/view/52/Kyde-i-kakvo-iskat-da-rabotyat-bylgarite> (accessed: 21 November 2016).

5 'Romanians and Bulgarians Coming to the UK in 2014: Influx or Exaggeration?', *The Migration Observatory*, Last modified November 21, 2016 <http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/commentaries/romanians-and-bulgarians-coming-to-the-uk-in-2014-influx-or-exaggeration/>.

6 Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labour*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

1 Evgenia Troeva and Mila Mancheva, 'Migrants to and from Bulgaria: the State of Research', in *Migrations, Gender and Intercultural Interactions in Bulgaria*, ed. Marco Hajdinjak (Sofia: International Centre for Minority Studies and Intercultural Relations, 2011).

2 'Германия – най-желаната страна за българските емигранти', *Vesti.bg*, Last modified November 11, 2006, <http://www.vesti.bg/bulgaria/obsh-testvo/germaniia-e-naj-zhelanata-strana-za-emigrantitenni-6056296>.

3 Mila Maeva, 'Organizations and Institutions of

in the spotlight of British (and Western European) anti-immigration discourses constructing Eastern European migrants as ‘abusers’ of social benefits who make little to no positive contribution to the local economy⁷. Despite the status and rights that come with their European citizenship, structural violence and discrimination continue to confine the majority of Bulgarian migrants to exploitative jobs in the informal economy and to a precarious existence at the margins of British society.⁸ These realities have received increasing attention in Bulgarian and global media, as well as in the stories told by return migrants, warning potential newcomers of the multiple hardships awaiting them. Yet the number of Bulgarians who wish to embark on such journeys is still growing year by year.⁹ What we are witnessing is a paradox of ‘popularity despite uncertainty’ in which a substantial number of Bulgarians continue to imagine their future in an increasingly suspicious and hostile Western Europe.

So far, scholarship on Bulgarian migration to the ‘West’ and the UK in particular has failed to grasp the complexities and contradictions of contemporary migration movements and their motivations. Studies dedicated to revealing the reasons behind Bulgarian emigration gen-

erally conform to the ‘economic reductionism’ characteristic of Eastern European migration research in general.¹⁰ Scholars tend to over-emphasize and generalise the importance of micro- and/or macroeconomic factors and pay less attention to the interplay between individual and structural reasons that underlie the difficult choice between ‘leaving’ and ‘staying’. In addition, Bulgarian migration experts and researchers very often partake in the use of normatively charged and politically useful dichotomies between the ‘economic’ migrations of classic labour migrants (usually denoted by value-laden terms such as ‘low’ migrants, (deficits, Gastarbeiter, gurbetchii) and, on the other hand, the transnational mobility of the ‘highly-skilled’ and educated ones (intelligensia, professionals, new Bulgarians).¹¹

This distinction between these two different migrant types is persistently reproduced in the discussion of different patterns of migration as well as in discussions of the temporariness and circularity of intensifying East-West movements. The so-called ‘incomplete’ migration¹² defined as short-term labour mobility is attributed to ‘poor’ migrants whose strategies are said to revolve around quick money-making stays in the West and periods of status-building consumption¹³. The migrants’ as-

7 Neda Deneva, ‘Conflicting Meanings and Practices of Work. Bulgarian Roma as Citizens and Migrants’, in *Situating Migration in Transition: Temporal, Structural, and Conceptual Transformations of Migrations*, ed. Raia Apostolova, Neda Deneva and Tsvetelina Hristova (Sofia: Collective for Social Interventions, 2014).

8 Polina Manolova, ‘Brexit and the Production of ‘Illegal’ EU Migrants: Bulgarians on their Way to the ‘West’’, *FocaalBlog*, July 6, 2016, <http://www.focaalblog.com/2016/07/06/polina-manolova-brexit-and-the-production-of-illegal-eu-migrants-bulgarians-on-their-way-to-the-west/#sthash.0Mvoguxt.dpuf>.

9 ‘Вече 37% от българите искат да работят в чужбина’, *dir.bg*, Last modified November 21, 2016, <http://dnes.dir.bg/news/rabota-chuzhbina-11890973?nt=4> (accessed: 21 November 2016).

10 Richard Black et al., eds, *A Continent Moving West? EU Enlargement and Labour Migration from Central and Eastern Europe* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010).

11 See, for example, Chavdarova, ‘Young People – Those New Bulgarians: What Do They Think About Bulgaria?’; Ditchev, ‘Mobile identities? Mobile citizenship?, Critique and Humanism, Cultures in motion’; Stoilkova, ‘A Quest for Belonging: The Bulgarian Demographic Crisis, Emigration, and the Postsocialist Generations’; Liakova, ‘The Hybrid World of Bulgarian Students in Germany’.

12 Marek Okolski, ‘Incomplete Migration: a New Form of Mobility in Central and Eastern Europe. The Case of Polish and Ukrainian migrants, in *Patterns of Migration in Central Europe*, ed. Clair Wallace and Dariusz Stola, (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 105.

13 Ivaylo Ditchev, ‘Mobile identities? Mobile citi-

sumed lack of long-term plans for settlement are usually contributed to their lack of cosmopolitanism – locally-bound identities, inadequate skills and cultural capital which ultimately make their successful integration into the host society impossible.¹⁴ At the same time migrants' own unwillingness and lack of ambition to invest efforts into social advancement in the host society is pointed out as responsible for their short-term perspectives.¹⁵ The self-inflicted marginality of 'low' migrants is often contrasted to the long-term plans of 'educated' and 'high-skilled' individuals ready to put in hard work and ambition into achieving personal and professional realisation.¹⁶

The aim of the present article is to challenge such problematic categorizations and interpretations that sadly continue to dominate the scientific discourse on post-accession Eastern European migration. By following the migration experiences of two Bulgarian men with working-class origins, I will shed light on the migration motivations of this particular social group. As I will argue, this can help debunk the simplified economic logic predominant in Eastern European migration research so far. Both case studies show how migration decisions are informed by accumulated dissatisfaction with postsocialist hardships and the apparent impossibility of my respondents to achieve individual and social aspirations in their home country. The inability to find adequate employment determined by lack of

zanship?', *Critique and Humanism, Cultures in motion*, 25, no.1 (2008), 9-23.

14 Ibid

15 John Eade, Stephen Drinkwater and Michal Garapich, (2006) 'Class and Ethnicity—Polish Migrants in London', Guildford, University of Surrey, Centre for Research on Nationalism, Ethnicity and Multiculturalism, Last modified November 21, 2016, http://www.surrey.ac.uk/Arts/CRONEM/polish/POLISH_FINAL_RESEARCH_REPORT_WEB.pdf, accessed 1 February 2007.

16 Ibid

marketable skills or social connections, the growing desire to achieve different forms of middle-class status and the demeaning attitude of employers are all factors constituting a precarious social position which would-be Bulgarian migrants are desperately trying to escape.

Their plans for long-term settlement in the British society are structured by expectations of a certain kind of 'normality' of life which they juxtaposed to unbearable living conditions in Bulgaria. However, as I will show, the institutional hurdles that migrants encounter upon entering the UK force many into the existing informal labour market in which particularly exploitative working arrangements predominate – a no-win situation which foils the migration strategies of even those who eventually manage to become 'legal' workers. I demonstrate how the inability to permanently settle in the UK is not only conditioned by subjective factors, as previous research would have us believe, but is due to the structural violence inflicted upon the migrants by informal institutional arrangements and everyday discrimination. Thus, shortly upon their arrival my respondents were subjected to daily reminders of their 'incomplete' European-ness in their encounters with British institutions, employers and fellow-migrants and felt pushed into a subordinate position of second-class citizens.

I will embed this insight into a macro perspective by arguing that the mechanisms through which migrants are forced into circular migration - institutional discrimination, de facto inaccessibility of living wage labour and the expansion of a short-term, precarious employment sector - are part of an increasingly sophisticated system of capitalist labour reproduction.¹⁷ This interpretation breaks with

17 Michael Burawoy, 'The functions and repro-

postmodern attempts of romanticizing highly-mobile identities as beneficial for all those who adopt them, and instead laments how the ideological attraction of 'free movement' regulations reproduces circular labour power that is highly beneficial for the capitalist state while detrimental for those who are forced to do it. In conclusion, I will link this critical insight back to the current debate in order to show how migrants' livelihoods and strategies are affected by the socio-political pre-Brexit climate. I will argue that scholarship on East European migration will have to inquire about and reflect on the realities encountered by migrants in order to move beyond the objectifying and alienating discourse that currently dominates both the political and scholarly debate.

Pre-migration dreams, hopes and uncertainties

This empirical section starts with presentation of two different stories, those of Stoyko and Dino. They both exemplify the pre-migration expectations and motivations that were relevant for the majority of the people I spoke to. The article then continues by exploring the experiences of both men upon their arrival in the UK.¹⁸

Stoyko

Stoyko was a male in his mid-forties living in a large Bulgarian city with his wife and one-year-old daughter. When the 'change'¹⁹ happened, he was a second-year student in the local Agrarian University. Stoyko never managed to complete his studies as he was urged into pursuing any low-skilled employment he could get his hands on to help his family make ends meet during the dramatic socioeconomic upheaval throughout the (early) nineties. He claimed he did not really regret this change of fate, as he had no interest in agronomy to start with. Instead he was very enticed to seize the private business opportunities which, as the popular narrative of the time had it, promised to turn every quickly-adaptable postsocialist individual into a middle-class entrepreneur. This status proved to be unattainable, however, as during the past twenty something years

¹⁸ This article is based on interviews and participant observation taken from a larger dataset collected during year-long ethnographic fieldwork between 2013 and 2014 in different localities in Bulgaria and the UK. I started by exploring the aspirations and expectations of prospective Bulgarian migrants who had long-term plans to settle in the UK. By accompanying people throughout their journeys, I was able to account for their experiences in the UK and investigate whether the realities of life abroad matched or contradicted their pre-migration ideas.

¹⁹ A vernacular term denoting the political and socio-economic transformation of 1989 and the fall of the Communist regime in Bulgaria.

duction of migrant labor: Comparative material from South Africa and the United States', *American Journal in Sociology* 81, no. 5 (1976): 1050–1087.

Stoyko engaged in a remarkable array of entrepreneurial and waged employment activities: builder, agricultural worker, wine and olive oil trader, tourist agent, real estate agent, and production worker. His most recent attempt to finally land on the 'right track' to middle-class normality was a cleaning business which he started despite his wife's aversion. The orders quickly picked up at the start of 2008 only to come to a painful downfall a year later when the effects of the global economic crisis hit Bulgaria. At the time of our first meeting in 2014 Stoyko was registered as unemployed and supplemented the meagre benefit he received with sporadic small favours to friends and family to whom he borrowed his former cleaning van. It was only possible for the family to make ends meet because of the monthly maternity allowance Stoyko's wife was entitled to and the money and provisions regularly sent by his parents.

When I met Stoyko, he seemed to have lost all of the enthusiasm and ambition that had kept him going throughout the 'transition'. He made an overall impression of being frustrated and struggling with a sense of personal failure. Looking back to the past – a time of 'wasted youth' and 'chasing windmills' – was painful, as was the present – full of regrets for being naïve enough to believe that life would ever become 'normal' in Bulgaria. He tried to express the disillusionment and despair accumulated throughout the 'reforms' as follows:

I am just so tired of trying anymore. She [his wife] is right; things can never work out for us. I don't know if it is because of me – I clearly lack inner motivation to go on, or it is because of the way things are in this country. For some [people] there will always be enough, others [the majority] are left to their own devices. It is survival of the fittest, only

those who manage to adapt will make it. Even if both of us [him and his wife] work it will never be enough for more than paying our bills [...] You have a house, a nice family but you don't feel like a normal person. What kind of life is this?

Stoyko and his wife agreed that migration to the UK was their 'last hope' for having the 'normal' life they imagined and unsuccessfully tried to achieve for themselves and their small daughter. Their claims that they were 'sick of living with little' and always 'counting their pennies' were time and again – in almost paradoxical manner – contradicted by sporadic confessions that they had 'nothing to complain about' as they 'had everything they needed', backed up with an enumeration of their family assets – a home of their own (inherited from his wife's mother), freshly decorated and filled with all necessary electrical appliances – 'even a dishwasher', a car – 'not new but not too bad either', a village home for summer holidaying and fresh weekly deliveries from Stoyko's parents' plot in the countryside. The seeming inconsistency in their claims, one which I observed in the narratives of many other would-be migrants in situations similar to theirs, becomes understandable when one tries to interpret what was implied in the notion of economic deprivation that Stoyko and his wife underlined as a main 'push' reason behind their migration plans. Here, economic deprivation, usually denoted with the emic term 'survival' (otceliavane) was not seen as threatening their social reproduction but as leaving no disposable income for 'extra' spending. They, as well as many other Bulgarians, were thus unable to answer to the social pressure to engage in consumption patterns constituting perceived symbols of 'middle-class'-ness such as regular trips

abroad, branded clothing and accessories, the latest mobile phones and electronic gadgets and appliances. The urgency of possessing such materiality was not necessarily in its capacity to ensure one's physical well-being but in its value as status symbol. In this sense, while perceiving themselves as 'flawed' consumers²⁰ within the local community, many of my respondents saw migration as a strategy of overcoming their symbolic marginality in a society that boasted the 'success' of the ambiguous politico-economic elite and prioritized the needs of a western-minded 'intellectual' class.

Dino

Although much younger than Stoyko and still single, Dino shared similar feelings of discontent with his present situation and with the impossibility to achieve a desired 'normality', which underpinned his migration desires. Dino was twenty-six years old and came from a working-class family from a small town in northwest Bulgaria, not too far from the capital Sofia where he moved to obtain a diploma for a railway transport technician from a specialized college. He hoped that this particular education would enable him to obtain employment in the forthcoming construction of the Sofia underground. His job aspirations were soon scalded when upon the completion of his unpaid six-months training in the 'Metropolitan' he was unashamedly told that the positions had long been 'reserved' for 'well-connected' people. This moment left an imprint on his youthful aspirations and led him to conclude that there was 'nothing' left (no opportunities for professional realisation and decent living) in Bulgaria for 'those like himself' (of working-class and provincial background, without

meaningful social capital and university qualifications). Regretfully, the years to come only proved his impression right by adding new nuances to an already seemingly bleak future. Since his graduation, Dino constantly juggled two, sometimes three part-time jobs which were just enough to 'keep him going' in Sofia. At the time we first met, he was working night shifts as a guard in the British embassy and delivering coffee to grocery shops and cafes during the day. The lack of sleep and the constant worries about money left him exhausted and with little time to invest in socializing and pastime activities. What he found harder to endure though was the demeaning treatment he was given by employers and co-workers who seemed to have no respect for the efforts he put in doing a 'good job':

The embassy job is not a problem; after all they [the British] are civilized people but on the other job it is different. They just treat you like a dog because you come from the province and you don't have a university degree. It is not just my boss [sighs], you must see those clients I work with; some of them act as if they own me. If I am a bit late or something they are ready to start a fight and the words they call you [...] it is just unbearable!

The combination of low payment and disrespectful attitude that made Dino wish to 'leave it all behind and start anew' was intensified by the moral quandary that some of his job obligations presented him with. He was often required to sweet-talk customers into increasing their orders by presenting them with false promises and deceitful information or protect the back of colleagues who refused to conscientiously observe their duties. For Dino economic and social success in Bulgarian society was only possible for the morally flexible,

²⁰ Zygmunt Bauman, *Work, Consumerism, and the New Poor*, (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2005), 38.

those who had a 'good back' (connections) and who were ready to succumb to the rules of the (market) game and obtain leverage at any price (often at the expense of a hard-working majority). This was the reason why, unlike Stoyko, Dino never felt like engaging in any kind of entrepreneurial activity. Dino's unwillingness to follow socially established practices for achieving 'normal' well-being condemned him to economic and symbolic humiliation. His migration appeared as conditioned by his desire for restoring feelings of self-worth and dignity and escaping a position of social and economic subordination.

For both of my respondents migration appeared to be a strategy of escaping their 'transitional', lives defined by dissatisfaction and growing despair with the impossibility to reach the 'normal' life they had hoped for. When trying to provide insight into migrants' motivations one needs to go beyond explanations related to the socio-economic and political forces, in order to understand people's subjective preoccupations with dignity and a sense of 'moving forward' in life. The visions of the would-be migrants show how ideas of what life should be like are projected onto imaginations attracting migrants to particular destinations. As Sarah Mahler argues in her ethnography of Central and South American migrants to the US, migration is always a result of two mutually constituting forces – the structural factors that uproot individuals from their 'customary forms of life' in their homelands and mythologized visions of a certain 'promised land' that structure their aspirations for a better future.²¹ Building on this approach, I take the constant references to 'normality' in the narratives of my respondents as

underpinning their longings and aspirations related to an imagined attainable future in the UK. The 'normality' they expected to obtain in the UK referred to a broad set of normative evocations usually experienced as 'lacking' in a present state of 'abnormality' in Bulgaria. Evocations of normality were thus constructed along longings for order and stability; universal availability of a 'decent' middle-class living standard and a sense of human dignity stemming from respectable work-related identities.

Notwithstanding the high hopes my respondents associated with their new lives in the UK, they were also aware that migration was a risky endeavour – a leap into the unknown – demanding considerable financial and emotional resources. Migration journeys necessitated investments often beyond the means of most families that was thus often obtained from money lenders/loan sharks, consumer credits and more rarely friends and family. Cases in which people had to sell off movables, like cars, laptops, and mobile phones in order to cover travel costs were not uncommon. That was coupled with the fact that before departure many chose to quit stable but low-paying employment. This made migration a high-risk endeavour and a point of no return.

The stakes were high for those decided to leave Bulgaria but their hopes for securing a better future for themselves and their families outweighed the fear of the unknown. Although rarely verbalized, the apprehensions and uncertainties were evidently persistent in their strategies. Without exception, all of those I spoke to were alarmed by the possible stigmatization that the UK anti-immigration campaign (explicitly directed towards Bulgarians and Romanians) might provoke upon their arrival. At the same time, my respondents un-

²¹ Sarah Mahler, *American Dreaming: Immigrant Life on the Margins*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995)

derlined their individual responsibility in dispersing negative misconceptions that British media instilled upon an overall tolerant and accepting British population. They expressed confidence that they would quickly be able to prove their 'properness' through hard and dedicated labour. In fact, almost no one of the people I met with accepted the 'migrant' label before their departure. This term was associated with a negative meaning for many, making them prefer to identify as 'free-movers' and 'European citizens'. In the following section I will show how this genuine belief in the rights and freedoms of 'free movement' was disappointed on multiple counts, making Bulgarians realise that they were not only migrants but in fact also second-class EU citizens, for whom the UK labour market had little more in stock than illegal employment and a marginal, precarious existence.

'Illegal' EU migrants

The hardship and vulnerability that marked the beginning of what my respondents believed to be a 'fresh start' often went far beyond their worst fears. Some of the tough lessons that migrants had to learn in the early days and months after their arrival were related to the bureaucratic conundrums that made obtaining all the necessary documents a painful experience with often no end in sight, meaning that starting a full-time, legal employment was usually impossible. Anyone seeking legal employment in the UK require a national insurance number (NINo) and a bank account. For most of the Bulgarians I met, the NINo interview, imagined as a 'tick-box' exercise, turned into a traumatic first encounter with British institutions.²² The right to use an interpreter during the interview or the help of an English-speaking friend was denied to many of those I spoke to. They were often scolded for not speaking English. The weeks – in some cases months – after the interview were marked by apprehension and insecurity as they waited for the decision which would determine their future socio-economic mobility. In some cases, the NI-number was granted only after months of unjustified rejections and painstaking re-applications.

For many, setting up a bank account proved to be the real challenge. Along with other documentation, most banks required a proof of address for creating an account. Although much depended on the specific bank and the employee, common options included a maintenance bill in one's name, a tenancy agreement, or a NINo(!). These were unattainable

²² Many Bulgarian immigrants had the feeling that obtaining a NINo became much more difficult in the months up to and after January 2014. They reported that they perceived increased rates of refusals and an overall delay.

for many Bulgarians. Migrants often stayed with friends or rented a room with unregistered landlords, as legal renting was expensive and required references and background checks. Even those who managed to provide all the necessary documents were often denied a bank account. After receiving consecutive rejections despite having all the necessary documents and literally begging banks to cooperate, many of those I spoke to found themselves forced to use the paid services of fellow Bulgarians who promise to issue a bank account within less than a day.

Both Stoyko and Dino, who possessed limited amounts of migrant capital in the form of trusted networks and English language skills, followed the negative trajectory of the early migrant experience. Stoyko came to London after a friend (a 'successful' Bulgarian migrant) got him a 'secured' job and accommodation only to discover that the cleaning job was 'no longer available' and the weekly rent for the shared room was higher than previously negotiated. Left to his own devices, Stoyko had little choice but to pay a month's rent in advance and do his best to 'sort' his documents and find employment. The arrangement of the NINo interview took several lengthy and expensive phone calls, and the interview itself proved to be a challenging first encounter with the British authorities: without the presence of an official translator he understood almost nothing of what the interviewer said. However, he was able to discern the employee's annoyance with his lack of language skills. When he called me a day after the interview Stoyko was clearly distressed and asked me to interpret the behavior of the interviewer, as he was still unsure whether his documents were accepted or had been rejected on the spot. A month later with still no news from the au-

thorities, Stoyko prompted me to call on his behalf and check on the progress of his documentation: 'It is like waiting for my death sentence. I am so nervous, I just don't understand why they keep me waiting for so long.' On the phone the emotionless employee provided me with the formal reply: 'As we are processing a large number of documents, the issuing of NINo might take anything from four to eight weeks'.

Around that same time, Dino had visited all the banks known as Bulgarian-friendly²³ to no avail. The opening of a bank account was implicitly refused as the employees kept requiring more and more documents. At some point Dino was told he was not eligible for a bank account as he was unable to provide a visa proving his legal right to stay in the country(!). Although they were by law European citizens with the right to reside and work in the UK, the lack of necessary documents gave my respondents the status of illegal workers which foreclosed their chances for socio-economic mobility in British society. It should be noted that Bulgarians, as all other EU nationals, can be legally employed for a period of up to two months before obtaining their NINo. Most of those I spoke to were unaware or fearful to make use of this right. Additionally, recruitment agencies and local employers used the absence of a NINo as a pretext for not hiring newcomers. British and Bulgarian employers and gang leaders often tricked them into exploitative and informal cash-in-hand jobs in construction, car washing, leaflet distribution, and cleaning. Such jobs usually paid between £35 and £40 for a ten- to twelve-hour work-day—less than half of the national minimum wage.

In the first two months after his arrival while

23 Around that same time, Dino had visited all the banks known as Bulgarian-friendly

waiting for his NINo, Stoyko alternated between days/weeks of painful waiting and short spells of underpaid exploitative cash-in-hand jobs. This was common for many Bulgarian male migrants. He spent a week working on a construction site as a painter and another three weeks working in a car wash where he was paid £35 for an eleven hours working day. He told me his monthly expenses amounted to £600. For the two months in the UK he only managed to make a little over £1000, which meant that he was not only unable to save enough to bring his family over, but in fact had to borrow extra cash from a friend back home. When he finally acquired his NINo, Stoyko was told he needed to obtain a self-employed status in order to enrol in a recruitment agency providing jobs in the construction sector. The 'false self-employment' practiced by many British and immigrant companies was highly beneficial for the businesses, while placing workers in a precarious situation with no guaranteed minimum hours per week, no entitlement to the 'national living wage', no employment rights, etc. This status also burdened them with extra accounting costs and taxes. While realising the unfairness of the situation, Stoyko admitted to have limited alternatives as all 'proper' jobs required English or an initial financial investment which he could not afford. In the next few months the irregularity and low pay of the jobs coerced him into spending a month or two in London working as many hours as he could and waiting out on 'quite' months (when there were less jobs on offer) back in Bulgaria.

Dino's immigration trajectory was somehow different although it ultimately led to the same end-result. He left for North England to work as a chicken catcher²⁴, a job was recruited for

²⁴ For very similar description of the working conditions of chicken catchers, see Guardian's report on

through a Bulgarian agency charging a fee of £300. Upon arrival, he discovered that the working and living conditions had little to do with the promises of the agency and the neat video clips they used in presenting the job. Work started at six in the morning or earlier when a bus collected the workers and took them miles away to different farms in the area. The backbreaking labour continued till late at night with a single lunchbreak of twenty minutes. Dino and five other Bulgarian workers shared two rooms in a rundown farm shed without running water and electricity for which he had to pay £60 per week. When he called the agency two weeks later to complain about the inhumane work conditions, he was told that he should have been more careful before signing up the contract as the job was not for the faint-hearted. A week later Dino was forced to come back home as his health had deteriorated and he felt unable to undergo the demeaning treatment of his employers. Half a year later, Dino, still determined to try his luck in the UK, left with a six-month contract with a Bulgarian sub-contractor to work in a solar panel field in central England. This time there was no fee required and he had been given an advance payment already in the first week of his employment. The work was hard but the general conditions and attitude of the supervisors, all of whom were Bulgarian, were way better than in his previous experience. The job was, however, temporary and required him to spend another half a year in Bulgaria before he embarked on another job with the same sub-contractor. Dino's ultimate goal was to permanently settle in London but he realised that without a NINo, bank account, any knowledge of English and no trusted friends the chances of modern slavery: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/jun/10/court-finds-uk-gangmaster-liable-for-modern-slavery-victims-kent-chicken-catching-eggs>

of him losing all of his savings while trying to settle there were quite high.

A number of Bulgarian migrants who just like Stoyko and Dino came to the UK with the intention to settle permanently and with the hope of experiencing a much desired 'normal' life found their prospects to be limited by a number of invisible structural mechanisms that they had little control over. Being stripped off their civic, social and labour rights, highly vulnerable migrants were entrapped into an exploitable informal labour market. In addition, they commonly suffered limitations related to their lack of language and other skills, stigmatization within the immigrant community, formal and informal discriminatory practices and general public hostility. The combination of unexpectedly high cost of living and low earnings meant that migrants were very often on the brink of survival - unable to repay debts incurred before migrating, to remit money back home, or to save enough to bring over their families. Thus, initial plans for permanent settlement often turned out to be unfeasible, and the only possibility to generate surplus income became circular migration: in order to avoid long and costly periods of unemployment while in the UK, short stays in Bulgaria were used to secure jobs and living arrangements in advance.

Internalization of inferiority and intragroup hostility

The dubious legal status, early experiences of marginality, and stigmatizing public discourses filled my respondents with fear, insecurity, and disillusionment. Looking at the lives of others within the immigrant community, they started to perceive their situation as unexceptional and embedded in perceived natural laws that determine the immigrant trajectory. Many of those I spoke to admitted feeling defenceless, ignorant and out of place, incapable of resolving even the simplest tasks, and often dependent on co-immigrants who cashed out on their vulnerability. In the eyes of many Bulgarians, the UK started to seem grim and unwelcoming, filled with traps that necessitated self-protection. The fear of conforming to the stigma projected on them made some reluctant to use public services and social provisions even after they had managed to legalize their status in the UK.

Eva, forty-one, who worked in a factory, for example, regularly consulted her GP back in Bulgaria instead of registering with a local medical practice. She explained her reluctance to do so with a general feeling of "uneasiness" whenever communicating with locals. This psychological barrier, as she told me, came not only from her poor command of English but also from the fear of being seen as an abuser of free health care. For similar reasons, during her first year in the UK, she did not feel confident looking for a job and even found it hard to leave the house. Stoyko reported similar feelings related to his unwillingness to spend time off work outside of his shared accommodation. Every social situation was a potential source of embarrassment and humiliation which he tried to avoid at any cost.

He feared falling into an awkward situation in which he had to communicate his needs in English or reply to a question he was asked. He found the sheer size and crowdedness of London intimidating; moving around the city was challenging and he rarely diverted from his routine itinerary to and from work. What he feared most was getting lost and finding himself in a hostile area or having a heart attack on the underground.

In order to put these sentiments into perspective, it is useful to consider Frantz Fanon's examination of the psychology of colonialism, which describes the emergence of an inferiority complex in the colonized subjects as a result of economic processes and psychological "epidermalization" of the cultural and intellectual supremacy of the colonizer.²⁵ Bulgarian immigrants' practices and the meanings invested in them exhibit similar processes of internalization in the adoption of self-blame narratives that attribute their inferior positions to their own cultural inadequacies; fear of humiliation and ridicule made them avoid social contact with locals whom they deemed intellectually and culturally superior. Furthermore, some who condemned exploitation and mistreatment by immigrant employers were less likely to oppose similar treatment by British. Eva, who at the end of her first year in the UK managed to muster all her confidence and started a job in a chocolate factory, spent endless nights crying because of the humiliation her Polish manager inflicted on her and her colleagues but accepted similar treatment by a British manager as "normal": "After all he is British, so it is understandable that he acts in this way."

The Bulgarian immigrant community was a no less hostile place. Bulgarians rarely practiced solidarity and to a great extent stayed divid-

25 See Fanon, 'Black Skin, White Masks'.

ed in their daily struggles for survival. The struggle for scarce resources often produced voracious competition, general mistrust, and disloyalty in the community. The basis for intragroup antagonism was not only economic but rested on cultural-civilizational discourse that differentiated more and less "Westernized" subjectivities. Self-ascribed middle-class members, who emphasized their cultural and symbolic proximity to the West, tried to compensate their feelings of inferiority and recuperate lost social status by blaming their fellow Bulgarians for their own marginality. They accused them of "flooding" the British market with cheap and uneducated labor and creating a bad name for the entrepreneurially minded and well-educated Bulgarians. This othering of the "typical" Bulgarian migrants reflects and reproduces existent social and cultural divisions within Bulgarian society. This conflict between neoliberally minded elites and uneducated and backward masses is embedded in a postsocialist process of Orientalization in which large groups of the population were constructed as incapable of making the "right" civilizational choices and thus the ones to blame for the failed economic reforms.²⁶ Trapped in a position of double subordination, my respondents were both conferred a marginal status of undeserving Europeans by British society, and discriminated by their fellow Bulgarians for their alleged cultural inferiority. It should be also noted, however, that despite being cautious and mistrustful against one another newcomers preferred being in a culturally-familiar environment, away from cultural and religious others.

26 Don Kalb, 'Elias talks to Hayek (and learns from Marx and Foucault): Reflections on neoliberalism, postsocialism and personhood', in *Neoliberalism, personhood and postsocialism: Enterprising selves in changing economies*, ed. Nicolette Makovicky, (Farnham: Routledge, 2014).

Thus, they often looked for 'Bulgarian' jobs and housing. Acts of solidarity and mutual cooperation were still a not so rare occurrence within the Bulgarian community still. Yet they were rarely recognized by migrants, most of whom shared a view that when abroad one should 'stay away from compatriots'.

The reproduction of a system of migrant labor

Bulgarians had limited resources for questioning the structural exclusion and discrimination they experienced. Instead they internalized the inferiority conferred to them and came to believe that the status of a "real" European is to be deserved through hard work and major sacrifices. This ideological justification of entrenched precarity and discrimination enabled and facilitated the production of an "illegal" army of highly-mobile labourers, who, in the ideal case, would only travel to the UK for previously arranged jobs in the formal and informal labour market and thus not make use of any social support or administrative capacities, let alone welfare, in Great Britain.

The benefits of this process to the British state becomes apparent when it is conceived as part of an international labor supply system that satisfies the demand for low-skilled and easily disposable labor in structurally advantaged economies. Michael Burawoy posits that the reproduction of the international labor force is only possible through the separation of maintenance and renewal processes: the costs of labor renewal (education, social provision, public services) are to be borne by the institutions of the sending state and the maintenance is organized by the receiving state. The mutual sustenance of the two processes is ensured by what Burawoy calls the interdependence of the productive and reproductive worker.²⁷ With the implementation of different legal and political mechanisms, the receiving state entrenches the vulnerable and weak position of the migrants, their separation from their families, and the reproduction of oscillatory

²⁷ Michael Burawoy, 'The functions and reproduction of migrant labor: Comparative material from South Africa and the United States,' *American Journal of Sociology* 81, no. 5 (1976): 1050–1087.

movements between work and home²⁸.

The migration patterns of my respondents seem to match Burawoy's theoretical model. The opening of the UK labor market for Bulgarians in the beginning of 2014 did not bring an end to their experiences of illegality, exploitation, and marginality. On the contrary, the institutional barriers faced by the newly arrived labor migrants and their vulnerable status made them easy targets for exploitation in the informal sector of the British economy. The impossibility to produce surplus income prevents permanent settlement and reunification with family as many Bulgarians earn just enough to cover basic subsistence costs. The UK thus mobilizes a reserve army of single, able-bodied individuals, the renewal of which presents no burden to the state as only very few of these immigrants achieve the status (and gather the moral courage) to claim the social benefits and provisions that their work entitles them to.

As Burawoy further argues that, apart from economic imbalances and mechanisms of structural and legal coercion, the reproduction of a system of migrant labor is highly dependent on ideological discourses. This is how, he claims, the functions of migrant labor are misrepresented and the legitimacy of bifurcated labor markets is sustained. Bulgarian migration to the UK is driven and sustained by the myth of Europeanness and free movement as part of a collective imaginary of Western supremacy that has long persisted in the minds of Eastern Europeans. And despite the observed disillusionment of the Eastern European working class with Western futures embedded in the EU membership, the analysis presented above clearly shows that, more than ever, life in the "imaginary West" holds the promise of fulfilling all that the postsocialist

28 Ibid.

transformation never delivered. Migration has become the main individual strategy for positioning one's future in the center of the global hierarchy of places and statuses—the "West." The construction and uncritical reproduction of the imaginary 'West' is embedded in a self-perpetuating 'cycle of self-deception'²⁹ that my respondents became caught up in but which they at the same time performatively sustained. This cycle starts with the pre-migratory formation of expectations of life in the UK which refer to illusionary constructions deeply rooted in a centuries-old hegemonic narrative of Western supremacy that still dominate political and cultural discourses in the eastern periphery. The nourishing of such utopian visions continues to be sustained in media and political discourses in Bulgaria, although these are not the only sources of information that Bulgarian prospective migrants draw on. Paradoxically, it is the embellished stories of return migrants and the material demonstration of what is often only an 'invented' success that feeds into the creation of an unrealistic image of the UK. However, it should be acknowledged that in many cases when encountering a more realistic depiction of Western realities, aspiring migrants often refute it as ill-intentioned and false. Instead of critically examining their ideas of a place they had never been to before, they chose to sustain their idealized version of the West as a place where a normal life was possible – even if dependent on hard and honest labour - and thus fled themselves into their own self-deception. Moreover, many of my respondents sustained the 'imaginary West' as a place offering a normal life even after experiencing the drastic contrast between the 'imagined' and the harsh reality full force. The zeal and perseverance

29 See Mahler, 'American Dreaming: Immigrant Life on the Margins.'

with which they kept believing in a normality whose arrival they postponed may indeed be interpreted as a delusional, naïve and utopian hubris. However, I would argue instead that it is rather to be understood as a performative reproduction of the predominant social ideology, something akin to what Sloterdijk calls the 'enlightened false consciousness'³⁰. According to this idea, people subscribe to ideological claims and reproduce them in the material practice of migration even when their illusionary nature and distance from reality is recognised (implicitly or explicitly). People thus 'still behave as if they believe'³¹. The reasons behind such a performative reproduction lie in the function of the imaginary of alleviating subjective anxieties and providing a sense of meaning and collective purpose. This is illustrated in the statement of Elena, a forty-one-year-old mother working as a nanny in London, who was hoping to be able to bring over her son and husband soon: Naturally everyone hopes that the future holds better opportunities and prosperity, this is what keeps me going; otherwise I would immediately put a halter around my neck.

Concluding remarks

On a warm summer evening in August 2015 during my UK fieldwork I sat down with Petya (forty-five) and her recently arrived son Ivan (twenty) in their tiny kitchen in North London. After spending months in preparation for her son's arrival Petya was deeply frustrated with the fact that while she had managed to find him a legal job with her own British employer, she was still desperately struggling to 'sort out' his documents. In an ardent diatribe, she put forward a spot-on summary of the experience of perhaps most of the Bulgarian migrants in the UK:

The English don't want us here; they don't need any more migrants. [...] They have turned our lives into a nightmare. It is just a closed circle; they are throwing you around like a rag from one place to the next. You have no rights, only obligations. If they complain all the time that the state has to support the immigrants, then they have to give immigrants a chance to work and support themselves. They have no adequate policy on dealing with large-scale immigration. Instead, what they do is to create chaos and panic and at the same time and sustain the black economy. This is why Bulgarians fall into a pit when they come here. They start to work illegally for Bulgarian companies which pay them peanuts and often force them to live on the streets. Some have no choice but to get involved in criminal activities. This is a good scheme to chase people away but some have no alternative in Bulgaria. so they choose to stay here even under these conditions and then they sink even deeper. On paper Bulgarians and Romanians have unrestricted working rights but in reality they don't. They are playing with peoples' lives, because you have to apply for some number which you are not even sure you are ever going to get and they can even refuse

30 Peter Sloterdijk, 'Cynicism-The Twilight of False Consciousness', *New German Critique*, no. 33 (1984): 190-206.

31 Slavoj Žižek, 1997. *The Plague of Fantasies*, (London: Verso Books, 1997), 106.

to give it to you without any further explanation because you are no one and they don't owe you one.

Petya's interpretation basically applies Burawoy's migrant labour reproduction model to the case of the UK. Through the use of the equal rights ideology, the country attracts migrants only to effectively bar them from entry into the legal labour market. Positioned on a precarious threshold of society, many find themselves in a much worse off situation than the one they left behind.

In the final remarks of her condemnation of migrant suffering, Petya foresaw what neither of the three of us could have imagined back in that pleasant summer evening, but which a year later has become an increasingly realistic scenario:

I sometimes think that the visa system that 'we had before, you know how Bulgarians could only work with a visa in the UK was much better. [Me: Come on, do you seriously mean this?] Well, see, in the UK the message is 'come, you have the right to work'. People fool themselves and believe they can really come and work. When they realise that in practice it is not so straightforward, it is already too late – they have quit their jobs and sink into debt. The visa system is just much more honest and fair. If they [the British] don't want to be in the EU, they better go out. Then they will bring back the visa system and maybe it will be better, at least people would know what to expect.

Petya's vision was not shared by most of the Bulgarian would-be and current migrants whose lives I continue to follow after the referendum of June 2016. For those who regularly remit money, who hope to raise some capital to invest back home, and for the many for whom circular migration is the only available

survival strategy, the drastic 'collapse' of the British pound was a harsh shock. In a desperate rush to 'legalize' their status and 'enroot' themselves better in the British society some of my respondents redirected all their disposable income into 'purchasing' documents through the services of Bulgarian 'accountants'. Others took on consumer credits with the hope that as long as they keep on repaying them they would not be expelled from the country. While pondering their ill fate and the possibility of facing more restrictions just two years after being granted their 'free mover' status, Bulgarians' increased vulnerability made them even less militant and more susceptible to exploitation and discrimination.

The academic discussions surrounding the recent British referendum on EU membership have tried to emphasise the economic, cultural, and demographic benefits of EU migration. Such efforts, however well-intended, still feed into an instrumentalist policy perspective that constructs migrants' lives as only important in terms of their added value for the local economy. Migration scholars, and particularly those working on East European migration, should try to shift the debate away from the prevalent macroeconomic and biopolitical framing and focus on the realities emerging out of migrants' own narratives. Only by giving necessary attention to migrants' own interpretations will current scholarship be able to overcome objectifying and 'othering' discourses that dichotomize migrants into low-skilled and voluntary temporary 'money makers' and educated high-achievers. Patterns of international migration can only then be conceptualized as not only dependent on subjective variables but as functional for an international system of capital accumulation.

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For further developments of this article and the special issue, please see: Manolova, P. (2016). Brexit and the Production of 'Illegal' EU Migrants: Bulgarians on their Way to the 'West', FocaalBlog, <http://www.focaalblog.com/2016/07/06/polina-manolova-brexit-and-the-production-of-illegal-eu-migrants-bulgarians-on-their-way-to-the-west/#sthash.0Mvoguxt.dpuf>.

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