

Looking Beyond the Public Discourses on Migration: Experiences of Bulgarians and Romanians in the UK



Bulgarian migrant on the way back home at the end of a working day, London, 2015 © Polina Manolova

The 1st of January 2017 marked the 10th anniversary of Bulgaria's and Romania's EU membership. In neither of the two countries was the event marked by celebrations but instead remained on the sidelines of popular and political interest, as people were most preoccupied with both countries' efforts to form new governments. The only sign of enthusiasm came from the EU Commission whose representatives congratulated Bulgaria and Romania for successfully advancing to the status of 'vital democracies'. Liberal international and local media also dwelled on the benefits that the two member states have reaped in the past decade. Stability, improved financial indicators and satisfied populations were amongst the commonly invoked positive achievements at the end of a decade of EU integration.

However, the situation on the ground looks

rather bleak: the benefits of EU membership have been distributed unequally, leaving ordinary people under the impression that a handful of politicians, elites and the mafia have been the only beneficiaries of generous EU funding. The past 10 years in both countries saw the continued de-nationalization of state assets, the closing down of industries and the implementation of drastic austerity policies that left more than a third of their populations at risk of poverty and social exclusion. The high social cost of these reforms has led to a collective disillusionment with a long transitional development towards a much desired 'Western' life for all. Recent polls confirm this conclusion with reports of growing rates of Euroscepticism in both Bulgaria and Romania, the two countries usually portrayed as the strongest supporters of the EU project.

The blame for the sluggish integration progress of the two poorest members of the EU has been construed in mutually opposing directions. The governments in Sofia and Bucharest continue to exploit the socialist legacy and corresponding inability of the majority of the population to transform their totalitarian habits and mentalities. As expressed in the words of the Bulgarian foreign minister: 'Ten years are not enough, fifteen years are not either. [...] prosperous, developed European peoples have been amassing democratic traditions and material prosperity for centuries. We cannot catch up with them and we cannot overcome the disgusting totalitarian legacy that has destroyed people's morality'. Meanwhile, the supposedly 'backwards' populations seem to direct their discontent with worsening living conditions towards corrupt politicians and dysfunctional national institutions and less so towards the imposition of EU regulations and the neoliberal restrictions on their countries.

One benefit of the EU accession, on which both working and newly-emerging middle classes agree, albeit for different reasons, is the unrestricted right to free movement. This newly-gained privilege, however, came with an important condition: Bulgarians and Romanians received restricted access to the labour markets of most EU member states, which, as in the case of the UK, directed workers towards the low-skilled sectors of a bifurcated labour market. The UK became one of the two most popular migration destinations (along with Germany) for Bulgarian and Romanian nationals, especially after the 2008 global economic crisis, which negatively impacted movements towards traditionally preferred migration destinations such as Italy, Spain, and Greece. The steady increase in the numbers of Bulgarians and Romanians coming to the UK has marked a new peak in the period

after January 2014, when the work restrictions for workers from both nations were lifted. The officially estimated 220 000 Romanians and 69 000 Bulgarians living in the UK at the end of 2015 represent 25% of total EU immigration to the UK, which itself has been on the rise since 2012.

In the public discourse in Britain, Bulgarians and Romanians have been commonly subsumed under the category of East European migrants. The institutional practices and media rhetoric to which they continue to be subjected negatively affect their perceived position in the host society. The imposition of 'transitional restrictions' on free movement for the maximum length of seven years can be seen as a reply to the panic produced by the unexpectedly high numbers of A8 workers (especially from Poland) who immigrated after 2004. The postponement of free movement for Bulgarian and Romanian workers was promoted with a political campaign presenting migrant workers both as a threat to the local economy and as potential 'benefit tourists', i.e. poor and morally-compromised individuals who try to capitalize on their right to free movement by abusing welfare support and social services in Western EU member states.

Such labels were widely used and reproduced in media narratives that added new nuances to already existing public fears by portraying migrants from the two countries as criminal, culturally inferior and as posing a general threat to British moral and social order. This racialized treatment of Bulgarian and Romanian migrants has led to the reproduction of structurally-embedded inequalities that confine migrants to particular professional positions, legal and cultural categories, all of which contribute to their subordinate social status. The stigmatization of Bulgarians

and Romanians and the corresponding construction of their identity as 'incomplete' Europeans limit their capacities for achieving social mobility or even minimal levels of security and living standards when compared to already more 'settled' East European migrant communities.

Academic studies, predominantly directed towards 'the first wave' of East European migrations (Poles in particular) had so far sidelined the dismal experiences of workers coming from Bulgaria and Romania. When existent, such scholarship has been most commonly informed by a policy agenda and geared towards a general description of the trends and dynamics in an effort to identify possibilities for steering and regulating migration movements. Both in its rhetoric and perspectives, such research has reproduced the value-laden and objectifying categories found in policy and public discourses. Especially in present pre-Brexit realities in which migrants are being used as bargaining chips in EU-exit talks and increased expressions of public animosity are seen by many as legitimate, academic analyses should refrain from the simplistic exploration of migration logics and give a voice to migrants' own concerns.

The contribution of the present special issue lies in its efforts to shift the focus towards migrants' actual experiences. The authors give Bulgarians and Romanians the central role of subjects able and deserving to speak for themselves in order to show how their experienced reality is affected by structural, economic and political barriers. Such an approach presents an alternative to the predominant research agendas - as migrants are not treated as 'flows' in need of regulation but as individuals trying to deal with the challenges of life in the contemporary capitalist economy. The following contributions reveal

realities of discrimination, institutional violence and exploitation that persist despite the granting of full working rights to Romanians and Bulgarians in 2014. Such dynamics of exclusion remain obscured in portrayals of migration in popular discourses where the two groups are unreflectively assumed as integrated into the UK labour market.

Mila Maeva starts off this issue with her analysis of the effects of British immigration policies and tabloid representations on Bulgarians' practices of settlement in UK society. The author's revision of the institutional restrictions imposed on Bulgarian and Romanian immigrants under the 'managed migration' agenda set out by the British government confirms previous findings on the historical racializing logic of policies that emphasise cultural, social and quasi-biological traits of migrant groups. The immigration restricting measures put in place have not led to a substantial curb on the number of newcomers, but they have had the effect of relegating migrants to the confines of precarious and undesirable segments of the British labour market. The cumulative effects of discriminatory policy and public discourse have provoked suffering and discontent among Bulgarian migrants whose unsupported political struggles for recognition, as Maeva concludes, bear out on their feelings of rejection by both home and host states.

Alexandra Bulat's article takes a logical further step by looking at how encounters of workplace and general everyday discriminatory attitudes have been experienced by Romanian migrants in several British localities. Instead of condemning stereotypical hegemonic representations of Romanians widely circulating in British

society, Bulat's informants tend to reproduce them by re-directing them towards those whom they see as 'low-class' Romanians and locals. By making use of class-tinted narratives for justifying discrimination as well-deserved by certain types of migrants, Romanians come up with a strategy through which they try to build on their own distinction vis-à-vis the rest of the Romanian community. What makes Bulat's contribution particularly salient is the fact that she allows for discussion of the less-explored and, as she proves, no less-stereotypical view back – or Romanians' own narratives and practices of discrimination which they direct not only towards Romanian 'others' but also British people.

Polina Manolova's paper shifts attention towards the invisible institutional mechanisms that continue to impact on Bulgarian migrants' long settlement aspirations in the UK. The early migration experiences of those longing for a new start in the UK are marked by their entanglement in a bureaucratic closed-circle which along with migrants' lack of language skills and limited understanding of local legislation often entraps them in the highly exploitative grey economic sector.

The de-facto 'illegality' of Bulgarian workers comes into contradiction with the rights stemming from their EU citizens status. As

a result of put in place informal institutional regulations, the dual structure of the British labour market and migrants' normalization of their subordinated social position, pre-migratory hopes for settlement and family reunification largely evade Bulgarians. Instead many are drawn into a circular labour mobility which is often the only way of alleviating financial burdens inflicted by migration itself. In the final article of this issue Iulius-Cezar Macarie provides an overarching theoretical reflection on the effects of the post-circadian capitalist economy on possibilities of solidarity formation amongst migrant night workers. His analysis of the transition from circadian to post-circadian capitalism gives an insight into the impact of proliferation of night-shift employment on migrants' subjectivities. The 21st century 'world-making' capitalism with its logic of short-term employment cycles, he claims, has led to unprecedented dynamics of destruction of migrant livelihoods. The grim conclusion that solidarity remains impossible to achieve amongst those treated as 'purely material objects commodified according to the current political economic interests' remains particularly salient to Bulgarian and Romanian migrant experiences in the UK.

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