

# 'Going to the West Is My Last Chance to Get a Normal Life': Bulgarian Would-Be Migrants' Imaginings of Life in the UK

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*Bulgarian migration to the UK has gradually increased since the country's EU accession and the removal of barriers to free movement of labour across the EU. The sustained popularity of the UK amongst those dreaming for a fresh start through migration, despite the hostility faced by Bulgarian immigrants, poses a paradox that cannot be explained with the 'push-pull' and cost-benefit calculation models prevailing in migration research. This article proposes a more balanced understanding of migration motivations on the basis of would-be migrants' own perceptions. Drawing on biographical interviews with self-ascribed 'ordinary people' with long-term plans for settling in the UK, I shed light on individuals' imaginings and expectations of life after migration. Firstly, I analyse the notion of 'survival' through which my informants articulated frustrations with their precarious financial situation, their inferior social and symbolic positioning within society and their inability to partake in forms of consumption and lifestyle that would allow them to experience a sense of social advancement. I then explore would-be migrants' imaginings of life in the UK (and 'the West') which depict an idealised 'normality' of life, in which they conveyed longings for security and predictability of life, social justice and working-class dignity and respectability. These insights into people's disappointment, desperation and disillusionment with a precarious present help us to understand the continuous construction of an 'imaginary West' as an ideal 'elsewhere', in the search of which migrants are ready to undergo hardship and stigmatisation. By engaging with the existing debates in migration studies and literature on Bulgarian migration, this article exposes the deficiencies of economic reductionism, which presents migration decision-making as a conscious, rational and calculative act and, instead, demonstrates that, very often, people are led by dreams and idealisations that are reflective of their emotions and life-worlds.*

*Keywords: migration motivations; imaginings; East-West migration; working-class; postsocialism*

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## Introduction

The global phenomenon of an increasing number of people moving from global ‘peripheries’ to ‘core’ countries in the North/West (Castles, de Haas and Miller 2014) is well-reflected in the large-scale post-1989 Bulgarian migration to Western Europe and North America. The end of 2012 marked a period of gradually increasing migration,<sup>1</sup> the direction of which, however, has shifted from the previously preferred Southern European migration destinations (such as Spain, Italy and Greece) towards the UK and Germany.<sup>2</sup> The lifting of the transitional labour-market restrictions for Bulgarian and Romanian citizens at the beginning of 2014 led to another relative upsurge in the number of newcomers to the UK, despite its intensity fully disproving the hysterical predictions circulating in the populist media and political discourses.<sup>3</sup> This change in migration patterns meant that, within a short period of time (from 2012 onwards), the UK has turned from being a country little known, remote and relatively unattractive to being one of the two most-preferred migration destinations for Bulgarian labour and educational migrants alike.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, in the past few years, in West European public discourse in general and in British discourse in particular, Bulgarian migrants have been constructed as ‘benefit tourists’ and ‘criminals’ – undesirable ‘others’ that present a threat to the established social order and the welfare provisions enjoyed by locals. Despite the status and rights formally gained through their European citizenship, structural violence and discrimination have continued to confine the majority of Bulgarian workers to exploitative jobs in the informal economy and to a precarious existence at the margins of British society (Manolova 2016, 2017a). Whilst the hardships faced by Bulgarians in ‘the West’ have received some attention in the Bulgarian and global media, as well as in the stories told by return migrants warning potential newcomers<sup>5</sup> – the number of Bulgarians who wish to embark on such journeys, settle, and make a fresh start in the UK, is not abating.<sup>6</sup> These recent trends point to a paradox of popularity despite hostility, exploitation and hardship – which cannot be properly explained through the economic reductionist approach dominating the field of migration studies.

This article aims to develop an understanding of migration that reflects migrants’ own perspectives. In order to reveal the meanings with which individuals imbue their migration projects, an inductive, ethnographic approach to data gathering and analysis is adopted. Individuals’ narratives of migration are approached through the imaginary as a conceptual tool that helps to analyse subjective motivations and expectations against the socio-economic, historical and political context in which they play out.

I utilise Alexey Yurchak’s (2006) concept of the ‘imaginary West’ in order to stress the intersection between subjective imaginations and wider imaginary constructs transpiring through the native notion of ‘the West’ (*Zapadat*) that my informants evoked in their pre-migration imaginings of life in the UK. By deconstructing the different aspects of the ‘imaginary West’ as they are subjectively appropriated by people in accordance with their socio-economic and symbolic position in Bulgarian society, I will demonstrate how a simplified economic logic is inadequate for fully understanding the subjective dimensions of the migration of a group of prospective Bulgarian migrants to the UK. Instead, I reveal how migration, understood as a ‘major event’ (Fielding 1992: 201) embedded within one’s biography, emerges as not only economic but also cultural process that is riddled with contradictory emotions, preoccupations, fears and aspirations.

I argue that engagement with the imaginary places and modes of existence, that to a great extent inform the migration aspirations of Bulgarians, enables us to conceive of migration as a strategy for accessing paths to social advancement which are unavailable at home. Instead of subscribing to a categorisation of migration as motivated either by economic or non-economic factors, I demonstrate the scope for complementarity between ideational and material perspectives that the focus on imaginings allows for. In this sense, rather than an effort to discard the intellectual contribution of economic models, this article tries to challenge its explanatory

monopoly by proposing a nuanced and complex account of migration motivations. As I will show, the ‘imaginary West’ is seen not only as a place where one can earn more money but also as a place offering a different mode of existence, where a ‘normal’ life, ‘dignified’ work and a sense of existential security are possible. The symbolic attraction of the ‘imaginary West’ further emerges in juxtaposition to the ‘abnormality’ of life in postsocialist Bulgaria, the disappointed ‘transitional’ hopes of my informants and the precluded possibilities they struggle with because of their marginal socio-economic and symbolic position. Furthermore, a focus on imaginary constructs and their subjective appropriations helps us to bridge the dichotomy between person-centred and macro-level explanations of migration models by demonstrating the entanglement between ‘individual biographies, trajectories and actions’ (Benson 2012: 1681) and wider socio-economic and cultural forces.

The article is based on interviews with prospective Bulgarian migrants taken from a larger dataset collected during a one-year period of ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2013 and 2014 in different localities in Bulgaria and the UK. During my initial exploration of the aspirations and expectations of prospective Bulgarian migrants with long-term settlement plans I encountered the frequent reproduction of well-established narratives of migration as a reaction to poverty and lacking economic opportunities; with time, however, a more nuanced and complex picture emerged that did not concur with economic modelling. Before engaging with my informants’ motivations for leaving the country and deconstructing their imaginings of ‘the West’ as a place offering some ‘normality’ of life, I begin by analysing the theoretical and methodological pitfalls which are characteristic of migration studies in general and Bulgarian migration research in particular. By drawing on the literature on the non-economic, ideational factors and particularly the role of imagination in migration decision-making, I put forward my argument that the reasons for migration can be better understood by inquiring into the meaning and intersubjective production of narratives of ‘economic’ migration. What follows is a brief overview of the methodological approach on which this project is based, the methods of data collection used and an insight into the demographic characteristics of my participants and their self-appointed class identity. I conclude by summarising the main findings and by demonstrating their theoretical and empirical significance in a context of an ever-growing global precarisation of migrants’ lives.

### **Challenging the hegemony of economic reductionism in explaining East–West migration**

The hegemonic paradigm of ‘push–pull’ economics that continues to inform the most influential theories of migration permeates disciplinary boundaries, reaching well beyond the field of neoclassical economics. Traditionally, migration has been conceptualised as a result of income differences between countries and has presupposed rational choice and economic maximisation as the main incentives guiding individual decision-making (see Borjas 1989). The uneven spatial distribution of labour and capital is said to leave some countries labour-scarce and capital-rich while, in others, the opposite ratio exists (Borjas 1989). By moving to regions where they can obtain higher remuneration for their labour, it was expected that migrants would eventually contribute to the equalisation of income inequalities and that population movements would come to a halt (see Harris and Todaro 1970). In this equation, individuals appear as rational decision-makers who decide to move after a careful cost–benefit assessment of the available regional and international economic opportunities. Such models have been harnessed to explain the motivation behind post-1989 Bulgarian and East European migration to the ‘Western world’. The devastating socio-economic effects of the rapid postsocialist market restructuring of the early 1990s have been identified as major ‘push’ factors of migration (Eade and Valkanova 2009; Guentcheva, Kabakchieva and Kolarski 2003; Kaneff and Pine 2011; Karamihova 2004; Maeva 2017). High unemployment and low incomes (Kovacheva 2014; Rangelova and Vladimirova 2004), the rolling back of

state services and diminished welfare support (Angelidou 2013; Deneva 2017), political instability (Karamihova 2004), impoverishment and indebtedness (Kovacheva 2014) have been put forward as macro-level determinants influencing migration motivations. On the 'pull' side, the more and better-paid employment opportunities and higher standard of living in Western countries, as well as the curtailing of border regimes and visa regulations, have all been proposed as factors attracting Bulgarians with short- and long-term aspirations for migration (Guentcheva *et al.* 2003). The overall picture that scholars have painted of migration as a strategy for economic survival has, to a great extent, been supported by surveys of migration attitudes and questionnaires for potential and current migrants who almost unanimously point out the search for better economic opportunities as the leading rationale for their undertakings (Bobeva 1994; Jekova 2006; Rangelova and Vladimirova 2004; Stanek 2009).<sup>7</sup>

While such scholarly engagements contribute by presenting a comprehensive outline of the structural predicaments and political regulations that propel and sustain the movement of labour power across national borders they tell us little about people's subjectivities and understandings of their migration projects. Moreover, research using mechanistic 'push-pull' models to analyse population movements falls short of explaining why migrants do not usually stem from those poorest sectors of the population that have undoubtedly been the most severely affected by market restructuring since 1989. The theoretical interpretations of such findings have fed into the scholarly production of normatively charged migrant categories which in Bulgarian context differentiate between the economic motivations of '*rabotnitsi*' (labourers), '*gastarbayteri*'<sup>8</sup> or '*gurbetchii*'<sup>9</sup> and the transnational mobilities of the 'highly skilled', 'intelligentsia' and 'new Bulgarians' (see Chavdarova 2006; Dichev 2008; Liakova 2008). Categorisations like these have uncritically endorsed the explanations of low-skilled Bulgarian migrants as that they had been 'chased out' by material poverty and attracted by a desire for increased earnings. The 'new type' of young, educated migrants (King 2002), on the other hand – those whose cultural predispositions and moral orientations supposedly position them in closer symbolic proximity to 'the West' – have been said to use migration in the enactment of their idealistic (as opposed to materialistic) desire to 'see the world', acquire new experiences and realise their potential (Liakova 2008; Stoilkova 2005). The production of such simplistic binaries is problematic for a number of reasons, one of them is the creation of a false division between economic and non-economic reasons on the basis of class distinctions between working-class people – presented as short-term migrants interested in quick money-making and, on the other hand, high-skilled middle class elites who are supposedly more suitable to be integrated in the international labour market and the cosmopolitan fabric of Western societies. By demonstrating the multifaceted claims conveyed in the emic notion of 'normality', through which my informants presented their hopes and expectations, I question the rigour of these binary categories.

Furthermore, researchers have been puzzled by the fact that many migrating Bulgarians leave behind relatively satisfactory standards of living and risk replacing prestigious and, in some cases, well-paid occupations, for low-skilled labour and life on the bottom layer of host societies (IOM 2001; Kabakchieva 2009; Karamihova 2004). Qualitative investigations that look beyond individual discursive scapes and offer in-depth engagement with practices and experiences have proven better suited to reveal the complexity and diversity of individual motivations for migration and have also managed to contextualise those in postsocialist economic, social and cultural realities (Kabakchieva 2009; Karamihova 2004; Maeva 2017; Stoilkova 2005). They demonstrate how migrants' motivations have been influenced by feelings of despair and disengagement with the socio-economic and political processes of the 'transition' (Maeva 2017; Stoilkova 2005), a sense of socio-economic deadlock and a lack of meaningful future perspectives (Angelidou 2013; Stoilkova 2005), as well as frustration with their devalued social status and desire to regain individual autonomy (Angelidou 2013; Kabakchieva 2009). Additionally, in her exploration of the trajectories of the first generation of post-1989 Bulgarian migrants in the US, Karamihova (2004) outlines a 'mythology of prosperity' which functions as

a guide for individuals' migration desires by sustaining often misleading ideas about the US as being a place offering an abundance of well-paid jobs, a high standard of living and material enrichment for all.

The reduction of migration to a rational cost–benefit calculation has been fervently criticised by human geographers and social anthropologists for it ignores the fact that people are also affective beings who entertain dreams and imaginings and that logic and rationality do not always and exclusively lead their decision-making. Fielding notes that, as a 'major event' (1992: 201), migration is always embedded in an individual's life stories and thus involves complex and often contradictory feelings, aspirations and personal attachments (see Graham 2000; Halfacree 2004; Halfacree and Boyle 1993). It is on this basis that the powerful role of collectively-shared imaginaries in determining why, where and when people move has been gradually gaining recognition in the work of scholars preoccupied with studying diverse types of human mobility – lifestyle migration, tourism, postcolonial migration, 'labour' and high-skilled mobility (see Belloni 2015; Benson 2012; Elliot 2012; Salazar 2011; Vigh 2009). Such studies have demonstrated the significance of expectations and aspirations in motivating migration decisions by revealing how the act of migration becomes a 'technology of imagination' (Vigh 2009: 105) through which people lay claim to a particular vision of a better and more fulfilling life. Salazar (2013), for instance, argues that people's determination to cross borders is connected to their ability to imagine other places and possible lives as being better than the ones currently experienced. It has been recognised that migrants often expect that, by settling in a particular 'elsewhere', they would be able to lead a life imagined as offering more fulfillment and meaning not only in terms of economic gain but also of general existential possibilities (see Benson 2012; Pajo 2007; Salazar 2013).

The exploration of the role of imagination in prompting and sustaining migration is usually attributed to the analytical framework proposed by Arjun Appadurai (1996). He explains the increased significance of imagination in social life as a result of the widespread use of electronic media in the last couple of decades. Imagination is understood as a social everyday practice in constant making, which reflects individuals' empowerment in bringing about change and forming solidarities. Contesting this 'empowering' role of the imagination in human life, Vigh (2009) demonstrates the process through which seductive collective imaginaries of a better life can also develop into a dystopic reality of migration which contradicts the initial visions of a 'promised land'. Taylor (2002), also preferring to speak of the social imaginary rather than imagination (referring to an individual quality) provides an explanation for its ambiguous workings by conceptualising it as a symbolic matrix that legitimises our practices and is reflected in our dispositions and actions. The imaginary therefore is collectively structured but also structures the collective (Taylor 2002). Of course, the role of the imaginary in informing individual action should not be overemphasised: people should not be seen as caught up in a rigid cognitive frame. As Gaonkar argues: '(...) one need not think of the social imaginary as a demiurge that sets itself to work behind the backs of the people. It can be reflexively interrogated and re-appropriated in a given context' (2002: 8).

This article is an effort to contribute to this existing but still rather faint interdisciplinary inquiry into the role of cultural imaginaries in influencing migration motivations.<sup>10</sup> It seeks to show how in-depth and sustained engagement with migrants' imaginings can yield a more nuanced picture of the contradictions and complexities that underlie the difficult choice between leaving and staying.

In order to provide this more complex and nuanced understanding of post-1989 Eastern European migration to the West – one that comes closer to individuals' own interpretations – we need to take into account not only processes of economic decline in the region but also the ideological shift that movement from state socialism to liberal democratic capitalism involved and, more specifically, the expectations and imaginings of a better future that this change gave rise to.

### Exploring the ‘imaginary West’ in Eastern Europe

The symbolic division of the world into communist East and capitalist West drawn by Cold War politics rested on an ideological confrontation between two different conceptions of modernity that left its mark on public perceptions and collective imaginations (Verdery 1996). In the official discourse and politics of socialist societies, ‘the West’ was constructed as an ultimate ideological enemy of the socialist order. However, certain aspects of ‘the West’ were regarded as positive, depending on the particular historical moment and context. The contradictory late Soviet policy towards Western cultural influence and commodities and the corresponding image of ‘the West’ in the popular imagination have been analysed by Alexey Yurchak (2006). He explains how one and the same cultural form – jazz, for instance – could be interpreted as a transmitter of bourgeois values and moral decay and as a symbol of internationalism and an expression of the creativity of the working classes at one and the same time (Yurchak 2006). Thus, the appropriation of Western cultural tastes, commodities and behaviours and the underlying desires and idealisations did not come into conflict with Soviet ideology but, in a certain way even strengthened it. According to Shiraev and Zubok (2000) the ‘choking hunger’ for Western modernity (with a specific focus on North America) in the socialist world throughout the 1980s was also a result of the ideological messages spread by American media outlets and their support for local dissidents’ anti-communist ideas. Pilkington, Omel’chenko, Flynn and Bildina (2002: 7) further assert how the restricted and biased information available to Soviet citizens contributed to the elevation of ‘the West’ to the symbol of a ‘normal (...) life’ and a civilisational standard.

With the collapse of state socialism, ‘the West’ turned from a utopian and geopolitically remote construct to an idealised benchmark defining the political, economic and cultural path of East European societies (Sampson 1998). According to Peshkopia (2010), people in postsocialist countries have fetishised Western capitalism in their attempts to approximate a utopian social order which is expected to ensure a happy and economically satisfying life for all. He recognises this mythologisation as resulting, firstly, from individuals’ desire to construct an ideological counterpart to the socialist order and, secondly, as rooted in the mystification of ‘the West’ following on from its demonisation and negation in official ideological discourse (Peshkopia 2010). He explains the mass support for capitalism and its political and normative order with postsocialist societies’ propensity for teleological thinking and way of relating to the future (*ibidem*). In this sense, while the Marxist conception of modernity became replaced by the Western capitalist one, the teleological understanding of the path towards modernity, development and progress remained the same.

In the Bulgarian case, as in that of other postsocialist countries in the region, the ‘imaginary West’ was the main trope around which the political project of the country’s democratic transformation revolved. The accession of Bulgaria to the European Union was seen as an important symbolic and material milestone in the transition towards ‘the West’ (Elchinova 2004; Ilieva 2010; Katsiakas 2011). ‘Catching up’ with Europe was seen as having the double function of bringing material prosperity and democratic values. At the same time, it was constructed as a continuation of the historical narratives of restoration of the ‘natural’ belonging of Bulgaria to the European family and an effort to free the country from its Ottoman legacy of backwardness and Orientalism. Thus, ‘the West’ regained its historical significance as a standard for political, economic and social development that required the dutiful adoption of European norms, ideas, policies and institutions. The harsh economic crisis, political instability and general sense of insecurity and deprivation that marked this ‘transition’ were usually framed in media and political discourse as the necessary price to pay for reaching capitalist prosperity (Katsiakas 2011).

The anthropological literature on postsocialist Eastern Europe has demonstrated the different ways in which people have attempted to appropriate ‘the West’ through practices of material and cultural consumption (Patino and Caldwell 2002; Rausing 2002), architecture and interior design (Fehérváry 2002; Hartman 2007), lifestyle

and cultural activities (Pilkington *et al.* 2002). In the Bulgarian context, the enchantment with fashion and accessories (Manrai, Lascu, Manrai and Babb 2001), the football craze and musical lyrics in Bulgaria in the 1990s (Buchanan 2002) and the appreciation of different lavish Western products (Creed 2002) were all interpreted as signs of Westernness and representations of desired but not always attainable cultural and symbolic capital.

Building on the above discussion of the nature of the imaginary and the specific function of ‘the West’ in postsocialist societies, I conceptualise the ‘imaginary West’ as a cultural schema that informs the way in which people make sense of their situation and the surrounding reality. Using the ‘imaginary West’ as a prism through which to study expectations and imaginings of life in the UK helps me to grasp the complex interplay between individual life-worlds, migration narratives and specific historic and material conditions. I understand the ‘imaginary West’ as a theoretical notion through which a more critical understanding of the emic concept of ‘the West’ and its characteristics can be advanced. I interpret ‘the West’ as denoting both the geographical region of Western Europe and a place offering possibilities for a more meaningful life and a better future. Thus, while I recognise the role of ‘the West’ as a utopian construct of collective longing, as it was mapped out in postsocialist scholarship, I have demonstrated how, by its careful deconstruction, we can see it as a repository of not only material longings but also of different moral concerns with questions of social organisation and the role and value of the individual in society.

## The study

The interview data on which this article is based are part of a larger, one-year, multi-sited ethnographic investigation (Marcus 1995) of Bulgarian would-be and current migrants in different localities in Bulgaria and the UK, conducted between 2013 and 2015. The article draws on biographical interviews and multiple informal conversations with 25 prospective migrants.<sup>11</sup>

The sample includes 15 males and 10 females, an imbalance that reflects the demographic gender characteristics of long-term Bulgarian migration in the period.<sup>12</sup> Five participants were in their mid- to late-20s, eight in their early- to mid-30s and 12 in their mid- to late-40s. Only two of the participants held university diplomas, five had specialised secondary-education diplomas and the remaining 18 had higher-education degrees. Four participants were self-employed in small family businesses, two self-defined as ‘voluntarily unemployed’ after the bankruptcy of their small-scale entrepreneurial projects, eight worked in state enterprises and institutions and the remaining eleven were employed in private companies in both low-skilled and skilled positions. Almost all of my informants relied on diverse informal activities and help from relatives to subsidise their monthly income.

Despite their diverse occupations and educational qualifications, all participants self-identified as ‘ordinary people’ (*obiknoveni hora*), a categorisation that denoted their perception that they lacked economic and social capital and had a diminished social status and restricted agency. Although the notion of ‘class’ was rarely explicitly referred to, the classification ‘ordinary’ was used to express a collective group belonging and was always constructed in opposition to those seen as ‘others’ – ‘those above’, ‘the rich’, ‘the big people’, ‘the educated’. This discursive process of drawing symbolic boundaries has been identified as a strategy for creating distance and building social identity and as an act of classification of others as similar to or different from oneself (Bourdieu 1984). The category of ‘ordinary people’ points to a class-based identification as it also alludes to the superimposed class categories of ‘ordinary people’ or ‘masses’ that were mobilised in pro-liberal narratives already in the early 1990s. They played a part in justifying the socio-economic and political misgivings of the market restructuring with the deficiencies of particular groups – workers, peasants, pensioners, the uneducated and minorities (see Buchowski 2006; Kideckel 2002; Lavergne 2010).

In this sense the definition of my informants as ‘working class’ refers not only to their income but also to the set of dispositions, beliefs, moralities, values and cultural practices on the basis of which they self-identify as ‘ordinary people’. I thus understand class as a lived category and a process in constant making (Thompson 1980) rather than a fixed, pre-existing social structure or professional and economic status. My aim is to provide insight into class as a subjective category by exploring how my informants’ perceptions of their class belonging relate to their lived experiences and, more importantly, to their motivations for migration and the imaginings they harbour about life in ‘the West’.

The wider study on which this article is based was focused on understanding what happens to the pre-migration expectations and aspirations of individuals once they begin their life in the UK. I decided that the best way to obtain such long-term insight is to engage with individuals with long-term plans for settling in the UK. At the time of my fieldwork, all informants were in the process of actively planning and organising their departures. As it was my intention to gain multiple perspectives, I adopted an ‘inclusive’ approach to participant sampling and recruited individuals of different backgrounds, ages, genders and occupations. The use of different recruitment channels and practices – including online forums, participant observation in a Bulgarian recruitment agency and snowballing initiated via family and friends’ networks – facilitated my encounters with a diverse group of participants with varying motivations, although it also served to introduce me to a disproportionate number of males and precluded access to so-called ‘highly mobile’ professionals (Amit 2007). The decision to base my fieldwork in Bulgaria’s two largest cities – Sofia and Plovdiv and their environs – was dictated by both strategic considerations and practical limitations. First of all, while I was interested in having a diverse set of informants coming from different urban and rural areas, I still needed to select a place that could serve as a ‘hub’ for my fieldwork. Secondly, scholars have noted that the profile and destinations of Bulgarian migrants are geographically determined and dependent on previously created networks (Guentcheva *et al.* 2003). The choice of these two cities allowed me to engage with a broad range of prospective migrants thanks to the high concentration of recruitment agencies there and their status as the most preferred destinations for internal migrants coming from different parts of the country. The practical reasons for my choice were related to the existing material resources, social networks and emotional support mechanisms in these two localities – all preconditions for a successful fieldwork experience.

In the next two sections, I present the diverse motivations that people shared with me and show how they imagined migration as a possible, and often the only, way to find new hope for a better, more dignified life.

### **‘Surviving’ in ‘post-transitional’ Bulgaria**

At the start of my fieldwork, my curiosity about people’s reasons for migration frequently provoked irritation and seemingly straightforward responses like: ‘We are sick of living with little’, ‘We don’t want to count our pennies any more’ or ‘For money, what do you think?’. Such evocations were often contained in a ‘survival’ narrative that emphasised material deprivation, an inability to cover monthly subsistence costs and difficulties in ensuring household reproduction. Forty-one-year-old Andrey (all names are pseudonyms), the father of a baby daughter and owner of a recently bankrupt small family business, told me the following in his efforts to explain his decision to leave for the UK:

*When you meet your friends here, do you ask them how they live? Everyone will tell you that things are going from bad to worse. Especially, after the crisis [the global economic crisis of 2008–2009] [pause] we are back at square one. People are stuck and vegetate, (...) it is just a brutal fight for survival. (...) I am sick of having to choose between paying my electricity bill, or fixing my car, let’s say, and buying medicine for my daughter. I know that the majority of those around me are also caught in the same dilemma. No one*



*migrates because of a good life (ot hubavo); it is always for money (za pari); if you have enough, your life changes and you live well.*

Similarly, Elisaveta (43), an assistant in an accountants' office in Sofia and mother of a teenage son, evoked the financial instability with which her family had been struggling since the start of the 'reforms' as key to her desire to find employment in the UK. She also pointed to the devastating effects of the global economic crisis, which resulted in a severe decline in the family's living standard.

*There is never enough money in Bulgaria, at least not for people like us – I mean 'ordinary folk'. People always say: 'In the capital it is different, there are plenty of well-paid jobs'. This is hardly the case, look at me; for years on end I have been struggling to find a good job. There are always problems – either the pay is low for the amount of work you are supposed to put in, or they promise you good pay at the beginning but then sack you when you ask for it.*

With time, it became clear that, by straightforwardly asking the question about people's migration motivations, one could not expect to prompt an engaged discussion. On the contrary, my inquiries often provoked annoyance and confusion. The majority of my informants seemed so convinced by the ubiquity of the economic truth about migration that they found it impossible to entertain any alternative explanation when reflecting on their own or even other people's projects. With the advancement of my fieldwork, my strategy for engagement with would-be migrants changed and, instead of inquiring about their migration motivations themselves, I became more interested in knowing more about their individual biographies. Interestingly, the sharing of personal stories provoked my informants to reflect on their present condition, in a way that went way beyond the economic narratives expressed in our initial meetings or even stood in almost paradoxical contradiction to them. In the course of my fieldwork, the same informants started claiming that they had 'nothing to complain about', had 'everything they needed', and that there was 'nothing more one could wish for'. When we were once discussing the hardship in which many Bulgarians live, Andrey and his wife, for example, told me the following:

**Andrey:** *After all, we have nothing to complain about, Polina. We have everything that we need: a spacious apartment, very well furnished as well, with all electric appliances, new furniture.*

**Katya:** *Even a washing machine.*

**Andrey:** *We have a car, we even have a holiday house in the mountain, it is not big or anything, but we can go there in the summer.*

**Katya:** *Plus, my parents live in a village, we always have fresh fruits and vegetables, (...) they help us a lot, really.*

Similar assessments were put forward by young informants who had managed to achieve relative financial independence from an early age – even those living with their parents and relying on their support. Yavor (21) who, every time we met, expressed his conviction that young people were pushed to leave the country because they needed money, recognised the comfortable lifestyle that he and his girlfriend enjoyed thanks to their parents.

*Each of us has a house in the village where we live. At the moment, she [his girlfriend] rents out her house and we live in mine. We don't pay any bills; my father covers those. He has always supported me financially; after all, he is a father and it is only normal that he does so. He will even buy my plane ticket for the UK and will give me enough cash to last me a couple of months.*

Yavor enjoyed his job at a petrol station, where he received a 'good' salary and was treated well by his boss and colleagues. His girlfriend had recently been offered an office job for a salary which was 'very decent' for Bulgarian standards, but she declined it as she was determined to 'try her luck' in the UK. This is how Yavor explained their choice to forgo their current material securities in the quest for an uncertain but, in their eyes, promising future in 'the West':

*Staying here is just pointless, even if you have a good salary and all. I mean, one will always have enough to live on but never enough to afford more things. [Me: What kind of things?] Well, like going out with friends to pubs and bars, for example; we don't do this as much as we would like to at the moment. Or, let's say, going to the mall for shopping or watching a movie. We rarely do it.*

When talking about 'economic deprivation' and being in a 'survival mode', others also referred to not having enough disposable income for what was commonly referred to as 'extra' spending. The common complaint was that a great proportion of a person's salary was spent on covering constantly rising monthly bills and basic foodstuffs, leaving almost no disposable income for any 'luxury expenditure'. Holidays, trips abroad, branded clothing and accessories, new mobile phones and electronic gadgets, and engagement in different leisure activities were all perceived as status symbols that my informants simply could not afford. The urge to engage in such consumption practices was driven by a constant evaluation of their social position in relation to that of 'others' within the group, as well as those 'below' and 'above'. As Nina (35), a cleaner in a state company, explained: 'You think you have all you need but then you see that someone's got something newer and better, a nicer vacuum cleaner, let's say, and you think to yourself – "I should get one as well"'.

Many of the prospective migrants I spoke to relied on a combination of subsistence wages, informal sources of income and/or 'kinfare' support (Deneva 2017) to provide for their families and cover bank loans and consumer credits. For them the frequently evoked theme of 'survival' reflected a constant state of economic insecurity and the struggle to sustain precarious livelihoods. In many cases, however, economic improvement was not necessarily equated to a struggle for ensuring elementary physical wellbeing but related to an aspiration for the enactment of a particular lifestyle. In this sense, while perceiving themselves as 'flawed' consumers' (Bauman 2005: 3) within the local community, many of my respondents saw migration as a strategy for overcoming their socio-economic and symbolic marginality in a society that, according to them, celebrated the 'success' of an ambiguous politico-economic elite and prioritised the needs of a 'Western-minded' 'intellectual' class. For many of those caught in what Vigh (2009) calls the 'schism between the culturally expected and the socially possible' (*ibidem*: 96), the satisfaction of consumer aspirations is possible only through the accumulation of considerable debts, which puts additional pressure on household finances. In this sense, for my informants migration held the promise for ensuring their participation in consumption culture which they perceived as the expression of relative affluence and good life. In present Bulgarian realities of life, the only way of satisfying such consumer aspirations was the accumulation of considerable debts which brought about financial pressure. Therefore, I argue that the economic dimension contained in the notion of 'survival' should be interpreted not so much as an 'absolute' but as a 'relative' deprivation emerging out of the need to respond to material pressures imposed by a desired lifestyle and an effort to 'keep up with the Joneses'. In the literature dedicated to East–West migration the interpretation of the 'economic' dimension

behind the migration desire has rarely been tied to future migrants' drive to gain symbolic capital and improve their standing in the local community (or society in general). One exception is Erind Pajo's (2007) investigation of the reasons behind the 1990s mass migration of Albanians to Greece. He claims that the widely stated economic rationale for migration after the end of state socialism actually stood for a desire to achieve social advancement, the routes to which were largely unavailable in (post)socialist Albania. His informants, too, expressed the hope that the possession of particular objects (especially electronic goods of Western origin) would enable the achievement of a much-desired social distinction. In the Bulgarian case, the interpretation of migration as a quest for upward social mobility has been explored in relation to highly educated young Bulgarians (representatives of the socialist 'mass intelligentsia') (Stoilkova 2005) and highly skilled workers with prestigious professions (Kabakchieva 2009) who had experienced status devaluation as a result of the post-1989 transformation of economic and value regimes and who were unable to see any legitimate way for re-dressing their declining symbolic and economic capital.

In this light, the findings of this article offer an important contribution to the literature explaining Bulgarian and East European migration motivations by demonstrating that, for the poorly qualified and less-educated Bulgarian workers and struggling or bankrupted small-business owners, migration can also be guided by a desire to achieve social advancement. It has been demonstrated that, in many cases, working-class individuals have been the most greatly affected by postsocialist transformations in ways that led not only to their material impoverishment but also to their social and symbolic marginalisation (Kideckel 2004). My informants' sense of the diminished possibilities for upward social mobility was expressed in narratives of 'survival' and was related to the lack of social and cultural capital through which opportunities for personal and professional development could become available. My attention was constantly drawn to a publicly circulating mantra reproduced by would-be migrants as an explanation of their disadvantaged positioning: 'If you do not have connections you are no-one'. Many believed that success in Bulgarian society depended on having a 'good back' (*dobar grab*).<sup>13</sup> Another determinant of the inferior positioning of 'ordinary' people in socio-economic and symbolic terms was their devalued or insufficient cultural capital. Many of my middle-aged informants were affected by the well-documented devaluation of various forms of labour and the pertaining forms of cultural capital and professional experience since the end of socialism (see Kaneff and Pine 2011). Access to well-paid and symbolically valued positions in attractive sectors like IT, finance, telecommunication and transport depended to a large extent on a person's knowledge of foreign languages, Western cultures, computer skills and relevant educational credentials that my informants did not possess.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, 'ordinary people's references to 'survival', understood as a precarious existence, were also related to perceptions of their symbolically subordinate position in Bulgarian society. Already the commonly used self-identification 'ordinary' denoted a sense of marginality in comparison to 'oligarchs', 'businessmen' and 'the rich' in general, as well as to 'intellectual elites' and the 'middle classes'. David Kideckel (2004) claims that the subalternisation of workers and other suffering groups was not only a result of the dramatic socio-economic effects of post-1989 structural reforms but the simultaneously occurring symbolic manipulation of the dominant classes expressed in the dominant argument that attributes the failure of the 'transition' to the backwards mentality and market-inadequacy of the workers. With their social and symbolic capital devalued, 'the victims of the economic downturn' suffered not only 'high unemployment and underemployment, plummeting standards of living (...), and alienation of new standards of consumption' but [also] 'denigration or condescension from the wider society' (Kideckel 2004: 41).

The construction of migration as a strategy for overcoming socio-economic and symbolic stagnation and achieving social mobility should be mapped out against the general social critique of and disillusionment with the failed promises of the 'transitional' path of development of the country. For their socio-economic and symbolic entrapment, my informants blamed the inadequate or lacking movement of the Bulgarian state, which

they considered to be ‘stuck’ in a ‘post-transitional’ temporality. Many of my informants considered the ‘transition’ (*prehodat*) to be a grand scheme orchestrated by a small ‘old’ dressed as a ‘new’ oligarchic elite, one which fabricated mass promises while plundering state resources and people’s dignity. Others claimed that ‘transition’ has become a permanent feature of Bulgarian society and its end could only come with the demise of the country itself. Dimitar (40), a recently bankrupted furniture maker, believed that the ‘transition’ was occurring in a chaotic, non-linear manner:

*We take one step forward and two backwards, you know, like in the tango. There are periods in which things are going well, like from 2007 to 2009 – one could see a positive change, there was hope amongst us, the common folk. Then the crisis came, and we were again back where we started (...) we don’t have the solid [state] structures and the mechanisms in place to withstand ever minor fluctuations. Honestly, I have lost hope that, in my lifetime, I will see a change for good; our children will suffer even more than us – not even they will live to see any change.*

There was an overwhelming sense of confusion and despair in the narratives of my informants, who struggled to make sense of a socio-economic and political context which presented them with constant change while, at the same time, ensured that things always remained the same (see Kofti 2016). It became clear that, for those who believed that they had no other option left than migration, the promises produced at the beginning of the ‘change’ remained unsatisfied. This feeling was well-expressed in the painful conclusion drawn by Maria (47), the former owner of a small cosmetics studio:

*I feel cheated, I have to admit it, I don’t mean to complain or anything but they [the politicians] lied to us. I was one of those marching in the squares and jubilantly welcoming the ‘change’ in the 1990s, (...) we truly believed that this was a new beginning. It turned out that nothing really changed – maybe now we have a greater choice of goods and services, but we have no money to afford them. The only good thing about the transition is the opportunity to travel abroad.*

The determination with which those I spoke to were ready to embark on their journeys to the UK came from the exhaustion of their hopes for a better future in Bulgaria. The fear, desperation and disillusionment that I captured in this particular ethnographic moment is said to have been present ever since the start of the market changes (Creed 2011), but what made it particularly poignant for my informants was the realisation that ‘Things would never get better’. The financial crisis of 2008–2009, the effects of which my informants were still struggling with during my fieldwork, presented a fundamental turning point and a ‘last push’, prompting many to take the decision to settle in the UK.

With its focus on migrants’ imaginings of life in the UK, the next section demonstrates that, the lost faith in Bulgaria’s advancement was paralleled by an increasing hope that migration to ‘the West’ would enable the fulfilment of the hopes and dreams that the postsocialist ‘transition’ never delivered.

### **‘The West’ as ‘normality’**

The struggle for ‘survival’, which marked my informants’ lives in Bulgaria and which were, in many respects, perceived to be ‘abnormal’, was consistently juxtaposed with a desired state of ‘normal life’ (*normalen zhivot*). ‘Normality’, understood as a normative category of what life ‘should be like’, denoted my informants’ expectations and imaginations of what life in ‘the West’ (and the UK in particular) had to offer. ‘Normality’ was, in this sense, a desired state of being, always constructed in contrast to current life predicaments (Jansen 2015).

In what follows, I explore several aspects of the ‘normality’ that my informants projected into their new ‘Western’ futures – stability and predictability, social justice and working-class dignity.

In contrast to the despair and helplessness experienced in Bulgaria, my informants imagined their anticipated ‘normal’ lives in the UK as first and foremost offering a sense of security and basic trust in the way life works and reassurance that tomorrow will be more or less similar to today and yesterday. Such expectations were commonly related to ideas about strong regulations, discipline, rule of law and a strong state. Elisaveta, who was about to start an au-pair job in London, often praised the glorious historical past of the UK and the successful promotion of its own interests against EU regulations. As a contrast, she highlighted Bulgaria’s insignificance in international affairs and the country’s historical position of slavery-dependence:

*Britain has conquered the whole world, they have history, they have stable rulers, they have it all! It is an imperial state; half of the world are their relatives. Bulgarians, however, are a sick tribe in their genesis, we have been enslaved for such a long time, and we don’t get along with any of our neighbours.*

This victorious historical legacy was, in her eyes, the result of a deeply entrenched social order and rule of law, which she found to be virtually absent in Bulgaria, where life was chaotic and disorganised:

*Their [the British] life has not changed for centuries. They keep on following the same old model. Here it is the opposite, we live in constant change, and we have experienced several different regimes of government [stroeve] for a very short time. This isn’t normal by any means; people get confused and don’t know what to do anymore – they don’t have a model to follow.*

The socio-political order and stability evoked by my informants was expected to ensure a better ‘grasp’ of their present and ability to plan and positively imagine the future. This temporal dimension of order and stability was metaphorically expressed in the notion of a ‘boring life’ (*skuchen zhivot*). Such a life, which people imagined to be the norm in ‘the West’, was characterised by ordinariness and non-eventfulness, in which each passing day made life manageable and predictable, thus allowing a greater sense of control and security. Anguel (26), for example, a security guard in a big company, admitted how, when trying to keep himself awake during quiet and eventless nightshifts, he would sometimes imagine what the life of a young man of his age would look like in the UK:

*He goes to work in the morning, most likely to an office. Spends eight hours working, I mean disciplined work, no slacking off. Then he goes home to his family. Of course, he has a nice house and a car. Everyone has dinner in front of the telly. They are laughing while telling each other about how their day went. It all repeats again on the next day. Quite an ordinary life, when you think about it, almost boring [laughing].*

Tanya (36), a mother of two and an office assistant, elaborated further on this by describing the day-to-day routine that she expected for her life in the UK, which she admitted was not much different from what she was presently used to: ‘I don’t imagine something miraculous and grand to happen when I go there. I see myself going to work, coming back home, cooking for my family, and going to bed. This same thing repeats itself at least five, six days a week’. I asked her to explain what made this envisioned monotonous routine in the UK so desirable, when the same everyday in Bulgaria evoked a much-loathed sense of stagnation. She replied:

*The difference is that, in the UK, all of this has a purpose; you know why you are doing it, so to speak. Your daily efforts, no matter how mundane, add up and you know that you are building something; (...) you are*

*building a secure future, for yourself and, more importantly, for your children. In Bulgaria, the everyday strain is futile – you fight and fight just to fail in the end. Here, it all melts away into thin air!*

In this sense, the imagined boredom that ‘ordinary people’ seemed to long for was related to sameness and repetition – signs of the predictability and security of life. In contrast, the monotony of life in Bulgaria was characterised by pointlessness and despair, augmenting the feeling of a lack of collective and personal progression.

Another important feature of ‘normality’ with which ‘ordinary people’ associated life in the UK (and ‘the West’ in general) was related to ideas about social justice. Many of my informants believed that, by going to the UK, they would be able to achieve an average degree of economic independence and ensure a ‘decent’ life for themselves and their families. Such expectations were not based on purely materialistic logics, however, but on perceptions of the morally just principles on which the social and economic organisation of Western society was based. Underlying this assumption was the belief that, in the UK, even those at the bottom of the social ladder were able to ‘have enough’. Expectations of just rewards, the affordability of life and an effective welfare state were other aspects of the social justice which my informants expected to experience. They all become evident in Nina’s contemplation of life in Western Europe and in the UK in particular:

*In those countries, one is awarded for one’s hard labour, not for one’s connections [vrazki]. If you are honest and hard-working, you don’t need to worry about anything – you will always have enough. The state cares about its people by giving decent salaries and good welfare support – say, if you have a child or if you fall sick and cannot work for some time, you will receive enough to live well. Those who live off welfare support in the UK are much better off than those like myself in Bulgaria who work from dawn to dusk and still need to fear for their bread. In one word: if you work, you don’t need to worry, there will always be enough for you.*

According to my informants, the general affordability of life and the strong British pound were key factors ensuring a comfortable living for everyone. They always made sure to mention that their choice of the UK as a migration destination was partly determined by the fact that the UK was one of the few Western countries unaffected by the global economic crisis. For them, this attested to the almost unique strength of the British economy and was a measure of the high degree of Westernness which the country had to offer. The belief in the lower cost of living in the UK in comparison to Bulgaria was widespread among my informants and was even evoked in ‘expert’ media commentaries and popular discourse. This was deemed true not only in terms of the differences in living standards between the two countries but also when comparing basic consumer prices in relation to wages. Many shared the impression that the cost of some essential products in Bulgaria not only approximated Western prices but in many cases literally surpassed them. This was often assumed to be the case with the price of fuel, foodstuffs, clothing and utility bills. Blagovest (52), a worker in the state railways, found proof of this in the fact that many of his friends who worked in the UK were quick to take their families with them after finding employment, because the cost of living in the UK was supposedly the same or even lower than in Bulgaria:

*They always fill up the suitcases before coming here. They bring to their family and friends everything you can think of – clothes, shoes, phones, computers, even toiletries and food. They told me that food is so cheap that they can afford to go to the supermarket and fill the basket with foods they could never afford in Bulgaria – shrimps, caviar, all sorts of cheese – and all of this for, let’s say for 20–30 pounds; here, for 20–30 leva<sup>15</sup> one cannot buy more than the basics – bread, milk, salad and oil.*

While economic security and principles of social justice were seen to be basic features of Western society as my informants imagined it, these were also understood as achievements which had to be earned and well-deserved. According to their reasoning, it was their hard and dedicated labour that would turn them into respectable citizens of British society and would entitle them to the expected benefits of ‘normality’ – stability and predictability, just remuneration and general material well-being. Imaginings of ‘normality’ also expressed working-class aspirations for obtaining dignity in labour, meaning a fair wage, stable employment conditions, job security and, not least, a sense of respectability. The assessment of labour relations in moral terms was particularly important for my informants, given the humiliating treatment they received from employers, colleagues and society in general in Bulgaria and in light of the marginal status of their occupations.

This was illustrated in the way Nikolay (34), who was about to leave his job as a nurse in the Bulgarian state medical sector for the position of a carer in a British residential home, considered his new job to be more prestigious and dignified. This evaluation was not only related to the much higher monthly remuneration he was offered, but to the respect and recognition he expected to obtain. After his Skype interview he told me how impressed he was with the attitude of his British employer:

*(...) he was so nice to me, all the time trying to put me at ease and super polite, right? But wait, what really struck me was that he was really interested in knowing more about me. What do you make of all these questions – ‘What are your hobbies?’, ‘How do you plan to relax after work?’, ‘Do you like going out with friends?’. (...) He said it himself – the job is psychologically and physically challenging and one needs to regularly unwind and re-charge one’s batteries.*

The interview confirmed what Nikolay had already heard from his colleagues working in Germany, Britain and other Western European countries – ‘They value workers there, not only medical workers, but all those who earn a living through honest labour’. Nikolay did not underestimate the huge emotional and physical strain that the new job would bring. In fact, it was precisely the exceptional challenge that the occupation presented that he believed would bring him high degrees of respectability and appreciation in the eyes of the locals. Thus, paradoxically, he ascribed higher value to the care worker job in England than to the nursing position he was currently occupying in Bulgaria.

My informants often praised the dignified position which was supposedly conferred on all workers in ‘the West’, while at the same time expecting to occupy a subordinate labour-market position by virtue of their nationality. Would-be migrants recognised that the pay they would receive would be below the ‘normal’ payment enjoyed by native workers. They were also aware that they were more likely to engage in backbreaking and demeaning jobs shunned by the locals that they would have to perform in a highly hostile environment. Such expectations did not, however, come into conflict with visions of social justice and working-class respectability because they were seen as temporary arrangements that all newcomers had to go through. By proving one’s loyalty, determination and strong work ethic, a migrant would earn the recognition of the locals and progress to a more respectable and well-paid position, they thought.

The three main themes of ‘ordinary people’s’ conceptualisations of normality are also pertinent to some of the recent theoretical discussions on the emic meanings of ‘normality’ in the context of Eastern Europe and East–West migration motivation. In his investigation of yearnings for ‘normal lives’ in a post-Yugoslav apartment complex in Sarajevo, Stef Jansen (2015) analyses the relation between ‘normality’ and temporal horizons of ‘suspended modernity’ – his equivalent of the notion of ‘post-transitional’ time that I discussed in the previous section. Similar to the findings presented here, Jansen (2015) discovered that the disillusionment with

modernist promises of collective political hope do not result in a substantial re-organisation of people's temporal orientation. Instead, it is in the sustained longing for 'normal lives' – desired despite their impossibility – that Jansen discovered temporal preoccupations with trajectories of 'forward movement'.

Secondly, the most important aspects of 'normality' highlighted by my informants – security, predictability, social justice and dignified labour – stood in direct opposition to their unsatisfactory present. Thus, 'normality' can be understood as a normative category which stands in contrast to current life predicaments. In this respect, 'normality' does not reveal as much about actual realities in the UK (or in 'the West') as it presents a contrast to the currently experienced 'abnormality' and frustration with the failed 'transition' in Bulgaria. Previous studies focusing on explaining 'normality' in an Eastern European context similarly position the notion at the intersection between the existent 'is' and the desired 'ought', in which 'normality' emerges as a normative standard and future expectation (Greenberg 2011; Hartman 2007; Rabikowska 2010; Rausing 2002). In this sense, the UK as the ultimate embodiment of the West for my informants should not be interpreted so much as a result of some pre-existing historical interconnections and significance, but as the function of a utopian construct with shifting geographical coordinates. In other words, the observed attraction of the UK for Bulgarian would-be migrants was conditioned by practical as well as ideational considerations, the most important of which were the relative familiarity with the English language, the high value the British pound and the existing social networks. It is thus safe to assume that a change in the political and socio-economic parameters that make the UK a possible and promising destination, as well as, the disillusionment with its inability to meet pre-conceived expectations of normality can re-project 'normality' in other 'more advanced', 'better organised', and 'more open' locales in the imagined global order (see Manolova 2017b).

Thirdly, academic engagements with the construction of 'normality' as an aspirational state towards which migrants strive have emphasised the entanglement of emotional and material considerations which imbue the concept with simultaneous longings for economic well-being and personal development (Lulle and King 2015; Stella, Flynn and Gawlewicz 2017). The findings of this article add another dimension to understandings of normality by demonstrating the fundamental normative questions of social organisation and the role and value of the individual in society mapped out in prospective migrants' narratives. In this sense, the material expectations which were clearly present in expectations of a 'normal' life should not be interpreted as a narrowly economic rationale but should be seen as pertaining to the wider existential concerns that the notion of 'normality' clearly outlined – a predictable and secure existence, the just redistribution of material and social resources in society, dignity and respect.

Finally, my findings substantiate arguments about the inextricable relation between normality and 'the West' in the postsocialist social imaginary. 'The West' has been presupposed as a mainstay of the much-longed for 'normality' at the heart of the 'transitional' project. According to Korte (2010: n.p.), 'For many East Europeans Western Europe became synonymous with 'normality'.

In the above analysis, I have demonstrated how the emic notion of 'the West', which was frequently evoked by my informants in relation to migration expectations and aspirations, denotes both a specific geographical location – Western Europe (the UK in particular) and an imaginary place offering possibilities for a better ('normal') life. The fact that my informants, none of whom had ever travelled to Western Europe, were able to produce remarkably detailed and homogenous depictions of how life functions there demonstrates how their subjective imaginings are informed by widely circulating cultural constructs – 'global imaginaries' – which 'change the way in which people collectively envision the world and their own positionalities and mobilities within it' (Salazar 2011: 577). The notion of the 'imaginary West' (Yurchak 2006) through which the imaginary can be interpreted as a social rather than an individual quality helps to understand 'the West' as a benchmark for modernisation, progress and civilisation, playing a key role in the formation of Bulgarian national identity and collective consciousness. The reproduction of this idealised cultural construct has been



constantly carried out in historical narratives, political projects, media representations and public discourses. Recognising the significance of migrants' imaginaries in informing the individual motivations behind migration helps to understand migration as a project that is not necessarily guided by rational considerations and quantitative calculations. I have illustrated that individuals' considerations prior to migration are often guided by much more complex preoccupations than the simple desire to earn more money. On the one hand, they reflect a reaction to the devastating effects of the socio-economic and political processes of the past 25 years and the overwhelming disillusionment they brought and, on the other, the struggle to achieve social advancement and a sense of 'normality'.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, I have aimed to unpack the puzzle as to why a growing number of Bulgarians choose to leave for the UK despite the widely noted discriminatory policies, negative public perceptions and dismal working conditions that many newcomers endure. It is agreeable to understand migration movements as a response to global socio-economic inequalities and processes in which individuals are 'pushed' by negative factors such as unemployment or a low income, or 'pulled' by the prospect of better living standards elsewhere. Even migrants themselves often readily employ such economic narratives as common sense and socially acceptable justifications. I have, however, argued for the need to develop a more nuanced understanding of migration, which accounts for the interplay between economic and non-economic factors and which better reflects contradictory and multi-layered motivations. To enable such an understanding, I have focused on the significance of prospective migrants' imaginings about the UK and 'the West' more generally for the construction of a desirable post-migration reality.

In the narratives of a group of self-ascribed 'ordinary people' with plans for long-term settlement in the UK, migration emerged as the only available strategy for leaving behind an unsatisfactory present marked by despair, disillusionment and constant 'struggle for survival'. I have demonstrated how such common articulations of 'survival' denote severe economic decline and, when inquired into in more depth, disappointment with blocked pathways to social advancement. The inability of would-be migrants to partake in certain socially desirable consumption and lifestyle patterns impinged upon their feelings of self-worth and sharpened their sensitivity towards the asymmetries between themselves and those standing above them in society – 'the rich', 'the educated' and 'the successful'. Their lack of easily convertible forms of social and cultural capital (connections to powerholders, skills and qualifications – e.g. foreign language and IT skills) that were seen as prerequisites for obtaining lucrative employment augmented these 'ordinary people's' feelings of socio-economic and symbolic marginalisation. At the same time, I have explained their feelings of stagnation and disillusionment with the future through their perception of the Bulgarian state as placed in a 'post-transitional' temporality, where further progress in social and economic development seems unlikely if not impossible. It is this suspended hope for collective movement forward that turned migration into an individualised strategy through which my informants tried to realise their aspirations for upward social mobility.

In the second part of the article I have presented my informants' imaginings of life in the UK and 'the West' in general and thus demonstrated how, when discussing plans for leaving the country, future migrants very often point not only to the unsatisfactory experiences of life they want to leave behind but to positive imaginings of existing alternatives available in distant places. Thus, they juxtaposed Bulgaria which, in their eyes, was marked by despair, stagnation and dwindling opportunities, to the prosperity and progress available in a place like the UK. This ability to imagine a drastically different reality was their main impetus for migration (cf. Benson 2012; Salazar 2013). It was through the notion of 'normality' that has been in high circulation in

postsocialist societies that my informants articulated their expectations for a better life. Perceptions of ‘normality’ encompassed different ideational and material concerns – i) a sense of stability and order that makes life predictable and controllable; ii) a basic level of social and moral justice, which implies a dignified life for every individual regardless of their identity, belonging or connections; and iii) a dignified status of labour, especially for workers of the classic professions who, in contrast to the predatory exploitation in the ‘wild’ Bulgarian capitalism, were imagined to receive appropriate salaries that allowed them to make a living and have a respected position within society. I have demonstrated how the emic notion of ‘normality’ foregrounds a normative perspective as it always represents a desired but unattainable state of being that denotes existential concerns with the nature of society and the position of the individual within it. I have taken my informants’ ability to produce a homogenous positive vision of the West as a place offering a ‘normality’ of life as an indication of the way in which subjective and class imaginations are influenced by powerful ‘global imaginaries’ (Salazar 2011: 577) which create idealisations which defy rationality and factual knowledge.

This article shows how prospective migrants’ imaginings and understandings do not always fit into a rational actor framework and how the economic component which is undoubtedly present in working-class migration is lived out and conceptualised in a way that is very different from dominant economic theories. Directions for further research that can contribute to unpacking the puzzle of why an increasing number of people from global peripheries migrate in advanced industrial countries should focus on revealing migrants’ realities in their countries of choice. How can we explain the fact that, in many cases, even when migrants’ dreams crumble in the face of deepening social inequalities and insecurity, many are still able to sustain hope for a better future? We need to look empirically at whether and how migration actually makes economic sense given the substantial investment that such a move requires and the lower-than-average income that migrants are able to generate.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See National Statistical Institute: [https://infostat.nsi.bg/infostat/pages/reports/result.jsf?x\\_2=72](https://infostat.nsi.bg/infostat/pages/reports/result.jsf?x_2=72) (accessed : 12 March 2017); Eurostat: <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=tps00177&plugin=1> (accessed : 12 March 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Note that the increased interest in Germany is not to be taken as a new migration trend; the country has been a ‘classic’ destination for Bulgarians ever since the beginning of the post-1989 intense out-migration. Bobeva (2017), Maeva (2017) and Kovacheva (2014) report on the increased migration rates towards Germany and the UK.

<sup>3</sup> There exists no precise estimation of the number of Bulgarian newcomers to the UK. The Office for National Statistics in the UK reports a threefold increase in the number of National Insurance Number (NINo) applications at the end of 2014. This figure should not be taken as an exact estimate of the number of newly arrived migrants as it also includes applications from existing migrants and does not account for undocumented workers. This indication of an increased presence of Bulgarian short- and long-term migrants in the UK is substantiated by my own fieldwork observations from the end of 2012 to 2015 in London and Birmingham. Estimates by the Annual Population Survey of the Bulgarian-born population in the UK demonstrate a 30 per cent increase in the number of Bulgarian residents from 2014 to 2016. Online: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/datasets/populationoftheunitedkingdombycountryofbirthandnationality> (accessed: 21 February 2018).

<sup>4</sup> See Maeva (2017). Data from the Bulgarian National Statistical Institute from 2014/2015 have demonstrated that the UK was the most-favoured educational destination for Bulgarian students (cited in Bobeva 2017).

<sup>5</sup> On the proliferation of TV shows and programmes (after 2007) depicting the life of Bulgarian immigrants in the EU and warning of possible pitfalls, see Balabanova and Balch (2010) and Kabakchieva (2009).

<sup>6</sup> National Statistical Institute. While it is too early to predict the effect of a possible Brexit on migrants' attitudes, a provisional estimation shows an increase in A2 arrivals to the UK in the year following the Brexit referendum: see <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/datasets/migrationstatisticsquarterlyreportprovisionallongterminternationalmigrationtimestimates> (accessed: 21 February 2018). This estimate is based on a survey of international passengers which only provides an indicative measure of migration flows.

<sup>7</sup> Scholars of Bulgarian migration have regularly relied on studies of potential migration because of the lack of comprehensive research on migration motivations (Guentcheva *et al.* 2003).

<sup>8</sup> From the German term *Gastarbeiter* (guestworker), which is usually used to denote temporary migrant workers who arrived in West Germany in the 1950s and 1960s.

<sup>9</sup> Stemming from *gurbet* – a traditional form of seasonal and temporary labour mobility in the Balkans.

<sup>10</sup> Such explorations are missing from East–West migration research, with the exception of Nicola Mai's (2001) study of Albanian migrants to Italy in the early 1990s and their articulations of utopian images of life in the West.

<sup>11</sup> The majority of participants were interviewed on multiple occasions with interviews/conversations lasting between one and five hours.

<sup>12</sup> [https://infostat.nsi.bg/infostat/pages/reports/result.jsf?x\\_2=120](https://infostat.nsi.bg/infostat/pages/reports/result.jsf?x_2=120) (accessed: 21 February 2018).

<sup>13</sup> A 'back' of some sort was seen as vital for the successful completion of all sorts of activities – seeking medical treatment, finding a place in a kindergarten, paying taxes or buying a car. 'Good back' mostly referred to informal connections to economic and political powerholders who could provide access to well-paid employment or lucrative business opportunities.

<sup>14</sup> Because of the dismal pay they offered and their exploitative nature, many small-scale business occupations and different forms of formal employment were perceived as unattractive. Voluntary withdrawal from the labour market was a common strategy that emerged from my informants' unwillingness to take on jobs offering inadequate payment and low prestige. Instead, many preferred to engage in informal entrepreneurial occupations which provided more autonomy and flexibility despite not offering any legal and social protections. Others, turned to state employment which despite its low pay, ensured some security, a better disposal of a person's time and long leaves of absence (used for temporary labour mobility).

<sup>15</sup> At the time of my fieldwork (2013–2014) 1 GBP equaled 2.45 BGN (commonly referred to as 'lev(a)' in Bulgarian).

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No conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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