YOUTH MIGRATION AND LIFE COURSE TRANSITIONS: COMPARING THE IMPACT OF WOMEN’S MOBILITY ACROSS GENERATIONS IN BULGARIA

Migracije mladih i tranzicije u okviru životnog toka: Poređenje uticaja mobilnosti žena različitih generacija u Bugarskoj

ABSTRACT: Migration abroad has become a significant part of the life experiences of a growing number of Bulgarian youths, since the regime change in 1989. In this paper we explore the effect of migration on the life transitions of two generations of young Bulgarians – the ‘Transition’ generation of those who had their formative years in the 1990s during the country’s transition from state socialism to a market economy and the ‘Accession’ generation of those who grew up after the country joined the EU in 2007 in a somewhat better economic situation. Taking into consideration the impact of the social context in the sending country in two different historical periods (before and after 2007) and in the receiving countries we focus on the differences of the transition paths of lower and higher skilled female migrants within the two migrant generations. The paper draws on a data base of 42 qualitative interviews with Bulgarian migrants living in EU countries that were conducted in 2017 and an in-depth analysis of the life trajectories of four women belonging to the two migrant generations. Our findings suggest that facing different structural constraints in their countries of departure and reception, young people employ diverse strategies of settling down, achieving success and attaining happiness. In the process they transform their social ties and national identities.

KEY WORDS: migration, young women, youth transitions, Bulgaria, Europe

APSTRAKT: Migracije u inostranstvo postaju deo životnog iskustva sve većeg broja mladih u Bugarskoj nakon promene režima 1989. godine. U radu se bavimo proučavanjem efekta migracija na životne tranzicije dve generacije mladih u
After the fall of the ‘Iron Curtain’ and the removal of the legal barriers to leave their home country, a growing number of young Bulgarian men and women opted for study and work abroad. Mobility out and back in the country became a part of their experiences even before the dropping out of the visa controls in the West of Europe in 2000 and the country’s accession to the EU in 2007 while the last restrictions on the free movement of labour in some member states were dropped only in 2014. In the 1990s there was a high emigration flow from Bulgaria, which researchers linked to the economic difficulties in the first decade of transition from the centrally planned to a market economy characterized by privatization and closure of many state-owned enterprises, and a steep rise of unemployment. This first emigration wave used mostly informal channels of migration and their integration in the receiving labor market was mainly in the form of illegal work. The key sectors incorporating migrants in the West were hospitality, cleaning, construction and trade (OSI, 2010). After 2000 the out-migration started to decline and became mostly temporary in comparison with the previous stage when many young people left the country for good (Atoyan et al, 2016). The composition diversified increasing the shares of skilled migrants, women and students who sought undergraduate and post-graduate degrees in Western universities (Minchev et al, 2012). The economic crisis of 2008 did not lead to the expected mass return of emigrants back to Bulgaria but rather further slowed down the emigration flow (Krasteva, 2014).

Young people are significant actors in the process not only through the sheer numbers involved but also because they often act as trendsetters in mobility flows. Our interest in this paper is focused on the intersection between youth and migration studies which has started to attract a great deal of research interest (Cairns, 2017; King, 2018). Migration can speed up youth transitions, open new opportunities or fragment their capacities and lead to social exclusion.
We examine the differences in the life transitions and personal strategies of young people, women in particular, who had migrated from Bulgaria to other European countries before 2007 – the year when the country joined the EU – and those who left after 2007. How has the legal act of Bulgaria’s accession to the Union changed the ways young women narrate their migration decisions, their pre-mobility aspirations, channels used and strategies for job search and social integration? How has this differing migration experience affected their life course transitions? And finally, how do social inequalities in terms of gender, education and skill levels play out in youth transitions inside the two migrant generations?

We answer these questions drawing upon a comparative research study of labour migration in Europe funded by the Horizon 2020 Program. One of its research strands includes in-depth interviews, conducted in 2017, with migrants from Bulgaria and Romania as countries traditionally sending migrants and from Italy and Spain that have recently become both sending and receiving countries. Out of this much larger qualitative data base we selected the narratives of Bulgarian migrants who had emigrated from the country in their youth. We defined those who migrated before 2007 as the ‘Transition’ generation and those who did so after 2007 as the ‘Accession’ generation. To fully understand their life strategies and the challenges they met we present in greater detail the journeys of two women belonging to the Transition generation and two women from the Accession generation. We selected them because of several similarities in their trajectories: first, of all because they did the move to a foreign country at the same age – around 24; then because of their gender as there was a clear rise in female migration from Bulgaria after 1989; and third, because they moved to the UK and Germany – two of the most popular destination countries for Bulgarian migrants in the developed European ‘West’ (Mitev et al, 2019). Another criterion for the case selection was the skill level of those female labour migrants and we divided them equally between high skill and low skill. This selection allows us to compare their experiences in the sending and receiving context and how they make sense of their life transitions and identity development. Analyzing the similarities and differences in their trajectories, we draw conclusions about the interplay between agency and structure between and within the two migrant generations.

Analytical framework

This article brings together the broad perspectives of youth research and migration studies both of which are multidisciplinary (Furlong, 2013; Triandafyllidou, 2016; Robertson et al, 2018). The intersection between migration and youth transitions is a fruitful field allowing to capture the interplay of the processes of becoming and ‘unbecoming’ (King, 2018) and their contextual and relational fluidity.

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Our approach builds upon the understanding of migration as situated in a particular social time and place and influenced by a wide range of individual, institutional and contextual factors (Triandafyllidou, 2016). Rather than measuring broad population flows, we look upon the lived experiences of mobility – the individual actions to overcome specific structural challenges, mobilize available resources, render meaning to their individual choices and thus change the societies of departure and reception. While many studies based on large-scale survey data have examined the profiles of mobile Europeans and the influence of class, gender, education, family situation on migration (Arslan et al., 2014; Triandafyllidou and Gropas, 2014; Cummings, 2015), the multi-layered nature of the individual decision-making is best captured by qualitative methods. In this we differ from the neoclassical economic approaches which rely on the assumption of migrants’ rational response to structural conditions. Migration decisions are always affected by a wide array of factors both in the sending and the receiving contexts which cannot be fully understood by a narrow push-and-pull economic model (EC, 2000; Chiswick, 2008). Hence, we aim to include in the analysis the cultural values and processes of meaning making and identity development of the mobile individuals. At the same time, our approach is different from some of those applied in ethnographic studies of migrant communities, which focus on mechanisms for cultural transmission but ignore the impact of the economic and political context of the increasingly interrelated European societies (Fitzgerald, 2006; Maeva and Zahova, 2013).

A very important analytical focus is on the spatio-temporal dynamism of the process of mobility. Migration is not a single journey but involves several transitions: negotiating with family and friends, preparing the journey, adapting to the new society and its regulations of labor and housing markets, forming new friendship and community networks, transforming feelings of belonging and citizenship.

In a similar lane, within the framework of youth studies the transition to autonomy is understood not as a single act but as a dynamic process (Schoon and Silbereisen, 2009); a set of interrelated movements and changes in education, employment, family, housing, leisure styles which are embedded in particular social and historical contexts. This approach to youth transitions draws upon the contextualist life course perspective (Elder, 2003; Kohli, 2007) and its interest in the movements of individuals ‘through institutions and social structures, and it is embedded in relationships that constrain and support behavior – both the individual life course and a person’s developmental trajectory are interconnected with the lives and development of others’ (Elder, 1998, p 5). The timing of the transitions is examined in relation to the historical period in which the individual life is lived and under the impact of different layers of context such as the macro economic and political developments, the meso changes in regional and local educational and labor market institutions and the immediate milieu of the individuals – their relations with family members, friends and neighbors. Youth research has long established the global trends towards prolonging, de-standardization and individualization of youth pathways to adulthood (Wallace and Kovacheva, 1998; Roberts, 2009). For some researchers this creates a new
youth condition where the young take charge of their own life course and build ‘choice biographies’ (Du Bois Reymond, 1998; Dwyer and Wyn, 2001) while others stress the inequalities of resources which place structural limits to the freedom of youth choices (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997, Walther, 2006). What is however generally accepted is that young people are increasingly required to make individual decisions against old and new risks and their personal agency is becoming more important for their life trajectories.

The life course approach in qualitative studies is often combined with a biographical analysis starting from the assumption that individuals actively construct their own biography (Heinz, 2009) making more or less informed choices, attributing personal meanings to their actions and rendering their own understanding of the sequence of events in their life course. Social institutions such as school, family or welfare confront young people with the expectations to fulfil specific tasks (Kohli, 2007). Instead of accepting the normative assumptions of what it means to be young and adult in modern societies, the biographical aspect of the life course approach prompts researchers to examine the subjective construction of a life-story which links one’s personal past, present and future in terms of individual meaning and continuity. The focus shifts to the subjective constructions of meaning, re-interpretation, modification, and transformation of the personal trajectory (Rosenthal, 2004). Such an approach has rarely been applied in previous studies (Kley, 2011; Wingens et al, 2011; Petroff, 2016) and was mostly based on quantitative studies and not focused on youth.

Our inquiry into the impact of migration on the life course transitions of young Bulgarian migrants draws from the life course perspective which helps to capture the dynamics of youth transitions, setting them within the wider picture of individual lives, and thus avoiding a static presentation of the comparison between origin-to-destination points (Vogt, 2018). Applying a life-course approach to the migration experiences of young migrants relates individual lives to their structural and institutional settings while also considering migrants’ individual agency and the process of meaning making of major life decisions. The paper examines migration as a contextualised process of mobility and considers the specific structures of two types of context – those in the country of departure and the country of reception. An appropriate way to acknowledge the link between biography and history is to study intergenerational changes in migrants’ experiences. The intergenerational approach in sociological research (Nilsen et al, 2012; Nilsen and Brannen, 2014) provides the opportunity for a better understanding of youth transitions in the contexts of particular times and places. The analysis of youth transitions during migration is thus enriched not only with the examination of two socio-cultural contexts but also of temporal specifics. In the case of Bulgarian migrants after the collapse of the Berlin Wall this means to compare the experiences of two cohorts: the first one who experienced the radical political and economic change in their teens and left the country in the 1990s and those who experienced the abolishment of the visa regulations and the country’s accession to the European Union in their teens and went abroad after 2007. We wanted to look at the differences in motivations and strategies of those two generations. At the same time, we took into consideration
the internal differentiation within the cohorts according to one major type of resources – their education and qualification level. We also acknowledged the gender specific challenges in meeting the conflicting demands of various institutions regulating youth transitions.

Data and methods

In order to explore the life strategies of young Bulgarian migrants as embedded in the changing social contexts of both sending and receiving countries, we used the rich qualitative dataset created in the comparative research project GEMM. It included 236 interviews-in-depth with experts from recruiting agencies, prospective migrants and first-generation migrants within the EU. The selection of the countries: two Eastern European – Bulgaria and Romania, two Southern European – Italy and Spain, and two North European – Germany and the UK provided a significant variation in terms of historical and contemporary developments, legal regulations and welfare provisions, dominant ideologies and labour market trends. The core group of the ‘actual’ migrants were defined as those who had lived for at least two years in the host country and were carefully selected taking into consideration gender, qualifications and occupational sector. The interviewed migrants were equally divided between men and women. One third of migrants were lower-skilled and working in the sectors of construction, domestic care and transport; two thirds were highly-skilled in the sectors of finance, ICT and health. We aimed at maximum diversity for the rest of the individual characteristics of the interviewees such as age, family status, housing situation and years of migration experience. An important standpoint for the study was the timing of the migratory move – both in terms of social time (e.g. whether the move happened before or after migrants’ home country joined the EU or before and after the 2008 economic crisis) and in terms of biographical time (whether migration occurred in the youth life stage, before or after forming a family, as a first or repeated international mobility experience).

The interviews of the Bulgarian team were conducted in the first 5 months of 2017 by researchers trained in qualitative methodology. We were fully aware that an interview is a social interaction and its success largely depends on the attention that interviewers invest in the relationship. Much consideration was devoted to the ethics of our research project and each team ensured an ethical approval from a relevant organization before the start of the fieldwork. Actual migrants were approached by contacting public institutions such as Embassies, schools and churches, by advertising the project on social network sites, through professional and political associations, by joining online groups on Facebook or LinkedIn and through personal contacts. The interviews lasted between one and two hours, and were held at a place chosen by the interviewees themselves: offices and other workplaces, cafes and restaurants, fitness clubs and art galleries. Most interviewees wished to have their stories told and justified their choices at length. All interviews were audio recorded and fully transcribed and the transcripts were read several times by the researchers to produce open codes...
and related categories. In the analysis we made a careful distinction between the trajectories of events as described by the interviewees and the meanings attached to them. We also took into consideration that the actual migrants were giving a retrospective evaluation of their motivation and often their reasoning was influenced by their experiences following migration. Similarly, we were aware that some questions (for instance regarding discrimination) could receive ‘socially acceptable’ or ‘prestigious’ answers which could further be nuanced in the process of substantiating them with concrete examples and experiences. The analytical frames used by the research team aimed at capturing the main points of the similarity and difference (Ragin, 1987) in migratory experiences as shaped by different national contexts and mediated by gender, education and skill levels.

Out of the 42 interviews with Bulgarian migrants 21 interviewees had emigrated before 2007 and the same number had left the country after that. A slight majority – 25 cases – had done the move in their youth – before they turned 30. Out of this group we selected to portray in more detail four women all of whom had migrated around the age of 24. The cases are equally divided between belonging to the Transition generation and to the Accession generation and between lower skilled and higher skilled. In what follows we present their life trajectories in more detail in order to identify patterns of linearity and non-linearity in their life transitions and differences by education and skill level. We focus on their motivations, channels of migration, job search strategies, types of social ties that they mobilised, and identity development. The four cases were selected to highlight the main findings of the analysis of the whole data set concerning the interplay between the structural features of the changing contexts and women’s own agency in mobilising different resources that were available to them. The research analysis (Kovacheva et al, 2018) found out that the classic economic motivation was more common among older and lower skilled migrants, while the young migrants more often narrated reasons for migration that could be defined as belonging to the ‘personal development’ motivation type such as higher career aspirations and new cultural experiences and adventures. Gender was a significant factor shaping migration experiences – we found similar aspirations for work and better life among male and female labour migrants but in some cases intolerance to non-traditional sexual orientation in Bulgaria acted as motivation for migration; as well as in the country of arrival women migrants faced some hidden gender discrimination at the workplace and many reported greater gender differences in work-life balance once children came.

Youth transitions of the Transition Generation

The young people who left Bulgaria before the EU accession were in their early forties at the time of the interview. They were born in the 1970s and experienced the regime change in the country when teenagers. They finished compulsory school at the age of 16 – that is in the 1990s, at the time of a rapid expansion of both state and private universities and a collapse of many industrial
enterprises, not compensated with a similar growth of the new private sector. The unemployment rate of the population as a whole and particularly of youth was rapidly growing and reached its peak of 40% in 1997 when the financial crisis resulted in the bankruptcy of 12 financial institutions. The period was marked by numerous street protests against the short-lived government coalitions and widespread corruption (Kovacheva, 1999). As a whole, their formative years coincided with the slow transition from a centrally planned economy to a free market and multi-party politics. 'The West', as a point of comparison in the life aspirations of many Bulgarians, was hardly reachable as the EU introduced visa restrictions for travel (Wallace and Kovacheva, 1998). We take the cases of Svetlomira and Borislava to consider how the institutional contexts of the country of departure and the country of destination shaped the trajectories of two young women with uneven resources to rely on.

Svetlomira – 'I live by the German rules'

The interviewee was born in 1975 in a poor family relying mostly on the mother's disability pension. She finished a general high school in a big Bulgarian city in 1993 and having no vocational skills, tried various jobs: saleswoman, cook, waitress, unskilled worker in an industrial factory. She attempted self-employment by opening up a babysitting service, but this project did not work – 'there were not many people in my town able to pay for childcare.' She left for Germany in 1999 at the age of 24 having been totally disappointed with how the things were developing in the country: 'everything was mixed up, some became rich overnight, others didn't have food on the table'. Economic hardship was one of the reasons she pointed at as a motivation for migration that fitted with the classic migration model. However, Svetlomira added some cultural and life-stage explanations demonstrating the complexity of the decision process.

I came with the thought I had to find a better place for living. I was young then, I was looking for happiness, I wanted more opportunities. Then many people around me were leaving for abroad, and I decided to try myself... I knew about Germany only from the history lessons and TV that there everything was very well arranged, that it was the most developed country in Europe. In Bulgaria it was believed that German cars and German machinery were the best.

Like many other Bulgarian migrants at the time, Svetlomira did not make long preparations before the move and emigrated without any pre-arranged work. She had heard that anyone ready to work hard would succeed in Germany and the language was not a problem since she could work with co-nationals. Her adaptation to the new milieu was supported by informal networks – 'an acquaintance of an acquaintance' who met her at the bus station and also helped her find her first job and housing, "without them I would have had to sleep on the benches for months on end.' Since Bulgarians did not have the right to work in Germany in 1999, she started illegally as a dishwasher in a Turkish café sharing the working hours with another woman. At the time of the interview she had...
lived in Germany for 16 years and had changed 9 jobs. Now she has a part-time employment contract as a cleaner but works extra hours unofficially as well as she helps Bulgarian immigrants who do not know the German language (in which she is already fluent) to prepare documents and contact German institutions.

Despite the limited resources at her disposal, Svetlomira has managed to achieve a degree of social integration with which she is very pleased. She lives in a small rental flat with her partner – a Bulgarian from the Turkish ethnic minority who works in construction. She has established new social contacts, mostly with other migrants thanks to whom she learnt speaking many languages: Turkish, Russian, and Serbian. The interviewee’s narrative demonstrates rather ambiguous feelings of belonging. She claims to still feel Bulgarian but is not interested in the life in Bulgaria and does not plan to ever return there. For all the time she has lived in Germany, she has traveled to her country of origin two or three times. She is proud to have managed to establish a life for herself in the new country. What she likes most in the new context is the efficient working of the legal system, ‘knowing the rules’ and ‘living by the German rules’ figure prominently in her interview. She does not have German citizenship and considers that she does not need it as an EU citizen. Most strongly her identity stems out of the multi-ethnic migrant community in Germany. As a whole Svetlomira considers that emigration has opened up better prospects for her.

**Borislava—‘Can’t understand people proud of being born in a particular location’**

A year young than Svetlomira, Borislava comes a privileged middle-class family living in Sofia. She received a BA in Bulgarian Philology in 1999 and easily found a well-paid job in the growing advertising sector in the country. Nevertheless, similar to Svetlomira, she soon became disappointed with the ‘direction’ of country’s development and gave a mixture of economic, political and ‘contagion’ reasons:

The 1990s I spent at the university, I was very enthusiastic, joined ecological groups, protests... Then I was working in a well-paid job as a copywriter in an advertising agency. But soon everything became very commercial. None of my acquaintances could not buy what I advertised... Then I went to an NGO, I was the coordinator of a very big European project, I travelled a lot in Europe... I saw that in other countries things were much easier while everything was very difficult in Bulgaria despite the efforts one makes... At one point I said to myself that something was wrong in the country, that I have no more strength to fight. Furthermore, everyone was leaving abroad...

The young woman decided that she should emigrate and with her partner, an IT specialist, decided to look for opportunities in English speaking countries since English was the only foreign language they knew. He applied for a job in an American company, but when the plan failed, he managed to get a 5-year contract with a German company which assured him that knowledge of German
was not necessary. Borislava took a one-month course in German and left at the age of 24 with the intention to go back home after 5 years. Despite some preparation (unlike Svetlomira’s experience), Borislava was not well-informed about Germany’s policy regulations and hoped that she would easily find a job with her university diploma. She was surprised to be told that her status as an accompanying family member did not allow her to work.

After the first disappointment, the young woman decided to invest in further education and took a university course in German and then won a 3-year PhD scholarship in Slavic languages. With her German degree she searched for jobs through ads and interviews. After a short experience with a consultancy company, she became self-employed and now works as a trainer in adult education. She proudly described her last project – training for the employees of the Labor Office to work with refugees and clients with different cultural backgrounds. Her current job satisfies her, because she has the autonomy to distribute her working tasks during the day and reconcile it with the care of her two very young children. Her narrative contains a long explanation about how in Bulgaria there is higher gender equality in the family as both genders work full time while in Germany most mothers work part-time and often look upon her as not fully devoted to her children placed in a full-day kindergarten.

Borislava has a much wider network of contacts than Svetlomira: ‘95% of the colleagues are pure Germans, plus Bulgarians and all kinds of Europeans’. She did not rely on informal contacts for the migration move or for the early adaptation unlike the low qualified Bulgarian migrants in Germany but experienced discriminatory treatment when looking for housing – ‘in this field Germans have the advantage’. She has both German and Bulgarian citizenship. She does not feel so close to Bulgaria any longer and visits the country occasionally for holidays at the ski and seaside resorts. In the beginning she experienced a ‘culinary identity crisis’ finding out that all Bulgarian dishes were considered Greek or Turkish. At present however besides ‘Balkan’, she feels mostly ‘a citizen of the world’. In the account of her life Borislavahighlights that she has managed to develop cosmopolitan and intercultural skills as a result of her migration experience. She is critical about the very notion of national identity. She says she can be proud of something that she has written or a project well done and does not understand those who are proud of ‘being born in a geographical location’.

Youth transitions of the Accession Generation

Youth from the second migrant generation were born in the late 1980s or early 1990s – around the time of the fall of the Iron Curtain. For them the market economy was ‘the normality’ and they had no personal memories of the communist regime. Wage differentials with the West were still significant and youth unemployment was stubbornly high but the living standards were improving and there were good career prospects in the sectors attracting foreign investment such as the ICT and finance (Mitev and Kovacheva, 2014). The formative experiences of this generation were linked to the country’s preparation for and then accession
to the EU to which they attributed a high symbolic value. While the employment restrictions for Bulgarian citizens were not immediately abolished in all ‘older’ EU members, yet travel was easier without the need of a visa and educational diplomas were more easily recognised in the EU member-states.

**Ana – ‘We work, we get money, nothing to worry about’**

Ana is a domestic worker in London. She was born in a large city in Bulgaria in 1989 to a working-class family. She finished a vocational school in 2007 and for the next five years was in and out of work as a waitress dissatisfied with the long hours and low pay. In the summer of 2012, she and a friend went to Cyprus where her aunt was working in a hotel. The odd jobs they did in a café and a fast food restaurant were Ana’s first experience with work abroad which proved to be very enticing. In the same year she and her boyfriend decided to move to England. For Ana, then 23 years of age, the reason was self-evident: ‘to search for work, better living conditions, better future’. She did not elaborate on her motivation in the beginning but in the course of the interview, in retrospect, explained:

Well, I can’t say anything good for Bulgaria... Our country is very nice, but just the people ... are sosullen, so nervous with the life there... it’s a very difficult life there... I am very calm now – we work, we get money, nothing to worry about.

Ana found her job before departure through a neighbor who had a business company in England. She signed her work contract before leaving Bulgaria. Initially she started as a house cleaner and gradually grew up to a supervisor. Ana shares her belief with the interviewer: “Anybody who wants to work can find a job in London”. She likes that there are “rules for everything and people stick to them.” The only difficulties in her initial adaptation which Ana listed were linked to finding housing. ‘You have to have an enormous sum of money to pre-pay for the rent, otherwise you take a loan from a friend and before you know, you need to take a loan from another friend to pay the first’. Upon arrival she and her boyfriend lived in a friend’s flat and then moved to a larger flat which they shared with another family. When she got pregnant, they moved again to live in a single flat.

She left for London with very little knowledge of English but improved her skills in the following years. Social ties are important for her wellbeing now as they were in the beginning. Most of her friends are Bulgarians living in London and she is a member of many Bulgarian groups on Facebook and other websites providing information for jobs, accommodation, child and health care. She also keeps contacts with friends and relatives in Bulgaria and the couple visits them at least three times a year. Ana has a more fixed attitude towards her national identity. She feels Bulgarian not less than before although she is critical about the situation in the country and would like her child to grow up in England because she thinks that the milieu there is more favorable for personal growth. Asked about her expectations about Brexit, she thought that it would not cause
a radical change for people like her who fill in the niches of low skilled jobs. She has the ambition, when her son turns two, to start her own business for domestic services in London. ‘I would like to have my own company, there is so much work here and so many dissatisfied young people in Bulgaria.’

Eva – ‘Once I am good at a job, I start looking for another, more challenging one’

Eva is two years older than Ana. In her educational path, she followed the steps of her parents who were engineers and graduated high school and then university in electronics. She started working during her first master’s degree as a design engineer but was not satisfied with ‘the heavy administrative burden’ of that job. Like a growing number of Bulgarian university students, she took avail of the Erasmus program to spend 6 months in England in 2010 to finish her MA project. She was among the few interviewees in our study to point at the 2008 crisis as her motivation to leave Bulgaria and go to the UK which was ‘not in such disarray as were Bulgaria and half of the world’. The consequences in her home city were that ‘90% of my colleagues from the Technological University were working in cafes and shops and those 10% that were working in engineering, were not paid regularly’.

Her Erasmus experience was a valuable cultural capital which she used to apply for a Master’s degree in marketing in Portsmouth. She explains that her choice of the destination country was linked to the assumed ‘easiness’ of adaptation based on the knowledge of the language:

I was very pragmatic ... hmm ... I’m not ... like those people who adore this culture or this food ... No, I pragmatically decided – I know only English and so I’m saving (laughing) ... all the difficulties in learning a new language ... That was it (laughs). Nothing else.

Before leaving Bulgaria, she took a bank loan and as a student in a UK university, she easily found a part-time job in a hotel. After graduation, with her British MA she did not have problems to find a job and changed several jobs before deciding to move to London. ‘People thought me crazy to leave my good job’ but she was ambitious and wanted to succeed in ‘the world city’. She reflected also on her life strategy more generally:

Once I am good at a job and there is nothing more to learn in it, I start looking for another, more challenging job. It might also be in another country.

Eva is among the few Bulgarian migrants who had experience from registered unemployment with the Labor Office in London. She stayed on the register for six months trying to get further training which did not work and she is now sorry that this period stays in her CV. She found a job in a publishing house ‘on zero hours’ and then a permanent job in an advertising company which she got after submitting 300 applications – a demonstration of her agency. She is satisfied with the pay but often feels the diminishing attitude of her colleagues for
being a foreigner. She likes communicating with people of different nationalities in London listing New Zealand, France, Austria and Eastern Europe while also maintaining the ties with her British university colleagues whom she defines as ‘friendships for life’. Eva is single although she has a ‘steady’ boyfriend in Austria. She also feels very close to her sister living in Sofia and visits her and their father at least twice a year.

Eva became interested in politics in London, not before that. ‘Here in London when you get together with Bulgarians, (laughs), the first topic is politics.’ She became very active during the negative media campaign against Bulgarians and Romanians in 2010. Then she was active again during the Brexit campaign. She is a member of two non-profit organizations, votes in elections and keeps track of the developments in both countries. The interviewee showed her agency again in getting British citizenship unlike most other higher skilled migrants in our study who did not think they needed it. In order to have more chances, Eva moved to ‘a nice house in a respectable suburb’ for which she pays half of her salary. She motivates the decision to get British citizenship with her experience of unemployment and the security which this legal status brings with it. She feels Bulgarian:

... in the sense, yes, that as a whole I want to keep these Orthodox traditions, the Christmas holidays, the martenizi, the banitsa... In general, when people ask me what your nationality is ... I say ‘Bulgarian’, it makes sense everywhere and I do not think that this will ever change. Nor am I ashamed of the accent, whatever it is.

Eva also describes herself as European and has a very positive view on the EU finding it ‘a great idea, a great union’ which helped her achieve her life plans starting with the Erasmus program. She also considers that for countries such as Bulgaria where there is a lot of corruption, the EU is very good regulator. Eva’s plans for the future do not include going back to Bulgaria but thinks it possible to move to another EU country.

Conclusions. Comparing youth transitions across generations and social resources

Comparing the life trajectories of four Bulgarian women who emigrated to Western Europe at the age of 24 we applied a life-course perspective to the process of migration. We selected the cases from a much wider data base of interviews-in-depth of labour migrants in the EU. Our analysis focused on the context of departure and reception as perceived in the narratives of the interviewed migrants, the social ties they maintained and newly created, and the changing feelings of belonging after spending years in the host country. In this we attempted to highlight the impact of mobility on young people’s transitions to autonomy from different generations. Migration and school-to-work transitions are interrelated processes entailed by specific educational, employment, housing, welfare and labor market regulations. While young people’s personal agency was clearly important for their successful integration, we also took into account the
difficulties arising from young people’s different cultural and wider resources when making their choices (Brannen and Nilsen, 2011).

The comparative analysis showed a great variation in the motivations for migration and the subsequent trajectories among migrants. However, there was significant commonality within the two analyzed groups among Bulgarian migrants: those migrating before and those after 2007. The generational approach proved fruitful to explain the differences in the explanations for mobility, the channels used and the feelings of belonging to national communities. Svetlomira and Borislava from the ‘Transition’ generation grew up and were schooled in the years of radical restructuring of the social order in Bulgaria in the 1990s. They were led by economic concerns, often framing their motivation in terms of mass unemployment, lack of social security, prevailing corruption and political disillusionment—a state often defined as anomie (Aadnanes, 2007; Bigness, 2015). They knew very little about the societies in which they would arrive and the choice of destination often depended more on the availability of relevant personal ties. To migrate, they used various ‘grey’ channels and the main sources of support in the new context were co-national friends and neighbours. Due to the legal barriers for work imposed in most EU countries towards migrants from Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall, those earlier migrants found it difficult and often undesirable to maintain cross-national links with relatives and friends in Bulgaria. Most considered their move as a fateful step without a prospect for turning back.

The young migrants from the Accession generation such as Ana and Eva were more inclined to explain their mobility decisions with the aspirations for career development, adventure and the desire to experience a new cultural environment. They employed different strategies of leaving the family home and country and settling down in the new place, attracted by a wider range of opportunities to achieve their life plans. They had much more information about the labour markets and housing situations in the destination countries although again did not invest much time and efforts in preparation before the move. Although ‘work abroad’ was their main aspiration both women invested time and efforts in training and further education. They seemed more prone to civic and political activism in the host society on local and global issues. While young migrants in this generation also relied on both ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ ties for the job search and social integration, they differed from the previous one in their wide transnational contacts made possible by the new communication technologies and cheaper travel. The migrants from the Accession generation tend to keep their options open and do not cross out returning to Bulgaria or moving to another European country in the future. More often they define the very act of migration not as a radical point of ‘no return’ in their life course but as a ‘key’ step in a new mobile and open life style.

Within the two generations the structures of opportunities and constraints were also a source of differentiation among young migrants. Our findings from the Bulgarian data set suggest that the higher skilled migrants in both generations more often used formal channels and ‘weak’ ties in the job search than the lower skilled migrants. Those supported by wealthier parental families started with higher aspirations, had more experience of travel abroad prior to migration, and invested more in education abroad as a social integration channel. The lower
skilled young people had more experience with precarious jobs before leaving and viewed the permanent jobs abroad as a factor for achieving security. On their part the higher skilled migrants initiated themselves more job changes once abroad aiming for career growth rather than for job linearity. The interviews with the young labor migrants in Berlin and London did not demonstrate greater differences between the work aspirations of men and women before the move than were those arising from their skill levels or parental background. The impact of gender become evident once the young female migrants make the transition to parenthood. The young women were more engaged in the childcare than their male partners which reduced their job aspirations temporarily or permanently. The experiences of working mothers in the new context reveal the persistent power of gender ideologies (Donato et al, 2017) when they usually took the bulk of the parental leave paid and unpaid – a practice quite similar to that of young mothers in Bulgaria (Kovacheva, 2010) and although they did not reduce the working hours after returning to work, delayed plans for more challenging jobs for after the children grew older.

Migration influenced the processes of identity formation in both generations. The feeling of belonging to their home country was less pronounced in the older generation while the young kept their national identity at a higher degree. The higher skilled had a more cosmopolitan orientation while the lower skilled identified more often with multi-ethnic migrant communities inside the receiving country. Most migrants shared some experiences of discriminatory attitudes from locals as well as other institutional obstacles in their adaptation in the new context (Kmiotek-Meier et al, 2019). Finally, what seemed common for young Bulgarians who migrated to other EU countries after 1989 was a positive attitude to European integration – an attitude they share with youth in other Balkan countries (Lavrič, 2019) Rather than opposing one national identity to another one, the young migrants tended to add ‘European’ to their ‘Bulgarian’ identity and considered that their work and life achievements had earned them the right to European citizenship.

References


