WORK CAREERS OF BULGARIAN MIGRANTS IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

Radne karijere bugarskih migranata u Evropskoj Uniji

ABSTRACT: After Bulgaria’s accession to the EU in 2007 increasing numbers of mobile workers have chosen emigration to the West as an attractive option for achieving a more satisfactory employment. The public debate in Bulgaria however perceives this mobility as a loss of human capital, while in the receiving countries in Western Europe immigrants are largely seen as a threat to the local labour markets. This paper builds upon 42 qualitative interviews conducted with Bulgarian labour migrants in four EU countries as part of the international project GEMM (2016–2019). We selected interviewees with diverse education and qualifications achieved in the home and the destination country and explored their work trajectories and career aspirations. The analysis focuses on migrant capital accumulated, mobilized and negotiated in the host country and the subjective meanings attributed to the events in the life course. An important finding of the paper is that the interviewed migrants understand a successful work career to be something more than a rise in income or occupational hierarchy and associate it with a wider range of achievements: autonomy, self-reliance, learning. Often low-prestige jobs are not perceived as a failure, but rather as a new opportunity for development in personal, social and occupational terms. Migrants’ work career is an essential part of their wider lived experiences.

KEY WORDS: labour migrant, work trajectory, career development, migrant capital, life course perspective

APSTRAKT: Nakon što je Bugarska pristupila Evropskoj uniji 2007. godine došlo je do rastućeg broja mobilnih radnika koji biraju da emigriraju na Zapad kao atraktivnu opciju za postizanje zadovoljavajućeg zaposlenja. Međutim, u javnoj debati u Bugarskoj ova mobilnost se percipira kao gubitak ljudskog kapitala,
The expectations of great opportunities and freedom in the labour markets in the developed Western European countries are the magnetic force that attracts many Bulgarians to take the path of emigration. Bulgaria is among the leading countries in the European Union (EU) with a high share of emigrants working in other EU member states (IOM, 2020: 33). Both specialists with higher education and people with low or no completed education, people with long work experience in their home country or who have just completed their training, try to find better employment in Germany, United Kingdom, Spain and Italy as the four most popular destinations. The free movement of people in the EU is not only postulated as a fundamental right of the citizens of the Union (EU Parliament, 2007), but also stimulated with the expectation that it will lead to a more efficient use of the workforce in the community as a whole and will benefit both the economies of the Member States and the mobile individuals and their well-being.

In fact, both the initial adaptation, and the later working careers of emigrants are far from a linear move upwards towards higher pay, better working conditions, more developed skills, and greater satisfaction. Western countries that accept migrants are also in no hurry or able to fully use the potential for more efficient work of immigrants. For Eastern European countries emigration is seen as a process of “brain drain or brain waste” associated with a downward social mobility of the emigrants themselves (Aziz, 2015). In the host countries in Western Europe the public discourse defines “uncontrolled” immigration as a threat to their labour markets, social security, and national identity (IOM, 2020: 95).

A good match between the skills and qualifications of immigrants and the requirements of the labour market in the host countries is a condition for the
effective use of available human capital, and a stimulus for an economic growth with equal opportunities (Quintini, 2014). On the other side, the mismatch between the supply and demand of skills has a high individual price – unused potential and competencies, as well as low satisfaction, dedication to work, work motivation, and productivity (Castagione 2015). This article analyses the process of mobility on the micro level, focusing on migrants’ lived experiences of mobility in contrast to the more commonly used macroeconomic perspective. We address the problem of the career development of Bulgarian emigrants in the more developed labour markets of the EU from a sociological life course perspective. We trace the work careers of emigrants as embedded in both the sending and receiving contexts, changing over time and influenced by the personal meaning that migrants as active actors give them. The dynamic approach of the analysis presupposes an inquiry into the life transitions of emigrants in at least three stages: their life experiences from education and work before emigration; work experience and training in the new social environment; and individual plans and aspirations for work and training in the future. Moreover, in the analysis of the “stories” of the emigrants we are interested in how they appreciate their own work path, and what meaning they attribute to it from the more general perspective of their life course as a whole.

Leaving the home country in search of work in the European Union by mobile Bulgarian nationals can be defined as both international migration, and internal mobility in the area of free movement of citizens of the union (King, 2002). The choice of terms is loaded with deeper political meanings, as the discursive differences between mobile “professionals” and “migrant workers” are intertwined in the public debate in European countries (Francescheli, 2020). Quite so often mobility is linked to highly qualified professionals only and understood as a legally acceptable movement, while the migration of low-skilled workers is seen as driven by selfish economic motives and “therefore” morally unacceptable. It should be noted that the distinction is also a result of the current state of the academic debate, which is dominated by the perspectives of the host countries in the West – as highlighted in a recent report of the International Organisation of Migration (IOM, 2020: 4; 139 on the ground of a review of the main affiliation of the authors of articles on the topic in the most frequently cited journals.

Theoretical framework for explaining migrants’ work trajectories

From a life course perspective, the career is an integral part of the movement of the individual through “social institutions and social structures” and is a “specific sequence and combination of roles” in education and work in a particular socio-historical context, and at a particular stage of one’s life (Elder et al, 2003: 8). In the work trajectory of the individual there are long periods of stability, interrupted by abrupt changes that result from both macro-social processes and their intertwining with other life trajectories of the individual and
his or her family members. Furthermore, careers should be seen as set in the biographical and historical time in which the change and combination of roles take place, and are influenced by a wide range of individual, institutional and contextual factors (Triandafyllidou, 2016; Kogan et al, 2017). The life course perspective towards migration requires that the analysis takes into consideration both the structures of opportunities and constraints in the home and destination countries and the agency and personal resources of the individual at a particular social time and place.

The influence of the contextual conditions on the process of migration is strongly manifested in the access to employment. Migrants face a variety of difficulties in the new labour market due to their migrant status: a lower employment rate compared to that of the local population, lower-skilled jobs than those acquired before emigration, and over-qualification, especially among working immigrant women (IOM, 2020). The academic literature offers two main hypotheses for explaining the lower level of integration of migrants in the labour markets of the host country (Simon et al. 2014; Carpio, 2019): assimilation of immigrants, and segmentation of the labour market. According to the assimilation hypothesis, in developed Western societies, immigrants start with a low participation level in the labour market, but then eventually catch up with the employment level of the local residents after gaining the necessary knowledge and skills. According to the second hypothesis, migration creates or at least strengthens the formation of a segmented labour market in which migrants concentrate in the precarious sector and remain trapped in low-skilled and low-paid jobs.

Both the assimilation hypothesis and the labour market segmentation hypothesis do not exhaust the diversity of migrants' employment careers or their explanations. Aziz (2015), for example, examines the trajectories of Polish immigrants in the UK with biographical methods and highlights the role of the individual agency of immigrants, many of whom manage to climb up the occupational stratification, albeit starting from a low level. Mobility actually increases paid employment opportunities (Morokvashić et al. 2008). Frattini (2014) also finds in his study that even in low-skilled jobs such as general work in hotels and restaurants, immigrants from the new EU member states can rise to managerial positions and emigration in general has an emancipatory effect, especially for women.

When applying a life course perspective to the career development of migrants, the analysis accounts for the principle of agency, according to which people create their life trajectories with the choices and actions they take within the structure of opportunities and constraints created by the historical and social circumstances of their lives (Elder et al, 2003). Migrants' life trajectories deserve a special attention as their agency is embedded in two contexts – of the home and the host country. According to Christensen (2017), migration is a form of development of individual life projects, with which migrants give an active response to changing conditions. Migrants’ subjective agency in building their career requires the application of a biographical approach in the analysis, with its characteristic emphasis on the subjective constructions of meanings,
reinterpretation, modification and transformation of personal trajectory (Rosenthal, 2004). The challenge of the analysis in this chapter is to capture the interaction between structure and action in the formation of the working careers of Bulgarian emigrants.

Many researchers of migrant work careers use Bourdieu's concept (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990) on the types of capital and their dynamics, accumulation, and conversion. Emphasis is placed on migrants' individual resources, representing both their “human capital" such as education, qualifications and health, and the more elusive manifestations of “cultural capital" such as tastes and lifestyles, implicit meanings of language and other practices for class distinction (Bourdieu, 1984). In his research with qualitative methods, Lisiak (2018) points out that this concept is particularly suitable for understanding migration not as a single-line and one-way road, but as a process of accumulating specific cultural and social capital. Del Rey et al (2019) combine the various forms of capital accumulated in migration into the term “migration capital" and argue that these are the determining factors for migrants’ working careers. Social capital is key to starting the first job. In the next stages of career growth, cultural and financial capital are of key importance. The authors explain the lag in women's career development and gender segregation in the labour market (the concentration of women in a small number of jobs) not only with the adoption of traditional family roles, but also with the limited financial opportunities of the family, which stimulate women to take low-paid jobs while their male partners develop an upward career. Föbker (2019) notes the possibility of devaluation of cultural capital accumulated in the home country, emphasizing that migrants do not passively accept this devaluation and enter into negotiations with institutions and people about the value of their cultural capital.

The categorization of migrants' careers as ascending or descending, based on the qualifications required at their place of employment in the host country, and their compliance with the pre-departure qualifications, seems easy to apply, but is not without problems. This division is loaded with values and does not take into consideration the development of multilateral skills, ambitions, and satisfaction of migrants in low-paid jobs (see also King, 2002, Vasey, 2016).

Further classifications of migrants’ labour trajectories are proposed in the academic literature, based on criteria other than the dichotomous division of careers according to low and high qualifications. In their study using quantitative methods, Buckman et al (2020) track migrants’ transitions between different employment and education statuses from the year of arrival in the host country and measure how long it takes migrants to reach full employment or entrepreneurship. Applying sequence analysis of events, they distinguish four types of paths: successful and less successful (including long periods of inactivity), transitions to self-employment and a stable trajectory. Based on an analysis of biographical interviews with Polish women emigrants in the UK, Azis (2015) develops the following categorization according to the subjective meaning that interviewees attach to their trajectories: feeling stuck; continuing (new work at the same level in another sector), moving on and moving up in the same or in a different sector and entrepreneurship.
Data and methods

The paper draws upon the rich data set developed in the international mixed-methods research project GEMM (Growth, Equal opportunities, Migration and Markets)\(^3\). We are using this strand of the study which examined the lived experiences of migration building upon interviews-in-depth with migrants at least two years after their move to the UK and Germany as countries traditionally receiving migrants, and Spain and Italy that in present are countries both sending and receiving migrants. The Bulgarian team conducted 42 interviews having gender, qualification level and employment sector as criteria for selection. We aimed at an equal distribution between men and women and two thirds highly qualified migrants from the sectors of health, finance, ICT and one third low-skilled from the sectors of construction, transport and domestic care. We aimed at maximum diversity for the rest of the individual characteristics of the interviewees such as age, family status, housing situation and length of migration experience. Participants were recruited through advertising the project on social network sites, joining various Facebook groups, contacting Bulgarian embassies and consulates in the four countries, Bulgarian schools, Orthodox churches, as well as personal contacts of the interviewers. The final selection of the interviewees is presented in Table 1.

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The interviews lasted between one and two hours and were held in cafes, galleries and interviewees’ homes. Informed consent was received before the interviews, all of which were audio recorded and fully transcribed, preserving the anonymity of the persons. The transcripts were read several times, coded and then more general categories were constructed capturing the lived experiences of migration from the stage of preparation through the stages of mobility, initial adaptation, further social integration and future plans. The thematic analysis of the transcripts was followed by case study analysis resulting in the construction of typologies. In the paper we present some career profiles chosen not for their quantitative representativeness for the group of Bulgarian migrants as a whole but for their relevance to the patterns of migrant trajectories starting from the initial education and work careers in the country of departure and the aspirations and experiences vis-a-vis the structures of opportunities and constraints in the country of arrival.

One of the consciously chosen limitation of our study was that it included only labour migrants from Bulgaria – people who moved to another country

\(^3\) GEMM project, 2016–2019, funded under the Horizon 2020 program, EC; grant agreement № 649255.
with the aim to find a job for a certain period of time, achieving social stability and economic security and not circular or short-term migration. Our study did not include the trajectories of migrants with education, health or family reunion reasons. However, even in the group of labour migrants there was a wide diversity of career trajectories based on the comparison between their qualifications, initial and consequent jobs. During the fieldwork it became clear to us that the strict distinction between low- and high-skilled jobs was not so strict as it seemed initially and migrants placed changing meanings on the work they did. That is why the paper applies a more sensitive and reflexive approach to the work career of our interviewees.

The social context of Bulgarian migration in the EU

In 2019, Bulgaria was second in Europe, along with Portugal, and only Bosnia and Herzegovina was ahead, in terms of the share of citizens living abroad – over 20% (IOM, 2020: 87). Under socialism, external migration was legally restricted and strictly regulated, and borders were strictly guarded against the “internal and external enemies” of socialism. However, many foreign workers arrive in the country from Vietnam, Cuba and other countries under official state agreements (Apostolova, 2014), and Bulgarian workers are sent to work in “fraternal” countries in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. The social transformation that began with the regime change in 1989 created a qualitatively new context. During the first decade, economic development was marked by a sharp decline in labour productivity, privatization and closure of enterprises, mass unemployment, rising prices, and periodic shortages of goods and services. With the opening of Bulgaria’s state borders and despite restrictions in Western countries, many emigrants were forced to leave the country due to economic difficulties and aimed primarily to earn “quick money”, and then return when the situation improved. If the aspiration for temporary emigration was typical for older emigrants, then many young people left the country forever (Atoyan et al, 2016). The National Statistical Institute (NSI, 2021) reports that emigrants in the age group of 20–29 year-olds make about a quarter of all emigrants. Bulgaria, along with Romania and Slovakia in the first two decades after 1989, were among the countries sending emigrants abroad in which the share of women emigrants exceeded that of men (Recchi, 2015: 56). Experts estimate that between 1.5 to 2.5 million people have left Bulgaria in the so-called transition period (Minchev et al, 2012; Krasteva, 2014).

After Bulgaria’s accession to the EU in 2007, the social context gradually changed in the direction of political stabilization and economic growth. However, the improvement has not been as rapid and significant as the mass expectations for the “end of the transition”, and emigration continues to be the predominant trend. Emigration has grown significantly, increasing by more than a third in the last ten years alone, from 27 708 in 2010 to 39 941 in 2019 (NSI, 2021). Men make up 51% of the emigrants, and the share of young emigrants is the highest among both sexes – aged 20 to 29 years. Assessing the context of
leaving based on research data, Richter et al (Richter et al, 2017: 187) believe that the main reasons for leaving the country are still the economic situation and the general perception of lack of prospects for development in the home country. Ethnographic studies confirm this observation. According to Maeva and Zahova (2015: 31), the home country is perceived as a social place where migrants return for a short time – only to reaffirm the rightness of their choice. Other characteristics of the national context that are perceived as factors for emigration are the poor quality and difficult access to services (legal, health, educational), growing social disparities, corrupt elites (Krasteva, 2014), and ethnic discrimination against minorities (Tarnovschi, 2012; Richter et al, 2017).

The legal regulations in the social context of the Western countries, accepting migrants from Bulgaria, are based on the principle of equal treatment of all citizens, located on the territory of the EU. In general, this includes: equal pay and equal working conditions, safety at work, unrestricted access to education and retraining opportunities, access to housing (including social), right to join trade unions and professional organizations, social benefits, social and tax benefits, right to retire. To be considered as a worker under EU law, the migrant must strive for “efficient” and “real” economic activity (Ruhs and Palme, 2018: 1483–4). Great Britain, Germany, Italy and Spain are among the most preferred destinations for immigration by Bulgarian citizens. Despite the migration policy approved by the EU and adopted by all member states of the community, it should be noted that in some of them the national policy frameworks concerning the management of migration processes continue to have a dominant influence (Cangiano, 2014: 420).

Sustainable economic growth and low unemployment since the mid-1990s have been a prerequisite for boosting Britain’s interest in EU migrants as a potential workforce, despite the negative public sentiment imposed in media. Until the great enlargement of the EU in 2004, UK migration policies were relatively liberal towards high-skilled immigrants and relatively restrictive with regard to the employment of less skilled immigrants (Ruhs and Anderson, 2007: 6). Following the accession of the Central and Eastern European countries to the EU in 2004, 2007 and 2013, the United Kingdom introduced certain restrictions on the free movement of European citizens, and this right was repealed by the decision of the United Kingdom to leave the EU.

The social context in Germany, as the other most preferred destination for Bulgarian emigrants, should undoubtedly be defined as an “immigration country”. It is characterized by significantly more liberal regulation of immigration, which is perceived as a means of compensation for the negative labour force growth and is backed by active social inclusion policies (Constant and Tien, 2011). However, Germany remains an immigration choice primarily for low- and middle-skilled workers, and high skilled foreign professionals face a number of formal and informal barriers to their labour market entry (Green, 2013).

In the second half of the twentieth century, Italy turned from a predominantly emigrant country to one of the most attractive Southern European destinations for labour immigration. The country’s policy fluctuates between opening the labour
market to cheaper and low-skilled labour in the face of immigrants, and the desire
to reduce immigration flows, perceived as an economic threat to security in the
country and a threat to its identity (Bonifazi et al., 2009). Following the economic
crisis of 2008, the country is once again facing the challenges of emigration of its
own population. Despite this trend and the general economic turmoil of the last
decade, Italy has maintained its popularity among immigrants concentrating in
the precarious employment sector (Finotelli and Echeverria, 2017).

Since Spain’s accession to the EU, its immigration policy has been more
balanced than that of Italy and has been characterized by tighter controls on
illegal immigrants, the negotiation of special agreements with sending countries
and an increase in the basic social rights of all immigrants (Fuentes, 2005). As a
result of the 2008 economic crisis, which led to a significant increase in the share
of the unemployed, a high wave of emigration was observed in Spain as well,
rather than an influx of immigrants (Hooper, 2019). Although immigrants in
this country also focus mainly on the service sector and low-skilled labour, the
level of high skilled immigrants is significantly higher than that in Italy.

The labour trajectories of Bulgarian emigrants
in the European Union

A career has many dimensions, such as transition from education to
employment, access to the labour market, duration and frequency of periods of
unemployment, the degree of compliance between education and qualifications
of the individual and work performed, consistency and changes in pay, positions
held, growth and job security, opportunities to combine work and life outside it,
changes in job satisfaction, the degree of subjective identification with the work
performed, and others. Our approach requires tracking migrants’ life transitions
in relation to education and work first, in the context of their home country,
then, the changes in their career trajectories and further training in the host
country, and third, their aspirations and more specific projects for the future.
Furthermore, we analyse both the external dimensions of the trajectories of
emigrants as changes in their status, and the subjective construction of the work
career and its place in the biographical narrative of the respondents.

From the exceptional variety of work trajectories experienced and formed
by different generations of Bulgarian migrants with different professional
qualifications, work experience and future plans, we have selected to present a
few that are illustrative rather than representative in a statistical sense for the
respective category. Our study does not provide data about the quantitative ratio
between the different migrant career types as it is not based on representative
samples which are anyway hardly possible because of the lack of officials list of
the general population of Bulgarian migrants in each of the countries included in
the study. We recognize that we have received consent for an interview primarily
from those who consider their career more or less successful. In the refusals to
participate in the survey, migrants with low-paid jobs prevailed, among whom
there were both those with higher and low education from Bulgaria. Our efforts
and perseverance allowed us to hear and reflect the stories of emigrants with such careers, which gave us a wider palette for describing the achievements and difficulties of the employment trajectories of Bulgarians in EU countries.

The group of migrants continuing their careers at a higher level

We begin by examining the careers of highly educated Bulgarian emigrants who have achieved high specialization and comparative success in their careers in Bulgaria and who gradually continue their successful development in the same field, often at a higher level abroad. This group consists mainly of young adults in their early 30s, employed in the finance and information technology sector. Bulgarian doctors among the interviewees have such a career, most of them in the next stage of life – in adulthood, and with experience of specializations in other countries.

‘I aimed at self-development, meeting more and more challenges’

Rayna, 35 years old, is a telecommunication engineer in Italy. As a student at the Technical University in Sofia, she decided to specialize in the field of business management in order to expand and upgrade the already obtained qualification. She really likes what she does in Milano and can be defined as a person with a clear idea of the future and always thinking from that perspective. In Bulgaria she quickly found her first job in the field of her specialty from university. She changed only two jobs, rising to the position of senior engineer in a large company. She defines her career development in our country as successful. Looking for new career growth opportunities, she decided to apply for a project, supported by her employer, to work for the “parent company” in Italy:

My career in Bulgaria was good enough ... I had the satisfaction with the work, but this project came out in Rome, for a much bigger network, a much richer company, with more testing opportunities, richer equipment. So it was a challenge, and I applied for the project.

Rayna left with the idea to stay abroad within the project time frame – for about half a year, which shows that the initial purpose of her departure was not emigration for good, and the strategy of long-term career development outside Bulgaria was not fully adopted. The adaptation period was short because it was supported by the employer of the new company. Rayna managed to prove her professional skills in the new position and at present continues her career in Italy, satisfied with the overall work environment and the collegial climate: “I was very pleased with the work itself and with the team in general. It was exactly what I expected to find, so there were no unpleasant surprises. “

At the time of the interview, Raina was expecting her first child with her Italian partner. Despite the way her life is developing, she is not convinced, both about her future stay in Italy and about her work, not because she is dissatisfied with her professional career, but because she defines herself as a person always looking for new challenges and new horizons for personal and professional development, and believes that the time has come to make some changes in this direction:
I’m not the kind of person who stops forever. In my opinion, life continues to evolve, there is always a bunch of challenges. So I can’t say that I will stay here forever and that this will be my country, and that I will stay here to live ... Changing jobs is something I’ve certainly been thinking about for a while ... And now I’ve planned some kind of change, say towards a managerial position, [to become] a manager, team leader, and things like that... in a way to expand my worldview.

Rayna’s work trajectory can be defined as rather smooth and successful, accompanied by correct and timely choices at the stage of training and career in Bulgaria. As a “corporate migrant” (Jokinen et al, 2008; Al Ariss et al, 2012), she managed to take advantage of the opportunities provided in the company. Her narrative clearly demonstrates the role in her migration and subsequent career achievements not only of the human capital accumulated in the home country but of her agency as a young woman.

The group with a career resembling an inverted bell

The second group includes emigrants with a university education who, like the first group have started a successful career in Bulgaria and sought career opportunities abroad, but unlike the first group have been forced to accept lower-skill jobs, often in a new field, and only after a while they managed to restore, and often surpass their job position in Bulgaria. Healthcare professionals predominated among the interviewees with such a career.

“I realized that if I did things right, I could achieve anything”

Elena, a 60-year-old nurse in London, had a stable career in Bulgaria. She started working as an operating-room nurse and upgraded her education with a second “higher” degree in health management. Appreciated in her work, she was sent for a year to work in a Middle Eastern country and then for a one-month specialization in the United States to operate with new equipment. Upon her return, she was disappointed with the way the health authorities managed the equipment sent to the hospital and started considering emigrating abroad. The period coincided with a dramatic turn in her family life – Elena separated with her husband, and so the responsibility for son and family home was left in her hands. Feeling emotionally stressed, she took the first opportunity to go to the UK when an expert recruiting medical staff for working abroad came to the hospital.

Elena left confident in her professional and language skills, and her ability to manage in a new milieu as this would not be her first trip abroad for work. She started working as an orderly initially in a nursing home and then in a hospital after passing the necessary exams. „For the first years I worked 90 hours a week, I made an incredible effort“, said the interviewee. Looking back, she considered that she was successful thanks to the knowledge she acquired about the ‘English culture’ communicating with the elderly patients. While she had gained high nursing skills already in Bulgaria, she lacked this form of ‘cultural capital’ which after three
years allowed her to pass the necessary exams to get a certificate as a nurse and to negotiate to have her son to come and live with her in the nursing home.

Since then, Elena has taken up several training courses and changed jobs several times that were moves up the occupational ladder. She considers that she has managed to establish herself as a professional in the field. In her narrative she claims that she has found her place in England and has accepted the English way of life. The most important thing for her is that the environment in England allows her to prove herself as a person and as a professional, which gives her a sense of justice and equality:

... [success] depends only on your own efforts and desire to succeed in the profession, to be good in the profession, in what you do, no matter what you do – whether you clean or put injections, or ... This country provides incredible opportunities to make your dreams and ideals come true, if you have any.

During the interview, the Bulgarian was already leading a team of 15 nurses, constantly studying and improving. She considered that the professional knowledge and skills from the practice in Bulgaria were very useful for her, while in England she learned important social skills, listening to people, working in different teams, being tolerant to different cultures. Although both she and her grown up son are well-off, Elena plans to continue working while she is healthy and is considering a new job, now as a district nurse in the community.

**The group of migrants making a transition from high to low-prestige jobs**

The third group of highly educated emigrants began their careers in Bulgaria, which, however, was interrupted by a collapse, either due to job loss or personal reasons. Like the second group, they start low-skilled work abroad, but fail to reverse the trajectory and climb to a step corresponding to their qualification from Bulgaria. Most emigrated before Bulgaria's accession to the EU and have experience of informal employment in the host country. Both among the interviewees, and among the ones that refused the interview, this group includes women of pre-retirement age who worked as teachers in Bulgaria and after emigration started working in cleaning services in Spain, Italy and the UK, pressured by the need to pay financial obligations or driven by a desire to “help their children” to buy a home. This group also includes young emigrants who graduated higher education in our country, but failed to obtain a satisfactory realization on the labour market in their university specialty and left in order to start low-skilled, but better paid (compared to Bulgaria) work in construction and transport.

„To make sacrifices for the sake of the family “

Boris, a 58-year-old emigrant to Great Britain, has a Master’s degree in biology and an ascending work trajectory in Bulgaria from a teacher, then
researcher and finally an industrial designer in a private company, where he stayed for more than ten years. He describes his career in Bulgaria as successful, as he believes that he has achieved a lot, having the opportunity to travel and learn from foreign experience. The collapse of his career happened abruptly and unexpectedly, as a result of the collapse of the business in which he was employed. The shrinking labour market in Bulgaria before the accession to the EU and the financial problems of his family motivated him to look for job opportunities abroad:

The company was very good, but due to circumstances such as bad management, it was closed. We had to save ourselves. I and several colleagues left under the pretext of attending a conference in our field ... then each took his own path.

Boris left for the UK, ready to do any work, hoping to improvements later. At the time of his departure, he was working five days a week for a construction company and did house repair services as self-employed on the weekends. He was fully aware that it would be very difficult for him to build a career in England similar to the one he had in Bulgaria. He saw his current job as a personal sacrifice in terms of prestige and health in order to earn enough to ensure an acceptable standard for his family:

For example, in what I work now, I am better paid than I would have been if I had started working as a teacher or even as a designer here. I met an Englishman who worked as a graphic designer, and who said that they were very poorly paid. Obviously, there are many people in this field, and you have to wait for years to become a chief designer in a company. Only then do you start earning well.

Later in the interview other subjective constructions of the ‘sacrifice’ turned out. Boris explained that living abroad had always attracted him, he only regretted leaving his wife in Bulgaria. He considered this separation as a sacrifice for the future of their children (son and daughter):

My plan is to sustain my son to complete his education [at a British university]. His career to progress, is enough, since for me there is no time to... It is worth it, because mine are smart children and want to do something big, they have ambitions. This gives you the strength to work.

His work experiences in the UK could not be described as a stalemate. Boris moved from his first job as loader to a stable job as an employee of an English construction company in which he gradually started doing more complex tasks. Thanks to the successful completion of a professional course, he received a qualification certificate as a painter, which provided him with a better income and a sense of stability. He lacks social contacts in the new place mostly due to having no leisure time and meets friends only when he returns to his home town for short vacations once every year. His greatest satisfaction comes from being able to support himself and his family and meeting social expectations for the
role of a man – head of the family, albeit from a great distance. Boris's plans for the time after his son has finished his education and can support himself are to go to work in another EU country, where his daughter has opened a café and help her expand the business.

The working careers of migrants with secondary education

In the fourth group we consider the careers of emigrants with secondary or less education in Bulgaria, who work abroad in low-paid positions compared to the majority in the host country. This is also a diverse group in their motivation to leave the country, in their career steps abroad and in their life strategies more generally. Most of them are middle-aged people, alternating temporary jobs with periods of unemployment. Similar to the previous third group they have poor command of the local language and limited social contacts mainly in various immigrant circles. Often, they share plans to return to Bulgaria after retirement. This group is also composed of emigrants in the life stage of youth who had come to look for jobs in the EU labour markets right after high school or after unsatisfactory experiences with insecure jobs in Bulgaria. The young migrants in this group, although working in low paid jobs, are rather satisfied with the economic security that their work abroad gives them, especially when compared to their peers in Bulgaria, and often share aspirations for additional training in the host country, wider social contacts, and higher social integration.

“I was looking for happiness, I wanted more opportunities”

Mila is a 42-year-old Bulgarian woman who emigrated to Germany at the age of 25. Mila graduated from high school in a large Bulgarian city in 1993, without professional skills and quickly entered the labour market, which then experienced its first major economic crisis. Like many other young people of the first post-communist generation, she failed to achieve satisfactory employment. In five years, Mila changed several jobs: saleswoman, cook, waitress and conveyor worker in an industrial factory. She also tried to start her own business, offering part-time childcare services, but the project did not progress: „...there weren’t many people in my town who could afford to pay someone to look after their children. “

The inability to find a secure job in Bulgaria is the main reason that Mila points out for the change in her life strategy towards emigration.

I came [to Germany] with the thought that I should find a better place to live. I wanted to find a job, to start a family, to live normally ... I was young, I was looking for happiness, I wanted more opportunities. Then many people around me we leaving and I decided to try ... I knew about Germany only from history lessons and the television...

Following the path of many Bulgarian migrants in the 1990s, Mila left the country without a pre-arranged job. She had heard that anyone who was willing to work hard would succeed in Germany, and proficiency in German was not a problem, because she could only work with compatriots. The choice
of the specific destination was also random – the destination of most bus lines at the time were from Sofia to Berlin. Like Boris, Mila emigrated at a time, when Bulgarian citizens were not legally allowed to work in Germany. She started as a dishwasher in a Turkish café, sharing working hours and pay with another officially employed woman. At the time of the interview, she had lived in Germany for 16 years and had changed 9 jobs. She now has a permanent part-time employment contract as a hygienist. Additionally, Mila works informally, assisting Bulgarian emigrants who do not speak German in preparing documents and contacts with German institutions.

Despite the limited resources available before emigration, in the new context Mila has managed to achieve a job integration that satisfies her and to make the transition to own family and home. She lives in a rented apartment with her partner, a Bulgarian from the Turkish ethnic minority, who works in construction. She is rich with her new social ties, mostly with other emigrants from the Balkan countries and masters many languages: German, Turkish, Russian, and Serbian. In general, Mila believes that her emigration has opened better prospects and she has achieved more in her life than if she had stayed in Bulgaria.

Discussion and conclusions

In this paper we have followed the work careers of Bulgarian migrants in the EU. We found a variety of trajectories among the so-called labour migrants that external observers would easily categorize as ascending or descending. Instead, we started from the completed educational degree and work experience in Bulgaria and then traced the steps of these emigrants in the labour market in host countries. We also inquired into the biographical meaning that our interviewees attributed to their choices of work and training and their place in the wider life strategies.

The analysis of the in-depth interviews with 42 labour migrants in the four most popular destination countries – members of the EU led us to distinguish between four large groups of work careers depending on the level of education achieved in Bulgaria, and the subsequent integration in the new labour market. The first group included Bulgarian migrants with upward careers, who had university degrees and successful work experience acquired already in Bulgaria. The mobility had expanded their opportunities and accelerated their professional development. The representatives of this group had a life strategy oriented towards higher professional success, self-affirmation among colleagues, and personal development. Among them we met some Bulgarian migrants who had been educated at American, European and Russian universities, as well as some that had taken advantage of Erasmus and other EU programs for international exchange. Many of these mobile Bulgarian nationals with high achievements in the sectors of finance, information technology, and healthcare were becoming a part of a transnational and rather global elite (Bauder, 2015). A major factor for the success of this group is their migrant capital, which allows them to
assess and take advantage of various opportunities. Among the forms of their migrant capital, we could distinguish between accumulated cultural capital as well as social capital in the form of contacts with colleagues and employers, both in Bulgaria and abroad. Newly created social contacts and the additional education and training in the host country act as valuable assets of their migrant capital on the road to career success. The biographical meaning that the first group invested in their working careers was most often related to professional and personal development, search for new challenges in larger companies and/or opportunities for creative work.

It is the social capital in the form of useful “weak” ties (Coleman, 1990; Lisiak, 2018) that the second group of highly educated migrants lacked. In the new environment, they started from a significantly lower job positions to build their careers anew, often in different economic sectors than the one in which they gained experience in Bulgaria, and their careers resemble the “inverted bell” (Vidal-Coso, 2019). They were also driven by career success, as was the first group, but the lack of recognized cultural capital posed many difficulties in their integration into the new labour market. The financial support of the family (del Rey et al, 2019), their own agency to achieve additional education, and knowledge of the social context of the host country were important factors for the success of the representatives of this group to go up the career ladder, earning more income, and professional satisfaction. The meaning they most often attribute to their working career was to prove professional skills and personal abilities and to achieve greater autonomy of work and recognition by colleagues.

The third group of highly educated Bulgarians, who have taken the path of employment abroad, do not differ significantly from the previous group in their cultural capital from the home country. In their life strategy, the pursuit of higher income comes to the fore. Representatives of this group are both older men and women, whose careers in Bulgaria had been interrupted due to the bankruptcy of the companies in which they worked, or due to economic and other problems in the family, as well as young people right from university or with experience only from precarious low-skilled jobs in Bulgaria. The long working hours per week that they are forced to choose in the new context in order to provide more income for themselves and their families do not allow them to create diverse social contacts, receive additional training, and achieve a higher level of proficiency in the local language that would open new work opportunities – a trend found in other studies as well (Nowicka, 2014). Sometimes direct and more often implicit ethnic discrimination also creates barriers to their professional development and devalues their human capital from the home country (Föbker, 2019). While they have often changed jobs in the host country, they remain in the rut of low-prestige and routine work, without being able to impose their cultural capital, accumulated in the social context of Bulgaria. Perseverance, ability to withstand difficulties and achieve security are the main constructions of meaning in their life strategies.

The fourth group of Bulgarian migrants – those with secondary or lower education concentrate in the insecure and low paid jobs in the host countries. They rely on strong, ethnic ties to find their first job, often in the informal
economy, and only after they enrich their social capital, they manage to more to jobs with more decent working conditions. Among the representatives of this group, career development abroad usually remains at the same level over time, although many of the interviewees shared with us plans for career changes, most often in the form of self-employment, which would lead them to higher income and economic security, which confirms the conclusion of Frattini (2014) about the emancipatory effect of migration. The biographical meaning is again connected with achieving stability in life, and among the young people in this group – also with gaining independence from parents earlier, and experimenting with new possibilities.

Although very different in their work experiences, the interviewed migrants, whose careers have been presented so far, provide evidence that career success and satisfaction with work are perceived as more than just a rise in pay and occupational hierarchy. A career as a social construct from a life course perspective includes a wider range of achievements and the meanings associated with them. It is important to emphasize that many migrants do not necessarily perceive low-prestige and low-skilled jobs as a career failure. Often, they see such kind of work as an opportunity for development in a new and different direction, both personally and occupationally. Among the various meanings that the interviewees attach to their understanding of a career are: self-expression by overcoming obstacles or doing creative work, providing security and education to family members, being able to “restart” one’s work path in a new direction, achieving autonomy at work and respect from colleagues and society. These meanings are not strictly divided among the four career groups and are often shared by emigrants with different education, skills and work experience. The career is an integral part of the individual life project (Christensen, 2017) and is embedded in a set of complex intertwined social relationships.

Our research shares the limitations of qualitative studies concerning the representativeness of the outcomes, the difficulties over the data controls and the high degree of dependence upon the personalities and skills of researchers (Bryman, 2012). Also we could not pay due attention to the differences in migrant careers in the diverse social places, the urban-rural divide in particular. Our design was limited to the labour markets in the big European cities where work careers and migrant identities tend to be more globalised than in more rural areas (Quassoli and Dimitriadis, 2019). At the same time the qualitative methods allowed us to examine the ways migration impacts on the work careers in the large urban centres of mobile Bulgarian citizens and their lived experiences more generally. The contribution of this paper to the migration research area consists of a deeper understanding of the life strategies of Bulgarian migrants in countries member of the EU through highlighting the processes of individual choices and meaning making vis-à-vis the structures of opportunities and constraints and the role played by different forms of migration capital. Such a qualitative design is best suited to the exploration of work careers as part of the wider individual life trajectories in particular social place and time (Heinz & Krüger, 2001). Expanding the selected research sites to other countries and
regions inside them is a promising way to refine the research design and achieve better explanatory models.

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