# A New Generation of Bulgarian Transition: In Search of a "Brighter Future"

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International migration appears to have become one of the most controversial issues of emerging global regimes. Last year the International Labor Organization published a report arguing that although globalization's major advantage has been to create conditions for the freer movement of products and industries instead of people, world migration pressures are in fact on the rise (ILO 2000). From an economic standpoint, this development is perceived as resulting from the fact that flows of goods and capital between poor and rich countries will "not be large enough to compensate the needs for employment in poorer countries" (ILO 2000). Contrary to the popular belief that globalization creates better opportunities for the well-being of local communities, the report argues that social disruptions caused by global economic restructuring are likely to shake more people loose from their communities and encourage them to look abroad for employment.

Analysts of world migration have acknowledged that it is becoming much more difficult today to estimate potential source countries and social groups from which new migrants will originate. This, matched with the rising levels of migration and its increasingly complex pattern have urged scholars to look for a new more comprehensive and multilateral analytical framework to account for the movement of people. Migration studies have yet to address the most urgent questions affecting this multifaceted system: Why do particular groups of people migrate while others in similar or worse circumstances stay at home? What role do information and new technologies (including the Internet and global television networks such as CNN) play in cultivating a new awareness of who we are in relation to societies abroad, and in generating a desire for emigration or for social change in general? A single event, the end of the Cold War, has been crucial in redefining the logic of this complex phenomenon. It is still unclear, for example, what the effects were of the aggressive campaign of the Western world to depict itself as a space of prosperity and economic well-being for the construction of the identity of whole generations of young people from the so-called socialist bloc, who today are among the most likely candidates for emigration.

This paper looks at the newly-formed Bulgarian diaspora in the United States —a cohort of young and educated people coming from a country that lacks any significant previous experience dealing with emigration—and examines some of the central rationales of their exodus. I believe that the logic of this recent migration can

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be read within the broader context of shifting relationships between postsocialist countries and transnational capitalism. The paper seeks to capture some of the ways in which the Bulgarian community in the United States has come to recognize itself as a collectivity with shared interests, as a result of various pressures originating both in Bulgaria and in the United States. Host polities not only assess newcomers through particular lenses of identification (such as a set of general perceptions of who, for example, Eastern Europeans are) but also use specific strategies and policy instruments, as well as organizational arrangements to incorporate immigrants. These pressures determine the ground for the social and political involvement of the Bulgarian community both in the United States and in their home country. Diasporic experience challenges certain traditional understandings of belonging and membership and thus invites us to rethink fundamental forms of political identification such as nationality and citizenship.

It is becoming more obvious today that we can no longer think of migration in terms of the earlier visions of how massive invasions of the poor flood the West. The most commonly exploited conceptual scheme is one which first analyzes migration as being provoked by mostly economic factors and general deprivation, or else political genocide, and then looks at the ways in which the newcomers adapt to life in host-countries. This framework is too limited to respond theoretically to the challenges posed by the new types of "migrants" involved in for instance the advancement of the bio- and high-tech industries in the West.

Migration scholars from various fields other than economics and demography have studied the particular relations between the predicaments of the emerging "global capitalism" and the shifting nature of the state, society, and culture (see Harvey 1989; Ong and Nonini 1997). They have argued that the increased internationalization of economies, which no longer necessitate internally homogenous national labor forces but instead increasingly rely on dislocating and redistributing certain groups of people, has given rise to what Manuel Castells calls "an emerging global cosmopolitan class." The appearance of highly trained personnel necessary for managing the global economy—a group of increasingly mobile professionals and technicians—may signify the consolidation of a new social structure on a global scale. These people carry a complex sense of national identity and political loyalty that is hard to define lineraly. On a global scale, the effects of migration flows may be seen as beneficial, insofar as they strengthen world political and economic integration, but at the level of those particular countries who have invested resources in the education of highly-trained professionals, these effects are often perceived as devastating.

According to the National Statistical Institute in Bulgaria, some 900,000 Bulgarians have left their country following the break up of the socialist regime.[1] This fact is striking against the backdrop of the unprecedented euphoria and will for social change sparked during years immediately following the chain of "revolutions" in Eastern Europe. The early 1990s was a time perceived by the members of the

Bulgarian intelligentsia as a new era of democratic development in Bulgaria, one that offered unforeseen opportunities for personal, intellectual, political and economic prosperity. Yet in spite of this overarching optimism, for many young and educated Bulgarians, considered as the vanguard of the intelligentsia, the deployment of discourses of the "Western," "democratic" and the "global" became a liberating turn away from Bulgaria and led to opportunities to study and work abroad. Many of these young Bulgarians today are practicing privileged international professions or continuing their academic careers in the United States. This outflow of the best-educated and younger generation of the country has been frequently described in the media as "the most severe brain drain in modern Bulgarian history." Moreover, Bulgaria today faces a devastating demographic crisis, whereby the population has diminished by almost two million within the last ten years, from close to nine million at the end of 1989 (Demographic Institute of the Bulgarian Academy of Science 1999). This demographic drop has often been explained as related to the overall decrease of the economically active population and the steady rise of the index in unemployment, combined with a high mortality rate and one of the lowest birthrates in the world.

Surprisingly, however, and until recently, there has been little attempt to generate public concern and explicitly relate the causes of this demographic crisis to the unprecedented outflow of young people from the country. In an emotionally charged attempt to attract these people back to Bulgaria, the Bulgarian government has for two successive years (2000-01) organized seminars and flown in a few hundred young and "successful Bulgarians living abroad" at state expense, in order to meet and to negotiate conditions under which this cohort may resume their loyalties to the Bulgarian nation. In contrast to the overwhelming enthusiasm by which Bulgarians living abroad responded to these initiatives, the reaction of the Bulgarian public in the country was largely negative, Bulgarians living in Bulgaria began to see themselves as "losers" compared to those who had left. The dialogue between young professionals abroad and the Bulgarian government did produce some interesting results and the situation today looks much brighter. It has not only helped to consolidate the young Bulgarian community abroad (among whom organizations such as the "London City Club," the "Bulgarian Wall Street Club," and the "New BGeneration" have been most active), but in fact has brought a large group of professionals back to Bulgaria. Few of these returning citizens have joined the newly emerging political movement of the exiled Bulgarian ex-king Simenon II—but rather became opponents of the political party which initially reached out to them—those who repatriated landed as winners in Bulgaria's 2001 parliamentary elections.

The organizing question of this paper is the somewhat paradoxical question of why a whole generation of educated and rather privileged people has chosen to leave Bulgaria precisely at a time when it seems to offer them heightened possibilities. It strikes us as almost natural to think of migration from Eastern Europe or Russia as being provoked purely by brute factors of unemployment, impoverishment, and the

general failure of postsocialist regimes to establish tolerable living conditions for their populations. With this study, however, I would like to reach beyond simply economic or political explanations and look at how status, prestige, and a sense of self-fulfillment, as well as larger patterns of social stratification inherited from socialism, may be just as critical as the former. Recent developments in Bulgarian politics and the return of a group of professionals to the country who took up key governmental positions suggest some interesting insights into how migration may affect the country of origin.

The conclusions drawn in this study are part of my ongoing research for my Ph.D. dissertation in anthropology and are based on extensive interviews with members of the Bulgarian community (mostly in three parts of the United States: the San Francisco Bay Area, Washington and New York), with officials from relevant ministries in Bulgaria and the Bulgarian consulate in Washington, and with representatives of various Bulgarian associations in the United States. My research draws as well on analyses of media reports, books and surveys and on two bodies of theoretical literature: the study of international migration[2] and the study of transnationalism and globalization.[3]

Recent research within these fields has challenged two of our most stable perceptions of world migration: the image that it is usually the poorest section of a society that migrates, and the notion that migration is above all a voluntary act. Saskia Sassen, among others, has argued that long-scale migration flows are embedded in specific systems that can be economic, political and ethnic, but also cultural and ideological (Sassen 1996:63). The influence of Cold War imagery to portray the West as a desired space for prosperity and betterment, for example, was a decisive factor inducing people to move westward. In addition, anthropologists deeply invested in phenomena of the social imaginary have paid attention to the relationship between transnational migration and the proliferation of new identities and cultural flows in the globalizing world. Yet, as Aihwa Ong (1999) argues, the product of these new identities promoted by modern forms of travel are entrenched in structures of various order— national and transnational—and are part of larger political-economic regimes in control of "the flow of people, things, and ideas," and therefore they should not be studied independently of these structures (26).

Along these lines, let me demonstrate the complex set of cultural perceptions through which Bulgarian immigrants in the United States are being assessed by members of the American community. The rules of belonging to a society are negotiated between newcomers and the larger public in the Unites States in institutional contexts and in their personal encounters within given "schemes of racial difference, civilization, and economic worth" (Ong 1996:738), which filter the socialization of immigrants in their host communities. During the Cold War refugees from communist regimes carried a special symbolic capital, being perceived as people who had undergone great suffering as freedom fighters. A certain positive Cold War

sentiment in the perception of Bulgarian immigrants in the US is still prevalent today. However, if we accept, as Aihwa Ong claims, that the "black-white polarity" provides the general ideological framework for symbolically ordering newcomers in the United States (Ong 1996:739), then the "whiteness" of the professionally ambitious Bulgarians is a factor that might be more significant in securing them a respected status in the highly stratified and racially charged North American society. Added to this factor is the immigrants' high level of Western-style educational background and competency in the legitimate "high culture," which allows for them to be recognized as at least "middle class" individuals. On the other hand, sustaining this perception becomes somewhat problematic given their initial lack of the economic resources usually associated with "middle class" status. Nonetheless, this initial "misrecognition," yielding them access into the ranks of the social middle class, ultimately opens up an entry into the economic middle class as well. Bulgarians are quick to notice that choosing highly prestigious and well paid professions, for example those of the "new economy" or in the fields of finance and consultancy, may secure for them the middle-class status.

I suggest that three factors are central to explaining the recent emigration of educated Bulgarians and shed light on the set of characteristics which consolidate their common identity abroad: 1) the radical incompatibility of the intelligentsia's cultural and moral values with those required for economic success in the contemporary conditions of "wild capitalism" in Bulgaria; 2) their alienation from the official life of the state, following the decline in the status and work perspectives of the intelligentsia's last socialist descendants; and 3) this generation's admiration for perceived values of western civilization.

My ethnographic evidence shows that the bulk of people who migrate westward and specifically to the United States belong to a generation that came of age in the mid 1980s and received their education from Bulgarian universities in the last years of socialism. In other words, one can argue that the emigration "crisis" in Bulgaria today is a result of generation-specific disadvantages brought about by the new economic realities in Bulgaria, following the dissolution of the socialist state. This insight prompted me to look further at the particular characteristics of social stratification during socialism, including the essential role the educated classes played in that society, in order to better understand this recent migration phenomenon. The common fate of many of these people as immigrants and the fact that they are gradually being perceived as an identifiable whole both by the larger North American community and by the Bulgarian public at home has bolstered their sense of a common identity and generational solidarity.

Statistics show that by the end of the socialist period, the stratum of professionals and intelligentsia, forming an identifiable socio-political unit together with people in administrative positions, constituted more than 40 percent of the population of Bulgaria (Tilkidjiev 1998). The breakup of the socialist system,

however, brought a very new concept of social distinction based on wealth, which came to obliterate formerly dominant criteria for social differentiation drawn along the lines of education, profession, administrative status, and the character of work (e.g., intellectual vs. manual). Today the status of the so-called "mass intelligentsia" of socialism (teachers, doctors, journalists, academics, engineers etc.)—the social group which was expected to constitute the "middle class" after the fall of socialism—has radically dropped in prestige, concurrent with a drop in their standard of living (Genov 1998:56). Significant structural redistribution of the administrative apparatus has left a large number of state-employed professionals and intellectuals literally on the street. It is precisely the educated group of the generation of the 1980s that have embodied in their personal lives the weight of the so-called "transitional period" in Bulgaria.

Let us concentrate for a moment on the above facts with a different set of metaphors. The postsocialist realities opened up a process in Bulgaria very similar to what Bourdieu has described with reference to France in his work *Distinction* (1998:99-168). Discussing the social costs of times that involve radical economic restructuring, he noticed that shifts in the labor market first and most dramatically affect the generation which enters the labor force at that particular moment. Furthermore, "the structural de-skilling of a whole generation, who are bound to get less out of their qualification than the previous generation would have obtained, engenders a sort of collective disillusionment" (Bourdieu 1998:144).

If initially directed towards the educational system alone, which in the case of Bulgaria has indeed produced far more specialists than the postsocialist labor market possibly could use, this mixture of revolt and resentment in the hearts of deprived young people extends to all other institutions and specifically to the state. As one of my informants expressed it, this "anti-institutional cast of mind" of the generation in question—whose betrayed ambitions make them refuse to accept such fundamental tenets of the new (but also in some senses previous) societal order as career, status, and in general what came to stand for "getting on" in society—is a major stimulus to leave the country. In some sense many young people today are confused by the fact that, just as in the rejected socialist past, finding a proper job depends again on "connections." Later this same informant concluded, "It is insulting to live in a society where success is measured through speculations and deceptions married with physical abuse, where there are very few who live well, and where those that achieved their prosperity though legal operations and professionalism are even fewer" (author interview, October 23, 2000). Expression of desire to leave Bulgaria is today among the most explicit, and probably less self-destructive, forms of refusal taken up by Bulgarian youth. The increased mortality rate mentioned earlier clearly indexes some of the more destructive forms of refusal, such as suicide or drug use.

My second hypothesis is that the cohort that is most likely—and, of course, most able—to emigrate belongs to the once privileged urban and well educated class,

commonly referred to as the "mass intelligentsia." For the sake of brevity, I will simply refer here to these people as "intelligentsia," while recognizing the much more complex nature of social structure and identification under socialism.[4] Two factors of life during that period—belonging to the upper class of the "intelligentsia," or the "nomenklatura," and residence in the capital of Sofia or another big city—were central in providing access to a prestigious status in society. My research to date has shown that the social backgrounds of Bulgarian émigrés tend to meet those criteria.

A few central characteristics of the cultural outlook of the "intelligentsia" became very influential in framing the experience of young émigrés, whom I will call the "transitional generation" of Bulgaria. Although ideologically egalitarian, socialist societies were in fact rigidly stratified, and the group of "intelligentsia" was one of the most visible layers of the social body, publicly defining the prevalent moral framework of Bulgarian society. As George Faraday (2000) has put it, "socialist intellectuals viewed themselves as the 'leaders of the nation' and combined their real passion for arts and ideas with a strong tendency to treat education and cultivation as a measure of human worth in addition to a heightened sense of social responsibility towards their nation" (58). The fact that many of the Bulgarian professionals in the United States envision some form of political participation in Bulgaria later in their lives is not coincidental but part of the expectations with which they were raised. These "hard core" values were also used as grounds for differentiating and denigrating other social stratas such as "the Party-elite," "the bureaucrats," "the provincials," and "the peasants" (not to mention "the gypsies").

Features of this attitude are manifest in the way Bulgarians in the diaspora construct their identities and communicate with one another, and I will discuss here two instances that demonstrate these relations. On the one hand, the new consciousness of exile of diasporic Bulgarians resides in the tension between a sense of national belonging cultivated within the intelligentsia's ideals (as described above) and another based on the idea of displacement. These two aspects of their identity clash as they attempt to redefine their political loyalties: a Bulgarian self, who is not supposed to leave, a person who is supposed to modernize the nation, and who heroically bears the burden of the hard transition that his country undergoes; and another self, shaped by the emerging notion that "we are citizens of the world" and, therefore, we do not necessarily subscribe to a narrow, nationalistic identity (or a similar version informed by the human rights discourse which seeks to promote the sanctity of the personal choice). The struggle to overcome the frustrations of this identity crisis reappears in many interviews over and over again. "The fact that I don't wake up in my bed in Plovdiv," a Bulgarian émigré shares, "but in Washington does not mean that I don't, so to say, dwell within the space of my native country....I have made a choice to live abroad that concerns purely and exclusively only my profession. Yet, this is difficult to explain to the Bulgarian public" (interview by Rudnikova 2000).

On the other hand, ambitious educated Bulgarians in the United States often feel very awkward in meeting their non-educated compatriots, who mostly enter the US through the "Green Card" lottery, launched in Bulgaria in 1995, or by illegal immigration. This awkwardness is a result not only of the explicitly distinct lifestyle of cosmopolitan professionals, which strictly separates them from the "petty ambitions" of service laborers, but is also a reflection of surprise at encountering "so many different kinds of Bulgarians," as another of my informants, a member of the recently established Bulgarian Wall Street Club, has noted. Such cohabitation of ambitious professionals and manual laborers was almost impossible within socialist Bulgaria except on a very superficial level, given the strict residence regulations, extreme contrasts of life in the capital and other parts of the country, and the prevailing ideology of egalitarianism, in which all Bulgarians were represented as equal. Socialization during that period happened within small circles of acquaintances in addition to other somewhat larger, yet still quite restricted networks of people pivotal for obtaining the bare necessities of goods and resources. As a result, Bulgarians of different social background were prevented from actively communicating with each other, further distorting the self-perception of the society as a whole. Moreover, there were no public institutions promoting solidarity across difference to compensate for that. In a way, then, Bulgarians in the diaspora, perhaps for the first time, have become more aware of the social inequalities inscribed and hidden in the socialist system they left.

Bulgarian historians have discussed another feature of life under late socialism that bears potential to support my explorations.[5] During the last years of socialism, Bulgarian intellectuals gradually came to see themselves as "exiles within"; not necessarily being political dissidents, they were nevertheless alienated from the official ideology of the socialist state and, more importantly, saw themselves as cosmopolitan "westerners." In addition, those whom I called the "transitional generation" of the 1980s grew up during a period when the socialist system became much more open to Western influences. As part of this process, Western popular culture, which mostly came through non-official channels, played an important role in the formation of the cohort that is at the center of my study. They tend to compare themselves to young people of similar educational and occupational status in the West, not to their parents or their grandparents. In the perception of this generation, the West was constructed to represent the goal of the pursuit of excellence and fulfillment, at once cultural and intellectual, professional and personal. Thus, the exodus of the young members of the intelligentsia to the United States, who were indeed supported in their ambitions precisely by their parents, paradoxically represents a form of spatial realization of this sentiment and seems to represent their search for the "true face" of European cosmopolitanism, albeit in a different geo-political body.

Bulgaria today has raised its hopes again that with the recent return of a small group of people from this generation to the Bulgarian political scene, the lost spirit of

democratic values will be resurrected. Although still quite suspicious of the potential and the sincerity of this group to really make a difference in the life at home, the Bulgarian public is gradually recognizing the positive effects of reestablishing its connections with the young and educated Bulgarian diaspora across the globe. An interview with one of these young politicians reads: "In 1995, when I was working towards my M.A. degree in London, I was roommates with couple of Latvians somewhat older than me. One of them was an adviser to the Interior Minister of Latvia, and the other was himself soon elected the Wise Minister of Defense; there were also a couple of other student advisers to the Prime Minister. At that time these people seemed like some kind of fantasy to me, like something that could never happen in Bulgaria, especially with the images that were haunting the political field in my home country at that time" (interview by Rudnikova and Lazarov 2001).

The time indeed has come for educated abroad young Bulgarians to participate in the social, economic and political life of their country. One question, though, is still in the air: Will the "transitional generation," with their indisputably positive political assets such as "a clean past, enough ideas in their heads and educational visas in their passports," as a Bulgarian journalist perceptively described them, revitalize the lost spirit of the Bulgarian intelligentsia and take up the social mission which once belonged to their parents "to lead their nation to a brighter future?"[6]

**Notes**

[1]The precise number is a matter of controversy with estimates ranging from 700,000 to 900,000 people. I have tried to compare various accounts in different sociological publications, in the Bulgarian press, and in the reports of the National Statistical Institute.

[2]See Basch, et. al. (1994), Schiller (1992), Sassen (1996), Ong (1999), and Portes and Rumbaut (1996).

[3]See Appadurai (1996), Clifford (1997), Bhabha (1994), Featherstone (1990), Hannerz (1989), Harvey (1989), and Lipietz (1987).

[4]For a comprehensive discussion on the role of the intelligentsia in Eastern Europe and Russia see Bauman (1987), Eyal and Townsley (1995), Faraday (2000), Konrad and Szelenyi (1979), Lipset (1972), Mokrzychi and Bryant (1994), Verdery (1996), and Frentzel-Zagorska (1996).

[5]See Daskalov (1994), Genov (1998), Jowitt (1992), Havel (1985), Milosz (1953), Orwell (1982), Yurchak (1997), and Zizek (1991).

[6]A popular slogan from the socialist past converted today into an expression denoting the cynical distance of the general public from the political messages of today.

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