ON THE WAY TO THE 'IMAGINARY WEST': BULGARIAN MIGRATIONS,

IMAGINATIONS, AND DISILLUSIONMENTS

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines Bulgarian migration to the UK since the lifting of work restrictions in 2014. Contesting the economic reductionism of mainstream migration literature, my aim is to provide an in-depth understanding of the diverse motivations, experiences, and meanings that migration holds for those who engage in it. By following the journeys of two groups of Bulgarians who share two different perceptions of class identity, I juxtapose their pre-migratory imaginations of life in the UK with the lived realities of migration. The phenomenon of migration is approached through the native concept of the 'West' (*Zapadat*), which simultaneously denotes the geographical region of western Europe and a place offering possibilities for a more meaningful life and a better future. By deconstructing this notion through the conceptual prism of the 'imaginary West' I grasp the connection between individual imaginations and globally circulating discourses and ideologies of Western modernity and civilisation and corresponding ideas about social hierarchy and class. I show how this idealised and in fact utopian version of the West foregrounds individual decisions to migrate and to sustain migration projects despite unforeseen hardships and unrealised expectations. I thus conclude that the 'imaginary West' is a major force structuring and sustaining migration between Bulgaria and the UK, and between global centres and peripheries more generally.

Acknowledgements

I remain indebted to all those people who openly shared their stories, sorrows, and happy moments with me. This thesis tries to give voice to Bulgarian migrants in the UK and all those living in Bulgaria unable to see a way out different than migration.

Finally, it is the love and support of my family that kept me going. I would like to thank my parents for always believing in my dreams and for always been there for me, understanding and silently encouraging. Their strength and kindness are admirable.

Thanks to my grandmother who is here to celebrate this submission and to my other three grandparents who were excited and proud but who did not live to see me graduate.

My greatest credit goes to Philipp Lottholz – my partner, my best friend, and my intellectual counterpart. For the love, patience, tiring discussions, sleepless nights and compassion I can never thank him enough. This thesis would have never been possible without you and without your edits, comments, and encouragement!

Note on transliteration and translation

In transliterating Bulgarian names, words, and expressions, I have used the Streamlined system which has been made official in Bulgaria since 1995. This system avoids diacritical marks and does not distinguish between *a* and ъ rendering both as *a.* I follow the '-ia' exception introduced by Bulgarian authorities in 2006 which postulates the transliteration of end of word -ия as -ia instead of -iya (for example: Sofia and not Sofiya). I have used anglicised forms for names of geographical places and people. All translations of my informants' words, or quotes from literature in Bulgarian are mine.

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Chapter One

Introduction

It was the end of June 2014 and London had been taken by a spell of unusually hot weather. That Monday morning, I was on my way to Kingston upon Thames where I was going to meet Assen (forty one) for the first time since his arrival to the UK two months earlier. I had known him from the time we both worked in the same real estate agency in Plovdiv – he as an agent, I as an office assistant. Back then he had returned from several years of work in Greece. In those days migration was a much-discussed topic in our lunchtime conversations. Unhappy with the lack of opportunities in Bulgaria, Assen would often contemplate better life prospects elsewhere. Having lost touch for years, I was surprised to hear from him at the beginning of my fieldwork in Bulgaria. When I informed him of my project he immediately offered himself as the 'perfect' informant. He and his wife had decided to start a new life in the UK – they considered this the best they could do for themselves and their one-year-old daughter. They planned for him to find a secure job and accommodation and for the rest of the family to join later. This was Assen's second attempt to 'conquer' London – few months before our first meeting he had already been to the city working at a carwash for a month. Back then he had his wife and daughter with him but they had difficulty getting used to their new life there so the whole family decided to go back home. Katya (his wife) told me that she felt she was 'in a prison':

> I was in shock. Living in a shared house was tough, plus the neighbourhood was full of black people. All this noise and bustle were too much for me. Assen

wanted to distract me with restaurants and shopping malls. I love shopping but at this moment I was so stressed out I didn't even feel like it.

Greatly disappointed, they planned to never again return to the UK, but with several of Assen's work projects in Bulgaria failing, they once again changed their minds. 'This time, it will be different', Assen told me before departing. Firstly, because it was summer and there were plenty of jobs; secondly, because he had already secured a carpet cleaning position in a friend's company. He believed that if he learned the language he could easily get a 'decent' job because he was smart and well-cultured. London, he said, was full of success stories of not so bright and educated Bulgarians who had 'made it' despite their 'Balkan mentality'. In contrast to Bulgaria, where people simply 'vegetated', Britain, according to Assen and Katya, was a place where 'dreams come true'. Their main explanation for this perceived discrepancy in the quality of life were the two distinct ways of thinking of British and Bulgarian people. Because of their subaltern historical fate and their unfortunate geographical location Bulgarians had adopted 'flawed' values and mentality, Assen told me, while the glorious imperial past of the British and their position in western Europe bestowed self-confidence and 'civilisational' virtues.

While Katya's dreams were primarily related to achieving a calm and materially secure life, Assen desired professional realisation as a life coach and motivational speaker – something he expected would bring him 'inner' satisfaction and fulfilment. Both stated that this was their last chance for bringing a much-needed change into their lives: 'We are sick of waiting and waiting for something to happen. The romantic years are over. Now we need to be sober-minded and determined – we need to take our life in our own

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hands and do what is best for us.' Before departing Assen vowed to do whatever it took to establish himself and his family in the UK and to never return to Bulgaria.

During our first meeting on British soil, I sensed that this determination and eagerness had vanished. As we found a shady spot in the park, adjacent to Assen's flat, he began to tell me about all the adversities he faced during his short stay in London: his job arrangement fell through, sorting his documents took longer than expected, there was no decent-paying employment, and he quickly ran out of cash. Not speaking English had made him feel like a 'complete outsider' but finding time for learning it was almost impossible. Assen complained about having grown 'mentally tired' of spending every single day thinking and worrying about his next steps: how to find his place in the UK, how to make a living and bring over his family? 'It is nice here, life is orderly, there are rules, and one can make money. If you work then all is good, you can earn some qualifications, there are prospects', he told me as we observed the passers-by. He pointed to a couple of dog walkers and exclaimed: 'Here they are, the British! What a fortune it is to be born British in this life, what a thing! Their life is good, their social life is proper, they just have it all!' Bulgarians, on the other hand, Assen believed, were born to suffer; they were wanted neither in their homeland nor in the West. 'You know what keeps me awake at night, Polina? That we, Bulgarians, have an unfortunate fate – in your own homeland you don't feel like a person, you come here, and you still don't feel like a person, what a lousy situation [...] what a life!'

Like some of my other informants, Assen had always considered himself to be more than the 'average' Bulgarian: he was well-educated, an intellectual by devotion, and believed to have a Western mind-set. His self-attributed middle-class status and many talents never brought him financial benefits or any other kind of recognition in Bulgaria.

On the contrary, the promises of the past twenty-something years of free market and democracy had convinced him that only corrupt and unscrupulous personalities could be successful. As many other Bulgarians, Assen decided that the only way to reach his aspirations for a better future was migration to the West. He and his wife imagined the UK as offering greater opportunities for personal and professional advancement and as a place where the 'normal' life they so wanted for their family was attainable.

The multiple blows Assen encountered upon arrival condemned him to suffering and disillusionment. Without a National Insurance number (NINo)[1], recognised qualifications, relevant work experience, and a satisfactory level of English, there was not much on offer for him. He spent the year after his arrival moving back and forth between Bulgaria and the UK in an effort to avoid long and costly periods of unemployment and generate income that would help him establish a permanent life in London. Eventually, he grew tired of the anxiety and emotional suffering that such circular movement entailed and decided to try and make a living in Bulgaria 'at least for the time being'.

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Contemporary international migration revolves around a paradox. In the past few years the number of people reported to have died or gone missing during attempts to reach the West (western Europe and north America) has increased to more than twenty

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[1] The National Insurance Number (NINo) is related to one's national insurance contributions and taxes. While British citizens (above sixteen years of age) are automatically granted one, non-British wishing to work in the UK need to apply for it. A NINo is one of the requirements for legal employment and benefits claiming. The applicant is required to attend a one-to-one evaluation interview in a local job centre which aims at identifying one's identity and intentions. An evidence of identity can be one or more of the following: a passport or an identity card, a residence permit, a birth certificate, a driving licence and a proof of address.

thousand.[2] Although on an international level the volume of migration has remained relatively stable, the number of people moving westwards has been rising since 1970s (Sassen 1988) with further upsurges in the 1990s (Castles, de Haas and Miller 2014) and in 2015.[3] This global trend has been well-reflected in the Bulgarian case especially in the post-1990 large-scale migration to western Europe and the US.[4] Throughout the first two decades of postsocialist transition[5] one in every four Bulgarians declared a desire to migrate if they could.[6] At the same time, exploitation, dismal living arrangements, and negative stereotyping have been all well-documented elements of migrant existence that often affect people regardless of the qualifications, education, and status they held at the beginning of their journeys.[7] The anti-immigrant politics and discourse that according to some have today peaked in a 'new wave of global resentment' (Rensmann and Miller 2010: n.p.) are rooted in sentiments that the western world has harboured for a long time.

It is unlikely that already prior to undertaking their journeys migrants are aware of all the different hindrances and privations that they are to meet. Still, the general risks, difficulties, and social decline that migration entails are no secret to anyone. Why is it

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[2] https://data.humdata.org/organization/iom-missing-migrants-project [Accessed 5 June 2017]. This data reflects only the documented death cases, there is of course no precise way of determining the exact migrant death toll.

[3] http://gmdac.iom.int/gmdac-migfacts-international-migration [Accessed 5 June 2017]. The United States and Germany have been declared the top two migration destinations. The UK comes fourth at this ranking.

[4] The lack of reliable and long-term data on Bulgarian migration makes the exact number of migrants hard to estimate (see Kabakchieva 2009).

[5] The term refers to the years after 1989 and the end of state socialism when the country was said to enter a period of 'transition' to free market and democracy.

[6] Rangelova and Vladimirova (2004).

[7] See Pajo (2007), Maeva (2017), Fox, Morosanu and Szilassy (2012) for the case of east and central European migrants to western Europe.

then that millions of people each year continue to see migration as an attractive option? Why do they direct their desires to certain places – western Europe and the US, where, as it is widely known they would not be welcomed with open arms?

The disentanglement of this paradox of popularity despite hostility is the starting point of this inquiry into Bulgarian migration to the UK. The interest guiding this qualitative investigation was sparked by the expectations and disillusionment that I had experienced myself as a migrant on my own journey from Bulgaria to the UK. My casual observations and conversations with fellow Bulgarians throughout the years showed me that many, just like myself, had left with inflated hopes and coloured imaginations that were shattered in the face of migration realities.

Assen's story is an illustration of the most recent migrations from Bulgaria to the UK. Like him, many of those who came in increased numbers after January 2014 were convinced that the lifting of EU restrictions on their right to work would enable them to enjoy the status and rights of a fully-fledged European citizenship. Since Bulgaria's EU accession in 2007 which brought about visa-free travel between the two countries the number of Bulgarian immigrants has been steadily increasing (Maeva 2017). Still, it is not the rising migration number that is most important here. It is rather the hopes, aspirations and meaning that people attach to their migration journeys. Many of those leaving after 1989 and even more so after 2014 did not see their migration as a temporary money-making exercise. They were, instead, motivated by plans of long-term settlement and dreams of constructing new lives for themselves and their loved ones (ibid). Another phenomenon that requires explanation are the perceptions that draw people to particular destinations. Since 1989, Bulgarians with long-term settlement intentions have preferred to travel westwards to countries such as Germany

and the US, whereas Greece, Italy and Spain have been the main destinations for short-term labour mobility (Krasteva 2009). The UK, previously a largely unknown migration destination, has been gaining increasing popularity since 2007 and has recently been pronounced as one of the two most desired migration destinations for Bulgarians.[8]

When scrutinised against wider socio-economic and political conditions in Europe and the UK in particular, such aspirational journeys appear paradoxical. Firstly, due to the 'managed migration'[9] approach adopted by British immigration authorities in 2002, Bulgarians' labour market access has been limited to low-skilled and highly exploitative occupations in the formal and 'shadow' economy (the so-called '3D' jobs – dirty, difficult, and dangerous)[10]. The differentiated treatment of Bulgarians (and Romanians) and the much harsher immigration controls directed towards them have assigned them the status of 'incomplete' Europeans; especially in comparison to citizens from the other eight east European countries ('A8') that joined the EU in 2004.[11] Secondly, such exclusionary policies implicitly legitimised the anti-immigration rhetorics taken up by British political parties and tabloid media who singled out Bulgarians and Romanians as the ultimate threat to the British economy, welfare, and national security. Stigmatising representations of Bulgarians and Romanians as 'benefit tourists', 'criminals', and 'uncivilised barbarians' have fuelled negative public perceptions and

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[8] See Maeva (2017), Pamporov (2011).

[9] Home Office report (2002:12).

[10] See Anderson (2010) for the power of immigration controls in molding a migrant labour force.

[11] See Fox, Morosanu and Szilassy (2012).

created a hostile climate towards newcomers from the two countries.[12] The intensity of such demonising and discriminatory public and political attitudes peaked on the eve of the lifting of labour market restrictions on Bulgarian and Romanian workers in January 2014. The negative reception of Bulgarian immigrants was prominently reported in Bulgarian media which for years has drawn attention to numerous cases of discrimination, exploitation, and other hardships faced by Bulgarians in the UK.[13] Finally, in popular discourses and perceptions, the issue of downward social mobility and de-skilling of Bulgarian migrants who despite their qualifications often do the jobs that locals shy away from (for a fraction of the wages at the formal labour market) gained increasing prominence in the past few years. In light of all these well-known obstacles and resentments, why is migration to the UK still an attractive undertaking for Bulgarians?

The disentanglement of this paradox of popularity despite hostility and desirability despite exploitation is the starting point of this inquiry into Bulgarian migration to the UK. The main questions guiding this thesis are:

1. Why do Bulgarians choose to migrate, and why do they migrate to the UK when they are aware of the hostile public discourse and the potential hardships they could encounter?
2. How do Bulgarians' post-migration experiences correspond to their expectations of life in the UK?
3. How do migrants' lived realities affect the status of the UK as an attractive migration destination?

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[12] The British Social Attitudes Survey (2013) demonstrates that a staggering majority of 77% of respondents want immigration reduced by 'little' or 'a lot' (see Ford and Heath 2014:2); See also Fox, Morosanu and Szilassy (2012) and Vicol and Allen (2014).

[13] For the proliferation of TV shows and programmes (after 2007) depicting the life of Bulgarian immigrants in the EU see Balabanova and Balch (2010) and Elchinova (n.d.).

In both popular and academic accounts, the reasons of international migration are most often attributed to economic advantage which is said to justify the suffering and the decline in status that migrants often undergo in destination countries. In scholarship dealing with post-1989 east European migration to the West, the motivations for migration have rarely been explored in a way that moves beyond such simplistic observations. Such studies often conform to the 'economic reductionism' accounts of the causes behind contemporary international migration. Wage differentials between east and west European countries are presented as the most prominent reasons for post-1989 movements.[14] A more macro-oriented approach sees east to west migration as part of a global trend in which people from developing regions are 'pushed' by low incomes, high unemployment, and general political and economic instability and 'pulled' by economic opportunities on offer in 'rich' countries where they can easily improve their situation.[15]

These orthodox views have dominated academic and public thinking about migration and have largely foregrounded social policy and decision making. Such positions, however, fail to engage with let alone answer important questions related to the lived experiences of international migration and its significance for those who engage in it. Firstly, reducing migration to rational cost-benefit calculation or global economic inequalities ignores the fact that people are also affective beings who entertain dreams and imaginations and that logic and rationality do not always and exclusively lead their migratory projects. Additionally, orthodox approaches do not tackle the complex interplay between individual motivations and structural forces that underlie the difficult

[14] See Morawska (1995) and Black et al. (2010).

[15] See Krasteva, Kassabova and Karabinova (2010), Mintchev and Boshnakov (2006).

choice between 'leaving' and 'staying' and thus tell us very little about the complexity of being a migrant. Secondly, even when economic privation is a significant push-factor, it is important to notice that usually it is not the most destitute members of society who are migrating. Nor are people from the poorest countries at the top of migration statistics.[16] With considerable investment and effort required, migration is not a strategy available to everyone and thus not simply a matter of choice, as mainstream migration research portrays it.[17] Thirdly, the assumptions on which dominant theoretical approaches rest often overlook the realities awaiting migrants in receiving societies – in many cases instead of reaping financial benefits migrants suffer economic decline. For instance, in most cases they earn significantly less than the average wage and existential minimum in receiving economies.[18] Finally, such theories do not account for the non-economic factors of migration, for example the cultural and historical links between countries or the social and political dynamics which can explain why individuals choose one of several destinations that all offer similar living standards.

This thesis tries to fill these gaps by engaging with migrants' own perspectives on and experiences of migration. As an in-depth study of Bulgarian migration to the UK, it tries to understand migration through individuals' own concepts and practices, the values they attach to the process of migration, and the stories they share to make sense of the 'new world' they find themselves in and the multiple changes that they undergo. By drawing on qualitative data collected during twelve months of fieldwork in Bulgaria and the UK, this thesis intends to provide a holistic and longitudinal engagement with

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[16] Stalker (2001).

[17] Ibid.

[18] See Anderson et al. (2006), Borjas (1995).

individuals' migratory projects. By following people at every stage of the migration process, I examine the way in which they interpret their situation at different steps of their journeys and trace changes in their opinions, perspectives, and experiences throughout time. This multi-sited approach (Marcus 1995) allows for a comparison between the expectations and imaginations of life in the UK that motivate aspiring migrants in Bulgaria and the realities that they encounter in the weeks, months, and years after their arrival.

This thesis investigates the migration experiences and motivations of Bulgarians with plans for long-term settling in the UK. It engages with people coming from a wide range of backgrounds, ages, and various Bulgarian localities. Migrants' narratives demonstrate that what motivates their migrations is a complex combination of different factors and circumstances. On one hand, it is their dissatisfaction with their present situation in Bulgaria and the multiple constraints that engender a widely-shared feeling of 'existential stagnation'. They are unable to imagine a viable future, feel a lack of movement forward in life and have a sense of diminished control and agency. On the other hand, they imagine their migration destination as a place offering a radically different life – one providing plentiful opportunities for fulfilment not only in an economic sense but in relation to overall existential satisfaction and achievement.

In my effort to account for the key function that imagination assumes in the formation of desires and expectations driving migration I utilise Alexey Yurchak's concept of the 'imaginary West' (Yurchak 2006). I stress the intersection between subjective imaginations and wider imaginary constructs to reveal how the emic notion of the West

(*Zapadat*)[19] that my informants evoked in their pre-migration imaginings of life in the UK reflects the supremacy of Western modernity and its developmental promise. The ethnographic cases in this thesis illustrate that the reasons for my informants' migrations are rooted in their perceptions of physical mobility as the only accessible strategy for achieving a much longed-for sense of existential advancement. Such understandings are embedded in pervasive visions of a hierarchically structured world in which different nation-states are ordered according to their ability to approximate an idealised Western telos. Would-be migrants' narratives reveal their desire to experience a Western kind of life upon migrating, one that they eagerly awaited but could never enjoy in Bulgaria. In distinction to Yurchak's (2006) analysis of how the 'imaginary West' always remains a fictitious 'elsewhere' in late Soviet socialism, I demonstrate how despite clashing with the realities of migrant life in the UK, the West in my informants' imaginaries is continuously renegotiated, re-projected and sustained as a benchmark guiding future aspirations.

As this research shows, Bulgarian migrants' early experiences in the UK expose them to jolts and challenges that they find hard to navigate. These are mostly related to structural limitations such as formal and informal bureaucratic barriers, a highly flexible and exploitative labour market, and different forms of everyday exclusion and discrimination. Thus, instead of reaping the benefits of their European Union citizenship they find themselves caught up in a situation of *de facto* illegality –

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[19] Throughout the thesis I do not use inverted commas when mentioning the 'West' or the adjective 'Western', however, I understand them as referring to social and ideological constructs and not as solely denoting a geographical location. I denote geographical descriptors in lower case, e.g. western/eastern Europe.

employed as undocumented workers and dependent on the services provided by the informal economy of the Bulgarian migrant community. Insufficient language skills, lack of recognition of former qualifications and employment experience, little cultural and social capital, and their own insecurities and doubts increase Bulgarian migrants' feelings of existence in a reality parallel to that of society at large. As a way of coping with the disappointment of their pre-migration expectations and their marginal and precarious existence, migrants devise practices that help them sustain their pursuit of a Western kind of life. My long-term engagement with the lives of my informants in the UK demonstrates that the Western dream largely eludes them. I show that in many cases migration results not only in despair and disillusionment but in fact in an existence worse off than the one experienced in Bulgaria. However, the social pressures and expectations that often accompany migration make it impossible for many to admit defeat or abandon their projects and return home. Instead they construct different strategies which help them to come to terms with their present and to sustain a positive outlook. Thus, instead of being debunked as illusory, the West continues to be pursued as a powerful dream guiding future life expectations. Their unwillingness to present a truthful depiction of their realities in the UK and the incapacity of their social circle to accept them feed into a 'cycle of deception' (Mahler 1995) in which the West continues to be reproduced as an idealised place constantly luring new cohorts of migrants.

Overview of Bulgarian migration to western Europe and the UK

Migration has been an important feature of Balkan and Bulgarian history since the mid-nineteenth century (Brunnbauer 2012, Hristov 2015). Seasonal labour mobility of

Bulgarian craftsman (gurbet) and agricultural workers within the boundaries of the Ottoman empire emerged as a common economic strategy driven by limited livelihood opportunities in the mountainous regions of the country. This large-scale cross-regional mobility was predominantly undertaken by men whilst women were mostly engaged in travel in search for work as maidservants (Hristov 2015). The first significant overseas migration wave from the Balkans to the US, Australia, Canada, and South America[20] took place in the beginning of the twentieth century. Within a short period of time Bulgaria had participated in three different wars – the First Balkan war (1912-1913), the Second Balkan War (1913), and the First World War (1915-1918) which resulted in loss of national territory, high reparation payments, and the devastating collapse of the national economy (Jakimova 2009). Because of these wars and the redrawing of territorial borders, seasonal economic mobility within the former Ottoman Empire subsided (Hristov 2015). The transatlantic labour mobility that replaced it retained some of the main characteristics of the earlier *gurbet* movements – temporary, male-dominated, driven by economic incentives, and always maintaining close transnational links with the home society.[21] With time, many of the migrants became permanent settlers and initiated the establishment of Bulgarian diaspora organisations in major migration destinations (Hristov 2015, Elchinova n. d.). Most Bulgarian workers, like other migrants coming from the Balkan region, satisfied the need for cheap and unskilled labour in the rapidly industrialising western economies. In the US, Bulgarians laboured in factories, mills, mines, and railways, whereas most

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[20] During the same period Bulgarians also headed towards destinations in central and western Europe-especially towards the former Austro-Hungarian empire (Elchinova n.d.).

[21] Overseas migration in the beginning of the twentieth century was also a strategy of avoiding military service (Hristov 2015).

of those departing for Australia sought work as gardeners (Tzaneva 2015, Markov 2015). The imagination of this first wave of Bulgarian migrants was sparked by widely circulating tales about the riches of distant places and the many opportunities they offered for young, able-bodied males. The image of the 'American El Dorado' was spread throughout the remote village regions of the Balkans in the stories of return migrants, travelling merchants, and recruitment agents (Markov 2015, Kolev and Kuluri 2012).[22] The period between the two world wars was marked by a drastic decrease in transnational migration flows – a result of the restrictive immigration policies put in place by the US, Canada, western Europe and other popular migration destinations (Markov 2015).

Traditionally, Britain served as a 'distributional centre' (Maeva 2017: 26) for Bulgarians on the route to the US, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia, rather than as a migration destination. In the beginning of the twentieth century, however, many Bulgarians sought employment as labourers, factory, agricultural and ship workers, miners, and servants[23]. Again, these were predominantly young single males, although with time female single-travellers arrived and started working as nurses and maids. Britain remained unattractive as an educational centre for Bulgarians, mainly because of the unpopularity of the English language[24], the high tuition fees, and the negative attitudes towards the country given its support of the Ottoman Empire's policies (Maeva 2017).

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[22] Other factors that played role in migrants' motivations according to Jakimova were the emergence of nuclear families and the population growth which reached its peak in 1930s (2009).

[23] Far less were those engaged in high-skilled employment as traders, clerics, insurance agents, lawyers and medical doctors (Maeva 2017).

[24] French and German were the two most popular foreign languages in Bulgaria at the time.

After World War Two the pattern and character of Bulgarian migration changed. Labour mobilities gave way to a wave of displaced people and political asylum-seekers who opposed Bulgaria's involvement in the German alliance (1941) and the establishment of the Communist rule in 1944. The size of the Bulgarian community in the UK significantly increased. The majority of new arrivals were white collar workers and intellectuals who established organisations and activities in support of the Bulgarian political exiles and refugees throughout Europe.[25]

During state socialism (1944-1989) opportunities for transnational mobility to the West significantly declined.[26] Still, the period was marked by numerous migrations: except for the ethnic and politically motivated mobilities another significant flow was the labour mobility of contracted workers and specialists to other socialist countries and the Arab world. Highly-skilled Bulgarian workers took part in the building of power plants, factories, and hospitals in Algeria, Libya, Tunisia, and elsewhere (Krasteva 2014). Study exchange trips, educational migration, and tourist mobilities to different socialist countries were also widespread. Labour migration was entirely regulated by bilateral agreements with countries from the Warsaw Pact or with the Arab world and others sympathising with Communist principles.[27]

Between 1944 and 1989 the Bulgarian community in the UK comprised different migrant groups: most numerous were political and economic migrants, followed by

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[25] The founding of the Bulgarian section of the BBC in 1940 by political emigres is an extremely important factor for the consolidation of the Bulgarian diaspora, its visibility, and in sustaining links with the homeland. The number of the officially residing Bulgarians in the UK rose from 29 to 93 between 1944-1989 which is still significantly less than the Bulgarian communities in other European countries (Maeva 2017: 44-45).

[26] Intense border controls and a system of exit visas significantly complicated travel outside of the country (see Elchinova n.d., Kovacheva 2014).

[27] See Elchinova (n.d.), Krasteva (2014).

those who had arrived before 1940s (Maeva 2017). Most Bulgarian workers remained concentrated in the industrial, service and agricultural sectors. Few developed business enterprises and engaged in intellectual and artistic occupations (Maeva 2017).[28]

The fall of state socialism in 1989 and the liberalisation of border controls to western Europe brought a new period in Bulgarian migration that was marked by a drastic increase in the number and diversity of cross-border mobilities. Despite the lack of widely-accepted periodisation of this most recent migration, three main time periods can be discerned that reflect different patterns, characteristics, and strategies: (i) 1989 – 2001; (ii) 2001-2009; (iii) 2009 to the present.[29] The first wave of migrations took place in the early 1990s when many Bulgarians headed westwards, mainly to Germany, Austria, and the US as asylum seekers, undocumented workers, and students. This sudden and intense increase in migration was attributed to the drastic economic decline, dismantling of state-run industries and farms, growing unemployment rate, decreased purchasing power, and the collapse of the banking system (Giordano and Kostova 2000; Baichinska 1997).[30] The neoliberal 'shock therapy'[31] reforms also led to social welfare reductions and the transformation of family and local community structures which in turn gave rise to pessimistic evaluations of

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[28] Still, the number of Bulgarians in the UK at the time remained relatively small compared to the Bulgarian communities in Germany, Austria, and Italy (Markova 2009).

[29] I chose to follow Elchinova's periodisation which takes account not only of the size of migration flows but the changing socio-economic and political context in Bulgaria and the changing migration regimes of different EU countries concerning Bulgarian citizens (n.d.).

[30] The period was also characterised by mass privatisation of industries, rigid financial discipline, and imposition of a currency board in 1997 (see Medarov and Tsoneva 2014).

[31] A metaphor describing a western-devised doctrine postulating the rapid implementation of market reforms in 'new democracies' across the world (Mandel and Humphrey 2002: 2).

the situation amongst large number of Bulgarians (Elchinova n.d.). As a temporary project, labour mobility often served as a survival strategy, although many Bulgarians shared intentions for permanent settlement in the West (Kabakchieva 2009). The desire to exercise the newly found freedom of movement and curiosity about western societies have been pointed to as important factors in motivating migration in these first 'transitional' years.[32] Visa requirements for most west European countries and the double structure of the host labour markets meant that both unskilled and qualified Bulgarians often became undocumented workers in agriculture, construction, domestic care, textile industries, hotels, and restaurants (Dimitrova and Kahl 2014, Kabakchieva 2009).

The second period in contemporary Bulgarian migration was marked by a public discourse of EU accession and the granting of visa-free access[33] to Schengen member countries in 2001 (Elchinova n.d.). Albeit with declining rates, the migration of Bulgarians continued, this time re-orientated towards south European destinations such as Greece, Spain, and Italy.[34] Scholars have explained this shift in direction with the establishment of different work schemes, the higher tolerance of local authorities towards undocumented workers, and the close geographical proximity of the countries in question (Markova 2009). This second period was also characterised by a clear shift from permanent to temporal and circular mobility made possible by the greater openness and accessibility of EU labour markets and the affordability of travel (Bobeva 2017). Whereas the high migration rates throughout the 1990s were explained with

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[32] See Krasteva (2014), Ditchev (2008), Mancheva and Troeva (2011).

[33] Bulgarians were given the right of a legal three-month stay in Schengen member states but many used this as an entry point and stayed as 'illegal' migrants for longer periods of time.

[34] Rangelova and Vladimirova (2004).

people's growing disillusionment with the devastating effects of the market reforms, the decline of migration in this second period was attributed to the hopes and expectations that came with Bulgaria's 2007 EU accession (Elchinova 2009). More employment opportunities, increased income per capita, and relative political and economic stability (Markova 2009)[35] were other reasons for the decrease in migration numbers.

The global economic crisis of 2008 began to affect Bulgaria in the beginning of 2009 when the so-called 'economic boom' of the previous few years came to a halt. Increased inflation, sharp rise in unemployment, consistent decline in GDP and reduced consumption ensued (Tomev 2013). Austerity policies, first introduced in the beginning of the 1990s with the start of the 'free-market transformation' of the country, were enforced with even greater intensity after 2009 as a way of stabilising the economy and decreasing deficits (Medarov and Tsoneva 2014). However, they failed to bring any improvement and resulted in a social crisis characterised by 'alarming poverty levels and increasing social unrest'.[36] The crisis and austerity deepened social inequalities and drastically escalated income stratification – in 2013 half of the country's population faced high risk of poverty and social exclusion (Tomev 2013, Medarov and Tsoneva 2014). Bulgarians' average salaries have been the lowest in the EU (396 EUR)[37] and 67% of the workforce at the time received a monthly salary below

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[35] The explanation behind the decreased migration rates in the period was corroborated by my informants who remembered the 2007 and 2008 as a period of relative improvement in their living standard.

[36] Statement in the European Commission report of 2013 on EU Employment and Social Situation, cited in Medarov and Tsoneva (2014).

[37] This is the figure for September 2013 presented by the National Statistical Institute cited in Tomev (2013).

the national average (Tomev 2013). In the beginning of 2013 the accumulated social discontent erupted into massive protests against austerity, which resulted in the dissolution of the incumbent centre-right government. The newly elected coalition lasted only one year, did not revise austerity policies and even initiated further privatisation of public goods and services (Ivancheva 2013).

The most significant trend in this most recent period of increased migration has been the shift of Bulgarians' movements from 'traditional' destinations such as Spain, Greece and Italy to the United Kingdom and Germany[38]. Bulgarian scholars have attributed this change of pattern to the harsher impact of the economic recession on south-European economies and their decreased demand for migrant labour (Bobeva 2017).

The first major influx of Bulgarians to the UK occurred in the years after Bulgaria's EU accession and consisted of both first-time migrants and Bulgarians resettling from European countries severely hit by the global recession in 2008. Maeva explains this change in migration flows and the steady growth of the Bulgarian diaspora with the changing migrants' perceptions of the UK. The country came to be seen as offering high living standard, strong economy and numerous employment opportunities (2017). For only a short period of time the UK has managed to turn from a country unknown, remote and relatively unattractive to one of the two most preferred migration

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[38] See International migration outlook OECD (2012), Kovacheva (2014), Maeva (2017); Although reliable data on return migration from the period is not available in Bulgarian public discourse the return of migrants mostly from southern Europe was widely debated. It has been established that in 2009 (2010) when the negative effects of the global recession came to affect Bulgarian economy migration numbers decreased (Deneva 2017). The reasons for this could be attributed to the people's perceptions of the worsening economic situation in different European countries and their own lack of economic capital required for migration. This observation is corroborated by my informants who claimed that during this time they considered migration a too risky endeavour and preferred to wait out for the effects of the crisis to abate before taking the decision to leave.

destinations (along with Germany) for labour and educational migrants alike.[39] This abrupt change in migrants' attitudes and perceptions was attributed to the relative economic stability that the country managed to sustain in the aftermath of 2008 economic crisis and the increasing popularity of the English language (Maeva 2017, Genova 2016a).

Until 2014 the opportunities for legal employment for Bulgarians in the UK were restricted.[40] After the EU accession of Bulgaria, the British authorities limited Bulgarian citizens' access to the UK labour market. Bulgarians were granted a three-month visa-free stay in the country, after which they were required to obtain a work permit. The only way to enter the labour market legally was by either acquiring a self-employed status or by working in the processing and agricultural sectors as part of established work schemes for low-skilled workers.[41] Studies have demonstrated that many of the Bulgarians who made use of these legal entry channels overstayed their temporary permits and became undocumented labourers in the construction, cleaning, and agricultural sectors where in many cases they received less than the national minimum wage (Markova 2009, Ivancheva 2007). Because of the undocumented status of many, and given the lack of official statistical data of the exact number of entries, the precise

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[39] See Maeva (2017). Data from Bulgarian National Statistical Institute from 2014/2015 has demonstrated that the UK was the most favoured educational destination for Bulgarian students (cited in Bobeva 2017).

[40] Prior to 2014 Bulgarians wishing to legally work in the UK had to obtain a valid work permit (for the different forms of work permits see Maeva 2017: 67-69) Bulgarians' access to social welfare provisions was also restricted. For comparison, Greece, Denmark, Hungary, and Portugal lifted labour market restrictions for Bulgarian workers in 2009. Germany, Austria, France and others allowed full access for Bulgarians in 2014.

[41] The Seasonal agricultural work scheme (SAWS) established in 2004 permitted quota entry of students outside EEA in unqualified seasonal jobs. Despite the exploitation involved the scheme became a popular summer work option for Bulgarian students who could not afford similar travel-and-work programmes to the US (see Ivancheva 2007). It should be noted that the UK also allowed legal employment for highly qualified workers.

figure of Bulgarian migration to the UK in the period in question remains difficult to establish. According to the Office of National Statistics in the UK, the total number of Bulgarians residing in the UK in this period was approximately 60,000 people.[42]

The lifting of the transitory labour market restrictions for Bulgarian and Romanian citizens in the beginning of 2014 led to the second and most recent upsurge in the number of Bulgarian newcomers in the UK. In its intensity this increase in migration numbers falls drastically short of the hysterical predictions circulating in populist media and political discourses. There is no precise estimation of the number of newcomers, but data gathered from several official sources attests to a certain rise in Bulgarian arrivals post 2014. The Office of National Statistics in the UK reports a threefold increase in the number of NINo applications made by Bulgarians in the first year since the granting of full access to the UK labour market[43]. It should be noted that this figure comprises applications from short-term and circular migrants, as well as, those arrived before January 2014. Estimates of the Bulgarian born population in the UK made by the Annual Population Survey demonstrate a 30% increase in the number of Bulgarian residents from 2014 to 2016.[44]

Since the start of my initial fieldwork in 2013, I myself have noticed an increase in the presence and visibility of Bulgarians in London and Birmingham. Despite this, the Bulgarian migrant group in the country remains relatively small compared to the size

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[42] Population by Country of Birth and Nationality tables January 2013 to December 2013. Available at: www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/...2014/rft-table-2---population-by-cob.Xls [Accessed 5 July 2017].

[43] http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20160105160709/http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/migration 1/migration-statistics-quarterly-report/february-2015/sty-bulgarian-and-romanian-migration-to-the-uk.html. [Accessed 25 June 2017].

[44] https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigrati on/datasets/populationoftheunitedkingdombycountryofbirthandnationality [Accessed 25 June 2017].

of other migrant populations and especially, to the number of migrants from other postsocialist countries (i.e., Polish, Romanians, Lithuanians, Latvians, Slovaks, and Hungarians).[45]

Traditionally, Bulgarians have settled in larger cities such as London, Birmingham, Manchester, Edinburgh and Glasgow which offer more employment opportunities and where East European and Bugarian migrant communities exist.[46] London is where most Bulgarians in the UK live.[47] Although Bulgarians are scattered throughout the city the highest concentration of Bulgarian businesses and homes ever since the early 90s is to be observed in the North and East parts of the city (zones 4, 5 and 6). In recent years larger number of Bulgarians settle in different localities outside London – the highest growing diasporas could be found in Southeast, East and West Midlands regions – drawn by the growing availability of jobs, the lower livings costs, and not least the greater ethnic homogeneity that life outside London offers.[48]

Bulgarian migration to the UK has been characterised by institutional discrimination, a result of the 'managed migration' policy agenda set by the British government in 2002. Under this approach, in 2004 'A8' citizens were granted full access to the British labour market in an effort to satisfy labour demands in specific sectors. The much stricter immigration controls adopted towards Bulgarian and Romanian workers in 2006 (a reply to the panic produced by the unexpectedly high numbers of 'A8' migrants) in

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[45]https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/datasets/populationoftheunitedkingdombycountryofbirthandnationality. [Accessed 25 June 2017].

[46] A trend that exists ever since the 1944-1989 period of Bulgarian migration to the UK (Maeva 2017).

[47] According to the date provided by the last UK Census of 2011 27, 207 Bulgarians live in London which is more than half of all Bulgarians living in the UK.

[48] According to Nygaard, Psierbek, Francis-Brophy's (2013) report the South East region contains the largest concentration of Bulgarian and Romanian migrants after London – 16%.

effect stripped them off the rights and freedoms related to their EU citizenship. Their *de facto* status of 'second hand' Europeans was further promoted by a political campaign which in turn provoked hostile public attitudes towards newcomers from the two countries. The circulation of hostile and discriminatory popular understandings and perceptions of Bulgarian and Romanian migrants in British society has been achieved mainly through the anti-immigration campaign taken up by British tabloids since 2006. In the media, they have been commonly stereotyped – often in a racialised manner – as criminal, poor, uneducated and culturally-inferior invaders posing a threat to the British moral and social order.[49] The cumulative effects of discriminatory immigration policies and public discourses on Bulgarian and Romanian migrant experiences have not yet been a subject of rigorous investigation.[50] Some of the findings of the scarce literature on the topic point to a process of identity questioning, feelings of being out of place and a rise in intra-community hostility as effects of the encounter with everyday discriminatory narratives and practices. Mila Maeva's (2017) study on Bulgarian migrants in the UK, for example, talks about the feelings of discontent and rejection that such policies and discourses provoke but also the role they play in relegating newcomers to the confines of precarious and undesirable segments of the British labour market. Exploring the motivations, experiences and hopes of this most recent group of Bulgarian migrants is the key focus of this study.

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[49] Fox, Morosanu and Szilassy (2012) study on tabloid representation of Romanian and Hungarian migrants demonstrates how in the framing of these recent migration flows media borrows racialised culturalist discourses used in the framing of past migrations to the UK. See also COMPAS's study on the representations of Bulgarians and Romanians in the British press (2012-2013) by Vicol and Allen (2014).

[50] For exceptions see Bulat (2017), Yuval-Davis et al. (2017), Vicol (2017).

Postsocialist East to West migration

In order to better understand the post-1989 migrations of Bulgarians to the UK and the role of the 'imaginary West' as a powerful driving force behind them it is important to consider the wider structural factors related to the collapse of state socialism and the socio-economic and ideological change that took place in eastern European societies. The adoption of the western developmental model in postsocialist societies led to the reordering of public policy and social organisation according to the principles of free market, private property and democratic and transparent governance. This refashioning came to pervade all spheres of life, as people embraced the ideology of western modernity under the promise that a collective effort to transform their country would eventually lead to economic development, prosperity and living standards equal to those in western Europe. Transnational migrations and short-term labour mobilities from the region to the West have been recognised as a widespread response to the effects of structural adjustment policies and neoliberal reforms introduced throughout postsocialist states after 1989.[51]

With variations across different states, the implementation of 'shock-therapy' reforms including privatisation, deregulation of financial and commodity markets, de-collectivisation of the agricultural sector, and withdrawal of state welfare did not bring the expected results.[52] On the contrary, the introduction of neoliberal policies resulted in the closure of industries and entire sectors of production which led to mass unemployment, impoverishment of large parts of the population, and gaping

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[51] See Kaneff and Pine (2011).

[52] See Berdahl, Bunzi and Lampland (2000), Hann (2002), Mandel and Humphrey (2002).

inequalities between a minority that was positioned well enough to navigate or profit from the restructuring and society at large.[53] Ethnographically-informed research has shown the effects of economic and political transformations on different aspects of individual existence, such as increasingly strained family relations and social networks (Benovska-Sabkova 2014, Creed 2002), deteriorating psychological and physical wellbeing (Kideckel 2002, Watson 1995) and the difficulties and moral dilemmas of adaptation to the new postsocialist realities (Mandel and Humphrey 2002, Kaneff 2002). Furthermore, scholars analysed the different individual and household responses devised in an effort to escape economic hardship and deprivation, for instance, household and subsistence production, informal economic activity, and small-scale entrepreneurship.[54]

Against the backdrop of such coping strategies and the fear and uncertainty produced by the economic reforms, different forms of labour migration to the West have emerged as a more fundamental and long-term solution to the problems faced by large parts of east European populations.[55] Thus, migration to western Europe has been theorised as an individual reaction to relative poverty and economic underdevelopment and therefore as a reflection of the global inequalities between capital-rich western economies and the cheap labour pool in eastern Europe.[56]

However, these explanations are only part of the story and often differ from people's own understandings of migration. In this thesis, I argue that east European migration

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[53] Kideckel (2002), Pine (2002), Schroder and Vonderau (2008).

[54] See Bridger and Pine (1998), Kaneff and Pine (2011), Medarov et al. (2015).

[55] See Kaneff and Pine (2011), Kideckel (2011), Pine (2014).

[56] See Burrell (2010), Goerlich and Luecke (2011), Kaneff and Pine (2011).

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

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

Anthropological literature on postsocialist eastern Europe has shown the different ways in which people have attempted to appropriate the West through practices of consumption (Patico and Caldwell 2002, Rausing 2002), architecture and interior design (Fehervary 2002, Hartman 2007), lifestyle and cultural activities (Pilkington et al. 2002). However, the role of the Western cultural imaginary has not been explored beyond these few examples. This thesis attempts to demonstrate how Western imaginings work as a driving force behind migration from eastern Europe to the West. The historical significance of the West in the socialist and postsocialist collective imagination foregrounds the relevance and importance of analysing the effects on the latter on individual life-worlds, as well as spatial and social mobilities.

Methodological reflections and ethics

This study has adopted an inductive, ethnographic approach to data gathering and analysis. It combines participant observation and informal conversations as main methods of data collection. Such a holistic approach elucidates individual perspectives and analyses them against particular historical, cultural, political and economic background. Most importantly, theoretical concepts emerge and develop in the process of data gathering and analysis.

For Geertz, the study of human culture and social experiences involves engaging with the 'symbolic forms – words, images, institutions, behaviors' through which people 'represent themselves to themselves and to one another' (1983: 58). The 'grasping of the native's point of view' (Malinowski 1922: 25) through physical and emotional immersion into the life-worlds of those in the focus of research interest has been the main principle of the ethnographic endeavour. The approach has been described as inductive – conclusions and theoretical reflections emerge from the data and not from previously acquired knowledge (Robben 2007). A holistic engagement ensures that the links between different aspects of individuals' lives are considered and local phenomena and understandings are brought into perspective through their broad contextualisation (Sluka and Robben 2007). Subsumed under the category of qualitative research methods, the ethnographic methodology, considered central to anthropology, has gained much popularity amongst researchers from a variety of disciplines including sociology, migration studies, and geography (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995, Sluka and Robben 2007).

The aim of this study is to ethnographically account for the experiences of Bulgarian migrants to the UK and to provide understanding of their motivations for migration.

Long-term participant observation was used as the main technique of data collection. Participant observation requires the researcher to constantly negotiate between their insider and outsider identities – subjectively experiencing and grasping meanings shared by those under study and at the same time maintaining some distance in observing and evaluating practices and understandings (Clifford and Marcus 1986). One of the main benefits of the approach is that by 'being there' (Fernandez 1985: 19) the researcher is able to grasp the difference between peoples' accounts and intentions and their actual practices (Bryman 2001).

The ethnographic approach has been identified as the most suitable in the study of migration for several reasons (Glick Schiller 2003). Firstly, it helps elucidate the causes and the process of migration by prioritising individual meanings and perceptions and interpreting them against existing structural constrains and opportunities (Pessar 2003). In this way, ethnography can bridge the dichotomy between person-centred and macro-level explanations of migration models and challenge some of the misconceptions still dominating migration research and public beliefs (Pessar 2003). Secondly, this research offers a longitudinal perspective into the lives of migrants – it accounts for the continuities and changes that they undergo. Intentions about moving or staying, desires and expectations are not constant in time; they change depending on different subjective and external factors. Quantitative methods (surveys, questionnaires, etc.) gauge a present sentiment – a snapshot of a moment in time - whereas ethnography gives us a perspective into processes across a variety of contexts (Glick Schiller 2003). Finally, the approach recognises the fact that migration is a cultural event for those who engage in it. It is invested with culturally specific meanings and understandings. Tony Fielding (1992) posits that 'only ethnographic

research can reveal the subtle details of the experience of migration' and its culturalist and idealist aspects. This conclusion is also related to the better elaboration of migrants' motivations: the in-depth ethnographic endeavour helps transcend the focus on discursive articulations engagement with which presents migrants as 'calculating' subjects (McHugh 2000). It does this by revealing the role of 'taken-for-granted' and common-sense knowledge that migrants draw on when discussing their decisions (Halfacree and Boyle 1993). According to McHugh (2000: 74) ethnographic research is capable of following the 'production and reproduction of sociocultural structures' through the engagement and interpretation of everyday life and individual histories.

In my study, I used participant observation and informal conversations to account for the different meanings that migration held for my informants and for the changes that these underwent with time. I was also interested in representing migration as a process that incorporates different stages and modes of being. I have done so by engaging with the lived experiences of migrants over a long period and in different localities– both in Bulgaria, where would-be migrants shared expectations, strategies, and imaginations as well as practically and mentally prepared for their journeys, and in the UK, where they came to discover firsthand the pressures and anxieties related to the migrant experience. My study prioritises migrants' own perspectives on their experiences but in doing so adopts a critical outlook and interprets emic observations in relation to social structures and historical processes. When it comes to theory construction, ethnography uses the so-called 'formative' approach (see Van Velsen 1967, Burawoy 1991) which engages with native concepts and emerging patterns and connects them to categories, explanations and hypotheses that are contextualised and constantly tested and reformulated in the process of investigation (Schensul, Schensul

and LeCompte 1999). I have tried to present my informants' understandings and experiences in their own words and colloquial formulations – what Geertz (1983: 58) calls 'experience-near' concepts – but I have also related those to 'experience-distance' concepts (Geertz 1983: 58) that help theoretically elucidate their meaning in relation to social and historical contexts. An example central to this study is the relationship between 'the West' (native concept) and the 'imaginary West' (theoretical concept). I use the 'imaginary West' to explain the way in which people understand notions like modernity, modernisation, and progress, but also wellbeing and good life under specific social, cultural, and historical circumstances.

As a project that requires substantial resources and is often invested with hopes for a better future migration has implications for the immediate and extended family not only the person migrating. This thesis, however, has adopted a more individualist approach of looking at migration decisions and strategies, a decision that was necessitated by several factors. Firstly, I found that some of my informants were more likely to plan their migrations on their own, in some cases, even actively hiding away information from their family and friends circle and unwilling to allow interference. This can be partly attributed to the fact that they saw migration as a highly risky endevour with uncertain outcomes that was at the same time invested with great expectations. In this sense, by not sharing their plans with family and local community members they were more likely to escape embarrassment and humiliation in case their project failed or they had to return empty-handed. Another concern that required prospective migrants' cautiousness was related to an exisiting public perception about the wealth and success that migrants obtain and the rumours, envy and loan requests provoked by it. Secondly, during my Bulgarian fieldwork my requests for being introduced to migrants'

families and friends were often met with suspicion which was part of the more general weariness amongst prospective migrants and the process of building trust which I discuss in more detail later.[57] Lastly, this person-centred approach is also preconditioned by legal, political and labour market mechanisms designed to encourage individual migration and discourage family reunification.

In the following I present an overview of my fieldwork and reflect on my recruitment strategies and methods; on the specificities of the dual-sited ethnographic approach I have adopted; and on ethical concerns and my positionality.

Fieldwork overview

I first came to London in January 2009 as a participant in a three-day workshop on a comparative analysis of quality of work and life of EU citizens in my capacity as a researcher for a Bulgarian NGO. I stayed in a hotel in the heart of Oxford Street and I remember feeling enchanted with the lights, the historical buildings, and the bustle of people from all over the world. I took these brief impressions as evidence confirming my stereotypical ideas about the UK as a place of tradition, sophistication, and affluence. In the autumn of the same year I returned to pursue my MA studies at the University of York. My student status and my relative financial independence put me in the protective bubble of the university campus which significantly biased the impressions of this migrant experience. This changed towards the end of my studies when I decided to look for a summer job that would provide me with some extra cash. My job search and my one-month employment as a cleaner in a local pub opened my

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[57] Later on, in my fieldwork in the UK I found meeting informants and their family members much easier. I further discuss the reasons for this in the 'participant observation' section of this chapter.

eyes to a different UK, one which had nothing to do with the UK of my dreams. I, however, did not let this dishearten me and was still determined to follow my aspirations for a Western life and education. I came back to the UK in 2012 – a few months prior to the start of my PhD studies. My plan was to stay with a British friend in London, get a taste of the life in this exciting metropolis and, most importantly, find a job that would allow me to save some much-needed cash. As my initial savings quickly dried up I found myself pulled into a precarious existence that had little to do with my previous privileged tourist and student experiences. My inability to find jobs matching my qualifications led me to constantly shift between different informal occupations, and my insufficient finances forced me to share accommodation with strangers in some of the most inhospitable parts of the city. With my initial plans turning into a disaster I began sharing my disappointment with other immigrants I met and I was surprised to find out that a great majority of them were also driven by rosy pictures of life in the UK. It was this experience that sparked my desire to explore the phenomenon of migration in more depth: I wanted to know why people moved, what role their imaginations played in their migration decisions and what the impact of their lived experiences of migration was on their pre-conceived images.

The ethnographic data on which this study is based was collected over a period of twelve months in different localities in Bulgaria and the UK. I first left for Bulgaria in June 2013 for a two-month preliminary research stint conducted mostly in Plovdiv and its environs. I returned to Bulgaria for another five months from April 2014 to August 2014 before spending three months in different parts of the UK – London and Birmingham, in particular.

Central to my study is the understanding of what happens to pre-migration expectations and aspirations of individuals once they begin their life in the UK. I decided that the best way to obtain such long-term insight into individual perspectives and experiences was to identify Bulgarians with plans for migration to the UK and engage with them prior to, during and after the completion of their journeys. As I intended to gain multiple perspectives, I adopted an 'inclusive' approach to participant sampling and recruited individuals of different backgrounds, ages, genders, and occupations. In the course of my fieldwork, I decided to narrow the scope of the study by focusing on people who held plans for long-term settling in the UK. This decision was in lines with my interest in providing a longitudinal depiction of migrants' lives: on the one hand people needed time to experience the different aspects of migration (arrival, finding accommodation, finding employment, gaining knowledge of the bureaucratic complexities, etc.). On the other, I noticed that those planning short-term labour mobility were less inclined to talk about their expectations and imaginations of life in the UK as they continued to imagine their lives back in Bulgaria (in this sense migration was more of a strategy for improving their economic and social situation back home).

Finding people who planned to migrate to the UK in the coming weeks and months proved to be more challenging than initially expected. If one could easily locate Bulgarians in schools, shops, pubs and even on busy streets in London and Birmingham, there was no specially designated space where prospective-migrants gathered in Bulgarian cities. I decided to 'cast my net wide' and simultaneously use a variety of recruitment techniques. Initially, I tried to find potential participants by posting a message on a popular online forum for Bulgarian migrants in the UK. My request

was met with fierce indignation and suspicion – users questioned my identity and intentions, some accused me of gathering personal data to obstruct their movements, others assumed I was a criminal trying to lure victims under a fake academic identity. After realising the limitations of this approach, I started mobilising family and friends' networks – this strategy helped to reduce issues of distrust and suspicion. After building trust and rapport, each of my informants was eager to introduce me to friends, colleagues and relatives who wished to migrate to the UK. This is how my research was greatly facilitated by what Polsky (1967: 129) calls 'snowballing' – participants vouch for the researcher and provide access to other informants.

In addition, I based two months of my fieldwork in a job recruitment agency in Plovdiv (Bulgaria) which allowed me to significantly broaden my selection of participants as I was introduced to people from different parts of the country. My decision to recruit participants through participant observation in a job recruitment agency was based on the increased significance that such institutionalised intermediaries have assumed in the post-2014 migrations to the UK. Whereas in 2007 there were only 15 officially registered recruitment agencies in Bulgaria in 2016 their number had risen to more than 300. Data from the local office of the European Job Mobility Portal (EURES) (where local and EU agencies advertise positions) demonstrates that in 2015 40 000 Bulgarians had been consulted on finding employment abroad whereas in 2011 their number was 11 000.[58] The opening of the British labour market to Bulgarian workers in January 2014 has led to the proliferation of local and transnational labour market

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[58] http://focus-news.bg/opinion/0000/00/00/23463/ [Accessed 20 January 2018]; As the job offers for the UK are increasing so is the interest of prospective workers. The agency where I did my fieldwork in 2014 received between 20 and 30 phone requests daily from people wishing to start employment in the UK.

intermediaries which fulfill the demands for low-skilled and flexible workforce in low-paid sectors such as agriculture, food processing, hospitality and social care.[59]

The use of different recruitment channels and practices facilitated my encounters with diverse group of participants with varying motivations[60] but it ultimately entailed certain limitations – it introduced me to a disproportionate number of males[61] and precluded access to so-called 'highly-mobile' professionals (Amit 2007).

In the end, I was able to follow the migration journeys from Bulgaria to the UK (and sometimes back) of a total of thirteen individuals. Of those, eight were males and five females; two were under 20 years old, two were in their early 20s, three in their early to mid-30s, and six were in their mid- to late 40s. Five of them held university diplomas, two were prospective students, and six had professional or secondary education; six identified as 'Western-thinking' and 'middle class' and seven as 'working class' and with 'Balkan temper' and 'mentality'. I supplemented this data through observing, accompanying, and conversing with a number of other prospective, current and return migrants who have lived and worked in the UK for different periods of time. I mainly used participant observation and informal conversations for gathering data.[62]

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[59] Prior to 2014 the role of Bulgarian agencies was limited only to the recruitment of workers on the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme (SAWS) and the Food Processing Sector Based Scheme on up to one-year long work permits.

[60] Educational and labour migrants.

[61] The higher share of male informants presented in this thesis reflects the gender characteristics of Bulgarian migration to western Europe (see Kabakchieva 2009).

[62] Additionally, the methods of virtual (online) ethnography (Hine 2000) were used in the form of observation of online discussion forums and Facebook groups popular amongst Bulgarian immigrants. A number of Skype conversations took place in times when face-to-face interaction was impossible; these resulted from an effort to keep in touch with main informants almost on a daily basis.

Participant observation – Although intended as main tool of data collection, some of the specificities of my research limited my ability of 'active membership' and participation in certain localities and stages of my fieldwork. It has been recognised that fieldwork which takes place in different sites offers less opportunities for participant observation (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, Hannerz 2003). Time and language have been identified as main practical limitations making multi-sited research more reliant on interviews (Hannerz 2003). In my case, it was mainly the scattered geographical distribution of my informants that limited the scope for participant observation, especially during my fieldwork in Bulgaria. The time spent in the recruitment agency allowed me to observe and converse with a wide range of would-be migrants on a daily basis.[63] A serious drawback, however, was the fact that they came from different parts of the country and their stay in Plovdiv was of limited duration. When possible, I undertook short-distance travels to meet key informants in their hometowns and villages. Another strategy for overcoming limited opportunities for participant observation was to spend as much time as possible with informants residing in Plovdiv. I tried to initiate occasions for interaction and 'hang out' with participants in coffee places, pubs, restaurants, their work places, and when possible accompany them in their daily errands and meetings with friends.[64] I also conducted observation whilst

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[63] During my fieldwork at the agency I conducted informal conversations with different duration with a total of 32 informants. I managed to keep in touch with around about half of them, mostly through social media. Although no one of them became a key informant - one of those whose journeys I was able to follow I was able to meet five of them in the UK and Bulgaria and obtain more information about their experiences in the UK and their relationship with the agency.

[64] This was fairly easy with informants of my age or those younger than me but proved challenging with older ones and those engaged with family care and obligations.

engaging in informal conversation with participants and made sure to note my impressions in my fieldwork diary.[65]

The initial distrust and suspicion that some participants occasionally expressed towards me was another challenge to my desire for full immersion into the lives of prospective-migrants. People I met (particularly those in the agency and the users of an online forum) questioned my intentions and my researcher identity and if they agreed to interact with me at all, were reluctant to engage any further beyond a short conversation over coffee. I believe this to reflect the particular context at the eve of January 2014, when the the EU working restrictions on Bulgarians and Romanians were to be lifted. Rumours of their extension made people particularly concerned and weary of anyone who inquired of their migration plans. Furthermore, despite my Bulgarian origin which made people more trustful I found that my affiliation to an English university raised questions about who was supporting and benefiting from my research.

In the UK, it was much easier for me to become part of my informants' lives, firstly because with time we had managed to develop a much more trustful relationship and, secondly, because they often needed me as a translator, an 'expert in migration questions', a friend they could spend time with and a sympathetic ear. I spent hours in their rooms and kitchens in rented homes where we chatted, watched TV, had lunches and dinners. I helped my informants with their job applications and accompanied them on their trips to job centres, banks and different state institutions. This gave me an

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[65] See Glick Schiller (2003) for the importance of this practice in ethnographic interviewing.

insight into their daily hardships, experiences of discrimination and their self-doubt and frustrations. Throughout my fieldwork, I also visited a number of social events organised by different migrant groups and associations and I spent time in 'Bulgarian' shops, pubs and cafes which migrants used as spaces for interaction, networking and recuperation.

Informal conversations – Throughout the whole research period, I carried out informal conversations with seventy-eight would-be, current, and return migrants. The length of these conversations ranged from half an hour to four hours. My initial strategy was to take notes during these interactions but this proved distracting for informants and interrupted the natural flow of the conversation. My experience showed that using a digital voice recorder was much less disturbing as informants would often note at the end of our meetings that they had completely forgotten about its existence. Once at home, I would listen to the interviews, transcribe important quotes, and summarise all the main points in my field diary. Towards the end of my fieldwork, however, recording conversations with informants who had by the time turned into friends became problematic. I gathered from their reactions that they felt uneasy when I mentioned the recording and they failed to see why would I need to record what had become a 'friendly banter' or 'sharing'. In such situations, I became extremely tense as I was constantly trying to memorise mentioned details and the exact words of sentences. I was using every opportunity to take notes without being noticed on my phone, napkins, small pieces of paper, and cigarette boxes. After those meetings, I would take time to write down a detailed overview of the conversation, my observations throughout and the precise words and expressions used.

Multi-sited fieldwork

In recent years, multi-sited ethnography has become an increasingly popular approach for ethnographers studying migration (Hage 2005). George Marcus explains this process as movement 'out from the single site and local situations of conventional ethnographic research designs to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects and identities in diffuse time-space' (1995: 96). The 'tracking' strategy I have adopted in designing my multi-sited research is the one Marcus calls 'follow the people' - an initial group of individuals is identified and their movements are followed between different localities (Marcus 1995: 90). Following Marcus' suggestion, I started my research from a strategically selected locale – Plovdiv, Bulgaria. There were strategic as well as practical considerations dictating this choice. First of all, while I was interested in having a diverse set of informants coming from different urban and rural areas I still needed to select a place that could serve as a 'hub' for my fieldwork. Secondly, scholars have noted that the profile and destinations of Bulgarian migrants are geographically determined and dependent on previously created networks.[66] Plovdiv, the second largest city in Bulgaria, attracts a number of internal migrants from different parts of the country and is popular for its high concentration of recruitment agencies. This forms a solid basis to engage with a broad range of prospective migrants. The practical reasons for my choice were autobiographical – I have lived in Plovdiv before coming to the UK and was thus provided with material resources, social

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[66] See Guentcheva, Kabakchieva and Kolarski (2003).

networks and emotional support mechanisms – all preconditions for a successful fieldwork experience.[67]

Still, I could not avoid some of the practical and methodological limitations that have preoccupied migration ethnographers conducting multi-sited ethnographic research. One of the main challenges of the approach is that immersion into the field, a key prerequisite for classic ethnography, is limited (Hage 2005; Hannerz 2003). The departures of the would-be migrants that I recruited in Bulgaria did not occur at the same time but at different moments within a period of six months. This meant that I could not carry out extended and uninterrupted periods of research with all of them and could only follow the narratives and experiences of a limited number of people, while interaction with others was more irregular. Reflecting on his own transnational migration research spanning across multiple localities, Hage (2005) notes the inability of the researcher to be deeply immersed in multiple sites and the analytical and psychological problems that such an effort creates. The challenges that I faced in terms of establishing a strong relationship with my informants and sustaining trusted and long-term rapport with them were very similar to the ones described by him. One advantage that helped me tackle the problem of depth and breadth of engagement was the fact that my two field sites were fairly familiar to me given my own personal experiences and background. My main goal was to sustain deep and personal interaction with my informants and not lose sight of everyday dynamics and changing perceptions. In order to sustain regular face-to-face interaction, I had to undertake

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[67] For discussion of the links between field site and home see Knowles (2000). Cohen (1987) for example also admits that fieldwork could be seen as a disguised autobiography – the choice of field is often guided by our desire to negotiate the deficiencies of our everyday life.

short trips between Bulgaria and the UK. When I was prevented from doing so I relied on Skype, emails, and other forms of online contact.

Finally, practical circumstances related to time and financial constraints prevented me from realising my initial plan of physically accompanying individuals on their migration journeys to the UK. In Bulgaria, I often accompanied people to airports and bus terminals gauging their immediate pre-migration sentiments and anxieties. In the UK, I had the chance of welcoming some in the first hours after their arrivals. Most, however, I met in the first weeks and months of their stay in the UK.

Ethical considerations and positionality

The ethnographic exploration of migration brings up ethical concerns that need to be carefully considered. My research entailed two months of participant observation in a job recruitment agency which served as an intermediary between migrants and British employers. The role of recruitment agencies in channeling migrants into temporary, precarious, low-paid, and exploitative employment has been well-documented in the migration literature.[68] Despite licensed in the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies and working in close cooperation with the National Employment Agency and the European Jobs Networks the recruitment agency I was placed in, as many others in the country regularly breached existing rules and regulations without drawing the attention of national authorities. One of the most obvious unlawful practices that often remains unchallenged is the charging of 'recruitment' fee often amounting to two average Bulgarian wages which workers are required to pay in full before departure

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[68] See Findlay et al. (2012), Sporton (2013).

with the explanation that this covers transport and 'other administrative' costs.[69] In addition to this, prospective migrants are often provided with preliminary contracts in English language which oblige them to financially compensate the agency (usually with the initially paid 'fee') in case they decide to leave their employment before their contract expires.[70] The negative public outcry over the fraudulent practices of Bulgarian recruitment agencies have not led to stricter regulations as usually owners (in most cases former migrants with connections to British employers) whose license has been revoked re-register and resume their activities a new name.[71]

Still, a great number of prospective migrants who lack networks and language skills rely on such services while being extremely cautious and mistrustful. Many of the people I met considered finding employment through a recruitment agency a risk worth taking – it was seen as a stepping stone that would enable them to set foot in the UK, procure the necessary documents and start their search for a permanent and better

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[69] According to the existing Bulgarian legislation intermediary agencies are not allowed to charge job applicants with service fees but can require payment for the arrangement of transport, accommodation and trainings. Most commonly agencies use this loophole and charge up to ten times the real costs of transport, accommodation, and training.

[70] This is particularly worrying as in most cases the agency misrepresents the job and living conditions - minimum working hours, work duties, accommodation arrangements and so on. During my time at the agency I witnessed many cases in which workers returned only a week after the start of their employment either because they were physically unable to meet the inhumane workload or because they were not provided with basic living arrangements.

[71] For example, the agency in question has existed ever since the early 2000 under more than eight different names. In 2009 the license of the company was revoked by the Gangamasters Licensing Authority (GLA) of the UK for supplying posted workers to British farms in breach of Bulgarian laws and for deducting large amounts of workers' salaries. This, however, did not prevent the owner from resuming his activity almost immediately under a different company name.

paid employment.[72] My decision to cooperate with the agency was accompanied by a desire to closely observe potential fraudulent practices, document them and possibly bring them into light after the end of my fieldwork. This intention to 'bring justice', however, as I came to realise later, contained its own moral contradictions.

The agency owner and his staff were extremely accommodating to my requests, they allowed me to spend as much time in their office as I wished, provided me with a desk and computer and had nothing against me interacting with their clients.[73] As expected, I witnessed several of the above-mentioned morally dubious and unlawful practices. For instance, before signing their job contracts, would-be migrants were charged a so-called 'service' fee which often exceeded an average Bulgarian wage (ca. 290 GBN). They were presented with video clips and brochures which gave them an unrealistic account of the nature of the work they were expected to do and they had no information about related hazards. In addition, they were often forced to sign English-language contracts that were not translated for them.

Anthropologists have discussed fieldwork contexts and circumstances that make it extremely difficult for researchers to sustain the role of neutral observers and even more so come to terms with the realisation that 'neutrality is not an ethically acceptable position' (Seymour-Smith 1986: 18).[74] What made the situation in the agency particularly difficult for me was that on one hand I had the urge to protect my informants

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[72] It should be mentioned that the dependence of some migrants on recruitment agencies has been also determined to a great extent by existing structural limitations in the UK, such as formal and informal bureaucratic barriers, a highly flexible and exploitative labour market, and different forms of everyday exclusion and discrimination that I discuss in more length in Chapter Five.

[73] At some point, they even gave me access to different employment contracts, email communication, and their own database.

[74] See also Nash (1979).

by sharing with them information about 'hidden' pitfalls, while on the other I did not want to lose access to the fieldwork site. I tried to address this issue by arranging private meetings with informants outside of the agency office and carefully drawing their attention to some of the risks entailed in their dealings with the agency. It was curious to hear that most people were well aware of the fact that they did not get the best, or even a good deal, but simply did not see an alternative given their lack of knowledge and contacts making it hard or impossible to migrate and find work on their own. They still chose to play along with the agency requirements and accept low pay and dismal working conditions for the lack of a better alternative.

A second ethical issue was the fact that, although having the right to legally reside and work in the UK, many of my informants had difficulties obtaining certain documentation which pushed them into the informal sector of the labour market. Thus, a great number found themselves in a highly precarious position, at least in the first months of their stay in the UK. They had to take on highly exploitative occupations, had no employment rights and protections, often lacked access to social and healthcare services. This made me extremely cautious about disclosing sensitive information related to my informants' occupations and identities both during fieldwork and in written outputs.

When recruiting informants, I was explicit about the focus of my study and the research process. I never concealed my researcher identity and I was always available for discussing their potential concerns and the extent of their involvement in the study. Informed consent was obtained verbally and in some cases was also audio-taped. I ensured my informants that I would protect their identities and treat the information they shared with me confidentially. They were encouraged to choose pseudonyms of

their own liking and, although a few of them insisted there was no problem with using their real names, I still preferred to change those.

Geertz (1988: 13) notes the role of ethnographers as 'lenses, selecting and interpreting "scenes" and "scripts'', these acts are not neutral or value-free – the research process, the collection and interpretation of data is undoubtedly influenced by the position of the researcher, her subjective experiences, and beliefs. Being a native ethnographer – doing research amongst people of the same culture and nationality – incurs both risks and advantages. Before starting my fieldwork in Bulgaria, I often worried about getting caught up in the so-called 'home blindness' characteristic for ethnographers studying their own societies and not being able to see beyond the familiar and the obvious. Throughout my research, however, I realised that because of the years spent outside Bulgaria and my strategy of engaging with social settings and with social groups with which I had had little contact while living in Bulgaria (for example visiting popular bars, cafes, and shopping malls with informants) provided me with a degree of distance and detachment and enabled me to get into the role of an outsider (at least at times). It was common for me to experience a sense of 'cultural shock' and feeling of being out of place while in an unfamiliar setting or when observing unfamiliar behavior. Overall, I found that my position of a 'native researcher' had brought many advantages – it has allowed a deep immersion into the field and an opportunity to gain informants' trust more quickly and easily. I was careful to sustain a reflexive stance and not slip into the position of an authoritative insider. Even though I managed to develop close and trusted relationships with some of my informants I did not let those limit my critical

reflection on their accounts of migrant life and the possible contradictions they were in.[75]

My position of PhD student and teaching assistant resulted in the emergence of power inequalities in the field. I was often perceived as an intellectual, expert in migration issues, fluent in the English language, and a much-experienced participant in a social and cultural setting of which my informants had very little knowledge. I was also said to have cultivated a Western mind-set because of my travels throughout western Europe and, most of all, because of my British education. Much to my displeasure this cultural capital often caused awe and admiration. My strategy to balance this was to adopt the position of a curious and unaware researcher, somewhat naïve and incompetent, who refrained from giving advice or influencing decisions. The power imbalance between my informants and myself became more obvious during my fieldwork in the UK. Some individuals would often note on the different kinds of migrant status that we held, defining themselves as 'ordinary migrants' referring to me as a 'student' or 'lecturer', which was seen as a more privileged position. Again, it was the sharing of my own early migrant experience and hardships similar to their own that helped me become accepted as 'one of them'. My own migrant experience also made me identify better with my research subjects and brought about a more empathetic understanding of what my informants were going through.[76]

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[75] Leaving the field proved particularly difficult as by the end of my fieldwork some of my informants had become good friends with whom I regularly met and shared news. Although I sustain these relationships to the present day I deliberately tried to limit our interaction throughout the writing up of this thesis.

[76] Except for my educational level and migrant experience there were other factors such as age, gender, and social background that ultimately affected my fieldwork. My position of a young female and single researcher led me to situations in which male participants would wrongly interpret my interest towards them. A clarification of my intentions, however, managed to resolve such confusions and I was still able to develop relationships of trust. As already said my age allowed me to 'hang out' with young

Thesis Outline

This thesis comprises one theoretical chapter and four empirical ones. **Chapter Two** outlines the theoretical discussions and main scholarly contributions in the three key fields of inquiry of this thesis: migration, imagination, and class. The first part of the chapter critically examines the theoretical models which continue to dominate understandings of the reasons behind contemporary international migration. By outlining their limitations this first section points to the need for an approach that recognises migration as a culturally, rather than solely materially-informed event and stresses the conceptual importance of the interconnection between migration motivations and imagination. To contribute to the development of such a research perspective the second part discusses literature on the social imaginary, its role in mediating between subjective longings and material practices, and its dystopian potential. The section further draws on the advances of psychoanalytical, culturalist, and postcolonial literatures and introduces the notion of the 'imaginary West', which forms the backbone of the interpretive framework of this thesis. Finally, the chapter discusses the conceptual pitfalls and merits of postsocialist class analysis and emphasises the role of insights coming from a Bourdieusian reading of class in understanding collective class-based identities in the region, as well as their relevance for migration research.

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participants and those my age but restricted opportunities for interaction with older informants who had to spend more time with their families. On the other hand, those older than me saw me as someone unexperienced and worthy sharing their stories and perceptions with. In terms of social background my origin from and residency in the central part of Plovdiv (second largest Bulgarian city) might have been perceived as indication of high status; however corresponding power imbalances seem to be less significant than the ones stemming from my position as a researcher/academic.

Chapter Three introduces the reader to present-day Bulgaria through the perspectives and stories of this projects' informants. It commences by showing how the conflicting self-identifications of my informants – expressed in the two emic ideal-types of 'ordinary people' and 'Bulgarian Westerners' – mirror existing class antagonisms in postsocialist Bulgarian society and how these can be used as analytical categories to trace the role and reproduction of class identities throughout the migration process. I shed light on the diverse motivations underpinning migration decisions by arguing that shared perceptions of class belonging and related experiences influence the way in which people make sense of their situation and the meanings they confer to their migration projects. I further demonstrate the commonalities in would-be migrants' narratives that denote a shared feeling of 'not going anywhere' in life – an existential impasse conditioned by multiplicity of subjective and class-based constraints. I argue that this condition, which my informants wished to escape through migration, is result of the shared disillusionment with the country's 'transitional' project and its underlying progressive temporal modality.

Chapter Four deepens the exploration of my informants' reasons to migrate by analysing their imaginations and aspirations of life in the UK. It highlights the centrality of the emic notion of the West (*Zapadat*) around which expectation of a more meaningful life and a better future revolve. Through the concept of the 'imaginary West' I grasp the function of this native notion as a widely-shared, collective social imaginary – emerging and developing against a particular historical and cultural background and rooted within the promise of Eurocentrically-conceived modernity. The deconstruction of the West as envisioned by my two different groups of informants demonstrates its class-tinted variations and reveals that, although a reflection of hegemonic cultural

constructs, this imaginary is still invested with distinct meanings pertaining to one's individual circumstances and social positioning. The drastic contrast between Bulgaria and the West that surfaced in my informants' narratives epitomised a deeply-entrenched understanding of the world as hierarchically structured. In this sense, migration stems out of a desire for existential advancement from a place of low to a place of high status.

Having explained the meanings and expectations that my informants invested in their migration projects, **Chapter Five** engages with the lived realities of migration. Its first part discusses the obstacles that my informants faced in the early months after their arrival, most importantly the difficulty of procuring basic documentation, the inability to find secure and regular employment, and their dependence on the services and resources of a hostile immigrant community. I argue that formal and 'hidden' bureaucratic mechanisms, a highly flexible and exploitative labour market, as well as different forms of exclusion and discrimination push all informants into *de facto* 'illegality' and precarious existence. The second part of this chapter follows the specific experiences of my two groups of informants in the mid-term period of their migration journeys. Despite the different amounts and kinds of capital at their disposal (economic, cultural, social, symbolic) 'Bulgarian Westerners' and 'ordinary people's' lives in fact developed in a world parallel to the one of the British society. The drastic mismatch between idealised visions of Western prosperity and opportunities and actual realities of migration necessitated strategies for coping with disillusionment and for maintaining strength and perseverance in the pursuit of pre-migration plans.

Chapter Six brings to a close the personal stories narrated in this thesis and returns to the main question with which this research started: What is it that propels and

sustains Bulgarian migrations to the UK in the face of widely-known hostility and exploitation? Firstly, I show how migrants' lives were affected by the contingencies of lack of time, social isolation, and limited mobility, which combined with the general structural exclusion they suffered drove them into a new state I call 'international stuckedness'. This existential stalemate was experienced as more painful and disempowering than the impasse my informants had struggled with back home because it turned into an entrenchment in the international hierarchy of places. On one hand, my informants realised that because of their inferior nationality they would never be able to achieve international advancement through migration, while on the other, they found the prospect of return unacceptable for a variety of reasons. I also point out how the shock and disillusionment that migrants experienced in the UK surprisingly did not result in the denouncement of the West and its deceptive nature. On the contrary, in the different visions of the future that they shared their hope of finding the 'real' West continued to persist. Based on this finding, I reflect on the teleological nature of the 'imaginary West' and its reproduction in a 'cycle of deception' (Mahler 1995: 88) which was sustained in the discourses and practices of current, return, and prospective migrants.

Chapter Seven summarises the main findings of the thesis and returns to the initial conceptual and contextual rationales for the study. It also outlines the key contributions that this research makes to different academic fields. Before identifying potential areas for further research, the chapter reflects on some contemporary developments and their implications on Bulgarian migration and the imaginary that propels and sustains it.

Chapter Two

Theoretical Background

The aim of this chapter is to position the three main themes on which this thesis is based – migration, imaginary, and class – within theoretical debates in migration studies, anthropology and sociology, and, furthermore, postsocialist, postcolonial studies, cultural studies, and psychoanalysis. This chapter presents both a review and critique of relevant theoretical engagements, as well as it introduces a theoretical framework for analysing the interconnection between migration, imaginary and class. The literature revised here covers research that has direct links to the themes identified in the process of data analysis. The empirical chapters of the thesis develop further the arguments outlined in this review and demonstrate how they connect to empirical reality.

The first part of this chapter focuses on current debates in the field of migration studies concerning both the reasons behind contemporary population movements and migrants' experiences in their new destinations. I will argue that this field and its understanding of the phenomenon of migration is still very much in the grip of a narrow economism and overly deterministic 'push-pull' explanations. The critique coming from different disciplinary angles aims to problematise this dominant logic by looking at the diversity of factors that come into play in the migration decision-making process. Efforts to reveal the 'cultural side' of migration and the connection between migration and imaginaries (imaginations), are still in their infancy but offer explanations that are much closer to people's lived realities. The second part continues with a discussion of some of the most influential theoretical engagements with the social imaginary and its role

as a concept that helps to unpack the nexus between subjective longings and material practices. I present the notion of the 'imaginary West' (Yurchak 2006) as a cultural and mental construct driving migration movements and underline the class-sensitive nature of this social imaginary. The final section of the chapter presents a review of the current state of class analysis in studies of postsocialism and demonstrates the usefulness of a Bourdieusian concept of class which helps to better understand the significance of class as a lived category in eastern Europe and beyond.

Understanding the reasons and experiences of migration

This section outlines the analytical framework for understanding migration through the viewpoint of migrants themselves. It begins with a critique of the dominant approaches in the field of migration studies which continue to be guided by a simplistic 'push-pull' economic logic. I follow this with a discussion of the main models explaining the experiences of migrants in their new life and work destinations, which leads to engagement with theories and debates that account for how institutionalised and informally imposed constraints, and a capitalist labour market affect the precarisation and temporalisation of migrants' existences. Finally, the review focuses on the importance of adopting a culturally-informed lens that can provide a balanced account of the multiplicity of subjective and macro-level material and ideational factors that all come into play in engendering and sustaining migration. Most importantly, by taking into consideration interdisciplinary contributions dedicated to revealing the non-material aspect of individual motivations and expectations the central role of imaginaries (imaginations) in disentangling the puzzle of migration is underlined.

Challenging the hegemony of economic reductionism in explaining migration

The most consequential theories of international migration whose basic premises continue to dominate public understandings have been devised by economists. Traditionally, they have been inclined to see migration as a result of income differences between countries and have presupposed rational choice and economic maximisation as main incentives guiding individual decision-making (see Borjas 1989). The uneven spatial distribution of labour and capital is said to leave some countries labour-scarce and capital-rich while in others the opposite ratio exists (ibid). By moving to regions where they can obtain higher remuneration for their labour it was expected that migrants would eventually contribute to the equalisation of income inequalities and population movements will come to a halt (see Harris and Todaro 1970). In this equation, individuals appear as rational decision-makers who take the decision to move after a careful cost-benefit assessment of available regional and international economic opportunities. For its simplicity and common-sense relevance, *neoclassical economics* has been responsible for the establishment of a still virtually unchallenged understanding of the reasons behind contemporary migration. Namely, the premise that money is the name of the game: pushed by material poverty, people leave their home countries, led by the desire to improve their economic situation, which ultimately brings them to wealthier places. In media and public accounts, the impression that people do indeed manage to achieve material enrichment upon migration and live more fulfilling lives than the ones left behind still holds resounding validity (Pajo 2007).

The new economics of migration (Stark and Bloom 1985) school that developed out of the neoclassical model has challenged the centrality of the individual rational agent as a decision-maker in the neoclassical model. Instead, it put forward the proposition that

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a larger collective – that of the family or the household – should be used as the main unit of analysis. Placing emphasis on the 'push' factors influencing migration, the theory holds that as a family strategy of risk minimisation, migration emerges out of feelings of relative, not absolute deprivation. A focus on the 'pull' side as providing a macro level explanation formed the basis of the prominent *'dual labour market theory'* developed by Michael Piore (1979). He claimed that it is advanced industrial societies' structural demand for cheap labour that sets population movements into motion. Migrants get absorbed in a secondary labour-intensive and low-productivity sector of the economy where they fill in the demeaning and low-paid positions shunned by locals (Massey et al. 1993).

The relevance of classic 'push-pull' explanatory frameworks has been questioned by a variety of disciplines and has even initiated some internal re-considerations within economics itself. The main shortcomings of the macro equilibrium explanations are said to be their rather one-dimensional representation of reality and their inability to account for different interrelated externalities that all affect the process of migration (Arango 2000). Their biggest drawback, however, is their disregard for individuals' own motivations and interpretations. In contrast, treating migration as a microeconomic phenomenon which revolves around the figure of the migrant as a self-interested, rational maximiser of economic benefit ignores the existence of broader structural determinants that effectively impinge on the process by influencing individual decisions. By and large, the economic determinism which structures the foundations of the most influential theories of international migration makes them ill-suited to grasp

the complexity of contemporary migration realities and insufficient to paint the full picture of why certain individuals chose to move beyond borders.[77]

Another macro-level theoretical explanation of migration developed within the 'dependency' (or 'world-system') model has been taken up by Alejandro Portes (1981) and Saskia Sassen (1988), amongst others. Inspired by Emmanuel Wallerstein's 'world-system' model (1979), the approach attempts to take issue with the deficiencies of 'push-pull' models, notably, their fragmented vision of social reality and lack of historical sensitivity. This holistically-conceived critical engagement with macrosocial processes reflected postcolonial shifts in global capitalism and their interrelation with international population movements. The historical-structural paradigm on which dependency scholars rest their premises is structured around the importance of relationships of domination between 'core' and 'periphery', which are reinforced by the movement of global capital. In search for cheap labour, new consumer markets and raw materials, capital, in the form of foreign direct investment, travels from core to peripheral countries to commercialise and modernise natural ways of life and local practices (Arango 2000). In the process, rural people, dislocated from their land, start moving to the cities where they become dependent on waged employment. As peripheral economies' service sector is unable to absorb this labour force, part of the surplus population migrates to core economies 'through the same channels that were

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[77] The dominance of methodological individualism in academic and public thinking about migration could be attributed to what has been described as the 'invasion of the economic man' (Baert and da Silva 2010: 125) into social sciences. With its origins, traceable to the early 19th century, the paradigm reached its greatest dominance in the 1980s with the introduction of the new public management and neo-liberal policy-making. The reduction of different aspects of social life and individual action to crude economic logic has formed the main premise of this widespread tendency (see Baert and da Silva 2010).

opened by the economic penetration, and through the cultural, transportation and communication links that followed' (Arango 2000: 291). The 'dependency school' positions the functioning of international migration in the global system of labour supply engendered by the spread of capitalist mode of production across the globe (Sassen 1988).

This structuralist theoretical framework of analysis disregards the importance of individual free choice, advanced by neo-classical migration theory, and instead emphasises the limitations produced by the interplay of different structural factors. Positioned in the dynamics of uneven capitalist development, migrants emerge as voiceless pawns moved around by forces beyond their control. They are often objectified in the concept of a 'reserve army of labour' which presents them as mere fractions of labour power (Castles and Kosack 1973, Castells 1975). The conceptual merits of dependency theory rest on its historical grounding and sensitivity towards persisting global inequalities that have undeniable effect on individual behaviour. Those, however, have been shadowed by the rigid determinism of this approach and its complete dismissal of the subjective dimensions of migration.

What made anthropologists come relatively late to the study of migration was the 'sedentarist bias' (Malkki 1995: 208) – i.e. the almost exclusive focus on local cultures and closed societies – that the discipline upheld at least until the 1960s (Brettell 2000). Anthropologists have also been accused of succumbing to and reproducing the primacy of economic advantage as explanation for migration (Pajo 2007). Preoccupation with particular aspects of the experience of migration, i.e. remittances, and ethnic identities, have reinforced a piecemeal approach which has in effect contributed to a more or less explicit acceptance of the 'fact' that individuals move

either because they are in search of better economic opportunities or because they have been trapped amidst the interplay of lager structural forces (Pajo 2007). However, the rich ethnographic accounts and theoretical innovations introduced by anthropologists within the paradigm of transnationalism, especially in the decades after 1990s have undoubtedly facilitated a better understanding of the diversity of international migration and have promoted the discipline's leading role in migration discussions (Brettell 2000).

So far, scholarship on east European migration in general and Bulgarian migration to the UK and western Europe in particular has been relatively unsuccessful in grasping the complexities and contradictions of contemporary migration movements and their motivations. Studies dedicated to revealing the reasons behind and the nature of Bulgarian migration to a significant degree conform to the 'economic reductionism' that is characteristic for east European migration research in general (Black et al. 2010). By overemphasising and generalising the importance of either micro- or macroeconomic factors, scholars pay less attention to the interplay between individual and structural complexities that underlie the difficult choice between 'leaving' and 'staying' (Krasteva et al. 2010). In addition, very often Bulgarian migration experts and researchers use normatively charged and politically handy dichotomies between 'economic migrants' ('labourers', 'gastarbeiters', 'gurbetchii') and, on the other hand, the 'transnationally mobile' ('highly-skilled' and 'mobile' 'intelligentsia', 'professionals' and 'new Bulgarians').[78] Such categorisations uncritically adopt the explanations of low-skilled Bulgarians being 'chased out' by material poverty and attracted by desire

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[78] See Chavdarova (2006), Ditchev (2008), Stoilkova (2005), Liakova (2008).

for increased earnings. The 'new type' (King 2002) of young and educated migrants, on the other hand, are said to use migration in the enactment of their idealistic (as opposed to materialistic) desire to 'see the world', acquire new experiences and realise their potential. This portrayal takes for granted and reinforces, as I will show in more detail below, classist and orientalising narratives about civilisation and deservingness that cloud the existence and effects of neoliberal capitalist restructuring in eastern Europe and beyond.

Understanding post-migration realities

Initially, in the early and mid-twentieth century, research on migrants' experiences in destination societies was conducted under the paradigms of *assimilation* and *integration*. Assimilationist models postulating individuals' incorporation into the receiving society through the complete appropriation of 'new' language, cultural and social norms have been criticised for their simplicity and uni-directionality.[79] The concept of integration recognises the possibility of diverse post-migration outcomes dependent on migrants' social and cultural capital as well as the structure of the labour market, immigration policies, and the existence and composition of an ethnic community (Brettell and Hollifield 2000). The framework of *transnationalism*, most-commonly associated with anthropological migration research, has been evoked as an alternative to both assimilationist and integrationist approaches. Conducting research on both ends of the migratory route, anthropologists and other ethnographers have been able to pay attention to the fact that migrants often remain emotionally and materially connected to two or more places at the same time. By contesting an

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[79] See Portes and Zhou (1993), Bean and Brown (2015), De Haas and Fokkema (2011).

'uprooted' view on migration and an understanding of a gradual but irreversible incorporation of migrants' lives into the receiving society, transnational scholars have outlined the emergence of a 'new' type of migrant[80] whose life develops in a social field created beyond the boundaries of home and host societies. Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton-Blanc (1994: 7) define transnational migration as a 'process by which immigrants forge and sustain simultaneous multi-stranded social, economic and political relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement'. Such articulation contests conceptually-imposed splits in migration research and renders clear the interconnections between the different 'stages' of migration and the processes of decision-making and settlement, as well as the new cultural and social practices, individual identifications, ideas and beliefs that emerge out of this process (Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton-Blanc 1994).

Anthropological research on migrant communities that is based on the concept of transnationalism reflects the discipline's traditional interests in questions of cultural change, identity construction and ethnicity (Brettell and Hollified 2000). As an analytical framework, transnationalism analyses contemporary population movements as engendered by global capitalist transformations and recognises the economic vulnerability of migrants. Still, the model remains mainly preoccupied with exploring the social, political, and economic engagement of immigrants with their homelands, as well as with the identity changes they undergo in the process of adjustment to the new society. In this sense, transnational migration scholars have been less concerned with

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[80] The newness of the concept of transnationalism has been contested by Portes (2001), who claims that transnational practices among migrants are not a new phenomenon and have been documented in prior research. For more general criticism of the temporal and theoretical novelty and usefulness of the approach see Kivisto (2001).

migrants' everyday activities and environments - the receiving state and its legislative and more informal constrains on migrants' lives (e.g. policies, public discourses, and the structure of host labour markets) – which has limited their understanding of migrants' immediate concerns and struggles (Kivisto 2001).[81]

Albeit working on a macro analytical level, models of immigrant economic integration can provide a useful insight into migrants' daily life challenges (Piore 1970, Sassen 1991). Such approaches have accounted for widespread employment practices and labour market positions that migrants assume in the receiving society and have drawn attention to the main reasons behind the marginalisation and precarity that many experience as a result of their movements. In *the Global City* (1991*),* Sasskia Sassen argues that post-industrial cities like London have become an arena of contestation between high-income earners in finance, banking, and insurance and low-paid blue-collar workers catering to the needs of a privileged stratum. Proceeding from theorisations on the bifurcated nature of advanced modern economies and their primary and secondary labour markets, Sassen's analysis helps understand the workings of a post-industrial economy and migrants' embeddedness within it. She claims it is mostly immigrants working as sales assistants, nannies, drivers, cleaners, and construction workers that satisfy the corporate economy's demand for low-skilled

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[81] The main reason for this has been the 'unbound' approach used and its reluctance to limit its unit of analysis to the boundaries of a single nation-state. Moreover, transnationalism scholars' interpretation of migrants' practices as strategies of resistance and subversion of 'the global political and economic situations that engulf […] (migrants)' (Glick Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton 1992: 11) underplays the fact that both in the past and present individuals have been more likely to comply with the capitalist system either because of lack of alternatives or genuine belief that successful incorporation into the receiving society can be achieved by enduring dismal existence and exploitation (Kivisto 2001).

services. Immigrant occupations are characterised by a lack of job security, health and other social benefits and by restricted opportunities for social mobility (Sassen 1991).

Low-skilled migrant employment in advanced economies was recently further theorised in debates on *precarious workers* by scholars with focus on the UK and London in particular.[82] They have rejected assimilationist and integrationist approaches in arguing that migration is nowadays implicated in a process of exclusion and 'de-citizenship' (Standing 2011, Mezzadra 2016). Migrants' settlement is said to be bounded by the precarisation of their livelihoods and their molding into easily disposable and highly exploitative mobile labour force that is advantageous to the needs of global capitalism. Guy Standing (2011) adopts Bourdieusian articulation of precarity[83] and extends it to the process of globalisation and imposed flexibilisation of labour responsible for the disappearance of a traditional working class. He claims that today a growing number of workers find themselves in an insecure position in relation to capital and state (Standing 2011).

The articulation of a clear and workable definition of precarity has proven an arduous task given the concept's slippery and potentially catch-all meaning (Anderson 2010). Its usefulness, however, lies in its ability to capture global economic and state-imposed pressures that bring instability and flux for particular groups of workers. Migrants have been disproportionately represented in atypical forms of employment defined by

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[82] See Standing (2011), Anderson (2010), Alberti (2014), Macarie (2017).

[83] Initially precarity is used to describe temporary and seasonal labour. See Bourdieu (1997) La précarité est aujourd'hui partout: Intervention lors des Rencontres européennes contre la précarité [Precarity is today everywhere: Interventions during the European meetings against precarity] Grenoble. International Labour Organisation. Available at: http://natlex.ilo.ch/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_dialogue/---actrav/documents/meeting document/wcms_161352.pdf [Accessed February 2016].

functional flexibility - agency work, self-employment[84], part-time and casual labour arrangements (Anderson 2010, Standing 2011). By employing the analytical lens of the 'denizen', Standing explains migrants' 'readiness' to engage in precarious work arrangements as a result of the denial of their civic, economic and social rights. He claims that there are in fact institutionalised mechanisms for shaping/producing a super-mobile and exploitable 'floating reserve' (2011: 102).

Michael Burawoy's (1976) conceptualisation of an international system of migrant labour helps to further explain the benefits of a low-cost, compliant, and highly-mobile labour force for structurally advantaged economies. He posits that the reproduction of international labour force, usually consisting of single, able-bodied individuals, is only possible through the separation of maintenance and renewal processes: the costs of labour renewal (education, social provision, public services) are to be borne by the institutions of the sending state while the maintenance is organised by the receiving one. The mutual sustenance of the two processes is ensured by what Burawoy calls the 'dependence of the reproductive worker on the productive worker' (1976: 1053). With the implementation of different legal and political mechanisms, the receiving state entrenches the vulnerable and weak position of migrants, their separation from their families, and the reproduction of oscillatory movements between work and home (Burawoy 1976).

This research presents Bulgarian migration to the UK as one of the many routes within the international system of migrant labour. It demonstrates that even when it is desired, long-term settlement is often impeded by systematic constraints and by a capitalist

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[84] Including 'false' self-employment (see Davis 2015).

labour market restructured in line with demands for temporariness and flexibilisation. In the empirical chapters I will show how Bulgarians, who formally enjoy a 'legal' free-mover status because of their EU citizenship, are equally affected by processes which *de facto* strip them off their granted rights and protections. I demonstrate how through the workings of formal and informal mechanisms (economic, political and bureaucratic) migrants' temporariness and circularity become 'institutionalised' (Mezzadra 2016). This is a clear case of the precarity systematically produced in the international system of labour supply (Burawoy 1979), where hopes to obtain a better life channel the supply of cheap labour from peripheral east European EU member states to the secondary and informal labour markets (Sassen 1991, Anderson 2010) in western Europe. This thesis thus questions the ability of one-directional assimilationist models to explain migrants' incorporation or lack thereof into the host society.

Connections between imaginaries and migration

In recent years, primarily due to the efforts of anthropological and ethnographically-engaged geographical research, the economic reductionism dominant in migration studies has slowly given way to a more nuanced understanding that accounts for the interplay between economic and non-economic factors of migration. This scholarship has been led by considerations expressed in the call the geographer Tony Fielding made more than two decades ago:

> The feelings associated with migration are usually complicated, the decision to migrate is typically difficult to make, and the outcome usually involves mixed emotions [...]. Migration tends to expose one's personality, it expresses one's loyalties and reveals one's values and attachments (often previously hidden). It

is a statement of an individual's world-view, and is, therefore, an extremely cultural event. And yet, when we study migration scientifically, we seem to forget all this (1992: 210).

Rooted in the 'cultural turn' in social sciences (Silvey and Lawson 1999), the conceptualisation of migration as a cultural process reflects the complexity of migrants' motivations and the multiplicity of factors which, although not always rationalised or acknowledged, affect the decision-making process (Halfacree 2004). Studied in the context of individual biographies, migration emerges as a process – rather than a single event – which develops in a complex entanglement with individuals' life stories (Silvey and Lawson 1999). When thought about as a 'story' (Champion 1999) riddled with contradictory emotions, preoccupations, fears and aspirations, the lived experiences of migration and their articulations largely defy abstract models prevailing in most academic accounts.

Most importantly, the adoption of a culturally-laden lens has proved useful in outlining the important connection between imagination and migration. The powerful role of imaginaries in determining why, where and when people move has been gradually gaining recognition in the work of scholars preoccupied with studying diverse types of human mobility – lifestyle migration, tourism, postcolonial migration, 'labour' and high-skilled mobility.[85] They have been able to demonstrate the significance of expectations and aspirations in motivating migration decisions by revealing how the act of migration becomes a 'technology of imagination' (Vigh 2009: 105), through which people lay claim upon a particular vision of a better and more fulfilling life. Salazar (2013), for

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[85] See Pajo (2007), Vigh (2009), Salazar (2010), Elliot (2012), Benson (2012), Belloni (2015), Mai (2003).

instance, argues that people's determination to cross borders is connected to their ability to imagine other places and possible lives as better than the ones currently experienced. It has been recognised that migrants often expect that by settling in a particular 'elsewhere' they would be able to lead a life imagined as offering more fulfillment and meaning not only in terms of economic gain but also general existential possibilities (see Salazar 2013, Benson 2012, Pajo 2007).

Those who have stressed the conceptual importance of imaginaries and other non-economic dimensions in migration movements have done so in consideration with the effects of wider historical, cultural and economic processes. Benson claims that in order to explain why migration occurs one needs to consider the diverse contingencies coming together and enabling individuals to enact their imaginings (2012). In this respect imagination alone cannot explain migration decisions as they are a complex combination of 'individualised biographies, trajectories and actions, as well as wider cultural contexts and structural conditions' (Benson 2012: 1681). Thus, rather than an effort to discard the contributions of economistic models, culturally-informed understandings of migration have tried to challenge their explanatory monopoly by advancing nuanced and complex accounts of migration motivations. By refusing to succumb to a binary that simplifies the process of migration as fully engendered by either economic or non-economic factors, researchers have demonstrated the scope for complementarity between ideational and material approaches to studying migration. In the same vein, this thesis questions the conceptual merit of the economistic premises of migration studies and renounces an understanding of Bulgarian migration to the UK as solely conditioned by an economic 'push-pull' logic. Instead, it presents an effort to contribute to an existing but still rather faint

interdisciplinary inquiry into the role of non-material factors in influencing decisions and experiences of migration. Thus, this research aims to grasp the lived experiences of migration and thereby reveal the central role that imaginaries play in it. The following section will discuss the origin, conceptualisation and most useful application of the 'imaginary' for migration research.

The social imaginary and its role in international migration

To account for the role that individuals' imaginations assume in the construction of migration motivations, choice of specific destination and migratory patterns, this section turns to a more in-depth discussion of the nature of the imagination and its role in social life. It begins by laying out a basic conceptualisation of imagination as a social rather than individual quality and introduces the concept of the *imaginary* for capturing the dynamic relation between individual imaginations and wider cultural formations across space and time. Drawing on the key works of Castoriadis (1987), Taylor (2002) and Appadurai (1996), I explore how the imaginary has been understood as a vehicle for reproducing social order and hierarchies, and, relatedly, the dark side of modern capitalism. I also discuss the distinction between imaginary and imagination, which has been mostly conceptualised as an expression of agency and individual creativity. I further expand the critical perspective on the imaginary as an ideological construct (Althusser 2008) luring large groups of people into supporting or acquiescing to the capitalist order and its logics of reproduction, thereby limiting their capacity for critical reflection and resistance. The collective propensity for conformism working through the imaginary is further explained in the psychoanalytical work of Lacan (1977), Zizek (1989), and Sloterdijk (1984) who see the structuration of collective desire and

behaviour as related to an individual propensity for fantasy identification and compensation of internal lacks and traumas. Finally, I introduce the concept of the 'imaginary West' (Yurchak 2006) and outline its relevance for understanding the perspectives and lifeworlds of my informants.

Imaginary, social action and capitalist modernity

Cornelius Castoriadis is probably the social theorist to have developed the most elaborate and influential contribution to the understanding of the imaginary and its embeddedness in the relationship between individual and society. His philosophico-theoretical engagement presented in *the Imaginary Institution of Society* (1987) provides the basis for much contemporary application of the concept to the understanding of different aspects of individual and collective lifeworlds. Castoriadis differentiates between an individual and a social imaginary[86], which, he argues, are in a state of dynamic interaction – it is the collective workings of individuals' imaginations that bestow meaning upon symbols, institutions and material things and give the so produced social imaginary the status of 'a symbolic matrix that enables human action' (Gaonkar 2002). Castoriadis is primarily interested in the function of the social imaginary and its effects on the way people think, make sense of things, and act. In his reading, the social imaginary operates as a unifying group ethos, which:

> gives a specific orientation to every institutional system, which overdetermines the choice and the connections of symbolic networks, which is the creation of

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[86] Bourdieu makes a similar distinction when he talks about imaginary and 'imaginary in the ordinary sense of the word' (1984: 150). He sees the imaginary as a quality – socially and historically determined. 'Imaginary in the ordinary sense of the word' refers to the popular usage of imagination as individual capacity for dreaming and fantasising. For him imagination is always contextual no matter how utopian (see Smith 2006).

each historical period, its singular manner of living, of seeing and of conducting its own existence, its world, and its relations with this world (1987: 145).

The imaginary, which always reflects a particular historical and cultural background, is seen as a framework within which people perceive and understand their collective social life (1987). The imaginary is not omnipresent or omnipotent, however. Castoriadis believes that individuals have the potential for achieving a multiplicity of outcomes by challenging the imaginary, the institutions on which it is built and its significations.

Charles Taylor's (2002) discussion of the imaginary perpetuates the tendency towards homogenisation and abstraction laid forward by Castoriadis. Departing from Benedict Anderson and his understanding of the imaginary as a framework of consciousness in which all representatives of a nation or group recognise themselves as 'an imagined political community' (1991: 15), Taylor advances an understanding of the imaginary as a widely shared cognitive schema (Strauss 2006). As it is 'shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society', argues Taylor the social imaginary is 'the way in which people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underline these expectations' (Taylor 2002: 106).

Taylor does not recognise the embeddedness of the imaginary within human creativity and is mostly preoccupied with the societal level of its workings. On the one hand, this puts him in a better position to trace the origins and development of the 'modern social imaginary' in the new ideas and theories emerging as part of economic and historical changes brought about by the rise of western modernity. On the other hand, in an effort

to completely dismiss a liberal conception of an autonomous self, Taylor (2002) reifies the imaginary as a force beyond individual control – a coherent structure, internalised by individuals that to a great extent conditions the way in which they understand the world and their place within it. The social imaginary thus also foregrounds a moral order in which subjective ideas, practices and understandings are granted their normative endorsement and are accepted as meaningful. Taylor's conception forecloses, however, the possibility of people challenging and changing this order through different forms of action.

Another scholar with whose work the imaginary has been associated mostly in recent years is the anthropologist and theorist of globalisation Arjun Appadurai. In *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (1996) Appadurai claims that imagination has become a 'social fact, and is the key component of the new global order' (1996: 31).[87] In his reading, imagination is exclusively approached as an individual quality. As a main characteristic of modern subjectivity, free from all forms of social control and ideological confinement, imagination is seen as an activity through which individuals make sense of their lives, take decisions, and devise self-identifications. Thus, instead of reproducing an entrenched social and moral order, imagination in Appadurai's conceptualisation is a force for empowerment that enables subaltern people to form solidarities, challenge the power structures of the nation state, and to even devise resistance strategies against modernising ideologies and their negative effects on local communities (1996).

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[87] Appadurai (1996) does not make a clear distinction between imaginary and imagination.

It can be argued that neither of these three most influential and frequently cited theoretical engagements is able to provide a satisfactory and balanced understanding of what the imaginary is and of the relationship between the individual and the social world it foregrounds. On one hand, we have the 'cultural model' understanding of the imaginary advanced by Taylor, who insist that as a 'symbolic matrix' the imaginary legitimises individuals' practices and is reflected in their dispositions and actions. In this respect, the imaginary is firmly rooted in the structural conditions of its creation and is intrinsic to the reproduction of dominant social and historical legacies. On the other side of the structure-agency dichotomy is Appadurai's conception of the imaginary as a 'form of negotiation between sites of agency and globally defined fields of possibility' (1996:31). While Appadurai is certainly right to position the imaginary within the everyday sphere of human life and to insist on its role in motivating certain activities, he appears to completely dismiss the objectively existing material basis and structures in which individual imaginaries are rooted. An understanding of the imagination (individual imaginary) as a self-contained and self-realising force is incapable, Smith (2006) claims, of granting authority to individual autonomy as it ignores a context of capitalist production which bears effects on all aspects of human activity. Echoing Wallerstein's (1990) and Amin's (1998) reluctance to see imagination, culture and narrative as purely ideational dimensions of social reality that have no connection to the tangibility of everyday materiality, Smith invokes Bourdieu's suggestion to see the imaginary as a 'social quality', or in other words, to recognise that 'there is a history and context to that which is imaginable' (2006: 58).

What can prevent us from placing too much weight on either side of the structure-agency dichotomy in which the working of the imaginary is unquestionably embedded

is the adoption of a more nuanced interpretation of the 'continual interplay between structures and practices and how these are mediated in everyday life' (Benson 2012: 1693). The understanding of the imaginary and its relation to the practice of migration that this thesis is concerned with acknowledges the historical and socio-economic context within which individual imaginings take shape. When we think of imaginaries as contextual rather than placeless we can better account for their dependence on cultural models, explicit ideologies, and different interpretative schemas circulating in the wider public domain. At the same time, this does not negate the possibility that individuals invest imaginaries with meanings and interpretations corresponding to their own individual circumstances or appropriate those aspects of them that resonate to their positioning within the social order (Benson 2012). Thus, while the empirical chapters of this work clearly demonstrate the powerful role that wider cultural schemas play in constructing individual imaginations and thus propelling migration, I am careful not to assume a deterministic relationship. What prompts people to act is the ability to appropriate dominant imaginaries and make them meaningful in their own terms and according to their own interpretations.

When discussing culturally-significant imaginaries and their ability to guide human action, attention should be paid to the regressive effects that they are capable of inflicting and their role as vehicles of deception. In his later work, Castoriadis starts to seriously question the imaginary's capacity to critically challenge the existing order and institute an alternative model of society. His pessimism is related to a modern reality of disillusionment brought about by pervasive cultural production, ideological justifications of technoscientific proliferations and the resulting entrenchment of apathy and individualism in western societies (Elliott 2002: 138). He warns against the

homogeneity and conformity brought about by the cultural production and rationality of modernity. Instead of offering alternatives, the imaginary starts to conceal and reproduce the negative effects of the capitalist mode of production and the mass organisation of social life.

In this sense, Castoriadis expresses the concerns with modern capitalism already pointed out by critical scholars in postcolonial studies and earlier critiques of modernity (see Horkheimer and Adorno 2002/1944). In his analysis of failed promises of modernisation in postcolonial Africa, James Ferguson (1999) directs his attention to the sphere of collective social imagination, where the interaction between mythological representations and people's aspirations takes place. Ferguson is convinced that 'modernisation' has been nothing but a 'myth, an illusion, often a lie' (1999: 253). Pietre de Vreis (2007) substantiates Ferguson's argument by outlining the mechanism through which ideological promises of western development and modernity structure popular imaginations and aspirations despite and even because of the systemic failures of developmental interventions.

This critical reflection on the nature and function of modern imaginaries in individual and social life helps explain how individuals led by their imagination often exhibit homogenous preferences, ambitions and engage in the corresponding actions.[88] Even if we acknowledge the existence of an unpredictable and uncontrollable dimension of individual imagination that allows each individual the freedom to dream with an audacity reaching beyond the confines of her material predicament, we are still left in

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[88] See the case of historical mass migrations to the US, prompted by an omnipresent cultural imaginary of the 'land of plenty' (Adams 2004), or the global phenomenon of personality cults, characterised by idealised adorations of political leaders, pop culture icons, or business entrepreneurs (on the personality cult around Steve Jobs see Valaskivi and Sumiala (2014)).

bewilderment by the fact that the contemporary world is a place of suffering and inequality. Led by concrete imaginaries of a better life, people undergo tremendous suffering and sentence themselves to lives marked by unforeseen sorrow. How else can we explain a paradoxical reality in which an extraordinary number of people yearly are willing to embark on life-threatening journeys to the West despite being at least partially aware of the multiple ordeals awaiting them? In an effort to shed more light on this puzzle the next section turns to a more focused exploration of the 'dystopian potential' of imaginary creations and their ideological effects.

The dark side of the imaginary

Influenced by the work of Freud in psychoanalytical studies and de Saussure's understanding of language as a system of signifiers, Jacques Lacan rejects the idea of an autonomous self and creative self-expression and postulates that individual desires are structured by language and other symbolic systems of representation (Strauss 2006).Thus, to understand Lacan's interpretation of the imaginary it should first be established that contrary to Castoriadis he saw individuality as inter-subjectively constituted within and through social and cultural relations. It is through language that people come to gain access to discursive systems, syntax orders and interpretive schemas, all of which come to condition the psyche's insertion into the institutionalised social order (Lacan 1977). Lacan emphasises the existence of three orders of being that exercise control over psyche's workings: the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real (1977). In simple terms and in lines with a Freudian tradition, Lacan considers the imaginary a fantasy, an illusion which is created by individuals themselves in an effort to misrepresent reality and compensate a sense of lack inherent to the inner process

of transformation (Strauss 2006). Therefore, both the imaginary and the symbolic represent a source of 'misconstruction' or concealment of the real, with the difference that the former is a subjective unconscious effort whereas the latter is an externally imposed mechanism (ibid).

Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser gives us the analytical tools for exploring the ideological function of the social imaginary in reproducing relationships of domination between antagonistic class groups. It is through the establishment of what Althusser calls 'Ideological State Apparatuses' (ISA) that the ruling class can assure the hegemonic domination of its ideology and the successful reproduction of the relations of production (2008). Althusser defines ISAs as a number of 'specialised institutions' such as churches, schools, the family, political parties, and different media outlets, all of which, despite their diverse activities, and audiences are 'in fact unified …*beneath the ruling ideology'* (2008: 20, his emphasis).

For Althusser, the main purpose of ideology is to 'recruit' or 'transform' individuals into 'subjects' - 'a precise operation' which he calls 'interpellation' and which he exemplifies through the hail of a police officer who exclaims: 'Hey you there!''. After the hailed individual turns around, she or he Altthuser claims, becomes a subject of ideology, merely through this 'one-hundred-and-eighty-degrees physical conversion' (2008: 7).[89]

The distinctive contribution of Althusser's analysis of ideology, which helps him avoid a simplistic criticism of people's naïve 'fetishism of imagination' (Smith 2006), is his

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[89] The power and pervasiveness of ideology for Althusser lay in the very fact that individuals do not recognise their deep immersion in it – 'What seems to take place outside ideology in reality takes place within ideology. What really takes place in ideology seems therefore to take place outside it'. (2008: 49) This unique function of ideology is contained in its ability to tacitly 'impose obviousness as obviousness' and make people recognise this obviousness and exclaim: 'This is true!' (Althusser 2008: 32).

recognition of the grounding of ideology in material practices and relations of production. He argues that ideology is not simply ideational or spiritual but always has a material nature in a double sense: firstly, because of its production in material apparatuses (themselves embedded in relations of production and class conflict), and secondly, because of its existence and reproduction in established practices and actions.[90] Thus, Althusser develops an account of the coercive and contradictory nature of life in the capitalist system, which makes people conform, out of necessity or a perceived lack of alternatives, to institutions and practices which they know are detrimental to sustainable development of society and satisfaction on the individual level.

Drawing on the contributions of both Lacan and Althusser, Slavoj Zizek, one of the most prominent contemporary critics of ideology, sheds more light on the mechanisms through which ideology permeates all aspects of individual life. In his *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), he draws on Lacan to claim that individuals are guided by internal tendency toward fantasy identifications which have the purpose of concealing internal lacks and inherent traumas. The lack of meaning that people feel in relation to their personal life and social reality as a whole constitutes 'nothingness' which they attempt to sooth by devising different fantasy creations. In an effort to grasp the totalising capacity of ideology, Zizek concludes that its function 'is not to offer us a point of escape from our reality but to offer us the social reality itself as an escape' (The pervert's guide to ideology 2012: n.p.) from that internal lack which is experienced as

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[90] In the example provided by Althusser, a religious follower, whose belief in God comes from the ideas set up in her own consciousness by the corresponding ideological apparatus, will without doubt engage in certain behaviour that reflects this devotion – church going, praying, mass attendance (2008).

traumatic. This implies that ideology, rather than being simply forced upon subjects, as Althusser would have us believe, is subjects' spontaneous reaction towards social reality. In other words, argues Zizek, 'we are made to enjoy our ideology' (The pervert's guide to ideology 2012: n.p.).

Zizek explains further the functional relation of fantasy identification to the conditions of life in late-capitalism by drawing on Sloterdijk's (1984) notion of 'cynical reason'. Sloterdijk argues that the overwhelming bitterness and disillusionment brought by modern industrial civilisation have led to the diffusion of pervasive cynicism into public discourse. The only way for individuals to function as a 'normal' part of society is by adopting a cynical worldview which rejects naïve optimism and does not buy into 'cheap' promises of a better future. The 'enlightened false consciousness' (1984: 192) thus bred by the mass phenomenon of alienating cynicism is immune to traditional ideological critique, Sloterdijk claims, because of the reflexive capacity to denounce the falsity on which ideological claims are conceived.

In the same vein, Zizek sees irony and cynicism as mechanisms through which individuals consciously blind themselves to the function of ideological fantasy (1989). This implies that even when recognising the 'distance between the ideological mask and the social reality' (1989: 29) individuals might still find no reason to tear this mask down[91]. Individuals engage in this paradoxical behaviour as it allows them to cope with constant lacks and desires and gives the impression of exercising free subjectivity.

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[91] For Zizek the reason for this lies in the fact that ideological illusion is not placed in 'knowledge' but in 'doing' - even though people are able to recognise the reality in which their social activity takes place they are still blind to the fact that their actions are guided by an illusion (1989). The analogy which Zizek (The pervert's guide to ideology 2012: n.p.) makes between the behaviour of today's subject of ideology and the fetishist's attitude towards the fetish, grasps well this peculiar contradiction: 'I know well that (for example) the shoe is only a shoe, but nevertheless, I still need my partner to wear the shoe in order to enjoy.'

However, rather than contributing to the emergence of post-ideological reality, such a stance ensures the greater efficacy of political ideology and the reproduction of capitalist relations of production.

The above discussion draws attention to the limitations of theoretical approaches that see the imaginary as a potential force for devising new strategies for self-emancipation, constructing more fulfilling futures or a better world. In its ideological function, the imaginary often presents people with misleading, illusionary, and one-sided ideas which can have negative effects on their and others' lives. However, as argued by Zizek and Sloterdijk, the lack and incompleteness that individuals feel in the face of their material predicament or psychological constitution, makes them nevertheless engage with such imaginaries and the ideology they present. Their attraction to ideological promises – even if portrayed as a self-aware case of 'enlightened false consciousness – nevertheless serves to reproduce the imaginaries, ideology and relations of production of contemporary capitalism.

Building on this discussion, this thesis is concerned with an exploration of the ideological seduction that imaginary constructions hold for individuals and their power to mobilise them into accepting that the only way of achieving a better way of life and a possible future is through migration to a particular place. In my empirical analysis, I show how my informants conceive of migration to the UK as the only way for obtaining a better life. Such conviction stems from the interpellation of their desires into a particular imaginary construct, that of the 'imaginary West'. Furthermore, I will demonstrate how the imaginary is contained and reproduced by people even after their pre-migration aspirations have proved to belie the realities of migrant life in the UK. Its persistence and its capacity to shape individual identifications and future aspirations

even when its illusionary nature is recognised reveals the function of the imaginary as an 'ideological fantasy' (Zizek 1989). This theoretical discussion finishes with the introduction of the notion of the 'imaginary West' which is used for unpacking the structuring role of dominant social imaginaries and their power in propelling human mobility across borders.

Imaginary West

When taken as a 'native category', modernity, according to Ferguson (1999), is still a valid and powerful dream, the realisation of which continues to captivate the imagination of diverse non-western populations. For those acutely aware of their debased position in a global hierarchy of places, the West routinely emblematises modernity and remains a template for social and economic organisation and advancement towards membership in a First World order. The West is thus an imperishable ideal and a force instigating collective and individual efforts (Ferguson 1999).

In the east European context, Alexei Yurchak's (2006) concept of 'Imaginary West' best captures the formation of a western-centric idea of modernity that informed the collective imaginary of people in the Soviet Union and incited individual longings for a magical world that appeared attainable and elusive at the same time. In Yurchak's reading, the 'elsewhere of late socialism', as he denotes the 'imaginary West', is a hyperreal construct with no exact temporal or spatial coordinates. The creation and dissemination of this imaginary, according to him, was instrumental to the logic of Soviet ideology, as it helped to limit the adoption of Western bourgeois values but still gave a sense of agency to the people who could appropriate and radically re-interpret

Western symbolic forms by investing them with local meaning. Furthermore, the consumption of Western (ised) cultural goods, entertainment and literature provided 'access' to a utopian 'parallel universe' in which the daily grind of socialist reality could be left behind (Yurchak 2006).

Building on the above discussion on the nature of the imaginary and its function in social life, I interpret the 'imaginary West' as a cultural schema (Taylor 2002) that informs the way in which people make sense of their situation and the surrounding reality. I am particularly interested in the role of the 'imaginary West' in constructing expectations and imaginations of life in the UK and thus propelling Bulgarian migrations. In applying the concept of the 'imaginary West' to the context of postsocialist Bulgarian migration I try to grasp the complex interplay between individual life-worlds, migration narratives and specific historical and material conditions. In the following chapter, I analyse how the hardship, precarity and dissatisfaction that Bulgarians experience in their lives lead them to the conviction that there must be a place where life is easier and fulfilling, much like in the 'elsewhere of late Socialism' envisaged by Yurchak. As I will show in chapter Four, the West is a focal point around which people convey personal and collective aspirations related to migration, present their social and moral positions and devise definitions of what a 'good life' should look like.

I understand the 'Imaginary West' as a theoretical notion through which a more critical understanding of the native concept of '(the) West' (*Zapad(at)*) and its characteristics can be advanced. Hence, I interpret the West as a collective social imaginary embedded in a mythological narrative of western modernity. I will further demonstrate how in my informants' narratives and interpretations; the West emerges as a standard

of an exemplary 'global form of life' that is expected to fulfill desires and aspirations they never had the chance to realise while in Bulgaria. I will also reveal the utopian and teleological nature of this Western-centric imaginary, which comes to the fore in the chapters on migrants' experiences of life in the UK. The way in which Bulgarians hold on to an idealised notion of the West by re-adjusting its temporal and geographic coordinates demonstrates, as I will argue, its status of a telos of modern capitalist ideology (Zizek 1989; see above).

As discussed above, the ability to get access to, adopt and act upon certain imaginaries depends on the different amounts and kinds of capitals at people's disposal (economic, cultural, symbolic).[92] When seen as a social quality (Bourdieu 1984), the imaginary is always class-specific: certain classes are predisposed towards certain imaginaries while completely disregarding others (see Chapter Four)[93]. In this respect, I differentiate between two different aspects of the 'imaginary West' that have been put forward by Bulgarians sharing two different class-based identities (see next section and Chapter Three). As I will show, the 'imaginary West', the same way as social imaginaries in general, works as a scheme through which individual and group identifications and positions within a particular social milieu or in the global order are perceived, defined and reproduced. This intersection of the analysis of class and socio-economic inequality, on the one hand, and social ordering and symbolic hierarchies in postsocialist societies, on the other, as well as their importance for migration processes and imagination, is discussed in the next section.

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[92] See Smith (2006) and Benson (2012).

[93] For example, see Buller and Hoggard (1994) and Benson (2012) who discuss how the migration of self-identified middle-class British to France is informed by a particular 'Arcadian dream' imaginary.

Class in postsocialism

This section begins by briefly outlining the state of class analysis in postsocialist literature and its adherence to a strictly materialist reading of social inequalities that does not account for individual and collective self-identifications and experiences of class. I contrast this to a Bourdieusian reading which sees class as a relational category that depends on the accumulation of different capitals (economic, social, cultural, symbolic). Bourdieu's work is particularly useful in its recognition of the importance of symbolic practices of class identity construction through differentiation and classification and through political and public articulations. Applications of his approach account for the role of hegemonic 'elite' versus 'masses' discourses in the formation of culturally-laden class identifications in eastern Europe. It is Mihal Buchowski (2006) who clearly demonstrates how such classifications often instrumentalise an Orientalising logic which informs individuals' practices of boundary-building and othering.

The need for class analysis and class as a lived category

Class analysis has been fairly marginalised in the work of anthropologists and other social scientists in the recent past, mostly at the expense of increased engagement with questions of cultural identity and discourse (Kalb and Carrier 2015). It has recently been recognised that the need for reinvigorated class-based research becomes ever more pressing in the face of deepening social inequalities, neoliberalisation, insecurity and a corresponding rise in class polarisation. These dynamics of 'capitalist restructuring and dispossession' (Carbonella and Kashmir 2015: 42) have transformed

the stable class oppositions between a Fordist working class and the 'poor' into a myriad of class formations and identities that become increasingly hard to conceptualise and explain.

Eastern Europe is a good case in point given the fact that the introduction of capitalist market relations has put class formations on a 'fast track' (Schroder and Vonderau 2008:5) and created unprecedented social divisions between economically successful elites and an impoverished majority. In public and political discourse in postsocialist countries, the concept of class has remained obliterated, as Schroder (2008) notes, although not in the name of socialist ideology of equality, but in line with a neoliberal proclamation of individual responsibility for wellbeing and achievement. In Bulgaria, academic research dominated by post-1989 political agendas has largely rejected class as ideologically-laden category and instead focused on studying social stratifications, in which status is viewed as a quantifiable category measured by indicators such as income, educational qualifications, and professional attainment (Boyadjhieva and Kabakchieva 2015).

The emergence of new social divisions in eastern Europe has been analysed in relation to capitalist restructuring and corresponding large-scale privatisation of state assets, the rolling back of welfare support and social services, decline in industrial production and rising living costs.[94] Class differentiations have been mostly conceptualised in the rather simplistic opposition between 'winners' and 'losers' of the 'transition' (Schroder 2008). The beneficiaries or 'winners' of postsocialist transformation have been identified as new entrepreneurs and proprietors consisting in part of former members

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[94] See Ost (2015), Buchowski (1996), Kideckel (2004).

of the socialist *nomenklatura* who have taken part in the process of privatisation and have successfully managed to turn their social capital into economic advantage (Buchowski 1997). The category of 'losers' covers the disadvantaged majority of the population, most of whom have lost their previously privileged or meaningful status – workers, farmers, pensioners, and some parts of the intelligentsia (ibid). The new postsocialist middle class has emerged as a thin silver line between the two very general categories of 'rich' and 'poor'.[95] The small group in the middle, scholars claim, has been composed of representatives of all social milieus of the socialist society – party activists and managers, former intelligentsia and skilled workers, all of whom were pushed into the market sector, as well as new self-made businessmen and professionals (Buchkowski 1997, Schroder 2008).

Such materialist readings reduce class to an 'objective' economic status and tell us little about the individual or collective experiences of class, self-identifications, and meanings that the concept holds for social agents in their everyday realities. E. P. Thompson's reminder (1980) on the importance of class as a process in a constant making and a lived category as opposed to a fixed pre-existent social structure is especially salient in the context of the changes undergone by east European societies.

Towards a Bourdieusian reading of class

In order to understand the construction of class identities and practices in eastern Europe, we need to, as Schroder (2008) suggests, move beyond immediate concerns with income and labour relations and conceive of class as emerging out of a

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[95] The consolidation of a discernible and stable middle layer has been anticipated by some postsocialist class scholars as a sure demarcation of a successful capitalist development (Boyadjhieva and Kabakchieva 2015, Buchowski 1997).

combination of political and cultural factors. Taking into account that political articulations of class identities often influence individual expressions in cultural and social practice, Schroder claims that class analysis should be related to questions of 'recognition and respect and to wider normative concerns with what is good in terms of practices, beliefs, ways of life and character.' (2008: 5). In this regard, it is Bourdieu's (1984) approach to class analysis with its focus on the dialectical interplay between processes of internal and external constitution of collective subjectivities that allows us to overcome strictly material readings of class and to recognise the way in which people perceive of themselves and others in relation to social location. The first important point of Bourdieu's contribution is that as a relational category, class results from the interplay between various kinds of capital. Apart from economic capital (in the form of income and material wealth), Bourdieu (1984) attributes great importance to the cultural and symbolic resources that agents mobilise in a classificatory struggle – a process of establishing symbolic boundaries between individuals in constituting their collective belonging. Bourdieu understands individuals' everyday choices in the realms of culture and material consumption as symbolic practices of building social identity and classification of others as similar or different from oneself. Acts of classification directed to those within or outside the social group are not necessarily conscious, as they are performed through an ingrained set of dispositions, which Bourdieu calls habitus (1984). Nevertheless, these are acts following a strategic purpose and, by engaging with seemingly routine practices, cultural dispositions and lifestyle choices, scholars can discover their importance. Thus, for Bourdieu, class boundaries are not fixed by one's economic position but are 'actively produced and reproduced by

individuals' quest for 'distinction' and social difference from other ('lower') classes and class fractions' (Joppke 1986: 54).

Secondly, Bourdieu points to a formal process of classification that overcomes the pre-reflexive, spontaneously constructed boundaries drawn by the work of the habitus. The 'codification' of class identities is a symbolic, political work of manipulation performed through discursive practices of naming (or labeling) in the purview of the so-called 'specialists in representation' – politicians, journalists, intellectuals, and academics (Wieninger 2005). Through their public articulation, identities that have been confined to individual realms become transformed into collective entities with a recognised social existence. The discursive construction of class identities has the capacity to turn 'classes on paper' into actually existing social groups whose members recognise their common belonging and capacity for collective action. Wright (2005) notes that this process can be met with resistance by individuals who may simultaneously act as classifiers and classified. The capacity to classify and escape classification, however, as already established, depends on the kinds and volumes of capital that individuals dispose of, which means that working-class members often have less 'world-making power' (Goodman 1978) than 'specialists'.

Lastly, it is important to keep in mind that the classification of difference through lifestyle choices, consumption practices and/or discourses may not correspond to pre-existing 'objective' differences such as income or wealth; and that differentiation in the former domain may even be used to compensate for lack of status in the latter. Thus, members of the same (economic) class might have quite different subjective experiences of their collective social belonging, a discrepancy foregrounding

dissonance and even conflict. In Bourdieu's words, the 'social neighbourhood [. . .] has every chance of [. . .] being the point of greatest tension' (Bourdieu 1980: 137).

Classification through Orientalisation

Echoing Bourdieu, Ingo Schroder (2008) insists that all anthropological preoccupations with east European class identity formation should investigate the process by which hegemonic discourses disseminated by those in power obliterate the existence of class divisions and replace them with cultural images of 'modernity' and the 'market'. Scholars of postsocialism have studied the proliferation of 'elite' versus 'masses' discourses in east European societies in 'transition'. They have revealed their role in justifying the socio-economic and political misgivings of the structural transformation process with the deficiencies of particular groups - workers, peasants, pensioners, uneducated and minorities[96]. Such pro-liberal narratives put forward by politicians, mass media, and intellectuals have suggested that market 'transition' should be guided by 'civilisationally competent' elites implementing changes despite the insufficient democratic culture of the 'masses' and their inability to recognise the benefits of the new capitalist economy.[97]

The main cultural attributes for which the postsocialist majority has been held responsible were, on one hand, their alleged adherence to norms and practices characteristic for the stereotypical image of *Homo Sovieticus* (Vonderau 2008) and, on

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[96] See Baysha (2014), Buchowski (2006), Heintz (2006), Kideckel (2002), Lavergne (2010), Medarov and Tsoneva (2014), Stenning (2005).

[97] Ibid.

the other, their 'Balkan mentality' related to backwardness and lack of civilisation, both seen as residues of Oriental historical legacy (Heintz 2006).

The expectation that the socioeconomic transformation would lead to a natural reorganisation of all spheres of life according to a western model has been assumed to depend on the ability of each individual to transform his/her personality with all its pertaining values and dispositions into what Makovicky, after Rose, has called an 'enterprising self' – flexible, self-actualising, responsible for its own success and development (2014: 2). According to the dominant ideology, it was only those 'new individuals', able to adapt to this new template of human existence, who could expect to become successful and prosperous in the new market reality. The 'enterprising self' came to signify a new normative model of personhood that would overcome the pathological deficiencies of Homo Sovieticus and the 'Orientalist mentality' allegedly specific for the peoples of the Balkan Peninsula (Mackovicky 2014).[98]

In line with the above, it can be argued that the essence on which such 'elite' versus 'masses' discourses have been based are the ideological dichotomies which underlie the Western mythological narrative – 'East' versus 'West', 'modernity' versus 'backwardness', 'civilisation' versus 'primitivism'. Mihal Buchowski (2006) has demonstrated how political manipulation structured around an Orientalising logic codifies class-based identities appropriated by citizens of postsocialist Poland.[99] His

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[98] As 'entrepreneurs', individuals are encouraged to perceive themselves and their lives as a project in constant making, requiring self-actualisation and advancement not only through education and training but also through the 'continual exercise of lifestyle and consumer choices' (Mackoviky 2014: 2).

[99] He extends his conclusions, however, as relevant for other central and east European societies.

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argument utilises the concept of Orientalism and the related notion of Balkanism, which are both of relevance for this thesis.

Originally coined by Edward Said (1978), Orientalism refers to the hegemonic discursive representations of non-Western peoples and societies developed in western Europe in line with the political and military process of colonialisation. By presenting the East as inferior in a political, societal, religious and cultural sense, Orientalist knowledge gathered by colonisers became a powerful tool for justifying cultural and political dominance over conquered subjects. As a mode of thought, Orientalism is based on the ontological and epistemological distinction between the Orient – backwards, stagnant, traditional, and mystical – and the Occident – rational, modern, progressive (Said 1978). This is how the Orient has been constructed as the West's ultimate Other (Said 1978).

The works of Wolff (1994) and Todorova (1997), among others, have demonstrated the applicability of Said's critique to eastern Europe and the Balkans. Larry Wolff (1994) elaborates on the emergence of eastern Europe as a cultural construct in the work of European Enlightenment's writers, journalists, intellectuals, and travelers. The role of eastern Europe as western Europe's complementary Other and its association with barbarism and backwardness foregrounds its ambiguous location 'within Europe but not [as] fully European' (1994: 9). At the same time, such Balkanist thinking served to obfuscate the (re-) production of this 'incompleteness' through political and economic dependencies. Maria Todorova's groundbreaking work in *Imagining the Balkans* (1997) explores the applicability of Said's Orientalism to representations of the Balkan Peninsula. By critically mapping out the discourse of Balkanism as it developed in the past centuries, she concludes that despite existing similarities, the phenomenon

cannot be considered a variation of Orientalism for several reasons. Most importantly because the Balkans have a concrete historical and geographical reality, they are mostly Christian and white, there is an absence of colonial legacy and lack of a prominent geopolitical importance. The in-betweenness of the Balkans that Todorova tries to signify with the metaphor of a bridge – a region that tries to Europeanise but is never able to fully shed off the remnants of the Ottoman legacy – presents it as semi-developed, semi-colonial, semi-civilised. The Balkans, she claims, because of their religious and racial similarity to the 'Western signifier', are not constituted as incomplete other but as Europe's 'incomplete self' (1997: 17) – functioning as a 'repository of negative characteristics' (1997: 188) against the backdrop of which a more positive image of the West can emerge.

Based on these discussions of Orientalism and Balkanism, Buchowski (2006) introduces the concept of 'the new European orientalism' - a way of thinking and a practice of creating the Other that has managed to overcome spatial and temporal confines and has been turned into a tool for constructing social divisions within central and east European nation state borders. This new Orientalism[100], produced by processes of globalisation, flexible capital accumulation and transnationalism, stretches beyond oppositions of 'orient versus occident' to accommodate the ones of 'capitalism and socialism, civility and primitivism, and class distinction between elite and plebs' (Buchowski 2006: 466). Of particular significance to east European formation of class identities is Buchowski's finding that this 'domestic orientalism', once in the purview of elite dominant discourses, has gradually penetrated the

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[100] I question the novelty of this phenomenon in my brief historical synopsis in Chapter Four.

consciousness of different social groups, who progressively define their collective identities by constructing their own, internal Others (2006). During his research in Polish rural communities, Buchowski observes how the downward gradation constructed by such discourses of otherness seems to have no bottom level but resembles 'a network of mutual social perceptions in a huge and intricate hall of mirrors' (2006: 473). Thus, for example, white-collar workers re-direct the Orientalising rhetoric used by 'transitional' elites towards proletarians, who in turn look down upon farm workers. By constructing their own social others, each of these groups resists subjugating elite discourses which blame them for their inadequacy to the new market realities (Buchowski 2006: 474).

Following a Bourdieusian understanding of class, this thesis analyses existing class-based identities as relational constructs (Wright 1997) emerging not so much out of a shared economic position but with reference to a set of dispositions (ideologies, beliefs, moralities, values) and cultural practices. In this respect, I engage not only with the cultural but also subjective aspects of class. Furthermore, I demonstrate how individual class subjectivities have been 'codified' (Wieninger 2005) by hegemonic 'elite' versus 'masses' narratives, and guided by an Orientalising logic. It is along these theoretical treads and context that I analyse the two different self-categorisations put forward in my informants' narratives. I discuss those under the labels of 'Bulgarian Westerners' and 'ordinary people'. Throughout the empirical chapters, I demonstrate how, both before and after their migration to the UK, individuals engage in different everyday acts of classification (Bourdieu 1984) – those express as material, discursive and symbolic struggles that aim to delineate class boundaries and overcome feelings of symbolic marginality and inferiority.

Those with less cultural and economic capital are less able to challenge such classificatory discourses and passively reproduce them through their acceptance and in the way they think about themselves and others. The material, discursive and symbolic struggles to delineate class boundaries and efforts to challenge and re-direct externally-imposed labels become evident in the everyday practices and interactions of people in Bulgaria.

Many of my informants saw migration as the only available strategy for reconciling the dissonance between their self-perceived and objectively prescribed class identities, as well as for achieving the symbolic and material assets that correspond to a desired but currently unavailable class status. The following empirical chapters explore how self-assigned class identifications, which often contradict people's social position identifiable by objective criteria, lead to different interpretations of the meaning assigned to migration and the reasons justifying it. Furthermore, the two groups defined on the basis of my informants' self-identifications – 'Bulgarian Westerners' and 'ordinary people', put forward differing imaginations of life following migration.

I demonstrate how in many cases, my informants' quest for recognition of their self-appointed class identity and attempts to advance to a place of higher status prove elusive in the face of the realities they faced in the UK (see Chapter Five). Thus, instead of resolving problems of personal class dislocation, many find themselves immersed in a downward spiral which threatens to strip them off even their original status. In the process of migration class identities do not lose their importance for how people evaluate their situation, make sense of their predicament, and get involved in different practices. On the contrary, they are reproduced and even reinforced in practices and discursive patterns emphasising cultural-normative as well as material

distinctions. Moreover, the classificatory struggles for providing 'the legitimate definition of the social world' (Bourdieu 1984: 72) increase their significance in the highly competitive post-migration context where the fierce reaffirming one's status vis-à-vis 'other' compatriots helps my informants to compensate their frustration with disappointed aspirations and continued status deficits.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have reviewed the main theoretical debates on the three main themes that my thesis focuses on and to whose development it seeks to contribute: migration, imagination, and class. I have discussed the different ways in which the social imaginary has been understood and theorised and, on this basis, introduced the core concept through which I analyse Bulgarian migration to the UK – the 'imaginary West'. In the following chapters I will show how this cultural construct helps explain Bulgarian would-be migrants' motivations to migrate to the UK (see Chapter Four) and their persistent fight to realise their hopes and dreams about Western life despite the disappointing realities they encounter (see Chapter Five and Six). Furthermore, the 'imaginary West' and corresponding notions of Westernness and 'Balkan mentality' help to shed light on societal hierarchies and struggles for differentiation and delineation of group boundaries that have been in the purview of recent analysis of class in postsocialist eastern Europe (Chapter Three). Against the heavily-contested status of class as a category of social analysis in the region, I have put forward an approach based on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, which emphasises the cultural and ideational dimensions of class identity formation and their importance for subjective experiences and articulations of class. I demonstrate the relevance of this approach in

the analysis of the pre- and post-migratory experiences of my informants and the intimate connection between their imaginations of western modernity and conceptions of class, social hierarchy and civilisation. In the following chapter, I give insight into prospective migrants' lives in Bulgaria and show how their disappointment with the process of 'transition' and their feelings of stagnation made them conceive of migration as the only way of achieving a meaningful existence.

Chapter Three

'There Are Two Possible Solutions to the Crisis in Bulgaria – Terminal One and Terminal Two of Sofia Airport': Stories of Precarity in Post-Transitional Bulgaria

'Immediate resignation!', 'Oligarski[101] go home!', 'Protest loudly and act wisely!' said some of the posters carried by protesters marching on the central pedestrian street in Plovdiv on a warm evening in late June 2013. Most of them were students and young professionals; others had brought their children who held small brooms[102], thrummed on drums and loudly whistled on hooters. They stopped at the municipality on the central square and started splitting into small groups, sporadically bursting into loud boos and cries: 'Ostavka'! (Resignation!). I approached one of the groups that was interviewed by a local journalist, who asked: 'Why are you here tonight?' 'It all depends on us', replied one interviewee. 'At the end, it will be us [the protestors] or them [the politicians]. If we give up, the political mafia gang [*politico-mafiotska shaika*] will win again. Democracy will be overthrown by dictatorship; the light will be conquered by darkness. We need to remain united till the end'.

On the following day, I saw the published interview on a well-known local online news platform. The interviewee turned out to be a promising local architect and he and his fellow protestors – actors, lawyers, art critics – were described as the young elite of Plovdiv.

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[101] A pun with the name of the Bulgarian prime minister of the time - Oresharski and oligarch.

[102] These symbolised the protestors' desire to 'sweep away' the political class.

When I started my fieldwork in Bulgaria in the summer of 2013, many of the people I met talked about the anti-government protests that were taking place in Sofia and other large cities since the spring. The so-called 'summer' protests, one episode of which I have just described, followed the 'winter' protests of the same year, which had been sparked by electricity price hikes. While the two events were generally seen as part of the same protest wave – the first significant expression of collective discontent in the past ten years – many flagged up the differences in their character, participants and demands raised.[103] The first spontaneous protest in February 2013 quickly spread across the entire country, mobilising many impoverished and despaired workers, civil servants, long-term unemployed and pensioners to voice their grievances. Although not consistent in their demands, protesters were outspoken against austerity, foreign investment and predatory monopolies and demanded the nationalisation of industries and the restoration of dignified living for the vulnerable masses. The 'winter' protests were marked by several cases of public self-immolations by working-class people of different ages.

The subsequent protests of May 2013 were mostly concentrated in the capital (Sofia) and started in reaction to the newly-elected coalition government and its ambiguous office nominations. The demonstrations quickly gained the support of students and middle-aged professionals and were, later on, joined by public intellectuals, university professors and journalists. Many of the protestors self-identified as part of a creative urban middle class and made sure to emphasise the civil and moral character of their demands which, they believed, stood in contrast to the economic and social rationale

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[103] See Ivancheva (2013), Nikolova (2014).

behind the 'winter' protests. The young and highly-skilled urbanites did not regard poverty and economic deprivation as deserving of their solidarity and made sure to delimit their *postmaterialist* motivations with slogans such as 'I can pay my bills'. In a strong anti-communist rhetoric, protesters raised claims for morality in politics, Western values, and less state intervention in the economy. On many occasions, they declared their disdain for the average Bulgarians whom they accused of lacking civic initiative, not being able to cultivate Western values and practices thereby impeding the democratisation of the country, its integration into the EU and transition to a 'truly Western' rather than Oriental capitalist economy.

This insight into people's concerns and related societal debates of 2013-2014 illustrates the two main issues with which this chapter is concerned, namely the existence of two conflicting class-based articulations of collective identity reflected in my informants' self-representations and, secondly, an overwhelming sense that in Bulgaria no progress, no meaning, and no future was available for people sharing either one of these two different identifications. This chapter focuses on how this sense of existential stagnation figures in would-be migrants' narratives of migration. By looking at individual stories, I try to grasp how Bulgarians understood their decision to leave behind their 'home' as an attempt to achieve a more meaningful existence and a better life.

In her ethnography of Central and South American migrants to the US, Sarah Mahler (1995) contends that people's migrations are always a result of two mutually-constituting processes – on the one hand, socioeconomic and political factors that 'uproot' them from 'customary forms of life' in their homelands and, on the other, mythologised visions of a certain 'promised land' that create and structure their

aspirations for a better future. Following her lead, in this chapter I take issue with the first one of these two components – the personal and collective experiences of life in present-day Bulgaria which made my informants consider long-term departure from their familiar surroundings as the only way forward in life. The personal testimonies presented here attest to the complex and diverse motivations that underpin each migration decision. I demonstrate how the significance attributed to the act of migration as a life-changing event is revealed in its embeddedness in biographical trajectories and life stories. At the same time, the personal route towards the decision to migrate and its subjective interpretation can make sense only when depicted in relation to the multiplicity of economic, political and social constraints that impact on individual livelihoods.

On the basis of migrants' emic classifications – the way in which they conceived of their social position and that of others, this chapter starts by presenting the two different categories of informants that this thesis discusses: 'Bulgarian Westerners' and 'ordinary people'. I relate the formation of these two self-designated identities to the class-based discourses that have become particularly popular at the time of my fieldwork but also to the 'elite' versus 'masses' discourses circulating since the beginning of the 'transition' (see Chapter Two). The following two sections of this chapter present the stories of two representatives of each of these two categories to show how different class identities foreground specific migration motivations. I argue that shared perceptions of class belonging led members of each group[104] to hold common explanations of the strategies and meanings conferred to their projects. The

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[104] I will henceforth use the term 'group' or 'category' in this emic sense conveyed to me by my informants.

latter reflect the routes that led people to their migration decisions and the socio-political and cultural factors obstructing the realisation of their desired life paths in Bulgaria. In conclusion, I argue that both 'Bulgarian Westerners' and 'ordinary people' held in common a collective feeling of 'not going anywhere' – an existential stagnation conditioned by a multiplicity of factors that communicated shared disengagement with the 'transitional' project and its underlying progressive temporal modality.

'Bulgarian Westerners' and 'ordinary people'

In their coverage of the protests discussed above, liberal media commentators[105] and intellectual mouthpieces translated the differences between the two waves into opposing social categories that fed into distinct class-based narratives. The 'winter' upheavals have been described as sparked by the discontent of the 'working class' (culturally marginal workers, uneducated, Roma, and pensioners) – those unable to adopt European civilisational values.[106] The 'summer' protests, on the other hand, were interpreted as expression of the moral indignation of an urban 'middle class' – a young, beautiful, and educated pro-Western elite.[107] Bulgarian scholars have correctly pointed out that such demarcations did not reflect actually existing economic stratifications and often concealed the 'precarious' socio-economic situation to which all of the protestors were subjected.[108]

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[105] It refers to political figures, intellectuals, businessmen and other publicly-engaged people dominating a political and media environment with right-wing, populist, nationalistic and anti-communist leanings.

[106] See Ivancheva (2013).

[107] See ibid.

[108] See Nikolova (2014), Ivancheva (2013).

The importance attributed to cultural and social divisions within the ranks of what can be 'objectively' classified as a working-class majority points to a shift in public discourses and understandings of class from narrower materialist ones towards a broader and more politically and culturally informed concept (Boyadjhieva and Kabakchieva 2015).[109] They also echo earlier oppositions between 'two geographical, cultural, political and social worlds, between the past and the future, between communism and liberal capitalism, […], between tradition and modernity' reasserted in the 'elite' versus 'masses' discourses promoted by the think tank experts[110] who 'engineered' the Bulgarian 'transition' (Lavergne 2010: 134).

Even though during my stay in Bulgaria I hardly met anyone who had participated in either of the two protest waves, the topic was brought up in most discussions of migration motivations with my informants – everyone was eager to express their position towards these recent events and identify with one of the two protest waves. I noticed how most of the middle-aged workers, small entrepreneurs, and unemployed young people living in provincial towns felt their concerns to be better represented in the 'winter' protests, as they identified themselves with those occupying a

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[109] Data from the early 1990s demonstrates that income (or wealth) was seen as the main marker for social stratification by Bulgarians. Self-identifications of the time have been concluded to reflect the actually-existing economic stratification with a very small number of respondents identifying as middle-class members (see Tilkidjiev et al. 1998). The current framing of middle-class identity in Bulgaria refers to a broader set of criteria including those based on educational and cultural capital and has successfully 'recruited' individuals from diverse economic positions (see Nikolova 2014). Such self-identification denotes support for neoliberal policies, Western values and civic causes. The division between 'ordinary' Bulgarians (commonly referred to as 'the masses') and their capitalism-friendly, liberally-minded, and 'Western-oriented' 'middle-class' counterparts is thus less an economic one than a cultural and dispositional.

[110] It refers to Bulgarian experts and commentators part of international research networks and projects, as well as Bulgarian think tank experts guiding the postsocialist economic and political 'transition' along the lines of neoliberal transformation and ideology. Their relations with local and international financial circles made them an influential factor in the formation and passing of laws through lobbying and media campaigns. Dostena Lavergne defines them as 'agents in the transformation of the economic sphere' (2010: 415).

disadvantaged position in the social hierarchy – lacking educational capital and struggling to cover high subsistence costs.

In contrast, the well-educated professional urbanites and struggling middle-sized business owners I met expressed more sympathy with the civic and moral demands put forward by protestors in the summer of 2013. They too shared concerns about the alleged rampant moral degradation and lack of 'civilisational' capital exhibited by the rank-and-file Bulgarians which were commonly blamed for Bulgaria's negative image in western Europe and its underdeveloped position, lagging 'years behind' other EU countries.

Thus, my informants not only validated the superimposed class categories of 'Western-minded elites' and 'ordinary' Bulgarians[111] as representing actually existing divisions between working and middle class but accepted them as relevant to their own perceptions of class belonging.

By following would-be migrants' own categorisations as they emerged in conversations and observations during my fieldwork, I thus distinguish between two emic collective identities: 'ordinary people' (*obiknoveni hora*) and 'Western-minded people' (*zapadnomisleshti; zapadnoorientirani hora*), whom I denote as 'Bulgarian Westerners' for convenience. Most of those who identified as 'ordinary people' were less-educated, middle-aged men and women employed as blue-colour workers both in the public and private sectors, owners of small family businesses and underpaid or unemployed university graduates. None of my informants spoke good English and only few had

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[111] I see such dominant discourses as a variation of the 'elite' versus 'masses' opposition of the 1990s that I have discussed in the previous chapter.

travelled outside of the country. They also commonly referred to their Balkan worldview, way of life, and emotionality; usually with embarrassment rather than pride.

'Bulgarian Westerners', on the other hand, were a heterogeneous group of freelancers, white-collar professionals, public employees, indebted and struggling entrepreneurs and school-leavers who identified as part of an 'urban middle class' – despite their varying social backgrounds and their unstable position on the social ladder. All of them possessed high levels of cultural capital in the form of university diplomas, language proficiency and experience-based knowledge and engagement with Western culture and lifestyle. These 'Western-minded' and modern individuals understood themselves to be contributing towards the transformation of Bulgaria into a 'truly Western' country.

Despite the fact that those to whom I spoke almost never referred to the notion of 'class', I see the above-described categories as denoting popular class differentiations. The use of idioms like 'us' and 'them' stood for collective identities constructed in opposition to those seen as 'others'. The active drawing of symbolic boundaries as a strategy of creating distance and building social identity, in which all of my informants engaged, indicates a process of classification of others as similar or different from oneself (Bourdieu 1984). The theoretical discussion on class in a postsocialist context presented in the previous chapter has already explained the intersection between class subjectivities and dominant 'elite' versus 'masses' narratives underpinned by an Orientalising worldview.

I take the above-described protest wave of 2013-2014 as an exemplary demonstration of the power of 'codification' (Bourdieu 1989) through which political discourses negate existing socio-economic inequalities and supplant them with cultural-civilisational differences between more and less Westernised subjectivities. I see my informants'

class-based identifications as shaped not so much by the economic assets they possessed but by shared cultural practices and capitals, value dispositions, ideological beliefs, and morality (Bourdieu 1984). The following sections (Chapter Four as well) demonstrate the discursive distancing and legitimisation through which class identities were built and sustained as woven in migration narratives.

What all my informants held in common was their migration destination, their intention for long-term settlement and their conviction that migration was the only available 'way out' of a presently-experienced state of stagnation with an intolerable future. The despair and disillusionment expressed in both waves of protest was the leading trope around which conversations concerning the lack of improvement and failed expectations revolved. Almost all my encounters with would-be migrants started with what had now become the most commonly evoked catchphrase epitomising both the urge to migrate and the deepening sense of meaninglessness and lack of a vision for the future: 'There are two possible solutions to the crisis in Bulgaria – Terminal One and Terminal Two of Sofia Airport'. The resurgence of this slogan during the protests of 2013-2014 carried with it a more general concern with the widely-shared conviction according to which the existence of open borders was the only available safety-valve to compensate for the lack of direction and mounting frustration taking hold in the country.

'Ordinary People' – 'Going for money, what else?'

Blagovest

One of the first emails I received in response to my initial efforts to recruit informants through an advertisement in an online forum for current and prospective migrants was sent by forty-five-year-old Blagovest. He invited me to visit him in his hometown – a small administrative centre situated halfway between the capital Sofia and the second biggest city Plovdiv. He said that seeing for myself how 'dead' this place was could give me a better idea of why he wished to leave it 'once and for all'. After meeting at the train station, we walked through the main town square. In passing, he explained the stories behind the run-down buildings, all built before 1989 and all attesting to the former importance of the town – a strategic transport hub and centre of woodwork and railway carriage industries during socialism.

> This is our 'town', as you can see it is nothing more than a village, everything closes at 8 pm. Can you sense the smell coming from the houses nearby? People are keepings pigs and chickens in their gardens. Who can blame them? Everyone is trying to survive and, as it is, there are not many options left.

The few people that Blagovest stopped to greet in the centre were huddled in front of the two small grocery shops, the café and the corner betting shop. These were the 'hotspots' for the remaining, mostly elderly town dwellers, he informed me. He went on to explain how the town's industry was almost completely run down except for a few factories and workshops that functioned with reduced capacity. The high unemployment and general lack of livelihood opportunities, he said, had chased away the 'young' and most of Blagovest's friends now lived either in the bigger neighbouring

cities or in the UK. He sadly interpreted the absence of children's clamour on the streets as a sure sign of the depopulation of the place, which he believed would surely lead to its eventual demise.

The 'ghostly' sights of this ex-industrial town and the hopelessness that transpired through Blagovest's account resemble the aftermath of postsocialist industrial decline reported across most of eastern Europe (Kideckel 2008, Morris 2016). It was in the light of this apocalyptic view of the present that Blagovest and I sat down for a coffee. After lighting up his first cigarette, he started laying out the events of his past which had a stake in his decision to migrate. He made sure to draw parallels between the development of his life trajectory and the societal upheavals in Bulgaria's recent past.

Blagovest started his story by first looking back to the most recent period of positive development in his and the small town's life. In 2007, he left his carpentry job and invested his modest savings in the opening of a small furniture shop. At that time, there was no 'crisis' and people had more money to spend, he told me. The orders quickly picked up and Blagovest was barely managing to satisfy the town's demand for fit-in furnishing. Within short time, he started making more money that he could have ever imagined (8,000-10,000 BGN per month).[112]

Things changed abruptly after 2009 when, in Blagovest's rendering, 'the crisis that the banks and the big loans in the US brought up' to Bulgaria hit the small town. People stopped ordering furniture and his turnover dropped to 2,000 BGN (ca. 830 GBP) a month. In the next two years, the business crumbled further to a point where he had to

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[112] Bulgarian currency Lev (plural Leva), coded as BGN, for the period of fieldwork was rated at around 2,4 to 1 GBP (British Pound).

run the shop without making any profit, driven solely by the hope that the stagnation could be somehow overcome. Two months before our meeting Blagovest was forced to close down the business and sell the remaining furniture and his transport van.

This was certainly the most profitable but not the only entrepreneurial project that Blagovest had embarked upon in the last twenty-four years. During the 'murky' 1990s when 'nothing was regulated' and 'everyone was fighting for survival', he combined his full-time factory job with informal, short-term business endeavours. He first started buying contraband VHS tapes with American 'super' films (*super filmi*) that he rented out to friends and neighbours. Later, he made a bigger investment and together with a couple of friends rented a small dam that he planned to turn into a commercial fishery. The costs were higher than the anticipated revenues and the project quickly fell through, leaving Blagovest empty-handed. Subsequently, he had the idea of starting a heavy-freight parts business with the help of a friend who lived in the States and promised an initial investment. With his friend proving to be an unreliable business partner, this endeavour eventually turned out unfeasible as well.

In fact, Blagovest never considered himself to have a flair for business and had no ambition to become a 'rich man'. He believed that money making required a special kind of 'talent' that only a select minority was given. His entrepreneurship was constituted by trial and error ventures and strategies of 'filling gaps'. His basic survival instinct thus helped him live through the 'transitional' hardships that have marked a great part of his adult life. The continuation of his story revealed that his true passion lay elsewhere and that the fulfilment of his life aspirations had become impossible with the 'arrival of democracy'.

As a matter of fact, before the 'Tenth'[113] I had a completely different vision of how my life would develop. I was three, or wasn't it even four, times national weightlifting champion, did I already mention this to you? [...] Anyways, nowadays no one cares about this. I wanted to continue my sports career; they [trainers] invested high hopes in me. After finishing the army service, I planned to go to university in Sofia and become a weightlifting trainer. Obviously, things didn't turn out as expected, far from it.

Not long after he came out of the army, Blagovest lost his father and was forced into the role of main breadwinner. In the early 1990s, he and his mother were amongst those given the chance to buy their state-allocated flat using an interest-free loan. The loan needed to be repaid in only eight years' time which meant that eighty percent of Blagovest's monthly salary went to the bank. This tense situation was further exacerbated by the massive lay-offs and breath-taking price hikes caused by the 'shock therapy' policies implemented at the time. In those 'scary times' pursuing a degree was the last thing on Blagovest's mind as he was barely managing to put food on the table.

The economic stagnation brought up by the global financial crisis of 2008 marked the end of Blagovest's most successful life period and gave him a bitter sense of meaninglessness and desperation. Taking a close look at his life achievements, he felt compelled to devise a way out of what he experienced as a dead-end situation.

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[113] Refers to 10th November 1989 when Todor Zhivkov (the Bulgarian socialist leader) stepped down from his position of general party secretary after 33 years in power. In common parlance, the expression 'after the Tenth' denotes the end of socialism and the beginning of democratic transformation.

I must use this time to think about my future and what I want to do with my life from now on. Unfortunately, I am part of the generation which took on so many negatives, our development was just stifled. We were made *chavdarche* then *komsomolche*[114], then democrats, Europeans, Nato-eans, what else will they turn us into? [sarcastically] What I am so gutted about is the fact I didn't manage to achieve anything big in life. I feel like I am sitting on a threshold.

He realised that 'nothing good' awaited him if he stayed in Bulgaria: there were no opportunities for securing a steady income and finding personal happiness. He recognised the need for a drastic change: 'The UK is my last chance for making it in life. Don't get me wrong I know I am not going to become Rockefeller, I just want to live a better life.' Blagovest was convinced that the 'good life' he envisaged would remain permanently unavailable to him in Bulgaria. 'If you really want to do something meaningful in Bulgaria you need to have a good "back" to tell you – "go there and do this", "get your hands on this business" – someone needs to open your eyes for where the profitable opportunities lie, if you know what I mean', he said. 'The small fish' like himself, Blagovest thought, would never be able to 'make it' in this cutthroat environment.

To him, the breakdown of his business, under the weight of the recent economic crisis felt like hitting 'rock bottom'. Because of this and his failure to create a family he concluded that the past twenty-something years had brought him nowhere close to the fulfillment of his personal dreams. The perennial ingenuity and hard work he had

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[114] *Chavdarche* is diminutive of chavdar which denotes a membership stage in the youth organisation of the Communist party organisation (Dimitrovski Komunisticheski Mladezhki Sayuz or Komsomol) followed by *pionerche* and *komsomolche* (*komsomolets*). *Komsomolche* denotes full membership.

demonstrated throughout the years seemed to have been in vain. It became clear in our conversations that his efforts have always been driven by a desire to 'make it', which extended beyond the achievement of tangible acquisitions to a more general feeling of 'going somewhere' in life.

Being able to relate his experience to those of his former schoolmates and colleagues, whose aspirations were similarly suffocated, Blagovest concluded that the blame was not entirely on him. It was the failed 'transition' and the corrupt politicians that he held responsible for his unfortunate situation. Migration had always been a possibility that he never ended up seizing. At the age of forty-five, he felt that he needed to grasp this last chance for leaving the country and bringing a fundamental change to his life.

Nikolay

Although much younger than Blagovest, Nikolay (twenty nine) felt the same despair with his disadvantaged position in society and with his inability to act upon his personal dreams and aspirations. I first met him in the job recruitment agency where I carried out part of my fieldwork. In the past three years Nikolay had been working as a nurse in the busy emergency care unit of one of the largest state hospitals in Sofia. Raised in a working-class family in a small town in southern Bulgaria, he had experienced periods of deprivation and insecurity since early childhood. This made him strongly determined to find a profession that would 'bring the money to him' so he would not need to 'chase after it'. Dentistry, he thought, would 'settle' him for life, so after finishing school he spent three consecutive years trying to get into a university degree programme. However, he never managed to become a dentist because he fell victim

to the corrupt educational system, as he claimed. Nikolay was crushed by what he experienced as 'a complete injustice' and wanted to give up his plans for pursuing a university degree. Eventually, thanks to his parents' persuasion he decided to get into a nursing programme which, despite its lower prestige and financial unattractiveness, still promised to give him some valuable skills.

Nikolay blamed the state and its corrupt mechanisms for the failure of his dreams; as they always kept 'people like him down' and away from opportunities for bettering their situation:

> If you are a child of 'someone' you give money below the table and you get a place in a prestigious university. If you are 'no-one' you have no chance. They will fail you no matter how well you have prepared yourself. No one cares about the ordinary folk (*obiknovenite hora*) in this country.

Not being able to rely on his parents' financial support Nikolay had to take up badly paid part-time jobs throughout his university years in Sofia in order to cover his tuition and subsistence costs. He was bitter about the unjust treatment he had received from his employers who only cared about taking advantage of him and never demonstrated any respect for the hard work that he put in. He gave me the example of one summer employment in KFC, where he spent four months doing daily sixteen-hour shifts, accompanied by the constant humiliating remarks of his employer, who refused to treat him as a 'human being' but considered him an 'easily exploitable robot'. The money he made during this summer was more than he had ever earned before, but it didn't bring him any happiness. Instead, it was a reminder of the abusive practices he had suffered through. His next job as a salesman did not last long either, as he quickly realised he could never become a 'fraud':

How can I persuade an old grandpa to buy a pan for 5000 BGN (ca. 2300 GBP) because of its special surface when I know very well that this is a lie? How to sell something which I know it is not helping people, but on the contrary, is to their detriment? Not everyone can do such kind of jobs.

For Nikolay, the lack of respect and the kind of treatment that attacked human dignity were the most pressing reasons for his migration. In his present employment in an A&E centre, he continued to be subjected to the demeaning attitude of superintendents, colleagues, and patients. He was often asked to work unpaid extra hours and to deal with the most severe cases that the doctors did not want to provide care for – tasks clearly exceeding his expertise and responsibilities. His protest and discontent was met by indifference and he was constantly reminded that there was a queue of people waiting to replace him.

Nikolay often condemned the corrupt practices of his work colleagues who constantly tried to extort informal payments from patients for carrying out routine procedures like applying bandages or giving injections. His colleagues, on the other hand, ridiculed his refusal to succumb to such practices and called him 'naïve' and 'guileless'. To him, both 'under the table' payments and sales representative practices were examples of immoral market activities, which, although justifiable given the economic hardship experienced by many, he never became comfortable engaging in.

The 'embarrassingly' low monthly wage of 500 BGN (ca. 230 GBP) that he received for his twelve-hour long shifts was just enough to cover basic living expenses but did not allow him to go out with friends or practice his hobbies. Contingencies and bigger purchases led to months of privation and rationing expenses. Unlike some of his colleagues who invested into studying English and applying for jobs that matched their

qualifications in the UK and elsewhere in the West, Nikolay's meagre income did not allow spending for expensive language courses. This pushed him towards the decision to take on a care taker position in a nursing home in the UK, a job that clearly entailed a great deal of deskilling. On the one hand, he was proud of his ability to manage with the little that he had, but on the other, he was exasperated for missing out on the life enjoyed by his peers:

> I am a thrifty guy, I like to have something laid up for a rainy day so most of my time I spend either at work or home. Like all young people I also like to let off steam and go out for a few drinks, but in my case, this only happens once a month after payday. If I had the money I would like to travel more, I would love to be able to practice some extreme sports.

Unlike Blagovest, Nikolay exhibited no entrepreneurial spirit. In fact, the kind of entrepreneurship he was forced to engage in made him think that success was only possible for those who bend the rules for their own benefit and at the expense of others. At the same time, his employment in the state medical sector, where financial wellbeing was dependent on informal practices, put pressure on the professional ethics and understandings of 'decent' work that he held valuable. His unwillingness to adapt to the situation and follow socially established practices for achieving success in the postsocialist market economy condemned him to economic and symbolic humiliation. The disappointments he had suffered on his path to professional realisation and social advancement had instilled in him the conviction that one's chances were always predetermined by one's socio-economic origins. The greatest injustice, for him, lay in the fact that no matter how diligent one was or how determined to uphold a high moral character, the struggle for material and symbolic respectability was always doomed to

fail. His migration was thus conditioned by his desire to restore a positive feeling of self-worth and recuperate lost dignity. The chances for a better future, recognition of moral equality and individual control over his life that migration to the UK was seen to offer stood in stark contrast to his visions of deepening material misery and symbolic subordination that awaited Bulgarians who lacked marketable skills and capitals.

'Ordinary people' in a state of 'survival'

These two personal stories present complex accounts of the reasons that made 'ordinary people' consider migration as a viable, and in some ways only, option for escaping a life of constant struggle. My informants in this group often related their motivations for leaving the country to a growing pessimism and despair with a long-standing precarious existence that most of them expressed in the notion of 'survival' (*otceliavane, prejiviavane*). The disentangling of the meaning of this condition and its class-tint dimensions elaborate on the shared conviction that there was 'no more future' in Bulgaria.

Firstly, the frequently used term 'survival' reflects a state of economic deprivation and a constant struggle to 'make ends meet', as many experience it. The majority of workers and 'petit' entrepreneurs that I met were subjected to the in-work poverty documented among working-class communities throughout the postsocialist region (see Kaneff and Pine 2011, Knudsen 2012, Morris 2012, Stenning 2005). Many relied on subsistence wages, informal payments and 'kinfare' (Deneva 2012) support to provide for their families and cover bank loans and consumer credits. Very often, however, my initial curiosity about their migration reasons provoked irritation and seemingly straightforward responses like 'we are sick of living with little', 'for money,

what do you think?', 'don't want to count my pennies anymore'. These stood in an almost paradoxical contradiction to the sporadic confessions of the same informants that they had 'nothing to complain about', 'had everything they needed', and that there was 'nothing more one could wish for'. This inconsistency is dissolved when economic deprivation is not understood as a threat to social reproduction but as leaving no disposable income for what my informants called 'extra' spending. The common complaint was that a great proportion of one's salary was spent to cover constantly rising monthly bills and basic foodstuffs, leaving almost no disposable income for any 'luxury expenditures'.

Georgi (twenty nine), for example, who worked on the assembly line in a Japanese car factory for 680 BGN (ca. 280 GBP) a month, complained that without the support of his parents, who provided living space and covered electricity bills, he would not be able to take care of his wife and new-born baby. He later assured me that although his family had an overall 'good life', they could not even 'dream of' renewing household appliances, electronic gadgets, or indulging into recreational activities. They, as many others, found themselves caught in what Vigh calls the 'schism between the culturally expected and the socially possible' (2009: 96). Regular trips abroad, branded clothing and accessories, mobile phones and electronic gadgets were all perceived as status symbols that my informants simply could not afford. The urge to engage in such consumption practices was driven by a constant evaluation of one's social position in relation to that of 'others' within the group, as well as those standing 'below' and 'above'. As Nina (thirty five), a cleaner in a state company explained: 'You think you have all you need but then you see that someone's got something new and better, a nicer vacuum cleaner let's say, and you think to yourself – "I should get one as well"'.

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The desire for such material status is not necessarily explained by its capacity to ensure one's physical well-being, but by its symbolic value. In this sense, while perceiving themselves as 'flawed' consumers' (Bauman 2005: 3) within the local community, many of my respondents saw migration as a strategy for overcoming their symbolic marginality in a society that celebrated the 'success' of an ambiguous politico-economic elite and prioritised the needs of a 'Western-minded' 'intellectual' class[115]. In many cases, the only way of satisfying such consumer aspirations was the accumulation of considerable debts which increased the financial pressure many wanted to alleviate through migration. Therefore, I argue that the economic dimension contained in the notion of 'survival' should be interpreted not so much as an 'absolute' but 'relative' deprivation emerging out of need to respond to material pressures in an effort to 'keep up with the Joneses'.

Secondly, the sense of diminishing possibilities summed up in the notion of 'survival' was related to the lack of social and cultural capital through which opportunities for professional and self-realisation could become available. My informants in this group constantly drew my attention to what had become a publicly circulating mantra in Bulgaria– 'if you have no connections you are no-one'. Many believed that success in Bulgarian society depended on having a 'good back' (*dobur grub*).

A 'back' of some sort was seen as vital for the successful completion of all sorts of activities – seeking medical treatment, finding a place in a kindergarten, paying your taxes, or buying a car. 'Good back' mostly referred to informal connections to economic

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[115] Such conclusion is also in lines with scholarly observations on the specificities of postsocialist working-class households which while rich in different assets such as housing, qualification, and social networks remain cash poor (Kaneff and Pine 2011).

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and political powerholders that could provide access to well-paid employment or lucrative business opportunities. For instance, once while Nina and I were having coffee in the murky basement staff room in the building where she worked, she expressed her frustration with the limited powers she had to change her situation. She regretted her inability to mobilise a 'good connection' in order to get a much-desired promotion. Pointing at a colleague passing by, she told me how he had recently 'turned' from a security guard to a driver for the owner (which meant that his salary doubled). This was because his father – a former village mayor – managed to 'find a connection'. She claimed that the education and competence of those who occupied 'good' positions did not determine their success as much as their ability to mobilise informal connections to 'big people' (*golemtsi*).

The 'mass' migration of former workmates, friends and neighbours has depleted previously existing social networks (Dunn 2004) and class-based resources (Morris 2012) which held a decisive role in managing general economic uncertainty. The decline of cooperation and solidarity within their social group and society as a whole was further entrenched, according to my informants, by people's increasingly individualistic attitudes and the commercialisation of interpersonal relationships within families and social circles more generally.

Another determinant of the inferior positioning of 'ordinary' people in socio-economic and symbolic terms was their devalued or insufficient cultural capital. Many of my middle-aged informants were affected by the well-documented postsocialist devaluation of certain occupations and of various forms of cultural capitals and professional experience (see Kaneff and Pine 2011). Access to well-paid and symbolically valued positions in attractive sectors like IT, the 'creative' sector or the

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tourist industry depended to a large extent on one's knowledge of foreign languages, western cultures, computer skills, and relevant educational credentials that my informants did not possess. The problem for them was not the lack of job openings but the scarcity of well-paid positions for those without the right knowledge or education. Because of the dismal pay and their exploitative character many small-scale business occupations and different forms of formal employment were perceived as unattractive. Voluntary withdrawal from the labour market (as in the case of Blagovest who vowed to never engage in waged employment in Bulgaria) was a common strategy that emerged out my informants' unwillingness to take on jobs offering inadequate payment and low prestige. Instead, many preferred engaging in informal occupations or state employment which, despite its low pay, provided security, better disposal of one's time and long leaves of absence.

Finally, 'ordinary people's' references to 'survival', understood as precarious existence, were also related to perceptions of their subordinated position in Bulgarian society. Already the commonly used self-identification 'ordinary' denoted a sense of marginality in comparison to 'oligarchs', 'businessmen', and 'the rich' in general, as well as - 'intellectual elites' and 'middle classes'. In his discussion of class transformation in postsocialist Romania, David Kideckel (2004) advances the widely-accepted scholarly conclusion that it was the working classes that had been most gravely affected by the processes of economic restructuring after 1989. The subalternalisation of workers and other suffering groups, he claims, was not just a result of the dramatic structural reforms but was also inflicted by the symbolic work of manipulation carried out by the dominant classes. With their social and symbolic capital devalued, 'the victims of the economic downturn' suffered not only 'high unemployment and underemployment,

plummeting standards of living [...], and alienation of new standards of consumption'
but [also] 'denigration or condescension from the wider society' (Kideckel 2004: 41)[116].

'Ordinary people' were aware of the stigmatising dominant rhetoric, according to which
their restricted economic and cultural capital reflected their 'backwardness' and lack of
initiative. They reported, just like Nikolay, how belittled they felt in daily interaction with
employers, colleagues, teachers, civil servants and others who looked down upon their
everyday problems, practices, and claims and effectively denied them dignity and
respect[117]. In her analysis of working-class subjectivities in Kyrgyzstan, Elmira
Satybaldieva (2017) demonstrates how individuals' efforts to counter their symbolic
marginalisation and mistreatment involved the drawing of moral boundaries against
more successful neoliberal subjects. Her informants, similarly to mine, however, were
rarely successful in rejecting the projected stigma and, by putting forward their claims,
often contributed to the hardening of class-based antagonisms and the vilification of
their public image. The undesirability and stigma associated with a working-class
status adds plausibility to the attempts of 'Bulgarian Westerners' to delineate
themselves against 'ordinary people'. I discuss these in turn.

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[116] It has been argued that the economic and symbolic marginalisation of the postsocialist working class
has been particularly painful (especially in comparison to the sufferings of western European workers'
communities) because of the privileged material and ideological status that workers occupied in the
socialist state (Kaneff and Pine 2011).

[117] For discussions on lacking working-class dignity see Morris (2012).

'Bulgarian Westerners' – too different to fit?

Miro

When I told Miro (thirty five) what my research was about he said he would not be able to help me as he did not think of himself as a migrant. He reproduced the dominant conviction that since Bulgaria's accession to the EU and the establishment of free movement of people, there could be no more talk of 'migrants': the term had become legally unfounded and should be replaced with 'free moving individuals'. He added that while 'migrant' could still be useful to denote those Bulgarians who went abroad 'for money'; this label was offensive for people like himself who wanted to 'achieve something more in the UK'.

In the past fifteen years Miro had been managing his father's car parts warehouse in Sofia. His hard and committed labour had ensured a comfortable lifestyle for his wife and six-year-old daughter. They had a nice, modern flat in a central Sofian neighbourhood, a car and went on regular holidays. Just a year ago, he quit his job because his never-ceasing drive for success and innovation, he said, clashed with his father's play-it-safe attitude and 'complete lack of initiative'. In an effort to 'keep up with the competition', Miro wanted to create more international contacts and shift towards online trade, changes which his father opposed as being too risky.

Miro described himself as entrepreneurial, 'Western-thinking' and adventurous. He told me how the time and efforts he invested in trying to build a successful business did not bring him the satisfaction he had expected and this took its toll on the relationship with his wife who had recently moved out of the family home:

> I was totally fixated on my work. I wanted to be the best, to know about the business more than anyone else. I was spending my days reading guides for running successful business, listening to TED talks and lectures for boosting one's creative performance. The moment I decided to quit was when I felt as if I had hit the ceiling.

Although Miro had considered starting his own business in Bulgaria, he was more tempted to make a 'fresh start' in the UK where he believed his knowledge and experience in online sales, web design and marketing would open doors to lucrative business opportunities. He put forward several rationales for his conviction that doing business in Bulgaria was like 'going against the tide' (*pluvash sreshtu techenieto*):

> If I decided to start something on my own here I would need to take a loan and would constantly be on the edge (*na ruba*) in the beginning. In Bulgaria things change all the time, there is no stability, the wheel turns by three hundred and sixty degrees. The state policy towards small and middle size businesses is not consistent; they burden us with high taxes and heavy bureaucracy. Plus, Bulgarians are doing business for how long? Twenty-something years now, they still don't know how to do 'proper' business; they know nothing about how business is done in the West. They stick to their Balkan way of doing things.

Apart from the instable business climate, distorted values of Bulgarian 'businessmen', and the dubious work ethics that the majority of the population shared, another factor that discouraged Miro from staying in Bulgaria were the moral concerns that guided his filial and professional consciousness.

I know everyone in the car parts business in Bulgaria, I can easily draw on my previous contacts and set up a successful company that will compete with and eventually eliminate my father's business. Is this moral? No, I don't think so. Would many people in my shoes have second thoughts? No, I doubt it. This is how Bulgarians do business, but not me.

Miro concluded that as a whole his decision to leave for the UK was prompted by the pressing need to change the 'surroundings'. The desire to break away from the familiar and have a fresh start, he told me, was provoked not only by the inability to progress in his career but by a growing feeling of fatigue and detachment from the people around him. The estrangement between him and many of his close friends, he believed, came from an unbridgeable discord between the personal values, interests and practices that made up their completely different personalities.[118] As much as he was committed to broadening his horizons by adopting a Western-like work ethic, lifestyle and mind-set for the purpose of self-improvement, his friends, as all 'typical Bulgarians', shared a 'constrained vision' – suspicious towards everything 'new' and preoccupied with drinking, indolence, and round-the-clock bemoaning of their fate.

The inertia, apathy, and backwardness that he found in those around him and which he summed up in the notion of 'Balkan mentality', he believed were at the same time a reflection of and a driving force behind the 'moral decline' in which Bulgarian society had lapsed during the years of 'transition'. Miro voiced what had now become a popular concern amongst the Bulgarian middle class and political and intellectual elites – 'the

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[118] Miro was another one of my informants who preferred not to share his migration plans with those around him. He feared that they will fail to understand his motives and will take him for a fool for leaving the lucrative family business and his family for migrant uncertainty.

crisis is not in Bulgaria [as in the state government] but in Bulgarians themselves'. This common view shifted the focus from state powers, bad government policies or faults in the market economy and put the blame for the present socioeconomic and 'moral' crisis on the average Bulgarian. As 'people of simple pleasures', Bulgarians, he said, were only interested in 'eating, drinking, and procreating'; they preferred to remain oblivious to the 'grand questions of life', those goals, ideals and aspirations that drove individual and collective progress. He rejected justifications of this 'flawed mentality' with material deprivations but instead lamented that it was more of an inherent and unchangeable characteristic of the 'people living in this part of the world' (the Balkan peninsula).

This story of Miro shows how some 'Bulgarian Westerners' were better positioned to live up to the ideal of an 'entrepreneurial' subjecthood (Makovicky 2014:12) as a result of their higher degrees of cultural and social capital. In this respect, Miro, unlike Blagovest, had managed to establish himself as a successful middle-sized businessman, secure a decent income and sustain a desired lifestyle for him and his family. He did not deem such achievements satisfactory, though, as he felt that his professional realisation did not reflect the full extent of his creative potential and capabilities. He blamed his arrested ambitions on the 'mediocrity' and 'backwardness' of his immediate social circle and society at large.

Gloria

Eighteen-year-old Gloria was one of the several young graduates of prestigious high schools that I met in Plovdiv who were eagerly preparing to continue their education in

the UK. Gloria had been planning to study abroad for as long as she could remember. She could not think of the exact moment she made up her mind but insisted she was the one in charge of her decision. However, she admitted the active persistence of her parents who did not want to 'hear a word' about her staying in Bulgaria. At the time of our first meeting, Gloria's parents had been working in London for almost a year. Their sudden migration was necessitated by the effects of the 2008 economic crisis that brought salary cuts for her father, a chief engineer in a security company; and bankruptcy for her mother, a self-employed embroidery designer. Not willing to compromise the higher education plans of their daughter, they concluded that the only way to provide her with adequate financial support was through undertaking low-skilled employment in London.

Gloria wanted to work with children with autism. She believed, however, that no Bulgarian university could prepare her for a successful career in this field.

> Bulgarian universities don't do a proper job. They lack qualified lecturers. For example, no one works on autism in Bulgaria, there are no specialists. I doubt most people [Bulgarians] even know what autism stands for. Acquaintances tell me they are not learning anything useful. They are taught from outdated Russian textbooks. Can you imagine?

Gloria's claim that Bulgarian education was of low quality and 'below' standard was based on widely circulating popular evocations and her own high school experience. She told me how many of her teachers were poorly qualified and lacked motivation, which caused slackness and demoralisation amongst pupils. What she found most disappointing was that her hard work and efforts were undermined by the equally high marks that her less-diligent classmates were awarded. The corrupt educational system

in Bulgaria, she claimed, allowed for anyone to pay their way through university, which diminished the local and international prestige of Bulgarian degrees.

Gloria's disappointment with the low quality of Bulgarian education, its lack of coordination with the demands of the business sector, and its outdated relevance have been confirmed as the main motifs behind young people's determination to continue their education in west European universities. In addition, the widespread corruption narrative that many of my young informants adopted in motivating their decisions has been considered a well-established 'socially acceptable theme' that often served to justify migration decisions without necessarily being a leading motivation (Liakova 2008).

Furthermore, the cultural capital in the form of university education, foreign languages and a pro-Western attitude that has been considered decisive in ensuring the successful adaptation to the market economy (Ghodsee 2005), was not considered by 'Bulgarian Westerners' as a valuable resource that could provide social mobility on the local, even less so on the global labour market. Many young representatives of this group regarded only qualifications acquired abroad as legitimate and valuable. These were also seen as a proof for one's initiative, determination, and cultivation of a Western mind-set.

Moreover, Gloria, like Miro, viewed herself as too different from and not understood by the majority of her peers. She claimed they were guided by values and exhibited interests that she could not relate to. For her, this inability to 'fit in' and the need to surround herself with like-minded people was another reason why she desired to leave

for the UK.[119] For Gloria those of her peers who remained in Bulgaria lacked ambition and had 'no clear vision' about their future. Those not considering migration, according to her, did so not because of lack of finances but because of 'messed-up' priorities: 'How else to explain the fact that they have money for expensive clothes and trendy bars but not for their own education?'. In contrast, those leaving to study abroad, she said, had set higher goals for themselves, wanted to enrich their personalities and live a better life. They were people who, like herself, had had the chance to 'travel a little' and broaden their horizons. The different set of values (and mentality) that defined the fundamental difference between 'leavers' and 'stayers', according to her, was also reflected in one's taste for music, clothes, and particular lifestyle.

I was able to witness myself how strongly determined Gloria was to realise her 'dream of England', when she explained the reasons why she broke-up with her long-term boyfriend. Gloria had started dating eight-year-older Nayden when she was sixteen. He moved in with her after the departure of her parents a year ago. During that time, he was always 'the rock' that she could 'lean on' and she greatly appreciated the love and care he had provided her with. Nayden was aware of her plans to study in the UK, had agreed to join her and even offered financial support. In the past couple of months, however, he started 'backing off', Gloria claimed, and she had doubts about their common future:

> He is a great person but very indecisive. It seems to me he doesn't really have a clue what he wants to do with his life. He lacks ambition and determination,

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[119] When I asked Gloria to introduce me to some of her friends and classmates who also planned to continue their education abroad she explained that she is not on good terms with anyone in her class and she only has acquaintances but not 'real friends'. She believed that those around her were envious of her achievements or that they don't understand her determination to succeed through education.

and this will not allow him to succeed in the UK. I think he is too used to live the easy life that his parents provide for him.

With luke-warm determination, she concluded that ending the relationship would be the most rational, despite the most painful decision that she had ever taken. Her desire to 'make it' in London was so strong that she could not allow this 'calf love' relationship to pull her back. After all, in London she could always meet 'someone interesting' and possibly British, she claimed.

For Gloria, continuing her education in the UK was a logical step and she could not recall having any alternative visions for her future. The only meaningful way of developing her personality and professional profile was through obtaining a prestigious diploma from a western university. Similar to Miro, she believed to be guided by normative principles and determination which set her apart from her peers: migration was the only available option for validating her exceptionality and capitalising on her 'Western mentality'. Unlike Miro, Blagovest and Nikolay, who all had invested time and efforts into realising expectations for a better future in Bulgaria, many young and well-educated people like Gloria were reluctant to explore any possibilities for realisation at home, either because these were considered not to exist or because they could not bring a desired prestige and recognition.

I found Gloria's migration narrative and that of other young 'Bulgarian Westerners' to be constructed in concurrence to a dominant 'brain-drain' rhetoric that has been put forward as an explanation of young people's migration since the beginning of the 1990s. According to this 'popular truth', it was the 'best and the brightest' – those with good education, ambition, and entrepreneurial spirit – that had left the country in a hard but often successful quest for professional advancement (see Ghodsee 2002). Gloria's

story also demonstrates the dire effects of the recent global financial crisis on many middle-class professionals and small-scale entrepreneurs. Gloria's parents, as other 'Bulgarian Westerns' who had lost previously-enjoyed middle-class status and materiality, were forced into migration as the only way of realising the aspirations that came with such a status.

'Bulgarian Westerners': precarious and aspirational middle class

The migration narratives of 'Bulgarian Westerners' were very clearly tinted by their subjective perceptions of middle classness based on their symbolic and cultural proximity to the West. When constructing their stories, they were carrying out a symbolic boundary-building in an effort to delineate themselves from a majority of what they called 'typical' Bulgarians. As a first step, they made sure to emphasise that rather than 'economic' their rational for leaving the country was 'ideational' - a moral necessity for escaping a culturally and spiritually impoverished society. Studies of aspirational middle-class cultures in postsocialist contexts have pointed to the importance of consuming commodified images and consumer goods which were expected to confer an imagined Western status and respectability (Fehervery 2002, Patico 2008). Quite to the contrary, my informants considered such material desires characteristic for the indebted 'masses' who recklessly lived beyond their means. The sporting of (fake) branded outfits, smart phones and cars, home refurbishments, visits in overpriced cafes and shopping trips to trendy malls were all mocked as a conspicuous and 'shallow' consumer craze.

Such a postmaterialist stance, I argue, should not be taken at face value as it does not express a transcendence of material needs or a moral condemnation of money as the ultimate measure of personal worth in the postsocialist period. In comparison to 'ordinary people', 'Bulgarian Westerners' were better equipped in adapting to the 'transitional' realities in Bulgarian society, either because of their family background, material resources, amassed cultural capital or ability to mobilise social networks. Their better positioning in the societal hierarchy (in an economic and symbolic respect) was also a result of their efforts to align their understandings of self, economy, business, and social relations with a Western standard. The relative degree of material prosperity that many 'Bulgarian Westerners' had attained, in the form of a house and a car, luxury items and leisure travels, proved to be highly volatile. This has been the case particularly in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis when many of them started struggling with declining businesses, salary cuts, precarious freelance jobs and low public-sector incomes. This signifies that rather than absent, socioeconomic precarity and materialist longings were often silenced or downplayed in the migration narratives of this aspirational middle class, and most likely so because they were too closely associated with a working-class culture of migration.[120]

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[120] On the other hand, such postmaterialist demonstrations can be referred to what Bourdieu calls 'denial of the 'economy' (1980: 285) – the phenomenon of 'disinterestedness' or disavowal of financial profit he observes in different social spheres – art, bureaucracy, religion, and so on. In the artistic field, for example, creators and craftsman are suspicious of economic success as they take it as questioning their value as artists (Bourdieu 1980). It could be argued that my informants followed a similar logic when they sidelined the economic and emphasised the symbolic dimensions of their class identities and articulations.

The 'new' middle-class elites in global peripheral regions have been said to consist of those able to enjoy western living standards and cosmopolitan belonging to a global social order (Heiman, Freeman and Liechty 2012). In eastern Europe, they have been the most celebrated fraction of the so-called 'transitional winners' – whose existence has been taken as a symbol of progress and a sign attesting to the successful advancement of postsocialist countries towards First World status (Schroder and Vonderau 2008). Samuli Schielke, among others, has pointed to the global proliferation of a different sense of middle classness, which is of great significance for people who are desperately struggling to acquire some sense of material security and social status (2012). Despite lacking economic privilege that would allow engagement in cosmopolitan lifestyles and consumption, the representatives of this 'lumpen' middle class, as he calls it, make sure to underline their support for and appropriation of a modernist ideology in regard to appearances, cultural tastes, consumer longings and political and religious commitments (Schielke 2012).

'Bulgarian Westerners' exhibited a similar tendency for upward identification. They aspired for a symbolic, but also economic recognition of their self-assigned middle-class belonging as they often did not possess the materiality and background that such identification required. Like other peripheral aspirational middle classes, they can be defined as 'working class' or 'transitional losers' from a purely materialist class perspective, but they often try to compensate their declining status by differentiating themselves from and claiming moral superiority over others.

When viewed as part of a growing number of people from the global periphery who identify as 'middle class' in this aspirational sense, 'Bulgarian Westerners's' migrations can be seen as an attempt to overcome a sense of dislocation in a double sense.

Postsocialist promises of middle-class success and prosperity extended to all those who managed to successfully adopt a new mode of personhood characterised by self-responsibility, self-actualisation and individual choice. In postsocialist societies the 'modal personality engineering' (Kalb 2014) of turning individuals with anti-market inclinations into what Elizabeth Dunn has termed 'choosing subjects', who are 'flexible' and 'self-directed' (2004), has been seen as part of an unbounded process of social and economic neoliberalisation. My informants had a hard time reconciling with the fact that they, as perfect embodiments of this exact model of personhood, were unable to achieve or sustain economic success. Yavor (thirty one), for example, a teacher by training, could not see why he had to work as an office assistant in an environment of 'primitively-thinking' people and for a salary that just about covered his monthly bills. He felt that all his efforts to obtain a university diploma, English-language proficiency and additional qualifications had gone to waste. He claimed that this was the reason for his forthcoming departure for the UK where, even if unable to legalise his qualifications, he could at least be 'around like-minded people'.

This aspect of personal dislocation came from the discrepancy between the subjectively recognised middle-class belonging and the lack of lucrative employment opportunities. In many cases migration was the only available path towards resolving this discrepancy and obtaining the quality of life that was understood to match a middle-class status.

Another reason for the class dislocation felt by my informants was the fact that their moral and cultural superiority failed to receive due recognition in the symbolic order of the day. Both Miro and Gloria felt unable to fit into the climate of present-day Bulgaria and were greatly embittered that their efforts and achievements were not appreciated.

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They, as many others, saw great injustice in the 'fact' that the dominant normative model in Bulgaria favoured culturally-impoverished and morally-compromised individuals while stifling the efforts of 'Western-minded' elites. More fundamentally, in a society stuck in a 'savage' mode of capitalism, social recognition was of little value for my informants and not even worth fighting for. They could not see their place in a society whose 'heroes of the day' were 'people with no culture and value system'.

It is along these lines, that the personal dislocation that 'Bulgarian Westerners' hoped to transcend through migration should be interpreted. In their own eyes, my informants appeared as the ultimate 'transitional' losers of the last twenty-something years. Those who correctly interpreted and adopted the true essence of a Western-styled personhood were supposedly the ones to reap the economic benefits of the postsocialist reforms. However, not only was the material reward for their efforts indefinitely postponed, but their symbolic status as cultural and moral leaders of Bulgarian society was increasingly pulled into doubt. They existed in an economically and symbolically marginal position that posed a contradiction to their self-image of Europeans and Westerners.

Being 'stuck' in a post-transitional time

So far, I have presented the stories of two categories of would-be migrants whose self-ascribed class belonging was built on mutually conflicting values and mentalities. When outlining the general societal context in which their lives were developing, 'Bulgarian Westerners' and 'ordinary people' pointed to different obstacles and constraints that made them unable or unwilling to imagine any meaningful future for

themselves and their families in Bulgaria. Despite their divergent evaluations, these two groups shared a feeling of desperation with the direction that their lives had taken, their diminished sense of control over the present and the apprehension with which they imagined the future. A shared sense of lack of individual and collective existential movement forward was what made life in Bulgaria unbearable for all my informants and what made them envision migration as the only way to overcome this impasse.

In his research on Lebanese transnational migrants and white racists in Australia, Ghassan Hage develops the notion of 'viability of life' as a 'sense of existential mobility', 'forward movement in time', one that presupposes 'meaningfulness and purposefulness of life' (2005: 471). Drawing on Spinoza and Bourdieu, he explains the longing for an 'experience of a growth from one state of being to a more efficient one' as universally intrinsic to the human condition and opposes it to a feeling of 'stuckedness' (2009:97) as existential immobility – 'going nowhere or too slowly' (2005: 470). The exact parameters of this feeling of being 'stuck' are hard to pinpoint and Hage is reluctant to attribute what is an encompassing subjective state of being to concrete objective and not always measurable factors. He is clear on the fact that this state can affect people from different social milieus and that in all cases it comes down to a feeling of lacking or insufficient agency – an individual who is 'stuck' has no alternative routes to take and is unable to seize new opportunities (Hage 2009).

Feelings of inadequate or unsatisfactory 'existential movement' were expressed in the notion of 'survival' by 'ordinary people', as well as in the class and status dislocations invoked by 'Bulgarian Westerners'. The socio-economic situation of my informants was clearly one of the factors preventing them from 'moving well' (Hage 2009: 471). Still, none of the prospective migrants who took part in this research belonged to those most

destitute and suffering Bulgarians who struggled to put food on the table, were homeless or had fallen out of all informal networks of social support. Rather, most of my informants were not satisfied with their living standard and most importantly, feared that whatever they had could be lost in the future. 'Ordinary people' often struggled to satisfy basic subsistence needs and many felt deprived of the 'right' to consume goods that although not vital to their social reproduction they considered everyone deserved to have. A small part of 'Bulgarian Westerners' acknowledged to 'have enough' but they always emphasised the insecure status of this attainment. The majority preferred not to talk about their compromised economic situation as they believed this would liken their motivations to the crude logic of 'ordinary' Bulgarians. The words of Assen, the unemployed father of a one-year-old baby girl, express this commonly shared sentiment:

> When you meet your friends here, do you ask them how they live? Everyone will tell you that things are getting from bad to worse. People are jammed and vegetate. There is no development, nothing can happen here, it is just a brutal fight for survival. I don't have any hope that things will change, not for me and my children anyways.

Hage (2005), after Bourdieu, relates the feeling of 'not moving' or 'moving with unsatisfactory speed' to individuals' ability to accumulate different amounts of capital that determine their symbolic position in different social fields. Feelings of 'stasis' can occur independently of one's externally-perceived social advancement and relate to what Bourdieu calls 'positional misery' – a form of misery that goes beyond material deprivation and denotes a sense of social suffering stemming out of perceptions of

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one's depreciated position in the social group (Bourdieu, 1993: 11, cited in Perry and Cross 1997: 48).

I have demonstrated how for both groups a sense of existential immobility was also related to perceptions of symbolic depreciation of their practices, adopted mentalities and models of personhood. 'Ordinary people', bereaved of social and cultural capitals such as 'Western mentality', 'good connections', and 'entrepreneurial mind-set', were pushed into symbolically marginal positions. This was detrimental to their sense of personal value and dignity. 'Bulgarian Westerners', on the other hand, were seemingly 'moving' in a better way, but they also experienced frustration about 'not being able to move forward' in the reality of their underqualified and low-paid jobs. For relatively successful people like Miro, it was their restrained capacity to express the full extent of their cultural competence and 'Western mind-set' that made them feel 'stuck'. The mismatch between their self-perceived middle classness and the lack of financial and social recognition of their distinctiveness made many of them feel as if they had their 'wings cut' in a social order not of their own choosing.

In their stories, my informants always related the subjective feeling of 'not moving well' to the desperation produced by the failed promises of the 'transition'. For their socio-economic and symbolic entrapment, they blamed the inadequate or lacking movement of the Bulgarian state, which they considered 'stuck' in a 'post-transitional' temporality.

Take your transition back!

One of the widely circulated and much debated images of the anti-government protests in 2013 was that of a woman holding a poster that read: 'Take your transition back'.

Blagovest, like many others I met considered the 'transition' (*prehodat*) to be a grand scheme orchestrated by a small 'old' dressed as 'new' oligarchic elite, which fabricated mass promises while plundering state resources and people's dignity. Other popular narratives shared by informants, claimed that 'transition' has become a permanent feature of Bulgarian society and its end could only come with the demise of the country itself. Many had the feeling that *prehodat* was occurring in a chaotic, non-linear manner envisioned as a reverse 'one step forwards and two steps back' movement. These different reasonings demonstrate the overwhelming confusion of my informants who struggled to make sense of a socio-economic and political context which presentedthem with a constant change while at the same time ensured that things always remained the same (Kofti 2016). While there was no agreement on whether the transition was ongoing, completed, circular, or never taken place to begin with, it became clear that the promises produced in 'the beginning of the change[121]' (*nachaloto na promyanata*) became satisfied only for a small economic elite, those who were able to always 'move well'. The remaining majority, to which my informants from the two different groups belonged, was said to have been permanently confined to a state of 'survival' with varying degrees of wellbeing and insecurity.

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[121] 'The change' (*promianata*) was how people popularly referred to the beginning of the postsocialist transition.

Figure 1. A student protesting in front of the Bulgarian Parliament holding a poster saying, 'Take your transition back', November 2013. Source: https://hystericalparrhesia.wordpress.com

The last twenty-something years were commonly represented as a succession of different crises; 'points of rupture' which often did not follow a chronological sequence but were ranked according to the severity of the impact they had on individual and collective livelihoods. Some of the most commonly mentioned peaks of insecurity were 'the hunger crisis' (1990), 'the fuel crisis' (1990), 'the currency crisis' (1993), 'the food crisis' (1995-1996), and 'the bank crisis' (1996). Apart from rupture, crisis also denoted a sense of continuity as often people struggled to remember a moment in which there was no crisis looming. The 'financial crisis' of 2008 the effects of which my informants were still struggling to overcome during my fieldwork, had been normalised by many,

as just 'one more crisis' of the 'transition'.[122] At the same time, as revealed in my fieldwork, this last crisis presented a fundamental turning point and the 'last push' prompting many to take the decision to try to re-settle their lives to the UK.

My informants' stories revealed that migration had always been on their horizons, as a 'last resort' escape from the different socio-economic and political crises that came along with the 'transition'. It was in the moments they felt pushed towards a precarious threshold with no foreseeable 'ways out' that they contemplated geographical mobility. Many of those I spoke to had made conscious efforts towards leaving the country in the past twenty years by: taking part in the Green card lottery[123], seeking refugee status in western Europe, looking for a connection that could 'pull' them abroad, or engaging in illegal seasonal labour in neighbouring Greece or Italy. In most cases, such endeavours proved unsuccessful as they were either not realised or failed to bring the expected results. Many of those I interviewed claimed that they had done their best to avoid migration while waiting for the situation in the country to settle down.

The 'financial crisis' surpassed my informants' willingness and ability to once more 'stick it out'. It appeared that continuing endurance did not enable feelings of being in control but, on the contrary, impacted on my informants' sense of personal strength and dignity.[124] The real proof of one's stamina became the capacity to break away from the stifling despite a familiar sense of stuckedness and to be courageous enough to throw oneself into the uncertainty of migration which at least carried the 'possibility of

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[122] See Kofti (2016).

[123] Refers to the Diversity Immigrant Visa Program of the United States Department of State, colloquially addressed as the 'American lottery'.

[124] For discussion of the dignity of stuckedness see Hage (2009).

mobility' (Hage 2009: 474). Such feelings were captured in the words of Eleonora (forty four) who was struggling to find stable employment for the last three years:

> Throughout the years, we [she and her husband] always postponed migration hoping that things will eventually work out for us. But the family business kept on declining and I kept on changing jobs every few months in a search for decent and well-paid employment. I finally realised there are no such jobs in Bulgaria, employers are only trying to use you for their own benefit. We finally made up our minds; we cannot suffer this dead-lock any longer. We are young, we want to live now, the only way forward for us is migration.

The determination with which those I spoke to were ready to embark on their journeys to the UK came from the exhaustion of their hopes for a better future in Bulgaria. The fear, desperation, and disillusionment that I captured in this particular ethnographic moment was present ever since the start of the market changes (see Creed 2011), but what made it particularly poignant for my informants was the painful realisation that 'things would never get better'. In his 'ethnography of decline' amongst Zambian Copperbelt mine workers, James Ferguson (1999) explores how times of acute socio-economic collapse lead to a change in the prevailing 'temporal sensibility' (Guyer 2007: 409). He contends that the modernist template informing people's interpretation of the world and their lives within it is 'turned upside down' and becomes replaced by a sense of irreversible decline which puts an end to hopes for linear progression. The 'abjection' of Zambians from the 'global stairway' creates experiences of 'disconnection' which Ferguson is careful to emphasise mean 'not simply a lack of connection' but loss of previously existing connection (1999: 238).

My fieldwork amongst would-be migrants revealed Bulgaria as one of the peripheral 'redlined' spaces which the global geographies of capitalism, Ferguson claims, shove in the category of global second-class membership (1999: 242). The hope of membership in a First World global order – the leitmotif of the 'transition' - came to be perceived as unrealistic by my informants who pictured themselves and the country in a state of what Stef Jansen calls 'collective spatiotemporal entrapment on the road to Europe' (2015: 173). Symptomatic of the dismantling of linear teleologies of development were widely used metaphors: 'we are sinking', 'the country is dying out', 'everything is disappearing', 'things are going down', 'we live in a dried oasis'. Generalising the situation in his hometown as symptomatic for the country as a whole, Blagovest, for example, once denoted this feeling of 'reverse movement' by comparing what he called the 'disappearing of Bulgaria' to the opening scene of the movie 'Lucy'[125] which depicted the effects of the hostile environment on the reproduction and evolution of animals and their eventual extinction.

Conclusion

This chapter has introduced some of the people whose stories this thesis follows to demonstrate how migration is always a result of the confluence of personal life circumstances and structural socio-economic factors beyond one's control. In individual life stories migration is constructed as a 'major event' (Fielding 1992: 201) embedded within individuals' biography – always a result of complex considerations, a multiplicity of circumstances and the intersection of varied factors that all lead to up to

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[125] *Lucy* (2014) Film Dir. Luc Besson. Universal Pictures. USA

the decision of leaving behind familiar surroundings. My respondents' narratives have demonstrated how individual decisions go beyond preoccupations with improvement of one's economic condition and relate to perceptions of individuals' positioning in the social hierarchy throughout time. Class-based identities depend not only on material attributes and professional occupation but on the accumulation of different forms of capital (cultural, social, and symbolic). The way in which people explain their reasons for migrating also reflects dominant class narratives and is expressed through the everyday enactment of diverse dispositions – aesthetic preferences and tastes, consumer choices, moral regimes, values, ideological beliefs, and modes of personhood. In narrating their migration reasons, my informants make sure to position themselves in relation to those within and outside of their social circle in a way that matches their self-identifications.

The chapter has showed that despite their different experiences and perceptions the two groups of respondents were in a similar state of existential 'stuckedness', defined by their inability to imagine a viable future in Bulgaria and a shared perception of lacking opportunities for personal advancement. I have explained their feeling of 'stagnation' as interrelated with their reasonings about the post-transitional 'spatiotemporal entrapment' (Jansen 2015: 19) of the Bulgarian state which was seen as standing outside of the modernist progressive template of development. The following chapter demonstrates how the shaken belief in Bulgaria's temporal advancement towards a Western standard of prosperity and development does not delegitimise the West as the ultimate centre of attraction. On the contrary, migration becomes the only available individual strategy through which individuals try to

'confound the established spatial order' (Gupta and Ferguson 1992: 17) and claim a

First World status.

Chapter Four

The Imaginary West

'There is no place like the UK', said Blagovest as we sat on a bench on the railway platform where I waited for the last train back to Plovdiv after one of my visits at his hometown. I asked him to elaborate. 'Well, I think it is the best place, the most Western if you like, it is ahead of Germany, for sure not even comparable to France, Italy, Spain and all these sorts of places.' 'What about Bulgaria?', I asked. 'You are joking, right? There is not even any point in discussing this. It is like comparing Bulgaria to the Central African Republic', he replied in bewilderment. He then raised one hand upwards to the level of his head, 'Look here is the West', keeping the other hand down on the level of his chest, he continued, 'Bulgaria is here. Even Romania is better than it. It is hard to admit it but it is true. Well, even Turkey, if you wish, I mean the European part of it, you know, their standard of life is very high, they are also very modern, you cannot see a woman wearing a burka in Istanbul.' 'Have you thought about migrating to Turkey then?', I asked and added, 'At least it is much closer than Britain?' 'Are you crazy? (he looked offended by my question) [...] everyone is going to the West and I should go to the East? Why didn't you go to study in Istanbul but you went to Birmingham instead?'

This short dialogue captures the gist of my informants' migration narratives and exemplifies their widely-shared convictions and deep-rooted visions of a global hierarchy of places (nations) and their own position within it. When discussing their plans for leaving the country, people very often, just like Blagovest, pointed not only to

the unsatisfactory experiences of a life they wanted to leave behind but to their positive imaginings of existing alternatives available in distant places. They juxtaposed Bulgaria, which in their eyes was marked by despair, stagnation and dwindling opportunities, to the prosperity and progress available in a place like the UK. This ability to imagine the availability of a drastically different alternative in a distant place was their main impetus to migrate (cf. Benson 2012, Salazar 2013).

When envisioning their migratory trajectories, my informants often drew on a hierarchically structured world map very similar to the one presented by Blagovest. In this imaginary world order, different countries were ranked according to their desirability as migration destinations, which in turn pointed to their capacity to approximate an imagined West, an ideal template of what a 'good life' should look like. Blagovest's vision demonstrated clearly that the economic advancement of a country was not the only criterion determining its appeal in migrants' eyes. The imagined international order put forward by my informants also implied a geographical principle of organisation around an east-west axis, according to which, the further westwards a country was situated, the more desirable it appeared.

This chapter examines the role of the native concept of the West (*Zapadat*) in migrants' expectations and aspirations of life following migration. The West signified both a specific geographical location – western Europe (the UK in particular) – and an imaginary place offering infinite possibilities for a better future. Even people who did not have first-hand experience of the West were able to produce remarkably detailed and consistent depictions of how things functioned there. Blagovest's only ever experience abroad, for example, consisted of his one time 'escape' to the Czech Republic in the early 1990s, where he spent two months in an asylum centre. Still, he

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prided himself with his extensive knowledge about the world. Similar, to other informants, he drew his information from personal contacts in western Europe, TV programmes and a range of media images. He expressed a common conviction when he said that one did not need to have been abroad or to personally know someone living there to 'know' what life was like. The confidence and detail with which my informants were able to imagine the West and the life it offered, as well as the impressive compatibility of their accounts, indicated how individual imaginations were informed by widely circulating cultural constructs – 'global imaginaries', which 'change the way in which people collectively envision the world and their own positionalities and mobilities within it' (Salazar 2011: 577).

In order to grasp the interconnection between individual imaginations and globally-circulating cultural repertoires making up the emic category of the West, this chapter uses the already introduced conceptual prism of the 'imaginary West' (Yurchak 2006). By deconstructing the West as it was envisioned by my two groups of informants, I demonstrate how at its root is the promise of a Eurocentrically-conceived modernity and its mythologies (see Ferguson 1999). This chapter argues that although influencing the way in which people imagine their existence and succumb to a corresponding moral order, imaginaries are also invested with meanings and interpretations that on one hand pertain to a specific historical and cultural context and, on the other, relate to one's own individual circumstances, class perception and positioning (Benson 2012, Smith 2006). In this sense, the imaginary of the West is not an independent factor mobilising individual and collective behaviour. It is the wider socio-cultural and economic circumstances that I see as determining its power of attraction. Its key role in driving my informants' physical mobility should be interpreted

against the particular socio-economic, political and historical circumstances that I have presented in the previous chapter. This approach is in lines with the conviction of the theorists of the imaginary - Taylor (2002), Castoriadis (1987), and Gaonkar (2002) who claim that when taken as a 'social' rather than simply an individual 'quality', a particular imaginary requires an understanding of the wider societal context.

Therefore, I begin this chapter by tracing the historical formation of the West as a powerful symbolic concept in the collective Bulgarian consciousness. I will demonstrate its interrelation with a western modernist project and its construction as a benchmark for development, in relation to which Bulgaria has always remained in an outsider position – 'incomplete' and 'lagging behind'. Subsequently, I outline the two different versions of the West constructed by my two groups of informants. Would-be migrants in the 'ordinary people' category shared visions of the West as 'normality' expressed in three main themes: predictability and affordability of life; social justice; and working-class dignity. 'Bulgarian Westerners'' visions of the West are best capture by the term 'American Dream', as they emphasised ideas of meritocracy and upward social mobility; success as a combination of personal and professional satisfaction; and freedom for practicing different personhood models and gender values. After deconstructing these two visions of the West I return to discuss the articulation of an imaginative hierarchy of nations that was inextricable part of my informants' visions of the West. I conclude by advancing an understanding of Bulgarian migration as international existential advancement.

A genealogy of the 'imaginary West' in Bulgaria: historical construction in three periods

The following historical review serves to contextualise the present empirical chapter by providing the necessary background for understanding the importance of the West in public perceptions and individual narratives. Special attention is paid to the historical and socio-cultural specificities which make the West such a durable and powerful cultural and symbolic construction in Bulgaria. Its emergence and development will be traced in three subsequent historical periods:

- The period from the beginning of the Bulgarian National Revival commencing in the 18th century, encompassing the liberation and establishment of independent Bulgarian state (1878) and ending with the post-World War II establishment of state socialism (1946) and the country's entrance into the Soviet sphere of influence;

- The period of state socialism from 1946 to 1989;

- The postsocialist period initiated with the dissolution of socialist structures and the start of the process of political democratisation and market reforms, during which Bulgaria also became part of the European Union (2007), and which is said to continue to the present day.

From National Revival to the beginning of the Cold War period

With the beginning of the Bulgarian national revival, a project for cultural and political consolidation of the Bulgarian people under Ottoman rule[126] in the late eighteenth

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[126] Bulgarian territories were under Ottoman rule between the 14th and the 19th century.

century, the dichotomy between East and West (Asia and Europe) started to penetrate the pre-modern Bulgarian imagination. The clash between these two cultural entities was presented in the antagonisms of 'barbarian' and 'civilised', 'backwards' and 'progressive', 'rational' and 'irrational', referring to both forms of social organisation and collective mentality (*dushevnost*) (Tsvetkov 1993). The rise of Bulgarian nationalism was associated with the gradual reception of western Enlightenment ideas and values through commerce, education, and travel (Crampton 2006). Drawing on the opposition between Europe and the Orient, Bulgarian enlighteners and revolutionaries hoped to consolidate a sense of national belonging amongst the people by emphasising their supposedly superior Slavic (European) ethnic heritage vis-à-vis an imposed and allegedly genetically foreign barbarian influence brought about by the Ottoman rule (Galavanova 1998). From this point in time, a unified image of western Europe emerged and came to symbolise the West as a whole. This image went hand in hand with ideas of 'progress', 'reason', and 'culture', and came to be seen by some social groups as supreme embodiment of civilisation and the 'ultimate goal of domestic development' (Valtchinova 2016:137).

At the same time, the growth of the West's popular appeal was paralleled by an attitude of mistrust and disappointment with western Europe's unwillingness to recognise Bulgaria's civilisational maturity and readiness to receive freedom and political recognition. European rulers' efforts to sustain the Ottoman power in the Balkans provoked the condemnation of many Bulgarians who accused the West of supporting slavery and despotism in the region (Daskalov 1998).[127] This disillusionment led to the

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[127] People's discontent of the time was directed to a great extent towards the British who were following a strong pro-Turkish policy (Daskalov 1998).

steady shift of the Bulgarian gaze eastwards towards Russia as another possible 'liberatory force' (ibid). The support that Russia provided for Bulgarian people's struggle for independence at the end of the 19th century (albeit in the process advancing its own imperial interest in the Balkans) harnessed the sympathies of the majority of the population.[128]

The ambivalent attitudes towards 'Europe' (western and northern Europe) were further entrenched with the development of an anti-modernist (and anti-occidentialist) conservative movement warning against the dangers coming from foreign cultural influences (Valtchinova 2016). The growing Europeanisation (*poevropeichvane*) of the urban population expressed in the embracement of Western values, ideas and trends was seen by Bulgarian patriots as a source of moral deterioration and was opposed to the preservation of the purity of traditional forms of life characteristic of Bulgarian rural communities. In this sense, 'Europe' came to be perceived simultaneously as an emancipatory force and a threat to national identity (Valtchinova 2016).[129]

In the decades following the end of Ottoman domination (from 1878 onwards), the newly-independent Bulgarian state underwent a process of speedy modernisation including the instating of modern political institutions (local governments, courts, administration, etc.), economic reforms, and regulations, all aimed at fostering progress towards a universal model of western civilisation. The normative power of the

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[128] This was specifically the case for the rural population and the petit bourgeoisie that saw Russia as a liberator and protector. The urban intelligentsia and salariat on the other hand expressed anti-Russian and pro-Western sentiments (Blagoev 1957).

[129] Meanwhile, the Bulgarian western-educated elites raised criticism against the superficial adoption of modern symbols and the insufficient engagement with the 'core' of what Europeanness stands for (Daskalov 1998).

West came to subordinate everything Bulgarian as inferior and backwards and a source of embarrassment in collective consciousness (Valtchinova 2016).

Some critical scholars have pointed out the colonial modus operandi of such transformations. Rather than political liberation, 19th century eastern Europe, they claim, was submerged into a new form of dependency, this time to a western imperial core. Manuela Boatca's (2007) analysis of Romania's neo-colonial peripheralisation from the period can also be extended to the Bulgarian case. According to her, without being formally colonised, the eastern European region has been systematically constructed as an incomplete and inferior 'Other within', which was in need of cultural, political, and economic intervention (Boatca 2007).

The collective Bulgarian imagination of the time appears to be blending together contradictory attitudes – it was not uncommon for someone to express criticism against 'Westernisation' as a hegemonic process of cultural and political domination while at the same time recognising the supremacy of western modernity and its progressive promise. As a 'country which has one side turned towards the West as a model and supreme benchmark in the cultural hierarchy, and another turned towards internal cultural space and domestic values' (Valtchinova 2016: 139) the orientation of Bulgaria vis-à-vis an ideal western culture was ambiguous. This ambiguity continued throughout the two world wars and the intra-war period up until the Soviet occupation of the country in 1944.

Socialist period

The establishment of state socialism in 1944 marked a process of radical ideological re-orientation of the country, a reversal 'from Europeanisation to Sovietisation'

(Hristova 1998). In the early socialist period, all spheres of life – economy, culture, education, were re-modelled in line with a Soviet modernisation model and Marxist-Leninist principles (Crampton 2006). The East-West dichotomy was now elevated onto the level of state ideology and geopolitical competition between 'communism' and 'capitalism'. In official discourse, the West was constructed in ideological contradiction to socialist life: a place of social inequality, injustice, mass unemployment, and decaying mores. The opaque portrayal of socialism was dominated by claims about social justice, humanism, democracy and security. At the same time, the isolation from foreign influences and the prohibitions of everything western in socialist Bulgaria increased the attraction of the West (Daskalov 1998, Chapter One).[130]

In the late socialist period, the depiction of the West in dominant ideology and the greater 'openness' of the system, led to the increased association of the West with consumption and lifestyle, and less so with distinct 'culture' or a 'democratic' political system. In the mind-set of the urban population in particular, the West came to be seen as a 'promised land' contact with which was sought in a multiplicity of ways (Valtchinova 2016). The consumption of western culture and commodities became not only a marker of social status but also an expression of revolt against the restrictions of the system and thus a symbol of freedom. The ambivalent place of consumption in socialist Bulgaria, was an important factor that contributed to the fetishisation of the West as a consumer paradise (Ditchev 2014). In the socialist modernisation project, consumption was, on the one hand, elevated as the ultimate teleological promise of

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[130] At the same time, however, agrarian, and industrial areas demonstrated strong support for socialism and by the same token strong pro-Russian sentiments (see Creed 1995).

the industrial production system while, on the other hand, it was inhibited by structurally-embedded production shortages and ideological reprimands of consumer desires as an expression of moral weakness and decay (Ditchev 2014).

Thus, it could be argued that the prohibition of individual consumer desires and the obscene exposure to consumption goods (in media images, smuggled products, rumours, and stories) led to a collective longing for a Western consumption. The circulation of both official and unofficial representations of western 'reality' was ideologically-driven and far from providing a realistic, let alone critical representation of life in western Europe. The socialist period led to the entrenchment of a highly mystified and mythologised image of the West that had lasting effects on collective Bulgarian consciousness long after the ideological smokescreen was dismantled (see Chapter One).

Postsocialist period

The fall of socialism in Bulgaria in 1989 was more a result of intra-party power struggles than a popular revolution (Crampton 2006). Despite the enthusiasm with which a great part of the population welcomed democracy and the free market, the devastating effects of the early 'transitional' years provoked support for the old system (Creed 1995).[131] At the end of the 1990s, however, the drastic socio-economic collapse led to popular discontent with Bulgaria's left-wing government and a full force turn of the

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[131] For example, the former Communist Party was elected into government twice after 1989. Agricultural and factory workers who have been most severely affected by the dismantling of state industries, enterprises and privatisation of agriculture are said to have been the most fervent supporters of the Socialist Party as they feared symbolic and economic devaluation of their status post-1989 (Creed 1995). The repeated election of the Socialist Party until 1997 was interrupted by the 1991-1992 rule of the Democratic Party.

country's ideological and political orientation to Euro-Atlantic institutions and actors (Crampton 2006).

The end of the socialist system presented the majority of Bulgarians with increased opportunities for direct engagement with the western world. The widespread dissemination of cultural messages and the consumption of mediated images and material commodities provided ways for establishing an individualised connection with the West. The sustainment of international contacts through business, educational or recreational travel, however, was still a privilege enjoyed by cultural and economic elites (Ranova 2011). The much more open access to the imagery and materiality of the West, as well as the short-term direct exposure to western environments, did not, however, result in its de-mystification. On the contrary, juxtaposed to the harsh economic realities of the 'transition', the image of the West as a 'consumer paradise' has been said to have attracted thousands of Bulgarians who left the country in the early 1990s in an effort to experience first-hand the wonders of the western world (Daskalov 1998, Ditchev 2014, Stoilkova 2006).

The 'transitional' narrative postulated that the only possible way for Bulgaria to reach this standard of material opulence and modernisation was to transform itself according to the frameworks of western liberal democracy and the free market. The West became the template guiding the process of Europeanisation, popularly referred to as 'catching up', or 'going back' to Europe[132], which implied the alignment of the political system, institutions and the economy to EU prescriptions and regulations (Katsiakas 2011).

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[132] The resumed movement forward that such discourses proclaimed, exhibited a desire for restoration of continuity with pre-socialist independent liberal state (19th century). In Bulgaria, as in many other postsocialist states communism was presented as disruption of the 'normal' historical temporality and a painful aberration from the 'natural' course of world history (see Rausing 2002, Kiossev 2008).

Beyond that, Europeanisation was also portrayed as a 'civilisational' choice that had to determine once and for all the national self-identification of Bulgarians. The dutiful adoption of European mores and values was expected to on one hand, enable people to re-fashion their mentalities and let go of their residual Oriental or Balkan way of doing things, and on the other, overcome their socialist mind-set. Such discourses further reinforced the idealisation of the western modernisation narrative (Bechev 2011).

The postsocialist transformation has brought intense hardship, destitution, and suffering for the majority of the Bulgarian population (see Bogdanova 2011, Buchanan 2002, Creed 2011, Kaneff 2002, Kaneff 2011, Mitev 2001). The accession of the country to the European Union in 2007 was initially welcomed as a big success and long-awaited recognition. In the following years, however, many people still found themselves trapped in a dead-end situation: on the one hand, they were promised the freedom and benefits of democracy and capitalism, but on the other, they were paralysed by a lack of economic opportunities and social routes to follow.

The seven-year transitional restrictions imposed by EU member states on Bulgarian workers and the constantly delayed entry into the Schengen area served to 'cool off' the excitement provoked by the EU accession. The strictness with which the EU imposed its policies and the humiliating status of the country as the poorest member state further deepened the historical perceptions of East-West disparities (Ilieva 2010). They aggravated people's perceptions of their subordinated status as 'second category' Europeans and ultimately stirred up some official and popular 'Europhobic' moods (Valtchinova 2016).

The harsh consequences of the 2008 global economic crisis have deepened the sense of disillusionment and decline for a large number of Bulgarians. Some commentators of the region have gone as far as to proclaim the end of modern teleological thinking (see Kofti 2014, Popovici and Pop 2016). The previous chapter demonstrated how the lack of hope about the realisation of 'transitional' promises and collective societal progress made it impossible for my informants, and many other Bulgarians, to envision a future in Bulgaria. Such widespread disillusionment, however, should not be taken as the end of the teleological anticipation of the Western ideal. As this chapter demonstrates, the West is still seen as a place offering radical alternative to life in a country where people could not imagine a secure and dignified existence for themselves and their families. Migration to the UK, I further demonstrate, becomes an individual path for realising the promise of Western modernity.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

This historical overview of the emergence and development of the image of the West in Bulgarian collective imagination from the formation of the modern Bulgarian state to the present moment reveals a 'centre-periphery' dynamic characteristic for colonial and postcolonial contexts. Even though Bulgaria has never been an object of European colonial domination, the West has played the role of a 'major signifier' (big Other) in the construction of Bulgarian national identity and collective self-consciousness. Bulgarians seem to have always thought of themselves as positioned on the geopolitical and symbolical crossroad between two opposing foreign Others – the Ottoman empire in the east and Western powers in western Europe. This geographical positioning and the different historical episodes of Ottoman and European domination

and acculturation have conditioned Bulgaria's sense of being Europe's 'incomplete Self' (Todorova 1997: 17).

As a dominant cultural formation, the West has always inspired mixed societal sentiments in Bulgaria, which range from irresistible attraction and idealisation foregrounding constant comparison, competition, and emulation, to disillusionment, resentment, and fear of ideological and cultural assimilation. Some have argued that the historical comparison and interaction with a superior 'European Other' has created a peripheral inferiority complex resulting in self-criticism, negation, and denial of all those traits seen to characterise Bulgarians as incomplete Europeans (see Kiossev 2011). Armbruster, Rollo and Meinhof's (2003) study of imaginations of Europe in border communities[133] confirms the ambivalent feelings that east Europeans hold about the West (in their case Europe and the EU), on one hand, fearing subjugation and exploitation, and on the other, sustaining aspirations for economic betterment and progress.

The efforts to overcome two of the main legacies that have been seen as determining Bulgaria's past and present – the Oriental and the Socialist one – have produced two main compensation mechanisms: one of uncritical admiration and emulation of the West and vilification of all socialist and ottoman; and a second one that resists and rejects the ideal of European modernity through the invocation of a distinct eastern European or Balkan identity, culture and belonging (Ranova 2011).[134] These positions

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[133] Their study looks at the narratives of citizens of Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovenia prior to their admission to the EU in 2004.

[134] Nationalism is a third popular position which promotes the assertion of Bulgarian national interest against any external interference. This rhetoric sits uncomfortably between the above-mentioned two

give rise to antagonism, conflict, and differentiation within society. They serve as basis for the crafting of class-based identities, as I have argued in the previous empirical chapter. As I will show in the remainder of this chapter, the key characteristics of the image of the West, which are the basis for its cultural authority and powerful presence in Bulgarian social imagination, were reflected in my informants' attempts to make sense of their own and Bulgaria's position within social and political dynamics on a global level.

The West as 'normality'

In this section, I discuss the expectations and imaginations of life in the West held by those of my informants who self-identified as 'ordinary people'. These reflected first and foremost a desire for retaining a sense of 'normality', which they were missing in their present experiences and hoped to achieve through migration to the UK. This 'normality' was denoted in the main categories of stability, affordability, social justice, and dignified existence, which I discuss in turn.

Stability, predictability, and boredom

Anguel (twenty five) worked as a security guard in a large exhibition centre of declining significance in the city of Plovdiv. Dissatisfied with the risky nature of his job and the awkward situations he had to deal with on a daily basis – and unable to find more satisfying employment or afford university education – he saw migration to the UK as the only way forward. His plan was to work in a farm for a few months, use his earnings

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compensational mechanisms. Nationalism, however, also draws on ideas of Enlightenment and western modernity (see Manolova and Lottholz 2015).

as a stepping stone towards finding better paid employment and eventually settle in London. One time he invited me to visit him at his workplace – a large glass-walled room at the entrance of the exhibition grounds overlooking a busy boulevard. We had just started talking about his expectations of life in the UK when he pointed through the window and exclaimed: 'Look at them! The yellow cabs! They are back!'. While trying to reach the police on the phone he started explaining how the taxis in front of the building had already been there in the past few days, trying to trick foreign athletes taking part in an international fencing competition. The unscrupulous taxi drivers, he continued, not only parked in an unauthorised area but took advantage of the clueless foreigners charging them twenty times the regular fee. Anguel had already tried to chase them away by threatening to call the police. The police had come to fine them earlier that day but this had only a temporary effect. 'This is what drives me crazy about life in Bulgaria – the complete lack of regulations and laws. This can never happen in the UK, right?' I murmured that I was not sure and it maybe depended on the situation. He replied:

> No! I am sure it can never happen there. People there live according to strict rules and regulations, as it should be. This is engrained in their mentality, they cannot even think of doing anything unlawful. Unlike us [Bulgarians], we are born with this mechanism in our heads – always seeking to overstep the rules for our own benefit.

Adamant to persuade me of the high morals and unspoilt mentality of the British and westerners in general, Anguel continued to pile up one example after another. A while ago, some friends had told him how a group of Bulgarian *gastarbeiters* who lived in one of London's migrant ghettos had started stealing electricity by filling their electricity

meters with coin-shaped ice cubes made in Heineken beer caps. What was baffling about the story, Anguel thought, was not this impressive Bulgarian 'ingenuity' but the fact that it had taken the dumbfounded British authorities almost a year to figure out this fraud. The reason, he claimed, was not their foolishness but the fact that such trickery was simply beyond their grasp. 'Western people', he believed, did not have the 'fraud gene' characteristic for people with a 'Bulgarian mentality'.

Shifting the emphasis from 'mentality' to social organisation, other people I spoke to evoked similar discourses of strong regulations and their rigorous implementation in the UK. These were related to positive images of a strong state; the contributions of historical political figures and an imperial legacy of a colonial super power. Eleonora, a temporary employee in a small accounting company in Sofia and married mother of one, who was about to start an au-pair job in London, praised the glorious historical past of the UK and its successful promotion of its own interest against EU regulations. As a contrast, she highlighted Bulgaria's insignificance in international affairs and the country's historical position of slavery-dependence:

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

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

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

Western life was perceived by my informants to be based on clear rules recognised and accepted by the disciplined western citizens. In contrast, many 'ordinary people' felt vulnerable and unprotected in Bulgaria where the laws worked for the powerful of the day, those who could pay. Their anticipation of 'normal' lives carried a sense of much-desired security and basic trust in the way life works and reassurance that tomorrow will be more or less similar to today and yesterday. The order and stability defining one's experiences were expected to ensure a better 'grasp' over one's present and ability to plan and positively imagine the future.

This temporal dimension of order and stability was metaphorically expressed in the notion of 'boring life'. Such life, which people imagined to be the norm in the West, was characterised by ordinariness and non-eventfulness in which each passing day made life manageable and predictable, thus allowing a greater sense of control and security. Anguel, for example, admitted how when trying to keep himself awake during the quiet and eventless nightshifts, he would sometimes imagine what a life of a guy his age would look like in the UK:

He goes to work in the morning, most likely in an office. Spends eight hours working, I mean disciplined work, no slacking off. Then he goes home to his family. Of course, he has a nice house and a car. Everyone has dinner in front of the telly. They are laughing while telling each other about how their day went.

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It all repeats again on the next day. Maybe on the weekends they all go out of town for a picnic [...]. Quite an ordinary life, when you think about it, almost boring [laughing].

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

The difference is that in the UK all of this has a purpose; you know why you are doing it, so to speak. Your daily efforts, no matter how mundane, add up and you know that you are building something; [...] you are building a secured future, for yourself and, more importantly, for your children. In Bulgaria, the everyday strain is futile – you fight and fight just so you fail at the end. Here, it all melts away into thin air!

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

These positively charged imaginations of boredom present a sharp contrast to common western-centric perceptions of boredom as a mass phenomenon of modern

times characteristic of life saturated by activities, entertainment, and distractions. The monotonous banality of an everyday devoid of passion and spontaneity is said to produce alienation, apathy, and frustration in the western subject (eg. Klapp 1986). It was precisely the predictability of this repetitive sameness of life, free from material worry, one epitomised, according to Lefebvre (1991), in western middle-class suburbia that my informants desired as meaningful and cohesive. Boring lives were thus lives of smooth social reproduction and transition between different life phases - attending school, finding stable employment, starting a family, becoming a parent, and ensuring the same life cycle from generation to generation. Putting one's existence into a progressive continuum in which the 'natural' flow of life was restored was expected to fill daily activities with meaning and provide a sense of coherence and purpose.

'Even those like us are living well!'- social justice and affordability of life

On a hot summer day, I took the train from Plovdiv and went to meet Blagovest for a quick coffee just a week before he was due to leave for the UK, where he had been offered a job in the construction of a solar panel farm. When discussing how to stay in touch, he suggested I add him on Facebook as he was quite confident that the caravan in which he was going to live would have internet access. 'I am keeping a low profile on Facebook, just to let you know.[135] Don't be surprised when you see my profile picture. It is a picture of a pirate. I don't like to publish my own photos.' In response to my question about his preferences for keeping an incognito profile, he explained:

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[135] Blagovest's reluctance to draw attention to himself was part of his decision not to share his migration plans with anyone but his mother. Even though, 'half of [his] the neighborhood' was in the UK he never shared his intentions or asked for assistance as he believed it was 'better if no one knows' and if he 'managed on [his] own'.

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Well, on Facebook one only puts pictures which are worth looking at, something easy for the eyes, you know. I simply don't have such photos. If I could photograph myself next to a nice car, a house, or in a nice holiday location, for example, I would have posted those, anything else is just not serious. Let's see, I hope that soon I will also have something to boast about as my friends abroad - a nice car or some holiday location [laughing].

Blagovest's expectations highlighted the material dimension contained in the image of 'normality'. In his and in the narratives of other 'ordinary people' the West emerged as a place offering a standard of living and individual well-being unattainable at home. A lot of my informants believed that by going to the UK they would be able to achieve an average degree of economic independence and ensure a 'decent' life for themselves and their families. Such expectations weren't based on purely materialistic logics, however, but foregrounded perceptions of the morally just principles on which the social and economic organisation of the western society was based. Thus, the provision of economic security was elevated to a normative understanding of a just society– a fair system which provided equal redistribution of material and social resources to each individual based on their individual merit and regardless of race, gender and social networks. Underlying this assumption was the belief that in the UK even those at the bottom of the social ladder were able to 'have enough'. Expectations of just reward, affordability of life and an effective welfare state were other aspects of the social justice my informants expected to experience. They all become evident in Nina's contemplation of life in western Europe and the UK in specific:

In those countries, one is awarded for one's hard labour, not for one's connections (*vruzki*). If you are honest and hard-working you don't need to worry

about anything – you will always have enough. The state cares about its people by giving decent salaries and good welfare support – say, if you have a child or if you fall sick and cannot work for some time, you will receive enough to live well. Those who live off welfare support in the UK are much better off than those like myself in Bulgaria who work from morning to dawn and still need to fear for their bread. Also, keep in mind that the prices for basic products and maintenance bills are much lower in the West.

Going by what they said, for my informants 'having enough' primarily meant satisfaction of essential needs and sustainment of the day-to-day reproduction of their households. As already pointed out in the previous chapter, the state of 'survival' that 'ordinary people' desperately wished to leave behind was partly denoted by their frustrated ability to engage in a desired consumption and lifestyle. A more careful reading of their longings revealed that it was precisely this materiality of life that they saw as universal norm in the UK. In this respect, Blagovest claimed that contrary to Bulgarians' popular perceptions, according to which 'all Westerners have deep pockets', in reality 'Western people' (*Zapadnyatsi*) were just 'normal' workers sustaining what in the West was considered an average level of material wellbeing. In his view, it was the overblown conspicuous display of economic success, practiced by many Bulgarian migrants that induced commonly held misconceptions about wealth and abundance characterising life in the West.

He insisted on sharing with me a widespread anecdote depicting the false promise of Western abundance that was subject of much amusement amongst his small-town community. A few years ago, a former classmate and neighbour of Blagovest left to seek work in the UK together with her husband. In the first year after their departure,

the couple did not return home even once, their parents claimed to have no regular phone contact with them and to be unaware of how they were managing. Just when their 'disappearance' started to provoke the circulation of rumors in the small town, their previously inactive Facebook profiles became deluged with photos demonstrating the couple's opulent lifestyle. On one of the photos they were sipping French Champaign in a jacuzzi in what looked like a very luxurious bathroom; on another one they posed next to a black SUV. The photos became the talk of the day for the next few weeks, with neighbors being divided over their authenticity. While some tried to get in touch with requests for loans, others remained skeptical and considered this to be a fake show-off.

Blagovest was one of the sceptics, he claimed, not because he was jealous of their success but because this opulence looked exaggerated to him. The true story behind the photos was exposed a few months later when two town dwellers working in the same cleaning agency as the couple revealed that the photos had been be taken in clients' homes during working hours. With self-righteous satisfaction, Blagovest ensured me that he could have never fallen for the story even without the disclosure provided by his townsmen. 'It is not easy to become rich in the UK. I am not saying it is not possible, but it is not given to everyone. It is like painting, not everyone can become Van Gogh.'

While dismissing the aspirations for exceptional economic success and luxurious lifestyles sustained by many of his friends, Blagovest tended to take for granted the promise of satisfactory well-being available to all full-time workers. He saw the socially just principle on which western 'normality' was based as a main precondition for

universal material security: 'If you work, you don't need to worry, there will always be enough for you.'

According to my informants, the general affordability of life and the strong British pound were other factors ensuring comfortable living for everyone.[136] Both 'ordinary people' and 'Bulgarian Westerners' always made sure to mention that their choice of the UK as migration destination was partly determined by the fact that the UK was one of the few western countries unaffected by the global economic crisis. For them, this attested to the almost unprecedented strength of the British economy and was a measure of the high degree of Westernness of the country. The high exchange value of the British pound in relation to the Bulgarian currency always triggered associations with lucrative earning opportunities. My informants routinely evaluated the earnings they expected to obtain in the UK against Bulgarian consumer prices and living standards, which did not make much sense given their plans to settle in the UK for good. Such juxtapositions left them with rather deceptive impression of the quality of life they would be able to enjoy in the UK.

Blagovest presented me with budget estimates for the time when he would leave his low-paid job in the solar panel farm and move to London where he hoped to settle. These provisional monthly estimations aimed to demonstrate his familiarity with the 'reality' of migrants' economic success:

> The lowest salary in the UK is 1000 pounds, even for a simple labourer. Imagine, this is [...] 1000 times, let's say 2.40 [the exchange rate to the Bulgarian Lev],

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[136] At the time of my fieldwork (2013-2014) 1GBP equaled 2. 45 BGN whereas in the post-Brexit realities (2016-2017) 1 GBP equals 2.19 BGN.

this makes 2400 leva! You can never find a job that brings you this money here. Sure, there are expenses. Let's say 200 pounds at most for accommodation, for transport – I am thinking of buying a car, petrol is quite cheap there. Food is even cheaper than here, so let's say another 100-150 pounds max. Even if you put something aside you still have enough left at the end of the month.

The belief in the lower cost of living in the UK in comparison to Bulgaria was widespread among my informants and was even evoked in 'expert' media commentaries and popular discourse. This was deemed true not only in terms of the living standard the two countries offered but even when comparing basic consumer prices in relation to wages. Many shared the impression that the cost of some essential products in Bulgaria not only approximated western prices but in many cases literally surpassed them. This was often assumed to be the case with the price of fuel, foodstuffs, clothing, and utility bills. Blagovest found proof of this in the fact that many of his friends who worked in the UK were quick to bring their families with them after finding employment, because the cost of living in the UK was same or even lower than in Bulgaria.

Thus, it became obvious that shared imaginations of social justice and affordability were not based on actual experiences or factual knowledge of life in the UK. Rather, they reflected impressions gathered through media, social networks and widely circulating rumours and anecdotes which appeared truthful because they promised to remedy present experiences of injustice and destitution. To those would-be migrants I spoke to, it appeared only logical that the UK with its global prestige, imperial might and stable social organisation – the opposite of Bulgaria – provided a corresponding standard of life to all its citizens.

Regaining dignity through labour

While economic security and principles of social justice were seen as main features of western society, my informants also imagined these as achievements which had to be earned and well-deserved. According to their reasoning, it was their hard and dedicated labour that would turn them into respectable citizens of British society and would entitle them to the expected benefits of 'normality' – stability and predictability, just remuneration and general material well-being. Imaginations of 'normality' also expressed working-class aspirations for obtaining dignity in labour, meaning a fair wage, stable employment conditions, job security and, not least, a sense of respectability. The assessment of labour relations in moral terms was particularly important for my informants given the humiliating treatment they received from employers, colleagues and society in general, and in light of the marginal status ascribed to their occupations (see Chapter Three). I have already discussed how the inability to obtain working-class respectability had damaged perceptions of self-worth and had negatively impacted on my informants' sense of human dignity and individual value. For many the impression that money and respect could only be obtained through illicit and immoral business activities produced moral conflict and denigrated their work ethic and value orientations. In order to illustrate expectations for dignity of labour and restoration of personal worth, I go back to the story of Nikolay who had decided to apply for a care taker position in the UK, as a result of the demeaning work experiences he suffered in Bulgaria.

One sunny summer morning, Nikolay came to the office of the recruitment agency for a Skype interview with a prospective British employer. He was wearing cheap black suit trousers, matching shoes, and a long-sleeved white shirt – the most formal outfit

he owned, as he later explained. As he did not speak more than a few basic words of English, I volunteered to serve as an interpreter. During the half an hour before the start of the interview, Nikolay, eager to make a good impression, started asking me about the 'dos and 'don'ts' when communicating with the British in 'order for him not to be considered a typical Bulgarian'. 'I heard they really cared about politeness and affability, is it true? Using words like "thank you", "sorry", "please" is very important, right?' I decided to confirm his stereotypes as I figured a few polite words would be helpful in a job interview in any cultural context.

The interview lasted half an hour and seemed to have been successful as at the end Nikolay was asked to confirm the earliest possible date on which he could get on a plane to Birmingham. He was thrilled to share the first impressions from his new employer – the first Westerner he had ever communicated with:

> Did you see how he was dressed? Looked quite smart, I hope he didn't think my clothes were too outmoded. And […] he was so nice to me, all the time trying to put me at ease and super polite, right? But wait, what really struck me was that he was really interested in knowing more about me. What do you make of all these questions – "What are your hobbies?", "How do you plan to relax after work?", "Do you like going out with friends?". It seems as these people really care about the worker. He said it himself – the job is psychologically and physically challenging and one needs to regularly unwind and re-charge one's batteries.

The interview confirmed what Nikolay had already heard from his colleagues working in Germany, Britain, and other west European countries – 'they value workers there, not only medical workers, but all those who earn a living by honest labour'.

Nikolay was about to leave for the UK in order to take on a job that presented serious deskilling in relation to his nursing qualification. The reason he felt pushed to take this job despite its lower prestige was his lack of English language skills and the fact that his qualifications would not be recognised in the UK. However, he did not seem too distressed with the social demotion that he had to undergo; on the contrary, he was excited at the prospect of being in a western working environment. Nikolay did not underestimate the huge emotional and physical strain that the new job would bring. In fact, it was precisely the exceptional challenge that the occupation presented that he believed would bring him high degrees of respectability and appreciation in the eyes of the locals. Thus, paradoxically, he ascribed higher value to the care taker job in England than to the nursing position he was currently occupying in Bulgaria.

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

As in the case of visions of social justice discussed above, my informants imagined dignity of labour in the UK as the logical counterpart of the humiliation and denigration

they experienced in Bulgarian society. They also demonstrated awareness that attaining dignity in the form of decent wage, stable employment and working-class respectability was conditional upon proving one's qualities as a hard and honest worker, gaining the trust of British employers and disproving the negative stereotypes attached to Bulgarians.

(Post)Socialist 'normality'

'Normality' is said to be one of the most frequently evoked notions throughout the 'transitional' period in the whole postsocialist region, both in political and wider public discourse (Kiossev 2008). In Bulgaria, the beginning of the market reforms has been put under the slogan 'return to normality' (or 'back to normality') – a political project that aimed at the temporal and spatial re-integration of the country into a capitalist western (European) world, the movement towards which had been perceived as ruptured by an 'abnormal' communist regime (Kiossev 2008). In this respect, the restoration of spatial and temporal continuity that was at the forefront of the 'transitional' project had always presupposed the West as the mainstay of this much-longed for 'normality'. Korte claims that 'in fact for many east Europeans western Europe became synonymous with 'normality' and for many 'return to Europe proved simultaneously to be a return to European normality'.[137]

I have already demonstrated the historical establishment of a Western teleology in Bulgarian context and its internalisation in national collective consciousness. This empirical section has revealed how 'ordinary people' imagined the West as a place

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[137] Korte (2010:10 cited in Kiossev 2008: no page).

where they could enjoy a 'normal' life. The three main themes of 'ordinary people's' conceptualisations of normality are also pertinent to some of the recent theoretical debates on the emic meanings of 'normality' in the context of eastern Europe. Firstly, I have shown how the ordinariness and non-eventfulness which was imagined to define Bulgarians' everyday life in the UK was largely missing from their present realities. The day-to-day living that marked the state of 'survival' (described in Chapter Three) comes close to what Jane Guyer (2007) has defined as 'enforced presentism' in the context of the United States. Studying changes in the doctrines of fundamental Christianity and monetarism, she discovered that short-term horizons (day-to-day thinking) and long-term visions (futurism) have come to replace near future vistas. It was precisely the restoration of this sense of coherent and progressive linear mid-term temporality and the ability for rational planning and prediction that my informants anticipated when they discussed the 'boring' 'normality' of the West. Such desire for a 'present with a future' is inextricable from the sense of existential stagnation underlying my informants' desires to migrate. In his investigation of yearnings for 'normal lives' in a post-Yugoslav apartment complex in Sarajevo, Stef Jansen (2015) analyses the relation between 'normality' and temporal horizons of 'suspended modernity' – his equivalent of the notion of 'post-transitional' time that I discussed in Chapter Three. As in the case of my informants, Jansen discovers that the disillusionment with modernist promises of collective political hope do not result in substantial re-organisation of people's temporal sensibility. Instead, it is in the sustained longing for 'normal lives' – desired despite their impossibility – that Jansen discovers temporal preoccupations with trajectories of 'forward movement' (2015).

Secondly, the most important aspects of 'normality' highlighted by my informants: security, predictability, social justice, and dignified labour stood in direct opposition to the unsatisfactory present which they found unable to forgo any longer. Thus, 'normality' can be understood as a normative category which stands in contrast to current life predicaments. In this respect, 'normality' does not tell as much about actual realities in the UK (or in the West) as it presents a contrast to the currently experienced 'abnormality' and frustration with the failed 'transition'. Previous studies focusing on explaining 'normality' in an east European context similarly position the notion in the intersection between the existent 'is' and desired 'ought', in which 'normality' emerges as a normative standard and future expectation.[138]

While emphasising the unbridgeable gap between their current lives in Bulgaria and their hopes for a desired 'normality' projected in the West, the concreteness and detail with which my informants could imaginatively describe this state with all its pertaining dimensions, I claim, was indicative of an experience with a previously existing 'normality'. Thus, common evocations of 'normality' echoed traces of positively evaluated previously existing or idealised characteristics of socialist 'normality'. Such associations were drawn mostly by older informants, who had been in their adolescence during socialism. Their knowledge of the 'past' came from recollections of lived experiences and memories of what life was like before. I, however, found that even young people, those in their mid-twenties and thirties, who had very limited if any experience of socialism, also made references to a past 'normality' on the basis of knowledge drawn from family stories and publicly circulating 'facts'. Thus, although

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[138] See Ditchev (2014), Greenberg (2011), Hartman (2007), Rabikowska (2010), Rausing (2002).

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there was never any reference made to the socialist past as 'normal', the aspects of life in the West that my informants put forward as most desired were often associated with positively evaluated characteristics of life 'before'. Similarly to Jansen's perspective (2015), 'normality' is thus simultaneously embedded in backward-looking recollections of an already experienced or idealised socialist past and an aspiration for an imagined Western standard of normalness, both of which were constructed in contrast to present 'abnormalities'.

Finally, the imaginaries of 'ordinary people' depict 'normality' as consistent with a range of moral concerns that far exceed economic and materialistic aspects of life, but refer to fundamental normative questions of social organisation and the role and value of the individual in society. Such articulations stand in contrast to predominant interpretations of 'normality', which position it strictly in the realm of consumption of material signs and lifestyles seen as characteristic of western middle classes (see Fehervery 2002). I have recognised existing economic longings for an 'ordinary' well-being, clearly surpassing an average Bulgarian standard of life, in my discussion of the high importance of social justice and affordability. However, such material expectations should not be interpreted as conforming to a narrowly economistic rationale but should be seen as pertaining to the wider existential concerns that the notion of 'normality' clearly outlined. Thus, imaginations of the West in terms of 'normality' that motivated 'ordinary people's' migrations advance an explanation that comes to contest the centrality of an economistic push-pull logic by foregrounding a desire for experiencing a qualitatively different form of existence in ideational as well as in moral terms.

The West as 'American Dream'

My other group of informants, whom I have chosen to call 'Bulgarian Westerners', imagined life in the West to differ from their present lives in ways that are best captures by the term 'American dream'. Although this term has accumulated a host of connotations and specificities and might appear a far-fetched interpretation at first sight, I will show how imaginaries of meritocracy, success and individual freedom outlined by my self-appointed 'middle-class' informants can be legitimately glossed as 'American dream'.

Meritocracy

Juliana was an eighteen-year-old rhythmic gymnastics student who had just graduated from the Sports High School in Plovdiv and was preparing her application for a prestigious London university where she hoped to study interior design. Despite having won several medals on national competitions and being recognised as a promising young talent by her trainers, she did not want to pursue a future in professional sports. She had lost her initial motivation for becoming an athlete as a result of the lack of respect, insufficient state support and widespread favouritism that marked Bulgarian gymnastics. She told me that she had grown tired of receiving just a 'pat on the shoulder' after each medal won and wanted her whole-hearted commitment to be rewarded in more tangible ways.

In the pursuit of her sports career Juliana had taken part in international competitions, sport camps and trainings all over Europe. She had also travelled abroad for family holidays with her parents – her father was an esteemed medical doctor and her mother a construction engineer; had stayed with friends in London for extended periods of time

and participated in homestay language exchange programmes in the British countryside. She held dear these glimpses of western life and regarded them as eye-opening and formative of her desire to settle her life abroad. The main reason why she wanted to study in the UK, she told me, was because there, the efforts of talented and hard-working people like herself were appreciated, both in material and moral terms. She believed that she had high chances of achieving professional realisation in her field of choice and that this would in turn enable her to spend her life as 'it should be'. Throughout our first meeting she drew constant comparisons between her own life and that of her professional peers in the West in an effort to demonstrate the advantages of western life and the possibilities it provided for a better future:

> As far as I can tell, there, they are able to evaluate the abilities and talents of every single person and they do all they can to provide you with the opportunity to make your dreams come true. It is not just that the investment in sports there is incomparably higher. The respect with which athletes are treated is impressive. They receive constant encouragement to go for the top and they know that their hard work will bring results.

Albeit determined to continue her sports career in the UK as a part-time children's coach, Juliana considered a career in interior design a more sensible and pragmatic choice that still offered enough space for creativity and feminine glamour. She had taken the decision of making this her new profession just few months earlier when she started watching *Your home in their hands* – a BBC TV show presented by Celia Sawyer, a glossy business woman and renown interior designer. What made this reality show so fascinating to Juliana was the fact that aspiring designers from all over the country and beyond were given the opportunity to prove their skills by re-decorating

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people's homes. Those who managed the task well and got the admiration of the homeowners landed themselves a job in Sawyer's design company. Juliana considered the programme and its self-made millionaire host a perfect proof for a working meritocratic system which granted equal opportunity for development to everyone according to their skills, talents and abilities and regardless of their sex, age and ethnic belonging. In this respect, Juliana maintained that:

> In the West, you are judged by your abilities and determination. No one cares about where you come from, the colour of your skin, your gender or who your parents are. Connections don't count there, only what you yourself can offer in terms of capabilities and knowledge. There, you are given the chance to grow and how far you will go depends only on your efforts and ambition.

The highly praised western meritocracy that my informants expected to take advantage of in the UK was seen as a legitimate and socially just principle. This interpretation is a good basis for discerning between the two different 'moral economies' (Thompson 1971) that 'ordinary people' and 'Bulgarian Westerners' shared with regards to visions of just social order. As already pointed out, in the moral framework of 'ordinary people', only a system based on egalitarian principles of social distribution which ensured a decent existence for all members of society according to the value ascribed to their labour could be defined as just. In contrast, the interpretations of meritocracy put forward by Juliana revealed a vision of a system that rewarded an elitist stratum of highly-deserving members of society – those who had intellectual capabilities and educational capital to offer and had successfully cultivated a specific range of value orientations. The fact that such distribution of merit perpetuated the advantage enjoyed

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by a particular social group at the expense of the marginalisation of those unable to mobilise sufficient degrees of cultural capital was not judged as unjust.

In fact, some of my informants even expressed disapproval of non-merit-based institutional mechanisms and policies as breeding mediocrity and creating learned helplessness. Such concerns were related to practices of university admission and redistribution of social welfare, observed not only in Bulgaria but 'even' in western Europe. For example, Juliana disapproved of the modest fees and the lower entry requirements characteristic of German higher education as they allowed the 'mass' admission of people from different social backgrounds. She considered this to derogate the prestige and quality of German education and undervalue the achievements of more intellectually developed students. British higher education, on the other hand, with its high tuition fees and competitive selection, filtered the high achievers and those truly committed to succeed in their lives, as she claimed.

Education was considered the main 'tool' for upwards social mobility in the meritocratic playing field of the West. The strictly instrumental value that educational qualifications held for the recent graduates I spoke to was mirrored by their readiness to pursue any degree just so they were able to obtain a 'document from abroad'. Juliana, for example, admitted she would not hesitate to start her studies in 'any university' and in 'whatever degree possible' just so she could live in the West.

Studies on highly educated Polish migrants have yielded similar findings: Rodriguez's (2010) research on aspiring 'middle-class' Polish mothers exhibits their visions of the UK as a 'meritocratic paradise' – a society ensuring equal opportunity for everyone despite their ethnic and national origin, which unlike Poland provides multiple opportunities for achieving a desired social status. The main emphasis is placed on

the high value of education – by investing in theirs and their children's qualifications, Polish mothers expected to be able to take advantage of meritocratic chances for economic success and upward social mobility (Rodriguez 2010).

The recognition that they needed to work twice as hard as the locals in order to break away from the stigma cast upon 'typical' Bulgarian migrants and demonstrate that, unlike those, they were culturally competent and led by a desire of self-realisation did not inhibit the moral endorsement my informants granted to equal opportunities. This is how Juliana tried to demonstrate her 'realistic' evaluation of the life that expected her as a foreigner in the UK:

> I am far from the utopia that you enter the country and someone spreads a red carpet in front of you and tells you: "you are a foreigner but you have education so here is a job for you, here is some cash". I am well aware that there, I need to prove myself as deserving of all of this. After all, they don't know me; for them I am a stranger. When they hear "Bulgarian" they think [I am] low-skilled and uneducated.

As I have already indicated above (both in Chapter Two and Chapter Three), 'Bulgarian Westerners' have internalised the postulates of the neoliberal discourse on self-actualisation and autonomy and believed to have invested significant efforts into cultivating the traits that were said to ensure personal fulfilment and professional realisation in a market society. Their frustration with the fact that they had not managed to become the new 'heroes of free market ideology' (Walkowitz 1995: 165) were compounded by the fact that they also had to struggle with diminishing living standards and restricted paths to social and economic success. Their conviction that Bulgaria would never be able to implement 'properly' functioning meritocratic principles had

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made them not only unable but often unwilling to pursue existing possibilities. Naturally, it was in the West and the UK in particular, where my informants hoped to have their neoliberal 'enterprising' subjecthoods rewarded with plentiful opportunities for achieving meritocratic privilege.

Success

Gaining success was important part of the 'imaginary West' even for those of my informants who had already achieved certain degree of professional realisation in Bulgaria. This was the case with thirty-year-old Steve, who worked as a journalist in one of the two largest private national media companies in Bulgaria. I was interested in meeting him after I learned that he was part of the team behind a short documentary about 'successful' Bulgarian yuppies in the City of London. The movie presented the story of two friends in their thirties, who, after graduating from a prestigious private college in Sofia, got admitted to two Russell group universities in London and, subsequently, found jobs as business analysts in top British companies. The documentary stirred much talk among my 'middle-class' informants who took it as a demonstration of the feasibility of hard-earned success for the talented and ambitious.

Similar reports, focusing on success stories of Bulgarians who had 'made it in the West' were part of local media's undying interest towards the so-called Bulgarian 'brain drain' (see Ghodsee 2002). While popular and political discourses continued to lament the exodus of highly qualified young people – the 'best and brightest' representatives of the nation – representations like the above documentary had the opposite effect of enticing the hopes of young people by constructing an often exaggerated and unrealistic image of success. I was keen to know more about what Steve, as an insider,

had to say about this apparent paradox. In the beginning, he told me how proud he was with the documentary and wanted me to understand why sustaining a positive image of the West in the public discourse was so important for the development of Bulgaria:

> For a country like Bulgaria, which is bogged down in the swamp, every other country is a good example. It is understandable that in such a negative context each media focuses its attention on something positive. I would never report the UK in a negative light and tell people not to come here because this is not a nice country, and I won't tell them that all is perfect there either. It is only logical that independent and objective Bulgarian journalism presents other countries as well-developing and offering a better lifestyle because this is what Bulgarians miss. This should be the normal reaction of each Bulgarian institution. This is how we import a good example. This image is a bit tricky but it is important for it to be such.

Steve's documentary was directed towards those young and well-educated Bulgarians who like the men depicted in his movie went abroad in order to 'develop themselves', 'learn something new' and be the ones to one day 'drag the country out of the swamp'. Based on what he said, it looked as if for them the West was really a place where 'dreams come true', unlike for those 'typical' Bulgarians who believed they could make 'easy' money without having anything to offer in return.

In fact, during his recent stay in London, Steve himself had fallen for the promise of meritocratic success. At the time of our first meeting he was preparing his departure to the UK where he planned to pursue a career in movie-making. Despite considering himself rather successful for Bulgarian standards he felt as if he had 'hit the ceiling'

with nothing further left to strive for. 'True success' for Steve was only possible in the West and this was how he defined it:

> Success is a complex thing, it does not only mean a job that earns enough money, it also requires one to feel satisfied with what one is doing. Bulgarians are ready to sell their kidneys just so they have money but they don't understand that this alone cannot make them happy. There are numerous examples of extremely rich and unhappy individuals. Many people in the West quit their jobs just because they feel out of place, they are not happy with themselves. I think I am in a similar situation myself at the moment.

For Steve, as for many of my aspiring middle-class informants, success stood for a sense of advancement and self-improvement through the pursuit of ever more exciting professional challenges. 'Bulgarian Westerners' were careful not to equate success solely to the fulfilment of economic ambitions, but instead tried to underline the existence of a deeper and multidimensional personality, which possessed not only material but also spiritual and affective needs.

The UK, according to my informants, would provide each of them with the possibility to – in Adam's words – 'grow to fullest development as man and woman' and 'attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable' (2012: ix). Steve's encounter with the two Bulgarian yuppies made him realise that unlike himself they were able to enjoy 'real' success: they felt as if the 'sky was the limit', they were constantly challenged by multiple opportunities for growth, and they seemed happy and satisfied with their lives. In contrast, despite his spectacular career advancement in the past few years, Steve felt that he had achieved all that was possible for Bulgarian standards and was currently 'stuck at the top' – a situation which evoked more frustration that satisfaction.

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Ignoring the fact that both of these young men came from highly privileged family backgrounds, he praised their success as 'genuine'; firstly, because it was achieved in the West and thus of higher value, and secondly because it represented the perfect example of a self-made social advancement, one obtained through ambition and self-determination.

There was an interesting twist to his story which he only shared at our second meeting and which granted his vision of success an unexpected magical aura. Back in London the film crew for the documentary, together with the two protagonists, went for a pint in a pub close to the City. A middle-aged man pushed himself in front of Steve in the queue to the bar and a 'bit like a typical Balkaner' (*tipichen Balkanets*) Steve – told him off. It turned out that the queue-jumper was Michael Kennedy – one of the directors of the Harry Potter sequel. Over the course of the evening it became clear that Kennedy was teaching filmmaking at Kingston University and, upon learning that Steve was keen on becoming a movie director, he invited him for a chat at his office on the next day. Steve immediately became fascinated with Kennedy's movie directing philosophy and professional passion and decided to apply for a place in his MA programme. His friends and colleagues were stunned by his readiness to quit his position at the TV channel and invest all his savings into pursuing further education in the UK. According to him, they failed to recognise the significance of this 'accidental' encounter, which for him was a 'sign' of a forthcoming success that was not to be ignored.

Commonly evoked references to Hollywood movies and other largely mediated products of American popular culture in the narratives of my informants, as well as numerous miraculous success stories circulating in public discourse, demonstrate a ubiquitous belief that 'in the West dreams really come true', sometimes in an almost

mystical way. This observation is confirmed by Jim Cullen's (2003) conclusion that what made the 'American dream' ever more compelling and at the same time dangerously misleading has been its intensive exploitation in the Hollywood movie industry. Having strayed away from its relation to virtue and morality, the 'American dream', he claims, started carrying the idea that the realisation of personal fulfillment was to come about without visible and conscious efforts (Cullen 2003).

Mentionings of success were largely absent in 'ordinary people's' imaginations of the West. As already discussed, they expressed strong scepticism towards promises for substantial enrichment and instead demonstrated ambitions for a 'modest' materiality and lifestyle. 'Bulgarian Westerners', on the other hand were much more inclined to see success, in the form of professional realisation and economic independence, as a realistic future outcome. It appears that these anticipations have been taken for granted because of this group's perceptions of middle-class superiority and sense of entitlement.

Freedom from social norms, freedom of self-expression

The individualism that my informants expected to practice in the West was related not only to the autonomy and empowerment they hoped to experience as 'enterprising selves' but also to freedom of individual expression and creativity. Thus, for 'Bulgarian Westerners', migration was a quest for achieving individual success through self-reliance as well as a possibility of liberation from restricting societal expectations related to gender roles, behavioural models, and value orientations. My informants often shared with me how burdening they found challenging traditional gender expectation in reference to appearances, marriage, and household roles. Thirty-one-

year-old Tanya, an English language student and office assistant in a building company, complained of the societal pressure she faced for not being married. The fact that she did not have a long-term boyfriend to introduce to family and friends was raising disapproving comments in the middle-sized town where she lived. She was annoyed by the fact that most Bulgarians, especially those in smaller localities, felt compelled to 'stick their noses' in other people's private business. She felt that in a society still greatly dominated by patriarchal values it was women who were mostly affected by this form of intrusive moral policing:

> In Bulgaria feminism is a dirty word. I am not even sure most people understand what this is all about; at least I haven't met many who see as problematic the way in which Bulgarian women are still treated. All my married girlfriends, for example, have resigned themselves to the role of perfect housewives and mothers, in many cases combining this with paid employment. The most horrible thing is that not only their husbands require such total subjugation but that the women themselves are not even able to realise and question the repercussions of such a twisted model for their emotional, physical, and mental health.

One common occurrence that in her eyes confirmed this problematic was the case of everyday sexual harassment. On one occasion, the two of us were taking an early evening stroll along the main town street when we got catcalled by a group of young men drinking beer outside a pub. After giving them a reprimanded look Tanya told me this was exactly what she meant when she talked about the constant mistreatment faced by women. She believed this type of behaviour was characteristic of the Balkan region; an expression of people's savage emotionality and objectifying ideas of women's value. This was one of the reasons why Tanya found Bulgarian guys to be

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unfit marriage partners and believed she could only be happy with a westerner who would respect and appreciate her for her personal qualities and individuality. This belief was partly based on her two months' student exchange stay in Wolverhampton in 2012 and the encounters, conversation and impressions gathered in the course of it. Tanya told me how there she found herself immersed in a 'completely different world' where people were understanding, tolerant and respectful of others' choices, ideas and sentiments up to the point of appearing cold and 'too preoccupied with their own selves'. This seeming indifference, however, she thought was a result of the value they ascribed to individual freedom, expression, and self-determination.

Some of my male informants put forward similar concerns about existing gender norms and expectations constraining their individuality. Those who refused to conform to traditional ideas of masculinity associated with alpha male behavior, aggressive demeanour and physical strength were often an object of ridicule by peers. Nikolay complained how his care for the patients and his polite attitude was often interpreted by his colleagues as lack of masculinity: 'In Bulgaria there is one accepted model of behavior; if you are kind and non-conflictual you are being called a faggot'.

Imaginaries of the UK as a place offering more freedom and opportunities for self-expression were on some occasions based on selective and geographically specific perception. Almost all 'Bulgarian Westerners', even those who had never travelled to the UK or who like Tanya had only visited for a couple of days or weeks, were convinced that London, more than any other place offered the diverse and open-minded environment that they considered most conducive for the realisation of their future plans. The different portrayals of London as 'beautiful', 'vibrant', 'dynamic', and 'colourful' gave it the magical aura of a 'promised land' that was otherwise only to be

found in the movies. Gloria, for example, had already visited London twice and compared the excitement she felt when there with the feeling of 'being a small child eating big pink candy floss on a fun fair'. Most of the people I spoke to were able to imagine themselves as merging successfully with the 'big and noisy current' of city life and expected to enjoy the lifestyles of real Londoners – taking full advantage of everything the city had to offer. It should be said that London was not idealised solely by my 'middle-class' informants, 'ordinary people' considered it an epitome of Western splendor. Other reasons why they found it so attractive were the fact that it was home to the biggest Bulgarian diaspora in the UK (which meant that they could manage with little English and have an easier time finding accommodation and employment), and one of the biggest in Europe, and the city offering the most well-paid job opportunities. Those who departed on pre-arranged jobs in villages, small towns and bigger cities projected such locations as provincial – dull, economically stagnated or a 'rural idyll' that lacked the buzz, glamour and abundance that London could offer. Their ultimate goal was to eventually save enough and re-settle in the capital.[139]

American dreaming

'Bulgarian Westerners'' imaginations of life in the West were to a great extent built on firsthand information gathered on short-term tourist, business and education-related visits to western Europe, as well as personal interaction with west Europeans in Bulgaria and abroad. In addition, many of those I talked to were involved in day-to-day

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[139] The same held true for the prospective students in my sample. For example, I was once present at a conversation where one of my informants - Kate (fifteen) who was about to start her studies in the very prestigious Loretto Boarding School in Edinburgh felt intimidated by her friends' comments that she was crazy to go in this 'godforsaken place' (Edinburgh) that 'noone has ever heard of' instead of going to London.

online exchange of imagery and communication with friends and relatives living in a western country. The image of the West that they put forward was also created out of diverse material from movies, TV series, reality TV programmes, music videos and other products of western popular culture.

Their conscious intention to arrange their everyday in a way which required minimum contact with the surrounding Bulgarian reality meant that they had virtually immersed themselves in the West while still living in Bulgaria – a choice stemming out of their inability to 'fit in'. A similar state of being has been described by Maria Stoilkova (2005) in relation to the reasons behind the large-scale migration of Bulgarian 'intelligentsia' in the early 1990s. Feeling morally and culturally alienated from the new social order and demonstrating high admiration for perceived Western cultural and moral values, her informants came to experience themselves as 'exiles within'.

It was on the basis of this constant exposure to and engagement with western culture, as well as the embracing of pertinent norms and modes of personhood, that 'Bulgarian Westerners' constructed a sense of familiarity and proximity to the West. The confidence with which they narrated their expectations often served to emphasise their awareness of the 'true' nature of the western world which they juxtaposed to the naiveté of 'ordinary people's' associations of the West with a place where 'money grows on trees'. Indeed, 'ordinary people's' imaginations did not provide the same amount of detail and to a great extent presented an impression of a 'distant' and 'remote' albeit still highly desirable place. This is not to say, however, that the above-discussed mental images of meritocracy, success, and individual freedom, outlined a more realistic version of western life. On the contrary, they came very close to popular

mythological evocations of the so-called 'American dream'[140]. I draw attention to the main themes within the literature on the 'American dream' which are worth revisiting when thinking about would-be migrants' imaginations of life in the UK.

First popularised in the novels of Horatio Alger in the late nineteenth century, the 'American dream' imaginary served the purpose of encouraging those most destitute and impoverished members of American society into believing that success, fortune, and wealth were available to everyone ready to invest 'energy, ambition and honest purpose' (Alger 1868: 7-8 cited in Weiss 1988: 54). Jennifer Hochschild (1996) is one of those who warned against the mythical seductive attraction that the 'American dream' has assumed with time. She saw this as resulting from its ability to speak to anyone – the notion has become so porous and stretchable that it could easily accommodate different individual or group longings and still retain its unifying meaning (Hochschild 1996). The interpretation of the 'American dream' that my informants evoked in their imaginations of the West resonated closely to the capitalist promise of material fulfilment, freedom and opportunity for upward mobility that was allegedly in stock for everyone willing to put in enough ambition and work, in disregard of their origins, gender, race, age and so on. The obvious inequalities in the distribution of this 'universal' fulfilment, its transitory nature and the fact that the successful ones in society will always be a minority have not diminished the fervour with which individuals from around the world continue to sustain this powerful utopia (Schielke 2015).

The so-called 'American Dream' has by now become part of popular parlance, it has been used as a colloquial expression that does not require a precise definition as its

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[140] The notion of the 'American dream' is not emic but I use it as a tool that helps me distinguish between the two different versions of the West presented by my two categories of informants.

widely-shared meaning appears self-explanatory. There have been scholarly attempts, however, to define and systematise the different historical uses and meanings that the notion has assumed not only for Americans but for all of those wishing to take a stake in the 'American Dream'. Firstly, according to the inclusive rhetoric of the 'American dream', everyone has the chance of leaving the past behind and designing one's life anew. The idea that on the meritocratic marketplace individuals are rewarded 'according to their talents and accomplishments rather than their needs, efforts, or simple existence' (Hochschild 1996: 21) was one of the main encouragements behind 'Bulgarian Westerners'' migrations. The betrayed ambitions of these 'Western-oriented' and educated Bulgarians had led them to the conclusion that the market economy established throughout the 'transitional years' was a local product marred by the inherited deficiencies of Oriental backwardness and Socialist rigidity. The realisation that this corrupt social model, which decisively lacked meritocratic virtues, would never be able to offer opportunities for individual, intellectual and economic progress to the presumably most deserving part of Bulgarian society was why my informants nurtured the idea of a meritocratic western paradise.

A second main tenet constituting the ideology of the 'American dream' that was assigned great significance in the narratives of those I spoke to was related to the idea of success (Hochschild 1996). It was the 'reasonable anticipation' that if you 'go for it' you might as well 'get it' that encouraged individual visions of successful trajectories in the UK. This was set in contrast to the success on offer in Bulgarian society, one seen as dependant on speculation, nepotism and often demonstration of physical violence. This understanding echoes Hochschild's (1996) claim that a well-embedded belief contained in the 'American dream' postulated that 'true' success was based on honesty

and hard labour, an expectation that implied differentiation between the 'worthy' and the 'unworthy rich' or the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor. Gaining success in the West was assigned higher worth by my informants firstly because it implied self-reliance and determination and secondly because it comprised not only economic wellbeing but a sense of inner fulfilment and satisfaction. This confirms Clark's observation that the quest for personal advancement had attracted to American shores 'middle-class' migrants who held 'noble' hopes of realising spiritual and not solely material aspirations (2003). I argue that visions of success which side-lined ideas of economic affluence do not suggest that such concerns were missing from the imaginations of 'Bulgarian Westerners' but that they were strategically silenced in an effort of self-distancing from the 'petty dreams' of 'ordinary people' (see previous chapter).

Finally, the general desire of freedom, which Cullen considers the 'bedrock premise upon which all else depends' (2003:10) figured prominently in my informants' imaginations. This referred to their ability to exercise control over their lives and to re-assert their preferences in negotiations of gender identities and opportunities, as well as in practicing desired modes of personhood.

Thus, the aspiring middle-class respondents that I met on the eve of their west-bound journeys shared a more or less homogenous positive vision of the West which, although cast in a different geographic location (the UK), represented a search for the ideal embodied in the so-called 'American dream'. Their imaginaries are to be understood against the backdrop of stagnation and despair characteristic of their Bulgarian realities and the lack of worthwhile possibilities for personal and professional development. The UK was where my 'middle-class' informants expected to find

liberation from the omnipresent 'Balkan mentality' that allegedly hampered their life courses. Migration for them was a long-awaited 'going back home', where they believed they naturally belonged and where their transformed subjecthoods could fully flourish.

Global hierarchy of places and migration as international existential advancement

When talking about their migration plans and aspirations, and particularly when explaining their choice of destination, would-be migrants drew constant comparisons between Bulgaria and the UK. The value attributed to each of the two countries as suitable for migration was a function of its geographical proximity to western Europe and the possibilities it offered for fulfilling migrants' desires. Prospective migrants were able to assign each country a particular position in an imagined international hierarchy of places. The UK was proclaimed as the 'best country of all' and the one to offer the kind of life that came closest to the way life 'should be', and was thus positioned at the top of this global hierarchy. The most important reason for this was its historical significance as an industrial revolution centre, global colonial power, and a cradle of progress and economic prosperity.

This fact is not to be taken as an evidence of an ever-present special significance held by the UK in collective Bulgarian imaginary.[141] In many cases, the UK was constructed as 'core West' or 'true West' only after the choice of destination was already made –

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[141] In Chapter One and in my historical account in this chapter I discuss the unpopularity of the UK, the suspicion and negativity that the country provoked in Bulgarians in the distant and more recent past.

this one was most often underlined by a combination of different pragmatic considerations like familiarity with the English language, the high exchange rate of the British pound (as of 2013-2015) and already existent social networks. Informants were often keen to persuade me of the Western qualities of the country as a way of easing their own apprehensions of starting a life in a place that had an aura of remoteness and coldness.

In this mental hierarchy of places there were countries which were said to be 'below' Bulgaria, as Bulgaria was at least in Europe and not part of the Third World. Still, the country was seen as inferior to all other EU states because of its status as 'the poorest of all' and its relative underdevelopment. Thus, Bulgaria and the UK, different in all possible regards, were believed to occupy the two opposing poles of the developmental civilisational axis between East and West.

The structure of the mental world map presented by my informants denoted a stratified order in which people and places appeared as 'situated along a continuum between a premodern tradition on one hand and Eurocentrically conceived modernity on the other' (Ferguson 2006: 30). Such visions reflect a linear modernist worldview in which global inequalities are naturalised as resulting from the fact that some nations are further than others on the path towards a universally recognised western telos of modernity (ibid, Baysha 2014).

From the perspective of such an 'awareness from below', migration can be interpreted as undertaken out of desire for achieving an international advancement from a place of low to a place of high status in the global hierarchy. Being physically and socially present in the UK, a country of the highest possible standing, was a way of escaping the existential immobility and stuckedness characterising life in Bulgaria. In this sense,

my informants were not simply migrating from a 'poor' to a 'wealthy' place but from a place offering restricted possibilities for meaningful existence to one promising ample scope for existential becoming. I have already explained how prevalent feelings of existential standstill shared by all would-be migrants were conditioned by a 'post-transitional' collective entrapment outside of modernist progressive template. For those I spoke to migration had become an individualised strategy for overcoming globally-structured inferiority and in fact the only possible way for claiming a stake in the project of European capitalism. As already discussed, in the eyes of my informants Bulgaria's EU membership did little to attenuate concerns with 'lagging behind' and developmental disadvantage that had long produced feelings of inferiority and incompleteness. This resonates with Ferguson's observation that formal inclusion in a First World order, which fails to bring about promised economic development, prosperity and welfare, leads to the re-assertion of demands about 'connection, a relationship and aspirational equality' (2006: 22). Thus, would-be migrants understood physical mobility to the UK as a 'claim of worldly connection and membership' (Ferguson 2006: 22) in a western modernity, the benefits of which were never experienced in Bulgaria. Migration towards the 'centre' of development and possibility was a chance for experiencing a 'truly Western' life that was believed to (re-) establish a feeling of meaningful movement forward.

The analysis of would-be migrants' imaginations about their destination and the so-outlined imagined international order appear to reflect an understanding of the West as a telos of individual and collective longing that could only be achieved through physical mobility. As the narratives in this chapter demonstrated the painful realisation that Bulgaria would never become a 'truly' Western country did not put an end to

teleological reasoning. In the narratives of my informants, the West formed a telos in a relation to which individual migration strategies and future vistas were conceived. De Vries (2007) contends that the gap between developmental promises and their actual realisation structures individuals' capacity to desire with even greater zeal a mythological Western modernity. As 'desiring subjects', my informants, similar to the Third World people de Vries focuses on, appeared as eager to do whatever it took in order to enter a utopian world of 'real' Western modernity. Their migration motivations were underpinned by persistent teleological drive to attain the Western future that had been promised to them but had never materialised.[142]

Conclusion

My engagement with prospective migrants' expectations of life following migration has demonstrated the great significance that imaginaries held in informing individual motivations behind migration. This underlines the argument that an analysis of the important connection between imaginaries and migration allows us to better grasp the complexity of contemporary international movements which goes far beyond the simple economistic logic put forward in most migration research. In contrast to much of the existing literature on the link between imagination and migration (see Appadurai 1996), I have conceived of individual imagination as conditioned by 'historically-laden and socioculturally constructed imaginaries' (Salazar 2011: 576). This

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[142] Chapter Six advances further the discussion of the teleological character of the West by demonstrating how migrants clung on to it and deferred its realisation to the future to come, in the face of the apparent impossibility to reach their Western dreams in the present.

interdependence between subjective imaginations and more widely circulating imaginaries is grasped through the concept of the 'imaginary West'. I have demonstrated the cultural and historical process through which the West came to symbolise the supremacy of western-centric modernity and its developmental promise in Bulgarian collective consciousness. The two different visions of the West – as 'normality' and 'American dream' – have highlighted how imaginaries are not merely enforced upon individuals but are appropriated and made meaningful in ways reflecting their own class-based experiences and identities (see Benson 2012).

Furthermore, I have shown that, despite of the different kinds and amounts of capital at their disposal and their differing migration motivations, there has been a more fundamental reason underlying my informants' desire to migrate. 'Ordinary people' and 'Bulgarian Westerners' alike saw migration as one, if not the only way of attaining a much longed-for sense of existential advancement and escape from the entrenched individual and collective 'stuckedness' they experienced in Bulgaria. This finding sheds critical light on currently dominant analyses of Bulgarian and east European migrations which differentiate between unskilled people's 'economic' migrations and highly-skilled professionals' 'transnational mobility' (cf. Chavdarova 2006, Ditchev 2008, Liakova 2008). In this sense, for all Bulgarians I met, migration was a means to empower and elevate themselves from an inferior and peripheral 'second-class' belonging to a full participation in First Order western capitalism. In the next chapter, I follow my informants on their migration journeys to the UK and demonstrate how the realities they encountered differed starkly from their idealised visions of the West.

Chapter Five

Realities of Migrant Life

It was on a chilly January morning in 2014 when Mitko (twenty seven) first set foot in the UK. Arriving on his own and without any pre-arrangements, he started calling Bulgarian landlords who advertised on an online forum for Bulgarians living in London. All but one of them refused to do viewings after learning that he was a newcomer with little savings and no secured employment. Dragging his heavy red suitcase through the crowds of early morning commuters, Mitko made his way to the nearest underground station. It all looked strange to him, it was much bigger and busier than he expected it to be, but he was filled with excitement. Two hours later he found himself in front of a shabby-looking house in west London. A young Bulgarian opened the door and right upon entering Mitko was hit by a smell of marihuana and alcohol. Passing a dirty-looking kitchen, he saw a man sleeping under a table. The room next door, a storage for old furniture and carton boxes, was the one on offer. Disappointed, he made his way back to Victoria station where the online search resumed. The next accommodation on his list was located in the eastern part of the city. Upon exiting the underground in East Ham, Mitko had the feeling of having entered a different continent: a thick and intense odour engulfed him, wherever he looked there were men with dark beards and veiled women, everyone was speaking Arabic, and he had the feeling they were all giving him bad looks. The next house he viewed had six bedrooms which seemed to accommodate at least twenty adults and children – in each room there were three to five people 'lined up like sardines', as he later explained to me. The living conditions were slum-like: dirty mattresses on the floors, broken furniture, and mould

stains on the walls. Not willing to rent, Mitko asked if he could stay overnight – it was getting dark and he had nowhere to go. The landlord asked for a 150 GBP security deposit and another 50 GBP for the night, he claimed the price was fair but Mitko did not trust him. Eventually, he managed to find a hotel room for much less. Later that night he was woken up by gunshots and sirens – 'just like in a gangster movie'. Terrified, he barricaded himself in the room and did not manage to get any rest until the morning.

On the following day, after an exhausting four-hour walk Mitko reached the place that became his home for the next few weeks – another 'Bulgarian' house in north London. Next on his list was finding a full-time job that would allow him to cover his rent and repay his debts to family and friends. All the staffing agencies he approached turned him down because he had no National Insurance Number (NINo). Not quite certain how to obtain such documentation and in desperate need of quick cash, Mitko spent the next two weeks giving away CVs to bars, hotels, and restaurants in the centre of London. All job interviews were called off once the prospective employers realised he did not speak much English and had no documents.

Just three weeks after he first came to London, Mitko made his way back to Victoria station. With the help of relatives back home, he had managed to scramble together enough money for a bus ticket back to Bulgaria. He was reluctant to qualify his first migrant experience as a failure. He admitted to having underestimated the high cost of living in the UK and the importance of legal documentation for starting employment, but did not feel disappointment with the opportunities that the city had to offer. The impressions he gathered throughout his eventful stay not only came close to but far surpassed the UK of his dreams. His eyes sparkled with excitement when he was

telling me how on his unfortunate first day in east London he managed to take a glimpse of West Ham United football stadium and walked the famous Green street that gave the name of his most favourite movie – 'Green street hooligans'. On another occasion, he passed by the famous Michelin-starred restaurant owned by his idol Gordon Ramsey in Chelsea. 'The first day was rough', he concluded, but in the following days it was like the London of his dreams came to life:

> It was exactly as I imagined it: big, dark, rainy and the underground, oh the underground [...] the first days I spent hours there, trying to find my way. Don't get me wrong, I am not complaining. I love this country, I love the football, I love their cinema. In all honesty, I think I have a good chance of achieving my dreams here.

Before embarking on his bus Mitko reassured me that he would be back in no time; as soon as he managed to save up a couple of hundred pounds.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

This chapter focuses on the experiences of my informants in the UK. Almost immediately after making their way to Britain many, just like Mitko, encountered a reality that presented them with obstacles they were unprepared to navigate. A wide range of institutionalised and informal exclusionary mechanisms (Standing 2011) worked against their incorporation into British society and diverted them from their plans for achieving a 'normal' life or 'American dream' kind of success. Guy Standing claims that migrants are denizens assuming the status of a 'resident alien' – granted certain rights while denied others (2011: 93). Even if people have '*de jure* rights' allowing them to reside and work in a particular destination, they may face difficulty

integrating because they are often 'excluded from [making use of] them *de facto*' (Standing 2011: 95). These 'outsider-inhabitants' as Standing calls them, are more likely to fall into precarious forms of (self-)employment, debt, and homelessness (2011: 95). The aftermath of the 2008 global economic crisis has further increased migrants' vulnerability and the intensity with which they are turned into 'low-cost malleable labour' (Standing 2011: 103).

This chapter aims to reveal how structural limitations such as inability to obtain documentation, unrecognised educational and professional qualifications, limited knowledge of the English language, legal rights, and entitlements, are experienced by migrants themselves. By exposing the effects of little-researched bureaucratic mechanisms, I outline the process through which Bulgarian migrants, who theoretically enjoy the status of EU 'free-movers', are turned into a precarious super-mobile labour force. The stories in this chapter follow the post-migration realities of life of my informants and their growing disappointment with their failed hopes for betterment and fulfilment.

In an effort to provide a detailed and longitudinal engagement with migrants' experiences in the UK, I have divided this chapter into two different parts. The first one focuses on the early settlement, which would-be migrants envisioned as a 'transitional period' of migration. This initial adaptation was believed to take up to six months; a period which my informants saw as necessary for setting their new lives on track and starting to work towards the realisation of their 'normality' and 'American dream' visions of the West. The second part follows each group of informants – 'ordinary people' and 'Bulgarian Westerners' in their mid-run experiences, which they expected to last up till the end of the first year. Many believed that by this time they would start reaping the

fruits of their hard labour and determination. As I will show, however, the experiences of 'ordinary people' and 'Bulgarian Westerners' alike continued to defy their pre-migration visions of the West. I also discuss the increased class-based hostility and antagonism between the two groups, which resulted from the forceful blurring of class boundaries in the marginalised migrant milieu. The chapter concludes by indicating people's slow but certain realisation that their initial imaginations and hopes about life in the West were too optimistic at best and outright naïve at worst.

Early struggles: from EU citizens to 'illegal' immigrants

All those I spoke to came to the UK with the intention of long-term settlement. Although rarely put into words, their anticipation of a bumpy start was evident in their migration strategies. Those like Mitko, determined to brave their way to the UK without using personal networks or having secured any sort of accommodation and employment, were a minority. The majority preferred to play it safe and leave only after having found a job through a formal migration channel like a recruitment agency and subcontractor, or available social networks. My informants believed that the 2014 lifting of work restrictions would make the attainment of a NINo, a bank account and other documentation needed for settling a life in the UK a bureaucratic nuisance.[143] Finding accommodation was another immediate post-migration concern. Staying with friends or relatives for the first couple of weeks/months was a common arrangement, while those who had no close contacts tried to find an affordable hostel or, like Mitko, relied

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[143] A lot of my informants have intentionally postponed their journeys to the beginning of 2014 assuming that the end of transitional immigrant controls for Bulgarian workers would remove all institutional obstacles to stable and well-paid employment.

on the numerous online ads offering shared accommodation in 'Bulgarian' houses. My informants had a very vague conception of the bottlenecks of early immigrant experiences. They shared the general anxiety affecting anyone who is about to start a life in a new place and faces the challenges of learning a new language, getting used to new surroundings, acquiring local knowledge, and going through the pain of leaving behind meaningful relationships.

There were, however, different factors that made migration a particularly risky endeavour; a leap into the unknown absorbing considerable financial and emotional resources. Without exception, all of those I spoke to were alarmed by the possibility of encountering hostility and stigmatisation by virtue of their nationality. At the same time, they underlined their individual responsibility for dispersing negative misconceptions supposedly instilled upon an overall tolerant population by media and politicians. Many expressed confidence that they would quickly manage to prove their 'properness' through demonstrations of strong work ethic, ambition or 'Western mind-set'. The stakes were high for my informants also because migration journeys necessitated investment that was often beyond the means of most families. Travel-related loans were obtained through moneylenders, consumer credits and in some cases with the help of friends and family. Last minute selloffs of movables like cars, laptops and mobile phones were a common occurrence. These investments, coupled with the fact that before departure many chose to quit full-time employment or close down businesses, made migration a risky endeavour and often a point of no return.

A bureaucratic cul-de-sac

Twenty-four-year-old Emil from Plovdiv arrived in the UK to reunite with his mother - Lora (forty four) who had been working abroad for the past seven years, spending the past three of them as a part-time nanny and cleaner in London. Lora had managed to persuade one of her British employers (also her landlord) to hire her son in his construction company, even though he was yet to supply all necessary documents. Lora had recently stopped subletting the sofa in her one bedroom flat so that she could make space for Emil. As a single 'migrant' salary could not cover Lora's rent in the costly south London neighbourhood it was vital that her son started employment as soon as possible. This meant that they had no time to waste in obtaining the needed documentation. On the morning before his arrival Lora called and asked me to pick up Emil from the airport and take him to her flat, as she had received an emergency call from one of her employers. She was adamant that straight upon our return to the house I should help Emil schedule a NINo interview. He carefully read the words that Lora had spelled out for him in phonetic Cyrillic transcription – he did not speak any English – while talking to the Jobcentre clerk. Emil was told to wait for a letter confirming his appointment scheduled for a month later. This delay made Lora furious. She wondered why institutions created so many problems for 'people like herself', who had 'everything clean' – legally employed, honest tax payers, and diligently keeping one's accounts in order.

In the meantime, she decided to focus on 'sorting out' her son's bank account. Two days later the three of us, armed with a thick folder of different documents and certificates, ventured into central London in search of a bank that would agree to file

Emil's application. In one of the branches we were told that the tenancy agreement[144] was not a sufficient proof of address and we had to supply a NINo confirmation letter. Not able to hide her disappointment Lora erupted in front of the stone-faced employee: 'This is complete non-sense! He has just applied for a NINo, we are still waiting for their letter. Why can't you accept this tenancy agreement, don't you see it is completely legit?'. The next few branches we approached also asked for additional documents we could simply not produce: a letter from the employer, a utility bill in Emil's name, a British driving license.

By now, chasing Emil's documents had turned into a full-time occupation and Lora was forced to reduce her workload by half for the next weeks, which put her under additional mental strain and financial anxiety. On one occasion, a bank employee told Lora that Emil had to demonstrate a visa confirming his right to stay in the country. Her contestations that Bulgaria was part of the EU and visas were a thing of the past fell on deaf ears. Her last resort was a branch of Barclay's[145] in East London, much-talked about in immigrant online forums for the Bulgarian employee working there, whose benevolence towards compatriots supposedly made the procedure much less painful. When learning that the lady in question had just gone on maternity leave, Lora decided she had suffered enough humiliation and that she would use the paid services of fellow-Bulgarian 'accountants'[146] who offered assistance in bureaucratic, accounting, and

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[144] In order to open a bank account most banks required two main types of documents: one proof of the applicant's identity (ID card, passport, a driving licence) and a proof of address. Most commonly, the latter included one or more of the following: a tenancy agreement, a mortgage statement, a recent utility bill, a current council tax bill, or a letter confirming the issuing of a NINo. However, each bank had its own list of documents acceptable as proof of address and often the number and type of those, as many attested, depended upon the applicant's appearance and nationality.

[145] A British bank.

[146] My research indicated that most of the so-called 'accountants' were in fact long term migrants without relevant qualifications who spoke English and have acquired a good degree of 'immigrant capital' in the

other legal matters. It was few days later that the cherished bank account in Emil's name arrived[147] in the post.

The night before Emil's insurance number interview we gathered in Lora's tiny kitchen for a celebration of what looked like the end of a bureaucratic nightmare. Lora was eager to express her frustration:

> The British don't want us here, immigration is a big problem for them, especially those migrants who don't speak the language. This is why they don't want to give documents. Did you see how they threw us around like rags? Go here, go there, and for what? You have no rights here, only obligations.

She wondered what would have happened to Emil if it was not for her: 'He cannot do anything without documents, he is like a ghost, he cannot live like a normal person. He would have been forced into the mud like the rest of them [Bulgarian immigrants], those who turn to drugs or become criminals'. On the next day, Lora was told by an employee in the local Jobcentre that people who do not speak the language should not be allowed to come to Britain in the first place. 'Of course, he will learn the language, but he also needs to eat and to do so he needs a job.', Lora told me while on the verge of crying. That same day she received a phone call from her landlord saying she would have to vacate the flat in case of another week's rent arrear.

Throughout my fieldwork, I witnessed numerous occasions on which people desperately struggled to acquire basic documents that they were at least formally entitled to. Many 'old' Bulgarian immigrants had the feeling that after January 2014 the

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form of knowledge of the local legislation, existing loopholes and contacts to 'cooperative' individuals in the respective institutions.

[147] Lora paid 85 GBP for it.

issuing of those had in fact become even harder. The unexpected requests for additional papers, the arbitrary delays and the increased rates of application rejections struck them as 'informal filtering mechanisms' (*neformalni mehanismi za filtrirane*) operated by the British state for the purpose of curbing immigration numbers and at the same time cherry-picking the type of people that would best suit the needs of the economy. Contrary to what many informants seemed to believe, the low-skilled and non-English-speaking Bulgarians were not the only ones deemed undesirable. 'Highly-skilled migrants' faced quite similar stumbling blocks. Miro, for example, was told that the only way for him to obtain a bank account would be to exchange his Bulgarian driving licence for a British one. Trying to avoid the additional costs and administrative hassle related to this procedure, he ended up signing up for an online paid package account. In many instances, the weeks – in some cases months – after the NINo interview were marked by apprehension and insecurity. Sometimes the number was granted only after months of unjustified rejections and painstaking re-applications. Tanya, for example, received a rejection after her first NINo interview and had to wait a total of two and a half months before obtaining her number. Another informant, Assen, likened the anticipation of his insurance number with the apprehension one feels before receiving a death sentence.

Cheap and exploitable labour

Such 'filtering mechanisms' were the foremost reason why many of my informants were 'pushed' into precarious and informal work arrangements shortly upon arrival. As newcomers without documents and little immigrant 'know-how', they were an easy prey for migrants with longer experience and local employers in need of cheap and easily

exploitable labour. According to the law, Bulgarians, as all other EU nationals, could be employed for a period of up to two months prior to obtaining their insurance number. Most of those I spoke to were unaware of or fearful to make use of this right. Additionally, recruitment agencies and local companies used the absence of a NINo as a pretext for not hiring newcomers.

Both London and Birmingham where most of my participant observation took place are former industrial centres that as a result of global neoliberalisation policies and market deregulation have experienced a swift transition from manufacturing to a service sector economy. This has led to the increased differentiation of their labour markets into highly-skilled, highly-paid and specialised employment on the one hand and low-skilled, low-salary and low-security, one on the other. This polarisation has been more extreme in London where the rapid growth of finance, banking, insurance and other professional sectors have created a demand for low-waged, casualised workers – cleaners, nannies, porters, waiters and others – who service the needs of business and financial elites.[148] Birmingham, on the other hand, had demonstrated relatively low economic growth in the recent past, at the same time sustaining relatively high levels of deprivation in relation to employment, income, health and crime. As opposed to London's labour market structure Birmingham and the surrounding area offers more jobs in food production and processing which is the largest sub-sector of

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[148] The highest proportion of workforce jobs (the number of filled jobs) in London in 2015 were service sector jobs-91.7%
https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/regionallabourmarket/2015-07-15 [Accessed 20 January 2018].

manufacturing.[149] The first destination for many migrants (Bulgarians included) in both cities are the so-called 3D jobs – dirty, difficult and dangerous, characterised by long working hours, irregular shifts, minimum or below minimum pay and zero-hour contracts, great part of which are concentrated in the grey sector of the British economy.[150] The average earnings in Birmingham remain lower (479 GBP a week) than regional and national averages.

The first entry point into the labour market for the newly-arrived were Bulgarian and other immigrant gang masters and subcontractors recruiting people for cash-in-hand jobs mostly in construction, car washing, cleaning, and leaflet distribution. Such jobs were given on a short-notice basis with no guaranteed minimum workload and usually paid between 3.5 – 5 GBP per hour[151]. They often required long and expensive travel throughout the city and in some cases investment in different job-related materials and equipment. The work was not only physically exhausting and humiliating, but often presented migrants with serious health hazards. One illustration is the case of Assen who came to London in the late summer of 2014 to take on a 'secured job' (*osigurena rabota*) promised by an old university colleague – a long-term migrant and a 'successful' cleaning company owner. In the days following his arrival it turned out that the carpet cleaning job was 'no longer available'. On top of this Assen was told that the rent for the shared room in his friend's house was higher than previously negotiated. Left to his own devices, he had little choice but to spend half of his money for a month's

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[149]file:///C:/Users/polin/Downloads/Local_Economic_Assessment_for_Birmingham_December_2014.pdf

[150] Although there is no official data on the size and structure of the grey labour market in the UK, it could be argued that in this case it is again London that offers more irregular jobs than Birmingham by virtue of its larger population and higher demand for such services.

[151] The national minimum wage for 2014 was 6.50 GBP and increased to 6.70 GBP in 2015.

rent and do his best to quickly 'sort out' his documents and find a job. In the first two months, while waiting for his NINo, he alternated between days of painful waiting and short spells of underpaid short-term employment. Once, a Bulgarian took him into his construction crew to work as a painter with two other Bulgarians for a week's time. Already on the second day a conflict arose between Assen and the other workers. He claimed that as 'old' migrants they took him for a greenhorn and started bossing him around. On the third day, he decided to quit the job. His employer refused to pay him, claiming that he had failed to complete the assignment.

Another one of his jobs was in a car wash next to his place where he worked between three and four days a week. A day shift lasted twelve or more hours and paid £35. He combined this with cash-in-hand jobs for which he got picked up from a common migrant 'hotspot' in a south London high street junction. According to his calculations, he had earned a total of 850 GBP in two months while his monthly expenses amounted to approximately 600 GBP (350 GBP for rent, 45 GBP for transport, and between 80 and 100 GBP for food). This meant that he could not repay the loan he took from a friend in Bulgaria, nor save for bringing his family over – which was his ultimate goal (see Introduction vignette), but instead accumulated more debt. With the coming of autumn, the available jobs became scarce and Assen was forced to go back to Bulgaria where he planned to spend the winter.

Tanya had left for the UK with the hope of finding well-paid employment matching her university degree and English language proficiency. A British friend whom she met during her Erasmus stay in Wolverhampton had agreed to host her in his London flat for a month. The arrangement was that she would share the flat for free as long as she contributed to the house chores and utility bills. Every time I would visit, I would find

her sitting in front of her laptop, frantically checking job portals for new openings. She told me she had set a goal of submitting no less than twenty applications a day, making me wonder how this was possible given the fact she applied for highly-skilled positions which usually required a well-tailored motivation letter and the filling of lengthy online application forms. Part of the answer was that she often compromised on her sleep as she was anyways too nervous to rest most of the time, as she explained. For three weeks of job hunting Tanya had been invited to only two interviews, with the prospective employers clearly taken aback when realising she was yet to obtain her insurance number and bank account. Anticipating this, she brought print-outs from the Home Office website proving her work eligibility to her following job interviews.

A month and a half after her arrival Tanya's savings had been used up; she was still unemployed and constantly pondering the reasons why. She acknowledged that the competition for 'good' jobs in London was in fact a lot fiercer than she had initially imagined. She considered her lack of documents to be a factor putting employers off, but also wondered if this did not serve as an excuse for concealing their prejudice against Bulgarians. On an interview for a job as primary teacher, the interviewer remarked jokingly on her strong east European accent. Distressed by what had happened she told me: 'Who would want their children to be taught by a foreigner with a peculiar accent, Polina? Getting rid of it will take me ages, does this mean I will not get a proper job till then?' A week later, desperate and running out of options, Tanya acquiesced to the job she dreaded most before her arrival and became cleaner for a Bulgarian 'agency'.[152] She started serving an average of three to four private houses

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[152] In many cases, Bulgarian 'agencies' were unregistered companies, represented by an 'agent' who mediated between private clients and migrants in search of a job.

a day, all across central London, often with less than an hour's notice. She earned 6.50 GBP an hour and was required to cover her transport costs and buy her own cleaning materials. Cleaning was something Tanya never thought she would end up doing. Before her departure, she had often told me that this was a job for women who had no self-esteem and ambitions for professional and self-improvement.

Stuck among one's own

'When abroad, stay away from Bulgarians' was the most frequent statement would-be migrants produced when asked whether they planned to engage with other Bulgarians in the UK. This was related to popularly-held beliefs about the nature of the 'Bulgarian (or Balkan) mentality' (*mantalitet, or narodopsihologia*) characterised by a 'typical' propensity for constant comparison with the achievements of others, behind the back talk, spite, and desire to inflict harm on others or use them to one's own advantage.[153] My informants were determined to rely entirely on themselves when in the UK in order to prove their strength, perseverance, and ability to adapt to new environments. On the other hand, often in contradiction to their own words, they sought assistance from friends, family and online Bulgarian forums when looking for a place to stay, legal advice, job recommendations or general information on life in the UK. 'Ordinary people', who did not speak English and deemed themselves culturally too distant from the locals remained hopeful about forging friendships with compatriots, because, according to one informant, 'after all, we are Bulgarians and we would prefer each other's company than that of British, Polish, Romanian and so on'. 'Bulgarian

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[153] See Maeva (2017) for similar findings reflecting the lack of cohesion and solidarity in the Bulgarian community in the UK and its split into subgroups according to length of stay and class principles.

Westerners', on the other hand were adamant about avoiding all contact with 'Bulgarian migrants' – their low-skilled and 'culturally impoverished' compatriots whom they believed to have come to the UK with the sole purpose of making money (*pechelbarstvo*). As I have already argued in Chapter Three, it was through such processes of boundary building that they carved out their 'middle-class' subjectivities, fulfilled their desire to escape from a social reality dominated by 'backwards masses' and hoped to fully immerse themselves into a British society composed of like-minded 'Westerners'.

Almost immediately upon arrival, both groups of informants were drawn into the confines of the Bulgarian immigrant community, whether or not this had been their initial intention. Newly arrived migrants' dependence on their compatriots was conditioned by several factors that caught them completely off-guard, such as the high cost of living, which literally 'ate away' savings; the long and painful scramble for documents; the missing opportunities for well-paid and stable employment; and the unfamiliarity with the particularities of the British real estate renting market.

For instance, when Tanya felt she had worn out her welcome in the flat of her British friend, she started searching for a house share in the same area – Camden – she liked the place for its multicultural flair, hipsterish vibe, proximity to the city centre and, most of all, for the lack of a visible Bulgarian presence. After a quick online search, she realised that the cheapest single bedroom in the area came at the cost of 600 GBP a month, a minimum six-month contract, and a security deposit of 900 GBP. Her monthly earnings of less than 1000 GBP and depleted savings made the area completely off-limits and Tanya decided to orientate her search further away from the city centre. She was despaired at the fact that any accommodation she was ready to consider was

beyond her budget and came with lengthy contracts and agency fees she was not sure she could commit to. One day she told me how after sharing her concerns with her family her mother had contacted the daughter of an ex-colleague of hers who rented her own house to Bulgarians in east London. 'Can you imagine me living with those people? God knows what villages they have crawled out of, they are most probably some primitively thinking people who see an inside bathroom for the first time in their lives.' A week later Tanya decided to give the place a try; it was the cheapest arrangement she had seen so far (350 GBP a month), there was no contract and it required only a one-week deposit.

A month later, curious to learn more about her new living arrangements and the relationship with her flatmates, I asked to visit her. She proposed that we meet for a coffee in a popular shopping centre next to her place. Later, she explained she felt embarrassed having me in the house as the neighbourhood was poor and filthy and one could see Bulgarians shop and hear Bulgarian speech almost everywhere. She described the place as a 'typical' Bulgarian house – loud music, constant quarrels, despicable hygiene, and frequent alcohol feasts. It was a mixture of anger and despair that I sensed in what she told me that day:

> I feel like I am in Bulgaria here. See there, a group of Bulgarian gypsies are crossing the street, there on the next table two Bulgarians are having coffee. Do you see any British around us? There isn't a single person, maybe only some passers-by. I came to London to get rid of it all and now I am surrounded by those people I would not even speak to in Bulgaria.

The immigrant housing market was largely run through highly exploitive relationships between newer and older migrants. A lot of the 'older' migrants I met had figured out

that buying a house, keeping a room for themselves and renting out the rest was highly beneficial as it allowed them to cover the costs of home owning and to faster repay their mortgages. Drawing on their newly arrived compatriots' needs to economise and their complete lack of knowledge and experience with the housing market, Bulgarian landlords were, at a minimum, able to cover theirs and their families' renting and utility costs and in some cases even turn this into a profitable business. The points of tension between landlords and tenants (as well as among tenants themselves) were multiple and I can hardly think of a case of problem-free renting or lending experience.

Still, solidarity and mutual help between friends and strangers alike were not uncommon. I witnessed multiple occasions on which genuine care, advice, and generosity were offered to the newly arrived. Such stories often provoked wonder and admiration and were presented as out of the ordinary experiences and a confirmation that even in such competitive and aggressive environment there existed people who had managed to preserve their empathy and kindness. Through its informal economic structures and practices, the Bulgarian immigrant community allowed newcomers to persist through the toughest first weeks and months in the UK by offering them cheaper services and a sense of familiarity and security amidst general hostility and discrimination. The immigrant community can thus be said to exist in a symbiotic, yet also exploitative interdependence between incoming and settled migrants. By filling in the crevices left by the mainstream economy, settled migrants set up structures that provided for accommodation, employment, legal, transport and other needs of incoming immigrants who had no way of entering mainstream society. At the same time, informal enterprises offered opportunities for 'older' migrants to generate extra

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income and achieve socioeconomic mobility, routes to which were to a great extent blocked for them in the larger society.[154]

Intra-community exploitation and migrant hostility towards new arrivals is well-reported in research carried out among east European migrant communities in Britain (Garapich 2005, Maeva 2017, Spenser et al. 2007). Such tensions have been explained as a result of the high competition for jobs and other scarce resources. While such explanations hold true for the experiences of my informants, the pre-existent class-based conflicts I have outlined in Chapter Three fuelled such antagonisms. As in the case of Tanya, many 'Bulgarian Westerners' felt humiliated by the need to cohabitate, work with and in many cases even depend on the benevolence of those whom they deemed not even worth 'talking to' back home. I further develop this class-based tension in the next part of this chapter.

On the other hand, the many examples of solidarity and mutual assistance that I witnessed throughout my fieldwork have been explained as a reaction to migrants' exclusion from the structures of the host society. Alejandro Portes and Min Zhou (1992) have argued that ethnic solidarity, which they denote as 'bounded solidarity', emerges out of a uniting feeling of 'foreignness' and prejudicial reception from the dominant society. The symbiotic relationships within immigrant communities that researchers alluded to were clearly observable in the relations of my informants and long-term migrants: new migrants provided cheap and exploitable labour for migrant businesses while they themselves benefited from the possibility of immediately starting jobs. Such

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[154] For a more detailed discussion of the functions of the parallel migrant economy in the context of the US see Sarah Mahler (1995).

arrangements, as I have shown, did not just apply to the sphere of employment but also to living arrangements, legal and other forms of assistance.

Informality, illegality, and precarious beginnings

My informants came to the UK eager to make a fresh start and fulfil the yearnings related to their imaginaries of the West. Almost immediately upon arrival, their fascination with the 'colourful', 'shiny' and 'magnificent' Britain of their dreams gave way to experiences of 'grim' and 'hostile' realities that had little to do with their idealised pre-migratory expectations. I have discussed how most prospective migrants did not anticipate an open-armed welcome and foresaw the existence of a 'transitional' period in which they would be challenged to disprove prejudice towards east European migrants and prove their worth for the local economy through hard labour and perseverance. In no way, however, were they prepared for the uncertainty and vulnerability that they were confronted with in their early weeks and months. I have focused on three key factors which made my informants' lives insecure and precarious to an extent often surpassing the circumstances they left behind. Firstly, the pains of procuring documentation that would grant them the status of legal workers revealed the functioning of a powerful informal ('hidden') bureaucracy that created feelings of going around in circles. Secondly, the combination of such 'legal discrimination' (see Fox, Morosanu and Szilassy 2015: 729) with a de-regulated and saturated labour market[155] pushed many into highly precarious and exploitative jobs. Following from these was the entrapment of the newly arrived into the confines of the Bulgarian immigrant community that on one hand increased their vulnerability and segregation

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[155] See Mezzadra and Nelson (2013), Anderson (2010).

and on the other offered a refuge that enabled their survival in a discriminatory and hostile British society.

In contrast to my informants' initial expectations the rights of free movement and labour across Europe had little to no meaning in the reality of the UK labour market. The above-described bureaucratic conundrum and the discriminatory labour market practices of local employers pushed many into a state of *de facto* 'illegality' which was in complete contradiction to their formal status of 'free moving Europeans'. The civil, economic, social, and political rights they were formally entitled to were in practice denied to them by systemically functioning formal and informal structural limitations. Thus, newly arrived Bulgarian migrants were put in a position of what Standing calls precarious 'denizenry' (2011: 14) and pulled into the casualised and informal economy which made them easy targets for dependency and exploitation (Portes et al. 1989). My informants' experiences bear clear resemblance with the effects of 'illegality' on the lives of undocumented migrants in the UK, which are well-documented by Nando Sigona (2012).[156] Social isolation resulting from restricted time and opportunities for interaction, humiliation, low-paid employment and reliance on co-nationals are the most pertinent characteristics defining 'illegality' that held particular relevance for my informants (Sigona 2012).

Since Bulgarians and Romanians gained equal rights to work and live in the UK in 2014, academic researchers' attention towards their experiences in destination societies have decreased. The structural mechanism of economic and social exclusion that I have outlined here remains largely uncovered with the exception of few important

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[156] Sigona (2012) focuses his research on Chinese, Brazilian, Turkish, Ukrainian, and Zimbabwean migrants.

recent contributions.[157] Raia Apostolova (2017), for example, points to the implementation of repressive measures by local municipal authorities in Munich aiming at humiliating and chasing away Bulgarian and Romanian undocumented workers gathering at central street corners. Migrants and their practices were deemed undesirable by local businesses and a threat to the civilised way of life of the locals.[158] She points out how the brutal policing which had turned into a daily practice of disciplining migrants had exacerbated their fear and vulnerability to a point when many of them decided to leave the city and search work elsewhere (Apostolova 2017).

When juxtaposed to pre-2014 studies on Bulgarian migration to the UK, my ethnographic data reveals that little if anything had changed for Bulgarian immigrants since the lifting of work restrictions in January 2014. Their entrapment in low-skilled, low-paid informal sectors (Markova and Black 2007) continued to persist and diminish opportunities for integration into the host society. Ethic 'ghettoization' (Markova and Black 2008:20), lack of solidarity and fragmentation within the Bulgarian community (Maeva 2017) were other previously – observed factors that still impacted on the conditions of Bulgarian migrants.

The cases of Mitko and Assen exemplified a commonly observed migrant trajectory of enforced temporariness, which Mezzadra and Nielson (2013) see as a main feature of contemporary international migration, one institutionalised through different formal and informal control mechanisms (see Chapter Two). The inability to legalise their status and produce surplus income, in combination with unexpectedly high costs of living,

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[157] See Apostolova (2017); Macarie (2017); Vicol (2017).

[158] See also Manolova (2016), (2017).

positioned many of my informants on the brink of survival. Initial plans for long-term settlement turned out to be unfeasible and many had to return home already in the first weeks/month after their arrival. 'Ordinary people' were more vulnerable to such an outcome as they often had no economic cushion to fall back on and no significant social networks to mobilise. 'Bulgarian Westerners' were also not completely immune to such 'involuntary temporariness' and they often realised that keeping one's head above the water in this turbulent early period was possible only at the price of unforeseen hardship, deprivation and further indebtedness.

My evidence in support of enforced temporariness contests widely-accepted assumptions in east European migration research which consider the so-called 'incomplete' migration (Okolski 2001: 105) a conscious quick money-making strategy of low-skilled migrants. Others point to the lack of 'strong' ties (White and Ryan 2008), locally-bound identities, inadequate skills (Ditchev 2008), or migrants' lack of ambition (Eade, Garapich and Drinkwater 2006) as reasons for oft-observed short-term horizons. In the next chapter, I discuss in more detail how many of these involuntary returnees did not abandon their migration plans but embarked on circular short-term labour migration between Bulgaria and the UK that further precluded them from accumulating enough capital for permanent settlement.

The decent into precarity that marked the early days and months of my informants' stay in the UK was not taken as indicative of the general path their new lives were to take in the UK, nor did it necessitate a re-evaluation of the Western imaginaries guiding their journeys. Such hardships were most often dismissed as a temporary nuisance and part of a process of 'settling down' (*ustanoviavane*) in which one's determination and stamina were put to a test. Many believed that by successfully overcoming this

initial precarious threshold they would complete their transformation into stronger and more deserving individuals and, most importantly, get a taste of the life that they had come to experience. Their sustained belief in fulfilling their pre-migration expectations was evident in the perseverance and courage with which they endured everything that their new lives threw at them and in the determination with which many returned for a 'second chance'.

Parallel lives and yearnings for inclusion: mid-term perspectives

The end of the initial period of 'settling down' did not bring the changes that my informants hoped for and many continued to grapple with the instability and insecurity that had hit them upon arrival. They often had the feeling that their lives developed in a reality parallel to that of the locals. They still lived and worked amongst Bulgarians and other immigrants, listened to Bulgarian speech, watched Bulgarian television and shopped from Bulgarian and east European shops. The outsider position they occupied in relation to the dominant society was not just a product of cultural and ethnic segregation but was to a great extent preconditioned by their economic marginalisation at the bottom rung of the social hierarchy, where they struggled to find and keep jobs undesirable for the locals. The intersections between these two parallel realities were limited to patron-client relationships in work life, interactions with authorities and daily observations gathered when commuting to and from work. These brief encounters were often a source of disappointment, fear and humiliation. They also offered a glimpse into British people's realities of life and thus exposed the drastic gap that divided the existence of my informants from that of the larger society. They filled Bulgarians with frustration and jealousy but at the same time provided hope that the

lives they had imagined for themselves had an actual existence and, although they were unattainable at present, they could become a reality in the future. The hope of bringing to fruition their imaginations of life in the West provided the motivation and inner drive to tackle the challenges head on and follow their dream of becoming part of British society with utmost perseverance.

In this sense, while they were 'living off borrowed time' (Ahmad 2008:309) and with no clear future perspective, Bulgarian migrants did not always confine themselves to a short-term mind-set. On the contrary, very often their perseverance through daily experiences of insecurity and socio-economic vulnerability was made possible by their effort to sustain a positive future-oriented vision and hope for achieving their long-term settlement aspirations. In the following, I will demonstrate how this determination despite disappointed hopes could be observed both among 'ordinary people' and 'Bulgarian Westerners'.

'Ordinary People's' mid-term trajectories

Caught in the 'migrant matrix'

Before coming to the UK 'ordinary people' had drawn pictures of day-to-day routines which they hoped would allow them to imbue their lives with much longed-for stability and sense of control. Instead, they found themselves immersed in an anxious and alienating everyday existence which they metaphorically described as 'living in a matrix'. After obtaining their documents, a process that took anything between one to six months, they did their best to find legal employment, preferably for British employers, as they were expected to pay well and provide better treatment than

Bulgarian ones. Male immigrants quickly realised that the only way for accessing better paid opportunities was through obtaining specialised training and becoming skilled labourers. This often proved an arduous task, however, as it required a good level of English, investment in qualification courses[159] and expensive equipment. In the meantime, many became agency workers, constantly shifting between different assignments and occasionally suffering spells of unemployment.

With time, women stopped being dependent on Bulgarian 'agencies' and started recruiting their own clients for cleaning and child caring. Men and women alike needed to obtain a self-employed status which meant additional bureaucracy, costs for accountant services, agency fees and payroll contributions.[160] The widely used bogus self-employment status precluded any social, health and labour protection, which left my informants highly vulnerable to economic fluctuations (see Anderson 2010). Many of those I spoke to had begun to recognise that 'decent' work remained out of bounds even after the procurement of all legal authorisations. As minimum wage workers, it was important for 'ordinary people' to take on as many working hours as possible – this was the only way they could make a living and repay debts or save for bringing over their families. This was how their entire existence revolved around and depended on finding and keeping employment, leaving little time for social interaction, recreation, and rest.

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[159] This applied even to those who had relevant training and qualification, which, however, often remained unrecognised.

[160] Many payroll providers charged temporary workers a weekly fee for covering administrative costs. On top of this, the national insurance and pension contributions of the employer were deducted from the worker's remuneration.

Six months after her arrival, Eleonora had managed to quit her au pair job and start working for a Bulgarian cleaning agency. After recruiting a few regular clients, she decided to quit the agency and start working on her own. Every day she serviced a number of houses spread throughout London, doing cleaning jobs in the morning and caring for school-aged children in the afternoon. She worked six days a week around eight hours a day and spent another three hours commuting. Saturday was her day off and she usually dedicated it to domestic chores and talking to her son on Skype. Eleonora's husband Georgi, who managed to join her six months later, worked six days a week as a labourer, with a day off on Sunday. Although Eleonora considered her current circumstances an improvement – she was earning more than before and she was finally reunited with her husband – she felt that they were still at a stage in which they were solely preoccupied with ensuring their daily survival.

> Each day is the same here - from work to home and from home back to work. I come back at half past nine in the evening, my husband is already in bed, I eat and go to sleep, I am so tired. I think, when my husband was in Bulgaria we talked more than we do now, we simply don't have the time anymore. We only think about how to pay the rent, our Oyster cards[161], and fill the fridge.

This day-to-day existence, in which one did nothing else but 'work as a robot', brought up a great sense of alienation and loneliness especially for those who had migrated on their own. Many such individuals led a lifestyle described by Piore (1979: 63-64) as 'ascetic': in their efforts to save money, they cut back on expenses that were not directly related to their subsistence, condemning themselves to material privation and

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[161] London travel card.

social isolation. With time, such asceticism took its toll and I witnessed many cases in which my informants' physical and psychological well-being was gravely affected.[162] This observation confirms Standing's (2011) claim that the precarious employment that migrant labourers are more likely to undertake jeopardises different aspects of their individual life – health and wellbeing, family and friendship ties and personal aspirations.

Migrants were not sure how to step out of this state of 'working, counting coins and not having time for anything'. They feared that if they invested time and finances into obtaining a better and more stable employment they ran the risk of losing the little that they had managed to achieve. Thus, the imagined idyllic boredom that they had come for was something that they glimpsed in the lives of their employers, the families taking a Sunday stroll in the local park or the well-clad early morning commuters. What they got instead, was a tedious day-to-day predicament marked by exhaustion, fear and seclusion.

While this was the predicament of most people working both in and outside of London, I found that the latter group managed to much quicker escape illegal and self-employment and enter contracted forms of labour. Thus, for example, when he first arrived to Birmingham Boncho took on a pre-arranged job as a night-shift milk driver for 7 GBP per hour. Despite the reassurance of his employer he was never provided with a full-time contract which meant that he kept a self-employed status – covering his own tax obligations and unable to use paid leave and statutory benefits. After half

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[162] For example, one of my informants suffered a major heart problem which required several operations and months spent in hospital care. Several other informants suffered with depression, panic attacks and social anxiety.

a year Boncho was told by a British driver he met on one of his deliveries about a transport company in the region which was hiring experienced drivers. Despite his poor language skills Boncho passed the recruitment tests and was given a full-time six-month contract with a pay of 9, 45 GBP per hour, 3 rest days a week and 20 days of paid holiday. Similarly to him, his eldest son – Dani managed to fairly quickly leave behind his job in a local car repair shop that paid him less than 5 GBP per hour for a minimum-waged employment in a chocolate factory. He soon managed to arrange temporary contract for his mother in the same factory despite the fact that she did not speak any English.

Double subordination and internalisation of inferiority

'Ordinary people' often repeated with unconcealed complacency that in the UK one's education and other previous achievements did not count as here everyone had to 'start from zero'. They welcomed this enforced sameness as levelling out the class and status inequalities that they had been particularly perceptive of while in Bulgaria. Their habituation to labour-intensive occupations was expected to ease their adaptation and put them in an advantageous position in relation to their better educated compatriots and work-shy locals. In the mid-run of their migrant trajectories, however, they had gathered enough negative experiences to realise that their hard and dedicated labour would not bring them the just reward and moral recognition that would allow them to become respectable members of British society. As discussed in the previous subsection, the pay they received was perhaps higher than their earnings in Bulgaria in absolute terms but was barely enough to cover their sub-standard existence in the UK. Even more disappointingly, 'ordinary people' were subjected to considerable

denigration, exploitation, and discrimination from local employers and Bulgarian immigrants (long-term immigrants as well as 'Bulgarian Westerners'). Therefore, the feelings of inferiority they hoped to address through migration deepened further as they were often in a position of double subordination – a state that made them experience themselves as standing below many others in the British social hierarchy.

'Ordinary people' came to realise that they were preferred by British employers not so much for their good work ethic but for their cheap labour. In this regard, they saw their hard work and efficiency as abused rather than rewarded. The discrimination they were subjected to was most often explained as rooted in ethnic prejudice. They complemented this impression with examples of the better treatment that other nationalities received in the UK. To many, it seemed that no matter how hard they tried they were still deemed less-deserving and less-capable by virtue of their nationality. Once when contemplating his job-related calamities in London, Assen told me the following:

> Bulgarians are the ones employed for doing the shitty jobs; you can never see a Pole, or another east European in a car wash or on a construction site. If you do, they would be supervisors, but definitely not labourers. We are the worst paid ones as well, only a Bulgarian can agree to work for 35 GBP a day. A Lithuanian, for example, would not get off the couch for less than 150!

They were even more puzzled by their observations of Indian and black British occupying prestigious positions in banks, companies and local administration, which seemed unreachable for Bulgarians. The unexpected and confusing realisation that white British people have 'allowed' the successful integration of such racial others while

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at the same time excluding white Bulgarians from such opportunities increased the sense of subordination that my informants shared.[163]

The everyday discrimination faced by migrants took on various forms and was encountered in diverse social settings. Krassi and Boncho, a couple trying to settle down in Birmingham with their two children explained how hard it was for Bulgarians to rent legal accommodation:

> We would check the website and call the agency to ask for viewing a specific property. They would immediately realise we are foreigners; it is not hard with our bad English and thick accents. When we tell them we are from Bulgaria they would say something like "The property is taken.", "We have nothing in the area.", or "Call another time.".

When they finally managed to arrange a couple of viewings and expressed readiness to rent a particular property, they were told that the owner, who was a former British doctor, had the explicit requirement of renting out only to fellow medical doctors.

Experiences of discrimination produced emotional suffering and were often compounded with personal insecurities related to the lack of English language skills and insufficient cultural and institutional knowledge. The men and women I spoke to often feared socialising beyond their national group and admitted to feeling helpless, ignorant and out of place, incapable of resolving even the simplest tasks. Before making their way to the UK, many 'ordinary people' did not see their lack of English

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[163] This also shows that after coming to the UK my informants started to understand the West in racial terms. It reveals original expectations of the West as populated by white and middle-class British which clashed with a reality of multicultural and tolerant coexistence of different races and ethnicities. They started to imagine British society as structured according to a racial matrix in which Bulgarians stood below most ethnic and religious minorities.

proficiency as an obstacle to their migrant success. They believed that once in the UK, they would be able to quickly pick up the language in their daily interaction with locals. As they quickly learned upon arrival this was hardly possible given their complete immersion in an immigrant economy where English was hardly if ever spoken.[164] They came to see this as their main deficiency and the biggest obstacle limiting their employment prospects, as it resulted in daily inconveniences and their inability to defend their case in front of authorities and employers. For instance, Krassi, who was a temporary worker in a chocolate factory in Birmingham, claimed that her supervisors were taking advantage of her and her co-workers' lack of English and treating them in an even more exploitative manner. She was often asked to sign documents she could not read, was penalised or asked to do unpaid overtime work without being able to express her protest.

Communication with locals remained challenging even after efforts were invested into studying the language. After spending half of her salary for a three-month intensive language course in a local college, Krassi was still unable to communicate, although she claimed she could understand 'almost ninety per cent' of what people were saying. Learning some English raised her confidence but did not bring significant change to her situation as she still felt unfit for applying for better jobs. The better language skills even brought her more sorrow as she became more aware of the demeaning talk of her supervisors. Another one of my informants, Eleonora, who spent enormous efforts to dust off her high school English while working as a nanny in London, was deeply hurt by the insulting remarks of the children she was caring for who often corrected her

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[164] The language could be mastered through courses and self-preparation, but this required time and finances that only few could spare.

strong accent and told her she needed to 'eat more boiled potatoes' if she was to ever speak 'proper' English.

This 'lack of language' was one of the factors responsible for a commonly felt 'internal barrier' (*vutreshna bariera*) that justified my informants' self-doubt and isolation. Long after their first arrival, many of those I met suffered insecurities that prevented them from taking advantage of opportunities for better employment. Moreover, they were unwilling to make use of different public services and entitlements and even fearful to perform everyday tasks. For example, although being aware of the existing free public healthcare in the UK, many did not feel comfortable registering with a local medical practice and instead relied on their GPs back in Bulgaria, who regularly administered treatment over the phone. Others refused to apply for child care benefits and other state support which further stripped them of any safety net to mitigate their situation. As a reason, they often pointed to their poor command of English but also their fear of being seen as abusers of social services. In some drastic cases, the inability to overcome such self-erected psychological barriers led to fears and avoidance techniques. Anguel, for example, was determined not to leave his accommodation in south London except when absolutely necessary. Firstly, because he feared being thrust into an awkward social situation in which he would be required to speak English, and secondly, because he found the sheer size and crowdedness of the city intimidating. What he dreaded most was getting lost in a hostile area or suffering a heart attack in the underground.[165]

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[165] As a proof for the health hazards of the mega polis, my informants often pointed to the large number of people with disabilities to be seen on the streets – a sight that was fairly uncommon in Bulgaria, albeit not due to the lower number of disabled people but to their public space invisibility.

In sum, 'ordinary people's' inability to progress towards the 'normal' lives they had imagined for themselves before departure was to a great extent due to their internalised sense of inferiority or what Erind Pajo, in his research on Albanian migrants in Greece, identifies as a sense of 'personal lowering' (2007: 143). This debilitating feeling can be attributed to several different factors: migrants' structural positioning at the bottom rung of British society, xenophobic public discourses directed towards them, daily experiences of discrimination and their own skill deficiencies. On a more fundamental level, however, I believe this self-abasement to be also a manifestation of deeply entrenched perceptions of Bulgaria's inferiority to the UK which I have already explained when discussing my informants' subjective visions of a global hierarchy of places. Just the fact that they were Bulgarians, and not British, was enough for my informants to naturalise their subordinate position in society.

In order to put these sentiments into perspective, it is useful to consider Frantz Fanon's (2008) examination of the psychology of colonialism, which describes the emergence of an inferiority complex in the colonised as a result of economic processes and psychological 'epidermalisation' of the cultural and intellectual supremacy of the coloniser. Bulgarian immigrants' practices and the meanings invested in them exhibit similar processes of internalisation in the adoption of self-blame narratives that attribute their inferior positions to their own cultural inadequacies; fear of humiliation and ridicule made them avoid social contact with locals they deemed intellectually and culturally superior.

Furthermore, some who condemned exploitation and mistreatment by immigrant employers were less likely to oppose similar treatment by British. Krassi, for example, spent endless nights crying because of the humiliation her British manager inflicted on

her and her colleagues but at the same time tried to justify it as 'normal': 'After all he is British, so it is understandable he acts in this way.' Additionally, it should be noted that the inferiority complex that 'ordinary people' struggled with was further entrenched by the negative attitudes and unfair treatment they received from their better educated co-nationals – those I have called 'Bulgarian Westerners'.[166] Thus, 'ordinary people' who came to the UK with the hope of overcoming their social and symbolic marginalisation in Bulgarian society, found themselves trapped in an even more degrading position of 'double subordination' – on the one hand conferred a marginal status of undeserving Europeans by British employers, public employees, and colleagues, and, on the other, being targeted by the class hatred of their fellow compatriots.

The migrant normal

Caught in the daily grind of the migrant existence, 'ordinary people' had little time to reflect on the direction that their lives had taken in the grand picture of their goals and expectations. It looked as if the Western imaginaries that had brought them to the UK had little relevance for their everyday which was filled with worries over acute questions of reproducing one's physical existence. Migrants would rarely talk about how their present lives scored in relation to their pre-migratory expectations on their own initiative. When prompted to do so, they would usually demonstrate annoyance with the inadequacy of my questions and quickly dismiss them by saying that they were actually 'not too surprised' with what they came to discover. At the same time, they would talk for hours about how hard it was for them to adapt to the environment and

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[166] In the next part I discuss 'Bulgarian Westerners'' perspectives towards their compatriots which often reproduced the class prejudice prevalent in Bulgaria and endorsed negative stereotypes targeting Bulgarians and east Europeans as a migrant group.

how despaired they felt with the inability to bridge the gap that divided theirs and the lives of locals. Their narratives of life in the UK were filled with comparisons with the lives they had led in Bulgaria, with aspects of the latter being cast in a new, more positive light and 'basic things' that had been taken for granted receiving more appreciation. It looked as if the disjuncture between the imagined 'normality' of life and the reality of migration was so significant that, if explicitly recognised, it would cast bad light on my informants' judgment capacities and put them in an extremely awkward position.

Figure 2. An informant posing with Jack Daniel's whiskey bottles in his kitchen, London 2015. Source: the author.

Adjusting themselves to and making the best out of their situation was usually the only way through which 'ordinary people' could persevere with their migratory paths. Their enhanced capacity to engage in different consumption practices was what facilitated this process and incentivised them to sustain their projects for a longer period of time. Those I met reported a sense of economic betterment as the only positive outcome of migration. This conviction was usually contained in the common phrase – 'The only good thing about the UK is the British pound'. This achieved economic fulfilment was a far cry from the standard of life that migrants expected to obtain but still offered a sense of material wellbeing which was unattainable in Bulgaria. Their economic 'success' they measured by their ability to cover their monthly utility bills, keep their fridge full and the occasional consumption of luxury items.[167] It was again those of my informants living outside London that most often experienced a sense of material wellbeing. They reported lower living costs such as food, transportation, rent and utility bills while the payment they received for the kind of jobs they did was comparative to the one in London.[168]

Krassi and Boncho would often tell me that despite all the unforeseen drawbacks and hardship that their lives in the UK had caused them, one thing was for sure: they could now afford to 'loosen up' (*otpuskam*) and spend 'without thinking'. They provided

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[167] According to my informants' understandings those were commodities that exceed one's basic necessities and were generally seen as unaffordable in Bulgaria. Such items had the ability to denote status both within the immigrant community and back home, for example, mobile phones, branded clothes, household appliances, and branded alcohol.

[168] For example, estimations demonstrate that the consumer prices in Birmingham in 2015 were 19 per cents lower than in London: rent – 61% lower, groceries – 15% lower and utility bills – 30% lower. The purchasing power in Birmingham is also estimated to be 14% higher than in London (https://www.numbeo.com/cost-of-living/compare_cities.jsp?country1=United+Kingdom&country2=United+Kingdom&city1=London&city2=Birmingham&tracking=getDispatchComparison) [Accessed 20 January 2018].

numerous examples of their improved consumption capacity: when going outside Birmingham for a Sunday walk, they would regularly drop at McDonalds for drinks and sandwiches; each day Krassi would get three to five scratch-up lottery tickets; they would do their weekly shopping in the nearby Tesco instead of travelling further to Lidl. Each time I visited them for dinner, the table would be piled up with a variety of side dishes and salads and at least two kinds of meat. On my initial visit in their newly rented home, they were eager to give me a full house tour in order to demonstrate all the new furniture and appliances they had purchased in the making of their home. The living room contained two old-looking leather sofas which they got from a neighbour, a huge plasma TV and a dining table. Different appliances were lined up on the two kitchen counters: an electric kettle, a toaster, a microwave, and a juice maker.

Krassi and Boncho wanted to draw my attention to their newest acquisition – an expensive coffee maker which they claimed made the best coffee one could ever try. A high-quality machine like this, Krassi informed me, cost around 200 GBP. It turned out that Boncho found the machine on the sidewalk and managed to get it fixed back in Bulgaria for 20 GBP. They often used it for impressing their guests (while concealing the second-hand origins of this and other items). The coffee maker regularly aroused envy among their Bulgarian acquaintances who took it as a demonstration of the family's migrant success.

Figure 3. Krassi and Boncho's kitchen, Birmingham 2015.
Source: the author.

Each of their three bedrooms contained a double bed, a wardrobe and a smaller flat screen TV. Incongruous with the furniture, all of the rooms were covered with flower-patterned wallpaper. The wallpaper was a 'bargain' purchased from the home zone of Sainsbury's for 0.20 GBP a roll. While demonstrating the sturdiness of the newly-bought furniture, Krassi commented: 'We just went to IKEA and bought stuff for 500 GBP. We had no second thoughts; we took everything on a zero-interest instalment plan. We pay 10 GBP a month, can you imagine? Let me tell you Polina, in Bulgaria we could never afford to replace our old furniture and here it is possible!'.

Through consumption, my informants were able to acquire different objects with meaning, which helped them recuperate their personal devaluation by raising their standing within the immigrant community. To them, the value of the things that they managed to procure did not necessarily lie in their being new but in their affordability and good quality. Collecting used goods was seen as legitimate as those were thought to come from rich local families, which attested to their good quality and my informants' good taste and ability to spot good value for money. Providing comfort and satisfaction,

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commodities were a way of conferring meaning to my informants' efforts and compensating for alienating experiences of exploitation and discrimination.

In her research on central and east European migrants in London, Barbara Samaluk (2016) similarly notes that consumption often becomes a strategy for overcoming subordinate class positions in the British labour market and a way for reclaiming value. She argues that her informant's ability to engage, however modestly, in transnational consumption in a western market – seen as offering more choice and diversity – granted them more prestige and value in their communities back home (Samaluk 2016). Likewise, having regular access to western goods which were deemed of better quality gave my informants a sense of social advancement vis-à-vis some members of their social milieu and even more so family and friends in their home communities.

On the other hand, 'ordinary people' were well-aware that their consumption capacity and lifestyles were not comparable to the ones enjoyed by members of the mainstream British society. I have already explained how the intersections between the two parallel worlds that immigrants and locals inhabited were not too many, although few occurrences gave my informants painful reality checks. Once, Krassi and Boncho asked me to fill in some documents for them and I proposed that we meet in a pub next to my flat. On the way there they were nervously asking me questions – 'What is this place like?', 'Is it a place where only locals go?', 'What do they serve there?'. Before entering, they stopped and told me that this was their first time in a 'real' British pub and they were nervous for not speaking the language but also excited to see what the locals did on a Sunday afternoon. When we were sitting at the table over coffees, the two of them did not stop commenting on those around: 'Look at them, they came for Sunday lunch, the whole family eating out! This must cost a lot. We never do this. We

always eat in.' Another time, when Blagovest came to visit me in Birmingham, I took him out for a coffee in a central canal side café. He was so fascinated with the nice environment that he asked me to snap a few pictures of him sipping his drink in front of the fireplace.

The money that migrants spent was earned through backbreaking labour and personal devaluation, for this reason they were spent with care and thought for the future. Many admitted that given the high price they had paid for improving their lifestyle and the huge sacrifices made they did not feel comfortable indulging in frivolous whims and wasting money on 'unimportant' things. They made sure to put aside a portion of their earnings as a form of insurance in case 'something bad happened' and their regular income stream stopped. Thus, consumption – a strategy migrants used for reconciling their precarious and marginal existence and for bringing some sort of 'normality' into their lives – also had the potential of increasing vulnerability. For example, eating out which denoted 'normality' was not regularly practiced as it incurred high expenses. This made migrants conclude that even if economically more fulfilling, the lives they had in the UK were lives they could not 'live to the full' and which were, in this respect, less satisfying than the ones they had left behind.

As I have shown in this subsection, 'ordinary' Bulgarians were able to secure modest levels of consumption and wellbeing, which gave them a taste of the difference between life in the UK and the life they had led back home. Overall, however, the dream of experiencing 'normality' characterised by dignified existence, fair remuneration and stability which were expected to confer a sense of meaning to their pursuits, largely eluded them; and many believed that it was denied to them by virtue of their nationality. Precluded from experiencing the Western kind of 'normality'

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enjoyed by most of the locals, they realised that the only 'normality' they could get access to, was of a lower order - a 'migrant' kind of normality.

'Bulgarian Westerners'' mid-term trajectories

Advancing within the immigrant community

As already noted, the early migrant trajectories of those who self-identified as 'middle-class' Bulgarians developed in a way very similar to the experiences of the rest of my informants. When taking into account the conviction with which they foresaw their smooth immersion into a British society welcoming their educational and cultural credentials, it is not hard to imagine that upon arrival their shock and humiliation was even greater than the one suffered by the rest of migrants. At the same time, they were better equipped to manoeuvre this bumpy start by making use of their language skills, cultural competences and in some cases the economic resources they were able to mobilise through family and friends back home.

The forceful blurring of class boundaries that migration often leads to (see Hilfinger Messias 2001) was painfully experienced by 'Bulgarian Westerners' whose journeys had often been sparked by a quest for recognition of their middle-class aspiration. Since day one they exhibited fervent determination to 'pull themselves out' of the bottom ranks of the immigrant community and join the British mainstream to which they believed they belonged. In most cases, however, such efforts did not yield the results my informants expected and their skilled employment in the immigrant economy, instead of being a stepping stone, proved to be an enduring attachment.

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Tanya kept her cleaning job for a little over six months. During that time, she continued searching for employment that better matched her qualification and abilities. For a month and a half, she worked part time in a call centre interviewing Bulgarian households on their energy consumption as part of an EU project on saving energy. The hourly wage was less than what she made from cleaning but she fully dedicated herself to the job as she hoped this could give her the access to the British labour market. After the end of the project, her supervisors refused to relocate her to English-speaking assignments as she was not a native speaker. A month later, one of her Bulgarian acquaintances approached her with a job offer for an office assistant position in a Bulgarian building company. Tanya accepted the job as more prestigious than her full-time cleaning occupation and as offering her an opportunity for professional advancement. A few months later, she told me that she was having some troubles and she was already thinking about quitting. We arranged to meet at a busy underground station in east London that was close to her work place. Upon my arrival, she called to say she was held at work and invited me to her office. After a short walk, I found myself in front of a not very welcoming semi-detached house in a small residential street away from the hustle and bustle. The 'office' into which Tanya ushered me resembled the 'home' office arrangements that were common for many Bulgarian businesses – a bedroom in rented accommodation furnished with three desks, and equipped with computers and a printer. I sat on the other side of Tanya's desk, and listened to her phone conversation with a British client. She demonstrated professional phone etiquette and clearly wanted to present the company in the best possible light. After hanging up the phone, she turned to her boss and explained that the client required some further information on the quotes she had given him. Seemingly not bothered by

my presence (I was introduced as a Bulgarian friend), the owner aired his annoyance with the 'fussy' client in a dismissive commentary peppered with swear words.

As Tanya told me later, the main reason why she wanted to find another employment was the 'double life' (*dvoynstven zhivot*) which she found hard to reconcile on a daily basis. She explained how while at work she had to play two different roles: she performed her Westernness while communicating with mostly British clients and she switched to her Bulgarian persona while interacting with colleagues and employers. Living and working with Bulgarians gave her the feeling she was back in Bulgaria, although back home, she added, 'you can at least surround yourself with like-minded people and avoid all the others'. In London, however, one was compelled to closely interact with all sorts of Bulgarians: 'We are in the UK but at the same time some people want to live and behave like they are back home. It is like living in two different universes. It is so strange.' Such existence presented a serious moral pressure as she was constantly asked by her employer to mislead customers and give false promises to fellow employees. She herself suffered the fraudulent practices of her employer[169] who despite his constant reassurance had not provided her with a regular contract.

Miro's professional trajectory took on a very similar direction. After labouring for a Bulgarian brigade for several months, he met an old acquaintance who offered him a managerial position in a Bulgarian cleaning company. Initially, Miro was excited about doing what he did best – managing a team, albeit in a different business sector. Three months later he was already having second thoughts about his role in the company

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[169] What made matters even worse for my informants was the fact that the Bulgarian employers hey worked for were often long-term migrants who had arrived at the time when the competition for jobs in the UK was less intense (mid-1990s or early 2000) and who had managed to advance despite their lack of education and 'Balkan mentality'.

and his chances of ever finding 'proper' employment in the UK. To Miro, the way Bulgarian immigrants did business seemed to be exactly the same as in Bulgaria – no organisation, very bad treatment of employees, always in the 'shadows of the law'. In his employers' understanding, a 'manager' was a man-of-all-work and someone who could fill in for others on all sorts of occasions. In Miro's eyes, this completely negated the nature and prestige of the position in its 'original' Western meaning. As a 'manager', he was required to be on duty around the clock, serve as a driver, a warehouseman and a telephonist. He worked without a contract, for a little over the minimum wage and, as he later admitted, even without a NINo. It was for this reason that when his back was injured on the job one day, his employer was quick to call in a Bulgarian doctor for some pain relief injections.

Thanks to their English language skills and office experience many 'Bulgarian Westerners', like Miro, were able to move up to white collar positions in the Bulgarian immigrant economy in their mid-term period in the UK. Such development was clearly interpreted as improvement to the low-skilled jobs my informants held in the early migration period, yet it was still miles away from the career ladder advancement they imagined for themselves. In fact, professional realisation in the informal immigrant economy was often interpreted as further cementing their embeddedness in a reality parallel to British society and as depreciating their Western capital. Tanya, for instance, worried that her English had gotten much worse since she started working in a Bulgarian company, she also often caught herself engaging in behaviour that was 'typical' for the Bulgarian 'masses' – raising her voice, engaging in gossip, and going to work in a tracksuit like her colleagues, as after all she was working in a 'bedroom' and not an actual office.

Rather than being a step in the right direction, 'Bulgarian Westerners' feared that their employment in Bulgarian companies would restrict their chances of ever accessing highly-skilled jobs on the British labour market. Many believed that local recruiters would be put off by their work experience and would doubt their professional qualities. Despite their qualifications, work experience and English language proficiency, I did not come across a single 'Bulgarian Westerner' who had managed to find skilled employment outside of the immigrant labour market. This confirms findings from research carried out among highly-educated Bulgarian, Romanian, and other east European migrants in the UK, which attributes their long-term entrapment in a low-skilled ethnic labour market to the dual structure of the British labour market and the growing demand for low-skilled jobs in consumer and service sectors, as well as the expansion of the informal economy. Rising levels of anti-immigrant prejudice, discriminatory policies and lack of recognition of professional qualifications have been recognised as structural factors limiting upward professional mobility.[170]

In explaining the difficulties related to finding and maintaining 'decent' employment, many concluded that Bulgarians were not well-accepted in the British labour market and successful integration into society remained a challenge even for those willingly investing major efforts and determination. At the same time, in a paradoxical manner, my informants denied the existence of structural or other forms of discrimination and continued to sustain their belief in the meritocratic virtues of a society that 'rewarded everyone with what they deserved'. Fox, Morosanu and Szilassy (2015) argue that such 'discrimination denial' is widespread among east European migrants in the UK

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[170] See Anderson et al. (2006), Briggs and Dobre (2014), Demireva and Kesler (2011), Pollard, Latorre and Srikandarajah (2008), Markova and Black (2007).

and serves as discursive strategy of mitigating the loss of status deriving from professional downgrading. Their informants' claims for improving their position in the British status hierarchy were based on the meritocratic values sustained in their middle-class ideas of success.[171] My informants would in many cases go even further by claiming that discrimination was justified in certain cases and for certain types of migrants. The bad name that Bulgarians had in the UK, they concluded, was to be blamed on the practices and behaviour of 'typical' Bulgarian labour migrants. 'Bulgarian Westerners' directed the bitterness of their failed advancement towards their fellow compatriots. Sarah Mahler explains a similar practice among Latin American immigrants, who blamed fellow compatriots for their misfortunes and exploitation with the fact that 'macrostructural forces are too faceless, while immigrant faces (and actions) are all too familiar' (1995: 218).

Drawing boundaries

I have already explained how 'Bulgarian Westerners' saw migration as a way of coping with personal dislocation produced by the dissonance between their subjectively perceived 'middle-class' belonging and the inadequate material and symbolic position conferred to them within the Bulgarian social hierarchy. The pre-migratory articulations of their motives for leaving the country and the construction of their expectations of Western futures were articulated along class-tinted divisions between 'us' and 'them' which indicated their perceived cultural and moral superiority via-a-vis 'incomplete' others. By and large, however, striving for a sense of middle-class distinction or advancement to a more privileged status proved fruitless in the UK. Given the high

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[171] See also Eade, Garapich and Drinkwater (2006) on the powerful migrant belief in British meritocracy.

levels of de-skilling they experienced in the UK and their homogenisation within the Bulgarian immigrant community, they found themselves caught in a steep downward spiral which threatened to strip them off their original or desired status and spoil their Western credentials. Thus, in the post-migration context class identities not only retained their significance in the way people evaluated their situation, made sense of their predicament, and engaged in different practices, but were reinforced and cast into sharper distinction. Through the drawing of new and more powerful socio-economic, cultural and moral boundaries, 'Bulgarian Westerners' compensated class frustrations and disappointed aspirations in a highly competitive environment of fierce identification battles (Lamont 2000). The fact that they were homogenised as part of a 'Bulgarian' or 'east European minority' and subjected to the corresponding prejudice and discrimination made them determined to reject and resist such classification. It was again through the use of Orientalising discourse (Buchowski 2006) that 'Bulgarian Westerners' tried to 'codify' (Wieninger 2005) their difference from compatriots with lower levels of cultural and symbolic capital (based on their class or ethnic belonging) – those they perceived as cultural Others.

Shortly after his arrival, Steve had started to make short documentaries on Bulgarians living in the UK. The protagonists were usually his acquaintances, people he admired for their efforts to give a more favourable image of Bulgarians, or in his words, 'those brave enough to be the political and intellectual class – writers, academics, directors'. 'My work is for them, Polina, it will be appreciated by them and not by the Bulgarian majority living here', he told me one day while we were people-watching next to the southern entrance of Hyde Park. Then he insisted that we cross the park and go to Marble Arch so that he could demonstrate better what he meant. There, in the heavy

rush hour traffic of people and cars he spotted a group of roughly-dressed, dark-skinned people who he claimed were most likely Bulgarian gypsies.

> Look at them! This is what they do all day long – begging and stealing. A 'Sun' reporter has probably already taken a picture of them and tomorrow we will be on front page again – 'Bulgarians beg in the centre of London!'. Because on their ID it says "Bulgarian", not "gypsy", right? This is how a bad name is created. No need to wonder why on my first interview in a British company they asked me – "But wait a minute, you are very white, how come you are Bulgarian?".

Steve as many of my informants ('ordinary people' included) tried to delineate himself from Bulgarian Roma who he defined as criminal, culturally backwards and unwilling to integrate. Bulgarianness same as Britishness was for him not about nationality but about ethnicity. By lying claims on their Bulgarian nationality Bulgarian Roma were seen as the main reason for Bulgarians' inferior positioning in the British racial matrix.

However, Steve claimed that such negative representations could not stop him from proclaiming his Bulgarian identity. He felt even more encouraged to consciously demonstrate it as through his positive example he could prove to the British that 'Bulgarians like [him] also exist'[172].

'Bulgarian Westerners' blamed the majority of Bulgarian workers in the UK for their greed and selfishness, their unwillingness to integrate in the host society and their lack of initiative and unclear visions of the future. Demarcation lines between ambitious cosmopolitans and undeserving Bulgarians were sometimes drawn between members

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[172] See Genova (2016b) for similar strategies used by educated Bulgarians in the UK for proving one's difference from other co-nationals.

of the same kin. Nasko, an electrician and creator of the largest online immigrant forum told me how there was very little interaction between his and his brother's family which was also living in London. The conflict between the two had started few years back when Nasko grew tired of helping his brother with his settlement and realised that he was the kind of migrant who always lived 'on other's back', never willing to stand on his own two feet. According to him, 'around 80 per cent of the Bulgarians living in the UK' shared the same 'sponger' mind-set:

> These people are happy to live day by day. They come to suck up as much as they can, they are not here to develop their personalities, they will always remain cleaners and labourers, and this is as far as their ambition goes. They don't want to become part to this society - their favourite food is not fish and chips but *lutenitza* and *lukanka*.[173]

When asked about how they cooperated with others within the Bulgarian community, 'Bulgarian Westerners' claimed that such a community did and should not exist in the first place. Instead, there were different groups, clubs and organisations that united like-minded individuals around cultural, social and professional interests: 'Bulgarian business club', 'BG kids charity', Bulgarian student societies, 'Bulgarian filmmakers association', and so on. This diversification was also structured around a classed differentiation reflective of the stratified structure of British society, as my informants explained: 'Britain, as opposed to Bulgaria is a class-based society. It is normal for Bulgarians to organise according to their class belonging. After living here for some

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[173] Lutenitza is a traditional Bulgarian dip made out of boiled tomatoes and peppers. Lukanka is a traditional kind of salami.

time, people start to think 'why should I go to a *chalga*[174] party with the labourers when I am a businessman?'

Classed distinctions were regularly maintained through the organisation of different events. On some rare occasions, however, the rigid lines separating different categories of migrants were blurred and led to a 'clash of classes' as some called it. I witnessed this myself during the visit of the Bulgarian prime minister in the Bulgarian embassy in London in the beginning of 2016. The press conference hall was packed with around two hundred people, including suit-wearing representatives of the business and intellectual 'elite', students and Bulgarians labourers who had taken time off work in order to come.

The premier's speech started with an enlistment of the achievements of his government, and at some point, he reassured the public that an abundance of jobs awaited all those willing to return back home. This claim was met with the loud derision of 'ordinary' Bulgarians who called him a 'demagogue' and blamed his politics for the 'mass exodus' of Bulgarians in the last few years. A heated confrontation ensued between the discontented migrants and the members of the Bulgarian 'elite', with the latter pleading the former to stop disturbing the official meeting with their undignified behaviour. Steve, who was there to report the event for a leading Bulgarian media, took the microphone and addressed the public: 'Let's please not turn this meeting into a provincial quarrel (*mahlenski spor*) and allow for a civilised dialogue'. His call for

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[174] A popular musical genre in Bulgaria with proclaimed Orientalist motifs, related to the low-brow taste of the 'working masses'.

order was followed by approving voices and demands to remove all those who could not 'behave in a well-mannered European way'.

Figure 4. Bulgarian Prime Minister's meeting in the Bulgarian Embassy. A security guard is trying to quench the turmoil among the public, London 2016. Source: *http://delo.bg/positions/ogledaltse-ogledaltse-ya-kazhi-video/attachment /boyko-12/#prettyPhoto*

In later conversations with Steve and several of his friends, everyone expressed their shame and anger with the uncivilised, non-European behaviour of their countrymen who did not allow for a normal and constructive debate. They believed their voices should have been silenced and they should not have been even admitted to the meeting as they did not provide a legitimate political representation of the Bulgarian community in the UK. What irritated 'Bulgarian Westerners' most was their fellow-immigrants' unwillingness to recognise their subordinate position and cultural remoteness and the impudence with which they dared to get involved in social events addressed to their more deserving compatriots. 'Unfortunately, newcomers don't have the capacity to understand

the class organisation of this society. They still don't know their place', Steve told me.

Discursive boundary construction and avoidance techniques have been reported from a variety of migrant groups and contexts.[175] 'Bulgarian Westerners'' attempts to minimise social interaction with those seen as class-inferior compatriots have been documented by Genova (2016b) who observes the delineation strategies of Bulgarian students and young professionals in London. She explains everyday hostility and lack of engagement as a way of counteracting the dominant stereotypes that homogenise all migrants as 'Bulgarian' or 'East European', as well as negative discourses in Bulgaria constructing educated migrants as national traitors (Genova 2016b). Along similar lines, Mihal Garapich (2005) discusses the representational struggles in the Polish diaspora in the UK, where old time political émigrés try to protect the image of the community in the eyes of host and home institutions from the damaging practices of recent 'labour' migrants.

Existing xenophobic and culturally racist public discourses in the UK (see Fox, Morosanu and Szilassy 2012) and stereotypical understandings of an exceptionally class-conscious British society came to compliment and strengthen the Orientalising rhetoric appropriated by my aspiring middle-class informants in relation to their less Westernised compatriots. In her discussion of Romanian migrants' discriminatory attitudes towards co-nationals Alexandra Bulat (2017) notes how better educated and professionally advanced Romanians accept and justify dominant stereotypes for a particular sub-group of 'Romanian Others' whom her informants claimed to have

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[175] See Bulat (2017), Eade et al. (2007), Garapich (2005), Genova (2016b), Stoilkova (2006).

nothing in common with. Such intra-group class tensions are often narrowly interpreted by scholars as a migration phenomenon (see Bulat 2017, Genova 2016b). My analysis demonstrates how these are reflective of deeply-rooted class and cultural divisions within Bulgarian society. When 'Bulgarian Westerners' came to the UK they started claiming that instead of being able to realise their potential and gain the status and respect they believed they had been deprived of back home, their opportunities were spoilt by fellow Bulgarians. 'Ordinary people', on the other hand, who were treated according to a 'lower mode of valuation' (Saltynbaeva 2017) in Bulgaria, were relegated to an even more marginal status within British society and had to deal with the familiar class prejudice of their more-educated compatriots. As I have shown, this class conflict was intensified and at times escalated because of the confinement of these two groups within the immigrant community and their impossible integration into the host society.

Fake it till you make it – practicing 'self-realisation'

'Bulgarian Westerners'' migrations brought up different conflicts that impinged upon their class identities and perceptions. The downward mobility brought about by their low-skilled employment and their failed attempts to step out of the confines of the immigrant community resulted in dislocations they had trouble reconciling with. Their occupations and living arrangements in the UK were not only in complete opposition to the middle-class lifestyles and success they expected to yield but in many cases resulted in a standard of living worse than the one they had in Bulgaria. The 'status inconsistency' (Lenski 1954: 144) – 'a state affecting those whose status or rank in one domain is inconsistent with how they are perceived in another' (Olszewska 2013:8) –

that my informants experienced in the UK compounded the already experienced mismatch between subjective perceptions of class belonging and their objective recognition in Bulgarian society (see Chapter Three). In their efforts to deal with such ruptures, people did not only employ the above-discussed discursive and practical boundary building strategies, but also mobilised available resources to attain recognition of their professional qualifications or obtain new ones through short courses and trainings in local institutions. Very often, however, such endeavours did not bring expected professional advancement and resulted in more despair and disappointment.

One of the most common practices oriented towards recuperation of lost social status and temporary soothing of class dislocations that I encountered during my fieldwork consisted in the conscious concealment of unpleasant facts of migrant existence and positive self-portrayal through identification with desired or previously experienced roles and identities.

The story of Maria (forty two) is a good case in point. She left her retail business in Plovdiv, Bulgaria and came to London in search of a new beginning and better entrepreneurial opportunities. At her insistence, Maria and I usually met at the top floor café of a busy shopping centre close to her flat in east London. I would often find her sitting on a table in one of the quieter corners with a tablet, a notebook and a mobile phone carefully arranged on the table in front of her. She would always wear a set of white shirt and black pencil skirt and sip from her cappuccino while telling me about her busy week. It was in this 'office', as Maria called it, that she made phone calls, organised meetings and did planning for her journalist job in an online Bulgarian TV channel in London. She did reporting on all major

events taking place in the Bulgarian community and hosted her own weekly TV show from her small kitchen. Additionally, she worked as a sales representative for two British companies where her earnings depended on the number of successful door-to-door sales she could pull.

Figure 5. Maria and the president of Bulgaria on the event organised by the Bulgarian embassy in London, London 2015. Source: Maria

Our conversations always revolved around the different events she had attended, her encounters with Bulgarian politicians and artists, and the romantic country escapes that she undertook with her new British boyfriend. [176] Maria prided herself with the fact that, as opposed to many other Bulgarians who came to the UK to 'suffer' as cleaners and labourers, she had managed to almost instantaneously shift back into her familiar role of a businesswoman and even discover a new professional devotion. After

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[176] Although she didn't explicitly mention it, Maria was very proud of having a British boyfriend. Their regular weekend escapes to the countryside and dinners in fancy restaurants (photos of which she regularly published on Facebook) increased her symbolic capital. It did not, however, improve her access to the British labour market and she kept concealing her actual full-time occupation from her boyfriend.

meeting several of her colleagues from the TV channel, however, I found out that the main 'business' Maria derived her income from was much less glamorous. It turned out all those working in the Bulgarian TV did so on a voluntary basis; in fact, they often had to subsidise their travel expenses and technical equipment. Maria, like her other female colleagues, was a self-employed cleaner for a Bulgarian company during the week and a waitress in a popular Bulgarian pub during the weekends.

Very similar coping strategies were used by Steve, who enrolled in a Master's degree in filmmaking. Throughout his studies and after graduating, Steve was doing small pieces of reporting that were sporadically broadcast on a Bulgarian television channel. Additionally, he was working on a few documentary projects that he published on his YouTube channel, a music video clip of a Bulgarian pop singer and a short video ad for a Turkish café. Like Maria, he was also present at most Bulgarian events taking place in London. Although he often emphasised how happy he was with his experience at Kingston University, it looked as if the benefits he expected to derive from it did not quite materialise. He would dismiss my observation by saying that although he was one of Michael Kennedy's favourite students the competition in the field was so strong that he could not do much to help him. Moreover, Steve always emphasised that he would anyways prefer to 'pave his own path to success'. In fact, he claimed, he already felt successful because he was in the best place in the world for getting ahead with his career. All my attempts at finding out more about the financial parameters of his existence were delicately diverted. Eventually, on one occasion later on in my fieldwork, after I noticed his dyed fingers, he admitted he made a living as a handyman in a printing company but dismissed any of my further inquiries on the topic.

Figure 6. Steve's professional profile description on his website. Source: Steve's website.

'Bulgarian Westerners' were even more reluctant than 'ordinary' migrants to talk about their disappointed aspirations. Moreover, as these two stories show, they were often ready to conceal facts that posed a contradiction to their self-assigned 'middle-class' status and to re-invent other personas and identities that were in line with their idealised visions of success. By constructing alternative narratives of their occupations and experiences, my informants were able to save face in front of friends and family back home, but also acquaintances in the UK, and frequently myself. They derived their status entirely from their hobbies and side activities which allowed them to maintain a positive self-image and future outlook.[177]

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[177]The contradiction and hypocrisy of Westerners' self-portrayal was made even more obvious when compared to their accusations against their 'ordinary' compatriots who were often said to be 'living in a lie'. Dismissal of other people's struggles and success appears to be a compensatory mechanism for Bulgarian Westerners' own lack of success and inability to attain the life they had imagined for themselves.

Conclusion

This chapter explored the experiences of my informants once they made their way to the UK by providing a longitudinal depiction of their new lives there. The first days and weeks shocked the newly arrived and presented them with obstacles which they had not anticipated. I have shown how the procuring of basic documents was hampered by 'hidden' bureaucratic mechanisms which delayed or made impossible the legalisation of my informants' status on the labour market. Structural violence and discrimination pushed many into a state of *de facto* illegality and employment in the shadow economy. British and Bulgarian employers and gang leaders tricked new migrants into exploitative cash-in-hand jobs in construction, cleaning and car washing, which often paid too little to cover basic subsistence costs. Their exclusion from the formal structures and institutions of the host society made them dependent on the services and resources provided by established co-immigrants. A place of antagonism, competition and ruthless exploitation, the immigrant community was also a safe haven where cooperation, assistance and solidarity between migrants took place. I have argued that immigrants' reliance on each other has engendered a symbiotic dependence that was difficult to terminate even beyond this early period of migration.

The end of the first six months did not bring the positive change that migrants anticipated. Their marginalisation to the bottom layer of the host society increased a feeling of existence parallel to the mainstream, the meaningful contact points with which were few and far between. 'Ordinary people's' lack of English language proficiency and economic capital disabled their transition into more stable and better-paid jobs. Their anxiety-filled and alienating existence revolved around their efforts to find and keep employment. This brought fear and insecurity of an extent surpassing

what they had experienced back home. Thanks to their language skills and professional qualifications, 'Bulgarian Westerners' were able to capitalise on opportunities for advancement within the Bulgarian immigrant economy in the mid-term of their migration experience. The white-collar employment they obtained, however, was not evaluated as a genuine success; on the contrary, it was believed to further entrench their association with compatriots they had little respect for. Working and living with Bulgarians was not what my informants came for – it was their desire to escape 'Bulgarian realities' and fully immerse themselves into a 'genuinely Western' society that propelled their moves. Such integration, however, was difficult to achieve, as their qualifications and work experience were not recognised in the formal labour market.

At the end of their self-defined mid-term migration trajectories, none of my informants managed to succeed in their quest for a better and more fulfilling life as projected in their 'normality' and 'American dream' visions of the West. They devised discursive and material practices that helped them cope with the disillusionment that migration brought and gave them strength to continue their search for an idealised Western future. The next chapter demonstrates how in their long-term strategies migrants sustained a positive future outlook and continued to hope for the realisation of their long-term settlement aspirations in ways that reproduced an idealised and deceitful West.

Chapter Six

'In Any Case, There Is Hope': The Persistence and Reproduction of the 'Imaginary West'

One day I received a phone call from Eleonora – with a quivering voice, she explained how that morning on her way to work, as she was exiting the underground, she was followed by two young black British who started insulting and laughing at her for no reason. At some point, they began throwing empty sandwich boxes and plastic bottles at her. With none of the passers-by coming to her support she started running till she made sure there was no trace of the two offenders. 'It is so humiliating, Polina. Why would they do this to me? I haven't done anything wrong; I was just going to work as usual. I cannot stand it anymore, my family and I have to endure humiliation and stress on a daily basis, and what for? What is the purpose of us even being here?' A few months later, on our last meeting in London, Eleonora demonstrated high spirits and, although she still referred to her migrant life as a 'really though one', she was able to see a future for her family and herself in the UK. She reflected on her situation with a wanly smile: 'Life is a canvas painted by our hopes and whipped out by reality. However, if we never lose our hope we will always have a colourful painting in front of us.'

Eleonora and her husband were among the few who continued to believe that despite different setbacks, they were on the right path for realising their dreams of 'normal' existence. A year after her husband's arrival, Eleonora's mother passed away and they were forced to bring their fourteen-year-old son to the UK, even though they still lacked the financial means to cover the related expenses. The coming together of the whole

family was a happy moment but also one of great hardship. For a long time, her son had to live in conditions which Eleonora defined as 'unsuitable for children' – the three were constantly on the move from one overcrowded 'immigrant' accommodation to another in the effort to find better value for money. Despite all this and the fact that Eleonora and her husband were still labouring on jobs that had little relevance to their qualifications, she claimed that their life was 'very messed up', but in a 'positive way'. Starting their own furniture restoration business – their pre-migration plan, still appeared feasible in their eyes. 'Good things happen to those who wait', concluded Eleonora, and assured me that in Britain the patience of those who take 'one step at a time' is always rewarded.

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In the previous chapters I have explained that, regardless of their class-based identities and backgrounds, my informants related their migration to the UK to the desire for existential advancement in a hierarchically structured order of nations. They considered the UK as standing at the top of this imaginary ranking. The country was seen as highly desirable migration destination because it was the closest approximation to an idealised West. Accordingly, I have argued that future migrants' motivations were significantly influenced by their search for the 'imaginary West' – a benchmark of western modernity and development – that took on different variations reflecting migrants' respective perceptions of class belonging. Soon after they made their way to the UK, my informants were rushed into a reality that was drastically incompatible with their pre-conceived dreams and aspirations. However, as explained, their shock and disillusionment did not result in immediate return, nor did it lead to acknowledgment of the illusionary nature of their imaginings and expectations.

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In this chapter, I will present the different future orientation strategies through which my informants hoped to overcome a new state of *international stuckedness* that migration has positioned them into. I demonstrate how the different trajectories migrants conceived as meaningful were all inspired by a sustained desire to pursue and realise the 'imaginary West'. I turn back to this central concept of my research and reflect on its teleological nature – a characteristic that became fully apparent only in the post-migratory negotiations of future possibilities. I further substantiate the argument about the significance of the 'imaginary West' in explaining the paradoxical persistence of Bulgarian migration to the UK by revealing the reproduction of the West in a 'cycle of deception' (Mahler 1995: 88).

By tracing how migrants' lives developed after the completion of my fieldwork I provide a closure to some of the personal stories told in this thesis. The period depicted here concerns the second year after their initial arrival in the UK. Restricting the regular contact with people who had by that time become my friends seemed impossible. As the ethnographic examples in this thesis have demonstrated, migrants' lives are often imbued by isolation and heartache. In our efforts to alleviate such feelings, both my informants and I insisted on talking to each other as often as we did before. And while with time some people disappeared from my radar, my connection with others became more personal and they accepted me as part of their families. In this sense, leaving the field proved to be harder than entering it, but staying in touch also allowed me to gather more data and indicate how some informants' lives developed after the formal end of my fieldwork.

The chapter returns to elaborate on the following questions: Where are my informants now?[178] How do they evaluate their present lives (the future that they hoped for) in respect to the goals they had set for themselves prior to their migrations? How do they imagine the future from now on?

In the first part of this chapter I outline a condition I call 'international stuckedness', which most accurately describes the condition of my informants. I see this state as resulting from the structural limitations inhibiting migrants' successful integration into British society and the virtual impossibility of return. The second part of the chapter is dedicated to the different future-oriented scenarios that migrants devised in an effort to overcome this unexpected stagnation, and which often stood in contradiction to their pre-migratory plans for long-term settlement. Finally, I explain the persistence with which my informants held on their dreams with the positive function that these served in alleviating inner conflicts, external hardship and, most importantly, sustaining an optimistic outlook.

Internationally stuck

Through migration, my informants had expected to gain access to an imaginary Western world which would offer possibilities to attain a way of life which was always desired but never attainable in Bulgaria. The previous chapter gave an insight of how the dreams and aspirations at the heart of the migration projects were crushed by unforeseen negative experiences. While Bulgarians readily confirmed the existence of ample possibilities in the UK, the structural obstacles posed by 'hidden immigration

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[178] This 'now' coincides with the time after the end of their first year in the UK.

controls' and an exploitative labour market, together with different forms of discrimination, kept them from seizing upon any of these. Therefore, instead of bringing them closer to the fulfilment of their dreams of meaningful movement forward, migration positioned them in an existential stalemate that was even more painful and disempowering than the one they had struggled with in Bulgaria. This state, which can be suitably denoted as 'international stuckedness' (cf. Hage 2005), impacted the lives of all my informants, albeit in different ways and to varying degrees. The return to a familiar, yet unexpected, feeling of stagnation that often took on a new depth was first of all a result of the drastic mismatch between my informants' anticipations of idealised Western futures and the actually available opportunities they encountered. At the same time, the realisation that even the UK could be a place where one could get stuck, in some cases in degrees far exceeding prior experiences of existential immobilisation, was prompted by my informants' lack of time, social isolation, and limited physical mobility and opportunities for recreation.

Time became a precious resource migrants struggled to procure in the face of uncomfortable trade-offs: more opportunities for interaction with family and friends often required time off work, which in turn reduced earnings and incurred the risk of losing one's job. Not having enough time to sleep, rest, eat, think, and enjoy – which had never been an issue in Bulgaria – created a feeling of lack of mastery over the pace and direction their lives were taking.

The lack of time was one of the reasons leading to oft-reported feelings of social isolation. My informants, especially those who made the journey on their own, were caught off guard by loneliness and alienation. They admitted to having underestimated their ability to cope with even short-term separation from their loved ones. Online

interaction often did not have the power to mitigate such emotional deficiencies and instead increased feelings of helplessness and vulnerability. For example, Miro had a hard time Skyping with his six-year-old daughter who could not stop crying and blaming him for leaving her behind: 'It is so hard, when I hear her asking "Daddy, who will take me to school now that you are not here?", my heart sinks. What to answer? She cannot understand why I am doing this. Who knows, maybe she is right and I should go back home.' The importance of maintaining social and kin networks for the physical and psychological wellbeing of migrants is reflective of the distrust and suspicion prevailing in the immigrant community, as well as of the cultural and physical displacement of Bulgarian migrants to the fringes of society. It also became obvious that restricted daily sociability and lack of trustful relationships made my informants share their lives with me more readily, something that had proven a challenge in my earlier fieldwork in Bulgaria.

Unfamiliar surroundings and unfriendly faces limited the physical movement of Bulgarians to the bounds of their own homes and neighbourhoods. I have explained how in some cases this was a voluntary seclusion induced by anxiety and feelings of inferiority. In other instances, however, migrants' spatially constrained existence was a clear result of economic limitations, the organisation of British urban life and the lack of familiarity with leisure opportunities in a country that remained still largely unknown to them. Those who commuted by car were stunned to find out that keeping a vehicle in the UK was a privilege that only people with stable and well-paid employment could afford. The cost of public transportation was found to be off-putting, especially when compared to Bulgarian fares. As Tanya once told me, London could feel like a prison without escape:

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Having to do without a car is not easy. In Bulgaria, each weekend you can jump in your car and go to the countryside, no problem. Here, even when you manage to find a day off you must spend it in the city, most probably not further than the local park.

By contrast, those living outside London complained that they felt like in the 'middle of nowhere', stuck in provincial localities that did not offer any pastime entertainment. In truth, however, there existed plentiful opportunities for leisure, entertainment, and consumption and all my informants were obviously aware of this. Those I spoke to always mentioned how in the UK 'there was anything one could think of', and how 'British just had it all – bars, cafes, shopping malls' all of a size and quality that 'Bulgarians could only dream of'. This was communicated most unequivocally to me by a Bulgarian stranger I met in a busy shopping mall in east London. Miro and I were in one of the seating areas on an early Sunday evening, contemplating the recent upheavals in his work and his growing desire to go back to Bulgaria, when he spotted a familiar face on the other side of the sofa. It was a young Bulgarian man with whom Miro had worked for a short while and who was currently employed as a carpet cleaner. Taken by his own doubts and disillusionments, Miro immediately asked the guy if he enjoyed living in London. 'Yes, of course', he replied 'Who doesn't?' Evidently annoyed by this answer, Miro continued: 'And what is it that you so much enjoy?' The guy shrugged his shoulders and gestured to the surroundings: 'All of this! What more can one wish for?'

Most of my informants, however, claimed that observing was not like participating and that, while a paradise for those with enough cash, for those without it, the city could easily turn into a nightmare. Gloria described this state of being as living under a 'glass

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lid' (*pohlupak*): 'On my way to school I look at the people dining in chic street restaurants, they are laughing, they look so happy and content. I am wondering: How can they be so happy, what is there to be happy about?' She added that for many of her fellow students London, was like a 'sea of pleasures' and they took every opportunity to explore its dynamic art scene, night life and multiple other perks. For her, as for many others, regular glimpses of sparkle and abundance they were precluded from enjoying provided a new scale for measuring their own marginality and privation.

If the lives led in the UK continued experiences of existential impasse and in some cases even augmented them, the logical question arises: Why did migrants not return to Bulgaria? The prospect of returning to Bulgaria became particularly salient in moments of extreme hardship and in light of the drastic gap between imagined opportunities and what was realistically achievable in the UK. Moving back to Bulgaria, however, was rarely seen as a real alternative. Memories of their lives back home were still too fresh not to be taken into account and migrants feared that if they were to return they would have to encounter the same limitations that had initiated their journeys. Bulgaria continued to be imagined as a place where it was impossible to earn a 'normal' living or achieve professional realisation and success. Every time I met him, Miro, for instance, told me that he carried his plane ticket back to Bulgaria in his pocket. On several occasions, he admitted to regretting leaving his family behind and coming to the UK. He was unhappy with his achievements and with his 'weakness' for not being able to 'brace himself' and 'endure' better the frustration and suffering. He would often call me in late evenings when feeling particularly despaired and ask me if going back home was the right thing to do. This question never left him at peace and he was

constantly asking advice from other Bulgarians he met. Some encouraged him to go back with the arguments that 'there is no place like home' and 'being with one's family is the only thing that matters'; others tried to stop him, pleading that all returnees eventually regret their decisions after realising that in Bulgaria 'everything is as it used to be'.

At some point in their 'migrant careers', upon re-assessing pre-migratory expectations against opportunities on offer, my informants' started to re-consider their migratory projects and initial visions of permanent settlement. For almost all of them migration became conceptualised as a temporary endeavor for reaching certain tangible goals or fulfilling moral responsibilities towards family members in the UK and in Bulgaria. Half a year after their arrival, Krassi and Boncho, for example, assured me they would stay in the UK until their sons completed their education and took on their own path. Others announced plans of staying no more than ten years as this was the minimum period required for obtaining a British state pension. Assen concluded that he would not go back before repaying his travel debt and maybe saving some extra pounds in order to eventually start a business in Bulgaria. Whether such re-configured strategies reflected realistic future developments or were used by migrants for opening up avenues for reconciling and coming to terms with their predicament is hard to judge. In articulating their visions, however, they all constructed Bulgaria as a place to which return was possible only after some financial security or other important achievement was realised. In this sense, Bulgaria was mostly seen as offering a slow-paced life and a space for rest, consumption, and enjoyment and not as a place where dreams came true or any grand accomplishments could be achieved.

Return, even when seriously contemplated and desired, was often impossible for a number of other reasons which migrants found hard to resolve. These included the fear and shame of being seen as a failure, the burden of incurred debts and the financial and moral promises made to family members. Even though by going back home migrants could have resolved a great deal of their present hardship, return was not preferred as it was taken as a move backwards. Their ability to sustain themselves for a long period of time in the UK was taken as a proof of their stamina and perseverance. This thinking was rooted in visions of a hierarchically structured world in which one's movement to a country of a higher order, no matter how unsuccessful, still denoted a sense of upward mobility; if not for migrants themselves, then at least in th eyes of external observers. This conviction was often conveyed to me with the saying: 'better to suffer in the UK than back in Bulgaria' (*po-dobre da se machish v Anglia otkolkoto v Bulgaria*).

In this sense, my informants found themselves in a position of *international stuckedness* within a hierarchy of places, unable to seize any meaningful opportunities for existential advancement in the UK and at the same time unwilling to incur regress by going back home. Rigid interrelations between individuals, countries, and national belonging made existential movement forward through physical mobility across national borders largely impossible. Migration led to the realisation that departure from a place of low ranking and physical presence in a place of top standing could not eradicate the inferiority that one carried by virtue of one's nationality. Regardless of their individual qualities, skills and experience, migrants were allocated to a certain standing in the host society that corresponded to their belonging to a certain country in the hierarchical world order. Through their experiences in the UK, they learnt that

one's national belonging determined one's position within an existent country-specific hierarchy of nations[179]. They started believing that their perseverance and struggle to escape prejudice and prove their worth would never serve to transcend the disadvantaged status that Bulgaria held in the local and international order of nations.

To paraphrase Henrink Vigh's (2009:105) conclusion with regards to the failed hopes of west African migrants in Europe, once in the UK, my informants reached the 'realisation that they do not just come from a disadvantaged place but belong to a disadvantaged nation'.[180] Thus, the existential advancement through the crossing of international borders between places of different rank remained impossible for my informants. On the contrary, this movement brought about an even more acute sense of entrenchment in their social and existential immobility. This finding, questions the salience of transnational approaches to international mobility which often focus on the way in which unrestricted flows of people successfully navigate their paths within an interconnected globe. In contrast, the examples presented here draw the picture of a fixed global hierarchy in which 'places have their place' (Ferguson 2006) and the place one assumes is determined by one's nationality and country of origin. My findings suggest that 'methodological nationalism' and national belonging continue to dominate the way in which people construct their perceptions of others and the social worlds which they inhabit. My informants' experiences in the UK demonstrate how nationality also has the power of determining how far one gets with regards to one's dreams and ambitions and one's chances for obtaining a membership in a first-class order of

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[179] Erind Pajo has called this 'domestic hierarchy of places' (2007: 277)

[180] In his words 'race' instead of a 'nation'. The understanding that they come from a disadvantaged nation was cast in yet stronger relief by their observation that people from what they considered inferior racial and ethnic belonging fared better in the British labour market and society as a whole.

nations (Ferguson 2006). Assen captured this existential impasse when in a time of great despair, he said to me: 'We Bulgarians are wanted nowhere, neither here nor in our own country, where should we go then?' In turn, I examine the ways in which my informants tried to deal with this stuckedness and the paths their migration projects took in the long run.

Future scenarios and long-term experiences of migration

This section presents the four most common future scenarios that my informants developed in an attempt to mitigate the state of international stuckedness. It also offers a glimpse of how their lives were developing in the long run and what happened to the imaginaries that had drawn them to the UK. Class remained an important aspect of migrant's self-representations, either in the form of self-ascribed identity, objectively allocated position or as a result of newly-gained (or lost) material and symbolic attributions. While such dependencies will be articulated where important, I chose not to differentiate their experiences according to this variable as the main goal is to elucidate the different patterns that migration took and the way in which visions of life in the West persisted despite their apparently illusionary nature.

Staying against the odds

As I already made clear, the majority of my informants chose to stay in the UK despite their dissatisfaction with their present achievements, either because they were able to imagine the opening up of future possibilities for advancement or as an outcome of the deadlock they were caught up in. Many continued to endure the hardships and constant insecurities of life in the name of their children's future wellbeing. After being

in the UK for little more than two years, Krassi and Boncho still lived in their rented three-bedroom house – their new 'British home' – in the outskirts of Birmingham. The family of four depended mostly on the salary of Boncho, who had secured contracted employment as a night shift delivery driver with a British transport company, and that of the older son Dani, who worked for a local staffing agency. After working for a year as agency staff herself and suffering what she described as 'constant humiliation and harassment' by employers and supervisors, Krassi decided to take a break and invest time and money into improving her English. She believed this to be her only chance of finding 'decent' employment in a British company. Although she had made good progress and even managed to help other Bulgarians with document translations, she was still very anxious when communicating in English. Every time we met she would express her frustration with her inability to finally let go of her inhibitions and start 'speaking like a normal person'. She would jokingly add that it seemed more likely for the British around her to start speaking Bulgarian than for her to ever master English.

Krassi and Boncho agreed that the UK was not where they wanted to be in the long run and they eagerly used each chance to go back to Bulgaria and spend time with their friends and relatives. Despite being confident that they would never be able to get used to British habits, people and culture, their stay in the UK was necessitated by their parental obligations towards their two sons. They believed that by bringing their children to the UK they had provided them with an opportunity to follow their ambitions and shape significantly different lives than the ones available back home. 'We do everything for our children, we live for them, we would give anything so that they have it better than us.' These were the words with which Krassi often explained her staying in the UK despite her strong urge to 'ditch it all and dash off to Bulgaria'.

With such hopes in mind, they encouraged their sons to pursue their desired careers and, despite their modest income, spared no resources in ensuring that they received the right education and qualifications. Their youngest – Slavi dreamt of becoming a commercial pilot, a prospect that Krassi and Boncho found very appealing for the prestige and economic security such job brought. Dani, who was already twenty-one and held no ambitions for pursuing a degree, was encouraged by his parents to develop his hobby and train to be a fitness instructor. Krassi would often seek my help and advice when searching for the colleges, university programs and training courses that would best suit her sons' ambitions. In my conversations with the two boys it became clear that they did not quite share the enthusiasm of their parents and had serious doubts they could realise the expectations directed at them. This is not to say that they did not have their future aspirations; they were simply not confident that the UK would give them the chance of living the lives their parents envisioned for them.

Krassi and Boncho were clearly disappointed with many aspects of their migrant lives. They were certain that they would not be able to reach the kind of 'normality' they had hoped for when first coming to the country. The economic security, professional realisation and dignified living they envisioned for their children, however, indicated their sustained belief in the possibility for ensuring a 'normal' life for their sons. It appears that they tried to compensate their own frustration by transferring the dream of 'normality' to their children.

The paths of Lora and Emil, the mother and son who managed to reunite in south London after years of separation had parted again after Emil's decision to move in with friends at the end of their second year living together. After obtaining several certificates, Emil had managed to advance to the position of forklift driver in the same

company he started working in after his arrival. He was happy with the lifestyle he was able to afford and with finally managing to surround himself with good friends. Lora, still toiling as a babysitter and cleaner, was deeply hurt by her son's move, although she understood his motives. She said to me she would stay in London up until she was fully confident that Emil was able to stand on his two feet and did not require her emotional and financial support. While realistic about her own restricted chances of ever getting out of low-skilled employment, Lora continued to claim that London was a place offering unlimited opportunities for growth and advancement to all willing to invest the required efforts. She hoped that one day she would see Emil enjoying the life she was no longer expecting for herself.

The best of both worlds

For others, the future was associated with regular mobility between Britain and Bulgaria. For Steve and other 'Bulgarian Westerners', turning mobility into a way of life expressed a cosmopolitan mind-set and an opportunity to devise a dynamic existence of their own choosing. After being in London for little more than two years, Steve was still working hard on short films, documentaries and other projects related to his filmmaking career aspirations. Such pursuits served to build up his portfolio and promote his work but were unable to secure him a living. This meant that he could not afford letting go of his low-skilled full-time employment. With the passing of time, sustaining the identity of a successful professional in front of friends and acquaintances in Britain and Bulgaria became harder, especially given his limited financial resources. Surprisingly, Steve started claiming that he had never held intentions to stay long in

the UK and had only come to draw on the 'positive sides' that the country had to offer, and to later make use of them in Bulgaria.

I noticed that at some point of their migration journeys, after realising the infeasibility of their 'American dream' aspirations for success and recognition, my self-appointed 'middle-class' informants started reiterating a popular discourse related to the historical migration of Bulgarian intelligentsia to western Europe. They started seeing themselves as continuers of the missionary deeds of nineteenth century Bulgarian revivalists (*vazrozhdentsi*), whose patriotic mission of unifying and consolidating the Bulgarian people in their liberation struggles against the Ottoman empire involved the promotion of Enlightenment ideas 'as a path to self-awareness' (Daskalov 1998). This is how they explained their desire to build up a transnational existence between East and West. Their return, they claimed, was necessitated by their patriotic calling for 'ennobling' the nation by promoting 'completely different visions' of how to make business, how to think about the economy, how to build a healthcare system, and most of all how to adopt a different 'mentality'.

Steve knew that he could use his stay in the UK for enhancing his professional status back home by telling about his prestigious education, his filmmaking experience, and his international networks. This way, he managed to not only get back his old job at the TV channel but also secured an instant promotion and a much better pay. By successfully exploiting his western capital and his real or invented achievements in the UK, Steve managed to land prestigious employment and avoid the stigmatisation of his return as a 'failure'. Sustaining such a cosmopolitan identity in the long run, however, required the maintenance of regular contacts with the West, indicated in Steve's statement that he could never imagine himself not coming back to western

Europe and not collaborating with his London contacts, either by working for them in the UK or inviting them to Bulgaria for projects. This back-and-forth mobility sustained a transnational existence and served as a constant confirmation of his Westernness and international success.

When under migrants' control, mobility can become a permanent strategy and be empowering (Conradson and Latham 2005). For 'Bulgarian Westerners', it meant a possibility for negotiating class dislocations through the conversion of western cultural and social capital into symbolic and economic capital back home. 'Ordinary people', however, many of whom were forced into intense back and forth movement, came to experience it as a compromise and as entrenching their feelings of precariousness (Standing 2011: 14). Since he first came to the UK in the summer of 2014 as a temporary worker for a Bulgarian subcontractor, Blagovest made several attempts to settle in London and start working towards a British 'normality' of life. Friends and long-term migrants on whom he relied for help let him down, and after a few weeks of drifting between odd jobs he returned back to Bulgaria. In the next two years, Blagovest's time was split between the UK where he continued to work for different subcontractors on badly paid labour-intensive jobs and Bulgaria, where he spent time recovering and securing his next employment. Each time, he left with the hope of 'getting on his feet' and upon each return he had to face the uncomfortable questions from friends and neighbours. Engaging in conspicuous consumption as a practice of enhancing one's status and escaping the stigma of 'failure' has been reported as common amongst returnees[181]. In Blagovest's case, however, the constant insecurity he had to struggle

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[181] See Marcus (2011), King (2000).

with and his ambition for permanent settlement forced him to make savings and hence limit himself to a thrifty existence both at home and abroad. Similar to Blagovest, the other involuntary 'circular' migrants amongst my informants continued to pursue their Western imaginary of creating a 'normal' life for themselves and their families.

The West is elsewhere

The disappointment with not being able to realise their pre-migratory aspirations made some conclude that the UK was in fact not the Western destination providing the best opportunities for the fulfillment of migrants' dreams. In the same way in which they constructed their initial vision of the UK as the West, my informants constantly, throughout their migration journeys, picked up on different rumours and impressions circulating within the immigrant community in projecting the West further afield. This is how other – 'more advanced', 'better organised', and 'more open' countries came to represent the 'real West' in their visions. For instance, Tanya's growing embitterment with her unsuccessful attempts to start working for a British company made her conclude that British society was quite racist and that, similar to Bulgaria, 'good' jobs were only available to those with 'strong connections'. She started imagining herself in countries with 'actually functioning' meritocracy. On our last meeting, she was talking about the United States and Australia as desirable destinations for further migration. She imagined the US as the place where the creative people would usually go and claimed that there, highly profitable occupations existed not to be found anywhere else. Australia, on the other hand, besides having the perfect climate was also believed to be a place with the highest demand for highly-skilled international professionals. As a proof, Katya pointed to the fact that the 'British themselves' often admitted that life in

Australia was much more fulfilling that the one in the UK. To her, the fact that the biggest British diaspora was living in Australia was not a coincidence. To my surprise, only a couple of months after this last meeting I got a message announcing that Katya and her Bulgarian boyfriend had left London for good and were now touring the east coast of the US. Their plan was to first gather impressions of life in different states before deciding on where to settle. In any case, she reassured me, they both felt much happier than before and had not missed London, at all.

Others, especially among my young informants, entertained imaginaries of the 'good life' to be found in New Zealand, Canada, or Italy. Several of those looking for a 'normal' life expressed regrets that they had not migrated to Germany or France, where their friends had managed to advance much faster on their migrant journeys. Nikolay, who left to work in a retirement home in the West Midlands when I first met him, grew tired of the humiliation that was part and parcel of his daily life as a care assistant. Not able to get his nursing qualification recognised he had spent two years changing different employers to no avail: everywhere he went he experienced 'slave-like conditions'. East Europeans, he claimed, were treated unfairly especially in comparison to other migrants – low wages, little respect and constant exploitation made their lives impossible to bear. For Nikolay, the problem lay in the British people's 'mentality': as opposed to Bulgarians, they were a 'cold nation' whose imperial past still made them 'look down' at foreigners. Spanish had a 'mentality much closer to the Bulgarian one' – they were warm and welcoming, he thought and asserted that he was ready to 'do wonders' to make a living there. He defined Spain as the 'real country' where one could 'enjoy every second of one's life', mostly because of the relaxed way of life, the good climate and the warmth of the people. For the time being, however, he

realised he had to stay in the UK for as long as it took Spain to overcome its economic collapse and become a viable migration option.

Many of those who for one reason or another remained in London started to see the city as the main impediment on their quest for 'normality'; much in contrast to their pre-migratory idealisations. London was said to be different from all other places in the UK – a 'universe of its own' that did not represent the country as a whole.[182] 'London is not England', they would often say and start imagining, often in extremely racialised way, what their future could look like outside the capital. If they managed to move out of London, my informants believed they could gain the chance of completely changing their predicament. Like many other Bulgarians, Georgi was initially confident that London was the place offering the best employment opportunities and hence the quickest path to settling down. After visiting friends in northern England who had migrated around the same time as him, he remarked on how much better their overall quality of life was compared to his:[183]

> It was so beautiful and clean there, I only saw two blacks (*dvama cherni*). I am also not British but when you live with other nations, like in London, they pollute, throw trach on the street. I don't like this. The British live in trust and cooperation – you feel like you live in a community.

One and a half years after his initial arrival, he decided to make a new start in Southend-On-Sea – a small seaside town next to London. When I last visited him there,

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[182] They often complained of their inability to save up any money, of not having enough time to spend with family and friends, and of having to live in destitute areas of the city where one couldn't spot a single 'white person'.

[183] Here, we see again the racialised imaginary of the West.

he was still adjusting to his new job as a self-employed multi-drop delivery driver and to his new house share. Thus, the West was not only re-projected into different countries across the globe, but migrants also developed more nuanced pictures of life in the UK and the regional differences in ethnic and racial composition, employment opportunities and living conditions.

Returning home

Very few of my informants chose to return to Bulgaria. One of them was Miro who terminated his 'immigrant career' only six months after he first came to the UK. He was content with the progress he had achieved for half a year, but also disappointed with himself for not finding the inner strength to resist the desire to return. The biggest problem for him was that his wife and daughter had no desire for joining him in the UK and he could not bear the prospect of living away from them any longer. Before leaving, he told me that his only regret was that he did not try hard enough to find his way in the British car parts trade. He asked me to accompany him to a meeting he had organised with some former British business partners whose company was in Lancashire. On the long drive there, he explained that if they accepted his idea for a car parts trade between the UK and the Balkan region he would have the chance to start running a successful business that he could manage from Bulgaria. This was his chance of making a living in Bulgaria and at the same time ensuring regular trips to the UK that would sustain his connection to the country and break the routine of a fully sedentary lifestyle. After brief consideration, the company rejected his business proposal because of the ongoing stagnation on the east European market. After his return, Miro started developing a small-scale manufacturing business in his hometown.

He managed to repair the relationship with his wife and they claimed to be happy and content with their life. Although he did not regret his return, he still had the feeling that his life in Bulgaria was boring in comparison to the life he could have had if he had stayed in London. He was confident that by now, he would have 'made it' there. Despite not having any concrete migration plans, he started taking lessons to improve his English and did not exclude the possibility of trying his luck again – this time armed with better language skills and accumulated 'migrant knowhow'.

After spending two years as a circular migrant, Assen decided to start a cleaning business in Bulgaria so that he could be with his wife and small daughter. This decision provoked th discontent of his wife and parents who still hoped that the family could one day settle in the UK and have the dream life of many successful Bulgarian migrants. His business was slowly picking up, but Assen was still contemplating trying his luck again in the UK. He would occasionally call me on the phone to tell that he came across a promising job offer and he was unsure if to take on it or not.

In the course of their migrations many of my informants started softening their highly critical evaluations of life in Bulgaria. A few even suggested that Bulgaria held some latent opportunities waiting to be seized by entrepreneurial and ambitious returnees. Such newly found appreciation of the homeland, which cast Bulgaria as an 'almost West' was a discursive framing adopted mostly by return migrants who used it as a way for compensating the prejudice that awaited them and as a self-persuasion strategy to alleviate doubt.

The West as telos

The main version of the 'elsewhere of late Socialism', as Alexey Yurchak calls the 'imaginary West', developed and persisted in Soviet people's imagination for as long as the 'real' West remained unreachable (2006). When the borders dividing the Socialist bloc from the West became more permeable and people gained the opportunity to see for themselves the world they so longed for, they were shocked by how different the 'real' West was from the 'imagined'. For Yurchak's informants, this first encounter led to the immediate collapse of the imaginary construct and the painful realization that, as their Soviet past, the alternative reality that the 'imaginary West' allowed for was forever gone (2006: 202). For my informants, as for many other Bulgarians, however, the illusionary dreams about the West continued to persist long after mass-scale travel to western Europe became available in the early 1990s and, more importantly, despite the fact that the aspirations and expectations of migrants have not materialised. As I have shown, the collision between expectations and reality which my informants suffered shortly upon arrival was hard to bear. When compared to their post-migratory experiences, the visions of the Western future that brought them to the UK seemed at best idealistic and at worst naïve. Throughout my fieldwork, however, almost none of my informants openly acknowledged this fallacy. Neither did I hear them saying that had they known better what they were to find, they would have never chosen to migrate. Even when lamenting the myriad calamities that they had been through and denouncing the UK for its hostile welcome, they rarely regretted their journeys and they never admitted that the 'imaginary West' had eluded them.

In fact, as these final glimpses into migrants' lives demonstrate, instead of being debunked, the Western dream continued to live on in imaginations of a better future.

The majority of my informants decided to stay in the UK either because they found return undesirable for a variety of reasons or because they experienced certain aspects of their present as more rewarding than what was before. In either case, they retained the belief that through determination and perseverance they could overcome the adversities and pave a way to the West either for themselves or their children. Others strove to shape a transnational existence between Britain and Bulgaria and reap the benefits that each of these places could offer. By maintaining a close connection with the UK, they enhanced their socio-economic position and symbolic status in Bulgarian society and experienced themselves as one step closer to the West. The ones caught up in a pattern of a circular mobility continuously confronted the insecurities of life that had slipped outside their control amidst their attempts to eventually establish themselves in the UK and realise their Western dream. Disenchanted with what the UK had to offer, others admitted having unrightfully identified the country as the ultimate embodiment of the West. By shifting the geographical coordinates of their imaginary, they demonstrated readiness to further pursue their dreams by embarking on journeys to destinations which could offer a more genuine Western experience.

Finally, it appeared as the few who decided to take the risk and return home – in most cases empty-handed – were the ones who at least implicitly recognised the elusiveness of the 'imaginary West'. In their evaluations of their immigrant careers and reflections on their uncertain new beginnings, however, they continued to nourish this imaginary by either keeping the option of future westwards mobility open, or by constructing Bulgaria as a 'possible West'.

The positive assurance with which my informants continued to sustain the desire for and possibility of a Western life can be explained with the proofs of its existence gathered from observing the lives of the locals. The West was glimpsed in the comfortable lives of their employers and their beautiful houses; it was in the lighthearted banter coming from the populated central cafes and chic restaurants and in the corporate demeanor of the men and women rushing their way through the morning city jungle. In migrants' accounts, the UK was indeed invoked as a 'different universe' – its economy was superior, it allowed a 'decent' standard of living for the majority, it had a better welfare system, and it was a lawful and orderly society that protected its citizens. All those benefits, which in the eyes of my informants clearly denoted a Western type of society, nevertheless, remained largely inaccessible to them because of their discernable accents, non-Western education, or their foreign appearance. Their marginalised existence at the brink of society and their precluded integration into the 'real' UK, they believed, was conferred to them by virtue of their inferior nationality. The West that my informants dreamt of experiencing turned out to be not as inclusive as they had imagined. Their encounter with this 'impossible West' left them with a bittersweet taste – it did not deliver the reality it promised, but it perpetuated their longing.

In his study of Romanian migrants' aspirations and practices, Todd Hartman refers to the 'Europe' that his informants long to discover as 'utopian object of impossible fullness' (Hartman 2007: 187 quoting Zizek 1999: 206). As in the case of my own informants, Hartman's subjects imagined that they could attain a particular, yet undefined 'normality' through migration to western European countries and through (re-) building their homes according to a Western template. Romanians' imaginations

of 'Western normality', as in the case of Bulgarian migrants, were never realised but continued to be deferred into the future. Hartman analyses the teleological nature of such imaginary constructs by tracing how people constantly filtered out moments and experiences in which 'normality' appeared non-existent or unattainable, thus preserving it as an idealised notion. He concludes:

> The utopian object of destination is a vector the direction of which may change completely (encompassing and then dissociating with 'Spain', 'Europe', 'America' and so on), yet its velocity – no less desired, utopian or impossible – and the distance between it and its destination – just around the next corner or across the next border – remain the same (Hartman 2007: 197).

In other words, when people realised that they were unable to ever come significantly closer to their object of desire, they simply shifted its geographical location, the temporal horizons and the conditions under which they expected to find it. Consequently, the *telos* – always expected and never arriving – could never be an object of criticism or discontent, as the distorted versions in which it appeared in front of my informants' eyes – like the exclusion and hardship they encountered in the UK – were always denounced as not representing the 'real thing'. My informants' expectations thus needed to be corrected, their strategies re-negotiated and their individual deficiencies recognised and addressed in the projection of the West into a future that was still to come. For instance, they did not attribute the hostility, discrimination and exclusion they were subjected to as inherent characteristics of the West. Rather, they concluded that either Britain was not the 'real West' or they had to work harder to prove that the stereotypes and prejudice afflicting their national identity did not apply to them.

As I already argued in Chapter Two, this persistent and stubborn pursuit of the Western telos presents the adoption and reproduction of the ideology of modern capitalism. According to Zizek, ideology is a subject's reaction to social reality resulting from an inner tendency towards fantasy identifications, which serves to compensate states of lack, deficiency and meaninglessness (1997). This mechanism is especially pronounced in peripheral regions across the globe where, according to de Vreis, the ideological discourses and institutional apparatuses of western aid and intervention have produced subjects of lack and desire (2007). Thus, people who have never experienced development, progress and modernity after a Western template are particularly willing to take risks and undertake major social engineering projects in the hope of coming closer to a utopian world that continuously remains 'out of place' (de Vreis 2007: 33). As argued in Chapter Two, the realization that 'transition' to a 'truly' Western capitalist modernity would never materialise in Bulgaria did not make people abandon their teleological longing but pushed them into embracing migration as the only route towards the West. My informants' migration journeys in this sense present a case of de Vries' 'decentred' and 'desiring' subject, who is willing to take risks and make cardinal decisions in the hope of coming closer to a utopian world that always remains 'out of place' (de Vreis 2007: 33).

The paradox emanating from this attempt to escape their current predicament – by embracing the hope to attain 'normal lives' in the West – stems from people's unwillingness 'to recognise their recognition of its falsity' (The pervert's guide to ideology: n.p.). Inconvenient truths become repudiated, false beliefs and constituting practices sustained through the power of denial. Thus, rather than being externally imposed and passively received, ideology is self-consciously maintained and

perpetuated by people's attempts to devise alternative social realities that sooth their hardships and traumas. Therefore, people's attachment to ideological fantasies should not be interpreted as a naïve form of self-deception (Zizek 2008). It can be argued that they possess what Sloterdijk calls 'enlightened false consciousness' (1988), which allows them to discern the falsity of ideological claims and still accept and reproduce them in material practices and discourses. What makes people still behave 'as if they believe' is the sense of power and control that they gain through acting in accordance to an ideological claim (Zizek 2008; Sloterdijk 1984). Of course, the self-inflicted blindness with which modern subjects performatively reproduce the 'ideological fantasy' ultimately results in the greater efficacy of ideology rather than in mastering its power. It is along these lines that I interpret my informants' unwillingness to give up on the 'imaginary West' and sustain this utopian object of desire even when they were certain about its illusionary seduction. Their drive for purposeful existence and improvement of their condition – an inherent characteristic of life in modern capitalism – made Bulgarian migrants hold on to the promise of the 'impossible West'. Eleonora captured the purpose of this utopian fantasy most pertinently when she explained her decision to remain in the UK:

> What choice are we left with than to keep on aspiring? Sometimes one needs to close their eyes to the negative and insist on the imagined. Naturally, everyone hopes that the future holds better opportunities and prosperity, this is what keeps me going; otherwise I would immediately put a loop around my neck.

The reproduction of the 'imaginary West' in the 'cycle of deception'

In the last two sections, I have demonstrated how the West was never abandoned but sustained and reproduced as a telos, always deferred into the upcoming future. In this sense, the 'imaginary West' proves to be a helpful concept in explaining sustained migration movements even after people's expectations and dreams have proven illusionary. This trajectory also has implications for the main question guiding this research – Why do Bulgarians continue to migrate to western Europe despite the hostility and discrimination they will inevitably face? One would think that the known stories of discrimination, exploitation, and suffering of Bulgarians in the UK would have made it clear to those back home that migration is unlikely to lead to a better life. However, the fact that each year new cohorts of Bulgarians embark on this journey with the same hopes, expectations, and imaginations suggests that honest accounts of migrant life do not reach or are not received by those back home. Thus, paradoxically, in today's age of hyper-connectivity and social media, it is still possible for people to maintain idealised and unrealistic visions of life in a faraway place.

It appears that the 'imaginary West' is reproduced and fortified by what Sarah Mahler calls 'a cycle of deception' (1995: 88). In her ethnography of Central and South American migration to Long Island, United States, Mahler follows a group of undocumented migrants on their quest for achieving the 'American Dream'. Quickly upon arrival, her informants are shocked and disillusioned by a reality that drastically falls short of their dreams. Their disappointed hopes are blamed on the inaccurate accounts presented by return and fellow migrants and the rosy images propagated by different media outlets. Interestingly, when their own turn comes to inform aspiring migrants back home about their bitter experiences in the US, they too, preferred to

mislead their audience by downplaying the hardship and boosting often invented achievements. According to Mahler, it is in this self-perpetuated 'cycle of deception' (1995: 88) that the naïve imaginary of the US as a 'promised land' continues to be reproduced for generations of migrants.

Reflecting back on my own research, it becomes obvious that it was through the work of a similar mechanism that the 'imaginary West' sustained its power as a main factor fostering migration. My informants entered the 'cycle of deception' in Bulgaria when they started constructing their visons of the UK by drawing on collected impressions and information provided by current or return migrants. This they did either by talking to friends, neighbours or other personal connections, or by reading online migrant discussion forums, websites and Facebook groups. The information disseminated through these channels was largely inaccurate, in some cases admittedly fraudulent. There were, however, some matter-of-fact depictions which represented the negative sides of migrants' Western journeys. It was intriguing to observe how would-be migrants intentionally shied away from such 'pure' facts, or how, when confronted with them, they tried to dismiss them as misleading or as not applicable to their own case. This was their usual reaction to my own, less positive accounts of life in the UK. Upon presenting me with their expectations and imaginations, my informants would often ask me to corroborate these with examples of my own migrant journey. I soon noticed that the episodes of adversity and the negative evaluations that I wholeheartedly shared received a cold and suspicious reception. I was told that my experiences were exceptional as there were many others claiming the opposite or it was subtly suggested to me that I tended to overemphasise the bad sides of the UK because of my own unwillingness or inability to find my place there. When I shared this with a friend who

had recently returned after a long stay in France, she laughingly commented that often when told that the West was not as miraculous a place as imagined, Bulgarians would suspect that something was wrong with the bearer of the message.

For my informants, media was another important source creating predominantly attractive representations of Western life. In Chapter Three, I have discussed their imaginings as partly stemming from their exposure to images and information mediated through movies and reality TV programs, music video clips and football broadcasting. Above all, however, their idealised visions of the UK and the West in general were rooted in the centuries-old hegemonic narrative of Western supremacy still dominating political and cultural discourses in Bulgaria, the emergence and reproduction of which I have traced back from the 19th century onwards in Chapter Four, Section One.

Shortly after their arrival, migrants were shocked by a sobering reality that had very little in common with their pre-migratory idealisations. Although, as explained, they never openly acknowledged that their beliefs turned out to be nothing more than fantasies, they were bitter and disillusioned. In times of deep despair, they would direct their anger against those who had mislead them. For instance, one time Eleonora said to me how deeply frustrated she was with her Bulgarian friends – long-term migrants in the UK who had concealed from her important information: 'When you arrive you realise that everything is so much more different than what you were told. I have spent three years collecting information and preparing for my move and I still found it so hard. This is because people lie, they lie about everything'. Eleonora believed that many Bulgarians were intentionally hiding important information in an effort to sabotage their compatriots' migrations out of fear of growing competition. Yet, she added, they could not help but boost their success – invented or real – upon their returns home.

Some of my informants felt deceived after finding out the truth about their friends and neighbours' immigrant 'success'. This happened to Blagovest who for years had been hearing about the good life that one of his neighbours was having in London: 'He told me that he was a businessman. He lived in his own place and had his own car. When he came back for the holidays, he would gather the whole neighbourhood for a three days' feast – food, drinks, it was all on him. He never complained, he seemed happy.' When visiting his friend for a couple of days in London, Blagovest found out how little of his account was true: he was a self-employed construction worker and he lived in conditions that Blagovest described as 'dismal'.

I asked my informants what they, in their turn, told people about their lives in the UK. All claimed that they always described things as they really were, 'no fairytales, only the truth'. Just like in my case, however, their truth would often fall on deaf ears. Those back home were usually not prepared to receive information that questioned the veracity of their 'imaginary West'. When encountering more objective depictions of British realities, those back home would often refute them as ill-intentioned or false, thus contributing to their own deception. Such realisation was painfully experienced especially by those who had had a hard time persuading their own family of their migrant suffering. Assen, for example, was pushed to go back home in his second month in London because of not being able to find employment. When he explained to his wife and parents the hardships he was going through and the impossibility to settle down and work towards bringing them over to the UK, they accused him of being passive and of not doing what it took to 'make it':

> They don't want me to go back. They are really pushing me to try harder. I tell
> them I don't have a job; how should I pay my rent? "How come everyone else is

managing and only you cannot?" This is what she [his wife] repeats all the time. She thinks I am lying to her, she is so mesmerised by her ideas of how easy and rosy everything is here that she does not believe her own husband.

In other instances, my informants contributed to the perpetuation of the unrealistic Western image by embellishing their own stories and conspicuously demonstrating their material success. In the previous chapter, I explained how 'middle-class' migrants went as far as constructing alternative versions of their occupations and lifestyles. Sarah Mahler (1995) explains such false accounts with migrants' attempts to compensate the devaluation they are confronted with in their migration destination. By boosting their status back home, Bulgarians were able to alleviate the pressure for success that migration always entailed and to compensate their frustrating experiences. The distorted accounts of migration, together with the selective reception of information in Bulgaria thus perpetuate the idealised version of the 'imaginary West' and, furthermore, the 'cycle of deception' luring more and more people to embrace migration to the UK and elsewhere as a strategy for obtaining a better life.

Conclusion

This chapter has advanced the understanding of what propels and sustains Bulgarian migration to the UK on three different levels. Firstly, I have shown the profound effect that migration had on the lives of my informants by outlining a state of 'international stuckedness' (adapted from Hage 2009). Driven by an imaginary construct depicting distant places and the lives they offered in a highly idealised manner, my informants' migrations did not only lead to disappointment and disillusionment, but in fact

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entrenchment in a situation which was, in most cases, worse than the one left behind. Initially conceived as a 'vehicle of empowerment' enabling people to 'confound the established spatial orders' (Ferguson and Gupta 1992: 17), migration brought them into a situation where they could neither realise their hopes of existential advancement nor return back to their pre-migration life. Their physical presence in a place of high status did not allow them to transform their state of globally structured inferiority and gain membership in Western modernity, as their inferior nationality located them at the lowest point of the domestic social hierarchy ultimately affecting how far they could get in the future.

Possibilities for meaningful existence in the UK were further precluded, as I have shown, by limited time, social isolation and restricted physical movement which made migrants feel more stuck in the UK than back in Bulgaria. Furthermore, the existence of material and lifestyle opportunities of a superior quality in the UK only augmented my informants' feelings of disadvantage and inferior standing.

The state of 'international stuckedness' turned out to be practically irreversible for my informants because the option of return was highly problematic. Going back to Bulgaria rarely emerged as a meaningful alternative, as in many cases such a move was interpreted as a regress and resulted in loss of status, although mostly in the eyes of friends and acquaintances back home.

By revisiting my informants' lives after the formal completion of my fieldwork, I have been able to identify four different future scenarios which they constructed as a reaction to the state of international stuckedness: staying against the odds, constant mobility between Bulgaria and the UK, further migration, and returning home. All of them

demonstrated ongoing hope for attaining the 'imaginary West', which migrants observed in the lives of the locals but could never experience despite their best efforts.

On a second, more analytical level, I have looked at the notion of the 'imaginary West' and its sustained significance in the post-migratory period. As revealed in discussions of migrants' imaginations and future scenarios, they continued to reproduce the West as a powerful dream, the realisation of which was a focal point directing their efforts, hopes and expectations. During my fieldwork, I was surprised to find that, rather than debunking its illusionary nature, my informants started adapting their conceptualisations of the 'imaginary West' in accordance to current realities and available choices.

The sustained appeal of the West and the perseverance with which it was reproduced in migrants' future dreams and desires, I have argued, revealed its teleological nature. The 'myth' of the West lured my informants into a hide-and-seek game, where incentives were displayed and promises made, which appeared to be within one's reach only to be deferred ever and ever again. The Western telos, always expected and never quite there, could not be an object of criticism and discontent, as the distorted versions in which it appeared before my informants' eyes were always denounced as not representing the 'real deal'. I have argued that the attachment and continuous reproduction of this imaginary construct should not be interpreted as naiveté or simple delusion. Instead, the power of the imaginary West stems from its ability to alleviate internal lacks and sustain a positive future orientation. There was no way that my informants and migrants more generally could simply abandon the visions of life in the West, because sustaining this notion gave them a sense of purpose in life, even if perpetuating the reproduction of modern capitalist ideology at the same time.

Finally, on a third, more global level, I have demonstrated the significance of the 'imaginary West' in propelling and sustaining international migration flows. This thesis was initiated by the desire to understand the paradoxical zeal with which Bulgarians pursue migration to the UK, where they are reluctantly received and usually relegated to the lower ranks of society. I have argued that it is the construction of the 'imaginary West' and its constant reproduction in a cycle of deception that informed the expectations of future and current migrants and that sustained the 'supply' of new arrivals. The 'cycle of deception' driving the reproduction of the 'imaginary West' also helps to explain my informants' own contribution in fostering, voluntarily or not, the unrealistic dream that this imaginary stands for. Studying this cycle, the expectations, information exchange and filtering mechanisms underlying it present a pertinent entry point for migration research. Furthermore, it substantiates the challenge faced by orthodox economistic approaches to migration research and the rational actor and utility maximisation frameworks they proffer.

Chapter Seven

Conclusions

The aim of this thesis was to explain contemporary Bulgarian migration to the UK which has marked a new peak since the lifting of EU work restrictions in 2014. This study aims to disentangle the paradox related to the growing desirability of the UK as a migration destination on the one hand, and the widely-noted discriminatory policies, negative public perceptions, and dismal working conditions with which the country 'greets' Bulgarian newcomers, on the other. I set out to answer the following three questions about Bulgarian migration to the UK arising from this paradox:

1. Why do Bulgarians choose to migrate, and why do they migrate to the UK in particular when they are aware of the hostile public discourse and the potential hardships they will encounter upon arrival?

2. How do Bulgarians' post-migration experiences correspond to their expectations of life in the UK?

3. How do migrant realities affect the status of the UK as an attractive migration destination?

In answering these questions, I was interested in presenting individuals' own changing perspectives on and experiences of migration, the meanings they attached to their strategies and the stories that helped them come into terms with their new realities. In order to achieve this, I have adopted an ethnographic multi-sited approach with informal conversations and participant observation as main methods of data gathering. My efforts to explain migration as perceived and experienced by those who engage in it challenges the premises of orthodox migration research that sees economic factors

as the main driving force of population mobilities. In the course of my research it became clear to me that my informants' decisions were to a great extent informed by specific imaginations, hopes and dreams about the UK (and western Europe in general), which they expressed in the emic concept of the West. My engagement with the literature on social imaginaries and the decisive role they play in individual lives and practices led me to adopt the notion of the 'imaginary West' as the one best suited to capture the complex interplay between individual imaginations and widely circulating cultural and ideological constructs.

The four empirical chapters have elucidated the diversity of individual motivations for migration and their embeddedness in wider historical and socio-economic factors affecting both Bulgaria and the UK. By exploring the different stages of the migration journey, I have also demonstrated how individuals cope with unexpected hardship and contradictions in an effort to bring their pre-migratory plans to fruition and sustain a positive future perspective. The different expectations and imaginations that foreground migration, the meanings attached to the practice, as well as the diverse subjective experiences and paths that migrants' lives take, exhibit a class dimension both in informants' understandings and in more implicit ways.

This concluding chapter starts by summarising the empirical findings of this thesis while discussing the most important questions they raise in relation to reasons and expectations of migration and post-migration realities of life. Subsequently, I return to some of the key conceptual debates with which this thesis started and reflect on them in the light of the most important theoretical and empirical contributions this thesis has made to a number of research fields. Finally, I discuss the possible implications of

recent political events on Bulgarian migrations and the Western imaginaries that inform them and outline areas for further investigation.

Dreams about the West – dreams about a better life

In this thesis, I have demonstrated how migration for my informants was informed by two factors – first the urgency to leave behind certain aspects of their Bulgarian present that they found impossible to bear and second the desire to experience an idealised Western future that had long informed their imaginings of a better life.

In Chapter Three I have focused on the pre-migration narratives of my informants and revealed their accumulated disappointment with the directions their lives had taken in many cases diverting sharply from the plans and aspirations they held about their future. A wide range of experiences, interpreted by would-be migrants as personal failures, brought about a sense of debilitating despair – inability to find a job that matched one's qualifications, unsuccessful business endeavours, missed opportunities for creating a family and bringing up children, and 'forced' pursuit of qualification in a field not of one's own choosing. The resulting feelings of everyday insecurity and fear of what the future might hold conditioned a state of lacking or inadequate movement forward in life. Drawing on the work of Bourdieu (1993) and Hage (2005) I have referred to this subjective experience as 'existential stuckedness', a state provoked by a variety of factors and diminishing opportunities for meaningful agency and control over one's situation. My informants were able to recognise this stagnant existence as an important impetus leading up to the decision to migrate and as a condition affecting the majority of Bulgarians, one stemming out of the collective

failure of Bulgarian state and society to transition towards ideal model of western capitalism and democracy. Remaining in a 'post-transitional' country which appeared as placed outside a progressive modernist template of development made my informants feel entrapped and disconnected from (or at least marginalised within) a First World group of countries whose citizens enjoyed the civilisational and economic benefits of modernity. As hopes for collective advancement and inclusion began to appear increasingly illusory in Bulgaria, migration emerged as the only available individualised strategy through which my informants could 'confound the established spatial order' (Gupta and Ferguson 1992: 17) and claim First World status.

At the same time, it was future migrants' ability to imagine the UK as offering a life drastically different from the one they had in Bulgaria that made migration an attractive and sensible option. In Chapter Four I have explored positive imaginations about distant places offering opportunities for progress and prosperity unavailable at home that aspiring migrants conveyed in the emic notion of the West (*Zapadat*). In their perceptions, the West was referred to as both a geographical location – western Europe (and the UK in particular) – and an 'imaginary elsewhere' (Yurchak 2006) where they could overcome the constraints defining their lives back home and tap into infinite possibilities for different and better futures. The detailed accounts of the West and referrals to its superior standard and civilisational advancement as common-sense knowledge, provided even by those who had never travelled abroad, pointed to its status of an imaginary and ideological construct. In order to capture the interconnection between individual imaginations and globally circulating cultural repertoires making up the emic category of the West I have introduced the concept of the 'imaginary West'. This has allowed me to reveal the power of attraction that the imaginary held for would-

be migrants as determined by the particular political, socio-economic, and cultural context of modern Bulgarian history. My historical overview demonstrated that since the Bulgarian national revival, the West emerged, was consolidated, and normalised as a symbol of the Enlightenment and its ideas of progress, civilisation, and culture. Through alignment with and adoption of norms and values, cultural, and political templates contained in the western modernity project, Bulgarians had been trying to overcome their Oriental legacy and escape their inferior position as Europe's 'incomplete Other' (Todorova 1997).

I have argued that during state socialism the ideological confrontation between two different paths of modernity – the communist and the capitalist one - has led to the further mythologisation and fetishisation of the West as a consumer paradise and place offering a 'good life' in the collective Bulgarian consciousness (Chapter One and Four). After 1989 western liberal capitalism and democracy became the main doctrine defining the path of east European societies (Sampson 1998) – the 'imaginary West' can be argued to have become the hegemonic civilisational standard against which the 'transitions' of these societies were measured. Throughout the market reforms people were led to believe that the adoption of the western developmental model and the refashioning of subjectivities and all spheres of life would eventually lead to economic development, prosperity and living standards equal to those in western Europe. These specificities of the historical context I have taken as an explanation of the special attraction that the image of the West holds particularly strong for those living in postsocialist eastern Europe.

Would-be migrants' narrations about their expectations and imaginations of life in the UK drew a world map in which countries were hierarchically ordered according to the

degree of success with which they have managed to adopt a western model of capitalist development and modernity. The further up in the hierarchy and more westwards the country was the more suitable migration destination it appeared in my informants' eyes. In this sense, the UK, which they placed at the top of this symbolic order, was said to represent the purest possible embodiment of the West and the country to offer the kind of life that came closest to the way in which life 'should be'. The historical significance of the country as the cradle of industrial revolution, its status as a former colonial superpower and its historical and present economic independence and strength were the specificities that elevated the UK as the epitome West in my informants' imaginaries. Bulgaria, on the other hand, was imagined as the complete antithesis of the West because of its underdevelopment and status as the poorest EU member state. My informants' narratives revealed that migration was deployed not simply as a strategy for overcoming economic disadvantage and marginality, as mainstream migration analysis points out, but as a way for achieving an international advancement from a place of low to a place of high status in the global hierarchy. I have claimed that for my informants migration was not simply a move from a 'poor' to a 'wealthy' place but from a place offering restricted possibilities for meaningful existence to one promising ample scope for existential becoming. The pursuit of existential advancement through migration contained the hope for overcoming a globally-entrenched inferiority and peripheral 'second-class' status and claiming a stake and participating in 'first order' Western capitalism.

The 'imaginary West' conditioned the way in which my informants viewed their and their country's position in an international hierarchy of places but also normative understandings of social difference, authority, and hierarchy. Thus, one's cultural and

symbolic proximity to the West measured by consumption of western cultural products and lifestyle but most of all by cultivation of perceived 'Western mentality' and adherence to its corresponding values came to determine one's symbolic position in society. As I have shown in Chapter Three my informants understood their own identity and social belonging according to their perceived degree of Westernness. Based on my informants' own classifications of themselves and others I have differentiated between two group identity designations: 'Bulgarian Westerners' and 'ordinary people'. Although social and educational capital in the constitution and differentiation of these two categories was important, what clearly delineated them was their relation to the West: 'Bulgarian Westerners' presented themselves as having successfully adopted Western values, while 'ordinary people' lamented that Western ways of thinking and doing things were not compatible with their 'Balkan mentality'. As I have indicated in my theoretical discussion on postsocialist class (Chapter Two) such conflicting self-identifications can be seen as crystallisation of superimposed class narratives in wide circulation throughout the 1990s which tried to attribute the blame for Bulgaria's unsuccessful transition to the uneducated masses, whose retrograde ways of thinking were said to have inhibited the transformational efforts of a pro-Western elite (see Lavergne 2010). I have argued that these narratives, which were reproduced in the protest of 2013-2014 (Chapter Three) served to conceal the actual reasons for social inequalities by misrepresenting them as arising from cultural distinctions. Neither group was able to recognise the structural forces conditioning their precarious economic and symbolic position: 'Bulgarian Westerners' looked down upon the 'simple-minded' and 'uncivilised masses' while 'ordinary people' often succumbed to their own Orientalisation by accepting that they were indeed inadequate and incompetent. Thus,

when considering 'Bulgarian Westerners'' lack of discernible economic privilege and insecure future prospects I have concluded that both groups could be subsumed under the category of 'working class'.

The self-ascribed class belonging of my informants was manifested in the different meanings and purposes they attributed to their migration projects, as well as in different imaginations and expectations of life in the West (the UK in particular) (Chapter Three and Four). For the so-called 'ordinary people' who included less-educated, largely middle-aged blue-collar workers and small business owners, the West was a place where they could finally enjoy a 'normal' life. This 'normality' was understood to offer a predictable day-to-day existence which ensured control over the present and ability to make plans for the future. The economic security and general affordability of life that my informants considered the main characteristics of 'normality' denoted a widespread belief in the socially just principles guiding western societies. For my informants it was hard and honest labour that entitled individuals to the benefits of Western 'normality' and constituted them as respectable citizens. 'Ordinary people's' future projections were constructed in direct opposition to those aspects of their lives in Bulgaria that they found most distressing and which served as the main triggers for migration. I have argued how one of their most oft-mentioned complaints prior to migration was related to their inability to engage in consumption of electronic appliances and gadgets, branded clothing and trips abroad which were expected to raise their life standard and bring upward status mobility. A factor that my informants saw as entrenching their inferiority was their lack of strategic social capital in the form of 'connections' which could be mobilised in the search for lucrative economic opportunities. Another constraint was their insufficient cultural capital in terms of higher education, knowledge

of western language and IT skills that limited their access to well-paid and symbolically valued jobs. Furthermore, it was their symbolic denigration in popular social discourses that affected their self-esteem and inflicted humiliation in their everyday interactions. I have concluded how 'ordinary people's' migration motivations and the significance that they attributed to their migration strategies were very much a reflection of their unprivileged class position in society and the economic, social and symbolic disadvantages pertaining to it, as well as the aspirations that came with such position.

I have discussed 'Bulgarian Westerners'' imaginations of the West under the term 'American dream', as I found their longings to reflect some of the norms and ideas popularly associated with that notion despite the fact that their dream land was Europe. The meritocratic functioning of western societies was expected to reward hard-working and talented individuals and thus provide ample scope for professional realisation. Another important promise that the West held for 'Bulgarian Westerners' was the unlimited opportunities for career development and self-actualisation which they understood as key components of personal success. Although the achievement of this success was believed to require hard work and perseverance in the narratives of my informants, it often acquired a mystical aura as accessible to those who were 'in the right place, at the right time'. Because of the freedom from societal expectations, gender norms and behavioural models 'Bulgarian Westerners' saw the West as a place of unrestrained personal independence where one could practice different forms of individuality.

Much like 'ordinary people' 'Bulgarian Westerners'' visions of the West were an antithesis of the lives they led in Bulgaria. They were constructed in reaction to their frustration with the discrepancy between their self-assigned 'middle-class' status and

their experiences of socio-economic hardships and lacking symbolic recognition for the efforts they put in refashioning their personalities. The contradictions between their own perceptions of their position in the social hierarchy and the corresponding sense of deservingness and their inability to find employment that matched their qualifications, or one ensuring enough finances for meeting a middle-class lifestyle resulted in personal dislocations they hoped to resolve through migration. Even those who were able to enjoy some financial independence and symbolic recognition were still unsatisfied with their achievements as they were gained in a society deemed underdeveloped and unable to let go of its Oriental legacy. Migration was the way through which 'Bulgarian Westerners' hoped to resolve such contradictions and dislocations, disassociate themselves from a majority of what they called 'typical Bulgarians' and become fully immersed in a society of like-minded individuals.

The expectations and imaginations of life in the UK held by all my informants put forward rich and detailed accounts of the West, the life it had to offer and the social and cultural norms guiding the everyday. They claimed that these descriptions were realistic even if not based on experiential knowledge of western Europe. My informants provided two different versions of the West, emphasising imagined characteristics of Western life that were important counterpoles to the problems they struggled with in Bulgaria, which in turn reflected their subjective class experiences and identities. I have argued that both of these were idealistic and often illusionary, making the West the fictitious 'elsewhere' (Yurchak 2006) where a better life was possible. In light of the failure of the postsocialist transition and Bulgaria's inability to become part of the western world, my informants wanted to realise their dream of western modernity for themselves. Thus, the teleological nature of the West – defining it as something

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ostensibly attainable but not here and now - already became apparent at this early, pre-migration stage.

From disillusionment to (self-)deception

The questions of how post-migration experiences map onto migrants' imaginings of life in the UK and impact on the country's desirability as a migration destination have been discussed in chapters Five and Six. Chapter Five has explored the early and mid-term experiences of migration by tracing newcomers' efforts to adapt and settle in an unexpectedly hostile environment that presented them with almost insurmountable everyday challenges and hardship. When embarking on their journeys informants were wary of the anti-immigrant prejudice and discrimination they would face when disclosing their Bulgarian nationality. They, however, also believed that their hard labour and perseverance would demonstrate their deservingness and quickly overcome local misconceptions. As they quickly found out, procedural issues (long waiting times for NINo, banks' refusal to issue accounts, etc.) and discriminatory practices of local employers precluded their incorporation into the legal labour market. Instead they were pushed into precarious and informal jobs in the shadow economy. By exposing the effects that 'hidden' bureaucratic mechanisms and increasingly de-regulated labour markets had on migrants' lives, I have outlined a state of *de facto* 'illegality' which affected almost all of my informants and which remains unexplored in research on Bulgarian (and Romanian) migration to the UK and other EU countries since 2014 (see Bauder 2008). These early challenges did not discourage my informants - they saw them as transitory adaptation issues and as the price to pay for their eventual incorporation into British society.

The persistence of marginality and exclusion into and beyond the mid-run period of migration, i.e. for a year or longer after arrival, made migrants reconsider the feasibility of their plans for long-term settlement and they started realising that their imaginations of Western life were ill-founded and in some cases outright naïve. The promise of the benefits brought by full EU citizenship had an important role in encouraging positive imaginations about life in the UK. Prior to their migration my informants believed that free access to the British labour market would enable their unrestricted participation in the economic and social life of the country. With time, however, even the greatest optimists came to see their EU citizenship as a formal membership which in reality did not guarantee many of the civic, social and political rights enjoyed by locals and by other EU migrant groups. The Bulgarians I talked to realised that instead of 'free-moving' Europeans they were in fact 'second-class' EU citizens, for whom the UK had little more in store than illegal employment and a marginal, precarious existence.

Whereas in the first weeks and months of their migrant 'careers', I found both categories of informants equally exposed to the above-described structural limitations, in the mid-run period of migration the different capitals at their disposal and their class identities started to clearly manifest themselves and produce different practices and experiences. Throughout this time all migrants continued to feel as if their lives were taking place in a reality parallel to that of the British society. They were, however, differently equipped in their struggles for escaping segregation. Because of their lack of English language skills, professional qualifications and education, as well as their restricted economic capital and knowledge of the British legal and institutional context, 'ordinary people' were in a more disadvantaged position than their better-educated compatriots. Even after legalising their status, many found that the only way to make

ends meet and secure the survival of their families was to take on multiple jobs and long hours. With their efforts entirely focused on keeping their employment and saving up enough for covering basic costs and previously incurred debts, 'ordinary people' tried to sustain 'ascetic' lifestyles (Piore 1979) confining themselves to social isolation and material deprivation. I have shown how often migrants' inability to progress out of exploitative work relations was result of the psychological barriers erected by their fear of humiliation and inadequacy. For example, some of my informants refused to use the services of local doctors, apply for welfare support or consider job openings because they did not want to be seen as 'benefit tourists', or mocked for their poor English. Of course, such fears were not unfounded. They often originated out of everyday experiences of denigration and discrimination inflicted both by local employers and co-nationals.

'Bulgarian Westerners' on the other hand, managed to achieve some upward social mobility through obtaining white-collar employment in the Bulgarian immigrant economy. Because of their English language and IT skills, office experience and university education with time they started working as office assistants, managers, and accountants in cleaning and building companies run by long-term Bulgarian immigrants. For my informants, this was perceived as a success, especially when compared to their previous dependence on low-skilled and informal employment. On the other hand, they came to realise that instead of creating a path to highly-skilled jobs in the British labour market, this meant further isolation in the confines of the Bulgarian immigrant community. They interpreted such homogenisation as a decline in their social status and as spoiling the Western credentials which they took as a main marker of their 'middle-class' identity. The only way of dealing with their deepening

personal dislocations and class frustrations was the drawing of cultural, moral and socio-economic boundaries between themselves and the rest of Bulgarian migrants. They did so by re-invoking Orientalising narratives (Buchowksi 2006) and subscribing to the xenophobic anti-immigrant discourse in the UK. I have, thus, concluded that in the post-migration context, class identities not only kept their significance in the way people evaluated their situation, made sense of their predicament, and got involved in different practices, but it continued to be reinforced and reproduced with even greater intensity. The erasure of class boundaries (Hilfiger and Messias 2001) as a result of the confinement of people of diverse class backgrounds within a wider immigrant community, their marginalisation and systematically limited integration within the host society explain the intensified class tensions within the Bulgarian community well.

Despite their best efforts 'ordinary people' and 'Bulgarian Westerners' did not manage to achieve the lives that matched their 'normality' and the 'American dream' imaginaries of the West. In order to come to terms with an existence that was in many respects worse than the one they left behind, my informants devised ways to help them cope with the disillusionment and which enabled them to continue their search for the West of their dreams. 'Ordinary people', for example, found comfort in their improved consumption capacity and material level of well-being. Their ability to cover monthly utility bills, food and transport costs and at the same time afford the occasional consumption of clothes, electrical appliances, and furniture helped them to compensate feelings of inferiority and devaluation, and raised their status. 'Bulgarian Westerners' often preferred to conceal unpleasant facts of their migrant realities and advance a positive self-portrayal through identification with previously-held or desired professional identities. For example, they would be silent about their low-skilled full-

time occupations or present them in a more positive light. By constructing alternative narratives of their occupations and experiences my informants were able to save face among friends and family back home but also with acquaintances in the UK.

In Chapter Six I have explained how even after spending a year or more in the UK my informants did not manage to attain the existential mobility that they had hoped would help them transcend their inferior position in the global hierarchy of places. They reached the painful realisation that it was their national identity that prevented them from getting desired employment and access to the level playing field in the UK, and did not allow them to lead a meaningful and dignified existence. It thus turned out that physical mobility in the global order could not help to overcome one's inferior national origin. Therefore, many found themselves in a new and unexpected condition that I have called 'international stuckedness'. This state resulted, on the one hand from their failed integration and marginalisation in British society and, on the other, from the stigma and shame associated with returning back home and admitting failure. The discontent and disillusionment with the obvious mismatch between expectations and realities of migration was rarely if at all explicitly voiced. At the same time, however, it led to re-evaluation of initial plans and ambitions and search for new ways of keeping alive the dream of a better life. Seeing other people around them enjoy the normality, dignity and success they had come for made my informants feel that their expectations about life in the West were not altogether misconceived, but that their realisation was a matter of time and the right circumstances. Accordingly, my informants started to adapt and re-project the time horizons and plans of when and how they would be able to come closer or achieve a Western life. This re-imagination took four distinct forms. A first set of people took the decision to stay in the UK despite their dissatisfaction

because they were able to imagine a better future for themselves or their children. A second group embraced regular mobility between Bulgaria and the UK. This enabled 'Bulgarian Westerners' to capitalise on their western experience, enhance their socio-economic position in Bulgaria and sustain a cosmopolitan identity. The same scenario adopted by 'ordinary people', however, translated into involuntary circular labour mobility which, despite entrenching their precariousness, they continued to perform with the hope to eventually settle in the UK and realise their Western dream. A third future-oriented strategy adopted by migrants resulted in the re-projection of the West further afield. They concluded that the UK was not a real representation of the West and expressed a desire to migrate to places like Germany, the US, and Spain which were seen as its closer approximations. Finally, the few who chose to return to Bulgaria did so out of the conviction that Bulgaria too could offer the opportunities for success and normality they were after. Thus, they sometimes granted the country with the status of an 'almost West' while at other times they kept the option of further westwards mobility open.

I have shown that despite everything they went through, my informants refused to abandon their imaginations, hopes and dreams of life in the West. Instead, they sustained and reproduced the 'imaginary West' in their future aspirations. In this sense, the West took on the nature of a telos – something never realised and always deferred into the future (Hartman 2007). As such, the West was not subjected to criticism or discontent; my informants did not attribute the hostility, discrimination, and exclusion they met as its inherent characteristics, but explained them with the fact that the UK presented a distorted and flawed version of the West. I have argued that this persistent and stubborn pursuit of the Western telos reflects the adoption and reproduction of the

social ideology of modern capitalism. The reaction of migrants to the dire social reality they endured appears to be resulting from an inner tendency towards fantasy identifications compensating states of lack, deficiency, and meaninglessness (Zizek 1997). However, I refrained from interpreting this attachment to ideological fantasies as a naïve form of self-deception and as succumbing to the illusionary projections of capitalist ideology (Zizek 2008). I have argued, instead, that their unwillingness to abandon the 'imaginary West' and sustain the hopes and dreams associated with it stemmed from their drive for purposeful existence and progressive improvement. Bulgarian migrants chose to hold on to the promise of the 'impossible West' because enduring their present was impossible without knowing that something better lay ahead. In the words of one informant, 'insisting on imagining and aspiring to realise one's dreams against all odds is the only way for people to carry on with their lives'. What this means is that individuals who realise the ideological nature of their dreams and their distance from reality often have no other choice but to follow and retell them as 'truthful'. In such a way, by consciously contributing to their own deception, Bulgarian migrants engage in practices that fail to challenge the logics of the capitalist system but serve to reproduce the latter.

The sustenance and reproduction of the 'imaginary West' in people's individual lifewords indicates the reasons for the importance of this particular imaginary as a driver of Bulgarian migration to the UK. The conscious self-deception through which the imaginary works, or what Sloterdjik calls 'enlightened false consciousness', takes place not only on an individual but also on a societal level. By introducing Mahler's concept (1995) of the 'cycle of deception' In Chapter Six I have explained the mechanism through which the 'imaginary West' continued to be reproduced in

individual but also public consciousness even if its illusionary nature was fairly obvious. I have explained how my informants became part of the cycle of deception already in Bulgaria by talking to and observing the consumption practices of current and return migrants, reading online discussion forums, and collecting impressions from social networks and media (Facebook, Viber, etc.). Public discourse on and media representations of the supremacy of western countries' standard of living and social organisation also played a role in constructing an overly positive and idealised vision of the West. The negative depictions and the critical voices that tried to question the veracity of such accounts were dismissed by my informants as either inaccurate or intentionally misleading. I have observed how, in the UK many newcomers felt duped by the overblown stories of friends and family, this, however did not stop them from consciously embellishing their own reality and conspicuously demonstrating their 'success' when communicating with those back home. Those willing to share their hardship and disappointment were taken aback by their families' lack of compassion and suspicion. This lack of interest in, or active denial of, more realistic accounts that could potentially unravel the fragile edifice on which the myth of the West was built, emanated from the above-discussed individual urge for hope and purpose but nevertheless perpetuated a cycle of deception. It was in this way, I have argued, that the imaginary West was reproduced as a driver of migration from Bulgaria to the UK – luring new cohorts of aspiring migrants each year to try their luck in a country that they knew would welcome them with hostility and prejudice.

The fact that my informants did not manage to realise their visions of Western living is not to say that all Bulgarian stories in the UK were negative. Indeed, I met few, mostly long-term migrants who had managed to establish their own businesses, re-unite with

their families and who were living satisfying and fulfilling lives. They all arrived before or straight after 2007 when there was a higher demand for migrant labour and the competition for jobs was not that fierce. These success stories were result of years of hard labour, migrant 'knowhow', and accumulated social networks but also hardship and privations. Initially, my informants hoped to replicate the migrant trajectory of 'old' Bulgarian migrants, but soon they realised that their efforts went against negatively changing socio-economic circumstances. In any case, my fieldwork period was too short to verify whether informants managed to eventually realise their dreams or not.

Re-visiting migration, imaginary and class

This thesis makes several contributions to the theoretical debates outlined in Chapter Two. Firstly, in my efforts to go beyond the economic reductionism prevailing in the field of migration studies I have explained migration as a process engendered by a diversity of subjective motivations and wider structural factors. In doing so, I have emphasised the important role of individual imaginations in driving and sustaining migration. By introducing the notion of the 'imaginary West' I have captured the imagination that propelled my informants' movements as an individual everyday practice, on one hand, and as shaped by wider cultural constructs, on the other. Thus, in opposition to Appadurai (1996) who sees the pursuit of imaginations and dreams through migration as an expression of individual empowerment and emancipation I have demonstrated how these journeys can lead to disappointment and further entrenchment of the precarity and marginalisation that people try to escape from. Understanding how individuals' imaginaries of particular geographical locations and the life they have to offer inspire and sustain physical mobility re-casts migration as a

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cultural process. The emphasis that my thesis has put on migration as a deeper statement of one's 'personality […] values and attachments' (Fielding 1992: 210) presents a balanced account of the interplay between a diversity of both non-economic and economic, as well as, structural and subjective factors which entangle in the enactment and reproduction of migration. I have revealed the wide variety of dreams contained in the imaginary West – ranging from expectations for experiencing existentially meaningful and purposeful lives to engaging in the consumption of luxury items and covering monthly utility and food bills.

Secondly, the thesis makes a timely empirical and theoretical contribution to research on east European migration to the western world and the UK in particular. So far academic interest has been predominantly focused on the so-called 'first wave' of east European migrants (Polish in particular) with very little efforts to address the experiences of Bulgarians who, despite their lower numbers, have been migrating to the UK since 1989. One of the reasons behind this neglect is the homogenisation of the experiences of different migrant groups from the region under the category of east European migrations. Moreover, existing studies are often informed by a policy agenda and geared towards a general description of trends and dynamics in an effort to identify possibilities for steering and regulating migration movements. My study presents an alternative to such research agendas – as migrants are not treated as 'flows' in need of regulation but as individuals trying to deal with the challenges of life in the contemporary capitalist economy. My contribution lies in my efforts to shift the focus towards migrants' actual experiences. I give them the central role of subjects able and deserving to speak for themselves in order to show how their experienced reality is affected by structural, economic and political barriers. In particular, I reveal the

discrimination, institutional violence and exploitation that persist despite the granting of full working rights to Bulgarians in 2014. Such dynamics of exclusion remain obscured in portrayals of migration in popular discourses where Bulgarian (and Romanian) migrants are unreflectively assumed to be integrated into the UK labour market.

Thirdly, this thesis presents a critique of the research on Bulgarian and east European migration that draws on normatively charged and politically handy dichotomies between 'economic' labour migrations and 'highly-skilled' 'transnational' mobilities (for examples see Chavdarova 2006, Ditchev 2008, Stoilkova 2005, Liakova 2008). Although my informants endorsed and drew on these distinctions when presenting their migration stories, I have demonstrated how many of the differences between these two groups - often taken for granted - are in fact concealing fundamental factors of inequality and precarity. I have argued that both categories of migrants demonstrate diversity of migration motivations. For example, I show how 'labour' migration is not solely, if at all, led by economic incentives but a desire for agency, meaning and recognition, whereas the mobilities of the 'highly-skilled', with the exception of the quests for professional realisation, are also attempts of achieving economic stability. More importantly, my thesis demonstrates that very often migration leads to the blurring of class boundaries and status equalisation as post-migration structural limitations exert equal pressure on newcomers despite their different levels of education and despite previously held social positions.

Furthermore, by basing my analysis on individuals' ways of defining and delineating their group belonging and identity this thesis contributes to discussions on postsocialist class and to literature that engages with the role of class in migration processes.

Research of postsocialist societies has been correctly criticised for its class blindness (Morris 2017). The adoption of an anti-communist ideology and neoliberal rhetoric on individual responsibility has reduced scholarly treatment of class to social stratification and professional status differences (Boyadjieva and Kabakchieva 2015). My research seeks to redress this bias by focusing on the lived experiences of class and discussing the construction of class identifications and the meanings they hold for individuals in their everyday realities. By applying a Bourdieusian class analysis I also demonstrate how class identities do not solely depend on economic but also on the possession of diversity of other capitals (social, cultural, symbolic).

Class dimensions have been largely neglected in contemporary migration studies particularly when it comes to their effects on the process of migration (Van Hear 2014). My thesis contributes to filling this gap by exploring how the different forms of capitals (economic, social, cultural, symbolic) accumulated by migrants affect decision-making, expectations, and imaginations of post-migration realities, as well as migrants' post-migration experiences and chances for reaching their goals and aspirations. I have also demonstrated how individuals' pre-and post-migration narratives on the reasons behind, meanings and experiences of migration have been constructed very much in line with their subjective class identities and externally-imposed classifications.

Fourthly, this study provides a contribution to anthropological scholarship on postsocialist transformations that so far has paid little attention to the significance that imaginings of the West in eastern Europe hold in influencing individuals' practices, worldviews, and self-perceptions.

Lastly, I demonstrate how the analysis of international system of migrant labour and core-periphery dynamics can benefit from the integration of hegemonic cultural

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imaginaries or ideological constructs to explain the triggering and perpetuation of migration movements.

Epilogue: a new West?

One warm summer evening in August I sat down with Lora and Emil in their tiny kitchen in north London. Back then, the two were in the midst of their scramble for documents. In an ardent diatribe Lora foresaw what neither of us could have imagined that pleasant summer evening, that which a couple of years later has become an increasingly realistic scenario:

> I sometimes think that the visa system that we had before, you know how Bulgarians could only work with a visa in the UK, was much better. [Me: Come on, do you seriously mean this?] Well, see, in the UK the message is 'come, you have the right to work'. People fool themselves and believe they can really come and work. When they realise that in practice it is not so straightforward, it is already too late – they have quit their jobs and sunk into debt. The visa system is just much more honest and fair. If they [the British] don't want to be in the EU, they better get out. Then they will bring back the visa system and maybe it will be better, at least people would know what to expect.

Lora's vision was not shared by most of the Bulgarians I met in the UK and those whose lives I continue to follow after the Brexit referendum of June 2016. They did not expect their rights and entitlements to be severely restricted but they worried that sustaining a satisfactory quality of life in the UK would become even more problematic and would eventually require them to reconsider their migration plans and strategies.

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For those who regularly remitted money or hoped to raise some capital to invest back home, and for the many for whom circular migration was the only available strategy, the plummeting of the British pound was a harsh shock. Many shared the impression that as the country was preparing for a hard Brexit the prices of essential goods and services have increased by up to 20 per cent. They had the feeling that there were more job opportunities available but they didn't take this as a good sign, firstly because for them this meant that more and more people were leaving the UK and secondly because the minimal wages these jobs offered were not enough to compensate the increased cost of living. Another post-referendum observation of my informants referred to the fact that people with anti-immigrant sentiments have been further empowered to express these in a more explicit way.

The effects of the pro-leave vote and the prospective change in migrant's legal status promise to increase my informants' vulnerability. Many feared that a forthcoming Brexit would make their stay in the UK impossible or will lead to a loss of their hard-earned achievements. More and more people are contacting me nowadays to say they have started to reconsider their migration plans. Although a return back to Bulgaria still doesn't appear to be a sensible option they are increasingly considering potential futures in other migration destinations – Germany and France being the most appealing. What this comes to show is that as further disillusionment with life in the UK threatens to dethrone the country from the status of an ultimate West, this idealised 'elsewhere' is quickly re-projected further afield. This demonstrates that in people's perceptions, the West does not have fixed geographical coordinates but can shift depending on the circumstances. When the realities of life in a given place do not match up with the imagined ideal and disillusionment prevails, people refuse to let go

of this ideal but again aim to locate it and attain it in a new geographical destination. This utopian place, state, and condition is immune to criticism because it is the source of meaning and the ultimate end making people persist in their life struggles. Because physical mobility remains the most direct, if painful, path to the West, the concept of the 'imaginary West' is of key importance for understanding the reasons and the mechanisms of migration from peripheral to core regions in contemporary capitalism.

Academic discussions of east European migration, especially in the context of Brexit, have tried to emphasise the economic, cultural, and demographic benefits that migrants bring to local society.[184] Such efforts, however well-intended, still feed into an instrumentalist policy perspective that tries to resolve the 'migrant problem' by pointing out the measurable added value of immigration for the local economy. In this light, migration scholars should make an effort to shift the debate away from the prevalent macroeconomic and biopolitical framing and focus on the lived realities of migration and migrants' own narratives. Thus, scholarship could make a more genuine effort to understand and demonstrate the effects of migration on migrants themselves and the price they pay for following the promises of a better life. This will also allow a grasp of the structural factors influencing migration and the global dynamics underlying it, such as inequality across and within countries, entrenched peripheralisation, and underdevelopment of regions like eastern Europe.

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[184] See for example a recent workshop titled EU Referendum 2016, UCL, School of Slavonic and East European Studies - http://www.ucl.ac.uk/ssees/news-and-events/eu-referendum [Accessed 20 August 2017].

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