



FOR A NEW MIGRATION POLICY TOWARDS THE HISTORICAL BULGARIAN COMMUNITIES AFTER THE COVID-19 CRISIS AND THE WAR IN UKRAINE

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Abstract. *This article examines the migrations to Bulgaria of representatives of the historical Bulgarian diaspora before and after the Covid-19 crisis and during the military conflict in Ukraine in 2022. For the group as a whole, it is found that at this time, due to the short distances, the preference is for seasonal, weekly and, among the population residing along border areas, for daily job commutes. Although Ukrainian Bulgarians account for 9.25 % of the total number of Ukrainian refugees in Bulgaria, the majority of the community remains at home. However, the planned land reform in Ukraine could alter the migration model and increase the number of those who wish to settle in Bulgaria for a longer period of time and remain permanently. For this reason, Bulgaria should develop a special program to aid the returning Bulgarian migrations from Ukraine.*

Keywords: historical Bulgarian diaspora; seasonal and weekly migrations; war in Ukraine; refugees.

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According to the National Strategy for Bulgarian Citizens and Historic Bulgarian Communities adopted in 2014, the historical Bulgarian communities can be divided into two main groups:

1. Bulgarians in the region of the so-called Western Balkans (North Macedonia, Serbia, Albania and Kosovo);
2. Bulgarians in the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine (the Bessarabia and Tavria regions) and their descendants who were forcibly displaced to various parts of Asia during Stalin's repression.

If the role of the migration factor in their occurrence is traced, this distinction becomes even clearer. Bulgarians in Ukraine and Moldova were forcibly displaced from the territory of present-day Bulgaria about 200-250 years ago. In contrast, the Bulgarians from the Western Balkans do not have a migratory past, they are an indigenous population from the times of the medieval Bulgarian state, who remained in their historical habitats after changes in state borders.

After 1994, several state documents were adopted to support the return migrations of representatives of the historical Bulgarian diaspora. In most cases, these documents were produced in the middle or at the end of the terms of the respective governments. There was a vicious cycle of each succeeding government either not working towards the implementation of the adopted programs or starting the development of its own similar projects. Since adequate funding has not been provided for the implementation of these state documents, in practice the policy of supporting the return of the historical

Bulgarian diaspora remains only on paper, without any significant demographic impact.

In 2020, within the framework of the project "Policies for Bulgarians Abroad" implemented by the Institute for Population and Human Studies — BAS, a continuation of the project "Measures for overcoming the demographic crisis in the Republic of Bulgaria" funded by the Council of Ministers, the migratory viewpoints towards Bulgaria of the historical Bulgarian diaspora were studied. Distinctions were observed within individual communities, but it can be summarized that at this stage the majority of their representatives prefer to remain in their places of birth, and to primarily carry out educational, circular or seasonal labor migrations to Bulgaria. Such motivation can be explained by the fact that the historical Bulgarian diaspora is composed of predominantly rural populations closely linked to the cultivation of land.

The educational migrations of representatives of the historical Bulgarian communities to Bulgaria are the most successful at the moment. From 1990 to 2019 in Bulgaria the following numbers were accepted for students, postgraduates and doctoral students*:

In total for the period 1990-2019, 14777 college students, PhD students and postgraduates from the historical Bulgarian communities were accepted to continue their education in Bulgaria. During their stay, many easily adapted to life in Bulgaria, choosing to remain permanently upon graduating.

Their family members (parents, siblings, relatives) also carried out migrations of different durations in Bulgaria. For example, in the summer of 2017, about 6000 Bulgarians from Ukraine and Mol-

Country of origin	Adopted for 1990-2019/number			
	Students	Doctoral students	Postgraduate students	Total
North Macedonia	5000	67	30	5097
Moldova	2522	80	150	2752
Ukraine	2406	72	139	2617
Serbia	1745	23	24	1792
Albania	705	46	17	768
Kosovo	177	1	-	178
Others	1547	9	17	1573
Total	14102	298	377	14777

* This information is taken from the annual reports of the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Bulgaria and is summarized by the author.

dova had seasonal employment in Bulgaria at tourist destinations along the Black Sea coast. This practice was facilitated by the Labor Migration and Labor Mobility Act, adopted in 2016, which allows persons of Bulgarian origin to work in Bulgaria by a simplified process. Its provisions mainly benefit Bessarabian Bulgarians, as only they have documents with which they can certify their Bulgarian origin. At the same time, the documents ascertaining the Bulgarian origin of citizens from North Macedonia, Serbia, Albania and Kosovo have been massively destroyed since 1944, which is why the establishment of their Bulgarian origin remains an unresolved issue.

Despite these difficulties, some representatives of the historical Bulgarian communities in North Macedonia, Ukraine, Moldova, Serbia, Albania and Kosovo have obtained Bulgarian citizenships or permanent residence permits. The holders of such documents carry out seasonal, weekly, and, for those residing in border areas, even daily work commutes. This labor mobility practically came to a halt in 2020 following the introduction of travel restrictions in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic.

It was only after the lifting of the COVID-19 restrictions in 2022 that work-related travel of the population with Bulgarian origin from the border regions began to gradually recover. On February 24, 2022, however, the Russian invasion of Ukraine began, leaving the Bessarabian Bulgarians in an entirely new predicament.

The contemporary problems of the local Bulgarian community, however, began in the early 1990s, when the authorities in Kiev carried out administrative "Ukrainianisation" of the names of some Bulgarians, actions against which Bulgaria did not react. After Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, analyses emerged in the Bulgarian media that the future development of a conflict in Ukraine could be expected, which is why the Bulgarian government should develop a policy to protect the Bulgarians in Ukraine. Despite these warnings, Bulgaria did not take any special actions to strengthen its ties with the Bulgarian diaspora in Ukraine and subsequently has found itself unprepared to solve their problems. For example, there was no clear official reaction from Sofia to the reduction of the number of mother tongue classes in Ukrainian public schools under the education law adopted in 2017, as did Poland, Romania and Moldova against restricting the rights of their minorities in Ukraine. The Bulgarian objection

to the attempt of the authorities in Kiev in 2020 to administratively fragment into 5 parts the Bolgrad region, where the largest part of the Bulgarian community is concentrated, was also lethargic.

During the period under review, one of the main policies of the Bulgarian state towards the Ukrainian Bulgarians was the granting of Bulgarian citizenship. From 2007 to 2021, the number of persons of Bulgarian origin from Ukraine who acquired Bulgarian citizenship was 14391*. According to data from the demographic statistics of Ukraine, Bulgarians are the fifth largest ethnic group. The 2001 census reported 204574 people, or 0.42 % of the country's population.

From the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine until November 10, 2022, 7776767 refugees have left the country, representing 17.75 % of its population. During the same period, about 900000 Ukrainian citizens have sought asylum in Bulgaria, but only about 7 % of them have remained permanently. Refugees leaving Bulgaria are thought to be returning to their homes in Ukraine, with a smaller percentage of them going to other parts of Europe.

It turns out that no Bulgarian state institution knows how many of the Ukrainian refugees in Bulgaria are of Bulgarian origin. Many Ukrainian Bulgarians who have sought asylum in Bulgaria call the call centers of the State Agency for Refugees and the Bulgarian Red Cross or personally visit their territorial divisions, but once it becomes clear that they have acquired Bulgarian citizenship, they are not allowed to be registered as refugees nor receive the appropriate support. For this reason, neither the Migration Directorate of the Ministry of Interior nor the State Agency for Refugees keep statistics based on "Bulgarian origin". There is partial information about such a category of refugees in the divisions of the Bulgarian Red Cross. However this data was not collected formally, but rather by Ukrainian Bulgarians working in it as volunteers, who recognized refugees of Bulgarian origin by their dialect.

As a result, it is not possible to say exactly what the number of asylum seekers in Bulgaria is Ukrainian citizens of Bulgarian origin, and the estimates are indirect or based on surveys. According to reports of state institutions such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but based on unofficial data, in the first four days after the Russian aggression, about 2000 Ukrainian citizens arrived in Bulgaria. Over the same period, 300 of them, or 15 %, had Bulgar-

* This information is taken from the annual reports of the administration of the Vice President of the Republic of Bulgaria and is summarized by the author.

ian passports. During the subsequent period, there were different dynamics and flows of refugees from Ukraine arriving or leaving Bulgaria. By the end of September 2022, there were more Ukrainian citizens leaving the country than those arriving. In October, the daily trends of arrivals and departures began to equalize and in early November of 2022 the number of Ukrainian citizens in Bulgaria remained stable, ranging from 53000 to 54000, of which nearly 17000 were accommodated in hotel bases. In order to clarify what proportion of Ukrainian refugees are of Bulgarian origin, in November 2022 interviews with 23 Ukrainian Bulgarians settled in Bulgaria, and identified as informal leaders of this community (civil activists and volunteers, members of the leadership of various associations, journalists, writers, etc.), were conducted. According to their estimates, the number of Ukrainian Bulgarians who came to Bulgaria after the 24th of February 2022 is about 5000 people, or 9.25 % of the total number of Ukrainian refugees in Bulgaria. Some of them have previous migration experience in Bulgaria, but there is no information on how many have remained in the country since the end of November.

The fact that while Bulgarians in Ukraine account for 0.42 % of the country's population, while at the same time representing about 9 % of the total number of Ukrainian refugees in Bulgaria, can be seen as a preference for Ukrainian Bulgarians to head to Bulgaria. Such behaviour is explainable in view of the presence of Bulgarian origin and the knowledge of Bulgarian language, which facilitates the integration of this category of persons in the country. Most media publications that discovered the presence of Bessarabian and Tavrian Bulgarians among refugees from Ukraine, found their desire to settle in Bulgaria. For example, refugees from the Bolgrad region stated: "We want to settle here permanently. My father is 65 years old, worked in the field all his life. Now he's saying: If we don't die from the war, we'll starve. The fields are mined, they can't be harvested. We talk to each other every day and see each other on the Internet. We wanted to get him here, but he didn't want to. I intend to settle here permanently. I don't want to go back."

However, a careful analysis of scarce statistics shows a number of discrepancies. While 17.75 % of the population of Ukraine has fled the country, assuming that the majority of Ukrainian Bulgarians are heading to Bulgaria, then the number of persons from the Bulgarian community who have left Ukraine is 2.44 % of their total number. This can be explained by the information received from the survey, confirmed by various media publications that despite the

military conflict, the majority of Ukrainian Bulgarians as rural population remain at home and continue to take care of the land they cultivate. According to Raina Mandjukova, Chairman of the Executive Agency for Bulgarians Abroad, "the refugee flow from the territory of Bessarabia, the Bulgarians from the Odessa region, from the beginning of the war until now, is not increasing. Not many people who want protection from Bulgaria are noticeable. Even our compatriots are taking in emigrants from other areas. The villages that suffered from depopulation are now overflowing with people."

The situation in the Zaporizhia region is slightly different. The population of 30 Bulgarian villages from Berdyansk and Melitopol Regions, as well as the town of Kherson and part of the Kherson Region, fell within the borders of the territories occupied by Russia in 2022. The Russian military authorities banned the teaching of Bulgarian language in settlements with Bulgarian population and closed the Bulgarian Sunday schools and centers. As a result of this occupation, there is an increase in the relative share of asylum seekers in Bulgaria from Tavria compared to their share of the total number of Bulgarians in Ukraine. However, one cannot speak of a mass exodus of Bulgarians from the Zaporozhye region.

The analysis of the migration behaviour of the historical Bulgarian communities on the eve, during and after the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine shows that at the present moment the majority of this population does not want to leave its historical habitations forever and prefers the circular or seasonal labor migration to Bulgaria. Such migration behaviour can be synchronized with variations in seasonal needs of the labor market in Bulgaria. In order to facilitate the seasonal, weekly and even daily labor migrations of representatives of the Bulgarian communities living in the border areas with Bulgaria, it is recommended that the border checkpoints, which are busy in the summer months, be provided with separate dedicated stations serving the population in the border areas.

As for Bulgaria's policy on the settlement of the Ukrainian conflict, it must be consistent with the commitment it has to ethnic Bulgarians located beyond the Black Sea. A report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees found that "the movement of refugees from Romania to Bulgaria, in particular Ukrainian citizens of Bulgarian origin, Bessarabian Bulgarians, could increase if there is an escalation of hostilities." Bulgarians in Ukraine are the fifth largest minority in the country, concentrated in southern Ukraine and especially around the Odessa region".

It is particularly important that a special state program be developed for Bulgarian citizens from Ukraine for their reception, as the assistance to be offered through it should be at least the same as that provided to other Ukrainian refugees. Such a program is also necessary in view of some indications for a possible future change in the migration behaviour of Ukrainian Bulgarians. According to surveys, the planned land reform in Ukraine will lead to the concentration of agricultural land in a small number of people. Thus, Ukrainian Bulgarians will be deprived of their traditional livelihoods and this will destroy their relatively closed community. The eventual loss of traditional livelihoods is the factor that prompts Ukrainian Bulgarians to discuss the possibilities for migration and a longer or permanent establishment in Bulgaria.

As a suitable model, the settlement of such Bulgarians near regional centers (a distance of up to 30 km) is outlined if there is a good communication infrastructure in such settlements. The idea of landing in depopulated areas is not accepted by the Ukrainian Bulgarians. Such a programme could also seek support from the European institutions, and Bulgaria could coordinate its actions with Poland, Hungary and Romania, which also have their own minorities in Ukraine.

For easier future adaptation and integration, Bulgaria should monitor the implementation of Article 40 of the Law, adopted in 2019 by the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, on ensuring the functioning of the Ukrainian language as an official language, according to which citizens of Ukraine whose mother tongue is different from Ukrainian have the right to record their names in their identification documents in accordance with their national tradition. The restoration of the Ukrainianized names of a part of the Bulgarian community in Ukraine in the early 1990s and the increase of Bulgarian language classes in school will help to strengthen the ties of Ukrainian Bulgarians with Bulgaria and get to know it better. This is of particular importance in the first phases after the realization of an academic or labor migration.

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