

BULGARIANS IN THE EU: IDENTITIES AND POLITICAL MOBILISATIONS

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Abstract

The notorious „foot voting“ from the initial years of the democratic transition has undergone its transformations and nowadays the departure from the geographic boundaries of Bulgaria does not involve a refusal to participate in the political entity. On the contrary, there are ever more numerous examples of civil commitment of Bulgarians abroad and the formation of a new citizenship beyond locations. The image of people waiting on long lines to vote in front of the state’s embassies and the multitude of initiatives in support of distance voting – by mail or via electronic medium – are some of the visible manifestations. Another is a multitude of solidary initiatives related to protests against the corruption and the „state captured“. The aim of the present text is to analyse the processes of emigration of Bulgarian citizens after 1989 through the prism of changing perception of identities and political activity.

Key words: (e)migration, political (e) engagement, citizenship, Bulgaria, voting

Bulgarian Emigration after 1989

The changes which occurred after 1989 have altered Bulgaria dramatically. Bulgaria’s closed society in the years of state socialism before 1989 experienced mobility and migration as either a privilege or a trauma. A select few had the right to travel; those who managed to escape had to carry the stigma of defectors (non-returnees); and eventually, the end of the regime was precipitated by the massive, forced emigration of Bulgarian citizens of Turkish background resulting from what became one of its most felonious acts – the so-called „Revival process“. These processes have left their mark on the country’s migration profile, despite the sharp differences in both understanding of migration and policies in the area. It is no surprise that in the first years following the fall of the communist regime, Bulgarians have construed migration and mobility within the political discourse in terms of an expression of freedom. Even to this day, Bulgaria remains predominantly a country of emigration. These processes, however, are already being perceived in the political talk, media interpretations and public opinion mostly in terms of a national catastrophe condemning the nation to extinction.

The dynamics of emigration in the post-1989 years varied. The factors can be grouped in two areas. Some are structural, among them high unemployment rates, risk of poverty and discrimination, the disintegration of the main social systems in the aftermath of the political and economic changes. These are some of the reasons for under-qualified and disqualifying labour migration which may have steady or circular character. The second set of factors is connected to the consummation of the „freedom to travel“ in the 1990s; transformation of migration into mobility; especially after the factual EU membership achieved in 2007 and the lifting of travel restrictions. The two sets of factors, however, involve an observable transformation of the notion of citizenship, and to a large extent there is also apparent disappointment with the institutions and the government and the state.

The total number of Bulgarian nationals living abroad, by various estimates, vacillates between a little over 1 million and nearly 2 million and a half. In fact, Bulgaria has one of the largest diasporas in Europe and the Central Asia region. According to UNDESA, approximately 1.7 million Bulgarians lived abroad in 2020, with the majority staying in the European Union. The Bulgarian emigrant population in the EU is estimated at over 800.000 people¹. The largest Bulgarian community in the EU, lives in Germany. They are followed by Bulgarians in Spain. In third and fourth place are Italy and France. Large Bulgarian diasporas traditionally also exist in Greece, the Czech Republic and Austria². Turkey is another major destination country hosting over 300.000 Bulgarians. The remaining live primarily in the USA, Canada and Israel³.

The group of Bulgarian emigrants includes two categories:

1. Bulgarian citizens residing temporarily or permanently abroad:
 - Contemporary („young“) Bulgarian emigration
 - „Old“ Bulgarian emigration.
2. „Historical“ Bulgarian communities abroad and persons of Bulgarian origin and with Bulgarian national identity and possessing foreign or dual foreign-Bulgarian citizenship.

Concerning the dynamics of emigration, it is worth noting that although after 1989 there were estimates of the number of people who have left the country varying between 600,000 and over 1 million, in subsequent decades there has been a significant decrease in the number of departures. The average net annual rate of migration, which added up to 66,000 departures in late 1980s, has dropped to about 27,000 people in the 1990s and to 17,000 people between 2001 and 2011⁴. Eurostat data indicates that between 2013 and 2019 the number of Bulgarians leaving the country has registered a gradual increase, with the number doubling over a five-year period - from 16,000 in 2013 to 31,000 in 2018⁵. It is noteworthy that 2020 has seen an

¹ Pragprocess 2022

² BNR 2023

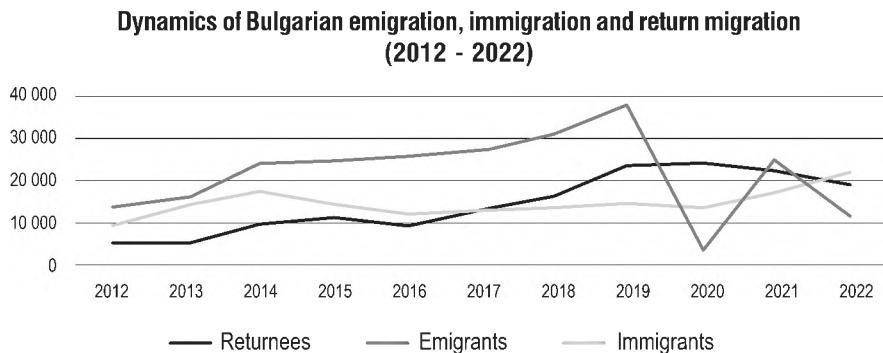
³ Pragprocess 2022

⁴ Angelov, G. & M. Lessenski 2017

⁵ Eurostat 2020

unprecedented decline in the numbers of people leaving the country – from over 37,000 for 2019 to a little over 3,600 for 2020. This is the first time that those who have left were less in numbers than migrants arriving to the country.

In the following two years, the number of people arriving in the country continued to be higher than those deciding to leave. This is an occasion to consider the possibility that Bulgaria is going through the same migration cycle that has been observed in other EU countries, which are gradually turning from typical countries of emigration into countries of immigration.



Source: The authors according to data from the National Institute of Statistics, 2023

In addition to migrant and immigrant flows, it is important for the analysis to consider the growth of returnees. The number of returnees has been rising steadily in recent years, and the COVID-19 pandemic has even reinforced these trends.

In recent years, there has been a trend of people returning to Bulgaria for a short period of time to join the civil protests against the government. There is another trend, which is also part of the phenomenon of returning migrants who are becoming political flag bearers of change through their direct involvement in the political process as MPs, ministers, etc.

Citizenship as mobilisation

The dynamics of the last decades have challenged a number of classic notions and perceptions of modern society. Citizenship has been for a long time among the basic institutions of the (national) state – accepted as a legitimate, juridical link between the individual and the political entity. The processes of migration and mobility have shaken this normative understanding as a legal status. That is why the concept itself requires constant ideological, philosophical and substantive rethinking⁶. At the same time, citizenship is also understood in terms of participation. Nowadays, it has more than one dimension – it can be in equal measure local and global, political and economic, culture- and value-oriented⁷. Also, a new geography of identities and affiliations is

⁶ Janowitz 1980, p. 1 in Staykova 2012, p. 48

⁷ Dichev 2009, p. 16

being created. Formerly conceived within the dual imagery of movement from point A to point B, of receiving and sending society, of here and there, of before and now, today migration is much more complex, multi-layered and multidirectional. Therefore, it can be said to evolve and upgrade within many forms of mobility. But to what extent is the individual, who can leave at any time, willing to commit? The dilemma, faced by the individual liberated from the location, is defined by Albert Hirschman in terms of „voice or exit“: shall I raise my voice to defend my rights, or I would simply exit the situation⁸. In the Bulgarian post-communist context of the early years of democratic change this dilemma was given a rather distinctive answer – many opted for foot voting and sought opportunities for realisation beyond the recently opened borders. This question is valid, however, if migration is conceived in the traditional image of an arrow indicating one-directional movement with return as the only alternative to departure. Nowadays, however, mobility presupposes many more opportunities. „Where I am is where I am active“, as shared by one of our respondents. In recent years we have been increasingly witnessed processes which indicate that migration is not understood as a disclaimer of participation in the political entity. Exit does not signify renunciation of voice, but in the contrary – it can add value. Those compelled to leave due to disagreement and discontent with the political situation, wish to return so that they can change the future of the state. Democracy itself is at the heart of the issue of participation. It is generally accepted that there can be no democracy without participation. If we look back to the twentieth century, the analysis of civil society follows two main directions. The first one relates to its role in the formation of values, norms and identifications. Civil society is the sphere of constructing collective identities, which are more or less contestatory. In this respect it has a definite structuring function. The second relates more to its informal aspect – the formation of social movements, networks and initiatives. In recent years, more and more citizens understand participation as transcending conventional forms, and it also becomes increasingly possible via the virtual format. The evolution of technologies and in particular, of Internet, was conducive to the formation of such *cross-border* networks of individuals and groups, sharing common interests which have shaped an alternative understanding of community membership. This has given a reason for a number of researchers to view the possibility of post-national form of citizenship⁹. The focus of our analysis, however, is not so much on post-national citizenship, but on the commitment to the nation, extended beyond the factual territorial borders of the state. Although based on the example of Bulgaria, these processes are relevant for a number of contexts on a global level as well. The commitment of the diaspora, understood not necessarily and only within cultural parameters, is equally interesting with respect to the Eastern and Central European states and the post-soviet space, as well as in post-colonial context, but also as a result of events from the recent decades such as the Arab Spring.

Emigrants as a resource for the „Motherland“

Considering the migration phenomenon through the lens of its potential and addressing it as a resource for development is well known. While emigration is more

⁸ Hirschman 1970

⁹ Saysal 1995, 1997; Jacobson 1996

often perceived traumatically as a loss, it should be noted that this is not the only possible perspective. The relationship between emigration and development has been abundantly studied by scientists for the last 50 years or so. Causality between these variables runs in both directions: development affects emigration, and emigration affects development¹⁰.

Usually, the focus of the Emigration-Development nexus analyses is on economic effects. For the present study, however, the social potential of these dual relationships, and more specifically, their political aspects, is of interest.

From the perspective of the change in the form and content of citizenship, as already described, it should be noted that emigrant communities are most often seen in the literature as examples of these changes. In the age of globalisation, the maintenance of multiple identities is aided by cheap air travel and telephone calls, the Internet and satellite television. These same factors also facilitate the transformation of diasporas into essential actors in the domestic political life of their countries of origin through return migration, voting abroad, and political mobilisation.

Another development in the research linked to this analysis moves away diasporas from pre-conditioned ethnic commonality to take into account more complex identity processes, a shift toward post-national and transnational practices and their effects, which more adequately capture recent mobility experiences. Brubaker¹¹ (2005), who detached the diaspora from ethnocultural assumptions almost two decades ago, did so to capture the stance-taking and claim-making capabilities of the diaspora and its ability to mobilise around shared interests and projects viewed from a transnational perspective¹².

Recent studies on the temporalities of diaspora mobilisation identify ‘diasporas as agents in transitional justice processes, contested sovereignty, and fragile and de facto states, as well as in civic and ethnic-based activism’¹³. It seems that diasporas react with mobilisations to events that occur in host-states and home-states as well as in other locations to which diasporas are transnationally linked¹⁴.

Curiously, states do not sufficiently recognise this potential for engagement and mobilisation at this stage. However, it is visible among migrants, especially in times of crisis. The Arab uprisings, which provided first and second generations living abroad a chance to assert their sense of belonging to their home countries or claim their own identity amidst host societies, is a relevant example¹⁵.

The Syrian uprising in 2011 can be considered another event that prompted unprecedented levels of collective action and organisation, particularly among the opponents of the current government of Syria, among the Syrian diaspora and emigrant communities¹⁶.

¹⁰ Docquier 2017

¹¹ Brubaker 2005, p. 13

¹² Vathi&Trandafiou 2022

¹³ Koinova 2018, p. 1251

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Colombo&Gozzini 2021

¹⁶ Diker&Ragab 2019

These examples are not the only ones but are highly vivid and significant. What is essential is that diaspora activism depends on the socio-spatial context in which diasporas are embedded. Here is the place to note one assumption: the long-standing attempts to bring Europe closer to citizens, revitalise democracy, stimulate civic activism, and ultimately stimulate mobile Europeans' engagement with their countries of origin.

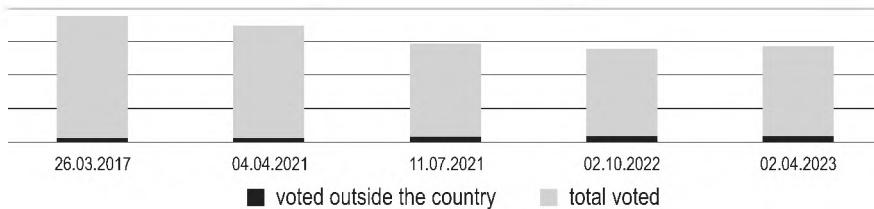
That emigrant engagement could assume direct and indirect modes of engagement through digital, civic, associational, and epistemic fields. Direct forms of diaspora mobilisation comprised financial support to political parties or NGOs, returning from exile to participate in the protests, national dialogue processes, political negotiations, or to run for elections. The next part of the text will examine the example of Bulgarian migrants in the EU, who have demonstrated increased interest and solidarity with what is happening in recent years in the context of a deepening political crisis in the country.

From foot-voting to civil (e)engagement

Bulgaria is not just the poorest EU member state, but also occupies the frontline positions by its levels of corruption and lack of confidence in the institutions among the citizens. The notorious foot voting from the initial years of the democratic transition has undergone its transformations and nowadays the departure from the geographic boundaries of Bulgaria does not involve a refusal to participate in the political whole. On the contrary, there are ever more numerous examples of civil commitment of Bulgarians abroad and the formation of a new citizenship beyond locations.

The image of people waiting on long lines to vote in front of the state's embassies and the multitude of initiatives in support of distance voting – by mail or via electronic medium – are some of the visible manifestations. Another is a multitude of solidary initiatives related to protests against the corruption and the „state captured“. Such were for instance the protests under the slogan #DanceWithMe in 2013 - 2014. The civil mobilisations of 2020 and 2021 have brought Bulgaria to serious political instability and several premature elections, but it was also the first time that votes from abroad actually have played a truly decisive part in the outcome. The different forms of civic engagements of the Bulgarians abroad are interconnected. After the anti-government protests held in Bulgaria in 2020, which were strongly supported by students returning home due to the Covid-19 pandemic as well as solidly supported at cities with a large Bulgarian diaspora, such as Brussels, Paris, Madrid, Barcelona, Berlin and London, Bulgarian emigrants showed unprecedented interest in voting in the 2021 election.

**Results of the last 5 parliamentary elections
(total and votes abroad)**



Source: The authors according to data from the Central Election Commission, 2023

While the overall turnout is declining, that of voters abroad is increasing and has remained despite the many parliamentary run-off elections. The role of Bulgarian emigrants is much more than electoral¹⁷, Ivaylo Dichev believes. In them is concentrated the hope for change, which in an interesting way connects with the traditional expectation of Bulgarian society that aid will come from outside.

There are some recent studies on Bulgarian diaspora, which state that migration and intra-EU mobility affect the political participation and activism by transforming the well-known Hirschman dichotomy „exit-voice“ into a more complex scale of forms of protest organisation and participation, facilitated by social media and the freedom of movement within the EU¹⁸. The evidence for that the scholars found in the 2013 protest waves.

While in the political discourse emigration is being presented as a part of some „national catastrophe“ and „nation extinction“, not without help from other power holders such as scientists, analysers, media, etc, and the majority of people experience it traumatically, Bulgarian expatriates have demonstrated that emigration can actually constitute a resource. Not so much because of the importance of money remittances to national economy and to the essential survival of many Bulgarian families, as for the social capital for transformation of society through a new kind of citizenship.

Although in the first years after 1989 civil society and civil participation were understood as unconditional factors in the democratisation process, their development, as with many other sectors, has also been marked more or less by the corrupted transition to a market economy and within the context of deformations of the political process. It is in this context that the concept of citizenship acquired a special significance. A relatively novel topic for the Bulgarian domain of research, it was introduced and asserted by Anna Krasteva. Citizenship pertains not just to legal status, but is also loaded with commitment, action and activity. This juncture coincided with the advent of digital technologies, the development of social networks and their increasing significance in politics „Technology becomes socially condensed and acquires sense only by becoming implicated in political transformation“, writes Anna Krasteva¹⁹, who believes that the 'digital citizen' is the political project of the Internet. He/She will eventually emerge as the key actor, who strives to revitalise the democratic processes, rationalising them through the new digital prism.

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¹⁷ Ivaylo Dichev 2020

¹⁸ Rone&Junes 2021

¹⁹ Krasteva 2013

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