

# **“Why would you stay in this *pauper/peasant* country?”: Re-examining the rural/urban post-social divide in migration discourses in Bulgaria**

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While most countries value staying in their homeland, in Bulgaria one is a “good Bulgarian” if they leave Bulgaria. This sentiment is heard in everyday conversations, public broadcast, newspaper, and online content within Bulgaria. In today’s mobile globalized world, people’s decision to relocate for a job or fleeing in search of a better life is common. As a result, both native and host countries attempt to understand and handle mobility through various policies and programs. Even though one cannot disregard the economic and material reasons for migration, policy changes often disregard the cultural and moral reasons informing such decisions.

Focusing on public discourses and interviews, this study examines how people discuss their and others’ migration choices in order to highlight the larger local cultural understandings of identity and social action. The study focuses on how communication reinforces cultural understandings (Carbaugh, 2007) of identity (a “good Bulgarian”) and proper action (leaving vs. staying). This work builds on studies within communication, social interaction, and post- socialism (Creed, 1995; Geertz, 1973; Verdery, 1996). The study uses Ethnography of Communication (Hymes, 1962) and Cultural Discourse Analysis (Carbaugh, 2007) to examine naturally occurring talk and discussions of and about migration in public settings in Bulgaria in order to understand how people view themselves, and their connection to their country. Mobility and migration patterns in Bulgaria have predominantly been studied from the perspectives of political psychology, anthropology, sociology, political science, folk studies, economy, and within a nationalist context (Elchinova, 2009). These fields have focused mainly on migration patterns, motivation, and diasporas abroad (Mancheva, 2008; Elchinova, 2009).

Bulgaria saw one of its biggest stream of emigrants (Council of Europe, 1999) during the period 1989-1996, continuing with approximately 40,000 people per year, which for a country of about 7,9 million is significant. The long-lasting economic instability, profoundly entrenched nationalism, and deeply cultural link to the land results in any migration being viewed as suspicious and an object of public scrutiny. Findings from this project not only shed light on the understandings of migration and the national identities people negotiate in everyday settings but also provide more nuanced understanding of how current policies in Bulgaria can be reconstructed in order to better address the current migration patterns. A focal local identity that is frequently highlighted in such discussions of migration is the notion of *seljnin* (“peasant”). Even though the term has been historically associated with a rural/urban divide, the data suggests that the specific cultural tensions of such a divide has been exacerbated and

transformed into political differences related to socialism—previously noted by Creed (Burawoy, 2000). Once the communist bloc crumbled, such a distinction was further reframed as global devaluation and latched onto the existing uncertainty as to the place of Bulgarians between the East and the West, socialism and capitalism. Examining the nuances of how a particular “peasant” identity is constructed and navigated in present-day migration discussions offers a unique understanding of the ties between context, identity, action, and the possibilities for transformation.

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