Cleaners and Labourers on Facebook? Bulgarians in the UK between Free Movers and a Digital Diaspora

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Abstract

This study explores the way Bulgarians living in the UK interact online. We rely on an online survey of attitudes among Bulgarians in the UK, participant observation in Bulgarian support networks during the period 2016-20, as well as qualitative interaction analysis (adapted for non-visual environments) over the course of six months (2019-20) of top posts from the largest online support groups. Our findings point to the gradual consolidation of organised informal support among Bulgarians, especially and predominantly among those of 'low-status' occupations and more precarious migration journeys. We also observe a trend of emancipation and entrepreneurship enabled by online networks in the almost complete absence of formal associations of Bulgarians in the UK. Finally, we acknowledge the importance of the context of crisis and precarity for the emergence of informal support networks online. What this tells us about Bulgarians in the UK is that, while often avoided by so called 'elite migrants', informal support groups have begun to function as quasi-diasporic communities assisted by online social networking platforms, (still) facilitated by free movement but creating a unique transnational space between 'home' and 'the foreign' to enable mobility, interaction and belonging.

Keywords

Bulgarians in the UK, social networks, digital diasporas, low-skilled migration, EU mobility

This study explores the ways Bulgarians living in the UK interact online in order to learn more about the nature of their in-group relationships. While Bulgarians have, in their greatest numbers, arrived in the UK as mobile European Union (EU) citizens enjoying the right of free movement, they have been among the most disadvantaged (together with Romanians).[1] They are also among the most recent EU arrival groups, so they are still relatively unsettled.[2] Moreover, Bulgarians (among others – see King and Pratsinakis, 2020) have faced numerous contexts of crisis in the UK (financial crisis, shifting immigration rules, Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic more recently). Have these adversities affected the way Bulgarians interact with each other in the UK: have Bulgarians remained but mobile individuals in search of better prospects, or have they formed in-group solidarities to help each other navigate adversity? If solidarities have emerged, what do they look like: are they visible online

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[1] Bulgaria is the poorest EU member measured by GDP per capita (2018 Eurostat data).

[2] See Office for National Statistics, Long-Term International Migration (2010-19) based on Department for Work and Pensions and Home Office data, https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/bulletins/migrationstatisticsquarterlyreport/may2020#eu-and-non-eu-migration-over-time.

or offline; do they form a Bulgarian community in the UK or many fragmented communities; do we have, perhaps, a Bulgarian diaspora?

We argue that solidarities have definitely emerged, especially and predominantly among those Bulgarians with more precarious migration journeys – and perhaps precisely because of this precarity. But we notice further peculiarities of the emerging solidarities. To begin with, they have emerged spontaneously online, enabled by social networking platforms (in our case mostly Facebook), having resisted other more formal – and rigid – forms of association. They have facilitated entrepreneurship on the basis of the emerging solidarity (e.g. businesses aimed specifically at Bulgarians in the UK which would not have existed otherwise). They have created a unique transnational (online) community space which has further consolidated the formation of the in-group and, to a degree, emancipated its members from the status of precarious outsiders in the host society. And unlike some other formal associations whose aim has been to showcase cultural heritage and success, these online solidarities have been focused specifically on practical self-help in the everyday, making them uniquely real and, ultimately, significant in the context of adversity.

What we have then are Bulgarian communities of solidarity online, besides the few small high-brow cultural associations in the UK. They are not 'cybercommunities' (see Brinkerhof 2009: 85 in her study of digital diasporas) as they do not remain exclusively online: they exist because they improve the physical parameters of the everyday in invaluable practical ways. And they do not remain just 'communities' in the way French communities form around the digital and physical sites of the Institut Français, for example, because they are born out of precarity and crisis. It is these features that call upon the concept of (digital) diasporas, even though many of the (otherwise fluid) elements of diasporas are missing here (enduring and often forced exile, inability or unwillingness to integrate, commitment to the homeland – see Berthomière and Sheffer 2005 for an overview). What we call them is digital quasi-diasporic communities enabled by online social networking platforms, (still) relying on free movement but creating a unique transnational space between 'home' and 'the foreign' to facilitate mobility, interaction and belonging before – and beyond - Brexit. In what follows we unpack what these communities look like, after framing and justifying the conceptual discussion on the solidarities we identify, and describing the methodology we have applied to exploring them.

Are Bulgarians in the UK a Diaspora?

Migrant groups, even EU citizens', have often been studied through the prism of diasporas (for Poles in the UK, for instance, see Elgenius 2017, Burrell 2009). But it is not unusual to see the term 'diaspora' used frivolously, outside of its stricter conceptual boundaries (as per critique in Cohen

1997, Safran 1999, etc.), also to apply to Bulgarians abroad (e.g. in Maeva 2010, Marcheva 2011 below). But should the concept of diaspora inform our understanding of in-group interaction in the context of free movement (after all, Glorius et al 2014 speak of 'a lifestyle of mobility') which seems to have undermined the role of traditional diasporas (Weinar 2017)? This question is relevant to our study as we are interested precisely in the nature of in-group solidarity.

Bulgarians tend not to have formal membership associations abroad (Koinova 2018, Markova 2010) and not to want to build such (Maeva 2010, Maeva 2017). In the post-communist period this may be related to path-dependent aversion to collectivistic behaviour, but it is also driven by the fact that Bulgarians' migratory decisions and experiences then (and especially since 2007) have happened within the rules of free movement, enabling individual mobility and a sense of entitlement ('We have a right to be here.' See also Scholten et al 2018, Glorius et al 2014 on the specificities of mobility when compared to migration). Yet, we find established informal social support networks.

Their emergence online brings up the relevance of the digital diaspora literature (see Andersson 2019 for a review), yet the question remains if the type of solidarity emerging here can be qualified as diasporic. After all, Bulgarians are free to circulate between their home and host society relatively unimpeded (at least in the studied period), there are no significant formal obstacles to their integration in the host society (if they wished it), and not all of them carry a significant sense of belonging to the homeland and desire to return at all costs (see Ranta and Nancheva 2019 for a more detailed study on this). This suggests that, strictly speaking, we are not dealing with a diaspora, albeit digital.

However, our study suggests, we are not dealing with individual movers free from in-group solidarities either, and clearly not among the communities we studied online. They were made up of methodologically harder to capture, 'low-skill' migrants often speaking little or no English (though we do look to, for example, Kofman and Raghuram 2005 problematising the 'low-/high-skill' divide). These migrants often undertake temporary, short-term or repeated circular migration trajectories (see for instance Ruspini et al 2016). Yet, they remain, bring their families or set up transnational businesses (e.g through 'migratory family/ work chains' as per Gomes Mestres et al 2012: 214), and establish social networks with wide-reaching impact beyond individual mobility (Ibañez 2007 looks for instance on Bulgarian nation-building from abroad).

How should we understand the nature of these networks? Exploring the complex internal dynamics of spontaneous in-group interaction within the sites of engagement of Bulgarians in the UK, we learned that interactions are multi-spatial and multi-level, they serve a range of practical purposes,

and reveal specific characteristics of the participants which would not have been captured in non-natural settings (e.g. interviews).

These informal but enduring online associations of Bulgarians in the UK, we argue, function as quasi-diasporic institutions in the context of free movement in that they enable all kinds of relationships between home and host country, they facilitate the settlement and emplacement in the host country in the context of adversity and crisis, and they maintain the various projects of belonging which span this relational transnational space (Vertovec and Cohen, 1999). And it is precisely the context of precarity and crisis which has given purpose and endurance to these informal associations, and which indicates we should not fully do away with the concept of diaspora just yet, despite freedom of movement. The case of online organisations of Bulgarians in the UK suggests we observe a quasi-(digital)diaspora in the making. In the next section we sketch what has brought this 'quasi-diaspora' into being.

Crisis as Normality

The UK has seen Bulgarian migrants even before the EU enlargement of 2007 but not in great numbers and without much visible self-organisation. Since the formation of the modern Bulgarian state (late 19th century) Bulgarians have migrated to Britain to study or trade (see Maeva 2017 for a detailed overview of periodisation of migration and sources) but greater cultural affinity with other states in Europe (Markova 2004, Kovacheva 2014 on Spain and Germany) has meant not many chose to do so. Those who did, for instance as political exiles during the Cold War, did not establish lasting structures of self-organisation. Many speak of Metody Kusev, for example, as 'leader of the Bulgarian community in London' because of the prominent role this Bulgarian émigré played in raising the profile of Bulgarian migration (during his 60 years in the UK he taught Bulgarian language at the University of London and at the Foreign Office, worked for the BBC, and took it upon himself to establish a Bulgarian church in London, see Tankova 2000, also *Bulgarians in London*). But until his death in 2000 (and to this day) Bulgarians are hosted in the garage of their Embassy in order to worship in Bulgarian. This suggests absence of desire or ability within the (quite small) in-group to self-organise (so no diaspora just yet).

It was only in the process of EU enlargement that the UK loomed as a desirable destination for Bulgarians and they began migrating in greater numbers.[3] What is peculiar about this process is that, for the UK, the migration of Bulgarians has been among the most problematic European migrations. This is because Bulgaria (and Romania) joined the EU at a point when the UK was already

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experiencing free movement fatigue and was moving towards more stringent immigration control (marked by the 2007 Borders Act). The UK was one of the countries which decided to restrict Bulgarians' (and Romanians') economic rights within a transition period of 7 years (work is the main reason Bulgarians state for coming to the UK according to the ONS and other studies). This was a popular move in the wake of the global financial crisis and the ensuing recession. When Bulgarians were allowed to access the UK labour market unimpeded (in 2014), UK's ever more problematic relationship with the EU was already heading towards the events which led to the EU Referendum in 2016 and the Brexit vote. Bulgarians featured prominently in the debates around it, together with other Eastern European migrants, as a problem (Guma and Dafydd Jones 2019 and Rzepnikowska 2019 on Brexit, Fox, Moroşanu, Szilassy 2012 on an earlier period). It did not help British attitudes towards the free movers from Bulgaria that the UK had set for itself the aim of attracting 'the brightest and the best' (UK Government 2020): the policy and narrative focus on 'highly-skilled' migration (however problematic the term may be) undervalues all jobs classified as 'elementary' by the ONS (even as they turned out to be essential in the Covid-19 pandemic).

Bulgarian migrants in the UK are predominantly (around 50% of the 85,000 Bulgarians in the UK in 2017[4]) employed in such undervalued 'low-skill' positions (see ONS pooled data on the period 2014-2016). One in five Bulgarians is employed in the construction sector, and one in five is employed in the distribution, accommodation and restaurant industry,[5] giving credence to the stereotype of Bulgarians in the UK (often internalised) as 'labourers' and 'cleaners'.[6] Researchers have occasionally attempted to challenge the stereotype by emphasizing the highly-skilled Bulgarian migrants in their samples (e.g. Marcheva 2011, Koinova 2018, Genova 2015, 2017, 2019), but they have not changed the public narrative or, indeed, the data.

The fact is that Bulgarians in the UK have been among those European nationals most determined to survive adversity and willing to accept compromises with their social status, career, and living conditions, in order to make their migration/ mobility journeys matter. This is confirmed in findings

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[4] This number is from an organisation conservative on migration policies https://www.migrationwatchuk.org/statistics-population-country-birth/#create-graph. In 2019 the UK government estimated Bulgarians in the UK to be 109,000, while 184,910 applied for settled/ pre-settled status by mid-year 2020 according to statistics by the Home Office (suggesting the number is a bit higher than that) https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/eu-settlement-scheme-quarterly-statistics-june-2020.
[5] https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/articles/livingabroad/dynamicsofmigrationbetweenbritainandtheeu2
[6] The labels 'labourer' and 'cleaner' are often used by the in-group for referral and self-referral purposes, indicating internalisation (only, 'labourer' is always used, incorrectly in English, as лейбър ('labour') to describe the occupation of certified general worker). A quick perusal of job adverts for Bulgarians in the UK reveals these as the most advertised, while our study confirmed these also as the most frequently sought and taken up occupations.

by Ivancheva (2007) who studied the earliest Bulgarian student farm workers in the UK, by Hristova (2008) who speaks of 'second class EU citizens', by Datta (2011) who focused on low-paid Bulgarians in the UK during the financial crisis and their labour market participation strategies. The Datta study also confirms, as others have, that the restrictions applied to EU2 nationals upon their accession have reinforced long-term biases against them and have impacted their ability to participate in the labour market on an equal footing (see the study by Ruhs and Wadsworth 2018 on Bulgarians and Romanians, and by Genova 2017 on, notably, highly-skilled Bulgarians in the UK).

As it appears, the impact of multiple crises emerges as particularly relevant to our study. In the UK, the four years after the EU referendum (which our study covers), have been a period of peaking hostile environment immigration policies (Goodfellow 2019 on the Windrush scandal), acute divisions over UK's relationship with EU free movement (e.g. Lulle 2017), and, in 2020, a period of public health crisis in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. Indeed, when these multiple layers of crisis compound an already precarious social environment defined by low-status, we observe a European migrant group which has been subjected to both implicit adversity in and explicit hostility on behalf of the host society (examples include, but are not limited to, reports in *The Mail* by Thompson 2020 on racist attacks on Bulgarians; racialised reporting on crime in *The Sun* by Dale 2019, etc).

How do Bulgarians in the UK manage this? What support networks exist to facilitate Bulgarians' often precarious lives in the UK, as well as their continued arrival? How do the adverse conditions affect Bulgarians' solidarity with each other? These are the questions which guided our study of Bulgarians' organised and spontaneous interactions online.

Our Methodological Path to Facebook

In our exploration, we rely on parts of an online survey of attitudes among Bulgarians in the UK (2017, n-275),[7] participant observation in Bulgarian offline and online support networks during the period 2016-2020, and qualitative interaction analysis (adapted for non-visual environments) of top posts from the largest online support groups during the course of six months in 2019-2020.

Surveying the Reluctance to Self-Organise

The parts of the survey we use descriptively here covered explicitly expressed attitudes on belonging, self-organisation and participation in a range of organisations both in Bulgaria and in the UK at a point in time when UK's decision on curtailing free movement was still unclear. The survey

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[7] Carried out within the *EU Migrants in the UK* Project with Ronald Ranta (funded by the British Academy SG161867). The survey was distributed online through snowballing.

results confirmed, for all ages, levels of qualification, occupation and gender that Bulgarians in the UK predominantly do not participate in any formal or informal organisations, and this is not behaviour typical for the status of migrants (they don't participate in Bulgaria either). 44% of the informants say they never engage with the Bulgarian Embassy in the UK (for the rest engagement has been necessary because of children's travel and other consular services). 43% say they never engage with the Bulgarian church in the UK (Bulgarians are traditionally Eastern Orthodox but they are rarely practicing). 78% say they never engage with Bulgarian cultural associations. Between 80% and 93% of our respondents (depending on the different types of organisations we asked about) declare that they never participate in any other formal or informal associations abroad (the few exceptions in our sample were for school parents associations and gym membership).

Participant Observation in the Few Associations which Thrived (or didn't)

To understand how these responses relate to Bulgarians' lived experiences in the UK, we complemented them with participant observation around the organised forms of community we identified as active. Indeed, we did not find many associations of Bulgarians in the UK which boasted any significant membership (see Maeva 2017 for a detailed ethnographic historical survey). We used the main researchers' affiliations and networks to observe some of the activities of these groups over the four years we cover here, and to learn more about their history and outreach.

The *Bulgarian State Agency for Bulgarians Abroad* lists nine associations of Bulgarians in the UK but they represent small groups of Bulgarians (Bulgarian students in Oxford, Bulgarians working in The City, Bulgarian health workers, etc). Some support Bulgarian businesses (the *British-Bulgarian Business Association*, based in Bulgaria, has offered information and networking since 2015, while the *Bulgarian Business Awards* forum, a recent addition, has been nominating Bulgarian entrepreneurs since 2019). Some are specifically cultural associations (their activity seems to have intensified in the 2010s). Besides the *Cultural Institute* at the Bulgarian Embassy (which runs regular events), the *Bulgarian Folk, Traditions and Culture* charity has been running spring dance festivals since 2012 in North London, the *Bulgarians in London* group has been organising casual 'walks' along places of historical curiosity since 2015, the *Bulgarian City Club* organised a Day of Culture in Soho in the spring of 2019.

Although these organisations do point to an increasingly more active and assertive presence of Bulgarians in the UK, they do not boast any significant membership or outreach. If anything, they represent Bulgarians in the UK who are already settled and seek to assert their cultural heritage and status. They can be understood as representing a small 'elite' of migrants rather than the more

recent, temporary or circular migrants which appear to be a majority. These organisations do not tell us much about how a predominantly underpaid group of EU nationals establish themselves in overall adverse economic and social conditions in what are considered elementary occupations of little prestige in the home society. They do not tell us either if Bulgarians support each other in such adverse conditions, how they relate to each other, and what they do in personally challenging situations once they arrive in the UK, because their activities are focused on showcasing success and culture, rather than responding to adversity in the everyday. This is the reason why we sought to identify other channels which have been set up for these precise purposes.

An all-purpose electronic information platform – *BG Help*[8] - set up in 2005 stands out as very popular and widely consulted by Bulgarians arriving in the UK or considering travelling.[9] Unlike *BG Help*'s advertising and information features, its Forum for interaction and problem-solving has not been used as frequently and widely as the eponymous Facebook groups in the studied period (discussions appear overall dated when compared to the bigger Facebook groups'). Not all members are currently residing in the UK but the active discussions, jobs, accommodation announcements and transactions are from members who live in the UK.

Besides *BG Help*, two Bulgarian language printed media published in the UK support and manage Bulgarians' work-related mobility and integration in the UK: the newspapers *BG Ben* (since 2004) and *Budilnik* (since 2001). Since their inception, they have been available in Bulgarian food shops, the Embassy, pubs and cafes frequented by Bulgarians (*BG Ben* say their physical distribution network spans 90 locations across the UK). However, since 2008 *BG Ben* has moved online[10] (2010 for Budilnik[11]) in view of faster turnaround and wider reach. This has meant the gradual decline of physical distribution.

In the absence of established community spaces, the decreasing relevance of printed media, and the limited interactive features of online forums and newspapers, Bulgarians' engagement with each other has appeared to shift towards social networking platforms online.

Facebook as our Focus

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[8] www.bghelp.co.uk.
[9] The platform has a Facebook page (est. 2010, currently featuring 7,500 members) which does not seem too popular. A group with the same name and function (spelled slightly differently and not associated with the BG Help platform) has had a Facebook presence since 2014, boasting a much bigger membership (currently 61,131 people). This study has followed the activity of the two BG Help Facebook groups, among others.
[10] www.bgben.co.uk.
[11] www.budilnik.com.

In our survey, 28% of participants declared they never engaged with Bulgarian language online social networks while in the UK (the rest had some degree of engagement) and this number corresponded broadly to these informants in our survey who occupied higher-paid professional positions. For the rest, online social networks stood out as very relevant, and in particular Bulgarian language Facebook as the mainstream social media platform of the late 2000s.

Marcheva (2011) studied Bulgarians' Facebook groups abroad in the period 2008-2009, looking to identify a global 'digital diaspora map' enabled by Facebook. Her study is a useful starting point for us. Marcheva says, for example, that her informants were then in the age group 18-35, thus predominantly young and mobile. She lists two of the 'most active' Facebook groups in the UK as '*Bulgarians in UK*' (524 members) and '*Bulgarians Studying in the UK*' (346 members). Today a group '*Bulgarians in the UK*' (though set up in 2010) boasts a membership of 24,280[12] (the students' group no longer exists) and is complemented by dozens of other groups for Bulgarians in the UK with different purposes, most with membership in the thousands. Marcheva does provide some reflections on what made Facebook 'the ultimate social network' but it is clear even without them that Facebook has dominated the social media space in the new millennium. This is why, in the absence of other forms of organised group engagement and interaction, we focused on Facebook.

Interaction Analysis as a Method

In order to explore interactions within the Facebook groups we identified, we joined them as members (after submitting our private credentials to the administrators and receiving approval). Over the course of six months we followed in-group activity daily, building an understanding of the purpose and function of the groups without interfering. We were specifically interested in capturing spontaneous interaction not moderated by the researcher or her tools, occurring in natural contexts.[13] With the help of Facebook's algorithms, 'most active' posts in the groups were identified, which were then analysed in terms of content, purpose, patterns of meanings and frequencies of actions, applying interaction analysis adapted for non-visual environments (on the basis of Jordan and Henderson 1995, Paugh and Izquierdo 2009, Allen 2017). As participants 'draw upon and create shared understandings, which shape their subsequent actions and meanings' (Bavelas et al 2017: 139), such interaction reveals otherwise unavailable information about their social contexts. The unique advantage of this method is understanding, given in-group cultural competence, what happens within the group without relying on interpretations of participants after the interaction has happened (Keyton 2018: 2). In the following section we present our findings.

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[12] All membership numbers henceforward updated as of July 2020.
[13] We have relied only on publicly available data shared in the groups by the participants, without retaining on record any personal identity information.

Bulgarians on Facebook

From our participant observation within existing online groups we noticed that most current groups have been set up around the mid-2010s with a significant rise in the period 2014-2017. The biggest group currently is *Bulgarians in England*[14] with membership of 68,580 est. 2012 (followed closely by the *BG-Help* group we mentioned above). It has a general purpose to engage all Bulgarians in the UK without any specific requirements for membership.

Types of Groups

Some groups are explicitly set up for work support either for the whole of the UK or for London: *Bulgarians in London Work/ Mutual Support*[15] numbers 37,000 members est. 2014, *Bulgarians in London Seeking or Offering Jobs*[16] 34,900 members est. 2015, *Bulgarians in London Seeking Work*[17] 29,187 members est. 2015, *Bulgarians Seeking Work in Great Britain*[18] 21,400 members est. 2010. Others are a mixture of mutual support for work and accommodation and entertainment: *Bulgarians in London: Work and Fun*[19] is the biggest one with a membership of 59,700 established 2015 (updated with its current name in 2018).

A series of groups are aimed at supporting local Bulgarian communities across the UK: *Bulgarians in Manchester* numbers 9,900 members and was established in 2011; *Bulgarians in Nottingham* numbers 4,900 members est. 2013; *Bulgarians in Liverpool* 1,800 members est. 2011; *Bulgarians in Norwich and Norfolk* 3,000 members established 2009; *Bulgarians in Southampton* 2698 est. 2011; *Bulgarians in Aberdeen* 1,156 members established 2015; *Bulgarians in Leeds* 1,900 members est. 2011; *Bulgarians in Portsmouth* 2,800 members est. 2011; *Bulgarians in Leicester* 1,264 members est. 2015; *Bulgarians in Cornwall* 397 members est. 2014; etc. It is noticeable that some of these groups have been established earlier than the biggest current ones, suggesting there have been functioning support networks in smaller cities and town before the ones in London (mutual support and assistance by place of residence is the declared purpose of all of the regional groups).

Some of the groups have a more narrowly defined purpose: a group fighting *Against the Discrimination of Bulgarians in the UK*[20] (1,277 members est. 2013); groups linking Bulgarian

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[14] "Bulgari v Anglia."
[15] "Bulgari v London rabota-vzaimopomosht."
[16] "Bulgari v London tarseshti/ predlagashti rabota."
[17] "Bulgari v London tarseshti rabota."
[18] "Bulgari tarseshti rabota vav Velikobritania."
[19] "Bulgari v London – rabota i razvlechenia."
[20] "Sreshtu diskriminatsiata na bulgarite v Anglia."

mothers in the UK (*Bulgarian Mums in England*[21] 21,235 members est. 2016); a group for *Bulgarians Working on Farms and in Factories* (1,262 members est. 2107); a group aimed at generating a positive impact on life in Bulgaria (*Bulgarians in London/ Citizens' Initiative for a Better Bulgaria* 9,955 members est. 2012).

It is interesting to peruse the requirements for group membership and participation. The vast majority of the groups are 'private' but usually a request for participation from a credible Facebook profile is sufficient to gain access (some non-Bulgarian fellow-researchers, among other interested parties, have been members of the bigger groups). Some of the groups have stricter rules for membership and participation which they justify on the basis of their purpose. The 8,600-strong *Bulgarians in London* group is 'only open to Bulgarians in London'. The Bulgarians in London group for job-seekers (*Bulgarians in London Seeking Work*) has the requirement to write in correct Bulgarian language using accurately the Bulgarian Cyrillic alphabet (the absence of Cyrillic in the first online social platforms had prompted the Latin transliteration of Bulgarian using a made-up mixture of Latin letters and numbers resembling Cyrillic letters which has widely been frowned upon by cultural purists). The group also calls for 'keeping a decent tone', having been 'set up for immigrants who want to be well paid, not white slaves'. Other groups have more standard participation rules. The 59,700-strong *Bulgarians in London*, for example, warns against pornographic posts, posts that advertise the sale of cigarettes when accompanied by photographs, as well as threats and intimidation. The bigger *Bulgarian Mothers in the UK* group prohibits male discrimination and re-posting the same post twice. The 28,200-strong *Bulgarians in England* focus on 'good deeds' and kindness. Finally, some of the groups are explicitly flippant, writing in made-up Latin transliteration and focusing on breaking the rules guiding the other groups, but they are not among the most frequented ones. In general, there seems to be an attempt to moderate the groups responsibly, within existing rules for acceptable online communication and exchange, and, most importantly, within their stated purpose.

On the basis of our interaction analysis, we have established three main functions which participation in these groups provides. These are practical mutual support in the absence of other support mechanisms, group self-affirmation on the basis of the nuanced relationships between the homeland and the host country and within the migrant group itself, and individual self-affirmation in the context of relative social isolation. In the following paragraphs we provide examples of when and how these occur within the interactions we analysed.

Practical Support in the Absence of Other Social Support Mechanisms

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[21] "BG mami v Anglia."

The most regular discussion posts within the Facebook groups we followed are from Bulgarians looking for work. They are not the most actively discussed ones (usually followed by responses from 3-10 users and several exchanges directing to private messaging) but they do appear with greatest regularity throughout the observed period, indicating that Bulgarians join these support groups even before they embark on their migratory/ mobility journey. Posts also appear when suddenly losing a job, or when moving to a different town. Sometimes they are accompanied by queries about renting accommodation (another regular post type).

A woman in her 30s wrote (Aug 2019): 'I am moving to Manchester, can you advise on a friendly and nice area to live and work?' In the subsequent interaction it became clear that the husband had to change jobs so she was scoping neighbourhoods to establish connections for schools for the children. Several recommendations from people living in Manchester or having worked there followed in a friendly, mutually supportive manner (with references to the fact that the young woman was married and a mother, invoking respect in a traditionally patriarchical mindset). Another example: a woman in her 20s living in a particular post-code in South London, asking for cleaning work in the area. Immediate questions followed on whether she drove or had a vehicle, and how many hours she was willing to work. The questions were asked in a business-like manner (boss to applicant) suggesting a standardised exchange.

The most frequent posts in all observed groups have been from Bulgarians in the UK offering services or selling products and looking for customers among the Bulgarian communities. Such posts appear several times a day every day in most of the groups (unless the group has explicitly prohibited advertising – which some more specific interest groups have). These posts are also not very commented: usually it is enough to express an interest in order to receive direction for contact via private messaging. However, they reveal quite a lot about the activities and interests of the Bulgarians in the UK, both as entrepreneurs and as customers.

To begin with, such entrepreneurship is always on a small scale. The one regular exception is big recruitment agencies working with EU nationals in the UK who have in their employment a Bulgarian agent, member of the Bulgarian support groups. Speaking through her personal Facebook account and in Bulgarian, the agent would describe the recruitment offer and provide contacts. The most regular offers are for storage and packaging workers, delivery and factory workers, and farm workers. Remuneration is usually at minimum national wage with possibility for overtime hours, 'depending on your willingness to earn'. The latter often appears in Bulgarian recruitment posts, suggesting a stable internalisation of the 'good worker' trope by Bulgarians in the UK eager to prove their deservingness (Bulat 2017). During the Covid-19 pandemic, the adverts that appeared were for

storehouse and delivery workers, with detailed 'insider' instructions on how to apply and be successful.

Besides bigger recruitment adverts, frequent and regular posts appear from small-scale entrepreneurs offering their own services. These often are from Bulgarian food businesses: shops, restaurants, cafes, or certified cooks in private kitchens offering delivery service. They could be from people trading in one particular food stuff: home-made Bulgarian salami of different kinds (lukanka, sudjuk, pastarma, babek are traditional Bulgarian cured meats), packaged olives from Greece, or home-grown vegetables. Another extremely frequent trade is cigarettes. Bulgarians are avid smokers[22] and the high prices of tobacco in the UK have given rise to a vibrant small trade in cigarettes among Bulgarians who carry as much as (or sometimes more than) their EU allowance of cigarettes every time they travel. During the Covid-19 pandemic, which cut off frequent travel to Bulgaria, posts offering or asking for cigarettes have been a daily occurrence.

Other frequently offered small services by Bulgarians to Bulgarians in the UK are van or lorry shipping and courier services to and from Bulgaria, driving passengers to and from Bulgaria, shuttle to and from airports in the UK (as a rule offered by men), as well as hairdressing, nails, make-up or massages from home (these are always offered by women). This detail suggests that work among Bulgarians in the UK continues to be gender-stratified with certain jobs considered masculine or feminine and without crossing of established gender boundaries (Datta 2011: 575 confirms the same for an earlier period and explains it through the relatively privileged status of Bulgarians as EU citizens, though this privilege is to be qualified in comparison to other EU citizens). This may also suggest a more traditionalist outlook among Bulgarian migrants engaging with such work, often co-related with lower levels of education.

It is interesting to learn that Bulgarians on Facebook prefer to use services offered by Bulgarians, even if the latter work for non-Bulgarian businesses. Posts often appear asking for Bulgarian dentists or doctors, Bulgarian-speaking lawyers or notary publics in the UK, Bulgarian teachers of English. This may be linked to lower or no competency in English (and hence inability to relate to an English-speaking dentist or lawyer) or it may be due to perceptions of quality or preferences of cost (anecdotally, Bulgarians often travel to Bulgaria to treat dental issues and only resort to dentists in the UK in an absolute emergency). Our data from previous focus groups with Bulgarians in the UK has indicated that more highly-qualified or more highly-skilled Bulgarians do not display such preferences (Ranta and Nancheva 2019), as they consider them a sign of 'inability to integrate'. This

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[22] Eurostat Tobacco Consumption Statistics (second highest in the EU after Greece).

also suggests that the Facebook users posting such requests are in the 'lower-skill' group of migrants.

A very important type of support provided by the Facebook groups we have been observing is in dealing with public authorities and services. Posts appear daily to ask for or provide information on a variety of needs: clarifications regarding consular services at the Bulgarian Embassy in London, dealing with the UK Home Office in applying for immigration status (especially the Settled Status Scheme since it was launched in 2019), bringing parents to the UK, applying for social support (the Universal Credit scheme since the onslaught of Covid-19), rights around statutory sick pay/ leave, undertaking an MOT, challenging a fine for discarding cigarette butts on the street, enrolling at college or university, learning English, sending money back home. What is interesting to note here is that all of the information requested or provided can usually be accessed on the official governmental or institutional websites in its most updated version. The fact that such exchanges occur and clearly meet a need suggests either lack of familiarity with how authorities deal with the public in the UK, inability to access this information in English, need for insider knowledge ('But tell me how it's *really* done!' is often the subtext of such exchanges), or perhaps simply a need for the exchange itself. Either way, we see that the Facebook groups which host such exchanges represent an important informal support network, especially for Bulgarians who are not fully or stably embedded into their host societies outside the network.

This becomes even more obvious in situations of sudden crisis, which occasionally pop as 'most active' discussions in the groups (cf also Wessendorf and Phillimore 2019). Some are relatively minor such as lost or found ID documents (a found Bulgarian ID card near the *Lidl* off Finsbury Park station in London, for example, became the cause of a campaign to find the owner and return the document to her: it turned out she worked in the supermarket), discrepancies in names when flying, finding types of medication for long-term diseases, or, indeed, buying cigarettes during the pandemic. Others are relatively serious: dealing with bank fraud, sudden death of a friend/ flatmate and putting together the money to send the body back home to relatives (Bulgarians traditionally bury their dead, rather than cremate them), donating money for a destitute mother who lost her job, finding a Bulgarian-speaking lawyer during an employment dispute. Such crisis situations appeared more frequently around the Covid-19 lockdown: arrive in London to realise the job was no longer there, lose the job because of lockdown, apply for assistance under the different schemes.

What is important in such crises is that the situation promptly develops from online commiseration to real-life material support (including financial) provided by users of the network. Bulgarians arriving at Stansted Airport on the low-cost *Ryanair* flight from Sofia (in Nov 2019) spoke to a

Bulgarian man in his 20s who told them he had no job, nowhere to stay and no money for a flight home after a brief stunt working odd jobs in London. The Facebook post was written by the Bulgarians who met him: they re-told the situation and summoned help. Within a few hours a contact number was provided for the young man, a nearby driver had gone to collect him from the airport while someone had offered to put him up until he was able to fly, and soon money was put together to buy a ticket home (the youth had explicitly stated he was ready to return to Bulgaria and had declined several offers for work from members of the group). The post had generated nearly 200 public comments (and, presumably, a series of private exchanges between the users who volunteered to help). The comments included both practical solutions and opinions on what the correct course of action was. A similar response occurred to a post about another young man who had arrived in London immediately before the Covid-19 lockdown only to find the job he had secured was no longer there for him. Advice and assistance followed on getting the youth to a stockroom or farm as soon as possible (the outcome of this crisis was not made public in the group).

In neither of these situations had the volunteers known each other, according to their publicly available information and the nature of the exchange itself. Of course, they must have been moved to help for their own private reasons, but voiced opinions often pointed to the need for mutual support amidst the foreign ('Who is going to help us if we do not help each other.'), the desire to demonstrate in-group solidarity ('Let us show that Bulgarians also help each other like other nations do!'), as well as previous migration experience of hardship ('I have been in a similar situation when I first arrived here [followed by the story].'). Such responses suggest the emergence of a quasi-diasporic solidarity nurtured in the contexts of crisis.

Group self-affirmation

This leads us to a second central function which the Facebook groups we studied seem to perform: group self-affirmation on the basis of the shared migration/ mobility experience in the UK. This function is not as immediately visible as the practical support function but has been one of the main findings of the interaction analysis we performed on most-commented posts. One of the most common forms it takes is voicing frustration over some personal experience as if in a friendship circle.

Examples include queues at the Bulgarian Consulate or incompetence of the officers there, poor customer service of the national air carrier *Bulgaria Air*, unreliable room-mates or landlords. More often than not, such frustration emerges as a result of interaction with fellow Bulgarians, prompting comparisons with the host country and justifications of the migratory decision ('This is why we

[Bulgarians] are never going to improve!' and 'This is why I decided to come here.'). These posts rarely have a visible practical purpose: occasionally, some of the responses point to available practical solutions, but often they serve simply as a conversation starter and an outlet for the frustration, suggesting absence of other available social contacts capable of commiserating. This may mean both the severing of some social links with friends 'back home' and a degree of social isolation in the host society.

Sometimes frustration is explicitly directed at representatives of the host society. A well-liked post of Feb 2020 included a photograph of the Conservative Secretary of State for the Home Department Priti Patel with an article on her post-Brexit immigration rules (putting EU nationals on an equal footing with non-EU migrants), with the caption 'Our Tyrant.' A widely discussed post shared a middle-aged man's unpleasant job interview experience (for technician with a middle-sized British employer). The man stated he had 'attended more than 150 interviews' for his 4 years in the UK, yet this was unexpected: 'Has anyone had a similar experience?' ended the post (56 comments on the day it was posted in Jan 2020). Lengthy responses from both male and female users similarly shared stories of strange questions or requirements, perceptions of discrimination and unfair treatment, as well as words of encouragement ('Do not take it to heart', 'You'll have other interviews', 'You'll never change them [the British]') and frustration at the host society's rules ('They are the best in the world at ignoring people', 'Especially since Brexit they are left to pour nonsense and discrimination on us', 'Yes, we may be smarter but so what: we are poorer').

Posts also appear carrying less negative reflections on life in the UK ('What do you like and don't like about living here?' from June 2020) or political discussions around events in the UK. Views are regularly expressed both in favour and against Brexit. While the latter are certainly predominant, a Bulgarian fisherman in Cornwall interviewed for local media, for instance, was quoted as supporting Brexit (Feb 2020). Popular are jokes about speaking English incorrectly or jokes about 'making it' in the UK. One joke about a Bulgarian mother boasting of her son's success in the UK ('He is just finishing Cambridge!') turned out to be about scaffolding workers (May 2020, 230 likes on the day, 49 shares, 70 comments). It prompted heroisation of scaffolding workers praising them for taking risks (masculinity) and working hard for what was commented to be 'very good money' ('I myself don't think £1,159 a week is a bad salary, unless I am mistaken', opined someone who had experience in scaffolding).

One strand of posts (not too frequent) is precisely on success stories of Bulgarians in the UK but also at home, re-posting material either from Bulgarian or (much more rarely available) British media. Multiple users from many groups in Feb 2020 re-posted the story of a beautiful Bulgarian female

pilot ('and a mother of three!' linking back to the patriarchical mindset) from the *Bulgaria Air* fleet who landed her plane at Heathrow during the storm Ciara. The *Bulgarians in England* group, for example, generated 2,200 likes of the post, 398 shares and 159 comments for the day. The *Bulgarian Business Awards* group, actively encouraging nominations for small businesses in various categories, has also been generating group self-praise.

Finally, members are also active in commenting events in Bulgaria (the forceful prime minister, elections, Covid-19 rules), celebrating Bulgarian holidays (the Orthodox Pascha), posting historical trivia with patriotic content. As well as more benevolent posts expressing nostalgia (Bulgarian folk performances during the Covid-19 pandemic, Bulgarian dance societies), some more problematic features of Bulgarian public life also emerge. Such are indulging in beloved nationalist narratives (sharing a map of the 'Bulgarian Empire' of 9th – 10th c. 'reaching three seas') or anti-minority prejudice (jokes and denigratory discussions about Bulgarian Roma minority citizens are always a taker). Such exchanges indicate that, although the relationship with 'home' has been affected by the migratory/ mobility experience, it remains strong and translates both its positive and negative features into social exchanges in the host country, especially in the context of relative social isolation. This again brings up the relevance of the quasi-diasporic functions we argue these groups perform.

Individual Self-Affirmation amidst Social Isolation

Of course, participation in Facebook groups also performs a function of individual self-affirmation during material hardship or relative social isolation. This is sometimes reflected in individual discussion posts but more often emerges in interactions on a different occasion (in any of the examples discussed above). As social identity theory has long explained (Tajfel and Turner 1986), attempts to dissociate from the in-group occur when the group is negatively perceived. This should explain 'individual mobility' strategies (cf also Genova 2017) which aim to distinguish the individual from the group. Such strategies appear in interactions where the user aspires to emphasise their individual difference ('I am not like other Bulgarians here living 6 at a room' or 'trying to be too important'), or pointing out to others their spelling mistakes in Bulgarian (no situations were observed when mistakes in English were pointed out). Notably, users picking on others' spelling are usually faced with a forceful group response ('We are not here to spell, we are here to support each other!') as spelling is clearly not a strength among the majority of users (another indication of low status, this time linked to the home country).

Other strategies of individual self-affirmation appear such as creatively emphasising positive in-group features (highlighting the preparation or appreciation of traditional Bulgarian culinary delicacies or expounding the healing qualities of the Bulgarian fire water *rakia*: memes appeared in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic pointing to its mythic immunologic qualities). At other times negative in-group characteristics are recognized and humoured (stereotypes such as the traditional dependency of Bulgarian men on their mothers). A curious discussion post of Dec 2019 mocked women doing their make-up live on Facebook (in reference to the many Bulgarian female entrepreneurs who sell cosmetic brands on social media through their private networks) revealing some typical gender-based biases in the responses they generated (mostly from men) but also serving a pseudo-moralistic purpose of affirming standards of 'appropriate' female behaviour.

But posts of this type which invite most activity are those asking for help on everyday matters you would customarily approach a neighbour or a friend with. A man in his 40s (June 2020) asked for advice on watering the garden of his newly rented accommodation without an outdoors tap: 'How do I attach a hose to this tap?' (accompanied by pictures of the kitchen tap). The comments his post provoked (70-80 exchanges within the day) ranged from specialist plumbing advice from other men, using very specific professional vocabulary to describe the solution, to know-it-all comments about poor housing in the UK without garden taps (also from men). A tone of real camaraderie permeated the interaction, while the original user engaged with various responses in a detailed and appreciative manner, as if over the garden fence. The fact that the man had rented non-shared accommodation with a garden (it emerged he was a family man with years of residence in the UK) warranted reverence from many of the other users (Bulgarians often share accommodation with other Bulgarians to compensate for high rents, especially if their families are back home, so *not* sharing indicates status).

Example of posts on everyday issues without much practical urgency but generating active exchanges with similarly competent solutions and opinions: how to set up a Bulsatcom [Bulgarian television provider] satellite dish ('It was working before!'). Most temporary/ 'low-skilled' Bulgarians in the UK keep in touch with shows and news at home by watching, almost exclusively, Bulgarian satellite television. Another similarly popular post was on how to get specific set of wireless headphones to work (accompanied by pictures of the devices): the user apparently had good knowledge of both the hardware and the software involved, so the conversation maintained a professional technical level (both posts were from men).

Such exchanges reveal good technical competence among Bulgarian men in the UK, many of whom work in the construction sector (data engineers, optic cabling technicians, mechanics, etc). This is

considered a 'low-skill' occupation (a 'labourer' named after the qualifying blue card required for it) but Bulgarians have shown to be suitable for it because of their higher-education technical/ engineering degrees from home: an illustration of one of the many discrepancies in the use of the term 'low-skilled'. What the exchanges also suggest, more implicitly, is a relative social isolation of the users involved, generating a need for the exchange itself (and not so much for the practical help requested through it).

So, what did we learn about Bulgarians in the UK?

This study explored how Bulgarians in the UK interact with each other in order to learn more about their in-group solidarity. Our observation (and previous studies) of Bulgarians in the UK points to a relatively low degree of formal self-organisation. However, when we look at Bulgarians' informal but organised interactions online, a slightly different picture emerges: Bulgarians appear to rely on the self-organised informal social support networks we studied for a range of important reasons, which suggests the emergence of various degrees of solidarity, after all.

We found that Bulgarians engage with informal networks of compatriots online (Facebook has been the dominant platform in the studied period, replacing previous online forum platforms and printed media) even before they make the journey to the UK. This engagement is very frequent after arrival to help with work, accommodation, customers, services, advice, to deal with public authorities, or to handle sudden crises. We can confidently say that this engagement concerns the most important practical aspects of everyday life in the UK and that it frequently transcends cyber space to translate into practical mutual support. Our analysis also suggests that this engagement is often central to the migratory experience, as it provides support which would otherwise have been unavailable (e.g. know-how, money, customers, fellowship) or inaccessible (in the spoken language).

We also found that the support sought and offered online serves the function of individual and group self-affirmation. The fact that we find the former function in the interactions we analysed suggests relative social isolation of the Bulgarians using these networks, explained by their perceived low-status in the host society, their relatively recent arrival, or their precarious migratory experience geared towards work and remittances. The fact that we find the latter function indicates a need for belonging and social interaction which cannot otherwise be met. Even when other options are available, Bulgarians often seem to seek and prefer exchanges (both social and material) with fellow Bulgarians, even for advice or services provided elsewhere (technical support, health issues, general information). The exchanges initiated and sought on the social networks we studied also indicate

that sometimes other social interaction options are not available (e.g. when seeking commiseration, an outlet for frustration, commonality).

On the basis of our observation and analysis we are led to conclude that not all Bulgarians in the UK make use of the online networks we followed. 'Elite' Bulgarian migrants rarely engage with them, unlike the Bulgarians identifiable along the so called 'low-skill' segment with little or no competency in English. This status characteristic – the 'labourers' and 'cleaners' stereotype – is often internalised and emerges in interactions performing a self-affirmative function. We also observe that the users we studied do not always steer away from nationalist tropes, traditionalist gender-based stereotypes, or anti-minority prejudice as other, self-declared cosmopolitan migrants often do. This also suggests relatively low degree of interaction with other cultures, including that of the host society.

Finally, we also observe that the online networks of Bulgarians have been actively sought and tapped in by small Bulgarian businesses and private Bulgarian entrepreneurs for a variety of commercial purposes which cater to a distinct community of Bulgarian users and would not have been viable otherwise. All functions performed by the online networks overlap and intertwine in different contexts and different participants make use of them interchangeably, depending on need and interests.

So, while there is no formal community organisation, there is abundant evidence of thriving community-based support, interaction and exchange across many spatial and relational levels. More importantly, this solidarity seems to have been elicited precisely by the context of precarity and adversity which may have characterised the migratory experience of the vast majority of the participants in our study. Despite the absence of other established features of the concept of diasporas, as discussed above, we are called to speak here of emerging quasi-diasporic communities online, prompted by the context of adversity and crisis, and mostly comprising those Bulgarians with more precarious migration journeys: the self-identified 'cleaners' and 'labourers' on Facebook.

In the shifting post-Brexit society (as per Kilkey, Piekut, Ryan 2020), it would be interesting to follow the implications of these emerging solidarities within the overall understudied Bulgarian migration groups, in particular with a view to the problematic 'low-skill/ high-skill' divide, but also the role of legal status (naturalised, settled, pre-settled, irregular), as well as gender, class, and ethnicity.

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