

BRAIN DRAIN, BOGUS ASYLUM SEEKERS, AND BABIES: CONFLICTING DISCOURSES OF MOBILITY AND FERTILITY IN BULGARIA AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

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The collapse of communism in Bulgaria was initially uneventful. Bulgaria had none of the wide-scale violence and chaos that characterized the transitions of the other Balkan states. What followed, however, was a drastic contraction of the economy from which the country has still not recovered; the standard of living for most Bulgarians today is significantly lower than that in 1989. These economic hardships, combined with the newly gained right to travel, have precipitated a wave of Bulgarian emigration. Scientists, professionals, students, and Bulgarians with relatives abroad are just some of those who have left in search of opportunity and a better life in the West.

In this essay I will examine the conflicting debates that attempt to explain Bulgarian emigration after the fall of communism. In the longer version of this paper, I look in depth at discourse production in Bulgaria, the European Union, and several Western European countries.¹ In this article, however, I am presenting a summary of my more detailed arguments.² Although no one doubts that Bulgarians have left the country, just who these Bulgarians are and where they have gone is a more complicated and contentious question. Bulgarian emigration has been characterized in vastly dissimilar ways, depending on which government or organization is discussing the issue.

From the Bulgarian perspective, these émigrés are “the best and the brightest,” the most educated and entrepreneurial. Both politicians and Bulgarian media bemoan the loss of their educated young people – a phenomenon characterized as “brain drain.” The concept of “brain drain” refers to the loss of the skilled nationals of one country through emigration to another country, with skill usually being measured by the attainment of formal educational qualifications. Brain drain has conventionally been characterized as a negative phenomenon because states that have invested in the education and training of their nationals do not reap the benefits of these investments.

Alternatively, “brain gain” is the term used to refer to the receiving countries that take advantage of this skilled labor, which has been educated at the expense of another country’s taxpayers.

For the Western European countries to which they immigrate, however, Bulgarians are often lumped in the popular imagination with their former Yugoslav Balkan neighbors and are characterized as economic refugees, bogus asylum seekers, and “trafficked humans.” Even worse, on the popular level, Balkan immigrants in general are often viewed as being undesirables: freeloaders, thugs, drug pushers, and prostitutes who are alleged to be responsible for increasing crime rates in West European countries. Consequently, the immigration issue has become a political tinderbox, and many extreme right-wing parties in Western Europe have successfully gained or solidified power by pandering to popular fears about immigrants. Officially, however, the European Union and many individual country governments are pro-immigration. Indeed, many West European nations that have both aging populations and perceived skills shortages in key industries are eager to recruit young, qualified Bulgarians.

In this paper I will examine the multiple and overlapping discourses on migration from Southeastern Europe in the context of the demographic crises in both the sending and receiving countries. I argue that many of these migration discourses obscure the most important underlying issue of demographic decline: fertility. Discussions about migration are conducted in lieu of conversations about the social, political, and economic reasons why women in both Eastern and Western European countries are not having children. Both in Bulgaria and in the current 15 EU member states, migration is either a safety valve or a temporary measure that allows governments to avoid making difficult and unpopular decisions regarding necessary social and economic reforms.

Conclusions about these measures, however, are not definitive. Scholars who are bound by traditional disciplinary concerns view the causes and effects of migration through their own theoretical lenses: demographers are preoccupied with population increases and declines; economists with labor shortages; and political scientists with voting patterns'. I am primarily concerned with the discussions on Bulgarian migration produced by politicians, international organizations, and national and international media. This paper illustrates the manner in which Bulgarian migration is talked about, by whom, and for what possible underlying political and material interests. Bulgarians have constructed a "truth" about brain drain, just as the United Nations has constructed a "truth" about shrinking and aging populations. Similarly, in Western Europe, the media and right-wing politicians are creating "truths" about bogus asylum seekers and economic refugees "flooding" into the continent.

To examine the complicated and conflicting debates on migration, I conducted official interviews with representatives of the Austrian, Swiss, German, Bosnian, Croatian, and Bulgarian embassies in Washington DC in June and July 2002. I was also in personal contact with representatives of the British embassy in the United States, the British Home Office, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the International Labor Organization (ILO). My data are also derived from discourse analysis of official reports and documents of the European Union, the United Nations-Population Division, the IOM, and the individual German, Swiss, British, and Bulgarian governments. Articles and letters in the German, British and Bulgarian press were also considered. I use excerpts from the media to demonstrate general tendencies, recognizing that the media is very diverse and that right-leaning papers are apt to have very different perspectives than left-leaning papers. Finally, I draw on 15 months of fieldwork conducted in Bulgaria between 1999 and 2000, a short visit in 2001 immediately after Bulgaria's removal from the Schengen black list, and my extensive network of Bulgarian friends and colleagues working both in the country and abroad.

From a theoretical perspective, it is important to examine how these different discourses shape perspectives of Bulgarian migrants in order to understand the political and economic interests that may lie behind the creation

and perpetuation of certain truths. On a practical level, however, it is also necessary to look at how these differing discourses may affect the motivations and actions of migrants themselves. Perceptions of brain-drainers versus those of bogus political asylum seekers will influence attitudes toward Bulgarian immigrants in Western Europe, as well as the ways in which Bulgarians construct their own identities abroad. This is particularly important because Bulgaria eventually hopes to join the European Union. The "free movement of people" issue is one the strongest areas of contention among the existing EU 15 member states and the accession candidates. Many of the roots of these disagreements lie within differing perceptions of who immigrants are and what they bring to the receiving countries.

The View from Bulgaria

In 2000, Bulgaria had a negative natural growth rate of -0.7 percent (World Bank 2000) and a total fertility rate of 1.1 children per woman (US Census Bureau 2000). With replacement fertility being 2.1 children per woman, Bulgaria is characterized by what demographers call "lowest low fertility" (Lesthaeghe and Surkyn 2002), and had the lowest fertility rate of any European country between 1995 and 1997 (Lesthaeghe 2000). Bulgaria's population stood at 7.9 million in 2001 (National Statistical Institute 2002), and United Nations (2000) projections state that by 2050 this figure will shrink by 31 percent – the second steepest decline in all of Europe. More importantly, the UN estimates that the percentage of the Bulgarian population over 65 will increase from 16 percent in 2000 to 30 percent in 2050.

Adding to the problem of lower fertility is the exodus of Bulgarians from the country. Estimates range from 500,000 to 800,000 – higher and lower figures are cited depending on who is talking about the emigration problem. The demographic makeup of the émigrés – even simple statistics on the percentage of male and female migrants – is also unknown. The haziness of the data allows the government and the media considerable leeway in telling their stories about "brain drain." From the 2000 age/sex pyramids, however, there does appear to be a sizable section of the 25-39-years-old cohort "missing"; consequently, it is often assumed that many of those who left Bulgaria in the 1990s were young people looking for better opportunities abroad.

In this context, the Bulgarian press and government understandably have been obsessed with emigration, particularly with what has been characterized as the Bulgarian brain drain. From

the early 1990s, when the media was first liberalized, journalists in Bulgaria have discussed the emigration issue. Emigration has been construed as one form of protest against sitting Bulgarian governments – “voting with your feet.” In the early transition period (1990 and 1991) one researcher (Gancheva 1992) found that Bulgarian media were more preoccupied with emigration in general and were paying little attention to the many scientists and scholars leaving Bulgaria. By the late 1990s, however, and especially between 2000 and 2002, stories of the brain drain filled the national media; and politicians began bemoaning the defection of so many of Bulgaria’s best and brightest.³

Bulgaria has also been recognized as a country rich in information technology (IT) professionals. Because Bulgaria was the COMECON country profiled to design the commuter systems for the Soviet space and defense programs, Bulgarians are highly skilled and have a reputation of being among the world’s best hackers. Stories in both the local and international press, particularly during the peak of the dot.com period in the United States, celebrated the international desirability of Bulgarian high tech workers.⁴ One representative article began: “Moves by countries like Germany to attract cheap foreign computer experts are good news for Bulgarian IT whizzkids” and ended with “but the brain drain is hitting the impoverished country just when it needs them most.”⁵ A July 2002 story by *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* reported that even the Czech Republic was targeting skilled Bulgarians for a pilot program welcoming professional immigrants.⁶

While it may be true that many skilled Bulgarians have left the country and that more advanced countries have actively recruited from Bulgaria for highly educated workers, the actual extent of the problem is very difficult to gauge and is surely overly exaggerated. According to Beleva and Kotzeva (2001), of the 6,005 scientists in

Bulgaria who lost their jobs between 1989 and 1996, only 600 emigrated. Furthermore, it appears that highly skilled emigrants (i.e., those with tertiary degrees) do not constitute more than ten percent of the total emigration from Bulgaria between 1989 and 2001. The fact that 90 percent of the people who have left Bulgaria are not “highly skilled” is masked in many ways by the constant attention that Bulgarian media and politicians devote to brain drain.

Gätcher (2002), in an ILO study on Bulgarian emigration, also challenges the idea of brain drain. He found that the overwhelming

majority of those who left the country between 1988 and 1993 were ethnic Turks who took the opportunity to return to Turkey. Furthermore, in his study he argues that the percentage of Bulgarians in the labor force with a tertiary education has actually increased between 1992 and 1997 and that Bulgaria’s figure is higher than that of Austria, Hungary, the Czech Republic, or Slovenia. In 1999, Bulgaria also had more working-age physicians per one million inhabitants than most other countries in the region, including Germany. In terms of academic employment, there was a large percentage decrease in the aggregate. Breaking the numbers down by degree, however, revealed interesting differences. According to Gätcher, the employment of Ph.D.s increased by 66.5 percent between 1985 and 1999 (from 1,016 to 1,581), while more than 25 percent of the job losses in academia were among those *without* an advanced degree (from 16,288 to 12,053 for the same period). The author concluded:

Overall, the data make it impossible to evade the conclusion that “brain drain” is far too big a word to describe what has been happening in Bulgaria. There has been a trickle of highly qualified emigrants, no more, and even cumulatively it is not big enough to make any difference at all. (p. 18)

If “brain drain” is defined by the emigration of those with tertiary degrees, the severity of the phenomenon is further complicated by the high number of Bulgarian youth who leave their country to study and obtain their Bachelor’s degrees abroad. Since the costs of their higher education are paid for privately or by scholarships from foreign states, these Bulgarians are not classical examples of a brain drain in which the home state has “invested” in their education. Instead, they represent a perhaps more significant phenomenon – a youth drain. Indeed, in many of the articles and public discussions of the brain drain in Bulgaria, the youthfulness of the emigrants is particularly emphasized. These are young, able-bodied Bulgarians *of reproductive age* who are striking out for better fortunes in the West, and thus exacerbating the demographic problem.

The constant attention to the brain drain and the emigration of the young allows the media and the politicians to externalize the blame for a deteriorating standard of living in the country. Those who have gone abroad are convenient scapegoats for the economic woes of those left behind, even while remittances from émigrés may

be the sole source of support for pensioners left wanting by the social security system. They are also held responsible for the collapse of the Bulgarian industry and science, as well as the erosion of Bulgaria's previous preeminence in sports and high culture. The shrinking of the Bulgarian population, the lack of foreign investment, and the disappearance of social safety nets are only a few of the problems placed at the feet of the brain-drainers.

The View from the EU

The United Nations Population Division (2000) estimates significant population declines for most of the European Union countries. For the EU as a whole, the UN projects that the population will begin decreasing in 2005, and that the Union stands to lose between 40 and 45 million people. This loss would be equivalent to the combined 2000 population of the EU's seven smallest members (Austria, Finland, Denmark, Ireland, Luxembourg, Sweden and Portugal). Eurostat (1999) estimates more optimistically that the overall population of the EU 15 will not begin to decline until 2026, owing to higher projected birth rates in some member states. Even so, the losses for individual EU countries such as Italy, Spain, and Greece are worrying trends. The UN predicts that these countries will lose 28 percent, 24 percent, and 23 percent of their populations, respectively, by 2050 (UN 2000).

The total fertility ratio for the EU 15 stood at 1.5 children per woman in the period 1990-1995 – well below replacement level, although this number hides significant variations among member states (UN 2000). More importantly, many European countries are aging at unprecedented rates. Life expectancy at birth rose from an average of 67.0 years in the 1950-1955 period to 76.5 years in 1990-1995. Meanwhile, the proportion of the population age 65 or older increased from 9.5 percent of the total in 1950 to 15.5 in 1995, and could increase to as much as 22.4 percent by 2025. The lower birth rates and greater life expectancy of the elderly mean that countries such as Italy may have to raise retirement ages to 75 or more in order to keep current pension schemes viable. The demographic "crisis" has led the U.N. to examine the possibility of "replacement migration" for Western Europe.

Replacement migration posits that increasing the number of immigrants can solve demographic shortfalls. Although it is controversial in many individual countries of the European Union, the UN's study of replacement migration has coincided with calls from European

capitalists to increase migration to rectify perceived skills shortages (Salt 1992). Particularly in the information technology and medical sectors, individual EU countries are passing new laws to actively encourage the immigration of skilled professionals. This may have been in response to an EU brain drain to the United States: many highly skilled European workers preferred to work in America where salaries were higher and hierarchies less rigid, especially during the dot.com boom of the late 1990s. European employers often believed that the United States' looser immigration laws (and particularly the H1b visa program for skilled workers) gave their North Atlantic ally an unfair competitive advantage. In this context, the European Commission (EC) has openly advocated for increasing avenues for legal immigration to the EU (Commission of the European Communities 2000, 2001).

Politically, the European Commission has as its ultimate agenda the preservation and integration of the existing EU 15. With a large and diverse constituency divided into Euroskeptics and Europhiles across so many countries, the Commission is surely aware that some of its strongest support originates with members of the European business community, who see great economic advantages in the common market. The future prospects of European corporations – particularly in the face of fierce American competition for markets – are intimately tied up with the survival of the EU, just as the sustainability of the EU is dependent on support from the economic elites. The loosening of immigration laws to allow for increases in foreign labor at the Europe-wide level is a policy that will greatly benefit these elites in both the long and short run.

On the other hand, the Commission cannot be seen as being too soft on the immigration issue, especially since there is growing resistance to the Union from large populations within the member states. The rise of right-wing parties is only one example of this discontent. Calls for the coordination of immigration and asylum policies across Europe in order to shut out economic refugees also can be seen as a move to appease these interests. The practice of limiting immigration from Bulgaria for all but the very highly skilled, despite its Europe Agreement, is supported by a perception that constructs Bulgaria as a country of potential immigrants who would all move West if given the chance. Although numerous studies have found the majority of Bulgarians are unlikely to emigrate (IOM 1997, UNDP 1999), the notion that they will

also reinforces the practices that have kept Bulgaria on the Schengen black list until 2001. Even after Bulgarians could travel freely to Western Europe, fears that Bulgarian tourists would be seeking illegal work have led to strict rules on how much money potential tourists must have before they are allowed to cross the border. West European perceptions of Bulgarians as potential asylum seekers and refugees are a stark contrast to the Bulgarian image of the emigrant as a brain-drainer.

The View from Individual Western European Countries

From the brief discussion above, it is apparent that, on the surface, the European Commission is in favor of economic immigration, at least as evidenced by its public discourse. This stance, however, has been dogged by controversy in many of the individual EU member states. Politicians in all West European countries have taken note of the electoral successes of extreme anti-immigration parties in Austria, France, and the Netherlands. Political backlash against immigration, and even against the expansion of the existing Union, has complicated the immigration issue for many states.

Xenophobia in Europe has been on the rise, and high domestic unemployment rates have led many to challenge claims about skills shortages. Furthermore, right-wing arguments claiming that the state takes better care of asylum seekers than of their own citizens find eager sympathizers among the socially disenfranchised. Because of the perceived necessity of foreigners on the one hand, and the sometimes-violent opposition of West European publics on the other, immigrants are also discursively constructed into two distinct types in the national imagination: the “highly skilled” and the “refugees, asylum seekers and illegals.” Unfortunately for Bulgarians, most Western Europeans tend to lump them together with Bosnian and Kosovo Albanian Muslims or conflate all of Bulgaria with its Roma minority – populations that have increasingly become demonized in the Western European press as refugees and criminals. Once again, the perceptions of Bulgarians in individual Western European countries are quite contrary to their own perceptions of the “brain-drainers.”

A Youth Drain: Another Truth about Replacement Migration and Fertility?

Underlying debates on migration both in Bulgaria and West European countries is the crucial issue of fertility, most succinctly captured

in the *Times* headline: “Breed or die out.”⁷ The entire debate about migration is couched in terms of a demographic crisis because women in the wealthy nations of the world have not had enough babies in the last 20 or 30 years. Coleman (2001) has shown that just a small increase in fertility rates in Europe could significantly mitigate the worst consequences of aging and declining populations, albeit in the long term. Ultimately, only increasing fertility rates (or increasing mortality rates among the elderly) will solve the demographic problems of Europe. Many scholars (e.g., Coleman 2001, Lesthaeghe 2000, Lesthaeghe and Surkyn 2002, UN 2000, Shaw 2001) agree that increasing the number of immigrants is only a short-term measure that may temporarily prevent the raising of retirement ages but will ultimately result in a very contentious erosion of European ethnic majorities in host nations. This solution is accepted, however, because increases in fertility rates will take at least 20 years to have an effect.

Public debates about the brain drain in Bulgaria and the need for replacement migration in Western Europe obscure the underlying issue of fertility rates and the demographic decline that characterizes European countries in both East and West. Because policies that will increase European fertility rates are expensive and take many years to “bear fruit,” sitting governments have few incentives to implement them, particularly in open, democratic political systems where governments are only in office for several years. In other words, supporting women and families does not have an immediate pay-off for politicians concerned with reelection in the short term. Immigration, on the other hand, does. All parties on the political spectrum can use the immigration issue to bolster support for their causes. In Western Europe, the right can win votes by championing the cause of the working classes against immigration. Meanwhile, left and center parties can welcome foreign workers and gain the support of European corporations. In Bulgaria, politicians can either scapegoat brain-drainers as a way of deflecting criticism of their own economic policies, or gain ballots by promising to bring young Bulgarians home.

The “problem” with pronatalism in both Eastern and Western Europe is that it is not just a matter of sending women back to the home in order to have more babies. In fact, the biggest challenge in most European countries is the aging population: there are fewer working people to support the increasing number of pensioners. In order to maintain the social security system for the elderly without having to raise retirement ages too

drastically, European women have to be encouraged to enter the labor force. Increasing the labor participation rate of women (and of men over the age of 50) is one of the most effective options that current governments have to shore up their pension schemes. More women in the workplace, however, might translate into even fewer babies unless there are family friendly policies in place to help support women in their efforts to combine work and family duties. Countries such as France and Sweden that have family friendly policies already in place still maintain near replacement, or replacement level, birth rates, despite high female labor force participation (Coleman 2001). Furthermore, De Rose and Racioppi (2001) and McDonald (2001) have also determined that countries with lower levels of gender equality have lower birth rates. Thus, policies that support women's equality may also be effective ways to encourage women to have more children.

Family support programs such as child allowances, longer paid maternity leaves, or subsidized kindergartens, however, would require large transfers from the state budget and long-term commitments by politicians. Private enterprises concerned about short-term profitability would be unlikely to contribute to these programs. Consequently, such strategies would mean an increase in the welfare state precisely at the historical moment where the hegemony of neo-liberal economic thought advocates the dismantling of such states. Furthermore, these family support programs would drain budgets already increasingly burdened by a larger number of pensioners and would likely require the raising of retirement ages in most countries. Given the growing number of older voting constituents, politicians will be highly unlikely to antagonize those nearing retirement. In Bulgaria, this situation is further complicated by the conditionalities of World Bank and International Monetary Fund loans that severely constrain public spending.

Given the political difficulties in supporting pro-natalist policies, however, it is understandable that migration would become such a hot political issue. In Bulgaria, both politicians and the media stress that brain-drainers are *young* and qualified. Images of successful Bulgarians abroad are invariably pictures of young people in their 20s and 30s. The high profile of the brain drain in Bulgaria may reflect not only a preoccupation with the skilled workers that Bulgaria has lost, but also a vilification of the youth who have abandoned their country and their "responsibilities" to the older generation. In Western Europe, too, the term "highly skilled"

may act in some ways as a synonym for "young." "Highly skilled" is often determined by the attainment of university degrees, and EU countries are making it increasingly easier for students who gain their degrees in Western Europe to stay and work after graduation. Although both of these assertions are impossible to support either way, it is important to examine how different discussions on migration might be infused with multiple layers of meaning beneath the obvious surface.

As far as Bulgaria is concerned, in the short term the situation will remain dire. Birthrates will likely continue to fall, and young Bulgarians will likely continue to find their way abroad. Ironically, the images and stories of successful brain-drainers in the Bulgarian media may actually encourage more youth to leave the country in search of better lives in Western Europe and North America. If the public believes that the best and brightest Bulgarians go abroad, ambitious youth will feel compelled to leave the country in search of validation. The attitudes of Western Europeans will also continue to be influenced by discourses that construct Balkan immigrants as undesirable refugees and asylum seekers. These negative stereotypes may become a disincentive to "highly skilled" Bulgarians for living and working in Western Europe. Instead, young Bulgarians will look farther afield to the United States and Canada, where North Americans are generally less familiar with their country, let alone know that it is in the Balkans.

Of course, discussions of demographic decline are far more complicated and nuanced than presented here; demographers debate these issues with much greater knowledge and sophistication. My intent in this paper is merely to outline the trajectory of the debate and to examine how these phenomena enter the public discourse. This paper represents the beginnings of a more in-depth study on the discursive interactions between discussion of migration and fertility in the Bulgarian and West European contexts. The arguments expressed in this essay should not be considered definitive conclusions, but rather preliminary hypotheses that can help shape questions for future research.

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Notes

1 Ghodsee, Kristen, "Mobility in Bulgaria and the European Union: Brain Drain, Bogus Asylum Seekers, Replacement Migration, and Fertility," EES Occasional Paper No. 70, Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center, November 2002.

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3 For example, "Bulgaria Faces Brain Drain," *Agence France Presse* (August 3, 2000); James Derleth, "Behind Bulgaria's Troubles:

Exodus of the Educated," *Christian Science Monitor* (February 2, 1997); "More than a Half of the Bulgarians Would Send their Children Abroad," <http://www.news.bg> (January 29, 2001); Plamen Velikov, "To Stay Or Not to Stay is the Eastern Question," *Sofia Echo* (March 3, 2001); "We're Advised Against Brain Drain," *Standartnews* (May 30, 2001).

4 For example, "Bulgaria-Germany-Computer Programmers," *Bulgarian Press Agency (BTA)* (August 9, 2000); "Bulgaria-Scientists," *Bulgarian Press Agency (BTA)* (October 8, 1999); "Bulgaria Vows To Restore High-Tech Industry," *Reuters* (July 23, 1998); Elisaveta Konstantinova, "Bulgaria Drafted To Fight Bug," *The Australian* (July 7, 1998); Veselin Toshkov, "East European Nation Fights to Hold Onto High-Tech Workers," *Associated Press* (March 4, 2001).

5 Vessela Sergueva, "Bulgaria Faces Brain Drain as Computer Boffins Head West," Agence France Presse (August 2, 2000).

6 "Czech Republic: Immigration Plan Hopes To Attract Kazakhs, Croats, Bulgarians," RFERL, <http://www.online.bg> (July 20, 2002).

7 Michael Gove, "Breed or Die Out," The Times (London), (November 15, 2001).