

Culture and Identity in a Migration Society:

The German-Bulgarian Heritage

A case study by Carolin Martinov

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on intangible cultural heritage, more precisely on places of traditional dances, music, and customs, of a migration society. It can be considered as a first approach to the question to what extent such a cultural heritage contributes to the formation of the identity of individuals with a migration background. The example used for this purpose consists of Bulgarian communities in Germany.

The Fribourg Declaration is a "Declaration on cultural rights to actors in the three sectors: public (States and their institutions), civil society (Nongovernmental organisations and other non-profit associations and institutions) and private (enterprises) with a view to encouraging the recognition and implementation of cultural rights at the local, national, regional and universal levels." (UNESCO, 2007) acknowledged by the UNESCO Chair amongst other actors. Article 4 in this declaration is most important to this paper considering the individual reference to cultural communities, hence the choice of identity-forming cultural heritage:

Article 4 (reference to cultural communities)

- a. Everyone is free to choose to identify or not to identify with one or several cultural communities, regardless of frontiers, and to modify such a choice;
- b. No one shall have a cultural identity imposed or be assimilated into a cultural community against one's will.

This case study on migrated cultural heritage considers the choice of cultural heritage as a part of cultural identity and its development on the example of the (supposedly) Bulgarian population in Germany. It thus states and encourages the hypothesis, that an individual and free choice of one's own cultural identity is possible. However, the question remaining would be whether the 'chosen' immaterial heritage coexists with different intangible cultural heritages or emerges into a new and common shared heritage.

The topic of such a personal and subjective question is a complex one. Therefore, the methods used to examine this hypothesis consists of several steps: The first step is to first understand on a superficial level what role Bulgarian migration plays in Germany respectively how it came to exist. Subsequently,

a selection of platforms that allow individuals to get in touch with the Bulgarian cultural heritage outside their own social environment, as family and friends, will be briefly outlined. These analyses of documents and websites form a foundation. Finally, and probably most relevantly, the results of a qualitative interview are presented.

2. Bulgarians in Germany

Migration is no exception in Germany: one in four people has a migration background. With a total of 319.271 people with Bulgarian roots living in Germany the by far largest Bulgarian diaspora¹ in Europe can be found in Germany (cf. Statista, 2020). Although the relationship between Bulgaria and Germany may not seem extraordinarily strong nor obvious – it arose a long time ago.

First transnational approaches of people and institutions of these two regions emerged in the context² of education and culture³ and go back (occasionally) to the Middle Ages. After the liberation of Bulgaria from Ottoman domination in the end of the 19th century by Soviet hand, the political connection and influence of Western Europe became more visible: Like many other countries in East Europe, Bulgaria was then to be reigned by German aristocrats until the takeover of the Soviet Union on September 9th, 1944. This date marked a turning point in Bulgarian history as travelling to other countries and territories was then forbidden to most people. Transnational exchange became difficult, almost impossible or a privilege to only a few Bulgarians – mostly because of their working fields and/or political commitment. However, the then prevailing Socialism, the following Post-Socialism after 1989 and eventually the 2007 effected EU Membership represent the most important period for today's migration movement: The DDR, particularly Leipzig, became a (legal) desired destination for Bulgarians. It is not surprising, that after the Fall of the Berlin Wall many more Bulgarians – given their romantic view

¹ In her current study *Verhindert, verdeckt, unsichtbar – Migration und Mobilität von Bulgarien nach Deutschland*, Marina Liakova discussed, among other things, the justified objection that the terms diaspora and community should be differentiated (cf. Liakova, 2020, p. 20ff). For lack of a better term, as well as the unwanted anticipation of my own research, diaspora shall be used here for the time being.

² It is also assumed that the geographical conditions, more specifically the Danube, played an important role in this context offering the mobility to wander. Nevertheless, for this case study the geographical aspects will not be researched more intensively as they are considered less important for the current migration movements than the following sociological reasons given.

³ Literature is probably the most important cultural aspect that linked Bulgarians and Germans (cf. Goethe-Institute Sofia, 2014). Since separated from traditions and cultural customs, literature is not of great importance for this work. For further interest, however, more examples of this literary link are researched in Schaller et al. (ed.) (2015), p.11-63.

and Image of Western Europe, especially Germany – decided to leave their origin and move to Germany as soon as it became legally possible. Still, as moving also requires a lot of social, cultural, and economic capital, the Bulgarian accession to the European Union with its consequences positively influencing people's mobility, can be considered the last step to an opening between the two countries (cf. Liakova, 2020).

Many of the migrated Bulgarians nowadays are living in Germany in the second, third or fourth generation. For them, it may sometimes be difficult to answer questions about their identity unambiguously in terms of their origin and culture: The longer the actual act of immigration goes back, the more the idea and cultivation of the culture in which their own ancestors grew up becomes blurred and the more hybridized it becomes with the culture of the current place of living. Nevertheless, the traditions of the culture of origin are also cultivated in Germany: Clubs and cultural associations are the nodal points for this memory, they maintain cultural programs and mutual exchange. Furthermore, festivals contribute to an opening of migrant associations in and with the German population as a whole and contribute to a vivid cultural exchange.

3. Associations and institutions of Bulgarian cultural heritage

Cultural associations or institutions of the Eastern European and Bulgarian culture of remembrance can be found throughout Germany including Baden-Württemberg. With slightly less than half of all organizations founded by Bulgarians in Germany, by far most of them are related to culture (cf. Liakova, 2020, p.308). The heritage represented with their activities is usually solely intangible heritage. In this region for example, the Bulgarian Forum Martenitsa in Stuttgart or the branch office of the Bulgarian Cultural Institute (BKI) 'Southeast European Bulgarian Cultural Institute' in Ellwangen try to keep the immaterial Bulgarian cultural heritage alive. They want to convey today's Bulgarian culture in Germany. In the following paragraphs the missions and programs of some of those institutions will be presented with the first results of an online research:

One of the first upcoming 'traditions' of Bulgarian migration to Germany are student associations. Bai Ganyo e.V. in Mannheim is a good example of such organizations. Founded in 2004, the group understands itself as a bridge between Bulgarian and other cultures that helps international students at the University of Mannheim with their Integration (cf. Bai Ganyo e.V., 2021). Moreover, Bai Ganyo aims at showing and explaining Bulgarian culture to students with different nationalities and cultural heritages. At this point of time Bai Ganyo lists three activity programs on its website: an event initiative for Christmas, a football team, and the initiative 'Folklore Fabrik' teaching Balkan folk dances (a common

activity throughout Bulgarian associations). What is striking when looking at this student association is the fact that they are multilingual: The communication (website, information, events etc.) of Bai Ganyo is in (mostly) English, German and Bulgarian.

A similar community care strategy is present at the cultural forum Martenitsa e.V.: This association provides useful information in German and Bulgarian language, such as news of political, cultural, and regional relevance to the immigrated Bulgarians living in the region of Stuttgart. Being situated in Stuttgart since 2003, Martenitsa aims not only at enhancing the German-Bulgarian relationship but to provide an intercultural exchange with events in cooperation with other associations of foreign culture. Martenitsa's own radio station (with the same name) extends the range of services offered by the club. Particularly due to the content's diversity as well as relevance to everyday life, it becomes apparent that the community of Bulgarians and the preservation of this identity is essential for the members. On the web appearances of the association, a private and independent Bulgarian school is also mediated. Likewise, a (developing) distributor of Bulgarian products delivering to Germany is linked to. Networking between each other is visibly crucial. However, the accessibility to deeper knowledge about the club's work and events are strongly limited to non-members.

The BKI was established in 1962 as a cultural center in Berlin, the former GDR. Its main task was to distribute Bulgarian books and records. Since 1997 it has become a cultural institute specializing in the promotion of cultural exchange between Bulgaria and Germany. Its aim is to present an up-to-date picture of cultural activity in Bulgaria, to portray Bulgaria's history and to provide advice on Bulgarian culture. The BKI is part of the network of Bulgarian cultural institutes abroad and a member of the Community of European Cultural Institutes EUNIC in Berlin (cf. BKI, 2021). Hence, the emphasis is now not only on a reciprocal relationship, but also on the exchange of multiple nationalities and cultures. When the director of the National Historical Museum of the Republic of Bulgaria in Sofia visited Ellwangen in May 2010, the idea of a Southeast European-Bulgarian Cultural Institute was born, which started its work the following year as a branch office of the BKI (cf. Honorary Consul Bulgaria, 2021). Unlike the organizations presented earlier, the branch office operates on a meso to macro level. Certainly, individuals can request and use the BKI's services and knowledge; the events and other formats of exchange are open to the public. Yet, the organization and mediation of the intangible cultural heritage does not exclusively take place within the Bulgarian circle. Although the previous associations have institutional character, the degree of institutionalization (and perhaps therefore of mutual interaction between the two nations) is much more prominent. Compared to the previous organizations, also the focus on a German target audience to explain and represent Bulgarian culture and its protagonists is (more) significant.

All these presented actors are helping migrated individuals to feel part of a/their current community. Besides, they are interested in making the interfaces of a Bulgarian heritage visible and offering dialogue on intercultural perspectives. The aim is both, to make the different cultures visible in a migration society, to present traditions and works of art from these cultures and to enable communication on concepts such as identity and community in a migration society. Looking at private clubs and associations, the opening to people of other communities or Germans without any migration background is pleasantly accepted but - given the language barrier - still rather difficult for this target group, rare and therefore maybe not even desired at some points.⁴ Nevertheless, a strive for knowledge, communication and exchange is becoming more and more apparent.

4. Insights from a Bulgarian member of Martenitsa e.V.

Mariana Kabakchiev is Head of the Association Martenitsa e.V. since 2013. She took the time to talk about her association, traditions, and herself in the context of this paper. According to her, she joined the association "by chance". About 90% of the members of the association, like herself, studied in Stuttgart. She encountered them at an event of the association. She wanted to get involved and help. "I have my own idea of happiness. For me, it includes family, friends, job, and social commitment - that was the fourth stone in my life. I have been truly fortunate in my life. I felt the need to give that back. I am good at organizing so I help with that." Today the association counts 40 members, most of them are rather passive. Most of them are in the second generation in Germany or live in German-Bulgarian mixed families. The active core of the organization consists of the same students who initiated Martenitsa e.V. Over time, their own interests have changed and so have the interests of the association. The focus is currently on language and cultural education for (also own) children with Bulgarian roots through the school founded ten years ago. This school, which was also mentioned in the previous chapter, is therefore an important topic for the association. In the past, there were also dance programs and groups, but this was not the focus: "It is important for the feeling of home, yes. Nevertheless, other issues are more important for our community work." The fact that there are not many more people in the association is probably due to the mentality and aversion of many Bulgarians toward associations – a remnant from the Communist era. Nevertheless, maintaining a close network is important to the members of the association: "We exchange information – currently online – about the

⁴ One of the most visible and committed associations for the Bulgarian communities in the region of Stuttgart is 'Balkan Dance'. Its activities, especially at festivities, are naturally accessible to all recipients, but the contact points (e.g., for information or to become a member) are initially and exclusively in Bulgarian language.

quality of the school, everyday things, leisure activities, jobs, books - you could also say that we are an extreme information pool." Due to data protection, the association discloses little or none of this information to third parties. Martenitsa e.V. also (usually) hosts many events that external people can attend. For example, at the end of 2019, there was a Christmas concert with over 300 participants. The audience was mixed. How to deal with audiences that are not familiar with Bulgarian culture so far? Kabakchiev comments that as an association they enjoy explaining the traditions and are happy to welcome foreign audiences. In this way they want to contribute to international understanding and eliminate the fear of the unknown.

Besides, she shares her personal story: In 2000, she arrived with a visa to study nutritional sciences and kinesitherapy. She met her current husband - also a Bulgarian - while studying. Communication has always been important to Kabakchiev. "I think we didn't have as much intel as we have today. If somebody arrives today, he or she knows how everything works. Back then, we only got important information we needed to settle down here through personal exchanges." The first two years in her new home were difficult, she says. "Home used to be a concept of place, Bulgaria, for me. Now it is not a place, but a feeling of well-being. I feel totally at home here - my home is here in Stuttgart. I think this is a phenomenon that many Bulgarians go through. I feel integrated, most of the people who have integrated probably feel the same way. People who have not learned the German language, I think they are more homesick - they miss the communication. I know people who live here for many years and don't bother to learn the language, and then integration is impossible." However, the question of how she defines herself in terms of identity is difficult, would she consider herself Bulgarian, German, neither, nor something in between? "I don't know how to answer that - I am European. I combine characteristics of Bulgarian and German mentality and culture. Bulgarian kindness and spontaneity with German reliability. The accession to the EU was an enormous enrichment for me, because freedom of movement is the most important thing for me. I think if I had to choose, I would be a Bulgarian living in Germany." The question makes her compare herself with other migrants in her surroundings. "I am in Bulgaria 1-2 times a year. People who feel comfortable do not feel the need to go there. That's how I recognize people who have settled here or who still need time to feel comfortable."

Which role does intangible cultural heritage, such as dances, language, or traditions of the respective countries, play in this decision? During the conversation, it becomes clear that this is a complex issue. Kabakchiev's children - 15 and 5 years old - speak both languages. The Bulgarian family customs and traditions, as the parents themselves remember them from their childhood, have not changed or adapted since they started living in Germany. "We celebrate both: German and Bulgarian holidays. Both equally. [...] My children are not Bulgarians living in Germany, I would say. These two cultures

shape differently. I was born and raised in Bulgaria; they were not. I feel that this is an enrichment. The more cultures they are influenced by, the more tolerant they are of other cultures. They can look at life from different angles without prejudice." So how and whether they will define themselves with the help of these two cultural backgrounds is (still?) unclear. However, she does not reject the idea of them being free to choose this. " Both in private and in the association - we don't try to preserve the ashes, but we try to pass on the fire. We give the fire to the children and what they do with it is their decision - they do not have to like it or anything else. We think it is the right thing to do, but if they do not like it, they are free to do so. The world is dynamic and constantly changing. Maybe after 20 years we may find that it was not the right thing to pass on the Bulgarian traditions, but at this moment we think it's right."

5. Conclusion

This case study first presented the causes of Bulgarian migration to Germany and the various forms of memory culture of Bulgarian communities in its institutionalized form today: While clubs acting on a micro to meso level focus on exclusively maintaining Bulgarian heritage within the (mostly Bulgarian) *community*, institutions acting on a meso to macro level, such as the BKI, have a rather transnational approach: On one hand they are aiming to represent a foreign culture, on the other they are constantly working on enhancing a dialogue, which is leading to the impression of implementing a (new) common heritage.⁵ Nevertheless, Associations, rather than those Institutions acting on a meso or macro level, are more important to people with migration background when it comes to learning, choosing and/or maintaining identity-forming cultural heritage. They offer many possibilities for communication and exchange within migrant communities. I would like to consider that the phenomenon of the increasing Bulgarian migration is quite new: Overlooking the newest research of Marina Liakova, in which she also interviewed a remarkable number of Bulgarian migrants, it becomes evident, that Bulgarians lived quite isolated during their first years in Germany – or in other words – the dialogue with people back 'home' as well as with the new fellows occurred insidiously. I assume this is a result of the paranoia they developed in the period of Socialism. Yet, with the increasing mobility, the

⁵ In this context, the Bulgarians living in Germany now are considered as diaspora rather than a community, since they are contributing to a transnational exchange (cf. Liakova, 2020, p.20-22).

convergence of Europe and the advancing generations⁶ of Bulgarian migrants, this self-delimitation slowly vanishes.

Now, if it is to determine to what extent the Bulgarian heritage contributes to the identities of the migrated there is no generally valid answer. However, it appears that this might only be an 'Issue' for the people of advanced generations and not for Bulgarians being the first in their families coming to Germany. Throughout my research it was striking that there is (yet) no common heritage evolving - in other words, Bulgarian and German cultural heritage is always strictly differentiated. Identifying oneself with a hybridized form of cultural heritage between German and Bulgarian culture seems hardly possible. Therefore, migrant heritage is not (yet) shared heritage. Since cultural identity is and shall always be a personal choice, it thus will be up to the following (4th, 5th, 6th...) generations of people with a Bulgarian migration background to decide whether they form a hybridized, common culture between both heritages, hence shared heritage with time. In the context of increasing transnational movements, it appears more likely however, even if only to help bridging a hybrid identity, Europe enhances a European Shared Heritage being adopted by people with migration background.

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⁶ Peggy Levitt and Bernadette Nadya Jaworsky describe the concept of transnational migration as follows: "Clearly, transnational activities will not be central to the lives of most of the second or third generation, and they will not participate with the same frequency and intensity as their parents. But the same children who never go back to their ancestral homes are frequently raised in households where people, values, goods, and claims from somewhere else are present on a daily basis". – Levitt, Peggy / Bernadette Nadya Jaworsky (2007): Transnational Migration Studies - Past Developments and Future Trends. In: Annual Review of Sociology, Vol. 33, 2007, pp. 129–156, here p. 134):

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