

BETWEEN TWO HOMELANDS: IDENTIFICATION PROCESSES AMONG THE TURKS IN BULGARIA IN THE CONTEXT OF THE REMIGRATION FROM TÜRKİYE

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Abstract

Objectives. This study explores the contemporary aspects of identity and the sense of belonging among the Turkish minority in Bulgaria, holders of Bulgarian and Turkish citizenship, who exemplify the so-called *transmigrants*, living and traveling regularly between both countries. The main purpose is to identify specific patterns and dynamics in the development of their ethnic, national, or transnational identity across various situational contexts.

Material and Methods. The study is based on field research in Northeast and Southeast Bulgaria, including interdisciplinary qualitative research methods: 28 in-depth interviews, a focus group discussion, and participant and direct observation. The collected field materials were subjected to comparative analysis within the theoretical frameworks of social anthropology and ethno-sociology.

Results. In the narratives of the informants, the period of forced ethnic assimilation (1985) and of the expulsion from Bulgaria (1989) occupies an important place, sometimes as a painful trauma. Turkish transmigrants who live on both sides of the border reside in a *multilocal* reality and reconstruct their identities in different ways. In certain situations, between two ethno-cultural spaces, their origin and kinship relations appear to be strong factors that motivate emotional attachment to Bulgaria.

Conclusions. Under contemporary conditions, Turks who move between the two homelands are developing new strategies of self-identification and ways of coping with historical trauma. Transmigrants, recognized as a distinct subgroup, often describe themselves as “foreigners everywhere,” while simultaneously embracing identities such as “citizens of the world” or presenting themselves as a “bridge”—mediators between Turkish and Bulgarian cultures.

Keywords: Turks in Bulgaria, homeland, remigration, transmigrants, identification processes

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Introduction

“We have no place to return to, we have many places to be” (Participant 11, woman, 57 years old).

One of the most common definitions of the modern world as a “world without borders” (Pries, 2001), a “global village” (Appadurai, 2006), once again brings to the fore the global problem of “a man’s place under the sun”, while at the same time confronting us with possible alternative answers to the crucial question, “Who am I?” How do Turkish transmigrants, former emigrants, respond to this question today, 36 years after their forced departure from their native lands in 1989, still seeking their “true” place and identity between Bulgaria and Türkiye? The focus of analysis in the following pages is precisely this ongoing process of “searching”, which still cannot be spoken of in the past tense, despite numerous studies on the topic.

During the annual conferences in Türkiye dedicated to “Forced Migration” (1989) of the Turks from Bulgaria, the introduction often begins with “The Expulsion from the Garden of Eden”—the story of Adam and Eve. This is not an exaggerated metaphor, nor a device for influencing the audience, but rather an attempt at a broader (and less painful) conceptualization of the trauma, dissolving it within the ontological boundaries of the universal human condition. This expression, alongside the emphasis on expulsion, and the analogy with “paradise”, is no less significant, considering that prior to their expulsion from Bulgaria, Türkiye had been the longed-for “motherland”. In reality, the term “motherland” can be defined and experienced differently, depending not only on circumstances but also on identity. Results from the conducted field research, as well as a number of other studies on the subject, show that the mass departure from homelands as a form of historical trauma has left permanent traces in the collective memory of the Turkish community (Erolova, 2025b; Goncharova, 2017; Parla, 2006). Therefore, the motive of expulsion, openly or implicitly present in each life story, is an integral part of their identity. Yet there was also something else in these stories: the plot of the past continued to unfold, to be rewritten, through new methods of spatial identification, moving beyond expulsion or return, even beyond the trauma itself. It carried new meaning and interpretation, not only of the concepts of “displacement”, “homeland”, and “home”, but also of the past itself. Along with frequent trips across the border, following the discourse of return, which assumed that the former emigrant would live peacefully and calmly in Bulgaria, the story proves to have a continuation. The path was not yet over; it was just the beginning, because this was no longer the path of the “victim”, but the “path of the hero”, from the work of the same name by the American anthropologist J. Campbell (1949/2000), which inspired a number of contemporary scholars. The theme of the personality’s transformation, passing through various vicissitudes, worlds, and borders, adjusts differently in the life stories of the informants, but with many common elements that justify talking about the transformation in question. They truly come back with knowledge, cultural and social experience, dual citizenship of two worlds. This process can be described as a strategy to overcome the trauma; however, it does not heal it. The travelling emigrants, as a mobile (transmigrant) community, or in Maeva’s words (2006), a “trans-state community”, find themselves once again rejected, this time by their own inner group, the local Turks in Bulgaria, who have become the new “other” for the returning Turks. Therefore, since they feel like strangers here too, they distinguish themselves as a specific transmigrant community, known among the local Bulgarian Turks as the group of “from Türkiye” (in Turkish *Türkiyeliler*). Thus, to the many definitions of Turkish emigrants from Bulgaria, such as migrants, returnees, and Bulgarian Turks, we can add the definition “transmigrants” as a specific subgroup in the community of returnees (re-emigrants) (Maeva, 2006). In this case, the aim of this work is to clarify the

consequences of these changes, focusing on the perception of homeland among the group of transmigrants.

After the radical changes (political, economic, socio-cultural, etc.), and the unsuccessful attempts of the totalitarian regimes of the last century to create a homogeneous society in which there is no place for the “other”, the new transnational paradigm subjects the primitive understanding of the relationship between identity and space to serious criticism and rethinking. This also requires a new conceptual framework in defining problems and situations, which, although inherited from the past, needs to be re-evaluated with each change of paradigm (Gupta, 1992; Nakova, 2024). In this context, transnationalism is indicated as one of the “most important and promising” approaches in the analysis of the problems of contemporary society and, above all, the constantly changing dynamics of social spaces, which are increasingly distinguished as “transnational fields” (Glick Schiller et al., 1995; Pries, 2001). Pries (2001) offers a comprehensive analysis of this new concept, which proves to be particularly relevant in research on identity issues among migrants and minorities, as well as in the choice of theoretical framework in the present work. The topic of the present study has a broad historical context, related to the periodic waves of emigration from Bulgaria to Türkiye, resulting from the establishment of the Turkish community as a minority group following the withdrawal of the Ottoman Empire from the Balkans in 1878. Migrations have always been an integral part of the history and daily life of the Turkish community in Bulgaria. However, unlike in the past, today, in the era of transnationalism, we speak not of migrations but of transmigrations, and instead of “homeland”, we speak of “hybridity” (Konrad & Szary, 2022; Nakova, 2024; Verkuyten et al., 2019) or “multiple identities” (Kang & Bodenhausen, 2015). It is well known that, already in the early years after leaving Bulgaria, many Turks returned for understandable economic, cultural, and other reasons. Although 360,000 emigrants left in 1989, more than 150,000 had returned by 1990; however, migration between the two countries continued in both directions (Maeva, 2006). However, the psycho-social and cultural dynamics of the constantly travelling “wanderer” are not so easily explained. With each crossing of the border, this individual increasingly becomes aware of the advantages of their intermediate state, acting as a bridge between two different worlds, yet belonging fully to neither. Within the scope of this article, we do not have the opportunity to delve deeply into the historical context of the topic, but it must be noted that contemporary identity attitudes among Turks remain closely linked to the traumatic experiences of the recent past (Erolova, 2025b; Goncharova, 2017; Kurtuluş, 2019). Ultimately, the policy of forced assimilation proved not only unsuccessful but also resulted in entirely unforeseen consequences. Even before the democratic changes of 1989, it became clear that instead of the expected outcome, the complete assimilation of the Turkish minority or their coerced acceptance of Bulgarian origin, the opposite occurred: internal cohesion of the collective and strengthening of Turkish ethnic self-awareness (Erolova, 2025a, 2025b). In almost all of the informants’ stories, the issue of identity occupies a central place, primarily due to the trauma of the forced renaming campaign of 1985 (Dinç, 2019; Karakusheva, 2012). This most painful part of their lives is mentioned without any direct questions being asked about that period and, in fact, permeates the entire narrative as a recurring theme, sometimes appearing in complex interplay with memories of a happy childhood. Most strikingly, in every case, this turning point is identified as the beginning of the process of self-awareness, a recollection of one’s own identity, which was on the verge of being erased naturally through “voluntary assimilation” (Participant 1, man, 50 years old). This fact is also documented in field research conducted by other scholars (Erolova, 2025a; Maeva, 2006). But what is the situation today? What are the main factors that determine identity attitudes and the sense of belonging within the mentioned community? The aim of this article is directly related to this

question, around which the structure and theoretical framework of the present study have been formulated.

The field material (in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, participant observation, as well as self-reflection—the author’s direct experience) were analyzed using methods from ethno-sociology and cultural anthropology, situated within historical and contemporary contexts. The analytical framework is based on new approaches—the concept of *transnationalism* in migration studies (Glick Shiller et al., 1995; Gupta, 1992), and on concepts of *dual identity* (Cárdenas et al., 2021) among ethnic minorities. A qualitative method was employed, with the study’s scope limited to highly educated individuals for whom the issue of identity is consciously perceived and has real-life dimensions.

Material and Methods

The specific objectives of this research were as follows:

- O1. To establish the modes of identification among Turkish transmigrants under conditions of constant mobility.
- O2. To trace the changes in identification processes (and the concept of homeland) from 1989 to the present.
- O3. To clarify the influences of multilocal belonging on the cultural identity of Turkish transmigrants.

Research hypotheses

- H1. The return migration of Turkish emigrants from Türkiye to Bulgaria is a long, dynamic process, which at its current stage can be defined as transmigration
- H2. Living between two or more countries, Turkish people from Bulgaria (former emigrants) are typical representatives of the group called transmigrants
- H3. Multilocal belonging and constant travel provoke new processes/models of identification, as well as the conditions for reframing past experiences, fostering self-awareness, and working through traumas of the recent past, through the constant crossing of borders (physical, cultural, etc.).

Sample

This study is based on fieldwork conducted among members of the Turkish community, former emigrants living between Bulgaria and Türkiye, carried out from March 13 to July 26, 2025, within the framework of the research project “Contemporary Dimensions and Aspects of the Dual Identity of the Turks in Bulgaria (on the case of highly educated professionals with dual citizenship)”, under the National Program “Young Scholars and Postdoctoral Fellows”- 2, at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.

The field material consists of audio recordings of biographical interviews conducted using pre-formulated questions. Meetings with informants took place in the following cities: Sofia, Plovdiv, Razgrad, Silistra, Duloovo, Ruse, Varna, and Dobrich. A total of 28 individuals, aged between 25 and 86, were interviewed. Out of the 28 participants, approximately 57.1% were male and 42.9% were female. Age group distribution was as follows:

- 10.7% were aged 18–30

- 32.1% were aged 31–50
- 39.3% were aged 51–65
- 17.9% were aged 66 and above

Although the analysis focuses primarily on individuals engaged in constant cross-border mobility, as a basis for comparison, individuals with permanent residence in Bulgaria who returned after a very short stay in Türkiye, as well as several individuals who have never emigrated but are in direct contact with the transmigrant community, were also interviewed. Conversations were conducted in two languages (Turkish and Bulgarian), according to the respondents' preference, with many interviews being bilingual. Translations from Turkish into Bulgarian were made by the author. To protect anonymity, each participant is referred to by a number in the text.

Results

1. Multilocal worlds and the Concept of Homeland

The contemporary aspects of the problem of dual or multiple identity among minorities are difficult to explain with the traditional understanding of kin and homeland (Basch et al., 1993/2020). For this reason, at the very beginning of this study during the fieldwork, and also during the analysis of the data, it was necessary to rethink the already familiar terminology for ethnic minorities and theories of dual identity. Gupta and Ferguson speak of the *reinscription* of space (1992). In this context, as a typical example of the changes that have occurred in the concept of homeland and belonging, we can refer to the statements of the informants themselves:

I am a Rumelian Turkish woman. Do I have to choose? I'm here today, there tomorrow. My homeland is here; my homeland is Türkiye. Well, what am I supposed to do now? If the story in Bulgaria had developed differently, we would not question ourselves with "to be or not to be." The political border does not divide our identity into two. We live both as locals here and as locals there in a more symbolic, larger homeland. You are probably familiar with Edward Said's Orientalism... Where is that man supposed to return? I am no different than that man. We have no place to return to; we have many places to be. (Participant 11, woman, 57 years old)

We, dual citizens, can't say "This is my place." We are between two countries. Neither here, nor there. I say to those with dual citizenship: Sell everything, come back, restore your houses in Bulgaria, and spend the rest of your days here... We lost ourselves over there. Over there feels like a trap to me... Here is homeland, there is homeland, homeland, motherland... But to which one do I truly belong? (Participant 19, woman, 68 years old)

During the field research, the answers to the question of what it takes for a place to become a home offered clear insight into the connection of former emigrants with their native places after many years of living in Türkiye. For some, it was the memories of childhood, the past, the comfort of the social environment, the feeling of being part of it, and above all, being accepted as such. For example, a participant who travels between three states (Bulgaria, Germany, and Türkiye, cannot experience this feeling anywhere but in Bulgaria, even though she currently prefers to live in Berlin with the thought that sooner or later she will return to her hometown: "I am a Bulgarian Turk... I burst into tears when I hear Bulgarian music in Germany. They can't even appreciate the smell of lilacs" (Participant 8, woman, 53 years old).

To Turkish transmigrants, the "homeland" functions also as a symbolic space that reflects their complex identity—as a cornerstone of identity that must constantly be rethought, not only in

extreme conditions, but also today, in times of continuous transformation of social reality. Identity as a dynamic social construct is directly dependent not only on changes in the social environment, but also on the nature of interaction with the “others” (Nakova, 2024). In the life stories of the participants, the attitude towards space has its own specifics. It is always connected with the emotional burden of travel and crossing borders. Constant mobility not only becomes a way of existence, but at the same time transforms the perception of oneself and of the “other”. In the interviews conducted, self-definition as “Balkan/Rumelian Turk” is used mainly to emphasize the difference from Anatolian Turks. This is specific mainly to the group of migrants who have lived in Türkiye for many years, but always with the feeling of being foreign. One of the informants from Northeastern Bulgaria expresses it as follows:

We are different... Türkiye became an incredible school to us despite the many hardships. There we gained incredible experience, saw different things, our language skills improved, our kids learned. And we, from this environment too... because something draws us here, I don't know exactly what... Migration is in our genes. We come but we can't find these places the way we left them. It's very different; everyone is very different (local Turks in Bulgaria), we have nothing in common. There is a gap between us and them, and it will continue to grow further. I have an expression I often use: “Long live forced migration!” If it wasn't for it, we would be miserable in these places. We came back with our Turkish identity. We said our names calmly. We gained confidence in Türkiye. My head is held high. Besides, Bulgarians behave differently with the local Turks and those who come from Türkiye... No one should be angry with anyone. It's a matter of personal development... I say: our garbage heap is here. For example, I can't say that my garbage heap is in Türkiye. I prefer to observe Türkiye from a distance - like a bird's eye view. Our house is in Istanbul, but when I go, I feel lost. (Participant 19)

These examples are not only one of the most frequently repeated answers to the question “Who am I?” or to positioning the self in the historical space with reference to a supranational identity, but they also represent a new topic for reflection on the cultural differences that have been clearly realized after many years of close contact with local Turks:

I don't say “Bulgarian Turk”; I use the term “Balkan Turks.” Balkan Turks! I am Turkish; the Balkans, however... this is it; this is the geographical part where I feel best. So, Bulgaria, Macedonia (North Macedonia since 2019), Greece... For me, there... where there is... That's childhood, music, folk music, the Rhodope Mountains, the things we grew up with... I am a Balkan person. I am from Bulgaria. For me, the Balkans, that's it, you know... Basically, we are, how shall I put it, as people, we are cheerful, we have a high spirit, we quickly swing from one extreme to the other... That is typical for a Balkan person. We don't like... I worked in Anatolia... A completely different mindset. Those are people who feed on sorrow, on tears... Their soul feeds on darkness. It makes me feel bad. Come on now, I'd say, I am a Balkan person... Our soul feeds on the good, on joy, on cheerfulness, on roses, on beauty, on scent. Everything... I'd say, on the sun. The sun, that's it! That's why I call myself a Balkan person. And maybe that is the greatest drive we have. (Participant 13, woman, 49 years old)

I am a Turkish woman from Bulgaria. I say it while emphasizing that I am from Bulgaria. A Rumelian Turk, a Balkan Turk... that's what I am. I am a Turkish woman from Bulgaria. This phrase, “a Turk from Bulgaria” is very important because our grandfathers, our mothers, their grandfathers are from Bulgarian land... Their lives, their homeland, their fields, their lands, how shall I put it, even their dreams, their thoughts, everything is

connected with Bulgaria. We realized this very clearly during the emigration of '89. Anavatan (the motherland) is the motherland, alright... (Participant 16, woman, 46 years old)

After the quotes above, can we claim that the integration of transmigrants in Türkiye was unsuccessful, considering that the interviewees have a high level of professional qualification? They have never lost their connection with Bulgaria, nor with the Bulgarian language, but the same cannot be said about their connection with the in-group (the local Bulgarian Turks). Along with the traumas of forced assimilation and forced displacement, which are still present in the life stories, the use of Bulgarian names in Bulgaria is another interesting fact ascertained during the fieldwork and is also well known from personal observations during frequent trips on both sides of the border. From this, it can be concluded that the Turks living between two homelands no longer feel the need to prove their ethnic origin. They are already sufficiently “trained” in this and have finally accepted that for their fellow citizens in Türkiye, they will always remain Bulgarian Turks, and even Bulgarians: “Wherever you go, you always remain a Bulgarian Turk. That’s it!” (Participant 11). And what about the issue of shared space, without which we cannot speak of belonging in the true sense of the word, or what are the relationships of former emigrants with local Turks in Bulgaria? From the interviews conducted, it is clear that emigrants who travel constantly or live in two places do not receive a good reception from local Turks in Bulgaria who have remained in their homeland. In this way, a new community of emigrants-transmigrants is emerging, who bring new habits and new values from Türkiye, and therefore their culture no longer has anything to do with the local one. Their state of “in-betweenness” irritates the local Turks, who have not fled like them but have remained “loyal to their community and homeland.” The same division is observed not only between relatives and friends, but also within families. Their language is different, their mentality too. The two groups cannot fully communicate with each other due to cultural distance, but on the other hand, it is easier for both of them to communicate with the Bulgarians, who play the role of a catalyst in social relations between local Turks and travelling Turks. This is a very interesting phenomenon for future research. Why is the “close other” more acceptable than the “foreign one of ours?” According to the statements of the respondents, it turns out that the dividing line within the Turkish community is Türkiye. The expression in Turkish “*Türkiyeliler*”, literally translated, means “those from Türkiye” in this case it implies a disdainful attitude towards those coming from there, as people who have replaced their homeland with another country and then, disappointed, continue to wander on both sides of the border, i.e., they do not know their place, and this in itself is sufficient reason for marginalizing the group. Bulgarians, who also often travel to Türkiye and throughout Europe, are closely acquainted with Turkish urban culture. Transmigrants are typical representatives of the post-modern world, with whom they can communicate without being burdened by the prejudices of the past.

In fact, with what cultural identity do the emigrants return, or what makes them different? This is another important question that was answered during the field study without the need for direct inquiry. It turns out that the transmigrants communicate more freely in both languages (Bulgarian and Turkish), while the locals have difficulties with literary Turkish, and the feeling of awkwardness was one of the most frequently cited reasons for the problems in communication between the two groups.

2. Identification Processes and Multiple Forms of Belonging

As can be seen from the results of the fieldwork, the identity issue is gaining new dimensions among the Turks living between the two countries today. After analyzing the field material, it becomes clear that after 30 to 36 years of residence in Türkiye, which is also regarded as the motherland (*anavatan*), transmigrants continue to search for themselves:

How would I introduce myself? If I'm in Bulgaria, I am... (Bulgarian name); if I'm in Türkiye, I'm also... (shortened version of Bulgarian name), sometimes (Turkish name). Two names, we can even say two identities, because each one is different in its own way. My family is the same. We aren't locals there; we aren't locals here. At some point it turned out that we have two personalities or I don't know how to put it, but this is very difficult to explain if a person has not experienced it themselves. At one point you realize, I'm neither there. While I am in Türkiye, I miss Bulgaria. While I am in Bulgaria, I miss Türkiye... I will never forget, before the emigration, I was already older; we had gone through the "Revival Process" and I was studying at a mathematics high school. I went to my teacher to request my diploma a little earlier because we were emigrating. Her reaction was: It can't be, you are such an intelligent family, how can it be, you can't be Turks. I stood up and shouted: What do you mean we cannot be Turks? I have always been Turkish, I am Turkish now, and we are leaving because this country doesn't want to accept us as we are. I had to hide that I was Turkish so that my teachers and classmates wouldn't ignore me. Nobody knew. (Participant 13, woman, 49 years old)

Despite the changes in the relationship between space and belonging, the concept of homeland remains essential in the processes of identification. Even if they feel foreign everywhere or at home everywhere, their answer to the question of homeland is always definitive: Bulgaria is the true homeland, regardless of how long they have lived in Türkiye. It represents as "the blood that flows in their veins," "childhood," and the land of their ancestors. (Participants 9, 10, 13, and 14). In cases with strongly expressed multi-local affiliation and dual identity, such as a 46-year-old businessman who travels between Bulgaria, Türkiye, and Russia, the respondents no longer want to live permanently in a single place. Yet every trip to Bulgaria fills them with emotional abundance:

I would never trade Bulgaria for Türkiye. I have traveled with my parents just to be in Bulgaria, to feel like myself, to reconnect with the real me. I am already 49. I have been searching for myself for the past few months. Where did I lose myself, where am I now, how do I feel, where do I want to live from now on? Because spiritually, I'm not truly happy or fulfilled anywhere. (Participant 13, woman, 49 years old)

Another respondent with a preserved Bulgarian name shared: "In many cases, I cannot find an exact answer to the question who am I because I am stuck between three names. I am looking for my identity. I feel like a stranger in Türkiye. I live there, but it could not become my homeland" (Participant 14, woman, 64 years old).

Discussion

Within the Turkish transmigrants, the concept of the "other" is also undergoing notable transformations, alongside shifts in the perception of social space. What stands out in the respondents' narratives is that the notion of "otherness" is more frequently attributed to the local Turks in Türkiye:

When we went to Türkiye during the emigration process, they said to us: Hey, you Bulgarians! That's when this doubling of the self-started again. I'm not Bulgarian, I'm Turkish, yet there they called me "the Bulgarian". So, I thought, well, fine, here I have my Turkish name. When I return to Bulgaria, all my close friends know me by my Bulgarian name. And I say, why should I have to change it again? So, I stay with both identities. And these two identities, very interestingly, also differ. One of them is more conservative. That is me, that is my Self. (Participant 11)

This self-confidence—sometimes accompanied by a sense of superiority over both "Anatolian" and local Turks in Bulgaria—is especially visible among respondents who continue to use their Bulgarian names. The full integration of a dual identity is often paired with strong ethnic and civic self-awareness; thus, social experience from Türkiye becomes a valuable cultural capital, distinguishing transmigrants from local Turks in both Bulgaria and Türkiye: "We made a mistake trying to prove that we are one of them too. They should have risen to our level, not us." (Participant 14); "Here at least we were Turks, and there they called us Bulgarians." (Participant 21, man, 67 years old).

Respondents frequently describe themselves as foreign everywhere or finding no peace anywhere. This collective sense of alienation functions as a strategy to assert authenticity and build a cross-border identity, emphasizing differentiation from "others", which is an essential part of identification. Research shows psychological and social advantages of dual identity for migrants and ethnic minorities (Verkuyten et al., 2019). For the Turkish transmigrants, dual identity is emerging as a valuable *cultural capital*, helping compensate for past traumas like assimilation, expulsion, and rejection. In the interviews conducted, the self-confidence from free communication with different cultures emerged as one of the typical characteristics of Turkish transmigrants:

I am a person with many identities. I have a civil identity, I have an ethnic one, a religious one. Many identities enrich a person, enrich the soul, the worldview, and in the environment in which I live I can boast of many friends, neighbors of different identities, with whom I can communicate excellently, I can communicate in my mother tongue - Turkish, Bulgarian, and other languages. I show understanding towards the culture and identity of other people, because difference enriches a person's worldview. (Participant 2, man, 50 years old)

The perception of multiple identity as a form of wealth is exhibited not only in expressions such as "I am a mediator, an intermediary between two cultures" (Participant 1, man, 52 years old), but also in the natural alternation of the two languages within the same narrative. In almost all conversations, when discussing topics with a Bulgarian context, there is an automatic switch to Bulgarian—despite the interviewee's initial intent to speak Turkish—and vice-versa. Therefore, the language during the interviews serves as a significant indicator in the data analysis.

The concept of homeland differs considerably for returnees (former migrants) and travelers (transmigrants). For those who returned after a short stay in Türkiye, typically between one and six months, homeland is not problematized; it is understood as historical heritage, a physical given. For travelers, however, homeland is experienced as something repeatedly suffered—a constantly shifting category in the ongoing process of reconstructing identity. At the same time, it functions as a meeting place with friends, relatives, and the past. Homeland is the space where not only historical roots from before Ottoman times but also the dual identity—belonging to Bulgaria, the Balkans, and Europe—is legitimized repeatedly. For the Turkish transmigrant community, the homeland is a symbolic space populated with constantly changing images from the past and the present. It is as a "parallel reality"—a place where one can move freely and stay whenever feeling lost, whether on the roads or temporarily residing in Türkiye. The other world beyond *Kapıkule* (border gate) also

carries the status of homeland, though in a different sense and not for everyone “The Turks in our northern region did not come from Türkiye, they welcomed the Ottomans here, we are before them...” (Participant 19); “We are before the Ottomans, we are from the Seljuk Turks” (Participant 21).

Is this distancing—whether consciously or subconsciously—from Ottoman heritage accidental, or is it a new strategy of belonging? This question cannot be answered definitively, but the fact that this explanation came as an answer to the question of relations with the local Turks in Türkiye, with a sharp distinction between “us” and “them” (“We are before them”), in order to emphasize the difference between the Rumelian (Balkan) Turks and the Turks in the Republic of Türkiye, is quite indicative. The notion of the “mother-country”, which for a long time served to maintain ethnic immunity against real or perceived attempts at assimilation, was reinforced by the historical interpretation of the “descendants of the Ottoman Empire returning to Anatolia”—a narrative especially popular in Türkiye after 1989 and into the present. Turks in/from Bulgaria generally associate their historical origins with Konya-Karaman (Türkiye), from where their ancestors were resettled after the Ottoman conquest of the Balkan Peninsula. This concept, which is often mentioned in field studies, was developed within the Turkish community even during the years of forced renaming, as historical evidence of ethnicity (Maeva, 2006).

Conclusions

“There is room for everyone under the sun.” (Participant 3, man, 50 years old)

The comparative analysis of the field material indicates that former emigrants from Bulgaria, living between two or more countries, now embrace the freedom not to choose, residing both “here and there”, “neither here nor there.” They occupy an intermediate transnational social space at the intersection of cultures, where they often serve as bridge-mediators—a role with which many in the community identify. This position also functions as a strategy to overcome the traumas of rejection experienced in both homelands, the tension of choosing between two countries, two cultures, two languages, and two identities, and as a mission that provides meaning to life, compensating for inherited feelings of inferiority caused by minority status, assimilation policies, and the constant search for the true homeland. Multilocal experience enables the preservation of dual identity, which under modern conditions of mobility becomes more of a privilege than an obstacle, both personally and in interactions with other cultures, religions, and ethnicities. The bridge-mediator role is a valuable asset not only for representatives of the Turkish ethnicity but also for fellow citizens on both sides of the border. (Maeva, 2008). The process of constructing multilocal belonging is complex, often preceded by attempts to choose one homeland, which fail to provide the expected resolution. For a generation shaped by collective displacement trauma, the principle of the “The stone is heaviest where it belongs.” (well-known Turkish/Bulgarian proverb, which is mainly used by returning migrants) is no longer valid. The sense of homeland is no longer tied to physical space. One cannot choose only their birthplace, but it is possible to feel at home even when far from it. For the modern transmigrant, true home is a cognitive attitude, a sense of fulfilment independent of place of residence.

The transmigrant experience combines strong attachment to the homeland with an expanded spatial identity. This “deterritorialization” (Glick Schiller et al., 1994) or rewriting of space (Gupta, 1992) is a defining feature of cross-border identity. In multilocal existence, social space expands over multiple geographical areas, as “transnational social fields encompass durable,

dense configurations of social practices, symbols, and artefacts across countries” (Pries, 2001). Multilocality does not eliminate the need to identify with a social space but it is no longer predetermined by national borders. Belonging becomes a continuous process of rethinking social experience in the search for oneself. A respondent travelling constantly between Ankara and Razgrad says: “In fact, true freedom is not to belong, but to love without belonging” (Participant 14). Thus, for transmigrants, space gains new functions and semantic potential. Travel becomes a form of self-rediscovery, rewriting both spatial and temporal experiences. Past trauma remains, but it is increasingly recognized and transformed into a path towards self-knowledge. According to respondents “there is no return migration”; they are simultaneously both “here and there” (Participant 11). Crossing distances between homelands reconstructs identity, merging divisions created by state policies, ideologies, and borders into a symbolic image: the border at *Kapıkule*, the only place where they do not feel foreign because they know it best (Participant 11).

The analysis of field data and ethnological studies, alongside the author’s personal experience as a member of the community, demonstrates changes in the concept of homeland over a generation. In the early years following forced expulsion in 1989, Bulgaria was perceived as both a “lost homeland” and a “lost past”. In subsequent return waves, homeland became the father’s house, the land of ancestors, a place to return to after long absences, where one “breathes”.

Today, 36 years after the emigration, the traumas of the recent past- the forced assimilation of 1984–1985- still remain central in life narratives, serving as a boundary between “before” and “now.” The homeland is no longer perceived as a physical place, but rather as a marker of dual identity. For Turkish transmigrants, after many years of striving to adapt in Türkiye and facing the “impossible choice” between “two homelands,” multilocal existence emerges not only as a mode of living, but also as a way to construct a more complete identity- one that for generations had been confined within the limits of minority status. Every interaction with the “close other” (the majority population in Bulgaria) or with the “familiar foreigner” (the majority in Türkiye) becomes an occasion to reconsider both inherited and currently imposed models of identity. Under contemporary conditions of mobility, the native home in Bulgaria still preserves its key function as a “topography of intimate essence” (Bachelard, 1996), but now as part of a larger social space that includes Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir, and numerous European cities. The answer to the question of the final destination of these ongoing cross-border journeys remains unknown-something that could serve as the basis or inspiration for a new and broader study on the topic.

Limits and Future Directions

One limitation of this study is the specific scope of fieldwork, which included only highly educated specialists. Consequently, the results cannot be generalized to the entire community. The study focused on transmigrants, yet in the context of high mobility, they overlap with emigrants who returned in 1989 and also travel to Türkiye, making it difficult to delineate research boundaries. The findings may inform future research on the second generation of migrants, descendants of returnees who were born and raised in Türkiye. Many members of this generation possess dual citizenship but not necessarily share the dual identity of their parents. The relationship of this generation with Bulgaria remains a significant topic that deserves a separate study.

Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

Ethics Committee Approval

The research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and the Bulgarian Sociological Association, Sofia (no. 16-784/30.12.2025).

Consent to participate

Informed written consent was obtained from each participant at the time of recruitment. The participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any stage. They were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of data in the publication of the research results.

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