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**MOBILITY IN BULGARIA AND THE EUROPEAN UNION:
BRAIN DRAIN, BOGUS ASYLUM SEEKERS, REPLACEMENT
MIGRATION, AND FERTILITY**

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Introduction¹

The collapse of communism in 1989 in Bulgaria was initially uneventful. Todor Zhivkov, the longest ruling leader in the Eastern Bloc, simply resigned. Democratic elections were held. Bulgaria had none of the wide-scale violence and chaos that characterized the transitions of the other Balkan states, most notably Romania and Yugoslavia. The effects of the social, political, and economic changes in Bulgaria, however, were just as devastating. The communists renamed themselves "socialists" and won the elections as the Bulgarian economy began a drastic contraction from which it has never recovered. The standard of living for ordinary Bulgarians dropped severely and new criminal elements appeared in society for the first time. The so-called "robber Barons" of Bulgaria pillaged what was left of the state's assets and set themselves up as the country's new elite. Meanwhile, the nearby wars and embargoes in the former Yugoslav republics gave the new Bulgarian Mafia ample opportunities to solidify their positions by smuggling arms and fuel into neighboring Yugoslavia.

On the other hand, Bulgarians had the right to travel abroad freely for the first time since the beginning of communism over four decades earlier. Clutching their newly minted passports, the first wave of Bulgarians deserted their country *en masse*. Scientists, professionals, students, and Bulgarians with relatives abroad were but some of those that emigrated in search of opportunity and a better life in the West. Between 500,000 and 800,000 Bulgarians left the

country throughout the 1990s. This migration, coupled with Bulgaria's very low birth rate, has led to a steadily declining population, from just under 9 million in 1989 to 7.9 million in 2001.

This essay will examine the conflicting debates that attempt to explain Bulgarian emigration after the fall of communism. Although no one doubts that Bulgarians left the country, just who these Bulgarians were 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 the Bulgarian media bemoan the loss of their educated young people – a phenomenon characterized as “brain drain.” Brain drain as a concept 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. Although the concept has been traditionally discussed in the context of developing countries, it has taken on new significance in the post-socialist context. The lifting of travel restrictions for the citizens of former communist countries and the recognized achievements of socialist science and education have created circumstances ripe for discussions of brain drain. These conversations initially surrounded security concerns that Russian nuclear physicists were for sale to the highest bidder, and eventually spread to the whole of the former socialist intelligentsia. Brain drain has traditionally been seen 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 was 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 Balkan neighbors and are characterized as economic refugees, bogus asylum seekers, and “trafficked humans.” Even worse, on the popular level, Balkan immigrants are often viewed as being undesirables – freeloaders, thugs, drug pushers, and prostitutes, responsible for increasing crime rates in West European countries. For many Europeans the word “Balkan” connotes undesirable Roma or Muslim populations with beliefs anathema to Western values. Consequently, the immigration issue has become a political tinderbox – 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, with both aging populations and perceived skill shortages in key industries, are eager to recruit young, qualified Bulgarians and have institutionalized official programs to this end.

This paper will examine the multiple and overlapping discussions 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 stopgap measure that allows governments to avoid making difficult and unpopular decisions regarding necessary social and economic reforms.

Conclusions, however, are not definitive. Scholars 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; political scientists with voting patterns' etc. I am primarily concerned, however, with the discussions on Bulgarian migration produced by politicians, international organizations, and the national and international media. It is not my intention to make sense of, and synthesize all of these arguments and perspectives. Instead, this paper seeks to clearly illustrate the manner in which Bulgarian migration is talked about, by whom, and for what possible underlying political and material interests.

Truth as Politics

According to Marx,² political and economic realities shape intellectual life; new ideas or predominant beliefs always serve the material interests of the ruling class. These discourses of truth manifest themselves in the “real” world and serve the interests of those who have the power to control and perpetuate them. Foucault further extends Marx’s analysis by linking knowledge and power more directly through an examination of “the political economy of truth.” He writes:

‘Truth’ is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements. ‘Truth’ is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extends it. A ‘regime’ of truth. This regime is not merely ideological or superstructural; it was a condition of the formation and development of capitalism.³

In other words, ‘truth’ is created and disseminated through discourses of knowledge, which support structures of power (although not necessarily economic ones as Marx would have it). For Foucault, power is more fluid and truth can be employed by anyone who can convince someone else that s/he is an “authority.” Behind the truth, there is always a political agenda. When previously unquestioned truths change, the new truths are not necessarily more or less true than the old truths, they are simply more suitable to the interests of those who create and control them. This paper examines the varying perceptions of migration – the various truths about why Bulgarians have left the country and why the West Europeans need them, but may or may not want them. The 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.

From a theoretical perspective, it is important to examine how these different discussions 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 the migrants themselves. Perceptions of brain drainers versus those of bogus political asylum seekers will influence the attitudes toward Bulgarian immigrants in Western Europe, as well as how Bulgarians construct their own identities abroad. This is particularly important given that Bulgaria eventually hopes to join the European Union. The “free movement of people” issue is one of the strongest areas of contention between the existing EU 15 and the accession candidates, and many of the roots of these disagreements may lie with the differing perceptions of who immigrants are and what they bring to the receiving countries. From the Bulgarian perspective joining the EU will surely exacerbate the issue of the brain drain as Bulgarians will be free to work anywhere throughout the Union. Fears of increased loss of young and qualified Bulgarians could potentially erode political support for joining the EU.

Methodology

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), the International Labor Organization (ILO), and the United Nations Population Division. My data is 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, and my extensive network of Bulgarian friends and colleagues working both in the country and abroad.

The View from Bulgaria

In 2000, Bulgaria had a negative natural growth rate of -0.7 percent⁴ and a total fertility rate of 1.1 children per woman.⁵ With replacement fertility being 2.1 children per woman, Bulgaria is characterized by what demographers call “lowest low fertility”⁶ and had the lowest fertility rate of any European country between 1995 and 1997.⁷ Bulgaria’s population stood at 7.9 million in 2001,⁸ and United Nations⁹ 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, meaning that there will be fewer people of working age to support an ever increasing number of pensioners. Although birth rates had already started to decline during communism, the transition from communism, economic hardships, and new cultural influences from the West have further decreased fertility.

Adding to the problem of a lower fertility rate, is the exodus of Bulgarians out of the country. Estimates range from 500,000 to 800,000, although no one is sure of the exact figure. Higher or 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 seem to be a good chunk 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. This is hardly surprising given the economic situation in Bulgaria after 1989.

According to the World Bank,¹⁰ the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of Bulgaria equaled 20 billion in 1980, 20.7 billion in 1990, and only 12 billion by 2000 – a total contraction of approximately 40 percent in the first ten years of the post-socialist period. The average annual growth rate of GDP per capita¹¹ was 3.4 percent per year between 1980 and 1990, and -1.5 percent per year between 1990 and 2000. By 1999, GDP was growing again, albeit at the paltry rate of 2.4 percent per year. And while hyperinflation had ceased to be a problem, in 2000, prices were still rising by approximately 10.3 percent a year. For the period between 1992 and 1999, 45 percent of Bulgarian households fell below the poverty line.¹²

Unemployment has been one of the biggest challenges post-communist governments in Bulgaria have faced and continue to face. By March 2001, the national unemployment, at 18.5 percent, still hovered well above that of its Western European neighbors.¹³ But even this fairly high figure hides the significant regional disparities that paint a far more tragic picture of the economic situation. In March 2000, regional unemployment rates varied from a low 8.2 percent in the Sofia district, to 34.2 percent in the Smolyan district. In urban areas, the unemployment rate in March 2000 ranged from 7.8 percent in Stara Zagora, to 28.9 percent in Yambol. In rural areas, where the crisis is most severe, the low was 9 percent for the Sofia district and an overwhelming 45 percent for both Shoumen and Turgovishte. Even for those lucky enough to be employed, salaries and wages are relatively low – GDP per capita in Bulgaria in 2001 was only 22 percent of the EU average.

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 researcher¹⁴ found that the Bulgarian media was more preoccupied with emigration in general, and was paying very little attention to the many scientists and scholars leaving Bulgaria. By the late 1990s, however, and especially between 2000-2002, stories of the brain drain filled the national media and politicians began bemoaning the defection of so many of Bulgaria’s best and brightest.¹⁵ Anecdotal evidence from Bulgaria suggests that many journalists may have based their stories on personal experience as they watched their friends and colleagues leave for better jobs abroad. The international mobility of journalists may have triggered the widespread concern with the emigration of the rest of the Bulgarian intelligentsia.

Politicians have also been preoccupied with the brain drain, and several government actions and initiatives placed the issue high on the national agenda. In April 2000, then Prime Minister Ivan Kostov organized a Bulgarian Easter (Velikden) for Bulgarians working abroad. The government paid for over 200 professional Bulgarians to come for a seminar in hopes of luring some of them back to work in Bulgaria. The Prime Minister himself met with the delegates and answered their questions. The event generated a lot of publicity in Bulgaria and was soon followed by a similar event sponsored by the Bulgarian president called Rozhen 2000. Both of these very high profile events fueled perceptions of a brain drain, as video footage and photographs of young, well dressed, and “successful-looking” Bulgarians filled the nightly news and the local newspapers.¹⁶

The Velikden event encouraged the formation of other groups of Bulgarian professionals working abroad. The Bulgarian City Club (an organization of Bulgarians working in London formed earlier in 1998) was joined by the Bulgarian Wall Street Club and Nova BGeneraciya (New BGeneration) in June and December of 2000, respectively. Most significantly, when Simeon Saxecoburgotski (Bulgaria’s former king) became Prime Minister in 2001, he invited members of these groups to form part of his new government. At 31 years-old, Nikolay Vassilev went “from Brandeis to Bulgaria’s Cabinet, in five years”¹⁷ when he agreed to become the new deputy prime minister and minister of economy. In March 2002, the new government together with Nova BGeneraciya sponsored another high profile event with successful members of the Bulgarian diaspora. Two months later, Vassilev bragged that Bulgaria was experiencing a “brain back flow,” stating that many Bulgarians had returned from prestigious jobs abroad to work for their “motherland.”¹⁸ This statement prompted strong criticism from the press and the opposition party; they argued that beyond the handful of those working in the new government, there were still many young and educated Bulgarians working abroad.¹⁹ Despite the criticism, the new government under Saxecoburgotski posits itself as very open to the Bulgarian community abroad. The diaspora clubs also maintain a relatively high profile in the Bulgarian media, sending open letters to the government on crucial policy issues.²⁰

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 dot.com bubble in the United States, celebrated the international desirability of Bulgarian high tech workers.²¹ The Bulgarian papers reported that Microsoft was headhunting for Bulgarian programmers, and that the German government was targeting Bulgarian IT specialists for its new green card program. A typical article would start: “Moves by countries like Germany to attract cheap foreign computer experts are good news for Bulgarian IT whizzkids” and end with “but the brain drain is hitting the impoverished country just when it needs them most.”²² A July 2002 story by *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* reported that even the Czech Republic is targeting skilled Bulgarians (along with Croats and Kazakhs) for a pilot program welcoming professional immigrants.²³

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 over exaggerated. In 2001,

UNESCO²⁴ launched a major study on brain drain from Eastern Europe in which Bulgaria was included. The international organization provided funding to local scholars researching the issue, but has not reached any conclusions as this paper went to press. Other Bulgarian academics writing about the problem have tended to view the phenomenon with alarm, although they have mixed conclusions about the consequences of brain drain on the country.²⁵ Stoilkova²⁶ has focused on what she calls “the Bulgarian intelligentsia in exile,” and examines the underlying reasons why children of the former *nomenklatura* have emigrated to the United States. All of them, however, recognize that brain drain is an important political issue and suggest further study of the topic, thus contributing to the national preoccupation with the brain drain.

According to Beleva and Kotzeva,²⁷ however, of the 6,005 scientists in Bulgaria who lost their jobs between 1989 and 1996, only 600 emigrated. Furthermore, it appears that highly skilled emigration (those with tertiary degrees) did 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 the Bulgarian media and politicians devote to brain drain. There are no high-level, national meetings to bring back Bulgarian construction workers from Germany, or hospitality workers from Austria, although they most likely outnumber the highly skilled emigrants.

In an ILO study on Bulgarian emigration, Gatcher²⁸ 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 – a population whose departure was not nationally mourned by any means (and not only because the majority of them were not considered “highly skilled”).²⁹ Furthermore, the study argued that the percentage of Bulgarians in the labor force with a tertiary education has actually increased between 1992 and 1997 – at 19.3 percent in 1997. Bulgaria’s figure was higher than that of Austria, Hungary, the Czech Republic and 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. But breaking the numbers down by degree displayed some interesting differences. According to Gatcher, 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). Finally, the study concluded that Bulgaria had gained brains throughout the 1990s through the immigration of skilled labor from other former Eastern bloc countries and through the return migration of skilled Bulgarians. 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.³⁰

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 (wherein 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* striking out for better fortunes in the West, exacerbating the demographic problem. [The underlying discussion on "youth drain" will be discussed in greater detail at the conclusion of this essay.]

In sum, the discourse perpetuated by the politicians and the media in Bulgaria focuses on the emigration issue as a "brain drain" to the exclusion of other types of migration. In particular, asylum seeking by Bulgarians is almost always constructed as a phenomenon exclusively related to the Roma minority in Bulgaria, as evidenced by a flurry of articles regarding a sudden exodus of Roma to Norway in 2001.³¹ Bulgaria imagines its emigrants to be young, educated and successful – making their fortunes abroad and depriving the country of their valuable human capital. Furthermore, Western countries and companies are seen to be "mining" for Bulgarian brains, extracting scientists and skilled workers from the country without its permission.

This 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. 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 laid at the feet of the brain drainers. They are also 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. Never mind that the fiscal constraints required by the International Monetary Fund have made it almost impossible to earn a living in Bulgaria; those who have gone abroad are imagined as having robbed the collective Bulgarian nation of a way out of the mire.

Popular discussions of the brain drain crisis allow successive Bulgarian governments to avoid making serious changes, and deflects responsibility away from the state and toward a ghost population that cannot defend itself. At the same time, when Prime Minister Saxecoburgotski revealed that he would be including brain drainers in his new government, many Bulgarians were concerned about the political inexperience of the candidates. During the parliamentary elections in 2001, I heard many Bulgarians (especially from the older generation) argue that the brain drainers' experience in the West was not applicable to Bulgaria. Thus the prominence of the brain drain when discussing the Bulgarian emigration issue may have less to do with any real desire to bring these young people back, but more to do with having someone for politicians to blame.

The View From The EU

Western Europe has also witnessed a population shrinkage. The United Nations Population Division³² estimates significant declines in populations 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) Eurostat³³ more optimistically estimates that the overall population of the EU 15 will not begin to decline until 2026, due 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.

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.³⁴ 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 United Nations to examine the possibility of “replacement migration” for Western Europe.

Replacement migration posits that increasing the number of immigrants can solve demographic shortfalls. Although 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 skill shortages.³⁵ 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 the avenues for legal immigration to the EU.

From the Commission's perspective, the key issue is coordination among member states. In two key communications from the EC to the European Parliament,³⁶ the Commission lays out the foundations of a community immigration policy in order to address the considerable variation between the policies of individual member states. Specifically, the EU hopes to harmonize application and assessment procedures, access to information, as well as the policies aimed at the integration of third party nationals. Furthermore, the European Commission suggests that the EU countries should work together to set detailed European targets for immigration. While recognizing the need for migrant labor, the European Commission also hopes to streamline and

coordinate its policies toward asylum and refugees in hopes of discouraging “asylum shopping,” whereby asylum seekers choose country based on their perceived friendliness to refugees.

In its statements, the EC explicitly recognizes that increased immigration to the EU will create a brain drain:

In the context of ageing and declining population, the Commission believes that reviewing the use of legal channels for the admission of third country nationals to meet labor market needs is necessary while being aware of the potentially damaging impact on the countries of origin of the brain drain that this may encourage.³⁷

Referring to the brain drain in this context exposes the Commission’s underlying assumption that it is the skilled migrants that are the most desirable, even though their skills have little to do with the “declining and aging population.” In terms of demography, it is young people in general that are needed to mitigate the effects of the decline, not necessarily skilled people. In fact, the EU explicitly couches its call for a community immigration policy in terms of Europe’s demographic decline *and* its labor shortages:

In light of demographic decline which will become increasingly important in the EU over the next 25 years and of the current strong economic prospects and growing skill shortages in the labor market, it advocates the development of a common policy for the controlled admission of economic migrants to the EU as part of an overall immigration and asylum policy for the Union. ...the Commission believes that, while immigration will never be a solution in itself to the problems of the labor market, migrants can make a positive contribution to the labor market, to economic growth and to the sustainability of social protection systems.³⁸

Throughout the documents and reports of the European Commission, constant reference is made to demographic issues, especially the aging population. Labor shortages also feature prominently in all of the official documents discussing the community immigration policy. Throughout, the need for immigration is constructed as being inevitable. Discursively, immigration is a necessary evil for the future survival and competitiveness of the European Union.

The European Union appropriates the United Nations’ study on replacement migration and employs it as truth, despite the fact that both scholars and politicians have contested its feasibility.³⁹ Interestingly, labor shortages are often taken for granted, despite the challenges of European labor parties and trade unions. The fact that European labor is more expensive than immigrant labor may mean that there is not a labor shortage *per se*, merely a “cheap labor” shortage. A report by the Independent Commission on Migration to Germany emphasized this point of view in its introduction:

Many citizens and residents do not understand how there can be a shortage of highly qualified labour and skilled workers in Germany when there was an annual

average of 3.9 million unemployed in the year 2000. They fear that additional foreign labour might jeopardize the employment opportunities of domestic workers. The general view...is that it is better to fight unemployment in the homeland, to enhance the qualifications of people already living here and to utilize domestic labour resources than to recruit foreign labour.⁴⁰

In addition to questions over the truthfulness of Western Europe's skilled labor shortage, the idea of replacement migration as a solution to demographic problems has also come under attack. Lesthaeghe⁴¹ argued that replacement migration is not a feasible solution to the demographic decline or to the issue of aging populations. Immigrants will also age and become pensioners. Furthermore, as Coleman⁴² suggests, the number of immigrants needed to sustain current social security systems is unprecedented and likely to be rejected by most member states, as is the idea that immigrants could solve the problems of an aging population. Thus, the truths deployed by the European Commission in justification of increasing channels for legal immigration may obfuscate underlying political allegiances to European economic elites.

Furthermore, the European Commission carefully distinguishes between the concepts of immigration and asylum. While immigration is to be encouraged in certain cases, asylum is far more problematic. The EU fully recognizes the "Member States international obligations to provide protection for refugees, asylum seekers and those in need of temporary protection." Although these are not the EU's "obligations," the Commission proposes a community policy to address the humanitarian issue and suggests that "the discussion on the number of economic migrants needed in different sectors should take into account the numbers of persons under international protection, since better use of their skills could also be made." Thus, despite the clear distinction between the two separate issues in the public debate, at the end of the day, the Commission is always concerned with increasing the number of working immigrants in the European Union.

At the official level, there is no specific discussion with regard to Bulgarian migration. The EU's policies toward Bulgaria are governed by its status as an accession candidate to the European Union. In this respect, the Commission's attitude toward immigration is particularly ironic. Despite the EU's clear preoccupation with increasing channels for legal immigration, the "free movement of people's" chapter of the *acquis communautaire*, allowing EU citizens to travel, work, and study freely anywhere within the union, is the most contentious issue between the members of the existing Union and those East European (and Mediterranean) states slated to join in the near future. Current member states' fears that they will be "flooded" with East European immigrants has led the EU to delay this provision for new members by as much as seven years.

Thus, in spite of the pressing need for economic migrants, the EU insists on being able to pick and choose among the immigrants and determining when they are to be admitted. Although it is assumed that, in the long run, the citizens of accepted accession countries will be able to work freely throughout the European Union, in the short term, the Commission has stated no specific preference for immigration from Eastern Europe. However, the Commission also makes it clear that the common policy on the integration of new migrants should provide "appropriate language training and information on the cultural, political and social characteristics of the

country concerned, including the nature of citizenship and of the fundamental European values.”⁴³ Obviously, migrants with “the fundamental European values” (i.e., Christian Europeans from the East) will be at a significant advantage when the gates to fortress Europe are finally opened. This last point is particularly important with regard to Bulgaria. As part of the Balkans, Bulgarians are often conflated with their Roma and Muslim minorities – populations imagined as being foreign to the fundamental European values.

Ultimately, then, the official position of the European Commission simultaneously extols the necessity of immigration as well as clearly indicates the European Union’s need to be in charge of this process at all times. The implicit subtext of this debate is that there are “good migrants” (those who productively contribute to the economy and help alleviate the pressures of skill shortages and demographic decline) and “bad migrants” (presumably everyone else, but especially unproductive, criminal and illegal immigrants, bogus asylum seekers, and those who would live off the largess of the EU’s welfare states). Bulgarians, if they are recognized as Bulgarians at all, are bifurcated into two distinct categories – the highly skilled and the rest. The former are welcome for now, and the latter will have to wait indefinitely until Bulgaria joins the EU and its seven-year probationary period has passed.

Politically, the European Commission has as its ultimate agenda the preservation and integration of the European Union. With a large and diverse constituency divided into Euroskeptics and Europhiles across 15 countries, the Commission is surely aware that some of its strongest support originates with the European business community, who sees great economic advantages in the common market. The future prospects of European corporations – 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,⁴⁴ the notion that they will also helps to reinforce the practices that 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 a potential tourist must have before he is allowed to cross a 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 the claims that there are skill 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.”

The Seville Summit in June 2002 promised to address the immigration and asylum issues, and to take steps to examine the possibility of creating a EU-wide policy. The EU correspondent for *Radio Netherlands* captured the political urgency of the Summit for the Member States:

The issue put high on the agenda at the request of Britain’s Prime Minister Tony Blair, who has called for a joint European response to growing public discontent with existing rules and to the rise of the far right in Europe. Promises to crack down on illegal immigrants and enforce stricter asylum policies have become vote-winners for right-wing parties in recent elections around Europe.⁴⁵

Blair’s proposals – which included linking development aid with asylum policies and sending the Navy to the Mediterranean to stop ships carrying illegal immigrants – where shot down by the French and the Swedish. Although the summit actually accomplished very little, it drastically increased media coverage of the asylum and immigration issue in Europe, resulting in stories around the world of “fortress Europe” in the weeks leading up to, and following, the summit.⁴⁶

Discussions focusing specifically on Bulgarian migration, however, hardly exist at all. Bulgaria is almost invisible in the media of West European countries. Unfortunately for Bulgarians, however, their close geographic proximity to the former Yugoslav Republics has meant that many West Europeans tend to lump in Bulgarian immigrants with asylum seekers and refugees from the Balkans. This perception is further validated by the significant number of Bulgarian Roma that continue to apply for asylum in Western Europe. Furthermore, in the early transition period, Bulgarians as a whole were in fact the fourth largest population of asylum seekers in Germany. Although the number of Bulgarian asylum seekers has slowed to an almost imperceptible trickle, waves of refugees from Kosovo has kept the image of the Balkan asylum seeker alive in the public eye.

When asked specifically about Bulgaria, most representatives of the West European governments interviewed did not perceive specific immigration problems. When asked about “the Balkans,” however, inevitably the conversation turned to the problems of asylum seekers and refugees. A German political affairs officer frankly admitted that the German public does not distinguish between Bulgaria and the rest of the Balkans.⁴⁷ An official brochure produced by the Swiss government entitled “The Balkans: The policy of the Swiss Federal Council” makes no mention of Bulgaria at all (despite the fact that the Balkan mountains are in Bulgaria). Instead, the brochure focuses solely on the former Yugoslav Republics and the burden under which Switzerland has been placed due to refugees from the various Yugoslav conflicts.

Balkan refugees have been a particular source of ire for West European media and politicians, particularly the Roma population from many Eastern European countries and the Kosovar Albanians – populations often imagined as being associated with drug smuggling, prostitution and theft. The publics of many West European nations feel “flooded” with these “bogus asylum seekers.” Stories of “human trafficking” and “sex slaves” – whereby people pay exorbitant amounts to be smuggled into Western countries or become indentured to their smugglers once they reach their destinations – also fill the press. Illegal immigration – of East Europeans slipping over borders – is also a high profile media issue. A quote from an article in the Wall Street Journal illustrates the type of language used:

Priding itself on having the toughest hulk in the union, Germany, since 1993, had tripled the border guards along its 1,200 kilometer eastern frontier. The police have also bought more than a dozen vans, at \$200,000 a pop, equipped with lavish night-vision cameras that can spot a person in the dark at 30 kilometers. With those along with 15 helicopters, the police canvas the frontier day and night... to keep thousands of undocumented and unwanted people from migrating toward higher wages and a better life in the West.⁴⁸

This same article goes on to claim that “hundreds of thousands of refugees descended on Europe starting in 1992” and that “...the wave swelled Germany’s welfare rolls and cost municipalities millions of marks a year.” These sentiments are echoed by the right-leaning media across Europe, and asylum seekers from the Balkans are seen as the main cause of the problem. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees,⁴⁹ however, Bulgarians do not figure prominently in the asylum applications to the European Union. Between 1990 and 1994, the total number of Bulgarian applications to the EU was 92,972. This number decreased by 87 percent, to a mere 12,108 in the 1995 to 1999 period – hardly a “flood” from Bulgaria by any means. Although Yugoslavia’s population is slightly larger than Bulgaria’s (10.7 million), asylum applications from Serbia/Montenegro/Kosovo vastly exceeded that of its Balkan neighbor. Total asylum applications to the European Union from Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) between 1990 and 1999 were 746,624. In 2000 and 2001,⁵⁰ reports that there were still 75,045 asylum applications from the FRY, while there were only 6,367 from Bulgaria.

Germany, Switzerland and Austria are particularly deluged with asylum seekers. During the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia and the Kosovo crisis, these three countries received the most asylum applications of all European countries – the Swiss received a thousand applications in a

single day. Other European countries also received refugees. Differing policies towards asylum seekers, however, inadvertently resulted in the ability of potential asylees to “shop around” for the country with the most liberal policies. Pascal Smet, the Belgian commissioner in charge of refugee affairs, was quoted as saying: “It makes no sense that one European country says that Roma people in Kosovo face problems while another country says they don’t. The objective situation is the same, so the assessment should be the same in every European country, as should the definition of refugees.”⁵¹

Asylum seekers, however, represent only part of the foreign populations in these countries. In Austria, official government figures state that there were 748,172 (non-asylee) foreign residents in the country, of which 340,862 (or 54.4 percent) were from the former Yugoslavia. The number of Bulgarians was so small so as not to be counted. In Switzerland, government figures indicate that there were 345,459 citizens of the FRY, Croatia, Slovenia, Macedonia, and Bosnia resident in Switzerland in 2001, compared to a mere 1,800 Bulgarians for the same year. Unfortunately, the resident populations are often conflated with the asylum seekers in the media, and the public attitude toward the citizens of Balkan countries remains negative. The number of Bulgarians resident in most European countries is too small to elicit specific attention from the media or Western politicians.

While many European countries are trying to toughen up their asylum laws in hopes of discouraging applicants, they are at the same time trying to encourage legal forms of migration for the highly skilled.⁵² These calls for increased legal migration are bolstered by claims of demographic decline, aging populations and skill shortages. The Austrian government is considering the implementation of a green card program for highly skilled workers based on the German model. The Danish, Irish, Swedish, and Dutch governments have all recently enacted legislation to allow for greater legal migration for skilled workers. In France, a 1998 immigration law created a special status for highly paid scientists and scholars who can obtain work permits with ease and who request family reunification. Most aggressive in the quest for highly skilled workers, however, have been the British and German governments.

The United Kingdom

Like the rest of Europe, the United Kingdom also faces declining and aging populations in the future, although less severely than its continental neighbors. Britain’s total fertility rate was closer to replacement levels at 1.78 percent in the 1990-1995 period,⁵³ and the total population decline is estimated at only four percent by 2050. Economically, Britain does face some skill shortages, particularly with regard to medical doctors and nurses.⁵⁴ Already, foreign medical workers support the fiscal sustainability of the National Health Service.

During the 1990s, Britain has been the second most popular destination country for asylum applications in Europe (after Germany). Between 1990 and 1999, the United Kingdom received 374,075 applications.⁵⁵ Although less of a magnet for Balkan refugees than Germany (the UK attracts many asylum cases from the Middle East and South Asia), between 1995 and 1999, the UK had 26,440 asylum applications from the FRY and 1,565 applications from Bulgaria. According to a *Financial Times* article titled ‘Refugee Hysteria’⁵⁶: “In Britain, much

of the [refugee] debate has focused on a perceived influx of gypsies from the countries of central and eastern Europe.” Bulgaria and its Roma population were thus included in the “backlash against immigration,” which has wracked the UK public.

The UK is a signatory to the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, as well as its 1967 Protocol. All applications for asylum made at UK ports of entry or within the country must be considered in accordance with the country’s obligations under the Convention. The Convention states that a refugee is a person who, “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.” The vague and broad language of the convention makes it very easy for almost anyone to declare political asylum in the UK. Because of the high number of applications, there is a long backlog in the review process. Meanwhile, asylum seekers enjoy relatively generous allowances from the state while they wait for decisions. According to the home office, only 17 percent of the applications are accepted. If an unfavorable decision is made, the refugee can delay deportation by asking for an appeal while continuing to enjoy benefits.

The media has tended to sensationalize the asylum issue in Britain, although there are a wide variety of opinions represented in the press. A sample of headlines demonstrates the interesting array of perspectives in what *BBC* news has called “The asylum seekers debate.”⁵⁷ On the anti-migration side, there are tabloid headlines that emphasize the “bogus” nature of many asylum claims and the easy life refugees enjoy in the UK:

Even with this lovely free house, I can’t cope on my GBP 230 handout, says the Romanian gypsy. That’s why I go begging on the Tube to make an extra GBP 20 an hour.⁵⁸

Asylum seeker’s life of luxury two homes and pound 30,000 state aid.⁵⁹

‘We love it here!; No work and life’s so easy’, says asylum seeker.⁶⁰

Special Investigation: Are this refugee beggar girl and her little baby victims or predators?⁶¹

Freezing out freeloaders⁶²

Soft-touch Britain to overtake Germany as favourite destination⁶³

On the other side of the debate, the press also discusses the potential benefits of migration for the British economy:

Migrants ‘benefit UK economy’⁶⁴

A warm welcome to Britain for all these clever people⁶⁵

Immigration will ease our burden⁶⁶

Refugees: So anxious about what they take, so blind to what we gain⁶⁷

Give us your huddled masses: Far from being a burden, refugees and asylum seekers could be our economic salvation⁶⁸

Appeasing the mob; The state plays a disreputable role in keeping out foreigners, for the voters believe they are being 'swamped'⁶⁹

This brief sample of headlines suggests that there is no united stand on the immigration issue, even with regards to the refugee population. This curious contradiction also manifests itself at the policy level. Tony Blair is portrayed as taking the lead against illegal immigration and asylum seekers in the European Union. At the same time, however, Britain has just recently enacted one of the most liberal regimes for encouraging highly skilled immigration in Europe. Hence, the British government is simultaneously taking steps to "repatriate" denied asylum applicants as quickly as possible, as well as actively encouraging economic immigration more strongly than any other EU member state.

The Highly Skilled Migrant Programme (HSMP) began accepting applications on the 28th of January 2002 and uses a point system to determine eligibility of potential immigrants. This new program allows for immigration to the UK without the prearranged sponsorship of a British employer. Applicants are judged on their educational qualifications, work experience, past earnings, and levels of achievement in the chosen field. In addition to the general program, there are priority areas, such as the field of medicine, where applications are judged even more favorably. Preliminary information from the British government suggests that the first applicants were mostly citizens of the Commonwealth countries or the United States. At the time of writing this paper, no official data was available on how many highly skilled immigrants have been granted entry.

In the British discourse about immigration, similar to that of the European Commission, there are clearly two types of immigrant – those who are genuine and those who are not, those highly skilled foreigners who will benefit the economy, and those who will be a burden. This dualistic construction of immigrants may seem like common sense in some ways, but it fundamentally misrepresents the spectrum of immigrants who live and work in the UK. This dichotomy leaves no room for the hundreds and thousands of both legal and illegal unskilled immigrants who are gardeners, nannies, housekeepers, and agricultural workers, upon whose cheap labor the country's economy truly depends. I suggest that these immigrants are intentionally left out of the public discourse because their presence (and necessity) is the most difficult to justify to domestic workers and nationalists.

Germany

At the heart of the European Union, Germany also faces its own demographic crisis. Between 1990 and 1995, the total fertility rate in Germany was 1.3 children per woman, and 15.5 percent

of the population was over the age of 65 in 1995.⁷⁰ The Independent Commission on Migration to Germany estimates that the German population will decline from 82 million in 2001 to less than 60 million by 2050. Economically, the German government is also worried about perceived skill shortages in the economy, particularly in the information technology sector. Competition with the United States in technical fields, compounded by a German brain drain to North America, has led the government to loosen its immigration policies to allow entry to skilled workers. The Independent Commission issued a 329-page report that began with the simple sentence: “Germany needs immigrants.” The report clearly argued for increased legal immigration, while also recommending that the state take a stronger stance on asylum seekers by speeding up the decision process and facilitating faster repatriations. The report states:

Asylum procedures that take years to complete are inhumane. They go against both the interests of the host society, which has to bear the *burden* [my emphasis] associated with long procedures, and the vital interest of both those in need of protection and their families.⁷¹

Germany attracts the greatest number of asylum seekers in Europe and its long land borders are porous to illegal immigration from the East. Despite the desire of many within Germany to reform the asylum granting laws, the fact that Germans who survived the Nazi regime did so because they were granted asylum abroad has meant that reforms are limited by historical antecedents, as well as by Germany’s obligation to the Geneva convention. Between 1990 and 1999, Germany attracted almost 2 million asylum applications. Public sentiment toward the asylum seekers is similar to that in Britain, with the extreme right-wing factions of society in Germany even more adamantly opposed. Andreas Zumach, a Geneva-based correspondent for *Die Tageszeitung*, worried openly in an article headlined “The growing right-wing network” that asylum seekers were fueling the rise of the extreme right:

The German People’s Union (DVU), one of Germany’s extreme- right parties, scored 13.2 percent of the vote in recent parliamentary elections in Sachsen-Anhalt, one of the 16 states of the country. No right-wing party has achieved such a strong showing in Germany since the end of the Nazi regime in 1945... The few issues they campaign on always center on are xenophobia... too many foreigners and asylum-seekers steal German jobs; the Germans have to be protected against foreign criminals...⁷²

Germany has repeatedly called for a formal system of “burden-sharing” that would force other European countries to accept quotas of refugees, but these proposals have been opposed most vocally by the UK. The German government came under attack by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees in March 2000 when, in accordance with a European Union agreement in Tampere, Germany began repatriation procedures for some 170,000 Kosovar Albanians. Many of these refugees had committed violent crimes in Germany, in some cases murder, and they were subsequently “dumped” back in Pristina following German public outrage. In the face of international criticism, however, the repatriations continued due to domestic pressures. According to the Independent Commission’s study on immigration, asylum seekers were the least accepted population of foreigners in Germany, and many German largely associated these asylum seekers as distinctly Balkan, with Bulgarians included in this group.⁷³

Simultaneously, German companies were actively seeking Bulgarian IT specialists. In February 2000, the German government bowed to pressure from German companies that argued that a lack of skilled labor in the information technology sector was leading to an erosion of German competitiveness in the global market. Bulgaria (along with Bosnia, Croatia and Macedonia) was one of the recruitment countries for the German green card program – the FRY was not included. An initial quota of 10,000 five-year work permits was set. Applicants needed to secure the sponsorship of a German company in order to be eligible, and the program was administered by the International Organization for Migration. Initial fears of an onslaught of applications proved unfounded, as third country IT specialists still preferred the United States as their first choice. The German green card program was intended as a temporary work permit, whereas opportunities to work in the US can often lead to permanent residency and, ultimately, American citizenship. Although some 300 Bulgarians applied to the German program, this number was also less than expected, given Germany's closer geographic proximity. Higher salaries and the possibility of citizenship may have also drawn Bulgarian IT specialists over the Atlantic.

In Germany, Bulgarians do represent both sides of the dichotomy. There are Bulgarian asylum seekers living in the same cities as Bulgarian computer programmers. But while the official policy and discourse disparages the former, it actively seeks and covets the latter. Both populations, however, are minorities in the Bulgarian émigré community in Germany. As in the UK, there are many legal and illegal working class Bulgarians employed throughout the German economy. Unfortunately for them, negative stereotypes about the Balkans disproportionately associate them with the least favored immigrant group – the refugees.

Discourse and Practice in Western Europe

Obviously, each of the different West European countries would have a unique view on the issue of immigration depending on its own social, political and economic circumstances. The UK and Germany are not taken to be representative of the European Union, rather they are used as illustrative case studies of how these discussions are created and perpetuated in individual countries. With specific regard to Bulgarian migration, discourses throughout Western Europe are also shaped by conflicting political undercurrents toward the issue of highly skilled migration versus refugees and asylum seekers. In practice, most West European countries are loosening their laws and trying to form a unified policy that will allow for an increase in legal immigration. The justification for increased immigration is couched in demographic terms: declining and aging populations need young foreign workers in order to retain their pension systems and social benefits. Greater immigration is also legitimated by arguments of crucial skill shortages, which are making European economies uncompetitive. Concomitantly, European countries are tightening their borders. The military build up on the external borders of the European Union continues to increase, while European governments try to coordinate their asylum policies to allow for fewer “abuses.”

These somewhat contradictory practices are accompanied by discussions which construct two distinct categories of the immigrant – those who are wanted and those who are unwanted. Desirable immigrants are highly skilled, law-abiding professionals open to the “fundamental

European values” who will contribute to the overall economic health of the nation. The undesirables are “bogus refugees,” abusing the asylum system in order to gain access to generous state benefits. They are often imagined as poor and unskilled “freeloaders” who will easily turn to crime or prostitution in order to support themselves. These two categories exist in opposition to each other and allow Western governments to justify their highly selective immigration policies whereby the wealthy, the talented and the educated are welcome, while the poor, destitute and disenfranchised are to be sent home – those somewhere between these two poles are seldom recognized. Discursive distinctions are necessary in order for individual states to maintain this status quo. Vast disparities in wages and standards of living between countries will continue to create disincentives for open borders for the foreseeable future, despite the forces of globalization.

Furthermore, the contradictory images of non-EU immigrants may allow West European states to increase immigration while posturing to their publics that they are strongly against it. In order to convince the public that some immigrants are a benefit to the economy, there must be a clear definition of which immigrants are not. Refugees and asylum seekers are the easiest target because they require direct assistance from the state and are forbidden to work. Allowing for “highly skilled” immigration is also politically safe. The highly skilled immigrant does not take jobs away from ordinary Europeans. There is also a recognition that highly skilled Europeans may take employment in the United States and that labor markets for the highly skilled are more global. Furthermore, the world of the highly skilled may be quite far removed from most working class Europeans, and therefore, they are less inclined to protest an influx of these kind of foreigners. In none of the official communications of the European Commission are there discussions of legal *unskilled* immigrants – these are almost entirely invisible in the public debates on immigration, despite the vital functions they perform in most European economies.

These Manichean discussions of the highly skilled immigrant versus the refugee have curious repercussions for the construction of the Bulgarian migration issue. Inside Bulgaria, the émigré is considered to be one of the highly skilled and desirable migrants. West European countries actively seek Bulgarian computer scientists and academics, and the loss of these educated professionals is mourned by the nation left behind in economic chaos. Once s/he crosses the border into Western Europe, however, the Bulgarian is lumped together with other Balkan immigrants and considered a bogus asylum seeker, a freeloader, or a criminal. Thus, there is a strong contradiction between the way Bulgarian emigrants may view themselves and the ways in which their new host countries perceive them. This contradiction then affects the push and pull factors that can motivate or discourage further emigration. There is, however, another very important issue lurking beneath the surface of these debates. The issue of fertility.

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

Underlying all 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.”⁷⁴ The entire debate about migration is couched in terms of the demographic crisis brought to public attention by the UN’s Replacement Migration report in March 2000. The European Commission itself openly states that the current immigration debate was ignited by demographic concerns:

...this Communication comes at a time when the question of the role of the EU with respect to immigration is of particular pertinence for a number of reasons. The projected decline in population in the EU over the next few decades has caught the attention of public opinion... There is a growing recognition that, in this new economic and demographic context, the existing “zero” immigration policies which have dominated thinking over the last 30 years are no longer appropriate.⁷⁵

The demographic crisis is made up of two key components: the numerical decline of populations and the relative aging of populations across Europe. The second issue, population aging, is especially important with regards to the viability of existing pension schemes in Europe. Both problems are the result of lower fertility rates among European women, but they have very different solutions. These solutions are often chosen by policy makers more concerned with political ramifications rather than with demographic issues. In the immigration discourse, the two issues are conflated in order to justify immigration as the only possible solution, despite the fact that there are other alternatives – alternatives which incorporate family friendly policies and social supports for women and children.

There are three factors that affect population – fertility, mortality, and immigration. In terms of population decline, the only way to correct the problem is to increase total fertility rates (TFR) in the long run. Population aging is a more difficult problem because of decreasing potential support ratios (PSR). The PSR is the number of young people in the economy that are paying to support the pension of one older person. Most pension systems were developed based on a pyramid scheme so that there would always be far greater numbers of young people than old. Because of the below replacement fertility rates in Western Europe for the past decades, there are now fewer Europeans of working age to support a growing number of pensioners. In the short term, without radical reform, these pension systems will become economically unviable and will draw a larger and larger portion of state budgets.

Coleman⁷⁶ has shown that just a small increase in fertility rates in Europe could significantly mitigate the worst consequences of aging and declining populations, but these effects would only be realized in 20 or more years. The Replacement Migration report, therefore, discards the fertility solution because it cannot positively affect the PSR problem in the short run. The only other solution to the issue of aging populations is to increase the mortality of the elderly, a policy which the UN recognizes as socially unacceptable. Thus, the UN and the EU turn to immigration as the only way to solve the demographic crisis. However, many scholars⁷⁷ agree that increasing the number of immigrants is only a *short-term* measure

which will ultimately result in the erosion of European ethnic majorities in host nations – a consequence that has been greeted with strong resistance in all countries.

In reality, the problem of aging populations can be solved through a combination of quite different policies. First, increasing the number of people in the work force does not necessarily require immigration. There are many Western Europeans (particularly women and people over the age of 50) that are not working. Increasing the labor force participation of these groups would increase the number of “young” people in the labor force and, therefore, increase the PSR. Second, increasing retirement ages would reduce the number of pensioners and increase the number of people in the labor force. Even small increases in the retirement age would go a long way to solving the PSR problem, although in some countries, such as Italy, retirement ages would have to be raised to around 77 for the policy to be effective. Finally, the government can implement family friendly policies which would encourage higher fertility rates so that the PSR problem would disappear by the next generation. Although these policies are “expensive,” and could require up to two percent of a country’s GDP to be effective,⁷⁸ they are less expensive than the public support required to maintain current pension systems. In fact, a UN report released in 2000 points to studies which have found that: “when considering the public provision of programs or taking into account private non-medical expenses, public education expenses and medical care, the costs are roughly two and a half times greater to support an older person (aged 65 and older) than to support a younger person (under 20 years of age).”⁷⁹

The UN report, and consequently the EU, either do not discuss or disregard these solutions. In terms of TFR, they argue that, *ceteris paribus*: “...there is no reason to assume that their [European countries’] fertility will return anytime soon to above-replacement level.”⁸⁰ Raising retirement ages is constructed as part of the problem, and not a possible solution, although the UN does recognize that raising retirement ages would lessen the need for increased immigration. Finally, increasing labor force participation rates does not address the issue of population decline, and is, therefore, ignored. Consequently, the concept of replacement migration is a very seductive one because it provides both a short-term solution to the PSR problem as well as a long-term answer for population decline. It also allows the EU and Western European governments to ignore families and the possible causes of low fertility in order to maintain the political support of both elderly voters and Europe’s economic elites.

As a concept, replacement migration is a kind of fantasy that views people as laboring units which can easily be interchanged with one another. Replacement migration is based on a simplistic view of the world – while the industrialized world has seen a steady decline in the number of babies born per woman, it recognizes that the developing world has both high birth rates and rapidly growing populations. Underlying the theory of replacement migration is a very basic assumption – that, setting culture and language differences aside for a moment, the shortage of people in the richer countries can be made up by immigrants from the poorer countries. The poor countries have a surplus of people and the rich countries have a shortage; if you allow people to migrate, eventually, there will be a global population equilibrium.

The situation in Bulgaria complicates this rudimentary model. Although Bulgaria is now poor, it does not have a high birth rate or a surplus of people. On the contrary, its birth rate is lower than that of any West European country. Migration from Bulgaria exacerbates the

demographic crisis as young people leave to seek their fortunes and make their families abroad. Furthermore, young Bulgarian women are having even fewer babies in the post-socialist period,⁸¹ and it is unlikely that these rates will recover significantly in the near future.

Demography, however, does not make for interesting newspaper reading. The issue of low fertility is rarely discussed by the media or politicians on either side of Europe. In Bulgaria, the newspapers will occasionally run articles about future population predictions,⁸² but there is little analysis beyond reporting that it will decline. In the British press, it was also difficult to find references to low fertility. Although the report on migration to Germany does address pro-family policies, it does so in an off-handed way and emphasizes that the effects of these policies would not make enough of a difference in the short-term.⁸³ The title of the section is telling: “Possibilities and *limits* [my emphasis] of an active family policy.” In one rare article in the *Times*, the issue of fertility is openly mentioned in the context of replacement migration.

The root cause of excessive population ageing is a very low birthrate. An effective response must make the workplace, the tax and welfare system and gender relations as a whole more favourable to women, so they can fulfil ambitions to have more than one child.

Look after women, and population will look after itself. The “easy” option of encouraging more immigration is short-term opportunism. It evades hard decisions and ignores harmful consequences.⁸⁴

Ironically, the 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 both East and West. Because policies that will help to increase European fertility rates are expensive and take many years to “bear fruit,” ruling governments have few incentives to implement them, particularly in open, democratic political systems where governments are only in office for a handful of years (and where children do not vote). In other words, supporting women and families does not have an immediate pay-off for politicians concerned with re-election 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 cause. 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.

One possible outcome of this situation could be an unprecedented alliance between Western European feminists and right-wing parties. Traditional conservative attitudes and pronatalist policies, which would force women back into the home (or outlaw abortions and contraception) in order to increase fertility, will exacerbate the PSR problem in the short-term. Even conservatives may recognize that European women must be encouraged to enter the labor force. Increasing the labor participation rate of women 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 to combine their 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.⁸⁵ Furthermore, De Rose and Racioppi⁸⁶ and McDonald⁸⁷ have also found 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 when the hegemony of neo-liberal economic thought advocates for the dismantling of such states. Furthermore, these family support programs would drain budgets already increasingly burdened by a larger number of pensioners and would most likely require the raising of retirement ages in most countries – perhaps the most politically unpopular policy of all. Given the growing number of older voting constituents, politicians will be highly unlikely to antagonize those nearing retirement. In Western Europe, right-wing parties concerned with preserving ethnic homogeneity could fuel anti-immigrant sentiments and be more effective in arguing for long-term policies that will increase both fertility rates and labor participation among European women, thus promoting a “feminist” agenda in the name of national preservation.

Conclusion

Given the political difficulties in supporting pro-family policies, it is understandable that politicians would prefer to focus on migration and how it can help or harm the nation. In Bulgaria, where the situation is further complicated by the conditionalities of World Bank and International Monetary Fund loans that severely constrain public spending, 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 most likely continue to fall and young Bulgarians will most 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 a field to the United States and Canada, where few North Americans have even heard of their country, let alone know that it is in the Balkans. If Bulgaria joins the European Union, the negative perceptions of Bulgarians may become even stronger in Western Europe as populations try to resist with prejudice the influx of legal immigrants. Alternatively, EU membership might make Bulgarians feel more welcome in Western Europe and could exacerbate the already existing “brain drain” in Bulgaria. EU membership is surely one of the most important and least predictable factors that will influence Bulgarian demographics in the near future.

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. The intention of 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.

Endnotes

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