

THE END OF PICKING FRUIT?

– Bulgarian and Romanian immigrants in Spain –

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“I am Romanian. I have been living in Spain for seven years, I married a Spanish woman three years ago. I am a thirty-six year old economist, and speak five languages. Finally I have a job that not only suits my profession but I also like. But until I had achieved it, I had picked almonds, sprayed orange trees, washed trucks, distributed advertise, renovated houses, I had also been a waiter and a pizza courier.” - Claudiu concludes his situation. (Viruela, 2006)

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In Spain 150.000 Bulgarians and 750.000 Romanians live these days. Although ten years ago a Bulgarian or a Romanian immigrant in the Iberian Peninsula was as rare as hen's teeth, the visa-free access to the Schengen Area for the citizens of the two countries launched a major wave of migration focused mostly on Spain. Since then there has been a growing tendency and though the economic crisis in the world slowed the rate of migration, as the moratorium of free movement for workers ceased in 2009, thus, slow and upward mobility of the Bulgarian and Romanian community can be expected.

Key words: *Spain, migration, Bulgarians, Romanians, EU enlargement*

The poor economic performance of Bulgaria and Romania in the 90s led to the drastic augmentation of migration pressure in both countries. While the changing of the regime, substantial numbers of job seekers flowed from the villages to the cities, the lengthy economic structural change has led to higher unemployment. Those who had problems with the cost of living had two different reactions. Some moved back to villages where they could not find a job, though, the cost of living was lower and could reduce the cost of their alimentation with the productivity of the backyard. Others, on the other hand, started to consider the opportunity of emigration. At that time the migration to Western Europe - either legal or illegal - was still difficult and an expensive adventure. In this way the opportunity was much more for skilled workers as well as for the civil servants who did not receive their salary, than for those who lived in indigence. (Sandu et al 2004)

Contrary to the popular belief, the similarity between the Romanian and the Spanish language was not the main reason of choosing Spain as one of the most important destinations of Romanian migration. While among the ethnic minorities living in Romania, the migration to the home country was considerable in the first half of the nineteenth century – most of the German minority from Romania moved to Germany, the Hungarians living in Transylvania, took up a job in Hungary either as a permanent or as a temporary worker – meanwhile the majority of the Romanians did not try their luck in Romanic countries, but in Germany, just like the Bulgarians. The strict immigration laws in Germany and as the Schengen Convention became operational (between 1990 and 1995, in the case of Spain in 1992), this way they augmented the number of potential target countries. In addition, the South European member states of the European Union had achieved a serious economic progress, thanks to the growth industries like building-industry, labour-intensive agriculture and tourism. These industries also offered a significant number of jobs without work contract in all of the South European countries; consequently they were ideal destinations for the illegal migrants from Romania or Bulgaria. At first the Bulgarian workers moved to Greece and Romanians migrated to Italy because of the geographic proximity of the two countries. Due to the free movement inside the EU, those who either legally or illegally could once enter the Schengen Area travelled along to Spain, where higher salary was offered and was a more efficient country regarding its economy. Many people renounced the migration when they got to know the price requested by the human smugglers and false visa traders. (Sandu et al 2004, Turrión 2008).

The situation changed dramatically in 2002, the date since the citizens of Romania and Bulgaria received the visa-free entrance to the Schengen Area and could spend 90 days as tourists there. The chronically low economic performance, the low payments, and the corruption that spreads into everywhere are quite encouraging, while the high salary and the slight labour control are quite attractive. In Spain an unskilled worker in the construction industry earns ten times more than in Bulgaria or in Romania, and what is more, there were a lot more opportunities to work unlike in the stagnant labour market in their home-countries. In the same year Spain signed the bilateral agreement determining the migrants' quotas. Therefore passing the borders became legal, however the migration with the objective of entering the job market still remained illegal, although there was no need to have a false visa, only a valid passport and some money to cover the costs of living. It was typical that most of those who wanted to work abroad did not fit the last condition, and the bus drivers lent them the necessary amount while crossing the boarder, then it had to be paid back in cash with usurious interest before continuing the journey. The majority of the Bulgarian and Romanian men positioned themselves in the construction industry, while women got jobs as domestic workers; besides this many people undertook seasonal agricultural works, especially in the immediate period following the migration. The Romanian fruit picker became the stereotypical protagonist of the Spanish migration discussion just like “the Polish plumber” in France. However, the Spanish society did not exhibit adverse behaviour towards immigrants, especially when it came to light that in most cases the Romanian fruit pickers or charwomen had university degrees. The regularization in 2005 – issuing residence permits to migrants residing illegally in Spain – ceased the category of “illegal immigrant” for many people. Since joining the EU in 2007 the migration of Bulgarians and Romanians is not concerned as the part of the Spanish migratory law any more (however the employment of many people is still illegal). On 1st January 2009 Spain opened its labour market for the Bulgarian and Romanian citizens, which led to a reduction in the number of blackleg workers. (Sandu et al 2004, Turrión 2008, Viruela 2008 a).

The efficiency or even inefficiency of some political arrangements can be observed in the changes of the number of Bulgarian and Romanian migrates (table 1). The numbers show that the increase caused by the regularization in 2005 and the EU integration in 2007, as well as the less significant growth after opening the job market in 2009 was not as intensive as it was predicted by the Spanish trade unions who did not support the migration. On the one hand it was due to the economic crisis, as the unemployment rate reached a record 20% in Spain; on the other hand, the slow, but firm equalization of income among the two home countries and the host country. Finally, we can also observe that the crisis did not cause a notable change in the number of the immigrants, although from other resources it is clear that many of the immigrants have returned to their home country. As a conclusion, this means, that the migration networks are so consolidated, that for the Bulgarians and for the Romanians moving to Spain is still attractive, even if there is no real reason offered by the labour market. On 1st January 2010 the Bulgarians accounted for 3.8% of all migrants in Spain while the Romanians for 15.72%. (Observatorio 2010).

1. Table: The number of the Bulgarian and Romanian immigrant communities in Spain between 2000-2009 (in thousands).

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Bulgarians	5	10	15	24	32	56	60	127	139	147
Romanians	11	25	34	55	83	192	211	604	687	752
Total number of immigrants in Spain	895	1109	1324	1647	1977	2739	3022	3979	4169	4791

Resource: Observatorio Permanente de la Inmigración, February, 2010.

The increase of the volume of migration was followed by the regional and sectorial differentiation. In the territorial distribution of immigrants the place of entrance was important (Madrid and the big cities from the Mediterranean coast), which provided the initial residence of the Bulgarian and Romanian immigrants. Later the immigrants spread into inland areas of Spain, too. It is a notable fact that the Bulgarians and Romanians settled down in different regions, this way it is rare to find a town where both ethnics are present at a high number. The reason for this is that for the employers the two groups are considered replaceable: the members of both groups were employed as seasonal workers in agriculture, as construction workers or as cleaning labour. The ethnic that first settled down in a town could first choose from the possibilities and could get in a better situation in the struggle for work by the efficiency of information flow among group members.

Other important peculiarity of the territorial distribution of immigrants is that a great proportion of the recently arrived immigrants – unlike others in Spain – have not chosen the big cities, but the smaller villages as a place of destination. The Bulgarians and Romanians found jobs mostly in the period of fruit picking or grape harvest; thanks to the fact that an important part of them had originally lived in the countryside in their home country and also thanks to the majority's stereotypic opinion about the relation between the two immigrant groups and the agricultural labour. These are the scope of activities that do not offer high wage, so they are characteristically filled with the recently arrived immigrants, who are not aware of the real value of the payment. Generally the Romanians who are about to speak Spanish at a low level and are acquainted with the value of the price and salary levels, move to the cities, where they enter the construction and cleaning job market (in many cases it does not mean that they work legally). However most of them are attentive to get to know the actually offered seasonal works and fill vacancies with their relatives or friends who arrived recently. In the case of Bulgarians and Romanians the possibility of the migration from the countryside to the cities is increasing, and more and more of them can find an appropriate administrative or mental job to their profession. (Ibáñez 2008, Pajares 2008, Viruela 2008a, Viruela 2008b)

In urban areas, however, they have to face the prejudices of employers, which associate them with physical work that does not require qualifications. This trend has seemed to soften since the EU integration of the two countries, that – in significant part – is based on the slogan “we are also Europeans”, thanks to the discourses applied by Bulgarian and Romanian civil associations for many years. In addition, Romanians like to refer to the Latin heritage and linguistic similarities, while Bulgarians try to represent that they are culturally close to the host country due to their culture and family-centred lifestyle similar to Spanish and to Mediterranean culture. Whether these efforts are behind the phenomenon or the fact that – unlike Africans or Latin Americans – the Bulgarians and Romanians do not form a clearly visible minority; it can be said, that the two nationalities show a much more increasing mobility and integration willingness. (Markova 2008, Pajares 2008)

The rapid integration is paradoxically also helped by the fact that compared to other immigrants, the social network of the Bulgarians and Romanians are surprisingly sparse. Partly because of the overall inconfidence of post-communist societies, partly because the increased competition inside these two immigrant groups; it is most common that they are exploited or deceived by compatriots, with the result that many of them as quickly as possible, even by giving up their own culture, choose the possibility of assimilation. The weaker group cohesion caused a number of disadvantages for the immigrants, for example, many of them did not use the possibilities of the regularization of the year 2005, because they did not know anyone who could explain why it would be advantageous for them. There are two smaller groups that represent exceptions: the Romanian Adventists and the Romanian and Bulgarian gypsies. The members of the first group are connected to a wider social network due to the typical solidarity of neo-Christian congregations (the Spanish Adventists are also members of that); the other group is protected from solitary by the traditional clan structure. It is particularly interesting that most of the Romanian gypsies are from Țândărei, a small village in Romania, Lalomita County; while the rest of the Romanians equally come from all over the country. The gypsy families - who mostly earn money from begging - are, in very conspicuous contrast with the other Romanians, therefore the Spanish public opinion identifies Romanians as gypsies. The Romanians having prejudices against gypsies or feeling dishonour for being confused with the gypsies, are aiming to dispel the misconception indicating the gypsies as an inferior and exterior nation; while others resigned with the situation, rather conceal or make undetectable their Romanian nationality. Both strategies weaken the strength of interest representation of Romanian citizens in Spain (including the gypsies), accelerating the assimilation process. (Sandu et al 2005, Sandu et al 2006, Markova 2008)

On the other hand, the economic crisis did not really stop but slowed down the improvement of the social situation of the Bulgarians and Romanians. The economic sectors that have not performed well permanently since 2008, are those, in which the Bulgarians and the Romanians could easily find subsistence, such as the construction and tourism industry. The crisis is much more severe for the traditional competitors, the Moroccans, Ecuadorians and Colombians; since they are not EU citizens, many of them do not have a residence permission and can not participate in local elections, unlike the Bulgarians and Romanians. This latter fact – although there are some Romanian representatives in local Spanish governments, and a constructions entrepreneur established the first, relatively unsuccessful Romanian party in Spain, called Independent Romanian Party, in 2006 - has not brought spectacular results yet, however in the near future it may help the consolidation of the two communities. (Aja et al 2009)

In the long term it can be assumed that the growth of Bulgarian and Romanian communities will proportionally slow down as the income inequality among sending and host countries is decreasing, but a precise prediction can not be given about when it is going to stop or turn to decline. Although due to the high unemployment rate in Spain and the easy entry and exit, the number of returnees and amphibiously living people is increasing, but these groups are not equally emerged from the total immigrant population: for the immigrants getting in a middle class and creating subsistence by business, it is still not worth returning to their home country. Those who are not highly qualified, if they find a job, they can earn much more than in their home country. In case of this group there are subjective facts that retain them from going home. They feel ashamed of returning without any important achievements in Spain. Those who would be demanded on Bulgarian and Romanian labour markets, are highly qualified immigrants who are totally integrated in Spain, or have taken advantages of the recent years of economic recovery of Romania (and in smaller part of Bulgaria) have returned home. Most Bulgarian and Romanian communities in Spain have found their places in the host country, in addition, they know, they have hopeful future as citizens of EU member states. In their case, similar processes might be expected to the ones that happened to the Spaniards, who emigrated to Germany, France and Switzerland in large numbers and could achieve to be members of the host countries' middle class (although many of them moved back to Spain when they got old). It is expected that within one or two decades a middle class group will be formed with Bulgarian-Spanish and Romanian-Spanish dual identity. These groups, on the one hand, due to the remittances, on the other hand by increasing the number of trade and institutional relations, can engage a significant part in the economic development of Bulgaria and Romania. The picking of fruit has ended, but not because of the eclipse of Bulgarian and Romanian communities in Spain, but on the contrary: they have started their way climbing up on the social ladder.

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