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URBAN–RURAL MIGRATION:  
ETHNOGRAPHIC EXAMPLES FROM BULGARIA, SLOVAKIA AND  
BELGIUM

Executive summary of

a dissertation

by

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The dissertation is available at the Department of Ethnology in the Faculty of History, Sofia University 'St. Kliment Ohridski'

## **Relevance of the topic**

The relative number of migrants from urban to rural areas has been increasing for decades. Especially in the last five years, and to some extent before that, there have been numerous academic studies and media products about people who have decided to leave the city and settle in the countryside. Luxurious vegetation and fruitful gardens; abandoned old houses restored to life, or newly built homes built with various shapes and materials uncommon for contemporary construction techniques; eco-friendly gardens; migrants who demonstratively explain how much better they live in the countryside since moving away from the city – some or all of these subjects are increasingly present (and distorted) on TV, in radio broadcasts, online videos, etc. The topic is a counterpoint to another one – that of the desolation of villages and arable land in the four corners of Bulgaria.

Quantitative data provided by the National Institute of Statistics also documents a tendency for part of the population to migrate from urban to rural areas. However, such data cannot accurately reflect the ongoing movement to Bulgarian villages, as many migrants do not document their migration. A large proportion live permanently or seasonally in rural areas without officially changing their residence. The quantitative indicators contain individual and community stories, practices and problems that have aroused my scientific interest since 2016 and which are at the center of the dissertation.

I'm focusing on lifestyle migration only and in particular: internal lifestyle migration from urban to rural areas. In their key article published in 2009, sociologists Michaela Benson and Karen O'Reilly define lifestyle migration as: "relatively affluent individuals, moving either part-time or full-time, permanently or temporarily, to places which, for various reasons, signify for the migrants something loosely defined as quality of life" (Benson, O'Reilly 2009: 621). Drawing on their work, I also consider the phenomenon as conditioned by the characteristics of modernity – individualism, consumption-oriented society, etc.

## **Main goals and objectives of the study**

I fully agree that lifestyle migration is related not only to the act of resettlement (how it happens, where and why), but also to post-migration experiences (Benson, Osbaldiston 2014: 3). Therefore, the main objectives of my work are to analyze:

- which trends occur before, but also after migration from urban to rural environments;
- the common factors present in Bulgaria, Slovakia and Belgium;
- the factors specific to Bulgaria.

In order to achieve these goals, I set myself key objectives:

- to conduct a field study observing several lifestyle migration projects in Central and Western Europe, collecting sufficient data for comparison;

- to analyze the motives for resettlement, the push and pull factors for my interlocutors in Bulgaria, Slovakia and Belgium, as well as their production and consumption choices and corresponding identities;

- to consider the lifestyle migration from urban to rural areas from various points of view – ecology, quality of life, creativity, change in the workplace, etc.;

- to present the development of lifestyle migration, to propose models for migration.

Given the fact that my topic of interest could be examined from multiple humanistic points of view (social psychology, anthropology of consumption, environmental anthropology, migration studies, etc.), I'm obliged to dig in different theoretical fields while discussing the role of identity and consumption for lifestyle migration. The research problem about lifestyle migrants from urban to rural areas is complex, and it includes a psychological, socio-economic, technological and ideological dimension. This determines the dissertation's structure in which the theoretical reviews alternate with case studies.

## Contents

The dissertation consists of an introduction, three chapters—each of which ends with conclusions—and a general conclusion, as well as an appendix with 40 collages of photographs taken during my fieldwork in Bulgaria, Slovakia and Belgium. The first chapter presents the main theoretical framework of the study, the second presents the rural environment from the point of view of the lifestyle migrants and the locals, and the third provides examples of lifestyle migrants' eco projects situated in the three countries.

## CHAPTER ONE: RESEARCHING LIFESTYLE MIGRATION: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Lifestyle migration is explored through the following terms: *identity*, *authenticity*, *consumption*, *downshifting*, rural idyll, urbanization and *counterurbanization*. I selected these concepts in relation to the self-presentation and self-understanding of a majority of my respondents. These are the concepts that have influenced their decisions. They are being used not only in the scientific literature on the topic, but also in the conversations I have had in the course of my fieldwork. Most of my interlocutors are knowledgeable people fluent in complex terminology willingly engaged in debates, as I will present in the next chapter. In the dissertation I'm opting for approaches to *identity*, *consumption* and *authenticity* that are often shared by my respondents. A full theoretical overview would go far beyond both the research objectives and my capabilities as an author.

I argue that this type of migration is determined by the transitional periods in one's life, as well as by socially developed attitudes of what it means to be successful, what a consumer society is and what is occurring in the countryside. I'm viewing lifestyle migration not as a one-time action with a specific beginning and an end, but as an on-going project, a varying result of one's personal quest.

The concepts of *identity* and *authenticity* are a priority for my respondents. In terms of identities, I'm observing a clear pluralism. Lifestyle migrants strengthen their identity as people moderately opposed to the status quo and the "System"; people who are conscious, free people with a free choice, who live by their own rules and values. In this way, they affirm the authenticity of their selves, which they believe they have suppressed while living in the city. Their new identity redefines their position in society.

In terms of consumption, it continues to function as a means of expression and connection even after migration, but goods and services are different in rural areas. Migrants express their individuality and sense of lifestyle through their objects, clothes, practices, experiences, and appearance. In all of these there is a tendency towards the ecological, handmade, unique. A lifestyle is being formed in harmony with these preferences and, accordingly, as an antipode/distinction from the civic lifestyle ruled by the values of the consumer society. They see their change of consumption through the lens of personal growth: lifestyle migrants consume more consciously, often share green ideas, voluntarily make anti-consumer decisions and live more simply, in some cases even off-grid. Materials and practices from their old lifestyle are put in a new light and combined with new materials and practices to form an innovative lifestyle pattern for the individual.

A highlight in this template is the motive of downshifting. Lifestyle migrants are turning their backs on established consumer societies and redefining their identity beyond their careers. Their ideal is to work on a limited basis or to fully abandon their civic professions. This way they're gaining more free time for activities that inspire them, are in harmony with their values and are characterized by more creativity and self-expression.

As migrants become a part of the rural landscape, so it becomes part of them. This landscape is built physically, but also symbolically by them through their daily lives and interactions, which they invest with meanings, memories and values.

Resettlement in rural areas however doesn't guarantee implementation of the downshifting intentions of the migrants. There, they expect to get rid of the negatives that tormented them in the city. In this sense they're describing their resettlement as "getting out of a trap" and "starting out anew", "taking control", "returning life to one's grasp". They are in the process of making their dreams come true, but this is not from scratch. It's inspired by the aspirations, expectations and skills that their previous urban environment has encoded in them. Their habitus conditions their choices, with educational, cultural and social capital standing out.

Thus, the urban way of life is gradually spreading even to small and remote rural areas. The citizens who entered the villages are modifying the traditional lifestyle. Paradoxically, as they are taking part in the process of counterurbanization, they are introducing urbanization and typical urban practices in the villages. As a result, urbanization ceases to affect just the growth of cities, but also influences the rural areas too.

Migrants mistakenly take the rural environment as a haven and the rural area as a symbol of timelessness, silence, idyll. They are heading off to the village aroused by the construct of rural idyll, the images of which are exposed daily on the Internet, on TV, in advertisements, in a variety of arts, etc. Most often, however, this construct contradicts the rural reality they face, which I discuss in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER TWO: LIFESTYLE MIGRANTS AND RURAL AREAS IN TRANSITION

In this chapter, I examine seven key factors for a lifestyle migration.

*Infrastructure:* it's not limited to the network of roads only, but includes also the networks through which lifestyle migrants are being supplied with water, electricity, internet. The presence of acceptable infrastructure is crucial for them and determines their residence in rural areas. In theory, lifestyle migrants are aware that in order for this infrastructure to be maintained in good condition, there must be people living permanently in the village, but in practice they rarely register as residents.

*Labor:* migrants predominantly try not to practice (or at least to moderately practice) their typical urban professions. By changing one's work, one's self is being actualized. In her new initiatives the individual strives to cover her values such as authenticity and creativity. In addition to teleworking, small-scale entrepreneurship and volunteering are preferred among migrants.

*Consumption:* migrants communicate their identity through consumption. In their consumer practices (or rejections of practices) values such as freedom, authenticity and individualism emerge. By adopting alternative lifestyle, they "cultivate" themselves in the rural environment, often consciously limiting themselves to what is healthy for both the person and the environment. Lifestyle migrants from urban to rural areas are trying to differ themselves from the consumer society from which they come.

*Environment:* living away from various types of pollution (air, noise, light, even advertising) and close to nature is one of the main prerequisites for lifestyle migrants to abandon urban areas. For them, nature is a source of invigoration and tranquility. Concerned about it, they try to pursue sustainable development on an individualistic level (family/eco-project).

*Raising children:* this is predominantly difficult in rural areas, as it is less likely to provide a good education and establish a social environment vital for children. However, my observations in Belgium show the opposite trend – in Brabant Walloon, families decide to migrate from urban to rural areas just when they have young children. This region doesn't face the issue of missing kindergartens and lack of other children in the same settlement, which is observed in Zajezova and Jelen.

*Awareness of the need to change one's lifestyle:* most often, migrants decide to move to a rural area after experiencing a serious physical or psychological problem while living in the city. While striving to achieve balance, some of them are making antipole shifts. Through release from the past, new opportunities for development open up.

*Searching for authenticity:* lifestyle migrants from urban to rural areas reformulate their self-perception and self-expression. They largely abandon the social positions, statuses and roles inherent in their urban lifestyle, and establish new ones both internally and in the variants of quasi-communities of migrants. This change is accompanied by some rules for the "new" life, which include living in harmony with nature, the values of "peace" and "free time", more creativity, and maintaining a weak or moderate—but not excessive—workload.

When changing identities, migrants deal with some contradictions (for example, "I love nature, but I live in a busy urban environment" or "I value my free time and peace of mind, but I'm working in a corporation"), but encounter others (I'd like to live in a rural environment close to nature, but I also need a cultural life", "I'd like to practice anti-consumption, but I often have to use my car in rural areas"). These contradictions are due to the constructed image of the rural idyll, which does not overlap with real life in a rural environment.

The analysis of the seven factors proves that migrants strive to combine the best of urban and rural living environments; to take advantage of the pros of both and at the same time avoid the cons. As one of my interlocutors put it: "It's city life, but out of town" (S., female, 50, Belgium). This could not become true if old and new values and practices weren't combined.

Lifestyle migrants insist on introducing elements of the urban environment into the rural one, thus improving it on the one hand, but sharply distinguishing it from the local rural community on the other. In a rural environment, where more urban migrants are gathering, a clear distinction is made between local and lifestyle migrant groups, and the latter are being taken as foreigners.

*From the point of view of the migrants:* an individualistic migrant quasi-community is formed of individuals who consider firstly their personality. For them, fitting into anything (not only in the local community, but even in the quasi-community of migrants) is a continuation of their individualistic trajectory. They are not ready to sacrifice even minimal autonomy. They set mostly individualistic and to a much lesser extent collectivist goals.

The newcomers keep in touch with the community they come from, although a distancing is being established with some people with whom they were close while living in the city. Regarding relationships with the locals, among my interlocutors they are mostly neutral, and often negative, due to the fact that migrants consider the locals as people with markedly different values and interests.

Lifestyle migrants usually do not build an identity based on locality, because they are multilocal and in constant transition (physically and spiritually).

*From a local perspective*, identity based on locality is key. My observations are limited to Bulgaria and the village of Jelen and show that locals look back to the past, when the village was "nicer" and "better". According to them, it can become "nice" again only if being funded and supported by the state (while they bitterly infer this isn't and won't be possible). In this sense, they do not find the newcomers particularly necessary and useful for the improvement of Jelen, as they are too busy with their own projects and aren't living there permanently. The individualism of the newcomers is again emerging through the lens of the locals.

### **CHAPTER THREE: URBAN-RURAL LIFESTYLE MIGRATION: EXAMPLES FROM JELEN, ZAJEZOVA AND BRABANT WALOON**

In this chapter, I'm sharing in-depth stories of lifestyle migrants, characterized by the practices discussed in Chapters 1 and 2: conscious consumption; production of food and/or other crucial supplies at home; volunteering; enhanced connection with nature, etc. My aim is to outline how such a life-changing decision is being reflected in the daily lives of my respondents and what it means to live alternatively in the countryside. The selected stories illustrate how migrants' lives in rural areas unfold in details that I was not able to point out in the previous chapters. I have intentionally chosen men and women of different ages who've been dwelling in the countryside long enough to be familiar not only with the "rural idyll" but also with problems in the countryside. By presenting these stories, I lay out once again my argument that lifestyle migration is based on one's desire to update one's identity by choosing to live in a place one finds inspiring and supporting values such as freedom, authenticity and individualism.

I'm drawing on specific inhabitants and their projects, and not on the observed quasi-communities as a whole, due to the specifics of my fieldsites: autonomous eco-projects whose owners are selective and do not always become part of a real community, eco-project mostly driven by one or two individuals. Due to the fact that I'm including elements of thick description, which makes it necessary to change the view point of the narrator, I sometimes speak as an external observer, and when needed I try to present the situation through the eyes of the interlocutors and share it as an insider.



In this chapter, I'm describing in detail three eco-projects central to my research.

### *1. The "Vegetarium"<sup>1</sup> eco-project in Jelen, Bulgaria*

The "Vegetarium" eco-project combines permaculture gardens and restructured old adobe houses. It is managed by two people – F. (m., 39, Jelen) and his partner the Austrian B. (f., 30, Jelen). It has been operating since 2016<sup>2</sup> and has received some funding from a Swiss project according to a contract in which the owners have committed to maintain guest rooms until the end of 2022. In 2019–2020, the "Vegetarium" eco-project consists of 3 rooms with 9 beds, plus a living room with kitchenette, storage room, bathroom and toilet and a foyer convenient for a greenhouse. The facilities is constantly evolving and F. notes: "We haven't stopped repairing and building. We're expecting to come up with a new dwelling every 2 years and finish our plan in 10–15 years, when the capacity of the place and the community will be full.

"Vegetarium" is accepting guests, but only if they agree to comply with the regime based upon the principals of the integral approach – a holistic set of rules for healthy living developed by Ken Wilbers and popularized in Bulgaria by Dimitar Pashkulev who is B. and F.'s mentor. In 2020, a visit up to 14 days costs 49 leva with meals included. Guests are required to adhere to the hosts' diet, described in detail on the wall in the living room: fruits, vegetables, cereals and legumes, raw nuts, seeds and oils, spices, bee products, dairy products with a predominance of easily digestible such as yogurt and low-fat cottage cheese, organic eggs with limited use, nutritional supplements, sprouted and fermented foods. Tobacco, coffee, alcohol and psychotropic substances are completely forbidden. It's not allowed to prepare them in the house. Their use is allowed occasionally and outside the common areas. In this regard, two significant cases arose when children came to "Vegetarium" for a one-day camp. B. was disappointed with the consumer practices of her young guests and especially with the fact that they wasted what was prepared.

Regarding plants, in "Vegetarium" there's an unusual diversity of local and foreign species, despite the barren soil and cold climate typical of this mountainous region. F. emphasizes that—in harmony with the permaculture principals—the native species have an advantage, and the unusual ones are just a hobby, an experiment.

F. told me that he loves cats and dogs and that he used to have a total of eight. Today, there are none here. Pests such as insects and caterpillars are dealt with by spraying with biological mixtures. F. and B. also use biodynamic fertilizers, which are believed to kill the appetite of pests and at the same time aren't toxic for humans.

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<sup>1</sup> A video presenting this and other eco-projects in Jelen is available at: <https://youtu.be/UvwHaDhI6g0>.

<sup>2</sup> Before that F. had been developing another eco-project called "Trinoga" at the same place but with completely different objectives and vision.

The hosts' conscious consumption is expressed not only in eating healthily, but also in compliance with nature conservation, as well as with their limited budget. No matter what variety of products are growing in the gardens, they are not enough to feed F., B. and their volunteers all year round. Conscious consumption goes hand in hand with waste reduction according to the principles of the "zero waste" movement.

F. advises that lifestyle migrants to rural areas should be careful not only with their consumption but also with their production, to not plan too much work for the people who participate in the project.

F. is still helping to establish a community of newcomers in Jelen, but he is no longer so intentional in this endeavor. Lifestyle migrants are still interested in buying a property in Jelen. Such people find out about the village from their acquaintances who have already bought a property here. In the third chapter, I present several other projects of newcomers in greater detail, most of whom have learned about the village thanks to F.: an off-grid house near F.; a project for a house and gardens in another remote *mahala* (neighbourhood), etc.

## 2. "Sekier" permacultural farm<sup>3</sup> in Zaježova ecovillage, Slovakia

In 1994, two people bought an abandoned farm called "Sekier" in the village of Zaježova, central Slovakia. They were interested in "traditional rural life" and environmental protection, but not so much in building a community. Their goal of living here and practicing a "simple village life," "back to the roots," attracted more like-minded people, as well as many volunteers who were settling for shorter or longer periods there.

During its more than 20 years of existence, the permaculture farm "Sekier" has been developing its facilities very well. The appearance of the old farm buildings is preserved as much as possible, new ones have been added (mostly built with natural materials), and the landscape has undergone changes that are helpful for agriculture. Today, in Sekier there is a community building; an additional community building with library; three outdoor composting toilets; additional houses near the community building; a straw bale family house 500 m away from the community building; a sauna built with natural materials; permaculture gardens and a greenhouse; a warehouse; a goat shed; and a workshop.

Given the fact there are so many buildings, a reasonable question is: if everything is common, does anyone actually take care of it properly? My observations show that rules for everyday living aren't strictly followed—just to the extent that everyday life continues to flow with no difficulties. One of the long-term residents comments the following: "there are rules that are not exactly rules and it is okay not to follow them" (L., woman, 33, Zaježova). It is noteworthy that, on the one hand, they are

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<sup>3</sup> A video presenting this and other eco-projects in Zaježova is available at [https://youtu.be/Xl\\_ie2obdmE](https://youtu.be/Xl_ie2obdmE).

not written in black and white—this is because life in this quasi-community prioritizes peace and harmony, not a strict regime. On the other hand, precisely due to the lack of clarity, there is a feeling that everything flows "just out of nothing". About 75% of the tasks for the day are completed, and "it's not about high productivity, it's about pushing things forward." At first, the observer may be left with the impression that this is due to laziness or lack of a charismatic organizer and clear rules. However, the main reason lies in the values of the inhabitants: freedom, peace, asserting one's own choice.

Short-term volunteers and visitors are free to stay, but the coming of every new long-term volunteer is a subject to discussion with the other "Sekier" residents and coordinators. What exactly is the role of the coordinators? They do not decide alone and in some cases do not even act as leaders. They support the activities and people living in "Sekier" (and in Zajezova ecovillage in general), but do not give orders about what should happen, nor how and when. In 2019, three people were serving as coordinators.

Over the years, leaders have shifted, but P. (m., 51, Zajezova) has remained. Some pay attention to "Sekier" for a few years, and then start their own projects, including family caregiving. A flow of lifestyle migrants is typical for the ecovillage and such flow is high in "Sekier" too, where mostly long-term volunteers live. They, and even more so the short-term volunteers, come in search of an alternative lifestyle and their authentic self, and sooner or later leave. Some of them even experience mental instability. After the end of their volunteering, many leave. Just a few decide to live in the ecovillage and find a way to do so. Thus, the permaculture farm is constantly in transition and there is a constant transfer of knowledge from one to another, especially among young people. With the different personalities of coordinators and volunteers, different aspects of production develop in the permaculture farm every year.

Permaculture gardens play a key role in the production practices of "Sekier": both for consuming fresh fruits and vegetables and canned goods, and for transferring knowledge on how to live closer to nature and in the countryside. Another issue is the production of cheese from the milk of goats raised on the farm. Selling cheese is an exception to the general practice of keeping the goods produced in "Sekier" for its own use.

Speaking about food, "Sekier" is at least half self-sufficient, and almost everything else that needs to be purchased is found in the food bank<sup>4</sup>. The Suzuki Vitara SUV is used for shopping, as well as for other activities. It is shared by everyone on the farm. However, the coordinator P. emphasizes that he doesn't approve when "Sekier" dwellers use it too often, as this contributes to pollution.

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<sup>4</sup> A kind of alternative shop, open not only to those who are staying in "Sekier" for a long time, but also to almost all other members of the quasi-community in the ecovillage.

Producing food on one's own is hard and requires a lot of efforts, but volunteers appreciate it, as it's a crucial part of "living traditionally" and off-grid, and because it requires handwork, which many lifestyle migrants enjoy. Apart from a few exceptions, most of them do not stay in "Sekier" long enough to get tired of it and crave once again for the comfort of buying food from the store. In food production and consumption, the desire of lifestyle migrants to live alternatively, healthily, and to be environmentally friendly is apparent. Shared meals are the cornerstones on which the daily routine is based and are almost always vegetarian.

Self-sufficiency in "Sekier" can also be traced in the handmade production of furniture and household goods.

Apart from consuming various goods, the members of the quasi-community in "Sekier" and in Zajezova ecovillage in general also spend money on travel. Many of them are almost constantly mobile, which requires some funds, although they benefit from shared travel, cycling, and hitchhiking.

In the third chapter, I'm also presenting another lifestyle migration project that has shifted from a collective to an individual one: the "Braná" eco-center for spiritual practices. Such is the fate of most eco-projects in Zajezova eco-village.

### *3. „Les Voyages d'Ulysse“ project<sup>5</sup> in Overijse, Belgium*

While I was living with the fine and elegant K. (f., 59, Overijse), she told me several times: "I love making things beautiful." It is not an exaggeration to specify this as one of the leitmotifs in her life. This aspiration emerges especially in the interior and exterior of her house, and in the stables and grazing lands she rented. K.'s two-storey house, whose selling price in 2020 would be around 600 000 euros, is cozy and classily furnished, and is located in one of the most expensive areas in Belgium—Walloon Brabant. Its two yards are about half a hectare in total and are also furnished with a table and seats. There is no vegetable garden, only trees, shrubs and a well-kept lawn. Among them one can usually find K.'s two dogs, a male beagle and a female greyhound, as well as her cat.

K. is not a vegetarian, but eats little meat as she does not tolerate the way animals are raised. Sometimes she buys steaks, but generally follows an alkaline diet, disrupted only by excessive consumption of various types of cheese. She aims to eat a lot of fruits and vegetables and a bit of bread. In her kitchen there's a huge cupboard full of superfoods, seeds and other healthy products. She also has a juicer and a smoothie blender (the recipes for which are stuck on one of the kitchen windows), but she does not use these appliances often.

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<sup>5</sup> A video presenting this and other eco-projects in Walloon Brabant is available at <https://youtu.be/Rgyt-PVcbho>.

Her consumer behaviour is similar to those of my other key respondents, but unlike them, she doesn't produce anything. Like all my interlocutors from Walloon Brabant, she's buying all she needs from the store, preferring goods labeled "organic".

K.'s daily life is divided between her home and her workplace – the stable where she develops her project “Les Voyages d’Ulysse” (The Wanderings of Odysseus). The two are 10 km apart. In the middle of 2019, K. rents the place for 200 euros a month, located in the village of Tombeek, 25 km south of Brussels. There's a stable and pasture meadows, part of a huge property consisting of a small castle, wide meadows, a forest and a pond. Although she goes to the stables every day, K. still doesn't spend as much time with the horses as she would like to. This is because visitors often come, as well as people involved in the trade and breeding of horses in various ways.

K. takes care of her four horses daily and devotedly – she combs their tails, manes and the rest of the fur, cleans them, smears them with a variety of ointment, and wipes their hooves. Her connection with horses is extremely strong. In the recent years, K. has increasingly improved the specific type of alternative psychotherapy that she offers – equine-assisted personal development, an alternative type of psychotherapy. In this educational program people develop skills related to leadership, confidence, maintaining relationships, intuition and emotional intelligence with the help of horses. K. practices coaching in nature and always individually, not in a group. No previous experience communicating with horses or riding is required. In the sessions, K. asks the participant to imagine what advice the horse would give; to monitor the behavior of the horse; to draw parallels; and to consider the lessons one has learnt from this communication.

One of the premises rented by K. does not house the horses, but hosts its numerous visitors. It is equipped with a refrigerator, utensils, table and chairs, with running water just from a hose in a bucket. Just like in her home, here predominate wood, lines and decorations inspired by nature. Many figures and drawings of horses stand out.

Between the buildings and the pasture meadow, K. has set up a large creamy tent with a beautiful view where she and her guests sit when the weather is nice. They often stay until dark and light a fire in a portable metal stand. This was also the case on a Saturday afternoon in November 2020, when K. organized a sound journey there: a meditative practice accompanied by many sounds of varying frequency and tone, believed to resonate with different parts of the human body and support one's connection with her authentic self.

K.'s values (freedom, autonomy) and everyday life (being close to nature; livelihood related to it; various New Age practices) are similar to those of my other key respondents, although her standard of living is noticeably higher and completely lacks the hippie characteristics apparent in the newcomers in Jelen and Zajezova. Unlike most of them, she has managed to find and maintain the balance they refer to as vital.

In Chapter Three I also present the daily life and motives for the lifestyle migration of a conservationist. He practices conscious production and consumption and seeks to draw himself apart from urban life, emphasizing that it contradicts with his authenticity and identity. Architect M. (m., 28, Wavre) and his girlfriend, who is also an architect, "got tired" of the city. They were striving to build something together, so they built a mobile home on a truck trailer. The house consists of 13 m<sup>2</sup> of living space during the day plus 6 m<sup>2</sup> on a second level, designed for sleeping. There's running water, electricity and a wood stove. The construction, furnishing and delivery to the yard in Wavre, where it was located in 2020, cost 30,000 euros.

The yard where M. and his girlfriend had parked it houses other lifestyle migrants too: a luxuriously furnished yurt where the son of the property owner lives with his partner and baby; and another architect who has renovated a small wood shed, insulated it and installed a fireplace. The property owners agreed for their house to be used as a community building. It hosts 14 people who dine together and buy some shared, wholesale provisions

All of the stories described in Chapter 3 highlight typical lifestyle migration from urban to rural areas based on practices I've analyzed in the previous chapters: conscious production, including agriculture; conscious consumption, including zero waste; following a daily routine and practices, which according to the migrants support their health and well-being, etc. Emerging are the leitmotifs of building/furnishing with natural materials and do it yourself projects; a desire for isolation; asserting values such as autonomy, peaceful living and freedom; existing close to nature (which most often includes caring for a garden and some animals). Activities and even specific objects owned by respondents from different countries overlap: B. in Jelen has a shruti box, which she sometimes plays for her guests, and K. organizes meditative practices in which the same type of instrument is included; in "Vegetarium" they sing before meals, and in "Sekir" too; B. in Jelen finds it calming to spend time with the horses, K. in Belgium too; there are mobile homes everywhere.

The lifestyle migration of respondents discussed in Chapter Three is based on two pillars—attitudes towards nature and attitudes toward the city.

Living close to nature is conceived not so much as an independent category, but as an opposition to the urban lifestyle. Different respondents attach different importance to this because their urban lifestyle was different. For some, nature brings peace – a classic value of the middle class consumers. Other newcomers are inspired for more conscious consumption and personal growth. Some aspire to fuse with it and thus find answers to their personal quests.

Still, even the owners of these successful eco-projects are seriously dependent on the cities, and staying connected with it enables their migration. This is not just due to the need of food supplies that are impossible to obtain in rural areas, but also because the city is a source of work, finance,

customers (for coaching, tourism, telecommuting, etc.), as well as new urban-rural lifestyle migrants. That is where the dissatisfied come from, and it is precisely them who fill the places of those who, for one reason or another, have decided to leave the village. Most of the places I describe are in constant transition, as are their inhabitants (especially in Zaježova and Jelen), either because they first came with the intention to stay temporarily, or because they do not financially or socio-culturally withstand the difficulties in rural areas. Most often, they are so mobile and multilocal that they are incapable of becoming members of a functioning community with common goals and objectives.

### CONCLUSIONS AND KEY FINDINGS

- What do my respondents lack in urban areas? They're lacking enough physical and social space to unleash their individualism and invented authenticity. I came to this conclusion based on the theory of Anthony Giddens, according to which the constant reformulation of the self and its identities is subject to the need to act authentically, to distinguish one's true needs and motives from those imposed by the environment, to obtain satisfaction by getting rid of addictions.
- And what do they find attractive in rural areas? They're finding attractive the ample space where their authentic selves can flourish without being dependent on many other people; the easily accessible and vast nature; the absence of any kind of pollution. But most of all – the opportunity to start again, to start anew, to win a second chance, to regain one's freedom (these are all expressions of my respondents). In my conversations with them and in the subsequent processing and analysis, I paid special attention to the means of expression used by my interlocutors when describing their lives and attitudes. These means are indicative—words such as "balance," "nature," "harmony," "calmness," and "freedom" are constantly used. They emphasize the ideology of self-sufficient living beyond the imposed standards of consumer society. By embarking on a physical journey from the city to the village, they also travel metaphorically to an updated and more authentic self.
- Most urban-rural lifestyle migrants have gone through a turning point that catalyzed their decision to change their lifestyle. It is not necessary that something stressful or negative has happened, although such events predominate.
- The new lifestyle is characterized by living more consciously, which according to the attitudes of my respondents is determined by the environment in which they settled. The rural landscape is a symbol of tranquility, of vast nature without many people and without the limitations of the urban. However, both in the city and in the

countryside, migrants exist not just in the landscape, but through it – in confirmation of Tim Ingold's theory of what a landscape is and what its role is (Ingold 1993: 67).

- “A choice about where to live is also about how to live” – Hoey concludes (2006: 366). In the majority of cases it is a question of running away/drawing a line from something in order to pursue/establish something else, something new, or something different. The freshly adopted lifestyle may be the antithesis of "before", or it may be characterized by the strengthening of an identity that was weakly expressed "before." Urban-rural lifestyle migration might be a form of realization of the Self and is therefore particularly characteristic of young people of working age. My respondents are firmly convinced that their needs are significant and that they are doing something necessary not only for themselves, but also for the consumer society in general. Thus their individualism overflows into reflecting on the collective and common welfare.

- Migrants perceive themselves as determined actors who have improved their lives due to their own choices, not those set by someone else; they believe they've taken their destiny into their own hands, avoided unsatisfactory circumstances, and don't expect other individuals (or societies) to decide for them, i.e. an institution or an authorized individual to act for their benefit instead of themselves (Korpela 2014: 27).

- No matter how individualistic they are, the choices, stories they tell, and their impressions are determined by the very structures and systems they'd like to leave behind. Their very idea of being lifestyle migrants, as well as the actions to accomplish it, are limited by gender, class, nationality and other affiliations. At the heart of their desire for autonomy, however, lies the need to differentiate themselves from other classes. If they managed to sever ties with society as they're claiming they would like to, their moral and material obligations to the other classes would not have been fulfilled.

- In my dissertation, I adopted Benson's thesis (Benson 2015: 12) that the recognition of consumption as a factor for lifestyle migration is one of the unique contributions of lifestyle migration research to the general field of migration studies. My respondents mostly refer to the negative aspects of consumption. Few of them realize that consumption is a means to satisfy needs such as communication and significance, as well as the need for control. In harmony with Miller's theory of sacrifice, we choose what to buy and use to express devotion to what we are interested in. In their case, it is mostly the Self and nature. In rural areas, they live a greener way of life, mixing revised materials and practices from their old lives (such as working remotely or



consuming healthy products made in distant continents) with new materials and practices in an innovative template. They build a bricolage: a construction of an innovative lifestyle, in which one can recognize pieces of the previous lifestyle.

- Turning our heads to the countryside as a space for living today is a continuation of a long intellectual tradition, combining the idealization of the village with dreams of modernization. Even if the homes my respondents reside in are built using "traditional" technology (i.e. natural materials), these homes offer basic accomplishments of civilization such as a bathroom inside the house, electricity, and internet. The only exceptions are the few respondents who have chosen to be non-users, but who are still dependent on the "System" in one way or another.

- Migrants' narratives outline what they value and would like to prevail in their lives: flexibility and resilience of the project instead of constant growth, being pleased with what's enough rather than constant seeking of efficiency at work, cooperation instead of competition, preference for the local instead of the global, obeying the laws of nature and not striving to dominate it. Their belief that it's easier to live in harmony with these values in the countryside rather than in the city influences their decision to relocate.

- Their models for rural life are often unfeasible, as these are caused by the construct of the "rural idyll." The wish to escape from the suffocating status quo to the promised rural paradise is evident. The paradox is that although it proclaims authenticity, this idyll is inauthentic, and more precisely fabricated according to the needs of citizens and materialised only in some tourist sites and ecovillages with strict rules (and not completed even there). This construct attracts lifestyle migrants, because it consists of deep and traditional values such as being close to the land, the nature and the community, and therefore provides them with a refuge from (post)modernity. Theoretically, the countryside lacks the various difficulties that migrants face – financial, cultural, social, material and others.

- Few of the established notions of the urban as modern and dynamic and the rural as traditional and static are confirmed in reality. The two are not oppositions as they are supposed to be, as urbanization, counterurbanization and the rural environment are inextricably bound up (Westlund et al. 2014: 142). Rural environment is already dependent on the urban one and this is not only true for the urbanized villages on the outskirts of the cities, but also for the more remote ones. The city supplies the villages with products, services and people.

- When moving from urban to rural areas, my respondents unwittingly transfer some urban practices and models to the countryside. At the same time, in the process of making this transition, many of them are changing their lifestyles, bringing more free time and awareness into it. I defined downshifting as going beyond socially accepted models of success by distinguishing from a developed/developing career and/or intensive consumption. Lifestyle migrants assess their importance not on the basis of profession or financial status, but on the fact that they have free time to carry out activities that inspire them contrary to developing a career, and possessing much belongings and big homes. Even if they decide to start a business in the countryside, it's small, and the leader identifies as a person whose dream is coming true and not as an entrepreneur; a person looking beyond the financial dimension and focused mostly on providing good quality and inspiration for the clients. Downshifting is rarely driven by economic needs. Lifestyle migrants who decided to downshift aim to slow down, be more connected to each other and to the place where they settled, to have their time at their disposal instead of selling it to an employer, to live more simply (Vanini, Taggart 2014: 191). But "This simpler way of life is quite simply not as simple as they had at first imagined", as Benson and Osbaldiston inform (2014: 16) and as lifestyle migrants find out after gaining experience in the new environment. If for the individual "a simple way of life" means to provide food self-sufficiently, she should expect an unexpected amount of work to achieve this, or various problems due to unfavorable climate. If, on the other hand, the intention is to earn money by having a "civic" job (whether remote or in-person), then the lifestyle migrant strengthens the bonds with the civic lifestyle that she possibly wished to end.

- My respondents build narratives that do not always overlap with and sometimes even contradict reality. For example, their constant emphasis on community life contrasts with the fact that the quasi-communities in Jelen and Zajezova function with extreme and deepening difficulties. Also, during the years I spent in the field in Jelen, radical changes in the intentions and attitudes of my interlocutors emerged.

- In rural areas, migrants feel freer not only to be occupied with whatever they decide on their own, but also to have the appearance they would like to have. They are pleased with their escape from the city and the urban society that have suppressed their authentic selves. Why are they so free of restraints in the new environment? Because they're foreign there, because they're in a liminal space, because they're multilocal and therefore do not have to obey the local social norms (Korpela 2014: 41).

- My respondents most often keep in touch with other lifestyle migrants – mostly those sharing alternative attitudes similar to theirs – but do not insist on fitting into the community of local people. Even if at first they would have liked to learn more from them about the "traditional practices" promised by the construct of rural idyll, they backed off as soon as they found that the locals did not comply with the framework of the construct. Sometimes the newcomers look down on the locals; consider them, if not "simpler", at least too different to speak a common language; they experience themselves as more competent and more potential. This is another confirmation of their class characteristics.

- At first glance, when lifestyle migrants come with their urban tools and experience, and import knowledge and practices that locals don't usually apply and don't have, this could be considered positive. However, this toolkit and experience aren't necessarily to be welcomed by locals, nor necessarily lead to positive rural development. The aspirations of the settlers to change the environment are rarely recognized by the local people as efforts aimed at the common good, but rather – as efforts to adapt it to their own needs and understandings. Ideologies about the environment are often opposing: lifestyle migrants feel they are more informed and take care of conservation, while locals are more exploiters who struggle to survive at the cost of nature's conservation. From the point of view of the locals, the migrants don't know enough and are too experimental: why would one like to deal with outdated/alternative and certainly more labor-intensive practices and lifestyles?

- Sometimes physical and moral distances hinder the full communication between like-minded people, as well as between lifestyle migrants and locals. Also, due to the large-scale spaces in fragmented villages such as Jelen and Zajezova, changes in the environment done by the newcomers or the locals often go unnoticed. Every owner lives in her own reality, in which the local rural community exists somewhere far, far away and interacts with it in rare cases.

- It's possible that even the quasi-community of like-minded people does not meet the expectations of the individual for common goals and lack of problems. One might find it not so inspiring or discover that she had just a short-term need to be a part of it. In such cases one might prefer to dedicate herself to her own project mostly. Here is another paradox related to invented authenticity: if a lifestyle migrant is very attached to her authentic self, this hinders her participation in the community, as it makes her unacceptable and unwilling to compromise, which is crucial for a community to

function. Due to disappointment with what the countryside offers, a person who had been determined to live there could transform to just an owner of a second-home where she periodically escapes. One of my respondents calls these people "cool villagers". However, such a shift should not be interpreted as a failure, as lifestyle migration is primarily a project in development, not an action with a beginning and an end.

## Scientific contributions

- Introducing the poorly known in Bulgarian scientific literature term “rural idyll.” Applying the term “lifestyle migration” which has hitherto been present in Bulgarian sociological and anthropological literature only sporadically, in short scientific texts.
- Analysis a scientific problem of present interest through the lens of several scientific fields. The theory is supported by many examples.
- Proposing models for urban-rural lifestyle migration applicable for several different European countries. Providing a detailed snapshot of a global trend.
- Collecting a significant amount of empirical material (including visual) from three different European countries. Ethnographic data on the Bulgarian rural areas in the 20s of the XXI century, as well as the data on the Slovak and Belgian rural areas, would serve as a basis for future research.
- By searching for and discovering the correlation between consumption and lifestyle migration, an innovative prism for Bulgarian science has been proposed for examining internal urban–rural migration.

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