

Article

Patterns of Social Integration Strategies: Mobilising ‘Strong’ and ‘Weak’ Ties of the New European Migrants

Boris Popivanov^{1,2,*} and Siyka Kovacheva^{2,3}¹ Department of Political Science, Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski, Sofia 1504, Bulgaria;

E-Mail: bpopivanov@phls.uni-sofia.bg

² New Europe Centre for Regional Studies, Plovdiv 4002, Bulgaria; E-Mail: skovacheva@neweurope-research.eu (S.K.)³ Department of Applied Sociology, Plovdiv University Paisii Hilendarski, 4000 Plovdiv, Bulgaria

* Corresponding author

Submitted: 19 June 2019 | Accepted: 26 August 2019 | Published: 7 November 2019

Abstract

The European mobility processes raise the issue of the integration strategies of new European migrants in their host societies. Taking stock of 154 in-depth interviews with migrants in the UK, Germany, Italy and Spain, we examine the social ties which they mobilise in order to adapt in a different social environment. The division between ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ ties established in the literature is particularly useful to assess migrants’ experiences in appropriation and transformation of social capital and the variety of their pathways in the labour market. Then we critically study the relative weight of social ties and skill levels in their choice of integration strategies. At the end, four types of strategies corresponding to the types of migrants’ interactions with the home and host contexts are outlined.

Keywords

European mobility; migration; social capital; social integration; social ties

Issue

This article is part of the issue “The Lived Experiences of Migration: Individual Strategies, Institutional Settings and Destination Effects in the European Mobility Process” edited by Neli Demireva (University of Essex, UK) and Fabio Quassoli (University of Milano-Bicocca, Italy).

© 2019 by the authors; licensee Cogitatio (Lisbon, Portugal). This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

1. Introduction: Theoretical and Conceptual Perspective

The European Union (EU) has established a framework in which the traditional—and analytically rather well-developed—difference between internal and international migration becomes blurred. This changing permeability of borders has pushed forward the concept of (intra-)European mobility as different from migration by non-EU nationals (in both policy documents and academic research Boswell & Geddes, 2011; King, 2002). It denotes cross-border movement within Europe, whose importance is theoretically acknowledged in terms of the very possibility of post-national integration at the individual level and is empirically recognised in surveys as a core

benefit of EU citizenship by Europeans themselves (Favell & Recchi, 2009).

Mobility processes across Europe are assumed to represent one of the important pillars of the overall European integration project. They should guarantee that all EU citizens are entitled to equal chances and equal access to the labour markets of each member state. Legal provisions, at the same time, need practical substantiation. That is why research attention has to be focused on the concrete reality of migrants’ integration in host societies, and particularly to the subjective meanings, strategies and experiences with which mobility is related. As migration is not a one-time move but a dynamic multi-sided and multi-sited effort, it affects not only the migrants themselves but also their social and cultural en-

vironments and the networks they are involved in (see Castles, 2000, pp. 15–16).

Granovetter (1973, 1983) points at the importance of the strength of interpersonal ties in network analysis. His well-known theory examines them in relation to diffusion, social mobility, political organisation and social cohesion. Social ties, in Granovetter's sense, reveal interactions in small groups, which, in turn, construct the individual's networks. On this basis, a key differentiation is made between strong ties (our close entourage) and weak ties (our more distant acquaintances). Mobilising social ties therefore stands out as a process differing from just specifying kinship and friendship circles; it is about the importance of networks providing social support. Close relatives may be out, geographically distant or even not quite familiar people may be in.

Social ties are subject to additional scrutiny in the light of the development of the social capital theories. Thus, Coleman (1990, Chapter 12) examines social capital as a set of resources found in the social relations in the family and community based on trustworthiness, mutual obligations and expectations. Numerous authors bring this kind of approach to the field of migration studies. Importance of kin and friendship networks is emphasised as a factor in shaping and sustaining migration. Through these forms, migrant communities and ethnic suburbs in large cities often emerge as an outcome (Boyd, 1989; Fawcett, 1989; Massey & García España, 1987). The heuristic potential of examining social networks for understanding migration has often been underlined (Arango, 2004; Boyd & Nowak, 2012). While quantitative studies have measured the size and intensity of the networks (see, for example, Luthra, Platt, & Salamońska, 2014; Richter, Ruspini, Michajlov, Mintchev, & Nollert, 2017), qualitative studies have analysed the cultural meanings and migrants' agency usually focusing on one migrant group or one life domain: family or friendship ties (Heath, McGhee, & Trevena, 2015; Maeva, 2017; Malyutina, 2018). We attempt to capture the content of migrants' social relationships in several life domains bearing in mind that a "given form of social capital that is valuable in facilitating certain actions may be useless or even harmful for others" (Coleman, 1990, p. 302). In research literature, it should also be added, 'social ties,' 'social networks' and 'social relationships' are often used interchangeably. Our study acknowledges the conceptual differences but does not elaborate on them as it goes beyond the purposes which we have set out.

Information infrastructure is further regarded as a basis for actual accomplishment of migratory integration. One should explicitly underline the growing criticism against the so-called 'integration research' agenda in the migration studies. The very use of the concept 'integration' according to these views suggests forms of knowledge which tend to favour government approaches as opposed to lived experiences; it privileges the viewpoint of the host-country administration and hegemonic culture types over the mutual encounters. Following this

shed of disagreement, integration is believed to define a certain state of the individual vis-à-vis a static society, personal responsibility of the former for the benefit of the latter. The discourse of migratory integration thus simultaneously moves us away from migrants' actual belongings and memberships and overshadows the genuine in-depth troubles of host societies. The main problem with the concept is found to be with the erratic vision of the society as an abstract benchmark of normatively posed conditions against which the migrant's success (or failure) is measured (Korteweg, 2017; Schinkel, 2017). In our case, however, integration is attentively viewed as a process of interaction between newcomers and the host society, which is framed by social ties rather than predetermined ideal types of settlement. We choose the term integration as more value-neutral, recognising interaction rather than the terms 'assimilation,' 'acculturation' and 'naturalisation' (Triandafyllidou, 2016). The transnational perspective, moreover, identifies how migrants establish and maintain social ties that link their societies of origin and settlement, and deepens the concept of integration. Migrants' experience and identity-transformations seem to be shaped by both concepts and this process is considered to be on the rise through the intense uses of technology, travel and financial mechanisms (Portes & DeWind, 2007; Schiller, Basch, & Blank-Szanton, 1992). Further, the framework of the European mobility promotes the opportunity of seeing migratory integration as a substantial feature of the complex phenomenon of 'horizontal Europeanisation.' This latter concept, in the sense of intra-European transferability of knowledge, skills and education qualifications, claimed importance in European studies not so long ago (Koopmans & Erbe, 2004), then was successfully appropriated in the field of migration studies (Büttner & Mau, 2010), and then further discussed and tested as an essential mechanism for formation of a post-national European society (Carlson, 2018).

The role of strong and weak ties in access to, and construction of, migrant networks in host societies is studied by Ryan (2011) through the prism of the flow of information. Strong ties are established to open up towards weak ties because of migrants' need of diverse resources and that is exactly the process by which social capital is accumulated. Skill levels are another variable attached to the issue of successful integration. Highly-skilled migrants, surveys suggest, tend to rely on weak ties in their integration strategies (Ooka & Wellman, 2003). An interesting warning is provided by Harvey (2008) in relation to the inequalities in the labour market: highly skilled migrants do not focus on family and friends since they do not hold key job information in specialised employment sectors. It comes to denote a specific trend in current research promoting information issues as factors of primary significance for labour market. Social ties are prescribed different functions.

Migration has influenced social processes in Europe for quite a long time. The term 'new European migra-

tion' is usually employed to outline the internal EU mobility of 'new' European citizens (those coming from the East and Central European countries acceding to the EU during the so-called Fifth Enlargement; McDowell, 2008). But this very term could have a larger connotation encompassing various mobility processes inside Europe in the aftermath of the Great Recession in the late 2000s (Lafleur & Stanek, 2017). It is precisely this meaning that we are oriented to.

In this article, we are interested in the ways that new European migrants mobilise their strong and weak ties in their integration strategies once mobility to the host society has been accomplished. We try to find how these social ties shape the patterns of migrants' integration and determine the results of inclusion in the host society.

To this aim, we examined the diverse social networking strategies of migrants drawing upon data from a qualitative study under the framework of GEMM (Growth, Equal Opportunities, Migration & Markets) project. We used the rich data set of in-depth interviews with 154 migrants coming from two countries (Bulgaria and Romania) traditionally sending migrants, two countries (the UK and Germany) that are traditionally migrants' destination contexts and two countries (Italy and Spain) that have become both sending and receiving contexts of migration. Besides the specific migration contexts, the selection of the interviewed migrants took into consideration their gender, qualifications and occupational sector. The migrants who had lived in the host country for at least two years, were equally divided between men and women. Two thirds were highly skilled and worked in the sectors of finance, ICT and health and one third were lower-skilled and employed in construction, domestic care and transport. We aimed at maximum diversity for the individual characteristics of the interviewees, such as age, family status, housing situation and years of migration experience.

The in-depth interviews were conducted in the first half of 2017 by trained interviewers after receiving ethical approval from local ethical boards at universities or national research associations (in the cases of Bulgaria and Romania). The interview guides had several fixed themes commonly discussed and decided by the research teams following the stages of the migration process from the migration decision when in the home country through the actual move to the first adaptation experiences, current challenges and future plans. In the actual interaction, however, both sides had a high degree of freedom about the length of discussing those themes and including other issues, significant for the interviewee. We were fully aware that the success of such interviews depended heavily on the time, effort and respect that the interviewers invested in the relationship. Migrants were approached by advertising the project on social network sites, through professional, religious and political associations, by joining online groups on Facebook or LinkedIn and through personal contacts, and gave their consent after being in-

formed about the objectives, methods and dissemination forms of the research. Most interviewees wished to tell their stories and justified their choices at length. The interviews lasted between one and two hours and were held at a place chosen by the interviewees themselves: homes, workplaces, cafes and restaurants, fitness clubs and art galleries. All interviews were audio recorded and fully transcribed in the national language and each transcript was read several times by two researchers to produce open codes and related categories, following the approach developed by Corbin and Strauss (1990). The comparative analysis is built upon three-page summaries of each interview, written in English, and on the six national reports. The resulting analytical frames aimed at capturing the main points of the similarity and difference (Ragin, 1987) in migratory experiences, as shaped by different sending and receiving contexts, as well as the impact that social inequalities (in terms of migrants' educational and skill level, age, gender and family status) might have on them.

2. Ties with Family Members in the Country of Departure

Bulgaria, Italy, Romania and Spain are known to represent family-centred social models. Ties with one's families are predictably important in shaping new migrants' considerations. Relatives left abroad do not only engage a large share of the migrant's thoughts and emotions but appear as a reference point and an ultimate target of their personal activities and strategies once they embark on the host country. Data allow for at least three intertwined perspectives emerging from migrants' relations to their families. In this sense, family abroad presents itself as a structure, which is often in need of (financial and other) support; an environment with which ties should be kept close; and a nostalgically coloured reality in which (short) reunions are stimulating and desirable although sometimes frustrating.

Concern for the family well-being was a very common explanation for the mobility decision of many migrants from Bulgaria and Romania. Rarely did they give economic reasons for migration alone without linking it with the care for other family members. This justification may have made their motivation more socially acceptable in societies where traditional family values are strong. In particular, those who planned to work abroad for a few years often cited that they would stay till they saved money to buy a new flat or house at home or to pay for their children's education or similar. For example, a 58-year-old Bulgarian construction worker in London mixed economic difficulties with the desire to finance his children's education and did this already in his self-presentation in the beginning of the interview:

[I am] a Bulgarian, who has several higher education diplomas, who worked in Bulgaria, but ultimately the economic situation forced him to emigrate to the

West to save his family and finance the education of his children.

The motivation to provide better opportunities for the family was common not only among those following a traditional model of the male breadwinner. Many women migrants in their mid-age years from the two new EU member states had taken the move alone with the aspiration to save money for the family while working abroad. Thus, two of the Bulgarian nurses whom we interviewed in Milan and London had started working as care-givers in the beginning and their children joined them later after they managed to achieve some financial stability in the new place.

Sending back money was another practice largely shared among migrants, exclusively those from Bulgaria and Romania. Clearly, this strategy was common for adult migrants, often continuing after reaching the age of retirement, while it was rare among young migrants from both countries. Our findings suggested that Italian and Spanish migrants seemed to be more motivated for personal realisation and in many cases were financially supported by their relatives rather than the other way around. In the narratives of migrants from Spain and Italy it was more often the emotional ties that were pointed at as the content of family links. The Southern European migrants in London and Berlin were often with higher educational credentials trying to succeed in desired professions while among Bulgarian and Romanian migrants there were people working below their educational level on low-skilled jobs being motivated by the higher income they secured abroad. It was not so much the education of the migrant than the qualification level of the job that impacted upon such personal strategies oriented towards the family well-being. Relatives (most often parents, children, siblings) back home in Bulgaria and Romania were the main recipients of financial support. Many interviewees had either done so in the past or continued to send money at present and considered this to be their duty framed as a “natural obligation.” In the words of a 35-year-old rental manager in Milan:

All the time, permanently, I give [money] to close relatives, friends—financial support in the sense of not giving large sums, small sums, but how can I tell you, that to me [these] are trifle sums, [but] to my uncle they are a [monthly] pension and a half, for example. They actually receive support [not for luxuries but] because they have to buy firewood for the winter, which is somehow upsetting—a person who has worked for 40 years to have to ask a 30 years younger relative for 50 euros to buy firewood, which is offensive, but that is their situation, so if I can help, it’s okay.

The new technologies facilitated communication with family members abroad and many migrants used Skype, WhatsApp, and social networks such as Facebook. The dominant discourse among Italian migrants were the

emotional ties and they often emphasised the value of making video calls home as the best way to keep in touch with their loved ones. This created the feeling of sharing everyday joys and activities with family members at home which was recognised by Bulgarian migrants as well:

We have a WhatsApp group and we talk every day with my parents and once every three to four days with my grandmother....Now I talk almost every day with them or read about what they do every day. (29-year-old Italian, programmer in Berlin)

Since I moved to London, FaceTime was my salvation. I have virtually seen my nephew grow for 5 years on that iPhone. (37-year-old Italian, clinic receptionist in London)

Cheap flights provide another way to maintain contacts with family members left behind and many migrants travel back home with different frequency and duration of stay. However, financial and logistic considerations actually stratified answers on a home country context. Italian migrants in our sample compared the trips with low-cost airlines to the cost of a restaurant dinner. Many of them were coming back to Italy about three to five times a year and identified the pace of work as the main obstacle for more visits. For Romanians and Bulgarians, the longer flights and bad roads inside the home country placed additional difficulties to the regular visits, and thus visits were often concentrated during holidays. In addition, financial considerations were also mentioned by migrants in low-paid jobs. While the new technologies were used equally by all migrants to ease communication with relatives and friends in the home country, trips home showed to be more impacted by income inequalities among migrants.

Being reunited with the family of origin was the main goal of visiting their home country for all respondents. Having children provided an additional reason for strengthening contacts. It was often about creating joy for grandparents. Nostalgic feelings—when visits resembled a “return to the past”—played a significant role as well. The journeys proved, however, limited sometimes just to the family and not to the whole experience of the home society. For instance, a 54-year-old Bulgarian respondent, social care worker in Italy, clearly differentiated the joy of meeting family members from the emotion of coming in touch again with the socio-economic and political reality:

I can even say that if I did not have a daughter, I would not go back to Bulgaria....I’m so angry with Bulgaria, I’m so offended, for example, by our government—the present, the former, to whichever it is now, I do not remember how many years have passed, they separated me from my own home, my daughter, my parents, my friends, the life I lived. Because we were forced to leave for our survival. No one asks us how

we live, how we have survived and what we have been through in Europe. No one.

In the majority of accounts, being together with family meant coming home. Reverse cases were to be observed much less frequently. Migrants' parents perceived it as 'natural' that their children should come back home rather than the parents visiting their children. Most parents of the Bulgarian interviewees had never visited them abroad or had done that on 'major' occasions—for example, the wedding ceremony in London of their son (IT consultant) with an English woman. A 23-year-old migrant from Italy working as a bartender in Berlin explained how unusual it was for his mother not to have him coming home for Christmas:

I didn't go back to Italy at Christmas because for us it's high season. When I told it to my mom she was traumatised by the upsetting news, she did not talk to me for a week. At the end of the week she called me and told me: "If the mountain won't come to Mohammed, then Mohammed has to go to the mountain." She decided to come here and I bought a flight ticket for her.

To sum up, for more adult migrants and those from the EU new member states ties with people in their home countries were both financial and emotional, including even money transfers, while for the younger migrants and those from Southern Europe the accent fell on emotional relations as parents and relatives who remained in the home country claimed that the young should reaffirm these relations regardless of busyness. Highly-skilled and well-paid jobs made face-to-face family visits easier although time constraints acted in the opposite direction.

3. Family Ties as Experienced in the Host Country

The interviews in GEMM provide insights into the family relations of those migrants who were living together with family members in the host country. While we did not include focused prompts in the interview guide about the partners living together with the migrants, all interviewees talked about them when discussing life 'here and now' and some did so already in the part on their self-presentation. Not only partnerships formed before migration, but also most of those created since the move involved compatriots. Nevertheless, from a fifth to a third of the migrants were in a relationship with people born in the country of destination or in rarer cases—from other countries.

Upon arrival, migrants meet a cultural environment diverging from what they had experienced in their home countries. It thoroughly affects their everyday practices and relationships. Family ties of this kind are challenged from at least three perspectives: institutional (as reflected by family policies); cultural (as impact of behavioural and stereotypical differences between nation-

alities); and economic (as difficulties arising from the necessity of combining family life and job responsibilities).

Family-friendly policies constitute a key comparative advantage of life in some Western European countries for those coming from the European South. Regardless of limited infrastructure and inadequate funding, Eastern Europeans were more prone to acknowledge the beneficial role of the state in their home contexts. Unlike them, many Spanish migrants commonly identified the family policies in Germany as providing better support for working parents than what the Spanish welfare state offered them. For instance, a 35-year-old lightning-rod installer working in Germany stated:

I, especially, can't imagine a future [in Spain] now that we're expecting a child. If my girlfriend and I had been living in Spain, I would have told her, "No way! No way," [with respect to having a baby] because we wouldn't have the financial capacity to go ahead with it. Even by killing ourselves at work in order to make ends meet, I would never be able to spend time with my child. Here, in Germany, thanks to all the social benefits and the support for parenthood, it is possible [to raise a child].

Cultural diversity also matters in terms of both chance and risk for children. Spanish migrants, again, compared the family orientation of the Spanish culture to that in the UK and Germany and were divided between those who preferred the transmission of culturally diverse values to their children and those who insisted that their children should be raised in line with Spanish cultural values. Many interviewees pointed at the opportunities for personal enrichment by exposing children to diverse cultures. Thus, telecommunication engineers who left Madrid with their young daughters expressed their conviction that living in London would widen their children's personal and professional horizons:

We want them [our daughters] to understand from this very young age [by living in Great Britain] that in this life, you can live in a different country, you can do different things. We want them to have that curiosity that will allow them to work somewhere else one day, get a degree somewhere else....These kinds of experiences can help make you more open-minded and share other cultures...seeing that in your classroom, not all the children are Spanish like you and that there are children from all over the world....We want to give this opportunity to our daughters.

Among the Italian interviewees, some, particularly those living in London, were worried that their children could not experience the freedom of playing in the open air that they themselves had during their childhood in Italian cities. We should state here that the value of cultural diversity and the excellent opportunities for career development in the social context in the North of Europe

was recognised by many interviewees from all four countries sending migrants. This was valid even for those who wished their children to know the language and culture of the home country of their parents.

Cultural understandings of gender roles appeared to be an important differentiating factor when migrants discussed the alleged greater openness of Western and Northern European cultures. Some migrants commented upon cultural differences in the ‘proper’ gender roles when speaking about their romantic relationships. A 44-year-old media expert in London made the observation that Bulgarian women more often married British partners while the opposite practice—Bulgarian men to marry British women—was much rarer:

Bulgarian women are very flexible, very open to new influences and new things to learn. That is why they marry Englishmen. While Bulgarian men are less flexible, full of stereotypes and if they marry English women, they feel insecure, [they feel] their manhood is lost.

He attributed this to the norms of masculinity and femininity in Bulgaria and the gender stereotype that the male partner should take the lead position in the family, which was easier done when he was from the national majority, while it was acceptable for the woman to be in a subordinate position linked to her migrant status. However, we had cases of exactly the opposite family pattern with the informants describing their relationships as equal rather than hierarchical. A young man who emigrated from Bulgaria five years ago and was now working as a financial expert in London considered that they shared domestic responsibilities with his British wife on an equal basis and took important life decisions after negotiations between the partners. Examples of sharing power in the family were also the two same-sex couples among our samples. A Bulgarian IT designer who was living with his male British partner in London reported that his desire to have a family and children had made him immigrate to a place where the tolerance towards such relationships was much higher than in Sofia. The partnership between a woman from Southern Spain and a British female care-worker led them to set up a home in a small Hertfordshire town, leading a very “quiet English” lifestyle with English cooking and mealtimes. In these cases, it could be that migration not only provided greater freedom from family ties and responsibilities in relation to the parental generation (Heath et al., 2015), but also from the partnership norms, as set in the traditional family patterns.

Difficulties in work-family balance were commonly reported by migrants. They seemed on the rise when a migrant had a partner of the same nationality (and often the same social position) sharing a household in the new country. Many explained this with the high intensity of the work of both partners (in comparison with the situation in the home country where support from the

extended family was more available) and the tension it caused in their relationship. A Romanian migrant who had had his own construction business in Romania and was now working as an employee in Berlin pointed at the conflicts with his partner. His low-status work and long working hours changed his family life: “In Romania, in 15 years, I argued with my wife only once....Here, over the past two years, we argued [every evening] for about six months.” Such stories were not only typical for the low-skilled and low-paid migrants but were also common among the highly-skilled dual-earner families as well. A Bulgarian woman, working as a strategic analyst in London and married to a Bulgarian man, a financial expert, explained that the high intensity of life in the first years of adaptation “almost ruined their relationship” and it took a lot of time to find the work–family balance that suited them both. Spanish migrants in Berlin emphasised their impression that being in a relationship with a co-national could be an obstacle to improving linguistic knowledge and establishing contacts with German people, in other words, a barrier to accumulating social capital.

The theme about children was present in our informants’ narratives when speaking about their family life, even among people who had not yet become parents. How to balance work and care for young children is a crucial question for all working parents, not only for labour migrants. While only a third were already parents, many of our informants commented on it. We already saw that a common practice among Bulgarian and Romanian migrants was to emigrate alone and the responsibility for childcare fell on the partner remaining in the home country who received support from the network of relatives, most importantly grandparents, and from the relatively dense network of public childcare centres. For the young families where both partners lived abroad, another widespread pattern was to make use of the free care provided by their own parents for some period of time. For example, the strategic analyst in London had two four-month paid parental leaves for each of her two children and then relied on long visits from the babies’ two grandmothers and one of the grandfathers to take turns to live with the young family in London. She and her husband came to the UK in 2008 after working for a few years in the USA. She compared the working cultures in the two countries, clearly appreciating the one in Europe:

Here I have again more than forty [hours per week] but not as many as in the USA and I have some control over the working time...and also, I should mention the completely different culture. The culture in the company is such that they understand—I can always ask to go out when necessary or work from home for a few hours.

4. Migrants’ Weak Ties

Friendship ties represented another way, besides kinship, for migrants to construct notions of belonging, as well as

for getting accustomed and integrated in the new social context (Conradson & Latham, 2005; Malyutina, 2018). Friendship networks played an important role not only in the initial period of adaptation during the search for housing and jobs but also for exploring new career opportunities, cultural experiences and personal development.

Among our interviewees, many migrants kept in touch with their friends at home and met with them during visits back home. Yet, compared to the family ties, friendship ties seemed to wane more quickly and there were more narratives about losing touch with friends who had remained in the home country.

While varying in strength and density, ties were created in the new social context as well and were of great significance for migrants' wellbeing and insertion in the host societies. Composition of migrants' networks tended to be complex. Generally, variations could be outlined along several distinct dimensions of migrants' positioning in the host society: where they live, where they work and where they spend their leisure. These dimensions contributed to different kinds of friendship ties, usually dependent on the types of settlements, perceptions of dominating culture and attitudes to nationalities. Diversification occurred as well, based on the ethnic background of both migrants and 'the locals,' and our study provided evidence for ethnicity networks, such as those of low-skilled Bulgarians from Turkish ethnicity working in 'Turkish' businesses in Germany or Romanians joining Roma networks in Italy and Spain. Religious affiliation did not figure out prominently as a factor for social inclusion or exclusion in the narratives of our interviewees and it was mainly Romanian migrants who identified churches in Spain and Italy as a source of support upon arrival.

Neighbourhood ties proved to be contingent on the specific urban context. The interviews were predominantly taken in big cities, providing numerous opportunities for contacts. While migrants living in Berlin and London often pointed at the cultural richness of these 'global cities,' which was always challenging with new experiences and people, residents of Madrid and Milan chose to speak more about the premises for good relations with neighbours. For instance, a 45-year-old Bulgarian driver in Spain concluded:

With the utmost confidence I can leave the keys to the apartment to my neighbours. And in Bulgaria just...I would not leave the keys. The apartment we have in Bulgaria is locked. Even my relatives...I would not give [them] the keys...let alone to a neighbour.

Good relationships with neighbours were reported in London and Berlin as well but in the two Southern European cities the focus was clearly placed more on visiting each other at home rather than going out.

The workplace is the other common site of forming friendship ties for migrants. There were many stories of socialising with colleagues in all contexts. A 28-year-old

Italian architect in Berlin described his leisure in the following way: "In my free time, which is really little, I often go to events that concern architecture with colleagues and friends. I do many things with my colleagues. I also go horseback-riding."

In his interview, a Romanian doctor almost repeated those words, only instead of horseback-riding, he regularly played tennis with his colleague friends.

Ethnic composition of migrants' networks was indicative of both cultural perceptions and integration strategies. Preferences to co-nationals, other non-locals and non-migrants revealed much of the motivation but also of the levels and forms of social capital accumulation characterising the new migrants.

The analysis of the interviews established that the dominant practice was to create new contacts with co-nationals. It was particularly true for Bulgarians and Romanians in both the Northern and Southern countries of reception: "We usually move in a circle of Bulgarians," said a 47-year-old Bulgarian dentist in Barcelona; "We hang out with Romanians because we are friends, they come to us, we go to them....With the Spanish we only meet on the stairs", said a 47-year-old Romanian housekeeper in Madrid; "We talk with people we know, most of them Romanians, but not Britons....After 6 years here, I cannot say I have English friends", said a 25-year-old Romanian information system developer in London.

Having few contacts with the local population in Spain and Italy was common for migrants who claimed that they had chosen one or the other of these Southern European countries largely due to their perception that there was a similar culture to that prevailing in their own homeland.

Italian and Spanish migrants cited as channels for creating new ties with co-nationals experiencing common Erasmus exchange programs abroad and mostly sharing the first difficulties of adaptation with new migrants and co-workers from the same nationality with whom they spent time after working hours. Some of the co-national ties involved fully new acquaintances while more often friendship ties were created from former distant contacts, made possible due to the mobility of co-nationals. Such 'revived' ties were defined 'best friends' as in the example of a 34-year-old Italian investment analyst in London:

Currently the person I meet most is a university colleague that, before our new meeting, I have not seen for six years. He moved to London when I moved on, more or less, we met again, and now we are basically always together.

When discussing their ties with co-nationals, the interviewees did not differentiate among ethnic minorities inside the home-country populations. Vis-à-vis the new cultural realities, previous 'internal' distancing seemed less significant. The analysis discerned anti-Roma stereotypes in some of the Bulgarian and Romanian interviews.

Apart from co-nationals, migrants made new social ties with migrants from other nationalities at the workplace or the neighbourhood in which they lived. It differed from self-closing in compatriot communities but anyway maintained the ‘border’ between ‘us’ (newcomers) and ‘them’ (locals). A former graduate from an IT university in Sofia, who worked as a cleaner in an office building in London, listed as friends of him his colleagues from Romania, Nigeria and Ghana. A 29-year-old café manager from Italy described his new friends in the following way:

I have two best friends, but both are not Italian: one is Korean—she is my colleague—and the other is Finnish, who is my old manager. Friendships are made within the workplace, this stuff is quite normal. I do not think I’ve known people out of the job yet.

There were also a number of migrants who developed a wide range of friendships with people of any ethnic group, gender and profession. This type of migrants sharing a culture of multiculturalism was open to diversity and easily created new social ties. These were more common among Italians and Spaniards than among Bulgarians and Romanians. In terms of occupational sector, the highly-skilled professionals in finance and ICT had more open and mixed networks but there were examples among the low qualified migrants as well. Sufficient knowledge of the local language and adequate representations of the local cultural landscape greatly facilitated eagerness for establishing new social ties inside the host society population.

For this group of migrants forming ties with people from different nationalities, ethnicities and cultures were seen as a valuable social capital and they invested time and efforts in raising such contacts. In contrast, some migrants employed a strategy to establish and maintain ties with ‘purely local’ people and avoided contacts with migrants. Although much rarer, it was justified with arguments for ‘true integration’ in the context of reception which was now considered ‘home.’ A 44-year-old media expert from Bulgaria, who had had experience from short spells of working in other EU countries before arriving in London, clarified his choice providing a comparison with his parents’ life experiences:

[My parents] moved to Sofia to study at the university when they were teenagers. They have been living in the capital for more than 30 years now, but they still keep their family house in [the village] where they were born. They still live in-between two worlds, split between the city and the village. Many migrants do the same, having houses here and flats in Bulgaria. I don’t want to live like this.

He made concerted efforts to establish contacts with British people, ‘true Britons.’ At first, he shared a flat with a colleague, a British national and mimicked his choices for brands of food and drink in the shopping mall or the

pub. Making a career in his job, he moved to live in a separate house, choosing the “most conservative part of London with the oldest average age of population.” He goes to the pub most evenings and to the church on Sunday “because it is there that you meet the local people.”

It was common for migrants to distinguish between ‘true’ or ‘pure’ local and other local ethnicities. Many migrants from the two Eastern European countries and some from the two Southern European countries in London, for example, spoke about “people from former colonies” being more discriminating towards recent migrants than the ‘real’ British. This ‘mirror’ effect of distrust and prejudice clearly diminished the value of migrant social capital.

5. Emerging Patterns of Social Integration Strategies

Based on the observations above, it is possible for us to highlight several types of personal agency for social integration that the migrants adopted, drawing upon the social ties they established in the process. Various typologies of integration strategies could emerge—for instance, ones related to local education, well-paid labour or political and communal participation—but we restrain ourselves here to the patterns resulting from mobilising social ties. We are also informed by the viewpoint that social integration does not necessarily involve the development of social ties with the host country population (for a recent evidence, see Wessendorf & Phillimore, 2019). At the same time, the transnational perspective suggests the various degrees to which migrants maintain social ties in both sending and receiving contexts as crucial to their experience and transformative potential for both themselves and their societies. Across this article, we demonstrated (and illustrated) that, in the context of the opportunity structures created by the climate and institutions of reception, some migrants developed their own active inclusion strategies and formed friendship, community and family ties with the majority of the population, as well as with diverse ethnicities while others were also active in maintaining borders and limited their ties to kinship and co-nationals, envisioning a return to their homeland in the future. Yet, others remained in-between reacting to the changing circumstances of everyday life in a foreign society in a more passive way. Therefore, we can distinguish among the following patterns of integration strategies:

1. Isolation from both worlds as a type of life strategy is argued as a way of coping with overwhelming difficulties in both contexts—sending and receiving. Some migrants stuck to the bonding ties of their immediate family and limited their contacts even with co-nationals. They often felt being “no longer there but not yet here” or as a Bulgarian migrant in Madrid put it—“a tree without roots.” They also claimed not to have any spare time. This type was

not widely spread and was found among low-skilled migrants, men in mid-adulthood who tended to live in mixed ethnic suburbs of the big cities.

2. One-dimensional (limited) integration represents a more active life strategy than the previous one but very restricted in terms of building social capital. The migrants employing it stayed in close contact with neighbours and friends in the country of origin while in the host country they invested little in creating new social ties with the local people. This strategy was typical for the low-skilled workers who had more or less stable jobs and income but still planned to earn money to spend it for a life in the home country. They saved on spending for leisure activities and their quality of life was rather low. This approach to forming social ties was found among all age groups, including youth, but was more typical for those in late adulthood who did not wish to open their worldview to new cultural influences.
3. In what we call multi-dimensional integration migrants tried to take part in various life domains in the local society, established social contacts with people from different nationalities, including local friends and colleagues. This type of strategy, outlined by transnationalists, was common among the interviewed migrants who were mostly highly skilled but was also practiced by many in low-skilled jobs with similar ambitions. They kept contacts with friends and relatives in their home countries, but also accumulated social ties where they lived. This cluster consisted of those individuals who consciously struggled to achieve the best of 'both worlds.' The most prominent group employing this strategy were young migrants, highly-educated women and men who deserved the definition of Eurostars (Favell, 2008). Without claiming statistical representativeness, our data suggest that the majority of the interviewed migrants in different age groups and occupational sectors aspired to such type of social inclusion.
4. Total integration was displayed by a few of the highly-educated migrants but not always working in highly-skilled jobs who limited their contacts with their home country and purposefully avoided forming ties with co-nationals abroad. They lived in typically local suburbs, without ethnic neighbours and tried to follow the cultural norms of the national majority as they understood them. Often such exclusionary practices were linked to ethnic stereotypes against those outside of their limited social network and reflected social divisions in the context of the host country.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

In the course of the study, we observed a wide variety in manifestations, development and the relative im-

portance of strong and weak social ties among the new European migrants.

Strong ties appeared to be very strong in all four sending countries (Bulgaria, Italy, Romania, Spain), which was perhaps no surprise, given the family-centred models these societies represent. Most migrants invested time and resources in maintaining and developing the strong ties within the family. Even when they formed a new family in the context of the host country, they struggled to keep their contacts with family members in the sending country. Emotional ties were clearly strengthened in cases of young children in the migrant family. Besides emotional ties, migrants from Eastern Europe (unlike those from Italy and Spain) provided financial support to elderly relatives in difficult economic situations. Reciprocity went both ways and often parents of migrants travelled to their offspring's home to provide childcare or help with house repairs. It was accepted as the norm that migrants from both East and South Europe should visit their relatives in the country of departure rather than vice versa. Both sides ('here' and 'beyond') perceived that the homeland should be the 'natural' place that family members separated by distance and economic necessity could meet together. Thus, strong ties functioned as bonds of affection rather than transferable social capital since their contribution to successful social and labour market integration in the host society was rather limited.

We can also infer that migration, although negotiated and decided within the family, was an individual strategy. In the case of Bulgarian and Romanian migrants, family responsibilities to partners and offspring were a significant factor for maintaining the ties that 'bind us together.' Individualism was much more pronounced in the mobility of Italian and Spanish migrants. Apart from the few individuals who migrated with their partners, informants always described the migration decision as a personal choice and more often exchanged view and information with friends than with parents. In all four countries, in the case of representatives of the younger generation, the family ties thrived upon the understanding that the young had the right to explore opportunities for better careers, adventures and self-expression. Practical dimensions of migration were more often than not related to functioning of weak ties. Colleagues and friends were relied upon more heavily in access to labour market, community initiatives and free time spending while strong ties were made use mostly in terms of moral support.

Integration outcomes were no single products of the availability and exploitation of social ties, either strong or weak. Skill levels largely determined both desirability and effectiveness of the process. Gender and family status contextualised to a great extent the difficulties of the integration experience while educational and skill status were rather more about the varieties of outcome. Motivation to integrate fully into the new social and labour context usually had a lot to do with one's degrees

of education, existing competences, language mastery and record of previous jobs. Cultural distances and prejudices were easier to be bridged over in cases of higher social capital accumulated before departure though, of course, achievements could not be reduced to it. Age and the biographical timing of the migratory move—whether it occurred in the youth life stage, before or after forming a family, as a first or repeated international mobility experience—also had a significant impact on the width and composition of migrants’ networks, as shown elsewhere (Kovacheva & Hristozova, 2019).

The article shows that social ties were important not only as a motivation for migration and a channel for mobility but also, and probably more so, for following stages of this dynamical process—for the early adaptation and further social integration of migrants. ‘Old’ and ‘new’ social ties connected migrants in networks of various strength and composition across national borders. Our study confirms that they played a facilitating role for the labour market and community incorporation, family formation and development of feelings of belonging and citizenship. Mobile individuals could mobilise kinship, ethnic, friendship and collegial bonds as social capital, reducing the risks and uncertainty in the new social context of the accepting country. ‘Horizontal Europeanisation’ could build on this soil. Yet, we do not intend to overemphasise the positive role of migration ties. The analysis of the types of social integration strategies demonstrates that social ties could also be used by migrants in an ‘exclusionary’ way (King, 2012) by creating small circles of strong ties, isolated from the new cultural milieu. The transnationalist trend is confirmed but hardly all-encompassing.

To put it shortly and perhaps not quite precisely, the dynamical relationship of strong and weak ties among the new European migrants represent the complex move from motivation to strategy in the integration process while skill levels serve as the crucial mediating factor.

Acknowledgments

The authors are grateful to their colleagues from Bulgaria, Italy, Spain and Romania who accomplished the fieldwork for this project and suggested directions for interpretation of the data, to the anonymous reviewers who helped us improve the original manuscript, and last but not least to all our interviewees who shared with us their personal ‘lived experiences’ of migration.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

References

Arango, J. (2004). Theories of international migration. In D. Joly (Ed.), *International migration and the new millennium* (pp. 15–36). Aldershot: Ashgate.

- Boswell, C., & Geddes, A. (2011). *Migration and mobility in the European Union*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Boyd, M. (1989). Family and personal networks in international migration: Recent developments and new agendas. *International Migration Review*, 23(3), 638–670.
- Boyd, M., & Nowak, J. (2012). Social networks and international migration. In M. Martiniello & J. Rath (Eds.), *An introduction to international migration studies* (pp. 77–103). Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Büttner, S., & Mau, S. (2010). Horizontale Europäisierung und Europäische Integration [Horizontal Europeanization and European integration]. In M. Eigmüller & S. Mau (Eds.), *Gesellschaftstheorie und Europapolitik. Sozialwissenschaftliche Ansätze zur Europaforschung* [Social theory and European politics. Social science approaches to European research] (pp. 274–318). Wiesbaden: Springer.
- Carlson, S. (2018). Intra-European mobility and the formation of a European society? German mobile graduates’ early careers in trans-/national professional fields. *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research*, 31(4), 464–483.
- Castles, S. (2000). *Ethnicity and globalization: From migrant worker to transnational citizen*. London: SAGE.
- Coleman, J. (1990). *The foundations of social theory*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Conradson, D., & Latham, A. (2005). Friendship networks and transnationality in a world city: Antipodean migrants in London. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 31(2), 287–305.
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (1990). Grounded theory research: Procedures, canons, and evaluative criteria. *Qualitative Sociology*, 13(1), 3–21.
- Favell, A. (2008). *Eurostars and Eurocities: Free movement and mobility in an integrating Europe*. London: Wiley.
- Favell, A., & Recchi, E. (2009). Pioneers of European integration: An introduction. In E. Recchi & A. Favell (Eds.), *Pioneers of European integration. Citizenship and mobility in the EU* (pp. 1–25). Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Fawcett, J. T. (1989). Networks, linkages and migration systems. *International Migration Review*, 23(3), 671–680.
- Granovetter, M. (1973). The strength of weak ties. *American Journal of Sociology*, 78(6), 1360–1380.
- Granovetter, M. (1983). The strength of weak ties: A network theory revisited. *Sociological Theory*, 1(1), 201–233.
- Harvey, W. (2008). Strong or weak ties? British and Indian expatriate scientists finding jobs in Boston. *Global Networks*, 8(4), 453–473.
- Heath, S., McGhee, D., & Trevena, P. (2015). Continuity versus innovation: Young Polish migrants and practices of ‘doing family’ in the context of achieving in-

- dependence in the UK. *Studia Migracyjne—Przegląd Polonijny*, 157(3), 139–156.
- King, R. (2002). Towards a new map of European migration. *International Journal of Population Geography*, 8(2), 89–106.
- King, R. (2012). *Theories and typologies of migration: An overview and a primer* (Willy Brandt Series of Working Papers in International Migration and Ethnic Relations 3/12). Malmö: Malmö University.
- Koopmans, R., & Erbe, J. (2004). Towards a European public sphere? Vertical and horizontal dimensions of Europeanised political communication. *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research*, 17(2), 97–118.
- Korteweg, A. (2017). The failures of ‘immigrant integration’: The gendered racialized production of non-belonging. *Migration Studies*, 5(3), 428–444.
- Kovacheva, S., & Hristozova, D. (2019). Youth migration and life course transitions: Comparing the impact of women’s mobility across generations in Bulgaria. *Sociologija*, 61(2), 210–226.
- Lafleur, J.-M., & Stanek, M. (Eds.). (2017). *South–North migration of EU citizens in times of crisis*. Cham: Springer.
- Luthra, R., Platt, L., & Salamońska, J. (2014). *Migrant diversity, migration motivation and early integration: The case of Poles in Germany, the Netherlands, London and Dublin* (LEQS Paper No. 74/2014). London: London School of Economics. Retrieved from <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/57605/1/LEQSPaper74.pdf>
- Maeva, M. (2017). *Bulgarian emigrants in England: Past and present day*. Sofia: Paradigma.
- Malyutina, D. (2018). Friendship in a ‘Russian bar’ in London: An ethnography of a young Russian-speaking migrant community. *Urban Studies*, 55(3), 589–604.
- Massey, D. S., & García España, F. (1987). The social process of international migration. *Science*, 237(4816), 733–738.
- McDowell, L. (2008). Old and new European economic migrants: Whiteness and managed migration policies. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 35(1), 19–36.
- Ooka, E., & Wellman, B. (2003). Does social capital pay off more within or between ethnic groups? Analyzing job searches in five Toronto ethnic groups. In E. Fong (Ed.), *Inside the mosaic* (pp. 119–226). Toronto: Toronto University Press.
- Portes, A., & DeWind, J. (Eds.). (2007). *Rethinking migration: New theoretical and empirical perspectives*. New York, NY: Berghahn Books.
- Ragin, C. (1987). *The comparative method: Moving beyond qualitative and quantitative strategies*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Richter, M., Ruspini, P., Michajlov, D., Mintchev, V., & Nollert, M. (Eds.). (2017). *Migration and transnationalism between Switzerland and Bulgaria*. New York, NY: Springer.
- Ryan, L. (2011). Migrants’ social networks and weak ties: Accessing resources and constructing relationships post-migration. *The Sociological Review*, 59(4), 707–724.
- Schiller, N., Basch, L., & Blank-Szanton, C. (1992). Transnationalism: A new analytical framework for understanding migration. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 645(1), 1–24.
- Schinkel, W. (2017). *Imagined societies. A critique of immigrant integration in Western Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Triandafyllidou, A. (Ed.). (2016). *Routledge handbook of immigration and refugee studies*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Wessendorf, S., & Phillimore, J. (2019). New migrants’ social integration, embedding and emplacement in superdiverse contexts. *Sociology*, 53(1), 123–138.

About the Authors



Boris Popivanov is Associate Professor in Political Science at Sofia University and researcher at New Europe Research Centre in Plovdiv, Bulgaria. He works in the areas of youth studies, migration policies as well as the history of political ideas in Europe and Bulgaria, and has participated in international research projects covering these issues.



Siyka Kovacheva is Associate Professor in Sociology at the University of Plovdiv, Bulgaria. She is the Head of New Europe Research Centre in the same city. Her research interests are in the field of youth transitions, mobilities and civic participation. She has experience in conducting qualitative and quantitative research in cross-national perspective and has been the national coordinator of more than 10 international comparative research projects.