

REPLACING GB WITH BG

Preface

According to unofficial data, between 50 and 250 thousand Britons have bought properties in Bulgaria in the last few years. Many of them live in the country permanently. Some voted at the last European parliament elections, others even ran for councillors at the local elections in October 2007. Nevertheless, there is still no official information on the exact numbers of those people, nor any sociological surveys focused on the reasons for their moving to Bulgaria and their way of life here. The few publications in the press and on the Internet and the TV reportages present the British mostly like eccentrics.

Although there are exceptions, as a rule the media reproduce the myth about the “poor British pensioners who have come here to live their elderly years in tranquillity”. As a rule, the journalists overlook the questions about the cultural meeting between the British and the local people, about the motivation of the British to come to Bulgaria and about the plans of the British and the Bulgarians for a common future.

The current report presents the results of a project, carried out by an interdisciplinary research team. The team leader is Martin Ivanov PhD – historian from the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. The team also includes Svetozara Petkova – lawyer - LLM from Sofia and Warwick Universities, Kristina Georgieva – MSc. in biotechnology from Sofia University and a MSc. in management from Sussex University and Venellin Stoychev PhD – sociologist from Sofia University “St. Clement Ohridsky”.

The project was carried out in the period June-September 2007 and covers the following regions: Gabrovo, Veliko Turnovo, Lovech, Ruse, Razgrad, Turgovishte, Varna, Yambol, Elhovo, Balchik, Smolyan. These are the regions where, according to unofficial data, British citizens acquired plenty of properties.

In the course of the project, the team did a total of 62 interviews. 51 of them were with British citizens and 11 control ones with Bulgarians. Interviews covered typologically significant groups among the British and the Bulgarians. The project team interviewed people of both genders between 8 and 70 years of age from different parts of Great Britain, with various professional experiences and civil status. Interviewees included people who have lived in Bulgaria for the last 4-5 years (some of them speaking perfect Bulgarian), as well as newly arrived British who just unpacked their baggage.

Respondents

The research is not representative for the British population living on the territory of the country. Due to the fact that there is no dependable statistical information on the number of Britons in Bulgaria and on their demographical profile, the elaboration of a representative sample was unfortunately impossible. The survey used a questionnaire for in-depth interviews. The research team based its choice of the qualitative method, as opposed to focus groups or included observation, on the determination that the problem has not yet been studied. Therefore, the project team concluded that it would be more important to gather and analyze different biographical trajectories, life stories and personal observations instead of provoking a group discussion on a given problem, as in a focus group.

All the conversations were carried out personally, face to face. The respondents were interviewed in their homes or in public places so that they could feel as comfortable as possible. An average interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. Almost all conversations were recorded on a Dictaphone. All the British respondents agreed to be recorded and did not express any discomfort with the recording device. Some Bulgarians refused to be recorded and their interviews were hand-written by the team members.

Although the team is interdisciplinary and the professional orientation of the researchers presupposes poliparadigmality, the results of the interviews carried out by different researchers are compatible since the project team applied a common scenario for the interview with common thematic blocks. Despite the relatively long duration of the project, there are no concerns that the answers of the respondents who were interviewed later could have been affected by a significant event or a local accident, which would have seriously altered the results.

As a rule, the project team aimed at covering different points of view. It interviewed Britons but looked also for the opinion of their neighbours, Bulgarians or British. A lot of attention was given to mixed British-Bulgarian couples. Even though many Britons seem to purchase properties on the coast, in big cities, or in the ski resorts, these appear to be predominantly summer homes. The project team determined that Britons who settle in villages tend to be the ones who stay in the country permanently and therefore have a bigger exposure to local culture. Therefore, with the exception of one interview in Veliko Turnovo, all the interviews were made in villages.

The settlements where the research team made the interviews were selected following media publications or broadcasts (Internet, TV, newspapers), as well as on the basis of information kindly provided by the British Embassy and by owners of Bulgarian and British real estate agencies. Respondents were selected on an entourage principle through the contacts of the British themselves or with the help of a local coordinator, a Bulgarian who lives in the region and is familiar with the situation there. Most of the people whom the project team approached gladly accepted the invitation for an interview. There were only a few refusals, e.g. by a woman in Elhovo who sent relatives of hers to be interviewed instead of her. Surprisingly, most of the refusals came from the Balchik area.

The questionnaire for the in-depth interview is divided into three main blocks (see the appendix at the end of the text). The first block comprises questions regarding the biography of the respondent: what did he/she do for a living; what is his/her education, civil status, social background. This block also includes questions about the motivation for moving to Bulgaria: what reasons (social, personal, economic) have provoked the decision to move; what motives prevailed in order to choose exactly Bulgaria instead of another country; how was the choice of a particular settlement made.

The second block focuses on Bulgaria through several groups of questions. First, it covers questions regarding the concrete mechanism of moving – how did the respondent acquire information on the opportunities to buy property here; did he/she make an inquiry regarding the prices in advance; what sources of information did he/she use; which were the factors that influenced his/her decision. Second, this block includes questions on the cultural meeting with the local people – how were the British received when they came to the respective village; how did they communicate; how and when were they involved in the social life of the community (local holidays, gatherings etc.); did they establish steady relationships with the local Bulgarians and with other British. Third, this block discusses the contacts of British citizens with Bulgarian institutions – from the crossing of the border, through the municipal administration and the mayor of the settlement, to the postal services, hospitals and schools.

The third block of the questionnaire focuses on Britons' vision for the future – how do they see themselves in the community they belong to now and what are their everyday life and business plans – do they intend to stay here or are they willing to look for a new place of residence.

Understandably, a questionnaire for an in-depth interview only marks the topics that are important for the researchers. However, unexpected problems frequently surfaced in the course of the interview. One such problem was the offering of one and the same service at a different price for Bulgarians and foreigners or the slow and sluggish procedure for prescription of certain medicines. In this report we have tried to present as correctly as possible the diversity of opinions, views, expectations and worries of our respondents by paying attention to the problems shared by all of them, as well as to some particular issues which contribute to the better understanding of the situation of the people who have decided to replace the United Kingdom with Bulgaria.

Key Findings

Before presenting the results of the project in detail, we would like to emphasize four major findings.

First, this survey suggests that there are no xenophobic attitudes or aggression towards foreigners on the part of the local population. The initial expectation of the project team was that some Bulgarians would be opposed to Britons coming to their country and buying out their land. Moreover, some political parties in the country (for example Ataka but also IMRO and MRF contribute to that) in recent years publicly defended positions legitimising xenophobic attitudes.

Although the survey registers opinions of Bulgarians who are not pleased with the behaviour of individual Britons, the attitude to the newcomers is generally rather positive. This is partly due to the prevailing tendency among the interviewed Britons to try to understand the local culture and integrate into it, to learn the language and the customs of the local people and not act in a colonial manner.

Second, the survey disproved the popular myth that it is only poor British pensioners who come to Bulgaria. Despite the fact that the majority of Britons we managed to contact are indeed retired, quite a few people in an active age also chose to come to Bulgaria along with their children who attend Bulgarian schools and kindergartens. We hardly met any people who supported themselves only with their pension – most of the respondents had some kind of business – even the pensioners were engaged in some kind of work – at least with the maintenance, expansion and repairing of their houses

Third, the situation of Britons we contacted suggests that they are not capsulated in a closed community (as seems to be the case in Spain and in France, for example). Many of the British citizens included in the survey demonstrate a vivid interest in the local culture. Some of them understand Bulgarian well enough to watch Bulgarian TV and to read newspapers. As a rule, they are friends with their Bulgarian neighbours.

Fourth, the existing problems are mostly connected with the everyday life and are surmountable. The report discusses in detail the existing challenges and the reasons the respondents see behind them. We can say though that there are no grounds to expect a rise of major cultural tensions between the two communities in the near future. On the contrary, while the respondents often point to the simplicity of village life, the warm human relations and the virginity of nature as leading motives for replacing the U.K. with Bulgaria, some purely administrative or everyday disorders are qualified as part of the local exotic, not as a possible reason to give Bulgaria up. Of course, this doesn't mean that efforts should not be made to overcome these deficits.

Section I. Finding a New Home

Interviews provided background information on the size and the general characteristics of British migration flows to Bulgaria, as well as on the reasons behind Britons' migration choices. In conducting the interviews, we have given particular attention to the decision-making process.

A. Why Leave: England Now Is Losing a Lot of its Culture

Survey participants mentioned an array of factors that induced them to move to Bulgaria, ranging from policies that made them unhappy with the life in the U.K., to policies in or characteristics of Bulgaria that drew them here. While the research traditionally identifies these characteristics as 'push' and 'pull' factors, respondents often made it clear that a push factor in the U.K. (such as the high cost of living) may have also been a pull factor (low cost of living) in Bulgaria. Additionally, responses varied in their emphasis on particular push or pull factors as the dominant motives for the move.

You're Not Allowed To Use The Word "Blackboard" In School Now Because It's Racist

Discussion of the push of British politics was centred around policies affecting foreigners' rights and liberties in the U.K. Some British felt that the U.K. was becoming a state for foreigners and increasingly saw it as a country not respecting her own population. One respondent spoke of British oversupportiveness of minority groups' rights, which he saw as a prerequisite for terrorist acts in the country. Some of the interviewed, expressed discontent with British political actions, and some described a sense of anxiety in the U.K. following 9/11. To use the words of a 53-years-old person from Essex:

Everybody is really not happy with the English government and the fact that as English people in England we are third-rate citizens in our own country. That's why Britons are leaving Britain, because they are no longer considering it their country. Foreigners get more rights... You're not allowed to use certain words. You're not allowed to use the word 'blackboard' in school now because it's racist. They now call it 'whiteboard'. If you use the word 'white' it's not racist, but if you use the word 'black' it's racist. It's just crazy, you know! ... You're not allowed to use even a children's song, which is called "Baa, baa, black sheep". We mustn't sing that anymore because of the word 'black'. So English people are saying: 'Enough is enough!'¹.

The growing discontent with governmental policies was expressed also by a 63-years old lady settled in Balchink area: "I did not want the Tony Blair government telling me what to do and what not to do. I am not a Tory. I am not anything. I just want all the governments get together and do something useful."²

¹ man, 53 years old, moved with family – wife and two sons, Smolyan area

² woman, 63 years old, former geologist

I Didn't Want to Spend my Next 20 Years between Stone Walls and the Rain Coming Down

British often cited a desire for adventure or a new beginning as a factor influencing their decisions to move abroad. One of the respondents shared: "My partner and I were looking for some sort of a change. We wanted to go somewhere else and do something different"³. The desire for a change in one's life had at times been rather vague. It had often been accompanied by a discontent with one's lifestyle back in the United Kingdom.

We were not happy with our life in England. We knew we want to do something different. And we were not happy with our jobs. And we thought we want to live in another country and start a new business.

Some imagined that the change would help them avoid the boredom of a life as a retiree: "I didn't want to retire and sit in a little flat in England"⁴. Others hoped they could start a business here: "Both my partner and me became increasingly unhappy with our jobs. We wanted to do something different and specifically we wanted to be self-employed. In the U.K. we couldn't even think about that. We needed a credit, which then we had to pay back for 20 years. We also wanted to travel."⁵ Yet another group of interviewees anticipated that leaving the United Kingdom would liberate them from the hectic and stressful lifestyle they had back in the U.K.: "We didn't want to work for 16 hours 7 days a week, My partner needed a place to take a break where he didn't have to earn a lot to live"⁶ (cf. more on that aspect in section two). Given that many Britons in Bulgaria are close to the retirement age, moving out of Britain meant a chance for an early and not so stressful retirement: "Because it's so expensive to live in the U.K. I would have most probably had to work until 80 years of age"⁷.

My Money's Worth Three Times More Here than in Scotland

Economic considerations were on the top of the list of factors cited in the interviews as to why the British chose to move abroad: "Britain was getting too dear for everything. Every day prices were rising". A lady in her 40s who had settled in a Smolyan neighbourhood shared: "We were working long, long hours for no reward really, just to pay bills. So we decided to take the chance and start a business in Bulgaria. Here we can get a better quality of life"⁸. Leaving the U.K. is perceived as a chance for social advancement: "It's not just old people who come here but mainly the ones who couldn't afford a home in England; people who look for a quality of life; in England everything is a rat-race"⁹.

³ woman, app 40 years old, translator at the EU Commission, Smolyan Area

⁴ woman, retired, Elhovo area

⁵ woman, 43 years old, former psychiatric nurse, married, Veliko Tarnovo area

⁶ man, app 40 years old, musician in film industry, Smolyan area

⁷ woman, 54 years old, former nurse, Ruse area

⁸ family in their early 40s, with two sons, man was in tourism and his wife in ceramics, near Kilifarevo

⁹ man, 41 years old, married for Bulgarian woman, owner of a real estate business, Veliko Tarnovo area

For some of the interviewed moving to a foreign country was a way to maintain the quality of life they had enjoyed in their working years, or to enhance that lifestyle. “Bulgaria is a retirement destination”¹⁰. Emigration was also perceived by some as a good investment: “When I turned 50 I’ve decided to retire and sold the business. Then instead of spending the money, which goes very quickly, I’ve decided to invest in this property in Bulgaria”¹¹.

B. Where to Go? Spain is Already a ‘Fish and Chips Country’

For many Bulgaria was not the first place they thought of after deciding to leave the U.K. Bulgaria competes with several other destinations: “I searched Spain, Morocco all over, even Dominican Republic, Brazil, and we came to Bulgaria”¹²; “We looked at France, Spain, Italy and other part of England and even in Ireland”¹³. It was also very interesting to find people who ended up in Bulgaria after having lived in Spain, Dubai, Greece or Canada.

Spain seemed to be the chief ‘competitor’ of Bulgaria as a place to move to. To those who preferred Bulgaria, the Iberian seemed to be very expensive, overbuilt, over-inhabited by other Brits, or way too hot: “Spain is out of the reach of the working man in the U.K.”¹⁴; “I wanted a country greener than Spain”¹⁵; “We went to Spain for 6 months. Didn’t like it. It was too commercial. I can see the real estate prices crashing over soon”¹⁶; “Years ago that might have been a good idea [to go to Spain] but now it’s very, very expensive. There are many English people there. Properties are very expensive and now I think the bubble may burst.”¹⁷

Interestingly, perhaps the key disadvantage of Spain in the eyes of our respondents was it becoming too British:

*Spain is already very ‘fish and chips country’. Too many Brits there. It is so commercial. And all the Brits there stick together. In Spain they don’t mix with local people. They don’t integrate.*¹⁸

Other options seemed either out of reach or not very attractive: “We took our van and travelled through 30 different European countries. We looked at Croatia and Slovenia. Croatia was already developed and Slovenia – too expensive.”¹⁹. France was also not a place the Britons would like to move to: “The worst thing of France are the French”.

C. Why Bulgaria? It’s Good Value for Money.

¹⁰ woman, 59 years old, former telephonist, married, Balchik area

¹¹ man, app 60 years old, married, former health and safety director for Gatwick Express, Mindya area

¹² man, app 60 years old, Elhovo area

¹³ woman, app 35 years old, former barman, Veliko Tarnovo area

¹⁴ man, 54 years old, former contract manager in a building company, Elhovo area

¹⁵ man, 55 years old, retired, former engineer, Russe area

¹⁶ man, app 60 years old, married, former health and safety director for Gatwick Express, Mindya area

¹⁷ woman, 54 years old, former nurse, Ruse area

¹⁸ woman, 63 years old, former geologist

¹⁹ woman, 43 years old, former psychiatric nurse, married, Veliko Tarnovo area

A number of factors play a role in choosing Bulgaria. The prime consideration seems to be the political and economic stability of the country. A businessman living in Yambol area told us: "I also invested in some other places but Bulgaria seems more stable. If you look Yugoslavia, very unstable. I didn't want to go there, to get in trouble"²⁰. A man from a village near Veliko Turnovo had made a rather in-depth research before making up his mind:

*I've done some research on Bulgaria. I checked out the ethnic relationship in the country... I know the GDP was growing in Bulgaria. Also in the list of going into Europe. And the weather. I know you have harsh winters but you cannot see snow anymore in England while here you can do skiing. Plus: price.*²¹

Bulgaria's EU-membership was among the key factors attracting our respondents to Bulgaria: "And 4-5 years ago I saw opportunity that you may be joining Europe. So, we invested some money there and we have to wait"²².

The reasonable level of safety represents another comparative advantage of Bulgaria. Indeed, security concerns were among the main reasons that prompted our interviewees to leave the UK: "We came here because it wasn't safe for the children in the U.K.", a lady from Smolyan area shared. The low cost of properties and the growing real estate market also represent key advantages that Bulgaria has in comparison with Spain, for example: "In Spain the property market levelled out too much and Bulgaria in that sense was much more promising. I hoped that maybe prices would go up here after you join the EU"²³. Important as it may be, this factor is not to be overestimated. To use the words of a lady from Veliko Turnovo region: "We were drawn by the cheapness of the property. That wouldn't have been enough if we haven't also loved the country."²⁴

The moderate climate also seems to be crucial for the decision to choose Bulgaria for a new home. The cold and gloomy English weather motivates many Britons to consider moving to places with a better climate. "I came here because I missed the warm weather."²⁵ Certainly, Bulgaria enjoys serious advantages in that respect: "Bulgaria has a nice climate. Although warm, it still has the four seasons"²⁶. On the contrary, the dry and hot weather in Spain discouraged some of the interviewed: "I wanted a country greener than Spain"²⁷. The warm weather also has some benefits for elderly people who are starting to have bone problems. Some shared that their arthritic pains aches were gone once they moved to Bulgaria.

Some of the respondents find Bulgarian scenery very similar to the British one. A lady from village west of Turnovo told us: "We are Scottish and Bulgaria is quite similar to Scotland in terms of the countryside. So, we felt quite comfortable [here]". This opinion is shared by a couple living in Ruse area:

²⁰ man, 45 years old, businessman, Elhovo area

²¹ man, app 60 years old, married, former health and safety director for Gatwick Express, Mindya area

²² man, 45 years old, businessman, Elhovo area

²³ man, 38 years old, real estate agent, married but separated, Smolyan area

²⁴ man, 38 years old, real estate agent, married but separated, Smolyan area

²⁵ man, 53 years old, former military, married with 2 kids, Veliko Tarnovo area

²⁶ man, 55 years old, retired, former engineer, Russe area

²⁷ man, 55 years old, retired, former engineer, Russe area

It is very similar to the U.K., the scenery, you know, the trees, there is no doubts about that. It is that similarity ...whether subconsciously, we all see it but do not recognize it as a fact. I do not know. But I did discuss with my wife last year. I did say ...If you do not listen to the language you would think this is part of the U.K. countryside'.²⁸

The subconscious draw to landscapes that would remind them of their homeland may have led many of our respondents to settle in relatively flat areas of Bulgaria. While it is generally mountains and beaches that would be attractive to Bulgarians choosing a second home, these people found a special, intimate charm in the lowlands of the Bulgarian North.

For some the religious similarity and the 9/11 syndrome also tended to be an important factor in choosing Bulgaria: "I checked out the ethnic relationship in the country, not too many Muslims. I was thinking: I am Christian; Bulgaria is Christian so there shouldn't be any ethnic disagreements."²⁹

The relative virginity of Bulgarian market and the low competition in many sectors of the economy provide an excellent justification for a more active group of Brits with an intention to emigrate (cf. section two). We came across at least three such cases among 60 or so interviewed i.e. about 5 percent of the respondents.

"We changed the Mediterranean for Mindya"³⁰. This very flattering acknowledgement came from a couple that spent nearly a decade in Greece. Their motives seem to be representative for those who seek peaceful and quiet life after retirement:

There's time in your life when you live in London, time in your life when you live in a place like Spain or Greece and a time when you like to retire. I loved everywhere I lived but as I said there's time in your life you should go to a more peaceful place.

Being mostly in their 50s and 60s many British emigrants find this to be an important advantage of Bulgaria. The slow pace of life and the natural, organic lifestyle (cf. more in the second section) positions Bulgaria well at the British want-to-be-emigrants' market. Therefore, we can envisage a steady if not growing inflow of pensioners or people near retirement who would seek a shelter from the stressful and hectic live they have in the U.K.

²⁸ man, app 60 years old, Elhovo area

²⁹ man, app 60 years old, married, former health and safety director for Gatwick Express, Mindya area

³⁰ couple, woman, app 60 years old, man, app 40 years old, Mindya area

The relatively small number of Brits who have settled in Bulgaria so far turns out to be an important advantage of the country: “We chose this area because there are not so many Brits. Anyway this was our main reason for not going to Spain”³¹, a lady from a village near Ruse told us. This matter will be discussed in more detail further in this report (cf. sections two and four) while here we would only mention that the majority of our respondents are interested in blending with the local people and culture to a much larger extent than those going to countries with a significant British minority: “We came here to mix with local people and if there are lots of British it would be more difficult doing that”³², a man from South England shared.

It is often impossible to always explain rationally why somebody from Midlands, Aberdeen or the Northern Island would finally end up in Mindya, Sokolovo or Momchilovtsy. To use the words of a Welsh from the Elhovo area: “I don’t know why! That’s a mystery! No scientific explanation. You tell me why!”³³

D. Prior Knowledge: I Fully Expected Most of the Women to do Weightlifting and Shave at Least Twice a Day

It is hard, however, to claim that the factors listed above (security, similarity, beauty, cheapness, peaceful life etc.) played a decisive role in shaping the choice to come in Bulgaria. Most of the respondents frankly admitted they knew nearly nothing about the country before buying a property here: “I didn’t even know where it [Bulgaria] was”³⁴. “I really had to look at the map to find out where is the country”³⁵ and “Never even heard of it”³⁶ was something we were hearing repeatedly in the interviews. A lady now living near Smolyan put it quite bluntly. The reason for her choice was a suggestion by her sister: “Why don’t you go to a weird place like Bulgaria”³⁷. This was summarised by a retired geologist from Norfolk:

People in the U.K. still know little about Bulgaria. They think it still is an Eastern Block country. A lot of people do not know it is a part of Europe now. They think of it still being communist. Which of course it was for a long time.

³¹ woman, 54 years old, former nurse, Ruse area

³² woman, app 40 years old, married, 2 sons, Smolyan area

³³ man, app 60 years old, Elhovo area

³⁴ woman, app 40 years old, married, 2 sons, Smolyan area

³⁵ woman, app 35 years old, former barman, Veliko Tarnovo area

³⁶ woman, app 40 years old, married, 2 sons, Smolyan area

³⁷ woman, app 40 years old, married, 2 sons, Smolyan area

Those who had some prior familiarity with Bulgaria mentioned its communist past: “All I knew it was an Eastern block country”³⁸; “I knew it was a poor, Russian block country”³⁹. Others had had the chance to meet Bulgarians from the growing Diaspora: “after meeting lots of people [Bulgarians], especially young ones, I saw they were forward-looking”; “A friend brought us, he is Bulgarian but he worked in Spain”⁴⁰; “In Spain I met a friend, Bulgarian from Plovdiv. He invited me to come and visit him”⁴¹; “At the EU Commission a young Bulgarian came as a stagier to check my emails. After that she invited us to her wedding in Sofia. That was the start...”⁴².

Interviewed Britons were frequently ‘pulled’ to Bulgaria by their friends or relatives who had already established themselves here: “My wife’s parents had moved to Bulgaria. We came to visit and liked the country”⁴³; “I first came to visit my parents... for a holiday... And see me now here!” A vacation in Bulgaria may also prompt one to start considering a move: “My husband and my eldest son came twice and explored Bulgaria and then they came the third time to buy a property”⁴⁴; “We came in 1997 on holiday to Bulgaria. At that stage we did not have any intention of leaving the U.K. but we fell in love with this country...”

Electronic media is another powerful source of information about Bulgaria: “I did a 3-year research on Internet”⁴⁵; “We looked first on Internet. As you know, Bulgaria is incredibly well represented on there”⁴⁶. TV programmes also had a significant contribution: “The first place I saw anything about Bulgaria was the television, property places”⁴⁷; “I saw the programme ‘A Place in the Sun’ and we decided to take the plane to here”⁴⁸.

E. The Real Estate Agencies

Once Bulgaria was put on the map of preferred destinations, the routine practice would be to contact a local property agent. Shared experiences varied largely, from “then we became even friends with them”⁴⁹ to “they ripped us off massively”⁵⁰. Unless there have been major conflicts or dissatisfaction with the agents, it is a common practice to keep in contact with them even after the purchase of the house and seek their advice or help when needed. Some agents also strive to be in good terms with their former clients and do not charge them for the additional services provided.

³⁸ man, 41 years old, owner of a locally published English newspaper, Veliko Tarnovo area

³⁹ young woman, Elhovo area

⁴⁰ woman, app 60 years old, Smolyan area

⁴¹ man, 38 years old, real estate agent, married but separated, Smolyan area

⁴² woman, app 40 years old, translator at the EU Commission, Smolyan Area

⁴³ man, 53 years old, moved with family – wife and two sons, Smolyan area

⁴⁴ woman, app 60 years old, Veliko Tarnovo region

⁴⁵ woman, 59 years old, married, Balchik area

⁴⁶ woman, 43 years old, former psychiatric nurse, married, Veliko Tarnovo area

⁴⁷ man, 45 years old, businessman, Elhovo area

⁴⁸ couple, woman, app 60 years old, man, app 40 years old, Mindya area

⁴⁹ man, app 60 years old, married, former health and safety director for Gatwick Express, Mindya area

⁵⁰ woman, app 40 years old, married, 2 sons, Smolyan area

About a quarter of the interviewed shared serious complaints regarding the poor service they received by property companies. A common complaint related to agencies not hesitating to change the price of a house a number of times in the course of the negotiations, often without the seller's knowledge. Others insisted on getting paid before they did anything. On some occasions, the agent would not inform the new owner about outstanding electricity, water or telephone bills. The result was that "[w]hen we came [again few months later] our electricity was cut off... All my freezer was rotten". One of the most frustrating examples was of a company which "kept 15,000 Euros from the original price plus the 5 percent commission. We were told the house costs 45,000 and the [Bulgarian] owners of the house received only 30,000. You can imagine when they [Bulgarians] understood that they were crying". The story of a couple from the Smolyan region was similarly distressing:

This house was advertised as furnished. When we bought it, it really was. But when we moved in there was nothing whatsoever. No taps, no light bulbs, nothing. Everything had gone. There was another problem. When we bought the house the family asked us to stay for some time and it took them several months before they moved out. We didn't understand why weren't they leaving. Because of the language barrier we couldn't understand what the problem was – the state agent, the lawyer, or the family. We were a bit stuck.

Normally, Britons would not put all their eggs into one basket. Most of the people used several agencies: "We actually used 3-4 companies. I viewed may be 20 properties"⁵¹. Another option is to avoid the service of the property companies and try to find a house either yourself or through friends: "Their friends befriended a person who began selling properties. When we decided to have a look we met him; he offered several houses in a few areas"⁵²; "I used people from the village to find this house. Not an agent"⁵³. Surfing the Internet was also used alternatively or complementary to property goers. This, however, had its own disadvantages: "We mailed one agency but discovered that their web page was actually better than their service on the ground"⁵⁴.

Those who were not so lucky with the intermediates were happy to give some advice to other want-to-be immigrants:

- 1) Come and see if you actually like Bulgaria; not for a week's holiday but for at least 1 – 2 months;
- 2) Absorb the local culture, travel, interact with Bulgarians;
- 3) Move here before you buy a property, rent a place, take care of things yourself because otherwise things may go slow or wrong;
- 4) Don't give a Power of Attorney to people you don't know;
- 5) Don't give your complete trust to an agency to find out a home for you. Talk to local Bulgarians and find out what it means to buy a house in Bulgaria;

⁵¹ man, 53 years old, former military, married with 2 kids, Veliko Tarnovo area

⁵² young female, Elhovo area

⁵³ man, 38 years old, real estate agent, married but separated, Smolyan area

⁵⁴ woman, 43 years old, former psychiatric nurse, married, Veliko Tarnovo area

- 6) Before you go to an agency search out Britons who live here, know what's happening and ask for advice;
- 7) Don't trust only Internet forums and web sites. One should come personally.

F. Choosing the House: To be Honest I don't Like What Your country is Doing With its Coastline⁵⁵

Finding The House is the last step of the long process of moving from the U.K. to Bulgaria. In many cases it is a matter of pure luck. Some people came with an idea of what and where they would like their future home to be. However, once they were here, they often changed their mind or had to reconsider their preferences. Most Britons started searching the Black sea coast or the mountain resorts. For many this turned out not to be the best option. A person, who ended up with a property near V. Turnovo told us:

*We originally wanted to find a property at the coast. In the area you can find really nice villages but you don't know what's going happen to them in the next few years, how developed the coast is getting. We could have bought a house with a wonderful view which would disappear a few months later being blocked by a new construction in front.*⁵⁶

Others found the property at the seaside was already too expensive. "I wanted a house overlooking the sea. But we came too late", a lady who found her house in a village west of Balchik admitted.

The image of the model location of the prospective house seems to be rather uniform. It should certainly not be in a town or a city, though in a close proximity to one: "My husband and my son came and they looked around Sofia and didn't like Sofia. It was commercial, built up, dirty"⁵⁷. Britons are usually attracted to villages, especially those that are near bigger towns. Britons generally seem to prefer middle-sized villages with 500 and more inhabitants: "Better bigger villages than hamlets – there are amenities, more opportunities to mix with Bulgarians..."⁵⁸; "How are you going to learn the language if there's nobody around you?"⁵⁹

As discussed above, the model place tends to be in the planes, rather than in the mountains. This diverges markedly from the imagined place for a country house Bulgarians have. The vast majority of them would certainly go for picturesque mountainous villages with traditional architecture. Quite the contrary, Brits often opt for an area in the lowlands. When asked about their reasons, Britons said they had concerns that such places would not be accessible in winter. "What happens if you break your leg, what happens if a snake bites you"⁶⁰, a lady settled in the plane North of V. Turnovo asked us.

⁵⁵ woman, 43 years old, former psychiatric nurse, married, Veliko Tarnovo area

⁵⁶ family in their early 40s, with two sons, man was in tourism and his wife in ceramics, near Kilifarevo

⁵⁷ woman, app 60 years old, Veliko Tarnovo region

⁵⁸ woman, retired, Elhovo region

⁵⁹ woman, 43 years old, former psychiatric nurse, married, Veliko Tarnovo area

⁶⁰ woman, 43 years old, former psychiatric nurse, married, Veliko Tarnovo area

Last but not least, Britons are often attracted by the dramatic landscape or the picturesque architecture of the place: “Before that we were looking in the South, both at the seaside and inland, but when I saw Balchik I fell in love with it. It is such a lovely place”⁶¹. Turnovo is another such place. A retired military explained us why “VT”, as the town is known among the Britons, attracted him: “The look of the place, the feel. It’s a city but it has the feel of a village. I don’t like cities. VT is one of the two cities I like. One is Edinburgh and then VT”⁶².

The time necessary for locating the property varied widely and was again mainly a matter of luck. A person from the V. Turnovo area described the process: “You go to a place, you see its potential, and you go to another place. You like it but don’t know much what to do with it”⁶³. For some the process took a few days, for others, more than 3 years. Most of the interviewees seem to do the search with a model house in mind. It seems to work like love at first sight: “I just walked in here and it took me 5 minutes to say – that’s it”. The length of the process depends on how lucky one is and how prepared he or she is to compromise with the ideal. The technical procedure of buying the property is reported to be fast and easy. A couple from a village near Russe told us it was much easier to buy a house in Bulgaria than in the U.K. “In Britain”, they claimed, “this normally takes 4 months. In Bulgaria it took us only a week”.

⁶¹ woman, 59 years old, married, Balchik area

⁶² man, 53 years old, former military, married with 2 kids, Veliko Tarnovo area

⁶³ man, app 60 years old, married, former health and safety director for Gatwick Express, Mindya area

Section II. Britons' View of Bulgaria

A. People

The Best Quality of All is the Bulgarians

Nearly unanimously Bulgarians are considered to be extremely friendly, nice, and warm people. The warm welcome Britons get in the country has its significant impact on their general attitude towards Bulgaria. Coming from a completely different environment most of them are amazed by the friendly relations among neighbours. One of the interviewed shared:

*...in the U.K. you do not know your neighbours, because people are moving so often – buying a house here, staying for two years and selling it, because it is now worth more money. So you sell it and upgrade to a bigger house. Your community is fragmented and broken. It is not like it used to be. **There IS a community here**⁶⁴.*

Furthermore, Bulgarians are seen as particularly welcoming to foreigners: “That is something that television and Internet cannot tell you – what the people are like.” Before coming many of the interviewed U.K. nationals were anxious as to how the local community would receive them. Once in Bulgaria, they were pleasantly surprised. To use the words of one respondent, “I don’t get from my neighbours envy as such. I haven’t found any resentment at all to my house which may be looks too expensive.”⁶⁵ On the contrary, Bulgarians were generous and helpful to the newcomers. “We could see that they do not have a lot of wealth. Yet, they are still very generous, they would keep coming around our house and give us fruits and veggies”.

It appears that if one is British settling in a Bulgarian village, it would not be long before he or she starts getting invitations from the Bulgarian neighbours. Krastavitsi [cucumbers], domati [tomatoes], goat cheese, eggs, rakiya, vegetables, flowers are among the things locals would often bring as presents not expecting anything in return: “I can’t even imagine the amount of vegetables they give to us”⁶⁶. If one is in trouble, one knows that there would be a neighbour willing to help. “My furniture arrived with a container” a Scotsman from Veliko Turnovo area told us “and six neighbours came to help off load the stuff. I didn’t even know them at the time. They didn’t want any money. I only brought them some beer. And they all had one each.”⁶⁷

⁶⁴ man, app 60 years old, Elhovo area

⁶⁵ man, app 60 years old, married, former health and safety director for Gatwick Express, Mindya area

⁶⁶ family in their early 40s, with two sons, man was in tourism and his wife in ceramics, near Kilifarevo

⁶⁷ man, 53 years old, former military, married with 2 kids, Veliko Tarnovo area

Indeed, Britons found the easily granted friendship very impressive. People quickly develop a strong bond with the foreigners. A lady who settled near V. Turnovo offered a very telling example: “My neighbour... He has no family. And he call us his “children” and loves us.”⁶⁸ Another lady from a near-by village had a similar experience. As a member of the folklore singing society her friends from the choir organised for her “the most amazing birthday party I ever had. They turned off the lights and all sung Happy Birthday to me. They brought me this huge cake with sparkling fireworks and then I notice the table being full of food, which they made themselves”.⁶⁹

Such a warm and welcoming reception puzzled the Britons. At the beginning they were afraid locals might perceive them as “the people who come and push up prices”⁷⁰. Implicitly the respondents suggested possible explanations for this situation: the British help the villages to survive; it’s “better have anglichany [Englishmen] than gypsies”. We were given a lovely example related to the first possible explanation: “A Bulgarian once told me that I am like a torch. Without people like me this village is going to die. I thought this is the nicest thing that was ever said to me.”⁷¹ Interviewed Bulgarians shared the second arguments with us as well.

Most U.K. nationals are manifestly positive about Bulgarians. To use their words: “I can’t say anything wrong about Bulgarians. They are better than Englishmen”⁷²; “People [here] go to great lengths to make me feel welcome”⁷³; “People here are very friendly even [when] they can’t understand you”⁷⁴; “Since we’ve been in Bulgaria everybody treats us with kindness, respect, we feel accepted”.

As one can imagine, there are some complaints of neighbours being suspicious at first, inquisitive and gossiping: “sometimes people would just enter the house and start looking around, in boxes, etc.”⁷⁵ However, this is more an exception rather than the norm and most respondents claimed that Bulgarians are, “not in your face all the time”⁷⁶. As a lady from Turnovo region put it, “We know our neighbours. We are not together all the time but if we wanted something I know they will help”⁷⁷.

They Solve Problems by Simple Ideas and without it Costing Anything

⁶⁸ family in their early 40s, with ywo sons, man was in tourism and his wife in ceramics, near Kilifarevo

⁶⁹ couple, woman, app 60 years old, man, app 40 years old, Mindya area

⁷⁰ man, 65 years old, married, Veliko Tarnovo area

⁷¹ man, app 60 years old, married, former health and safety director for Gatwick Express, Mindya area

⁷² woman, 63 years old, former geologist

⁷³ man, singer, married to Bulgarian woman, Russe area

⁷⁴ woman, 18 years old, former nurse, Russe area

⁷⁵ female, 64 years old, former social worker, married, Elhovo region

⁷⁶ man, app 60 years old, married, former health and safety director for Gatwick Express, Mindya area

⁷⁷ couple, woman, app 60 years old, man, app 40 years old, Mindya area

Besides being generous, friendly and hospitable Britons' acclaim Bulgarians for being very "clever", "inventive", "eternally curious" and "resilient". According to a Briton from the Elhovo area, "Bulgarians are very clever. They have to be to survive. I've learnt a lot of survival techniques here"⁷⁸. In another interview the story appears in a slightly different facet: "Bulgarians have lots of initiative for making things, for using things – solve problems by simple ideas – and without it costing anything. In the U.K. one is used to buy everything and people have lost this"⁷⁹. Brits who have settled in the country are amazed that Bulgarian men "can do everything – the garden, the well, building"⁸⁰. According to Britons, these survival skills are most probably due to the Bulgarians' historical background: "It's hard not to have tremendous admirations to people that have been through horrible times. And yet, they can find joy in such simple things."⁸¹

You Need Contacts, No Contracts

Indeed, there are complains too. For the research team it was very interesting to find out what the Britons thought of Bulgarian working ethics. Opinions are split; however, most Britons consider Bulgarians to be "lazy", "slow", "poorly qualified", "untrustworthy". In the interviews, these observations came in very colourful expressions: "I'm satisfied with Bulgarians that I keep an eye on"⁸²; "In England everybody must have a license to prove his skills of doing something. Here you don't particularly need to have skills to do something"⁸³; "It takes him [my employee] a day to do what I do for an hour... No style, no deadlines, no standards."⁸⁴ In a particularly interesting observation, a man from the Veliko Turnovo area compared Bulgarian working ethics with that of Scotsmen: "Workmanship in BG is very Scottish – not intense, people just do it to earn a living, for the next rakia, no long-term plan; mentality is to survive from one day to the next; not planning ahead"⁸⁵.

For the majority of people who settled here it is very annoying that contracts are not always observed. In order to get a job done you need contacts, not contracts: "I have contracts; I have penalty clauses. Could I enforce them? No! What's the point? The man has no money. Unless you have the right contacts with the right people it is a nightmare"⁸⁶.

⁷⁸ man, Elhovo region

⁷⁹ couple, woman, app 60 years old, man, app 40 years old, Mindya area

⁸⁰ woman, 64 years old, former social worker, married, Elhovo region

⁸¹ woman, 43 years old, former psychiatric nurse, married, Veliko Tarnovo area

⁸² man, 53 years old, former military, married with 2 kids, Veliko Tarnovo area

⁸³ woman, 63 years old, former geologist

⁸⁴ man, Elhovo region

⁸⁵ man, 41 years old, owner of a locally published English newspaper, Veliko Tarnovo area

⁸⁶ man, app 60 years old, married, former health and safety director for Gatwick Express, Mindya area

On the other hand, about 20 or so percent of Britons are satisfied with the job done by Bulgarians they hire. As a girl from the Ruse region put it, “They work for nothing and work fast”⁸⁷. There is also an appreciation that untrustworthiness is not a unique feature for Bulgarians: “When the cat’s away you would not be so hard working of course. But that’s true of many people”⁸⁸. In a notably balanced interview Bulgarians are presented as being both “implicitly trustworthy”⁸⁹ or “having good intentions but do not always following trough”⁹⁰.

Some Brits try to find a more sophisticated explanation of the poor Bulgarian working ethics. To them, this negative impression may be due to the type of people they are most commonly engaged with. Settling in the countryside they need mainly builders and masons. Those professions, however, are in high demand by the booming Bulgarian economy. As a result, “skilled labour is in big towns and resorts not in villages”⁹¹. Other Britons acknowledge that Bulgarians don’t get paid enough and “they do the work according to the pay they get”⁹².

Bulgarians Tend to Go With the Flow

Besides not being very hard-working, in the eyes of the Britons local people appear not to demonstrate much of an initiative for improving one’s condition either. The “putting up with everything”⁹³ mentality comes as a shock to some of the newcomers. They are not used to such inertness. “Bulgarians accept things by just saying that it’s Bulgaria; or it’s mafia”⁹⁴. The passiveness comes together with a short horizon. Bulgarians seems to have “difficulties to make plans for the future”⁹⁵. A lady from Hotnitsa gave us an interesting example:

This could come with small silly things like when we were building our bath. The bottom was completely bricked in and we asked, knowing what Bulgarian plumbing is like, what happens when it fails. Then there would be not way of getting under the bath to fix the leaks.

You Have to Give Roma a Chance

⁸⁷ woman, 18 years old, former nurse, Russe area

⁸⁸ woman, 54 years old, former nurse, Ruse area

⁸⁹ woman, 43 years old, former psychiatric nurse, married, Veliko Tarnovo area

⁹⁰ woman, 43 years old, former psychiatric nurse, married, Veliko Tarnovo area

⁹¹ man, app 40 years old, musician in film industry, Smolyan area

⁹² man, 53 years old, moved with family – wife and two sons, Smolyan area

⁹³ man, app 40 years old, musician in film industry, Smolyan area

⁹⁴ man, app 40 years old, musician in film industry, Smolyan area

⁹⁵ woman, 43 years old, former psychiatric nurse, married, Veliko Tarnovo area

Most of the Britons were stricken by how tolerant Bulgarians are to foreigners and how xenophobic and prejudiced against Roma and Turks they might be at the same time. Some Englishmen even consider this to be the “biggest challenge your country really has”⁹⁶. A British settled in the Toplovgrad area was once criticized by the locals for having a drink in the pub with his gypsy workers. He was put under the lash “have you no **white** Bulgarian friends”⁹⁷. Many respondents report the common practice that people from minorities are paid less for same type of work (15 levs instead of 20 in one reported example). At the same time, a young English girl who dates with a local Roma from the village claimed: “The two communities do not tease each other or have problems. They make jokes with one another of course but noting serious.”

Some Britons are trying to explain those “xenophobic outbursts”. They think such an attitude is “understandable because there were similar sentiments in Britain towards minorities”⁹⁸. Some acknowledged: “What Bulgarians are saying about Roma is what Brits or Americans were once saying about blacks and what Britain is now saying about Eastern Europeans.”⁹⁹

Racism and xenophobia clearly disturb most Britons. They understand that some of the problems (thefts, violence etc.) may well be real but in their opinion “this is true for any enfranchised group in the world”¹⁰⁰. A lady from Hotnitsa rightfully pointed out that “it is difficult because there is an element of truth in it but it can only be changed if trust develops in both sides”¹⁰¹. A British lady from Balchik advised: “you have to give gypsies a chance”.

B. Lifestyle

Here You Can See the Stars

According to Britons, the second best thing in Bulgaria after the people is the unspoiled nature. Some even assert: “Bulgaria is probably the most beautiful country in Europe”¹⁰². Low population density gives a chance to “explore the natural beauty in freedom”¹⁰³.

Overcrowded and dynamic Britain contrasts pleasantly with the peaceful and quiet lifestyle in Bulgarian countryside. “In the U.K. you just go constantly by 100 miles an hour. You go home thinking about work. Life’s quite stressful in England.”¹⁰⁴ The lifestyle in the villages of Bulgaria reminds many elderly British of their childhood:

*My mum is 84 and she was here... She loved it because it may have reminded her England when she was young. She was fascinated by the home-grown vegetables, the countryside, the ladies in the field.*¹⁰⁵

⁹⁶ woman, 43 years old, former psychiatric nurse, married, Veliko Tarnovo area

⁹⁷ man, 54 years old, former contract manager in a building company, Elhovo area

⁹⁸ man, app 40 years old, musician in film industry, Smolyan area

⁹⁹ woman, 43 years old, former psychiatric nurse, married, Veliko Tarnovo area

¹⁰⁰ woman, 43 years old, former psychiatric nurse, married, Veliko Tarnovo area

¹⁰¹ woman, 43 years old, former psychiatric nurse, married, Veliko Tarnovo area

¹⁰² man, 53 years old, moved with family – wife and two sons, Smolyan area

¹⁰³ woman, 54 years old, former nurse, Ruse area

¹⁰⁴ woman, 54 years old, former nurse, Ruse area

¹⁰⁵ woman, 54 years old, former nurse, Ruse area

Many cannot help feeling like in a time machine:

It's like we got back time in a way. Making things I used to make some 30 years ago. I love it. I've done my own pickles, which I haven't been doing for years. I made jam¹⁰⁶.

Getting back to the simple, not stressful, natural life is something, which charms many of the British who have decided to settle here. To some it resembles “the U.K. in early 1950s”¹⁰⁷, “Portugal like 30 years ago”¹⁰⁸, or even “Ireland less than 20 years ago”. For a significant group of U.K. nationals who moved to Bulgaria it was this simple, organic lifestyle that is more attractive than the cheap properties and low beer prices. A 60-years-old Welsh now living in the Yambol region was very straightforward in this respect: “I was looking for a place where you can get rid of technology, motorways, all the things you have in a developed world and take for granted. I found it in Bulgaria”¹⁰⁹. He was not alone in this view. A middle-aged British couple from Novo selo frankly admitted: “Here it is nice and relaxed. We want to sit and eat. Drink a pint of beer or a glass of wine. We like to walk down to the centre and people say zdrasti [hallow]. Just sit and relax and watch the world nearby, which is the Bulgarian way of life”¹¹⁰.

The natural atmosphere in Bulgarian villages has one more advantage. Unlike in England “community structures are still not broken down”¹¹¹. The strong bonds between neighbours, among relatives and friend and within the family appeal to many Britons. They often draw a comparison between these pre-industrial types of interpersonal relations here and the deep alienation, which fragments the British society: “There is no cultural life in the U.K... Our community is fragmented and broken. It is not like it used to be. Here there **IS** a community”¹¹².

This traditional lifestyle comes at a price. Britons have the impression that machismo is still very strong in Bulgaria: “It is a patriarch society run by the man”¹¹³. A British teenager from the Elhovo area who had a boyfriend from the village complained that “young Bulgarian boys a quite controlling”. To some however, even that is more an advantage than a disadvantage: “English women are “hard work.” When it comes to establishing a family, I think it's good to have these clear roles; the nurturing role of the mother, as long as the father is open to sharing these experiences”¹¹⁴.

¹⁰⁶ woman, 59 years old

¹⁰⁷ man, app 60 years old, Elhovo area

¹⁰⁸ couple, app 70 years old, man is former journalist, Balchik area

¹⁰⁹ man, app 60 years old, Elhovo area

¹¹⁰ woman, app 60 years old, Veliko Tarnovo area

¹¹¹ man, app 60 years old, Elhovo area

¹¹² man, app 60 years old, Elhovo area

¹¹³ man, 41 years old, owner of a locally published English newspaper, Veliko Tarnovo area

¹¹⁴ man, 41 years old, married for Bulgarian woman, owner of a real estate business, Veliko Tarnovo area

Another facet of such, one may call it organic lifestyle, is the low intensity of state intervention in the everyday life of people. One of the first things that struck Britons here is the “strong sense of freedom”. There is no feeling of being watched all the time. Children in Bulgaria are considered much freer, “they can play in the streets and go to school alone”¹¹⁵. Unlike in the United Kingdom, rivers are accessible and people can fish or swim freely. One more ambiguous freedom is the lack of smoking restrictions in public places. To some Brits this comes as an advantage but others understandably complain.

In Fact You’re Better Off Living Here

Low prices come as a distant third in the list of things to include in a would-be advertisement of Bulgaria. Few Britons confess it was the cheap property that played the critical role in their decision to move here. Of course, the fact that low prices did not feature as highly in Bulgaria’s advantages is quite understandable; many of the interviewed obviously felt uncomfortable to elaborate on the topic. Some were more frank admitting: “From a purely financial side we could not afford a house like that anywhere else”¹¹⁶. Others were worried that the country’s accession into the EU would push prices upward. When asked whether she feels strange moving to Bulgaria while many Bulgarians desperately trying to emigrate to Britain, a lady from the village of Sokolovo replied:

They think I’m mad... They want to go to England to get bigger salaries because the pay is so poor here. But, then again, what most of them don’t realize is that the cost of living is so much higher in England. In fact you’re better off living here.

C. The Downside of Things

Naturally, this project was not about praising Bulgaria as the preceding section might have suggested. We felt that Britons’ observations on the negative sides of this country and its citizens would be particularly valuable. Self-critical, even nihilistic as Bulgarians might be, it is difficult to predict what the most visible flaws of ours are. At first, most of the interviewed felt embarrassed to criticize. Such inhibition would normally present itself in phrases such as “who am I to judge”¹¹⁷ or “I can’t think of anything wrong about Bulgarians”. A Bulgarian linguist who organizes language classes for the Brits even suggested: “Englishmen dare not criticize harshly because they see Bulgarians also dare not criticize”. A more likely explanation is British politeness and the fact that many of them are actually satisfied with most of what they get in Bulgaria.

Rubbish among the Most Stunning Views

¹¹⁵ man, 53 years old, moved with family – wife and two sons, Smolyan area

¹¹⁶ woman, app 40 years old, translator at the EU Commission, Smolyan Area

¹¹⁷ woman, app 40 years old, translator at the EU Commission, Smolyan Area

Rubbish is one of the most visible flaws of Bulgaria. The missing concept of recycling astonishes the interviewed. Garbage is rarely collected separately; there is no rubbish collection in most of the rural areas; locals are not embarrassed to dump their rubbish in the most beautiful countryside. “We’ve seen people stop the cars and push old washing machines into the [Chaya] river”¹¹⁸ a lady from the Smolyan area reported. Because of the lack of garbage collection, many Britons make over 15-kilometres round trips just to get rid of their rubbish. And they are still required to pay for the service. “It’s just 4 levs a year and we’re not bothered but it shouldn’t be like that. They take money for something they don’t provide us.”

Savage Treatment of Animals

Mistreatment of animals is another “savage custom” that fills many of the interviewed with rightful indignation. “I know there’s a lot of poverty here but I don’t think this excuses cruelty to domestic animals. Dogs being chained and that’s their life – 2 meters long chain. I’ve not actually been to another country where I’ve seen such cruelty to dogs, cats, and horses”¹¹⁹. It is often the case that Britons adopt street dogs but this could not be a permanent solution to the problem. “I came here with two dogs from England and I adopted [another] 2. But my house is not big enough to adopt more”, a lady shared. Furthermore, most of the vets in rural areas are poorly qualified and not accustomed to treating pets. A couple from the Smolyan area reported a shocking example of a veterinarian who nearly killed a dog while castrating her and then prescribed camomile tea. The Sofia-based doctor whom the British couple had to visit afterwards was furious, insisting that they should sue this man “because he is giving vets a bad reputation”¹²⁰.

They Drive as Lunatics Here

Bulgarian driving habits are certainly among the things the respondents criticize the most. “Absolutely dreadful”, “completely crazy”, “disgraceful”, “terrible” are some of the commonly used expressions for the way locals behave on the roads:

*Keep out the way. Keep out the way. They do not seem to have rules here... We came from Brighton... That’s a very busy city, you know. I would drive there happily. Here I am frightened to go down the village...*¹²¹

Some Britons are ready to excuse such a driving style when comparing it to worse examples they experienced in Dubai, France or Italy: “in Dubai awful drivers, in Bulgaria terrible drivers”¹²². But the vast majority of the interviewed shared that they feel frightened on the roads: “I feel safe [in Bulgaria] except when I am on the road” a former military settled in Veliko Turnovo area told us.

¹¹⁸ woman, app 40 years old, translator at the EU Commission, Smolyan Area

¹¹⁹ woman, app 40 years old, translator at the EU Commission, Smolyan Area

¹²⁰ woman, app 40 years old, translator at the EU Commission, Smolyan Area

¹²¹ woman, app 60 years old, Smolyan Area

¹²² woman, app 60 years old, Veliko Tarnovo region

Not many interviewed Britons tried to find an explanation for these outrageous driving manners. The few who did, blamed it on the roads: “roads are outrageous, potholes”¹²³; on the old cars: “cars are old, they are slow”¹²⁴; on people’s irresponsibility: “people drink and drive”. Even fewer Britons went deeper stating that the laws are not properly enforced: “Nobody knows what the rules and laws on the roads are”¹²⁵; “They do not seem to have rules here”. Summing up his experience in Bulgaria the former military from the V. Turnovo region told us: “Actually I can’t think of anything bad of the whole of Bulgaria, unless you want to talk about the roads”¹²⁶.

D. The Social Systems

In Danger, Here, in Bulgaria? You Are Joking!

Surprisingly, all interviewed Britons felt particularly safe in Bulgaria. The project team found this to be quite interesting, especially when compared to the popular public opinion of the high level of crime in the country. Safety issues are still considered to be among the top-3 problems according to the most recent opinion polls. Oddly, most of the Britons reckoned Bulgaria is much safer than the U.K.: “In England I had a special police dog for protection. Not here.” The feeling of safety permeates one’s daily life and makes people behave much more nonchalantly than they would in the UK:

There’s an area where all the teenagers gather... 15, 16, 18 ... just by the courthouse. And they sit there, they chat, have drinks ... I can walk past them and feel safe. You walk past a crowd like that in England, someone’s gonna come out and have a go at you”¹²⁷

A lady from Elhovo area gave us a very telling example: “I still don’t know who the local policeman is. Which for me is a good thing since it means I’ve never been in trouble. I feel very safe here.”

Most if not all interviewed claimed they are not locking their houses and cars and that windows could be left open even when not at home. Brits never came across the organised crime and an interviewee even asked us: “Does mafia really exists in Bulgaria? For normal people like us! Why would the mafia bother me?”¹²⁸

Indeed, we were told few unpleasant stories, e.g. a generator had been stolen by a neighbour; a theft of a digital camera, jewellery and money had occurred; a British has been forced in a very aggressive manner to pay for a perfume he broke by accident etc. In most of the cases, however, police was very efficient in detaining the culprit within hours or days at most. A lady from the Balchik area was very pleased when “they caught him and brought him to my house in handcuffs... Police was very, very helpful. Honestly, I didn’t think they would be.”¹²⁹

¹²³ woman, 64 years old, former social worker, married, Elhovo region
¹²⁴

¹²⁵ man, 65 years old, married, Veliko Tarnovo area

¹²⁶ man, 53 years old, former military, married with 2 kids, Veliko Tarnovo area

¹²⁷ man, 55 years old, retired, former engineer, Russe area

¹²⁸ man, 53 years old, former military, married with 2 kids, Veliko Tarnovo area

¹²⁹ woman, 63 years old, former geologist

It seems to be a common practice for the police to pay a visit to the newcomers instructing them on safety matters or just checking whether everything is O.K. As a result, we got mainly positive reactions: “The police in the area appear to be very, very fair”¹³⁰.

Moreover, Bulgarian traffic police seems to be lenient to the British. Normally they just let you go when they find out you are a British. “They have stopped me for speeding and when I say *ne razbira* [I don’t understand], they said to go away”. A person from Turnovo area even admitted, “Once I was drunk and the policeman drove me and my car home”¹³¹.

Corruption is Not As Big As People Say

If we can trust the information from the interviews, corruption does not appear to be a big problem for the U.K. nationals. Many perceive it as something natural: “to oil the wheel of commerce”¹³² or “if you scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours”¹³³. In a country with “terrible bureaucracy” there seem to be two ways to get your job done quickly: “people with **contacts and money** can bypass some of the procedures”¹³⁴. Given that the first channel is not easily available to foreigners (it, however, is not completely closed and some of the Brits are already using it (cf. more in section four), U.K. nationals have at times resorted to bribing.

Even though our respondents had heard of incidents of corruption, few of them had experienced it personally “I’ve heard a lot of it but haven’t been asked myself”; “that’s more through what I’ve heard not what I’ve personally experienced”. Brits know and tell outrageous stories of other people being asked for few hundreds or even thousands levs but the eye-witnessed cases were pretty rare. The few reported cases of corruption were initiated by the British: to extend the registration permit, for example, which cost them 50 levs or a bottle of whiskey, “but that’s not exactly a corruption, isn’t it?” This, indeed, is not to say that corruption doesn’t exist. To use the words of a Bulgarian lady married to a British, “nobody asked for bribes but nobody refused presents either”.

Compared with other countries the situation here seems to be not so tragic: “No corruption in Bulgaria, In Romania – Yeeees!”¹³⁵ A lady who spent most of the last 10 years in South-East Europe was particularly frank:

*I was very mad when Bulgaria was entering the EU and all the media was hammering: corruption, corruption, corruption. And I was thinking: ‘Italy wasn’t corrupt? Greece wasn’t corrupt?’ It is so unfair. Of course there is a corruption. It’s right to the top and it affects Bulgarians themselves... When we wanted electricity connected in our Greek ruin it took us 2 years to get it and somebody said to us: if you give the electric man money he’ll get it quickly. For the telephone line we also waited for 2 years.*¹³⁶

¹³⁰ family in their early 40s, with two sons, man was in tourism and his wife in ceramics, near Kilifarevo

¹³¹ man, 41 years old, owner of a locally published English newspaper, Veliko Tarnovo area

¹³² man, app 60 years old, married, former health and safety director for Gatwick Express, Mindya area

¹³³ man, 41 years old, married for Bulgarian woman, owner of a real estate business, Veliko Tarnovo area

¹³⁴ man, 41 years old, married for Bulgarian woman, owner of a real estate business, Veliko Tarnovo area

¹³⁵ man, 45 years old, businessman, Elhovo area

¹³⁶ couple, woman, app 60 years old, man, app 40 years old, Mindya area

Don't Come to Bulgaria if you are Not Prepared to Wait

Nearly everybody complained of the heavy bureaucracy. It was depicted as slow, cumbersome, unprofessional and unhelpful: “bureaucracy drives me crazy”¹³⁷; “administration is horrendous, if it’s done correctly”¹³⁸; “You are like in Spain 30 years ago. Everything is mañana”¹³⁹. Even getting rid of the old broken down car turned out to be a serious problem. Registering a vehicle takes ages when in England it is done by post. “Buying a car is a two-day job; in China they hire gypsies to do all the waiting for you in queues. In Bulgaria they don’t take this opportunity.”¹⁴⁰ Brits are not accustomed to the typical bureaucratic procedures that clearly horrify them: “Each time we go to the administration we are told different things and requirements”¹⁴¹. Particularly difficult was to get the *lichna karta* (ID card) or Bulgarian driving license. “Probably one of the most stressful things we had to do in Bulgaria was applying for *lichna karta*”¹⁴². For the *lichna karta* some had to travel more than 200 km round trip to Bucharest and visit the Bulgarian embassy there.

Bureaucracy certainly is among the topics that receive some of the most colourful expressions by the Britons

*There are too many offices to go to get things done but it’s perhaps a way to provide more employment in such remote areas...*¹⁴³

*One of the jokes we have about Bulgarian bureaucracy is that: when they make you sweat enough and suffer enough then you’ll be OK. Whether in that instance they’re waiting for a bribe I don’t know...*¹⁴⁴

*Administration: sometimes it’s hard to tell what is confusion, what is incompetence, what’s corruption. Not every time, not every individual but yes, we have problems.*¹⁴⁵

Different people react differently to the outrageous bureaucracy. Some try to use connections, others resort to bribes. British oftentimes show impressive adaptability to the new environment adopting various strategies to bypass the administrative impediments.

*Going to government office is like banging your head against a brick wall”. The only thing you can go is “go with the flow”. When I first came here I was troubled why I cannot get things done easily. But not any more. They don’t want me to pay my electric bills. Fine. I won’t pay it until they come and knock on my door. You just go with the flow.*¹⁴⁶

¹³⁷ man, app 40 years old, musician in film industry, Smolyan area

¹³⁸ man, 41 years old, owner of a locally published English newspaper, Veliko Tarnovo area

¹³⁹ woman, 59 years old, former telephonist, married, Balchik area

¹⁴⁰ man, 41 years old, owner of a locally published English newspaper, Veliko Tarnovo area

¹⁴¹ woman, 59 years old, former telephonist, married, Balchik area

¹⁴² woman, 43 years old, former psychiatric nurse, married, Veliko Tarnovo area

¹⁴³ man, app 40 years old, musician in film industry, Smolyan area

¹⁴⁴ woman, 43 years old, former psychiatric nurse, married, Veliko Tarnovo area

¹⁴⁵ woman, 43 years old, former psychiatric nurse, married, Veliko Tarnovo area

¹⁴⁶ woman, 63 years old, former geologist

Certainly the easiest way of getting around is to use the help of local intermediates: translators, attorneys, real estate agents or simply friends. Another reason for that is the limited command of Bulgarian most of the Brits have. “We find out our own lawyer, our translator and an accountant. And this is our small team, which helps us with all the paperwork”¹⁴⁷

Even though rarely, we were able to meet people who were not so critical to Bulgarian administration. “When people come”, a lady from the Smolyan region told us, “everybody complains about the bureaucracy but in actual fact when you are in England you don’t realize how big bureaucracy is there. Here it is [just a] different kind of bureaucracy.”¹⁴⁸

As it seems administration at the local level tends to be far more efficient and helpful than the central units of bigger towns and cities. Most of the mayors are enthusiastic of their new fellow-villagers. The British influx, they hope, would bring more money in the village, reduce unemployment and at least partially ease the demographic pressure (cf. the comparison of Britons with a torch in a paragraph under “The Best Quality of All is the Bulgarians”). The mayor of Sokolovo for example, was the person to put pressure on the police after one of the U.K. nationals suffered a robbery.

*The mayor desperately wants this village full of foreigners. He doesn’t want bad publicity for the village. So if anything goes wrong he is on the phone ringing to the police.*¹⁴⁹

Being “very helpful and polite” the mayor of Koshov was one of the main reasons for a mixed Bulgarian-English couple to settle there and not in the near-by village, where the “mayor was so unkind and aggressive to us”.

We are Not Yet Making Money but we are Losing Money More Slowly Now

Provided the level of bureaucracy and the amount of paperwork, one would expect the business environment to be markedly hostile. In reality, however, the few interviewed British who dared start a company are generally positive about the conditions for doing business in Bulgaria. Taxes don’t seem to be a very high; the formalities are also “not too bad”. To use the expression of an Englishman who runs a horse-riding business: “One thing balances up with the other. Bureaucracy with smaller competition. We could have not afforded to have a business like that in the U.K.” Another entrepreneurial family from the Rodopy mountains shared this opinion: “It’s easy to start business here. There is no competition. In England I can’t open even a garage. They will smash me.”

Few of the interviewed nationals had started a business. Where they did so, their preference had been to open a guesthouse or cater to other British families who moved to the country – real estate agencies, building companies, setting a local newspaper. Few went into tourism opening ‘Bed and Breakfast’ places, horse riding or off-road jeep businesses.

¹⁴⁷ couple, woman, app 60 years old, man, app 40 years old, Mindya area

¹⁴⁸ woman, app 40 years old, married, 2 sons, Smolyan area

¹⁴⁹ woman, 63 years old, former geologist

The Customer is Never Right Here

Like bureaucracy customers' service in Bulgaria attracts a well-deserved criticism. "Public institutions don't treat citizens as clients but as a problem"¹⁵⁰; "In most shops people are unhelpful, especially in supermarkets". A couple from Balchik area complained from restaurants with flies, mice in Internet café's WC etc.

We were chased by the staff of the [newly opened] supermarket trying to convince my son to get a basket. As if we don't know how to use supermarket. They thought we would do shoplifting. They follow you around like shadows. They don't still seem to understand the market, the etiquette.

Warranty is also a problem. The attitude towards customers seems to be very aggressive if you take something back to the shop. "We had a boiler", a family from the Turnovo area told us, "which had 5-years guarantee. But that turned to be only for the case of the boiler. For the electrical element it is 12 months; the wire has a different guarantee; and the bit, which is most often to be broken down, is the one without guarantee or with the shortest guarantee"¹⁵¹.

Naturally, there is no unanimity of opinions in this area either. Some of our respondents were satisfied with the level of services they were getting: "Services here are fantastic. Shops a fine. I made a lot of friends in local supermarket and shops"¹⁵² a lady from Sokolovo claimed.

Utilities and public services get most of the criticism. "EVN electric. Nobody there seems to speak English so we have to bring a translator". The CEZ and e.ON are not better either: "When I wanted to go from single phase to triple phase that was a nightmare. I had to go to so many different offices"¹⁵³; "It was so difficult to get this house connected to the electric system and it seems to me only paperwork"¹⁵⁴. Furthermore, "power-cuts are regular"¹⁵⁵; "Electricity and water come on and off. There are days without both. But we're learning to have supply of drinkable water, matches, candles etc"¹⁵⁶.

Due to unknown reasons few interviewed Britons manage to get through the bureaucratic obstacles and to pay their bill electronically. The vast majority of people still have to go to the local post-offices for transferring the money. Moreover, bills sometimes seem to be suspiciously high: "The last month water bill was 20 levs when before was 6 levs and the same [around 6 levs] for this month. And I don't know whom to go and ask about this difference".

¹⁵⁰ man, 41 years old, married for Bulgarian woman, owner of a real estate business, Veliko Tarnovo area

¹⁵¹ woman, 43 years old, former psychiatric nurse, married, Veliko Tarnovo area

¹⁵² woman, 63 years old, former geologist

¹⁵³ man, app 60 years old, married, former health and safety director for Gatwick Express, Mindya area

¹⁵⁴ family in their early 40s, with two sons, man was in tourism and his wife in ceramics, near Kilifarevo

¹⁵⁵ man, 66 years old, entrepreneur, construction engineer, Elhovo area

¹⁵⁶ woman, 59 years old, married, Balchik area

“Postal service is a pain”¹⁵⁷. Post-cards, letters, parcels all tend to disappear. “Every single card for my birthday last year had been torn open”¹⁵⁸. Surprisingly, most of our respondents were not inclined to protest: “You can protest all your life but it doesn’t make any difference”¹⁵⁹. This proved to be an erroneous strategy as the experience of a lady from Ivanovo showed: “I wrote a letter of complaint. I got a very nice reply and then everything was O.K.”¹⁶⁰.

Internet connection is just another example of the poor level of customer service in Bulgaria. Few villages have wireless (like Cherven) or satellite connections. In most of the places the Internet is dial-up or non-existent at all (like in most parts of Hotnitsa). In such cases British had to travel to Internet cafés in near-by towns (like in Boyanovo).

Some People Seek to Take Advantage of Our Perceived Wealth

Internet is not just poor in quality. It regularly comes with double standards. We came across at least three examples when providers charged British people two and even three times more than the regular price. In Momchilovtsy, for example, instead of the official price of 25 – 30 Levs Britons were asked 60 Levs in the one case and 90 Levs per month in the other. We were told of similar stories in the village of Boyanovo as well.

It’s not only the Internet providers who try to rip off the foreigners. Different segments of the services sector are particularly susceptible to such bad practices. Construction companies, exchange bureaus, hotels etc. sometimes also tend to charge higher prices. “There is a culture in Bulgaria: “he’s English, I can charge him much more money because he makes much more”¹⁶¹.

A lady settled North of Varna shared an amusing story on how she managed to reverse a particularly striking overcharge when changing money in Nesebar. She pretended she had a heart attack and managed to get her money back. “May be I could have made a better life as an actress”, she wondered.

On the whole, our interviews suggest that double standards certainly exist but they are an exception, rather than the norm. Some British were rightly disappointed but there are others who showed understanding: “It is the same thing in England. If a provincial boy goes to London for instance it won’t be too different. They would charge you 3 times more of the real price”¹⁶².

It’s Not Just the Speed; the Quality is Very, Very Good

¹⁵⁷ woman, retired, Elhovo area

¹⁵⁸ woman, 54 years old, former nurse, Ruse area

¹⁵⁹ woman, 63 years old, former geologist

¹⁶⁰ woman, 54 years old, former nurse, Ruse area

¹⁶¹ man, 55 years old, retired, former engineer, Russe area

¹⁶² woman, 63 years old, former geologist

The social system which got surprisingly good feedback from our respondents was health care. It was seen as “not even near as negative as people say”¹⁶³. Most of the Brits we met had used at least some kind of medical care. Thus, they have personal observations of Bulgarian health system. All but two or three exceptions are markedly happy with the service: “We are very happy especially with the speed of getting appointments, the blood tests, the results.”¹⁶⁴ Having doubts about the diagnosis received from a local doctor, a British went to double-check it in England: “In the U.K. they confirmed all had been done perfectly”¹⁶⁵.

One of the positive things our respondents had observed was the efficiency and the speed of work: “From initially seeing the doctor to being on the operating table here took me about 3 hours, which in England comparatively would be about 6 months”¹⁶⁶. A person who was received in V. Turnovo hospital with a heart attack told us: “I have no complaints whatsoever, except for the food”¹⁶⁷. Indeed, there are complaints of the infrastructure but to most this is marginal to the quality of the service they were getting: “Facilities, to be blunt, are ruined. But that’s not the doctors’ fault”¹⁶⁸. To the contacted Brits Bulgarian doctors appear to be “absolutely brilliant”; “superb”; “the best dentist in the world. I felt no pain and I hate dentists”¹⁶⁹.

The third factor for the general satisfaction with the health systems, next to the speed and the quality of the service, is of course the price: “I paid 60 leva and for the same treatment in the U.K. we are talking about 300 pounds plus”¹⁷⁰. To some this even seemed unfair: “I would feel uncomfortable to take advantage of the Bulgarian NHS without paying contributions in the country”¹⁷¹. Others, having been longer in the country, pay contributions and use the service: “I’ve changed all my teeth there. And now I’m known among the British in the village as the “teeth bridge”¹⁷².

According to our interviews, one relative advantage of the British in using medical services is their better financial situation compared to most of Bulgarians living in rural areas: “I’m in a privileged position because I can choose to go to a private facility”¹⁷³. That might, at least partially, explain the big difference between the locals’ and the newcomers’ assessment of the health system. In most of the cases, however, the interviewed were not asked for an extra payment and all expenses were covered by their contributions. A lady, who used to work as psychiatric nurse in Britain, was particularly happy with Bulgarian health system:

*The state of the hospitals is horrible... But the speed of the care, the considerations of the care and the attitude of people towards us have just been absolutely brilliant. I worked in health service in Britain and I think I have good chance for comparisons. But what I’ve seen is better here. **And this is not because we were paying***¹⁷⁴.

¹⁶³ man, 53 years old, moved with family – wife and two sons, Smolyan area

¹⁶⁴ man, singer, married to Bulgarian woman, Russe area

¹⁶⁵ man, 65 years old, married, Veliko Tarnovo area

¹⁶⁶ family in their early 40s, with two sons, man was in tourism and his wife in ceramics, near Kilifarevo

¹⁶⁷ man, 53 years old, former military, married with 2 kids, Veliko Tarnovo area

¹⁶⁸ family in their early 40s, with two sons, man was in tourism and his wife in ceramics, near Kilifarevo

¹⁶⁹ man, app 60 years old, married, former health and safety director for Gatwick Express, Mindya area

¹⁷⁰ man, app 60 years old, married, former health and safety director for Gatwick Express, Mindya area

¹⁷¹ couple, app 70 years old, man is former journalist, Balchik area

¹⁷² woman, 59 years old, married, Balchik area

¹⁷³ man, 41 years old, married for Bulgarian woman, owner of a real estate business, Veliko Tarnovo area

¹⁷⁴ woman, 43 years old, former psychiatric nurse, married, Veliko Tarnovo area

It has already been mentioned that few Brits had a negative experience with Bulgarian health service. The most appalling story is of a British who was kept for nearly a week in the hospital with the official diagnosis of heart attack. For more than 5 days no information was provided to his partner and when she turned to the WHO office in Sofia with an inquiry the patient was immediately released from the hospital. This indeed raised a lot of doubts, which were to grow when the couple was asked for a massive sum of money:

*The nurse took me to a room together with one of the young doctors who spoke English. Then she wrote with a pencil the sum I should pay. It was in thousands [7,000 Levs]. When I asked for a receipt I was brought to the financial manager of the hospital and they told me: you'll get that money anyway from your health insurance. I tried to explain that NHS wouldn't refund me. Finally I paid only 62 levs...*¹⁷⁵

Besides such shocking exceptions, other more 'ordinary' things also worried our respondents. Residing predominantly in rural areas, they could be too far away if an emergency medical help is needed: "I am aware that in case of emergency our chances of survival here in the village would probably be less than in Britain. On the other hand, the chances of having a heart attack here are less than in Britain"¹⁷⁶. There is rarely a pharmacy in the village and even if there is one, the chances of finding the proper medicine are slim. The problem actually is that "the Britons are used to some medicines, which are known under different names here", a translator told us. Brits are also concerned with the language problems. Few of them have enough knowledge of Bulgarian that would allow them to freely communicate with the doctors and the nurses. This was the main reason for a couple with extremely positive past experience of Bulgarian health system to decide that the wife should give birth in the U.K. Receiving insulin for diabetics could in some cases also be a pain: "to get it one has to get a protocol all the way from Sofia. It takes 4 days of going to offices and another 10 days before the protocol comes back"¹⁷⁷.

Here I Think Schooling is Better

To our great surprise the Bulgarian educational system was viewed positively by the interviewed British families. The few negative reactions the project team got came from people without personal experience of the system. Both pupils themselves and their parents seemed to be satisfied with the level of education here: "the fact the all the children here want to go to school is telling in itself. In England nobody wants to go to school. There's a lot more enthusiasm here"¹⁷⁸. The teachers were one of the key reasons for this opinion:

¹⁷⁵ woman, app 40 years old, translator at the EU Commission, Smolyan Area

¹⁷⁶ woman, 43 years old, former psychiatric nurse, married, Veliko Tarnovo area

¹⁷⁷ man, 65 years old, married, Veliko Tarnovo area

¹⁷⁸ woman, app 40 years old, married, 2 sons, Smolyan area

*Here I think schooling is better because the teachers have a better relation with the children. My son went to a restaurant with the teachers and everybody was laughing and dancing. The teachers were cuddling the children. So they got a bond here. In England that could have never happened ever. We were shocked when witnessing this because we could not believe it.*¹⁷⁹

Indeed, not all teachers were alike. Some of them showed a lot of understanding: “the teachers: they understand I don’t know a lot and they help me”¹⁸⁰. Others, however, were rather merciless like the one in Elhovo who gave a 13-years-old girl from Middlesboro 16 poor marks in Bulgarian Language and Literature within a single year. It is strange to expect a 13-years-old girl from Middlesboro to know about Ivan Vazov and Hristo Botev [famous Bulgarian writers and poets].

The project team was particularly interested in the comparison between the two schooling systems. According to a teenager living in Turnovo area here you have “more lessons, longer day, more subjects, shorter lessons but longer breaks and more of them”¹⁸¹. A key difference is in the way the various subjects are organized: “Lessons [here] are more theoretical than practical. In England you do more practical work”¹⁸². At first we expected that the common Bulgarian ‘learning-by-heart practice’ would attract tons of criticism. However, according to a lady from Smolyan area, such practices are not completely alien for the British education either: “In England all you do is copy what the teacher writes on the board. And then you have to memorize. There’s no actual teaching there.”

As far as discipline is concerned, however, the situation in Bulgaria seems to be worst than in England:

*Yeah, I act totally the opposite of what the Bulgarians act. Bulgarians, should you know, are shouting and I am sitting all quiet because in England if you say anything at all you’re in detention. Here, I mean everyone here gets their mobile phones, plays games...*¹⁸³

Other teenagers told us similar stories: “I really couldn’t believe that pupils could insult teachers in such a nasty way. In England for that you’ll get at least two extra hours of work after school”. As it appears, discipline becomes an issue from 7th or 8th grade onwards. A boy from Turnovo mentioned that here it was not before the 8th class when pupils become “more aggressive towards the teacher”.

¹⁷⁹ woman, app 40 years old, married, 2 sons, Smolyan area

¹⁸⁰ student, 14 years old, Smolyan area

¹⁸¹ family in their early 40s, with two sons, man was in tourism and his wife in ceramics, near Kilifarevo

¹⁸² family in their early 40s, with two sons, man was in tourism and his wife in ceramics, near Kilifarevo

¹⁸³ student, 14 years old, Smolyan area

EU accession solved one of the major issues for British citizens with children living in Bulgaria. To have their children enrolled at Bulgarian school Britons had to pay sums varying from 1,600 to 2,000 Levs per annum. Other problems persist. The offering of drugs at schools is an issue and we were told of cases when this was the prime reason for English boys to be stopped from the local school. It is also not rare for British teenagers to start going to Bulgarian school but drop out due to various reasons, the language difficulties being only one of them. According to a Bulgarian teacher, her colleagues "are not fit for the task. They are supposed to know at least a little bit of English and this is rarely the case". The same person told us a story of an English girl who wanted to study in the Dobrich College of Tourism. She had to take 2 or 3 exams to get her secondary education diploma. As it turned out there was nobody in town who could examine her so the girl had to fly back to the U.K. just for that.

Section III. What Bulgarians Think

A. I Suspect That These People Have Been Sent Here With a Purpose

In the beginning, some of the interviews conducted with Bulgarians suggested the hypothesis of negativism among the local population toward the British 'newcomers'. In the end of the fieldwork, however, there is enough evidence against this hypothesis. Although some negative attitudes against Brits could be identified, as a rule Bulgarians are very positive toward Brits coming to live and work here.

A 60 y.o. mayor of a village in the Yambol region with 1,200 people population where several British families live expressed most extreme negative views about Brits. According to him the Brits who come to Bulgaria are "scum": "those who come to our village are rubbish. Those who go to Turnovo are richer. Our [Britons] are poor." This man illustrates his thesis through an example of an Easter celebration:

First, the way they came and how they looked – for me it was a demonstration of disrespect to the mayor of the village. You know, you can't appear at an official party dressed in a t-shirt just taken down from the wash-line... the mayor has invited you to a cocktail party... you are expected to come properly dressed. But they came like vagrants.

When Bulgarians talked about any problems with Brits, the topic of pubs and alcohol would usually appear. The mayor of another 'British' village in the Turnovo area told us:

When they take a drop too much they create problems. It is because they talk too loud and always find something to laugh at. At this point the Bulgarians become irritated. They laugh every two minutes and it is quite noisy. A Bulgarian customer complains that they won't give him a break. Ours (the Bulgarians) also are noisy but in the end they pay.

It seems that the British culture of celebration is not fully comprehensible for some Bulgarians and this generates tensions between the two communities. Here are again the words of the first mayor:

We were talking to them and when we invited them to join the table it turned to chaos – they looked as if they had not touched food or drinks for months. Yahoooooo...glasses, plates ...started to clank. I was totally offended. I felt insulted and I was on the verge of showing the door to everyone and leaving myself.

This behaviour and the fact that "frankly, I don't see them on the streets of the village. They are this kind of people – wild. They live only in their own shell" made the respondent conclude:

Now I am convinced that we [the Bulgarians] are far, far ahead in manners and culture. And now no one can change my mind about something I have seen with my own eyes, because I live here.

These attitudes together with the higher living standard of Britons produce negative statements such as the following:

Our fellow-villagers [the Bulgarians] act as servants in their [British] houses. We do the cleaning, the sweeping, the brushing, the dusting while they only lay back and drink!

Many Bulgarians are still puzzled why people living in a rich European country have decided to come to poor Bulgaria. Furthermore, many Bulgarians seek all sorts of ways to immigrate. That is why the explanations that appear are quite close to conspiracy theories. The former regional governor of one of North Bulgarian districts was very straightforward in that respect:

*There is something else that bothers me a lot. I suspect that these people have been **sent** here with a purpose. Let me give you an example: there is a family living in the village... and they propagate some sort of religious cult. They tour the villages around, they disseminate leaflets, they brainwash people.*

Here is another interpretation in the paradigm of conspiracy theories:

I think that this is a policy of England to drive them away. They live here for three months and go back to England for 10 days. This comes to show that they are no citizens of the Republic [of Bulgaria]. How can you imagine that they could be citizens?

It is indicative that these types of explanations are mainly popular among the people of local 'power elites'. This, however, is not to say that local administrators are all negative to the newcomers. When conducting the survey we were able to detect both positive and negative reactions (cf. more in section two). It is yet true that most if not all of the critical reactions came from the mayors' group. A former governor, currently running in the local election campaign of October 2007 claimed that Britons coming to Bulgaria are not the best 'breed of people' we can get here:

*Decent ones are not coming here [in Bulgaria]. I don't know if it is true what people talk around because I have not been particularly interested, but I can see them – those [Britons] who come here are all the **dregs of [their] society**.*

The fact that the respondent “has not been particularly interested” is certainly not an impediment for him to reproduce the entire “model” of how the Britons come to Bulgaria:

They [the Brits] are given their whole pension if they buy a house here. Their government gives it to them. If they stay in England, the pension is given on a monthly basis. If they come here and prove they have bought a property, they can draw the entire pension. And this is a lot of money here so they become as free as a lark.

However, the problem is not mainly that the government sends the Britons to Bulgaria, but that they do not contribute to the local economy:

On the whole, the people who come here are poor. They won't straighten out the economy. They can't manage in the U.K. and therefore their own country's conscious policy is to encourage their emigration. Their own country can't deal with them so they pass the problem on to us and we, being the fools we are, feel happy about it. ... we've turned into a dumping ground – we've gathered here all second-hand cars in Europe and now we're gathering all indigent old people... Our youth is running away and we're importing old people. Who's to propel this economy?"

Another mayor made similar statements:

Q: *Now, is the region going to prosper since Britons are coming? Here, they've opened the border control point...*

A: *Yes, in prostitution. I do not see what else is going to prosper. This is all plundering.*

The former regional governor tends to find a passive if not an active support of the Bulgarian authorities:

“Have you ever seen any of them getting punished for drunk driving or for getting into fights? Only the kid in Varna and even he got away with it in the end.”

Most of the people who shared these negative views had not had any personal interactions with the Britons and reported second-hand knowledge. Also, in most cases these people did not speak English and could not directly communicate with the Britons. They were seemingly nervous about the foreigners not showing sufficient respect to their positions of authority, worried perhaps that the Britons might not even be realizing how important those positions were. Also, it seemed that the negative attitudes regarding Britons' loud manners often masked self-consciousness about one's lack of English-language knowledge. "My profession is one of responsibility and I take everything seriously. And the English take everything as a joke – they wave, they laugh, they babble in their language. What is there to laugh about?!"

However, the majority of the Bulgarians who express negative attitudes toward Britons search the grounds for the problems in Bulgarians rather than in Brits. The mayor from Yambol area told us:

This is our fault not theirs, because we became bad people. We allow them to buy out our motherland. That is not a democracy we've built here, but a chaos. Democracy – bla-bla... We're to blame, trust me, not the foreigners.

Probably this kind of statements that conceal the tensions between local patriotism and auto-aggression are the reason for the definitions offered to us in an informal conversation by a representative of the Turnovo hi-life: "Four types of Britons come to Bulgaria. First, pensioners; second, drunkards; third, people hoping for a social leap from a lower to a higher strata; and forth, faggots who desire to be seen as gays."

As a rule the interviewed Bulgarians are focused on specific everyday problems of Britons rather than on world politics. These are the concerns of the mayor of a village near Turnovo:

I think this is a problem and we have to react. Now there is no such obligation according to which they must register in our office. But at least they can present themselves in order for the mayor to know that they live here. This is important for the state, but not only for it. It's important for them as well. Very often they need assistance but we can't help them if we do not know they exist.

It is surprising that the mayor is not aware that what he insists for is done as a rule by the police and we were told of many cases when the local policeman pays a visit to Britons just to make sure everything is O.K. (cf. more in section two).

B. I am So Lucky to Have a British for a Neighbour

Discourse changes radically when interviews focus on personal interrelations. Even if there are some allusions that the Bulgarians are in a state of subordination because they are poor, as a whole the attitudes toward Britons are extremely positive. To quote the wife of the mayor of a village:

I'm so happy for our girl [Bulgarian girlfriend of 23 y.o. Englishman]. She hit the jackpot. She is from a very poor family. But honestly speaking, the boy wins more. Listen, he likes drinking. I'm not telling you he is a troublemaker, not at all. No fighting ... nothing like that. But he likes the drink... That is what I don't like. Our girl is from a poor family... with a sexy bottom...

Although some Bulgarians are not pleased by the way the Brits drink, we did not meet a single respondent claiming that Britons were not good workers, wonderful neighbours, and correct business partners:

He really works hard during the week. But on Friday evening he is as drunk as a fish. Till Monday morning "the line is busy". But they like living here.

The more the interviewed Bulgarians are involved in direct interaction with Britons, the more they are inclined to give up the popular generalizations and think of them as real people:

There are different people among them. There are some black sheep in the herd, indeed. Now we are visiting the family that is the most sociable, the closest to the Bulgarian mentality.

When the conversation is focused on particular Britons, the Bulgarians usually point to their working ethics and humanity as positive personal qualities. In general, these appear to be demonstrated in hard times. An illustration is the story of a 70 y.o. pensioner from a village near Elhovo

They are wonderful neighbours. They do favours. They lend money. I asked a Bulgarian neighbour – she did not lend me 2 Levs. I asked my British neighbours – they gave me 20 [Levs]. My wife passed away recently. Two months ago. It turned to be a tumour. They came often and helped a lot [he refers to his neighbours – an English couple]. Words fail me how much they helped. They had become very good friends [the wife of the respondent and her English neighbour]. They are compassionate. They help. Whatever my wife needed, she was always there to find it and bring it. God knows...they are very good people. She was always here in the house... [he bursts into tears]. She was always near her deathbed...I have two sons, but they are far, far away – one in the Sliven and the other in Burgas. She stayed with her [his wife] till the very end.

The British business ethics is one of the things that make the strongest impression on the Bulgarians:

I became somehow more at ease, because I feel a sort of certainty. They made all social provisions for me, now I am legally employed. It is, I will repeat again, it is no good to talk against my people, but the fact is that they [the Britons] made the provisions for me, they paid my health insurance one year back and now I have the confidence that I could go to see a doctor, a dentist...I was totally pushed to the bottom before that. (50 y.o ex-military officer, from a village near V. Tarnovo)

The majority of Bulgarian respondents really admire the fact that the Britons are “not pushed to the bottom”, that they are so active, full of initiative, ready to fight in order to achieve their goals:

She is a very strong person. You can't even imagine how bad the condition of the property they took was. A human hand had not touched it for more than 20 years. It was completely weed-grown. They put so many efforts to turn it into what is now. (45 y.o. English language teacher from the region of Ruse)

Statements concerning the British diligence and tenacity often enter the Bulgarian discourse:

They are used to different kind of weather there. The broiling hot disturbs them a lot. It was 43 degrees centigrade and we worked on the roof. His hands got burnt. But he didn't say we stop working. They are very vital, very active.

A widely spread expectation among Bulgarians seem to be that rich people do not take up any kind of work, let alone physical. That is why such Bulgarians are very surprised to see how their British employers work side by side with them:

There are no problems. They [the Britons] have complete confidence in me. When they have to do something in the nearby city, they leave me the keys and everything is all right. They are very fair people... We are always together. Not only to divide up the work. They look after the garden, the house. We work together. Very fair. You can't work with a Bulgarian that way... I was kicked up from the military department. They (the military) gave me nothing – 40 000 denominated levs.” (50 y.o. former military officer)

Contrary to the negative statements cited above, the Bulgarian respondents who are directly involved in interactions with Britons claim that it is not the Brits, but the Bulgarians, who exploit their workers:

Of course, as far as standard of living in concerned, the Brits are better off. However, they don't squander their money and get out of control... If a Bulgarian makes a little money, he starts to show off – look at me, look who am I. Brits never act like that. They are always helpful.

It is understandable that the salary is an important motive for many to start building work for Britons:

All the men in [the village] are engaged in their [British] companies. They are paid on a daily base – 20 Levs each evening. They don't have to wait the end of the month. My salary is 400 Levs. (Mayor of a village near V. Tarnovo)

However, the fair treatment by the British employers seems to be more important than the salary:

Since 1994 till last year I was working for Bulgarians as a private worker. If I get what they owe me for that work, I would never have to work again in my life. But the Bulgarians don't pay. They say they have no money and that's it. I have never met a fair employer among Bulgarians. While here [among Britons] everything is fair and square. We work side by side, we share everything. There are no chiefs, no subordinates – when there is a work it has to be done.

Bulgarian workers are used to the fact that the Britons pay more, but they also require more:

Our break is like that: I smoke a cigarette and he eats a block of chocolate. That is it. They [the Britons] are accustomed to fairness. If you do not watch over a Bulgarian worker, he will certainly take his wage doing nothing. With Brits – there are no such things. From 9 to 5 you do work and that's it.

The fact that the Britons pay more by no means implies that they squander money. Quite the contrary, the Bulgarians seem to expect that wealthier people do not look twice at every penny and they are surprised to find out how wrong such expectation turned to be:

They do not always pay well. They keep a strict hand over the money and they do not just let go...they do not give more in every case. They can give a present, but they are certainly more demanding compared to the Bulgarian employers.

In addition to British working ethics, Bulgarians are impressed by British customer culture. The words of an English-language teacher in Rouse area are very telling in that respect:

They [her British neighbours] have a perfect orientation in the big shopping areas – they had gone to Kaufland and Billa before I went. They are just amazing [in the sense that her British neighbours are better in finding out more efficient ways to spend their money]. They do not have any problems with shopping. And even with the car registration procedures they did it by themselves. They [the Britons] are people who know how to keep a strict hand over the money and they carefully budget every penny. It happened that I bought parts for their swimming pool and they always wanted a receipt or an invoice. For example, last year, I paid an accommodation bill for them and it was 80 Levs and 85 stotinky. She gave me 81 Levs and I had to find 15 stotinky for the change. This is something that we would never do as Bulgarians, but for them it is absolutely normal. Such behaviour was very surprising to me.

A more comprehensive and thorough survey is necessary in order to offer better and more detailed understanding of the cultural encounter between Britons and Bulgarians. However, even the empirical evidence, collected under this pilot project, provides grounds to formulate a hypothesis. It is highly probable that the main motives for Britons to move to Bulgaria are related to the simplicity of life here, the warm human relations, the clean nature and the preserved village communities. That is why most Britons here truly enjoy all natural and spontaneous events in the everyday life – starting with the sweets passed through the fence of the neighbours, the little donkeys and dogs running free in villages ending with the drinking of beer together with the local Roma in the village pub.

Such demonstrations of warm humaneness touch the souls of many Bulgarians and win their trust in Britons. However, some representatives of the official institutions, particularly those at the local level, feel threatened that their deserved institutional respect is neglected and that is why they accumulate negative attitudes towards Britons whom they seldom meet personally. It should be stressed again, however, that such negativism is not shared by all local administration. We came across many cases when mayors were particularly nice and helpful to Britons. (cf. more in the second section) It is important also to mention that nearly all Bulgarians we interviewed were extremely complimentary about their British neighbours, employers and friends. Such examples of friendship and hospitality are very impressive to Britons and they almost unanimously mention: “The best quality of all is the Bulgarians”. (cf. more in the section two).

Section IV. The British Perspectives

A. Most of These Idiots You'd Find in England, They Just Don't Come Out Here

Most of our interviewees made a point of distinguishing themselves from mass-scale British settlers like those in Spain. "Brits coming to live here are looking to make a contribution; unlike the ghettos in Spain, here they want to mix; I hope it doesn't become like Spain."¹⁸⁴ (cf. more in section one). Our interviewees were proud of having made a less conventional choice. "The crowd coming to Bulgaria is more open-minded than the ones going to Spain."¹⁸⁵ When asked what kind of Britons was coming to Bulgaria, one of our interviewees shared: "I don't think that Bulgarians should take the conclusion that Bulgaria's only attracting the rubbish. That's not true. If anything, it's attracting a better class of British people, not in terms of money, but the better kind of person generally than you find living in England. Most of these idiots you'd find in England, they just don't come out here."¹⁸⁶

I Would Like to Blend With Bulgarians

Our respondents were very keen on building a relationship with the locals and having exposure to local culture. "I would like to blend with Bulgarians. I don't care what nationality somebody is. If I like him we would be friends. That's why I didn't like Spain because it's always packed with English."¹⁸⁷ "We don't want to stay in the bar just on an English table. Having an English club in the village would stop us actually to understand Bulgarians."¹⁸⁸ Perhaps because of their strong negative attitude to the situation of British settlers in Spain, many of the contacted Britons prefer to live in an area where they have fewer compatriots: "I don't want more English. It sounds horrible. It sounds snobbish to say I don't want anybody else here."¹⁸⁹ (cf. more in section one). So strong were such attitudes, that many people shared that if more Britons were to settle in their village, they would consider moving elsewhere in Bulgaria:

*If this village become more British than Bulgarian I would be very sad. I think that our presence here would do a benefit for this country but not if we bunch. I think it is better to have a dispersal of people throughout the country than communities, which are totally dominated by a minority. If this village becomes more British, we would certainly consider moving to another area of the country.*¹⁹⁰

We Play Darts Together

¹⁸⁴ Man, app 40 years old, VT

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Man, app 55 years old, VT area

¹⁸⁸ Woman, app 55 years old, VT area

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Woman, app 45 years old, VT area

The above however, does not mean that the Britons whom we met do not keep in touch. Every respondent knew the other U.K. citizens in the area and most people reported of regular meetings and at least of some sort of community life. “We play darts. We do organize competitions on Wednesday nights.”¹⁹¹ They acknowledged that it is useful to maintain such contacts. “In Turnovo a guy called Malcolm tried to organize a club for English-speaking people, not just Englishmen. It meets every last Sunday of the month. Here you can swap stories, give advices if you had problems with builders for example.”¹⁹² Many Britons see such contacts as something they need to do. “If you are not part of the community, you don’t know where to get a plumber!”¹⁹³ In the village of Sokolovo, the local Brits meet twice a week at Marin’s Pub while those living in Balchik have their meeting place in Bar Paris.

Feeding Dogs with Salami

While the project team did not come across any serious conflicts within the British circles in Bulgaria, most of our interviewees acknowledged that there are more tensions among the Britons themselves than there are between Britons and Bulgarians. “I get more annoyed with English people and their expectations than I get with Bulgarians.”¹⁹⁴ Most of these tensions seemed to arise out of disapproval of each other’s ways. Given that they are a relatively new minority in Bulgaria, some of our respondents are aware that the locals are in the process of making up their mind about the newcomers and the first impression is an important one. “It’s a shame that there are some English people that overdo drinking. I’m sure this affected the attitude of Bulgarians towards the Brits.”¹⁹⁵ Indeed, many interviewed Britons were embarrassed by others drinking a lot or being loud. “Our neighbours now are British but they drink more than they should and I find it a bit embarrassing.”¹⁹⁶ “To be honest, English could be very loud and you cannot listen to the conversation. And they drink a lot.”¹⁹⁷ Another thing that many of our interviewees are sensitive about is flashing one’s relative wealth. “... and to feed the dogs salami in a village with a staple diet is a little bit insensitive. She’s just from another planet. Just look around you! Observe what’s going on!”¹⁹⁸

¹⁹¹ Man, app 60 years old, Balchik area

¹⁹² Woman, app 55 years old, VT area

¹⁹³ Man, app 70 years old, Balchik area

¹⁹⁴ Woman, app 55 years old, VT area

¹⁹⁵ Man, app 60 years old, Balchik area

¹⁹⁶ Woman, app 18 years old, Elhovo area

¹⁹⁷ Woman, app 50 years old, Elhovo area

¹⁹⁸ Woman, app 55 years old, VT area

According to some opinions, these critical attitudes within the British circles have caused it to become somewhat fragmented into “pockets of people.” We tried to look for patterns in this fragmentation, to identify the lines along which people would divide. One explanation we were given was that “when you leave your own country your own biases tend to become more amplified; ...class, ethnic, religious differences from back in the U.K. are being transported and amplified here.”¹⁹⁹ Others had a more circumstantial explanation: “Everyone who comes here comes through an agent and there is a lot of tension between people who have used this or that agent; there are clans of people around the agents because agents are bitchy about each other. There is no sense of cohesion among the British people – there are groups.”²⁰⁰ Yet another division that came through in our interviews was the one between the ‘new’ and the ‘old’ settlers. The new ones may not be aware of this division, but the ones who have been here longer point to it quite a bit. They feel that they have discovered Bulgaria and came here full of the spirit of adventure and out of love for the country. The new ones, they feel, come to an already publicized place and are looking chiefly for cheap property, without the intention to live in Bulgaria or make a contribution.

It seemed at times in the course of our project that the Britons living in Bulgaria are divided. However, a Bulgarian lady married to a Briton shared an observation that, to us, rang true: “They have a lot of differences but if there is a real problem between Bulgarians and Britons, they unite. Instantly.”²⁰¹

B. There is Cultural Life ... There Is A Community Here...

This research was conducted mainly in the villages of Bulgaria because the preliminary information we collected suggested that Britons would usually prefer to buy a home there. Consequently, the Britons whom we interviewed have an immediate and close contact with some of the most traditional Bulgarian ways, ones that may be long lost to Bulgarians in large cities.

*There is cultural life. ... There is a community here. You know your neighbours. Everybody knows how you are doing, where you are going... If you want to find where Stoyka is going, I can tell you exactly where Stoyka is. So in the U.K. we have those structures broken down, that old community structure is broken down, whether it is consequence of the way we've began to live – everything is on your doorstep, the Internet, fast cars, motor ways, flights, airports, you know... alienated.*²⁰²

They communicate with old people in villages whose own grandchildren may not have the time to spare or the awareness to appreciate such communication. “The old ladies are great fun, we have long chats as they’re walking their cows every morning,”²⁰³ one of our interviewees said. Indeed, Britons who live in the rural areas see a side of Bulgarian culture that few of the Bulgarian city dwellers know.

¹⁹⁹ Man, app 40 years old, VT area

²⁰⁰ Man, app 40 years old, VT

²⁰¹ Woman, app 45 years old, Rouse area

²⁰² Man, app 60 years old, Elhovo area

²⁰³ Man, app 50 years old, Smolyan area

The Alphabet Day and the Christmas ‘Pig Killing’

The Britons we talked to participate in the village festivals, in the celebrations of the name days of locals. They have learned that 24 May is “the Alphabet’s Day” and that 8 March is “girls’ day” and some have grown to love the local Easter traditions:

*We celebrated our first Christmas with some Bulgarian friends. Then on the second Christmas my partner had to go to the U.K. so I spend the whole Christmas day cutting fats in intestines. Maybe not fascinating but integrating!*²⁰⁴

Yet another story with a pig at Christmas time went like this: “At Christmas my partner was asked to help killing the pig. This horrifies English people because their meat comes in plastic wrapped-up. It’s a fact of life. You have to kill an animal to eat meat. Here it’s just a little bit more in you face.”²⁰⁵

Coming to Bulgarian villages, our respondents brought some of their holidays and traditions. Some celebrate St. Patrick’s Day, others just Christmas. Notably, a Scottish lady shared: “We still have Burns’ night. 25th of January is Burns’ night... And you have haggis, and you play bagpipes, we always recite some of Burns’ poems while we have dinner. We always do that.”²⁰⁶

C. I Am Really Charmed by the Rhodope Folklore Music - the Bag-pipe

One of the goals of the project team was to explore Britons’ familiarity with the “official local culture”. Given that few Bulgarian books, films, theatrical performances are translated into English, our respondents knew virtually nothing about them. Many expressed a willingness to learn but were not sure how to go about it. Those who used to live in cities with a vibrant cultural scene shared that this was what they missed the most. It seems that the time has come for Bulgarian cultural authorities to think of ways of “translating” our culture and making it accessible to the foreigners that will probably continue to show an interest in settling in Bulgaria.

²⁰⁴ Woman, app 45 years old, VT area

²⁰⁵ Woman, app 55 years old, VT area

²⁰⁶ Woman, app 60 years old, VT area

When exploring Britons' familiarity with the local life styles, the project team always asked about their musical preferences, the assumption being that music is perhaps the most visible element of local culture and one that would easily reach across language barriers. While many of the respondents did not have a particular opinion of Bulgarian music, those who did generally made a distinction between folklore and pop-folk, popularly called *chalga*. We frequently heard statements like "the folklore I like; *chalga* I don't like."²⁰⁷ "I like Bulgarian folklore dance music but not the *chalga* music,"²⁰⁸ "I am really charmed by the Rhodope folklore music - the bag-pipe - I am just stunned how everybody is into *chalga*,"²⁰⁹ There were also Britons who liked pop-folk and would highlight it in an advertising TV spot.²¹⁰ Some of the interviewed were familiar with the names of Ivana and Preslava. Of the pop singers in Bulgaria the best known were perhaps "Charisma", fancied by some British teenagers. Interviews confirmed our initial expectation that *chalga* is the most visible genre in Bulgarian villages at the moment. However, there is certainly a thirst among some of the interviewed foreigners living in the country for more traditional styles.

D. I Don't Know Exactly What Happens but We've Started to Understand Each Other

Not surprisingly, one of the main problems that Britons encounter when coming to Bulgaria is the language barrier. It affects their contacts with Bulgarian authorities and with their neighbours. Unlike languages from the Latin group, Bulgarian sounds to them totally incomprehensible, even "*alien*"²¹¹. It must be daunting for people, many of whom are retired or close to retirement age, to be faced with the prospect of learning a new language and relying on it almost entirely in their daily life. It is very impressive therefore, how upbeat the majority of our respondents were about this prospect. They rely on a few trusted interpreters for the vital interactions with Bulgarian authorities but generally make an effort to learn enough Bulgarian that would allow them to communicate with the local community. Those who can find a local teacher take lessons; others learn from their communications with the neighbours and workers. Oftentimes the first words one would learn are the terms for tools and building materials. The person who would give them their first somewhat more sophisticated glimpse into the opinions of a neighbour would frequently be the granddaughter who came for the weekend and who only recently took up English at school.

Our British contacts shared complex stories of their interactions with the local communities. Somehow the old guy next door who does not speak a word of English managed to explain that the cardboard boxes should not be thrown away because they may be used for lighting up the fire in the winter or that the outdoor toilet should not be taken down because the regular one might freeze when the snow comes.²¹² Listening to these stories one might think that the language barrier matters not:

²⁰⁷ Woman, app 55 years old, Rousse area

²⁰⁸ Woman, app 65 years old, Balchik area

²⁰⁹ Woman, app 40 years old, Smolyan area

²¹⁰ Man, app 40 years old, VT area

²¹¹ Man, app 40 years old, VT

²¹² Man, app 50 years old, Elhovo area

*The communication is very difficult. They don't speak our language. But we understand each other because, I suppose, we are all human. Some peculiar process happens.*²¹³

In an almost alchemic reaction, understanding is distilled through participating in the everyday motions of village life. And “distilled” is in some cases not simply a metaphor. “It’s the language of *rakia*, I’ve grown to speak it very well!”²¹⁴

The quickest to learn Bulgarian are of course the children. But then, they are also the ones for whom the interim period while learning Bulgarian, may be the most taxing, especially if they need to attend a Bulgarian school. Their Bulgarian classmates and the teachers would usually show a lot of understanding but every now and then someone would be penalized for struggling with the language. Perhaps the best Bulgarian speaker we interviewed shared with the project team that during her first year at school, the Bulgarian language teacher gave her the poorest grade (grade 2) sixteen times in a row. The girl who told us this story speaks a most authentic Elhovo-region Bulgarian, virtually undistinguishable from a native’s accent. (cf. more in the first section). Indeed, few as they may be, we met U.K. citizens whose Bulgarian can hardly be distinguished from the locals’. They have picked on the regional accent and expressions and are justifiably proud with their achievement.

Regardless of the huge difficulty that the language poses for many Britons, most of the respondents were not critical of the fact that few Bulgarians in those regions speak English. Quite the contrary, they often voiced the opinion that the Britons were the ones who needed to learn Bulgarian rather than expect the locals to change for their sake.

E. The Capability of Producing Good Food in Restaurants is There But the Willingness is Not

Yet another facet of Bulgarian culture that Britons encounter in their daily life is food. There is a common belief that Bulgarians tend to be proud of their food, especially of the vegetables and perhaps above all of the Bulgarian tomatoes. Seeing that Britons spend a lot of time in restaurants, their neighbours have little doubt that the newcomers must love the local food. Surprisingly however, our respondents were divided on this topic and many of them were rather critical. Criticisms were sometimes extreme: “The one thing I don’t like in Bulgaria is the food. It’s the worst in Europe; it’s possibly the worst in the world.”²¹⁵ Interviewees complained that restaurants often serve the food cold or bring it at the wrong time or do not understand how to present it. Our conversations suggested that in order for Britons to consider a food item a proper dish, it needs to be hot. Thus, while most Bulgarians would point to the *shopska salata* as the landmark Bulgarian dish, the people we met were more excited about dishes that are served hot, such as *kavarma*, as well as dough-based dishes such as *banitsa* or *palachinki*.

²¹³ Man, app 60 years old, Elhovo area

²¹⁴ Woman, app 40 years old, Elhovo area

²¹⁵ Man, app 40 years old, VT area

Another criticism was related to the lack of variety, to the fact that local food “is not very adventurous”.²¹⁶ “You must have cheese with everything and there’s only *sirene* or *kashkaval!*”²¹⁷ It is very difficult to find good beef and lamb in Bulgaria, according to many of our interviewees; still, they consider pork to be quite good. Those who live near a large department store can get almost anything, albeit at higher prices, but those who reside in remote areas struggle with the lack of products they used to consume daily. Indeed, when asked what it is that they miss the most, our respondents often rated family, friends or social life a distant second after food items such as cheddar cheese, Heinz baked beans, tea, mustard and even marmite.

There we met many people who appreciated Bulgarian food. They find the produce “fresh and wholesome;”²¹⁸ to them vegetables “taste like they used to taste years ago in England” and the egg yolks are brightly yellow “like the sun.”²¹⁹ Our interviewees admitted that when cooking, they generally stick to the recipes they brought from home. Most of them had had a chance to try local homemade food though, since the neighbours often presented them with food, both cooked and uncooked. Especially for elderly, widowed Bulgarians who often live alone in villages, having a younger neighbour to share your food with seems to be a treat in itself.

I Like Vodka *Flirt* and *Zagorka*

Interviewed Britons generally dislike the most traditional Bulgarian alcoholic drink, *rakia*. They find its taste too strong. Still, given the numerous invitations by neighbours to have a *rakia*, some have come to see this drink more as a metaphor, a way of bonding with the locals:

*Last year we made our own rakia. I don't like rakia very much, but a lot of Bulgaria people come to our home and have rakia.*²²⁰

*...It's the language of rakia.*²²¹

Our respondents’ preference is for beer, vodka and more rarely for wine. Many refer to local drinks using not the generic but the brand name. Vodka ‘Flirt’ was perhaps the brand most often mentioned, followed closely by the beer brands like ‘Zagorka’, ‘Kamenitsa’ and ‘Shoumensko’. The best quality of Bulgarian drinks, in the opinion of many respondents, is their low price. Actually, the price is considered so low that some interviewees would claim it a waste to be living in Bulgaria without drinking. Others would make a point of distancing themselves from the perceived drinking culture. Contrary to the popular belief, some of the Britons we met specifically noted that they do not drink alcohol.

F. Knowledge Transfer: We Plant Vegetables the Way Locals Do

²¹⁶ Man, app 40 years old, VT

²¹⁷ Man, app 40 years old, VT area

²¹⁸ Man, app 40 years old, VT

²¹⁹ Woman, app 65 years old, Elhovo area

²²⁰ Woman, app 45 years old, VT area

²²¹ Woman, app 40 years old, Elhovo area

A different culture can teach one new things. We inquired whether our interviewees had learned something from their Bulgarian neighbours. They surely had and the most widespread lesson was the one in gardening. "I've now learned to keep an eye on my neighbours to see when they plant and what they plant."²²² And while Britons are learning how to grow vegetables, local are impressed with the British lawns: "Ryegrass is the most respected culture! They care that it's fit for treading on, not eating!"²²³ Preparing preserve for the winter is another practice that some of our respondents pick up from their neighbours: "We'd forgotten how to do bottling, pickling, making jams. I remember my mum doing it when I was little but I'd never done it myself. We hope we'll do our own pickles this year."²²⁴ (cf. more in part two). One of the most interesting practices that we saw adopted by Britons dates back to Ottoman times and is almost forgotten in modern Bulgarian construction: "We made a special door to connect us with the neighbouring house"²²⁵ (popularly known by the Turkish name *komshuluk*). In a curious example, a 20 year old Briton from the Elhovo area shared that he had a car accident and was taken by the locals to an old lady who melted lead in order to help him deal with the shock. This is the local tradition of "bullet moulding," a technique practiced by old wives to oust the negative energies accumulated in the human body as a result of sudden fear.

I Know Few People at the Ski Lifts

Other lessons learned included simple "survival" skills: "I do my housework like locals early in the mornings when it is still not so hot."²²⁶ Perhaps the most questionable survival skill that our respondents learned from Bulgarians was how to use connections to go around the rules, save money and generally make one's life easier. "I ski a lot. I know few people at the ski lifts and they let me without paying,"²²⁷ one of our interviewees shared. Yet another clever, albeit not entirely proper technique, allowed our respondent to avoid overcharge for Internet connection: "I have a Bulgarian friend and he has Internet via satellite. They are cabling it for me. When we first came here we wanted to get connected but Internet people knew we are English and asked for 90 levs per month while Bulgarians are paying 25-30. Instead of paying we decided to get connection from my friend and split the monthly fee."²²⁸ Having realized that you need good friends from the local community to get things done, another interviewee recommended to befriend someone from the opposite sex: "make a good friend of a Bulgarian who speaks good English; take the initiative – for men it's easier to make friends with women – not for an affair but because it's easier to build the relationship."²²⁹ (cf. more in section one and two).

The Reverse Side of the Knowledge Transfer

²²² Man, app 65 years old, VT area

²²³ Bulgarian mayor, VT area

²²⁴ Woman, app 65 years old, VT area

²²⁵ Man, app 50 years old, Elhovo area

²²⁶ Woman, app 65 years old, Balchik area

²²⁷ Man, app 35 years old, Smolyan area

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Man, app 55 years old, Rouse area

Interviewed Bulgarians also learn from the Britons. They are impressed by their houses and ever interested in peeping in. As a Briton pointed out, Bulgarians generally do not seem to pay enough attention to the finish of a house. This is something that they see while they work on British houses and may then apply in the future. Several Bulgarians shared how much they liked the sensor lights in the gardens of Britons, which light up one's way when coming home in the evening.

Interestingly, at times some of our respondents would underestimate the prior knowledge of Bulgarians and would assume that observations of British lifestyle introduced a certain item or practice for the very first time. Some believed, for example, that Bulgarians first saw the two-side stepladder or a human caressing a dog when Britons moved in.

G. We're Not Here Just for Cheap Property; We Want to Give Something Back!

One of the most encouraging phenomena that the project team observed in the course of this project is Britons' participating in the community life of the towns and villages where they live. Britons in Bulgaria often settle in depopulated areas with ageing inhabitants. Many of the newcomers are retired but they still may be a lot younger than the Bulgarians living there. Even when there is no age difference, the Britons come with their distinct culture, their individual talents and their ideas of community life. Throughout our trips we saw wonderful examples of the ways, in which (ex-) UK citizens were participating in Bulgarian community life.

Whether it is an English lady joining the local women's choir or an East-end rock singer performing in the *chitalishte* (traditional cultural centre) following the performance of a Bulgarian old ladies choir, these occurrences breathe life in local communities. A British lady shared with us the story of her joining the local choir:

I walk my dog every day and one day a lady called Maria she invited me to sing with their choir. It's all in Bulgarian so I'm trying to understand it first. So I went but I thought they'll not want me again. But they were so helpful. Nobody made me feel stupid. I think it is like a women club because women don't go to the bar really. Its 15 of us from ages 15 to 70. Most of them are older like me. I started to pick up words. Then they dressed me in a traditional costume. I was so nervous the first time we performed in public. It was on the village day. Everybody was so happy with our songs. The other from the choir tried to calm me down saying: don't worry, we are all nervous as well. After that the mayor came and fetched us both and invited us to their special table where there were mayors of several villages.²³⁰

²³⁰ Woman, app 55 years old, VT area

In another village a retired British man organized the local kids, both Bulgarian and Roma, in a football team. He used to train a children's team back in England and felt that kids in his new community would benefit from some structure to their free time. Since the team was getting better, our respondent had scheduled a meeting with the local mayor to request the designation of a football pitch. There were examples of Britons supporting local schools, churches or *chitalishta*, teaching yoga, opening their pool for the local kids on a hot day, helping the municipality buy fireworks for New Year's Eve.

I noticed we never had fireworks on the square and I asked the locals would we have them this time when Bulgaria is entering the EU to which they replied they have no money for that. So I rushed home and gave the mayor 50 Euros.²³¹

H. Now You Joined Europe... It's Going to be a Big Challenge, but it's a Chance.

Many of the Britons living in Bulgaria witnessed the country's entry into the European Union. While in the eyes of some Bulgarian citizens EU accession brought little or no change, our respondents generally saw it as a deeply meaningful act, with its benefits and challenges. To many the prospect of Bulgaria's EU entry was a factor in their decision to invest in Bulgaria. It meant stability and it meant that the prices of property are bound to rise. (cf. more in section one).

Our respondents have been rather sensitive to any changes brought about by EU accession. Many interviewees reported changes in the operations of Bulgarian administration since January 1, 2007. *"Since Bulgaria is in the EU it's easier to do things,"²³²* one respondent acknowledged.

I've seen massive improvements in all areas since 2 years when I first came in'. I was shocked by roads, infrastructure, and rubbish everywhere. But the longer you stay here you start to realize the recent history of the country. Nobody was putting money into such things but now you see the money coming in and improvements are already visible. You see big improvements in infrastructure. The shops develop in everywhere. Housing's going up. And you can just see money being poured in, invested in the country.²³³

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Man, app 65 years old, Elhovo area

²³³ Man, app 55 years old, VT area

The Britons we interviewed were never indifferent to EU accession. Some however, felt that Bulgaria was not yet ready for the European Union, or even that EU accession is one of the biggest problems the country faces at the moment. “Bulgaria shouldn’t be in Europe; it should find its own face and it’s own infrastructure first,”²³⁴ one of the interviewees said. Another shared that with EU accession “prices are going up, which affects too much the local population. A sizeable amount of your wage is just to lead one’s daily life. The number of people living in villages will deplete even further.”²³⁵

I. The President’s Name Starts with ‘P’, Doesn’t It?²³⁶

Even though the majority of interviewed Britons stay in Bulgaria permanently and regard it as their home, they are generally uninterested in politics. Many interviewees share they were similarly disinterested in politics back home and they do not see a reason to change. “I don’t follow Bulgarian politics. Neither did I in England.”²³⁷ The language barrier does not allow them to follow the news and get a hold of the intricacies of the Bulgarian political situation. “Well, I don’t understand the language enough to really know...”²³⁸ Something else - they feel that Bulgarian politics is generally not their problem. “It doesn’t really make too much difference to me, does it? Personally. I mean, we live on a pension from England. So, it doesn’t really affect me...”²³⁹ The majority of people interviewed did not know that they had the right to vote at the European Parliament elections. The notable and highly publicised exception is the British community in Hotnitsa where seven Britons exercised their right to vote. (cf. more in the Main Conclusions paragraph)

The opinions of the few interviewed Britons who were interested in politics demonstrated which Bulgarian political party is the most visible in small Bulgarian communities. Any respondent who was more or less acquainted with the country’s political life was aware of the name of Ataka. “I got the feeling what is going on. Usually the news is about scandal, lately Ataka done worse and someone else done that. Vary rarely something positive.”²⁴⁰ Despite Ataka’s frequently xenophobic positions, the contacted Britons do not feel that these are directed against them. They realize that the objects of xenophobia in Bulgaria are rather the Roma and Muslim communities. Thus, respondents view the presence of an extreme right party in Bulgaria as a mere fact of life. Still we met people who were very particular in their opinions, on both ends of the political spectrum. “Ataka gets my sympathy because if they were in the U.K. I’d be supporting them. This is the closest thing Bulgaria has to the Scottish National Party, which supports independent Scotland and wants to preserve their culture,”²⁴¹ a Scot shared. A lady was of the opposite opinion: “I follow Bulgarian politics and there are parties that frighten me. Ataka, of course. Neo-nazism!”²⁴²

²³⁴ Man, app 50 years old, Smolyan area

²³⁵ Man, app 40 years old, VT area

²³⁶ Woman, app 50 years old, Rousse area

²³⁷ Man, app 40 years old, VT

²³⁸ Woman, app 65, Smolyan area

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Woman, app 45 years old, VT area

²⁴¹ Man, app 40 years old, VT area

²⁴² Woman, app 45 years old, VT area

The Future Prospects

At the end of our conversations we always asked our respondents what their future plans were. A great majority of them envision staying in Bulgaria. “We’re here to stay,”²⁴³ a lady shared. Others are expecting their family to join them soon: “My partner’s brother bought another house in a village 2 km. away. My parents are moving to this village.”²⁴⁴ Some shared that they would like to be buried here.

For our respondents the reasons for staying in Bulgaria were not primarily economic. When asked what they would do if they won a large sum of money from the lottery, only a couple of people answered that they would move to an exotic destination (e.g. the Caribbean). The vast majority of respondents however would stay in Bulgaria, invest the money here, perhaps buying a few more properties near mountain or sea resorts.

²⁴³ Woman, app 55 years old, Elhovo area

²⁴⁴ Man, app 40 years old, VT region

Recommendations

Our respondents were for the most part people who managed well. It takes a certain spirit of adventure and a readiness to experience hardships to move to another country, especially a poorer one. Perhaps due to their acceptance of such a premise, the Britons we contacted had rarely sought assistance from the British Embassy in Bulgaria; neither did they expect such assistance. When asked whether they would contact the Embassy in any particular case, most of them felt that the Embassy only needed to be there in times of crisis. Still, it seems from the responses we got that there are things that could be done to better the life of Britons in Bulgaria. These could be divided into three groups.

The first group includes things that would help Britons who consider moving to Bulgaria make a more informed choice. This advice could take the form of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) and could be posted on the Internet. Britons can be informed of some of the more common mistakes or risks. We often heard such advice in the course of our research. Certainly, one should avoid buying property based solely on internet communication and photos of the estate. One should also be careful giving Power of Attorney to anybody. An opinion that we heard frequently was that it is quite affordable and wise to first rent a property in Bulgaria and try to live here before purchasing. This would also facilitate the process of choosing the property, negotiating with agents and owners, etc. It would also be useful to read some of the ex-pat forums in Bulgaria. The most popular of these forums, according to our interviewees, was <http://mybulgaria.info/>. Altogether, while there is a lot of information posted on the internet, little comes from an unbiased sort and there does not seem to be a reliable FAQ source.

The second group of potential activities includes things that would facilitate Britons' life after they move to Bulgaria. Encouragement to and cooperation with Bulgarian authorities to translate into English the administrative forms and instructions, which are most commonly used by British citizens, would go a long way towards alleviating the burden of paperwork. Offering information on how one should react in cases of price discrimination would also be immensely helpful. It may be necessary to give some attention to the procedure for obtaining free insulin for diabetics who have moved to Bulgaria and streamline it. Some attention could be given to also obtaining further information on Bulgarians' perception of the British community in Bulgaria and improving its image where it might have been affected by prejudice or by the media interest in scandal. In the opinion of the project team, broadcast media products, such as documentaries, which cover positive examples of the cultural meeting between the British and the Bulgarian communities, could help oppose xenophobic attitudes.

A third group of activities that we would recommend, include ones that could help the Britons who have settled here partake in the community life of their towns and villages and implement their many ideas of improving the situation there. As mentioned, some of the people we met are artists. They have an interest in performing and in sharing their culture with the local communities and are seeking appropriate ways to do that. Others have ideas of helping their settlements by fixing the medical clinic or constructing a football pitch. Yet others want to learn more about Bulgaria through having access to Bulgarian culture, performances, English-language press issued here (many were not aware of the existence of newspapers in English like the Sofia Echo). Some of our respondents shared that they needed a regional English language newspaper for the British community (there seems to be one only in the Veliko Turnovo area, The Frontier Times) or that they wanted to get together and create a charity. The British Embassy in Sofia could consider bringing to life some of these ideas, potentially through the institution of a small grant scheme for community work for British citizens living in Bulgaria or thorough other activities. All of these ideas have the potential of turning the British community in Bulgaria into Ambassadors of good will for the United Kingdom.