

## **BESSARABIAN BULGARIANS: STUDYING IN BULGARIA, SEARCHING FOR AN IDENTITY**

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The falling of "The Iron Curtain" and the onset of USSR reforms in 1985 had an important influence on structuring people's lives in the Soviet Union. The democratization of society, the granting of freedom of speech, and the opening of borders have caused an increase in the ethnic consciousness of national minorities. Bessarabian Bulgarians, who did not have the legal right to communicate with Bulgaria for approximately one century, or access to Bulgarian literature or other media, now have access to the country and its literature. This, in turn, is bringing a change in their identity; a desire to know their history, literature, and something about their national heroes. Bulgaria has catered to these wishes and in February 1991 the first group of Bessarabian children were admitted to a language grammar school in Sliven, Bulgaria. Since then, a commission formed by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology from Bulgaria has accepted approximately 100 students from ethnic Bulgarian villages in Bessarabia every year for training in higher educational institutions in the country.

In this paper I explore the question: "How does studying in Bulgaria influence the transformation of identity of youth from Bessarabia?" It is necessary to note that an overwhelming majority of Bessarabian Bulgarians, who eventually study in Bulgaria, were born and have grown up in villages rather than urban centres. About forty villages with a prevailing Bulgarian population are located on the territory of south Bessarabia. The average size of a village is 5,000, and the number of representatives of this ethnic community in the region is approximately 200,000. Each Bulgarian village in Bessarabia represents an isolated entity, an endogamous circle which has maintained traditional Bulgarian culture for over two hundred years.

In such traditional small communities, identity is predetermined by the village and there is little opportunity for alternative identities. However, when youth move to Bulgaria, they move into a completely different type of society<sup>64</sup>. Considerably more egalitarian and mobile, the more industrialised Bulgarian cities (in comparison with the rural villages of Odessa province) provide greater freedom for a choice of identity. Studying in Bulgaria enables students to become anonymous and independent

individuals, in other words, to rethink their personal identity.

The present research is based on questionnaires, conducted by the author in 2002 among Bessarabian Bulgarians who were students in higher education institutions in Sofia, Bulgaria. A total of 60 students were interviewed: 10 from each year of the 5 year courses (ie those studying between the years 1996-2002) and 10 students who had completed their degrees and were working in Bulgaria. This amounts to 10% of the total number of students studying and living in Bulgaria at that time. The questionnaires aimed to highlight the dynamics and transformation of identity over the period of years of higher education.

### **Historical notes**

The formation of a Bulgarian diaspora in Bessarabia resulted from mass migration in the second part of the 18<sup>th</sup> and the first part of 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, after the eviction of Tatars in 1807 from the Budzak steppes, a small population of Bulgarians, Ukrainians<sup>65</sup>, Russians<sup>66</sup> and an insignificant number of Moldovan autochthonous populations<sup>67</sup> were established in Budzak<sup>68</sup>. Greek, Armenian, and Jewish communities migrated to the cities. In 1809 an intensive resettling of south Bessarabia began by Moldovan, Bulgarian, Ukrainian, Russian, Serbian and Greek populations. In the period 1814 to 1817 there was also a resettlement of Germans to Budzak. The ethnic configuration changed along with population shifts, following the resettlement and migration of Bulgarians during the period 1828 to 1835. Other ethnic communities also moved, for example, Serbs, Greeks, Roma and others; however, they migrated in far smaller numbers and were gradually assimilated into the Bulgarian population. Later, other migrants also settled into the predominantly Bulgarian colonies (Gagauz, Greeks, Moldovans, Ukrainians, Russians, Roma and others). They were also assimilated gradually and eventually lost their ethnic identity. The reverse also occurred in the cases where Bulgarian groups settled in villages where other ethnic groups predominated: Bulgarians became incorporated into the other communities. In the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, monoethnic, homogeneous colonies were formed which developed

their specific ethnic features over the following century.

The cultural originality of each colony and interactions between villages of different ethnicities created an important basis for the maintenance of endogamous marriages within village boundaries. In this respect, family-marriage relations played a particularly important role. On the one hand, Bulgarians were isolated from other ethnic communities in the region, on the other hand, language and cultural differences characterize the wider region and indeed one Bulgarian village from the next. Dialect differences between different Bulgarian villages are a barrier for marriage between families from different Bulgarian villages.

The birth of the first generation of Bulgarians on the territory of Bessarabia generated a new social group of 'Bessarabian Bulgarians'. Such an identity was first evident in the first half of 19th century, and was probably determined as much in spatial as in other terms. At the beginning such an identity was not particularly strong: Bessarabian Bulgarians realized their difference from Bulgarians from the mother country only gradually. Firstly this was because the vast mass of the population during this period was born in Bulgaria, and they carried certain ethnic markers, transferred to Bessarabia and transmitted to the new generation. These markers were transformed only once the new generation was born. The new generation developed an alliance to the new land and developed a new identity.

By the end of the 19th century the isolation of some colonies, in cultural and language terms, meant that each village developed its own autonomous identity, as village 'Chijshijci', 'Chushmilijsi', 'Troyanci' and so on. Language and cultural differences between ethnically Bulgarian villages were recognised by the members of each community as well as by representatives of other villages. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century every settlement existed in local isolation, each representing a border based on a number of markers, especially in terms of language.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century the ethnic identity of Bessarabian Bulgarians was strengthened through direct communication with Bulgaria. Immigrants, even after the final settlement of Bessarabia, continued to visit relatives in Bulgaria (under Ottoman Empire until 1878) illegally. In parallel with this, significant numbers of Bulgarian Revival figures visited Bessarabian villages, teaching at schools and in the Bolgrad gymnasium, and conducted cultural-educational activities amongst the Bulgarian population.

However, the connections began to gradually erode, especially by the end of 19th century. On the one hand, this was a result of weak connections with Bulgaria. On the other hand, the Russification politics of the Russian empire also significantly reduced the influence of the Bulgarian Revivalists in Bessarabia. All this, in turn, led to the gradual disappearance of an ethnic identity focused on Bulgaria. Connections with Bulgaria were only renewed again after 1985.

Far fewer studies on the Bulgarians living in Bessarabia were carried out in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Bulgarians lived through political changes which saw the area come in turn under the power of four different states: Russia, Romania, USSR and Ukraine, while the local peoples' ethnic identity remained relatively unchanged. Both younger and senior generations of Bessarabian Bulgarians speak exclusively in Bulgarian. The majority are bilingual (Bulgarian, Russian), while the younger generation is developing trilingual skills (Bulgarian, Russian, Ukrainian). The Russian language is still used for administrative purposes and in official activities. Bulgarians from different villages, meeting in the regional centre, use the Russian language at least as frequently as Bulgarian. The exception is the senior generation which was brought up during the time that the area was under Romanian rule (1918-1944) and are, therefore, less skilled in Russian.

### **The research**

The subject of research is the generation born in the 1980s, the young citizens of a newly independent Ukrainian state. The questionnaire aimed to reveal the direct influences associated with the formation of identity of youth from Bessarabia studying in Bulgaria. The first-year students in Autumn of 2002 had just arrived in Bulgaria, so the information reflects their views at the moment of their entering the new country.

The first general question concerned the way they identified themselves as either "Bulgarians" or "Bessarabian Bulgarians". The majority of the students chose the second, thus emphasizing the importance of their origin. It is necessary to note that these informants also specified Ukrainian as their native language.

The ethnic identity of a person is formed on the basis of a number of markers. The questionnaires allowed consideration of the most meaningful markers for Bessarabian Bulgarians themselves. The majority of respondents gave primary importance to ethnic traditions while a common historical origin was secondary and consciousness and language were equal in third place. Psychology, religion and

appearance were determined as less significant. Below I discuss how this initial valuation changed during the time the students spent in Bulgaria.

The formation of an ethnic identity and understandings of ethnic borders is rooted, above all, in the family, where the transmission of ethnic markers occurs. The environment is crucial in the formation of a personal identity. Among the questionnaird informants, two were brought up in mixed families, where the language was Russian. However, in both cases, Bulgarian was spoken in the village, and this wider context influenced the individual cases. Both individuals identified themselves as Bulgarian.

To continue with the language marker, in another two cases, Ukrainian was specified as the native language. However, as in the above cases, in these instances too both informants identified themselves as "Bessarabian Bulgarians". Maybe the reason for this is that the young people were brought up in a mixed household and in such cases the wider environment has dominant influence. We are also presently witnessing an imposition or replacement of language identity due to government impetus. That is, under the influence of Ukrainian mass media and the increasing Ukrainisation of schools, a mixture of identities is developing amongst youth. It is necessary to note that most susceptible to these new enforced changes are individuals from mixed ethnic families. One hundred percent of the first year students spoke the Ukrainian language fluently.

In such a way, the characteristic identity of Bessarabian Bulgarians, who enter higher education establishments in Bulgaria, can be summarized as:

- people with a socially constructed individual and group identity that is viewed as part of a common Bulgarian ethnic community; but they are divided in terms of a common history, culture or religion;
- Bulgarian language features prominently;
- A territorial identity, based on Bessarabia as a whole, and also particular places within the region.
- A Ukrainian identity, or a Moldovan one in the case of Bessarabians from the Republic of Moldova, is less developed and marks an opposition "us - them" with respect to Bessarabian Bulgarians.

It should be noted that irrespective of the mobility of the society at the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century, Bulgarian youth in Bessarabia were relatively isolated from the external world, so much so that a

Bessarabian identity represented a significant part of local identity.

Before considering further elements that are part of the identity of Bessarabian Bulgarians studying in Bulgaria, it is necessary to also note the emotional factor. Perhaps as a result of a long absence of communication with Bulgaria, a nostalgia towards the native land has developed that praises its way of life and its landscape and that reflects a general nostalgia towards Bulgaria as the ancestral home. The falling of "The Iron Curtain" and opening borders have renewed this nostalgia. The opportunity to study in Bulgaria after the 1990s has caused a wave of interest. While motives for studying abroad vary, an important aspect is the emotional link to Bulgaria.

After completing high school and passing introductory examinations, students arrive in Bulgaria. This can be viewed as a point of reference, the starting point for a transformational process where the identity of young Bessarabian Bulgarians will be exposed to change over the years of studying.

Young people who have never before lived independently, or dealt with administrative, financial or housing problems, face for the first time such challenges in the Bulgarian capital. A relatively conservative Bessarabian village life does not prepare youth for such challenges. In the village all is regulated by traditions, customs, common laws and moral foundations. In rural communities cultural frameworks are clear and restrictive. The city environment gives the individual an opportunity for greater liberalisation, a choice of means and methods of achievement of moral and financial satisfaction. A city, which is highly industrialised, multiethnic, with high mobility rates, and with many structures and hierarchies, can often be indifferent and cruel to personal problems.

The realities of such a life quickly destroy the nostalgic representations held about Bulgaria in Bessarabia. Further, the young people recognize how they are different from Bulgarians. This leads to a significant reappraisal of the existing system of values and often to a crisis of identity.

To return to the findings of the questionnaire: data demonstrated the instability of ethnic identity. Ethnic and territorial differences, as well as religious differences, served to remold the identity of the students. The questionnaire bears out that by the end of the study period the overwhelming majority of students continued to identify themselves as "Bessarabian Bulgarians" and only a very small percentage began to see themselves as ethnic Bulgarians.

Data about self-identity in terms of the language of the students also confirms this position. Among the questionnaire respondents, some people specified the Russian language as their native tongue despite being ethnic Bulgarians and identifying themselves as Bessarabian Bulgarians.

At home in their native villages in Bessarabia, everyone feels highly involved and valued by the community, giving him/her a sense of stability and protection. In Bulgaria each student felt a necessity to replicate such a situation, in which he/she felt relatively safe in a community. For the students, other Bessarabian students provided such a replacement community, even though they were not denied the opportunity to integrate into the Bulgarian society. Criteria that unite a group of Bessarabian students in terms of culture, language and religion markers, define the ethnic borders of the community. These criteria are the mechanisms for the preservation and transformation of group identity and are key points in binding the given group while in Bulgaria.

The main uniting factor for the group as a whole was its origin: people born and raised in Bessarabia. An identity on this territorial basis received higher priority than one based on ethnicity. A significant proportion of the questioned students specified their nationality as “Bessarabian Bulgarian male” or “Bessarabian Bulgarian female”. Such a group identity also included students from other regions of Ukraine, and even representatives from other states such as Russia and Moldova. The overriding factor in all cases is the socio-economic mutual support of members of the group, giving each other security and stability while away from home. Support is expressed foremost in mutual financial aid, moral and physical help in different situations.

The questionnaire also took into account changes over time, allowing us to see how specific elements changed in terms of importance during the years of study. While at the beginning the main marker of differentiation between Bessarabians and Bulgarians was language, by the end of their studies language, traditions and common historical origin were allocated equal value as inseparable in terms of importance. Less important were religion and physical appearance. Obviously, during the years the importance of these criteria fluctuated, but the generalization above holds and there was no important exceptions deserving special attention.

Not less interesting was the position of the group with respect to the “us” and “them” dichotomy (Bessarabian Bulgarians—Bulgarians from Bulgaria). While in the hierarchy of markers of difference,

language was most important, during the study period the students changed their opinions significantly concerning the historical development of the migrants and in turn language became more and more important. By the fifth year of study, culture and other aspects also gained importance. The least important markers of difference between “us” and “them” were religion and the physical appearance of group members.

In discussing Bessarabian Bulgarian group identity amongst students in Bulgaria, it was not enough to focus on the ‘us’ side of the equation which included representations concerning the consolidation and attributes of the group. It was also necessary to recognize the society from the side of the other citizens – Bulgarians – that is to look at the “them”. Let us turn now to look at the researched group from the Bulgarian side.

Firstly, it is necessary to note that our Bessarabian Bulgarians were nicknamed *rusnaci* (Russians) by the Bulgarian students. The reason for this is that the majority spoke Russian, listened to Russian music, read Russian newspapers and books. Statistical data concerning the language spoken in student dormitories is that from the first year Bessarabian Bulgarians, who on most occasions spoke to each other in Russian. This is due to the fact that every Bulgarian village in Ukraine has its own dialect, which is not always understandable to other Bessarabian Bulgarians. Russian is therefore the common language equally accessible and clear for all group members. At the same time local Bessarabian boundaries between insider and outsider are also reinforced, since each village speaks Bulgarian only to other village members, while Russian is the language of inter-village communication in the region (as well as between Bulgarians and the other ethnic groups represented in the region – Gagauz, Moldovans). Thus local identity is reproduced in a ‘foreign’ Bulgarian context. From the second year, students use Russian for exchanges between themselves almost exclusively. This can be explained in terms of the expansion of the circle of acquaintances amongst the students.

Those students in their third to fifth year still communicated mainly in Russian amongst themselves and it is only once they graduated from their educational institutions and made the decision to remain permanently in Bulgaria or to enter postgraduate study that they were more likely to use the Bulgarian language<sup>69</sup>. The same is true for Russian music, films, newspapers and books. Their popularity can be understood as a ‘natural’ process of socialization; from childhood, students are surrounded by modern Russian culture. Favourite

groups, actors, books and so on are taken to Bulgaria where exposure to new culture adds to the previous foundation. The same is the case for Ukrainian culture. Many Bessarabian Bulgarians in Bulgaria listen to "Elzi Ocean", "VV" and other popular Ukraine musicians. Bessarabian students in Bulgaria visit discos where Russian music is played at "Rusko party" events organized and run by Bulgarian clubs. Migrants interact initially with culture from the motherland through the music, food or art of the country of their origin and by associating predominantly with compatriots or fellow-exiles<sup>70</sup>.

The social life of Bessarabian Bulgarians is complemented by established relations with native Bulgarians. The ethnic border dividing one group from another is, first of all, a social border. Groups enter into intensive cooperation with each other while not reducing identities with each other. The questionnaires show that the collective identity of Bessarabian Bulgarians is positive and not dependent on the "us" and "them" contrast. (A negative identity consolidates the community of "us" on the basis of a negative opposition to "them"<sup>71</sup>).

A positive group identity is expressed, primarily, in the tolerance the two groups show towards each other<sup>72</sup>. Questionnaire materials show that almost 100% of Bessarabian Bulgarians would agree to marry a native Bulgarian. Students attribute to the Bulgarians such moral qualities as industriousness, economic skills, sympathy and generosity. Alongside these positive qualities they also recognize some negative qualities: insolence, lack of punctuality, stubbornness and pride.

Conversely native Bulgarians characterize Bessarabian Bulgarians as positive and cheerful, responsive, enterprising, hard-working, bold and honest; while negative characteristics include being envious, sly, hypocritical and unpunctual. Such criticisms do not, however, have a deciding influence on the tolerance or acceptance of Bessarabian Bulgarians.

Bessarabian Bulgarians in Bulgaria maintain a position that is both inclusive and exclusive. Members realize that they are "Bulgarian" and thus belong to the community in terms of sharing the same language and a shared cultural identity. Yet at the same time while living in Bulgaria they often settle in areas separate from native Bulgarians, the separate community being denoted in terms of a shared historical past, the use of the Russian language and other features defined as distinct to "Bessarabian Bulgarians". And in fact the community is officially acknowledged by state organs of the Republic of Bulgaria, both in terms of public organizations and in

scientific circles. In this sense Bessarabian Bulgarians in Bulgaria may be considered a subethnic group.

Naturally the group extends beyond the student population. Graduating students often remain permanently in Bulgaria, marriages are made and they become active in the life of Bulgarian society. At the same time the majority of Bessarabian Bulgarians continue to support their close relationships with the representatives of their subethnic group. A topic for future research is to explore how this subethnic group, now becoming a permanent feature of Bulgarian society, functions and changes over time.

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### Notes

<sup>64</sup> Гелнер, 1999: 38.

<sup>65</sup> The settlement of Ukrainians in Budzak started in the third decade of the 18th century and over the following 80 years the settlement became relatively large. At the beginning of 19th century a significant number of Ukrainians from Podolia, Volhynia and west-Ukraine moved to Bessarabia. For more details see Бачинский, 1964 :328; Кабузан, В. М. 1974: 23.

<sup>66</sup> Political events and reforms introduced by Peter the Great in Russia provided the reason for massive migrations of Russian Old Believers-necracovcy to south Bessarabia. In the fourth to eighth decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century they established a number of settlements in Underdunabe. In the 19th century about 20 000 state peasants moved to Budzak from the central areas of Russia. For further details see: Анастасова, 1998 : 17-44; Пригарин, 2001 : 379; Кабузан, 1974 : 23.

<sup>67</sup> Кабузан, 1974 : 24.

<sup>68</sup> Budzak is a historical-geographical region, that includes the territory of the contemporary south-west districts of the Odessa region, Ukraine. From the west the region is bounded by the river Dnestr, from the south by the Danube, and from the north and the west by the border with the Republic of Moldova. In 1818 the national structure was as follows: Moldovans - 36,98 %, Bulgarians - 21,46 %, Ukrainians - 17,93 %, Germans - 9,2 % and Russian - 8,94 % - Кабузан, Century of M. the Decree. соч., with. 36.

<sup>69</sup> There are no statistics available as to how many students remain in Bulgaria after completing their studies, but indications are that the vast majority do not return to Ukraine.

<sup>70</sup> Bledin 2002: 99

<sup>71</sup> Ачкасов В.А. Этническая идентичности в ситуациях общественного выбора. // <http://hq.soc.pu.ru/publications/jssa/1999/1/8achkas.h.tml>.

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