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Counter-Urbanization and “Return” to Rurality? Implications of COVID-19 Pandemic in Bulgaria

The studies of the movements between the city and the village generally (especially in Southeastern Europe) refer to analyses of the processes of urbanization, and rarely focus on the so-called counter-urbanization. However, over the past decade, the increasing environmental sensitivity of a part of the urban population in active age, as well as the emergence of social movements that promote a slow and environmentally friendly lifestyle have intensified the anti-urban trends. The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and the measures introduced to limit its spread have created a new social reality in which people continue their lives in ways that for many differ from the previous routine, influencing also the mobility patterns. Hence, the article aims at analyzing the urban-rural migration in Bulgaria within the context of the current coronavirus crises. Our thesis is that the pandemic enhances internal mobility in the medium term, since the physical distancing motivates people to spend more time outdoors and away from the urban environment. At the same time, some of them are able to seek spatial freedom in rural areas due to the opportunity to work and study from distance. In this respect, the ethnographic case studies presented in the text show the peculiar impact the constantly alternating imposition and lifting of certain restrictions has on the mobility decision-making and lifestyle of individuals and entire families..

Key words: rural, urban, internal migration, home-making, pandemic

Контраурбанизација и „повратак“ руралном? Импликације пандемије ковида 19 у Бугарској

Студије покретљивости између градова и села углавном се, нарочито у југоисточној Европи, односе на анализе процеса урбанизације, а ретко се фокусирају на такозвану контраурбанизацију. Ипак, током последње деценије, повећана осетљивост на питање животне средине од стране дела активне урбане популације, као и појава друштвених покрета који промовишу успорен и еколошки освешћен животни стил, интензивирали су антиурбане трендове. Пандемија вируса ковид 19 која је избила 2020. године, као и

мере уведене како би спречиле његово ширење, створиле су нову друштвену реалност у којој људи настављају своје животе на начин који се у великом броју случајева разликује од претходне рутине, што такође утиче и на обрасце мобилности. Стога је циљ овог чланка анализа урбано-руралних миграција у Бугарској унутар контекста актуелне кризе изазване појавом коронавируса. Наша теза је да пандемија на средњи рок повећава интерну мобилност, с обзиром да мере физичког дистанцирања мотивишу људе да проводе више времена напољу и далеко од урбаног окружења. Истовремено, неки од њих су у могућности да траже просторну слободу у руралним крајевима, с обзиром да имају могућност рада или учења „на даљину“. У том смислу, етнографске студије случаја представљене у овом тексту указују на јединствени утицај који константне промене оличене у увођењу или укидању одређених рестрикција имају на процесе доношења одлука у вези са мобилношћу и животне стилове појединаца и читавих породица.

Кључне речи: рурално, урбано, унутрашње миграције, стварање дома, пандемија

Introduction

Notable to the contemporary worlds and societies, spatial mobility and human migration are an integral part of the global and local processes of social and cultural transformations and influence every sphere of human everyday life – economy, politics, family and social relations, culture, communication, etc. (Castles 2010, 1578). Although the dynamic movements from, to, and through Bulgaria during the last three decades draw scientific and public attention mainly on the international migrations, the research problem of internal migration has not lost its relevance. However, the studies of movements between the city and the village generally refer to analyses of the processes of urbanization, and rarely focus on the reverse movements – to rural areas. Over the last decade, the factors that influence the migration dynamics have become increasingly diverse – along with the relentless urbanization, there are trends of counterurbanization (Berry 1976; Dahms & McComb 1999), which emerge as a result of the increasing environmental sensitivity of a part of the population, as well as the social movements promoting anti-consumer and anti-capitalist ideas for working less, going back to nature, economic downshifting and spending more time for recreation, leisure activities, loved ones, and spiritual development.

There are also more people who renovate a family-inherited property, build or purchase a house in rural areas in order to use it as a second home. The latter is “an occasional residence of a household [...] which is primarily used for recreation purposes” (Shucksmith 1983, 174), a place that provides some kind of “escape” from the urban environment. In the scientific literature, the owners of such properties are claimed to be “merely visitors who come to (conspicuously) consume their second home and various aspects of its environment for a few weeks each year and then go home” (Halfacree 2011, 216). Some authors, however, view second homes as an integral part of owners’ everyday life within “a comprehensive life-course strategy” (Müller 2007, 199; Overvåg 2009), and having in mind that any escape from the daily routine is inevitably shaped by one’s lifestyle (Quinn 2004, 113).

In this context, the COVID-19 pandemic and some measures introduced in order to limit the spread of the coronavirus for more than a year have proven to be crucial new factors influencing the place of second homes in the countryside within the changing lifestyles of many, who choose to move or live in-between places.

Purpose and methodology

The current text focuses on the urban–rural movements within the context of the developing coronavirus crisis, offering ethnographic analyses of the issue, using materials gathered within the scope of the research project “*Going Bravely to the Village*. Migration to the Village – Sociocultural Adaptation, Practices and Challenges”¹. We worked continuously for two and a half years (spring 2019 – spring 2021) in about 15 villages in two geographical regions in Bulgaria – the Central Western part of the country (mountainous and semi-mountainous) and the Northeastern (plain and coastal). The aim of the study was to determine the reasons and processes of such residential change, as well as the patterns of sociocultural adaptation in the new settlements of urban–rural in-migrants. The research focused solely on families and individuals in active age who chose to reside permanently in villages or divide their time between two or several locations (more than 40 cases). Among the interlocutors, however, there were people in a peculiar transit phase, trying to figure out the place of rurality within their everyday life and vice versa. Owing to our continuous fieldwork, we had the chance to follow the unfolding lifestyle choices, influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic and the imposed restrictions.

In order to propose a more complex research analysis towards the topic, we also use qualitative data from our questionnaire survey “Mobility and Sociocultural Transformations in the Context of COVID-19 Pandemic”. We conducted it entirely online in the period from April 5 to June 5, 2020, among Bulgarian citizens² between the age of 18 and 78 (90% of them are in working age).

The personally collected materials will be commented on in the light of information from secondary sources – statistical data, sociological surveys, real estate market analysis, and print and electronic media publications.

Dynamics of internal migrations in Bulgaria

In Bulgaria (as well as in other Eastern European countries) the urbanization process reached its peak after the Second World War, between 1950 and 1985, under a socialist ruling regime, striving for forced modernization and industrialization. For a few decades, the ratio between rural and urban population in Bulgaria

¹ The project is financially supported by the National Science Fund of Bulgaria (KII-06-M30/1) for the period of December 2018 – August 2021.

² We received 185 responses to the survey. 76% of the respondents were female, 23 – male and 1% – people who did not specify. Most of the respondents (50%) live in the capital Sofia, 34% – in district centers, 10% in other towns, 3% in villages and 2% did not specify.

significantly changed: in 1946 it was 75.3% (rural) against 24.7% (urban), and in 1985 – 35.2% (rural) against 64.8% (urban) (Statistical Yearbook 2020, 58). The share of rural to urban movements exceeded all other directions of internal movements during almost every decade until the 1990s (Figure 1). A slight change in this trend occurred in the period of 1986–1992, when, for the first time, national statistics recorded more movements from cities and towns to villages than in the opposite direction (Shishmanova 2014, 93).

Figure 1. Structure of the internal migrations in Bulgaria

Directions of migration	Periods between censuses						
	1956-1965	1966-1975	1976-1985	1986-1992	1993-2001	2002-2011	2012-2019
Total (%)	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
City–city (%)	16.6	30.2	38.3	42.5	46.2	57.4	39.6
City–village (%)	8.1	9.9	13.3	23.4	27.9	18.4	29.9
Village–city (%)	44.7	42.7	34.3	22.0	15.6	17.2	21.1
Village–village (%)	30.6	17.2	14.1	12.1	10.3	7.0	9.4

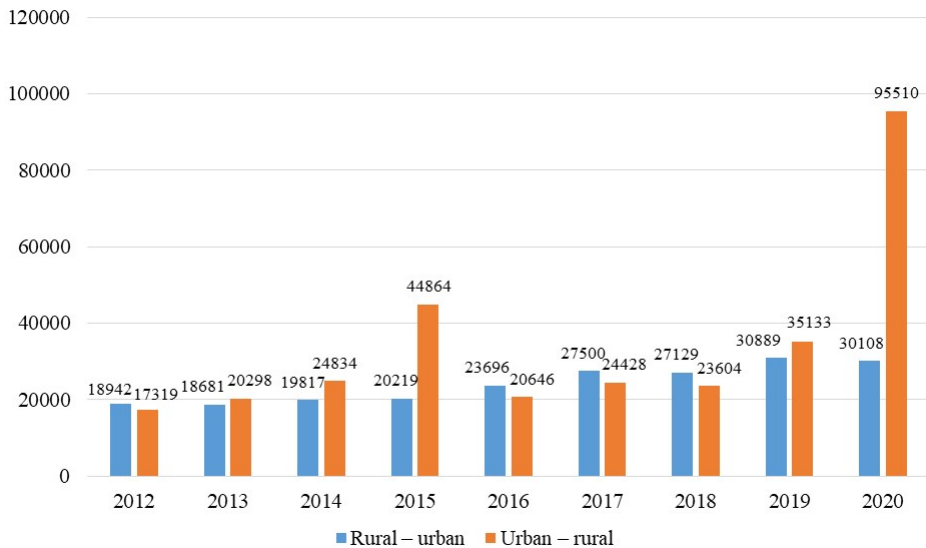
After the political changes in 1989, in the context of the Ownership and Use of Farmland Act of 1991, the so-called “optimistic mythology” foreseeing a mass population return to the rural regions emerged (see Kozhuharova-Zhivkova 1996, 19–21). There were expectations that with the removal of the state agricultural cooperatives and the following restoration of the agricultural land ownership to the former owners and their heirs, a significant number of people would choose to settle in villages and to establish new, private and competitive individual farms (Kopeva & Noev 2003, 138).

In the 1990s, the tendency seemed to really reverse and between 1993 and 2001 the migration balance amounted to 36,545 people in favour of the villages (Shishmanova 2014, 93). However, those movements were far from the expectations and the people who settled in the countryside were mostly in retirement age. In many cases, they ended with a consecutive migration back to the city, because of the financial and production difficulties in farm maintenance. The statistical data indicate that during the next decade (2002–2011) the share of the urban–rural migrations have considerably decreased.

Over the last decade, despite the continuing negative demographic processes in the country in general and the rural population decline, there has been a new

significant change in the migration balance in favour of the villages and in the attitudes towards rural life among some parts of the urban population. The state statistics register that between 2012 and 2020 the rural–urban migrants were 89,740 more than those in the opposite direction (Figure 2). The figure illustrates that the rise of urban–rural movements is the highest in 2020. The data, however, should be carefully and critically interpreted within the context of some specific measures and restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which will be further commented on in the text. An interesting change noticeable in the whole period is that the number of children and people in active age settling in rural areas is growing (Slavova 2019, 41).

Figure 2. Internal rural – urban and urban – rural movements



According to a sociological survey aiming to establish the attitudes of the population in the big cities in Bulgaria towards resettlement in villages³, conducted in 2019 among 600 people, almost 2/3 (61.8%) of the respondents claimed they would move to a village. The results by age groups of those who answered in the affirmative show the highest percentage of positive attitudes towards rural migration among people in active age (Figure 3), which confirms the statement based on national statistics made above.

³ It was conducted within the research project “Migration processes in Bulgaria, structuring the settlement network in Bulgaria” headed by Marina Simeonova Slavova and funded by the Centre for Research and Design at the University of Architecture, Civil Engineering and Geodesy, Contract No 121-19. The raw data were kindly provided to us by Marina Slavova. Results of this study are published in Simeonova, K’osev & Naïdenov 2020, 940–941.

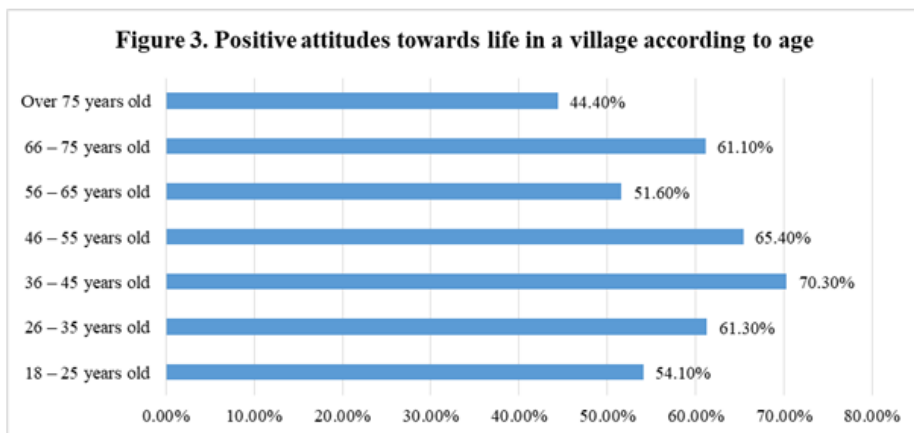
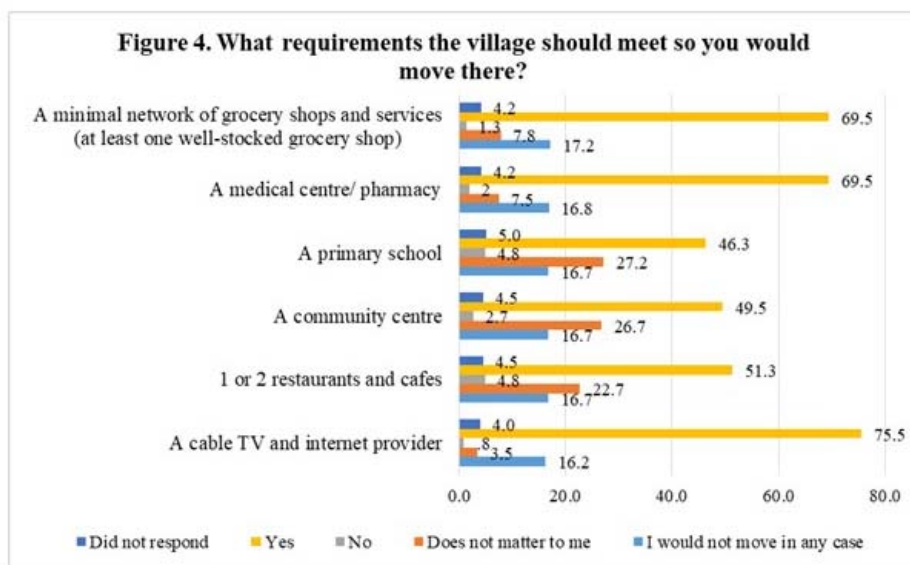


Figure 4 represents the respondents' answers according to the importance of some particular requirements of the rural environment.

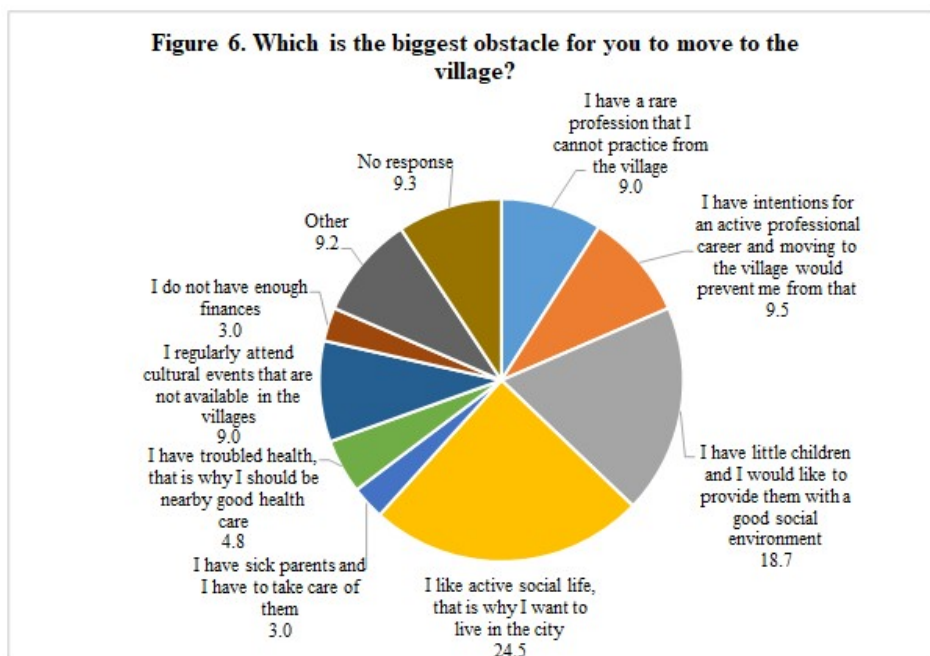


The opportunity to work from home is also an important factor, even a decisive one when it comes to migration to the village. However, more than the half of the respondents would not change their profession in order to be able to work remotely and leave the city (Figure 5).

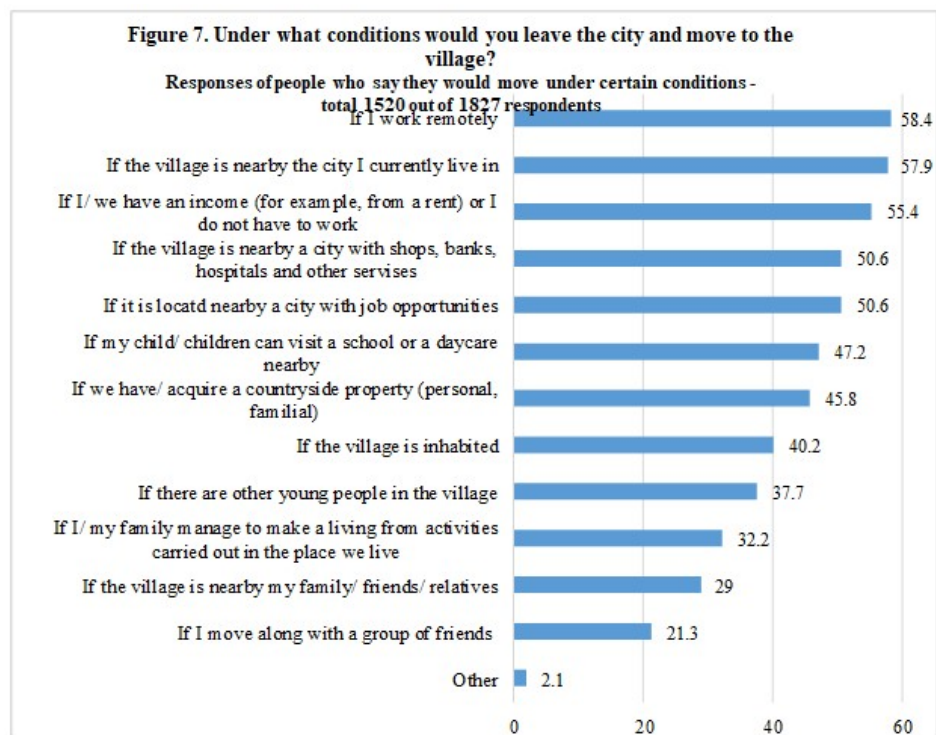
Figure 5. Professional development and attitudes towards urban – rural migration

Question	Yes (%)	No (%)	Did not respond (%)
Would you live in a village if it were possible for you to work remotely?	65.7	29.0	5.3
In order to leave the city, would you change your profession to such that you would be able to work remotely?	40.7	53.5	5.8
In order to go to work, would you commute to the city daily?	56.0	35.8	8.2
If possible, would you move your business from the city to a nearby village?	42.3	44.3	13.3

Hence, professional development is among the main obstacles for resettlement. There also are the lack of sufficient conditions for active social and cultural life, limited opportunities for education, and access to health services in rural areas (Figure 6).



Indicative are also the results of another sociological survey, conducted among people in active age (15–54 years old) at the very beginning of 2020.⁴ In this case, out of 1,827 respondents from big and medium-sized cities across the country, 83.2% expressed readiness to leave the urban environment and move to the countryside under certain circumstances, as follows (Figure 7):



Based on our own observations and ethnographic materials, we outline two main groups of urban–rural migrants. The first group seeks the outdoor space and quietness that the village offers, but not at the expense of the urban amenities, the better infrastructure, shops, and entertainment establishments, therefore, they have chosen to settle down in villages nearby a bigger city. For them the urban environment continues to be their working place to which they commute daily. As for the second group, the rural environment is not only the main place for dwelling, but also for professional development, therefore, the closer proximity to a bigger city is not of such a great significance. On the one hand, these are people, who work remotely from their homes. On the other, there are families who develop their own farms and rural businesses, and for that matter, most of them choose to settle in their hereditary countryside properties. However, there also is a significant number of people who look for a more eco-friendly lifestyle away from the urban noise and

⁴ It was conducted by the Market Links Agency. The results of the survey have not been published. The primary data was kindly provided to us by the agency. In this regard, we would like to thank Maria Boncheva from *Magazine 8* who assisted us in obtaining the data.

air pollution, settling in more remote and depopulated mountainous villages, located further away from big cities.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictive measures introduced to limit its spread have created a new social reality in which people continue to live their lives but for many of them in ways different from before, influencing also the internal mobility in the country.

COVID-19 measures in Bulgaria

The first cases of COVID-19 in Bulgaria were registered on March 8, 2020, and a few days later, on March 13, the parliament voted to impose a state of emergency in the country.⁵ According to it all entertainment establishments (restaurants, cafes, nightclubs, cinemas, theatres, opera houses, museums, spa-centres, gyms, etc.), retail outlets and shopping centres were closed, and all gatherings of people including sport, cultural, scientific, and other events were banned. Only food stores, pharmacies and drug stores remained open. Schools, universities, daycares, nurseries, and other educational establishments and organizations were also closed. Online teaching replaced regular in-person classes. Wherever possible, all employers were required to provide their employees with suitable conditions for working remotely.⁶

In the following days and weeks, additional measures were introduced. It was recommended people to minimize physical contact outside one's household. In this regard, on March 21 measures restricting movements within the country were adopted – at the entrances of district cities the so-called checkpoints were established and only persons meeting certain requirements were admitted through. Visits to parks, playgrounds and sport grounds were prohibited.⁷

In May, the crisis headquarters began to loosen the anti-epidemic measures. On May 1, the visits of parks, children and sport grounds were allowed.⁸ On May 6, restrictions on movement within the country were lifted and the outdoor areas of

⁵ "Reshenie za obîaviavane na izvûnredno polozenie", Dûrzhaven vestnik (=State Gazette), br. 22, 13 Mart 2020, <https://dv.parliament.bg/DVWeb/showMaterialDV.jsp?idMat=146931> (Accessed May 11, 2021).

⁶ Order issued by the Minister of Health, 13 March 2020, https://www.mh.government.bg/media/filer_public/2020/03/13/rd-01-124-vuvejdane-protiepidemichni-merki.pdf (Accessed May 11, 2021).

⁷ Order issued by the Minister of Health, 20 March 2020, https://www.mh.government.bg/media/filer_public/2020/03/20/rd-01-143.pdf (Accessed May 11, 2021).

⁸ Order issued by the Minister of Health, 01 May 2020, https://www.mh.government.bg/media/filer_public/2020/05/01/zapoved-rd-01-248-01-05-2020.pdf (Accessed May 11, 2021).

restaurants were opened.⁹ At the end of May, daycares and nurseries, cultural and entertainment venues were opened.¹⁰ On September 15, the new school year started with in-person classes.¹¹ However, on November 27, due to the increasing number of people infected with the coronavirus in the country, all nurseries and daycares were closed, and all school classes switched to distance learning once again. Restaurants, shopping and sport centres also were closed.¹² On January 4, 2021, all nurseries and daycares opened, and only pupils in primary school (classes from 1 to 4) returned to in-person classes.¹³ The tightening and loosening of the COVID-19 pandemic measures in the country occurring in turns continues at the time of writing.

In this respect, according to some observations and preliminary research, the anti-epidemic measures, mostly the restricted domestic and international movements, and working and learning from distance, act as an additional catalyst for urban–rural migration. In various countries around the world (including Bulgaria), these ongoing processes prompt some people to seek more spatial freedom in rural areas (Ross 2020; Rose 2020; Finnsson 2020; Seraphin & Dosquet 2020).

The ethnographic cases

In order to give complex ethnographic impressions of the issue discussed here, we chose to present five cases from our research project mentioned above. We endeavour to highlight the life choices, which people of different age, marital status and social specificities made in the given circumstances of COVID-19 pandemic.

S. (mid-20s) claims to be in a spiritual search, reconsidering his personal and work priorities. As a turning point for such a self-seeking journey, he recognizes the 2018 burn-out at the workplace and his subsequent dismissal from a big corporation. A crucial part of his peculiar lifestyle metamorphoses is the (re)discovering and (re)attaching to the village and the natural surroundings as places for recreation, self-isolation and eventually – a residence. Thus, in autumn 2019,

⁹ Order issued by the Minister of Health, 05 May 2020, https://www.mh.government.bg/media/filer_public/2020/05/05/rd-01-251.pdf (Accessed May 11, 2021).

¹⁰ Order issued by the Minister of Health, 30 May 2020, https://www.mh.government.bg/media/filer_public/2020/05/30/zapoved__rd-01-287-30052020_g.pdf (Accessed May 11, 2021).

¹¹ Order issued by the Minister of Health, 31 August 2020, https://www.mh.government.bg/media/filer_public/2020/08/31/rd-01-489.pdf (Accessed May 11, 2021).

¹² Order issued by the Minister of Health, 25 November 2020, https://www.mh.government.bg/media/filer_public/2020/08/31/rd-01-489.pdf (Accessed May 11, 2021).

¹³ Order issued by the Minister of Health, 18 December 2020, https://www.mh.government.bg/media/filer_public/2020/12/18/zapoved__rd-01-718-18122020_g.pdf (Accessed May 11, 2021).

he made the decision to start renovating his grandfather's country house in Svoge municipality (Central West Bulgaria), around 50 km north of his birthplace – the capital Sofia. He was drawn by the idea of a more minimalist lifestyle away from the noise and air pollution, and the hectic everyday life in the big city. Therefore, S. quickly started spending more days of the month there, sitting on the hammock in the garden, while working on his computer, and walking the mountain surrounding the village by himself.

However, the declared state of emergency turned out to be crucial for his permanent settlement in the countryside. The introduced checkpoints on the big cities' exits provoked him to even change his address registration in order to facilitate his travel between the village (place of residence) and the capital (place of work). Although S. describes himself as a rather withdrawn type of person, the recommended social distancing during the pandemic actually brought him closer to a certain group of people in the village. These residents (in their 20s and 30s) have also moved there from different cities in Bulgaria and even abroad in the last several years. S. relates to their eco-friendly lifestyle, strongly influenced by Eastern philosophies. Therefore, he even decided to move temporarily to their farm (both premises are 4 km apart in the mountains). There, S. continued to work remotely, while helping in the household chores and the garden (permacultural) activities. In case he happened to visit the capital or another city, in the period of March to the middle of May 2020, on his return to the village he isolated himself for 10 days in a tent in the yard.¹⁴

D. and V. are a young couple in their early 30s and have no children. They are peculiar nomads, living in-between several locations. She is an artist and he is a chef. Their main income used to come from temporary occupations in restaurants in Belgium and France, in the summer. The rest of the year the couple usually spends in Bulgaria, residing in their city apartment in the northern part of the country. However, desiring to establish their own place in a mountainous countryside, back in 2014, they bought a land property with a building permit in a village in Sofia district. Thereby, they acquired a getaway place away from the city, while staying well connected to the urban environment (the municipal centre and the capital). In the following five years the couple has visited the land for several weekends of the year, using it as a camping spot.

However, at the beginning of 2020 their entire mobility behaviour started to change significantly. The shutdown of international borders ruined their plans for another couple of months of seasonal work abroad, which they saw as an opportunity to start construction on the property on their own. They plan to build a cottage and a small restaurant for homemade food within the self-grown forest with a terraced vegetable garden positioned down the hill. At this point, D. and V. reside in two places: in the warmer months – in their small van, which they converted into a camper; while in the colder part of the year they are in the city apartment. However,

¹⁴ This was considered necessary, since at that time the host also welcomed a few relatives with significant health issues from around the country.

they both hope V. would find a permanent job as a chef in Sofia, and D. – a better market for her art work, which would eliminate the need for seasonal work abroad and would allow them to settle in the village.

T. and D. were a young couple with no children when in 2013 moved out of Sofia to a property they bought the year before. They settled in the mountainous countryside, Zemen municipality, about 70 km from the capital. In general, the distance has not been a problem for the couple, since T. works mostly from home, and D. commutes five days a week to the outskirts of Sofia where his workplace is. In 2019, however, when the partners were already in their late 30s and with three small children (of age six, four, and two), they decided to go back to the city, due to the lack of good educational opportunities in the countryside. Thus, the country house quickly became a villa for weekends and holidays.

In the following year, however, the family's place of residence has been subject to many changes, directly influenced by the state of emergency in the country. In March 2020, when the daycares were closed, and D. started working exclusively from home, the couple saw an opportunity to resettle in the village. They chose a quieter and cleaner vicinity to dwell for an unknown period of time, while there were multiple restrictions in the city environment. Afterwards, in September 2020, when the educational facilities re-opened, the family went back to Sofia in order for the children to visit daycare, which would allow both parents to better fulfil their work commitments, while working from home full time. In this context, the country house again became a family villa. However, in the following winter months when educational establishments were closed once again, T. and D. moved back to the village. These movements back and forth between the city and the village continue to this day, following the introduction and removal of certain restrictions.

Z. (mid-30s) and T. (late 40s) alongside their two children (of age twelve and eight) have resided in the medium-sized district city Dobrich (Northeast Bulgaria), until recently. In spring 2018, the family bought an old house in a village 10 km from the city, in order to turn it into a getaway place for the spare time. Due to its proximity, the countryside property quickly became a favourite place for social gatherings, and the family gradually increased the time spent there.

Thus, the settlement to the village after the state of emergency in the country was introduced and the school education went online, was an easy and expected choice for the couple. She has been a housewife since the birth of her second child. He is a business owner and has been commuting to his workplace in the city whenever needed. On the one hand, out of fear of infection with the virus in the urban environment, and on the other, finding more benefits for themselves and their children in the rural lifestyle, the couple decided to remain in the countryside even after the beginning of the new school year, allowing in-person education. Therefore, on work days the family commuted between the village and the city – in the morning, before driving himself to his workplace, the father took the children to school and his wife to their urban apartment. In the evening, the entire family came back to their country house together. In autumn, they even renewed the construction of their

property to ensure better living conditions during the winter months. In the winter, while schools were closed and classes were online, the children and the mother spent their time almost solely in the village, while the father commuted to the city whenever needed. Similar to the previous case, during the first half of 2021, the family's movements between the two settlements and the time spent in each of them are being defined by the way the educational system works within the context of the pandemic measures in the country.

D. and M. are a 60 years old couple from Sofia. For nearly fifteen years, she has been a housewife, and he – a self-employed construction worker. Visits to their countryside house in Pernik district a couple weekends a month has been a well-established practice for nearly thirty years. However, in 2019, they extended their stays due to the increasing need for care for an older relative. The introduction of the state of emergency found them in the countryside. Because of the anti-epidemic restrictions in between district cities movements, and the possible difficulties in supplying the loved-one with medications and food, the couple decided to stay in the village for a while longer. However, the continuing need for care for the relative, as well as the fear of infection with the virus in the capital, pushed them towards the decision for a permanent settlement in the countryside. Having financial support from their children (all grown up and living in the capital), M. almost completely stopped working, and the couple visits Sofia just for a few days a month, mostly for medical reasons. At the very beginning of 2021, M. started setting up a central heating installation in the house, in order to improve the living conditions of the family, as of their aspiration of staying there after the pandemic continues to grow strong.

New trends in the real estate market

Similar examples also can be found in many print and online media publications. About half a month after the beginning of the state of emergency, the following material was published on the site of the Bulgarian national radio: "As the coronavirus pandemic escalated, many citizens who own properties in villages hurried to move to the countryside even before the travel ban... [because of] the opportunity to spend the lockdown away from the urban environment constraints".¹⁵ There are numerous media publications of such sort from all over the country, covering urban–rural movements of people with heterogeneous profiles. The reports also cite data from the Department Civil Registration and Administrative Services (CRAS) and the National Statistic Institute for significant increase of new registrations at the current address in small municipalities and villages, at the expense of regional centres and large cities. These data and publications should be critically interpreted. In some cases these are entire families who had already settled in the countryside (many had been living there for years), but who found the need to offi-

¹⁵ "City-Village Migration as a Way of Survival", Radio Bulgaria, BNR, April 1, 2020, <https://bnr.bg/radiobulgaria/post/101250669/migraciata-ot-grada-kam-seloto-kato-nachin-na-ocelavane> (Accessed May 11, 2021).

ciate their residential address just last year due to the travel restrictions in the country. However, there are also new residents, who are able to work remotely and crave the freedom of life in a house with a yard.

From this point of view, the data referring to real estate market development in Bulgaria in the context of the pandemic has also caught our attention. The experts in the field point out that in March, transactions stopped almost completely. In May, the sales rates returned to their pre-pandemic levels, though. The data that real estate agencies announce in the media, however, show a new trend in the property search:

“People are looking for houses near big cities, at a distance of 40 – 50 km. There is also a tendency for purchasing vacation homes. This isolation [social distancing] of about two months affected the situation. I think this would be a real estate market trend for a long time to come”.¹⁶

According to data from the real estate agency “Bulgarian properties”, the rural property sales increased up to 20% at the end of 2020. The significant housing market dynamics in the countryside provoke comparisons with the 2003–2007 period when British citizens were the main factor referring to transactions with rural property. Therefore, their withdrawal from the country after the global financial crisis in 2008 led to a decline in the real estate market. Nowadays, the pandemic once again leads to a similar growth of property transactions, this time by Bulgarians, residents of the big cities in the country. The verification of this data, however, is difficult because the NSI surveys the housing market only in the six biggest cities in Bulgaria. Along with that, the Registry Agency keeps only statistics of the concluded real estate transactions by settlements, without specifying the type of property – houses, agricultural fields, and office or retail spaces. Without excluding the possibility that such analyses, coming from the real estate agencies themselves, might be related to an advertising strategy, they cannot be ignored. Even so, they are provoked by some behaviour among a part of the urban population, which we commented above, and which is undoubtedly being intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Such attitudes could also be found among the responses in our online survey – 12% claim that during the state of emergency they have spent some time in their rural villa, and 4% chose to stay in their country house for the time being. Here are some of the commonly repeated answers to the question we asked, “What is the first thing you would like to do after the end of the state of emergency?”:

To go to the village and spend some time in the yard.
To go to the countryside.
To go to the villa.

¹⁶ Interview with Alexander Bochev, second chairman of National Association “Real estate”, NOVA television, 23.06.2020, <https://nova.bg/news/view/2020/06/23/291788/имотният-пазар-се-съживява-търсят-се-къщи-около-големите-градове> (Accessed May 11, 2021).

To buy a house.

To go to the mountains, to be away from the urban environment.

To go somewhere in nature with my family.

To go on a vacation somewhere away (at least in the country).

Concluding discussion

The ongoing pandemic crisis has raised the issue of the impact of external environmental and biological factors on the social development of urban areas. The pandemic hit “global cities” rapidly and noticeably, showing the vulnerability of contemporary societies by destroying the well-known chains of social interactions, transforming the way of life in urban areas into something that is rather different from the previously established patterns of everyday life (Pokrovsky, Makshanchikova & Nikishin 2020, 54–55).

Everything stated above clearly shows that flows of people, commodities, services, resources, and finances between cities and villages should be carefully studied within the context of short-, medium- and long-term measures against the coronavirus spread and the COVID-19 pandemic development in general (Sietchip-ing et al. 2020, 1). The urban lifestyle usually contradicts the rural lifestyle – traditionally, the city is associated with a great variety of opportunities (labour, social, cultural), technical development and innovations, due to the larger population. While the village, with its more homogeneous local communities, offers a simpler way of life and is largely seen as a place that opposes innovation and drastic change (Malatzky et al. 2020, 2).

The rapid rise of new coronavirus cases and the shocking data about deaths in metropolises such as London, Rome, Madrid, New York, etc., and their media representations produced the global image of the SARS-CoV-2 virus as an “urban problem” (Boterman 2020, 513–514). Thus, during the pandemic the urban–rural dichotomy persists, however, some of the citizens’ perceptions regarding both environments are changing significantly. The high population density has become a source of concerns, strangers and crowds have become worth avoiding. From places for cultural and social interaction, museums, theatres, cinemas and restaurants have become places threatening people’s health. City life has become a source of fear and caution. At the same time, the village life homogeneity has become an equivalent to safety (as long as inhabitants know one another), simplicity – to freedom, and the resistance to changes has been offering predictability (Malatzky et al. 2020, 2).

As a result, the escape from the cities to less densely populated urban peripheries and rural areas has become a common response to the pandemic crisis for a sizable share of the urban inhabitants (Galent 2020, 141–143; Onishi & Méheut 2020; Seraphin & Dosquet 2020, 487; Finnsson 2020; Pokrovsky, Makshanchikova & Nikishin 2020, 56). Therefore, a number of citizens either move to their second house in the countryside, which previously they used to dwell as a holiday or leisure

home, or buy a property in the village. Hence, for more than a year the rural environment has been preferred to the city as a main place to settle the household.

The motives behind such a decision are various. For some people the self and loved one's health concerns are of significant importance, for others – the desire to avoid urban restrictions and to move elsewhere, a place that could provide more gratification, spatial freedom and access to nature – the last became especially valuable when the measures prohibited even the visits to city parks. Additionally, there are factors, generally attractive to the urban environment – restaurants, cafes, sport halls, schools, cinemas, theatres, etc., which in the situation of repeated closing and opening of such social and cultural facilities, significantly diminish their meaning. Therefore, life outside the city becomes of great importance to some people (cf. Pokrovsky, Makshanchikova & Nikishin 2020, 58–59). Moreover, there stands the strife to establish greater control over one's everyday life, lifestyle and personal choices, given the circumstances. Such as, fulfilling one's work commitments and providing children access to education, while choosing how and mostly where (indoors or outdoors) to spend the spare time, and still being safe. However, the cases also show the peculiar inevitable impact that the constantly alternating imposition and lifting of certain restrictions has on the lifestyle of the families. The latter justifies the intensification of the movements between urban and rural areas in specific periods of time.

Our research largely confirms the thesis that in a medium-term the COVID-19 pandemic accelerates internal migration, increasing people's desire to spend more time outdoors and away from the urban environment. However, it should be noted that inhabitants who are able to afford such a lifestyle (dwelling in-between places) are mostly those with medium and high income or are able to work remotely from anywhere. Such mobility and change in daily life patterns are inevitably followed by many sociocultural, economic and other processes and transformations, which define the research topic to be relevant nowadays.

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