

TO RETURN OR NOT TO RETURN: MIGRATION STRATEGIES OF BULGARIANS IN SPAIN IN THE LAST DECADE

This article analyses the geographic mobility of Bulgarian immigrants during the serious economic and labour crisis, by which has been gripped Spain for over a decade now. The information used was collected from different sources: the statistics, compiled by the National Statistical Institute and the Ministry of Employment of Spain and the testimony of the immigrants. The results indicate an increase of external emigration. The majority of those leaving Spain are heading for Bulgaria, others emigrate to other European countries and still others circulate between the country of origin and the destination relatively frequently. Nevertheless, despite the severity of the crisis, the majority remain in Spain for various reasons. Some opted for internal geographic mobility and were moving to other Spanish provinces in search of temporary employment.

JEL: F22; J61; O15

Spain has a large community of Bulgarian immigrants. The first of them arrived about twenty years ago and in a very short time, the number of residents experienced an extraordinary growth, reaching about 170,000 in 2012. Since then their number significantly decreased, so that at present less than 120,000 actually remain. The reduction is due fundamentally to the grave crisis, which has been gripping for over a decade the Spanish economy and which was characterized by job losses, growth of unemployment and job insecurity.

The article examines the migration strategies of Bulgarians in the context of the crisis, which has been affecting Spain for more than ten years and provides answers to questions like: What are the migration patterns of Bulgarians in the last few years? Are the internal movements among Spanish provinces increasing or decreasing? How does the crisis affect the inbound and outbound flows? Which way are those who leave Spain heading? Are these return flows, are they looking for other countries or are they leaving and coming back? Who is moving, the family or any of their members? What are the motives for those movements? Why are some of the migrants moving, while others remain at the places

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which hosted them? For this purpose, the quantitative methodology is combined with a qualitative one.

The text is organized in five sections. In the first place, a review is made of the recent evolution of Bulgarian immigration and of the characteristics of migrants. Then a brief reflection is made on the subject of geographic mobility like a strategy. The third section presents the information sources used. Thereafter the main patterns of internal and international mobility of Bulgarian migrants are discussed as well as the motives, for which many of them remain in Spain. The article ends with a brief recapitulation, recalling the most relevant conclusions.

Bulgarian immigration in Spain

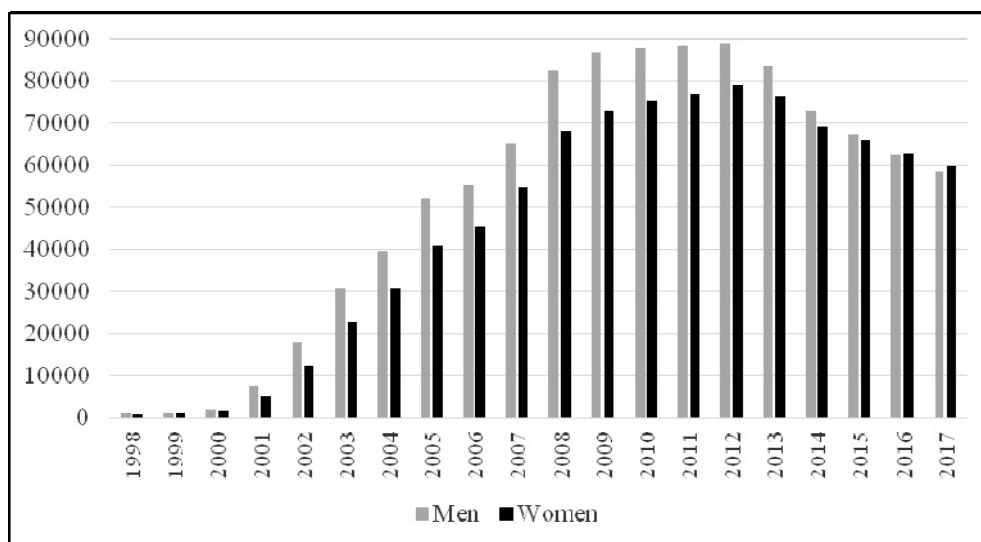
The transition from communism to capitalism, which occurred in Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin wall (in November 1989), required structural reforms, which left the economy in a disastrous state and caused unbearable suffering to millions of people, who had expected for their living standards to improve with the systemic change. The balance may be summarized as a loss of millions of jobs, drastic contraction of GDP, runaway inflation, general impoverishment and an increase of social inequalities (Viruela, 2003). The collapse of the communist bloc and the resulting opening of the economy instantly unleashed a great potential for emigration (Stanek, 2010).

Bulgarian emigration fits into the context of the grave socio-economic crisis of the 1990s and, basically, reflects the desire for achieving higher living standards (Gómez-Mestres and Molina, 2010; Mintchev and Boshnakov, 2016). In the first years, Germany and Austria were the main countries of destination, apart from Turkey, where thousands of citizens from the Turkish minority “found refuge”, fleeing from the forced assimilation policy. Since the mid-1990s, the emigrants started preferring the countries of Southern Europe: Greece, Spain and Italy (Ragaru, 2008; Kovacheva, 2014).

In Spain, the group of Bulgarian immigrants reached a large number in a quite brief period of time (figure 1). In 2001 their actual number was 12,400 and in 2008 more than 150,000 were registered. The figure continued to grow until 2012 (168,000), with a lower intensity due to the grave economic and labour crisis, which had commenced four year earlier. Different factors coincided to lead to the spectacular growth of Bulgarian immigration in the first years of the XXIst century: the expansion of the Spanish economy and the increased demand for labour, the migration chains and networks, based on family connections, or on the geographic or social proximity and the favourable political and administrative decisions, such as the lifting of the visa requirements (April 2001) and Bulgaria’s accession to the EU (on 1 January 2007), despite the restrictions on access to the labour market in the initial couple of years.

Figure 1

Evolution of the population, born in Bulgaria (1998-2017*)



* Data as of 1 January of each year. The results for 2017 are not yet finalised.

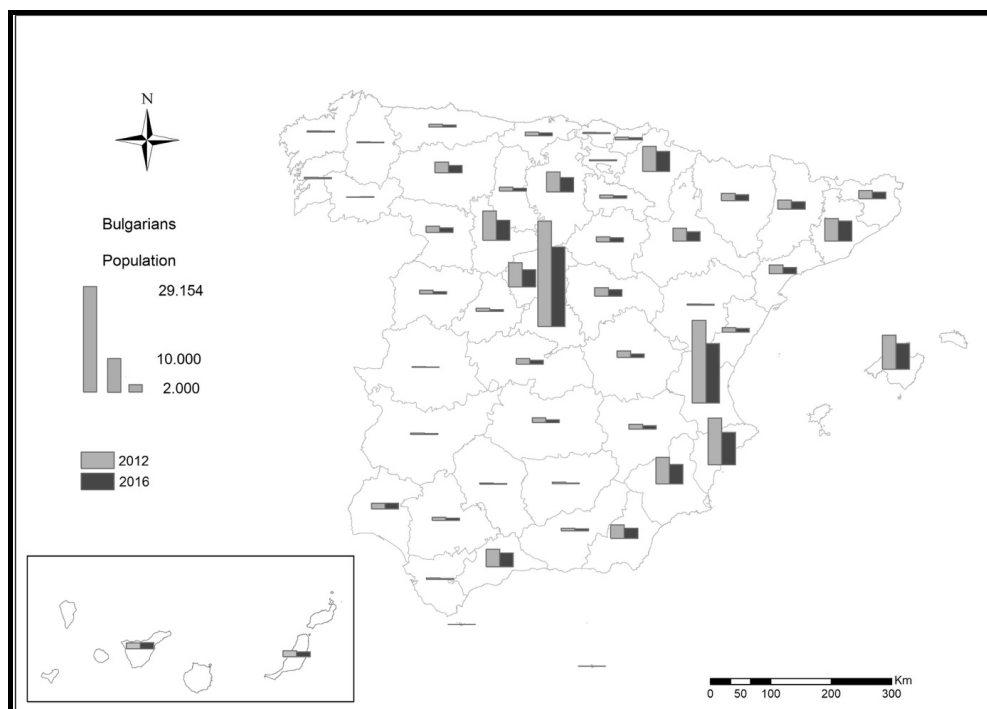
Source: NSI [*National Statistical Institute*], *Continuous Register Statistics*.

The Bulgarian community residing in Spain is characterized by a balance between the genders, a higher share of the groups of active age (more than half of them are between 25 and 49 years of age), a rapid integration into the labour market and activities concentrated in construction, industry and transportation – in the case of men and housekeeping services, commerce and accommodation – in the case of women, in addition to agriculture for both genders (Domingo, Gil and Maisongrande, 2008; Mintchev and Boshnakov, 2016). The numbers reached by this group were accompanied by a rapid process of territorial diffusion. Nevertheless, the geographical distribution is characterized by major concentrations in Madrid and on the Mediterranean coast and also in Castilla and León (figure 2).

The “glorious decade“ of the Spanish economy (1996-2007) was interrupted abruptly in 2008 and was superseded by a Deep recession, manifested in rapid job losses, a surge in unemployment (affecting one in each four working-age individuals in the first quarter of 2013) and progressive deterioration of the living standards. The crisis had a direct impact on migration flows: it slowed down the arrival of new immigrants and some of the Bulgarians, who resided here emigrated, yielding as a result a negative migration balance. The change of the trend led to a shrinking of the Bulgarian community by about 30% in the last five years. The decline in numbers was observed generally on the entire territory and bigger losses were registered in provinces with greater numbers of residents (Madrid, Valencia, Alicante, Murcia, Valladolid or Segovia). According to provisional data of the NSI, at present less than 120,000 Bulgarians are residents of Spain.

Figure 2

Geographical distribution of Bulgarian immigrants, in 2012 and 2016

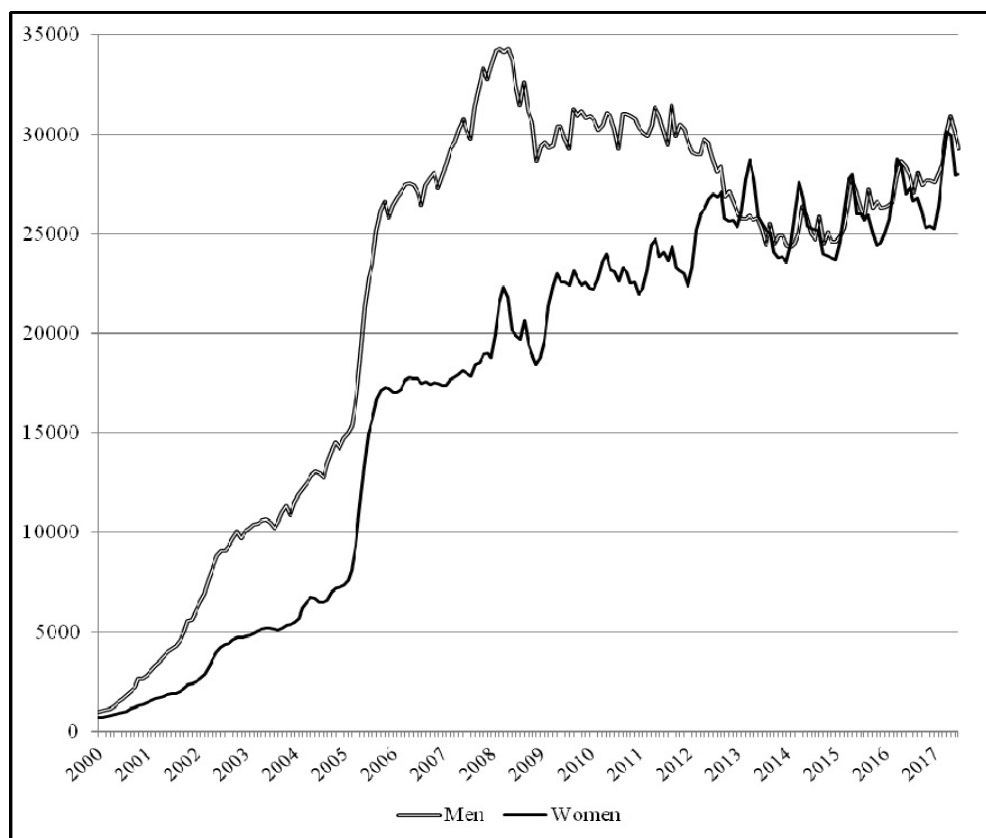


Source: NSI, *Continuous Register Statistics*.

The crisis affects the immigrants more (their unemployment rate is 39%) than the local population (unemployment rate of under 25%) and the groups from Eastern Europe were among those hit the hardest (Collective Ioé and Fernández, 2010). The unemployment rates for those immigrants reached in Spain the highest values in the whole of the European Union (Brinke and Dittrich, 2016). Men had suffered the crisis most intensely, as it can be observed from the figures concerning workers, participating in Social Security, primarily between 2011 and 2014-15 (figure 3). On the other hand, the number of women of legal age in Social Security increased continuously, which increased their share in the total employed population. In fact, women make up 50% of Bulgarian workers, while at the stage of economic expansion they were outnumbered by men.

Figure 3

Bulgarian workers participating in Social Security (January 2000 – May 2017)



Source: Ministry of Employment and Social Security, *Foreign workers, participating in Social Security* <<https://expinterweb.empleo.gob.es/series/>>. Data from the end of each month.

The different trends in the occupations of men and women may have consequences for the mobility patterns of both genders. On the other hand, it is noteworthy that the recent recovery in employment could contribute to a new increase in immigration.

Geographic mobility as a strategy

The crisis cut short the expectations of progress and well-being, which were achieved by – or to which aspired – thousands of people during the phase of rapid economic growth. In order to mitigate its consequences, the migrants applied different strategies, both in the

production sphere, as well as in the reproducing system, whereby they tried to bridge the gaps between family needs and available resources. The strategy is an entirety of decisions, actions and activities, adopted by a subject (individual or a group) in order to achieve an objective, with great likelihood to achieve the effect desired (Bourdieu, 2006). A part of the migrants tries to improve their working and living conditions by means of the geographic mobility.

The geographic mobility increases along with the globalization and the demand for flexible workers, the development of the means of transportation and communication (Guarnizo, 2003; Urry, 2007; Portes, 2012). The information, the contacts, the relationships and assistance, provided by families and friends are resources, which guarantee the mobility (Palloni *et al.*, 2001). The routes and the times, when movement takes place, reflect the functioning of the networks of migrants, which leaves little room for a chance (Hannam, Sheller and Urry, 2006).

In Europe, the circulation of migrants between East and West was facilitated by the progressive enlargement of the European Union and by the opening of the frontiers (Wihtol, 2013 and 2017). As Catherine Wihtol said (2016), the more open the frontiers, the more migrants circulate. Also, the crisis of recent years played a prominent role for the mobility. (Fassman *et al.*, 2014). In a recession there are fewer openings for employment and a greater number of migrants are inclined to move in search of opportunity. The loss of a place of work, the job insecurity and the decline in incomes provide an impetus to the mobility, which is transformed into a survival strategy (Miguélez and Godino, 2014).

Mobility can be internal or international – a distinction which is frequently blurred, because the flows are becoming ever more complex and fragmented (King and Skeldon, 2010). A migrant chooses one or another result of the circumstances, of the needs of the family group, of the resources available (in terms of personal relations and economic means) and of the objectives. In Spain, the internal mobility of the immigrants was very intense in the first years of stay (Recaño, 2002) and remains a common practice, even though in many cases it does not involve a change of the place of residence. The accelerated deterioration of the living conditions activated the international emigration, which public opinion identifies as a return. But the reality is more complicated, because not everybody leaving Spain return to their country, nor all who return are doing it for good.

Return refers to a movement of emigrants, who go back to the country of origin with the intention to establish themselves there (Snel, *et al.*, 2015). The migrants return for many reasons: some because they had an unsuccessful experience abroad, lost a job, find difficulties to re-integrate themselves into the labour market or were unable to adjust themselves to the receiving country; others return, because they achieved success and the goals desired and decided to return when they thought that the country of origin offered opportunities (Ruspini *et al.*, 2016). In general, economic success, social and cultural integration in the country of destination and/or weak attachment to the place of birth were facilitating the decision to remain in the country of destination and reduced the intention to return. By contrast, difficulties encountered abroad make return a credible option and all the more likely one – the stronger the attachment of the emigrant to the place of birth. In the case of Bulgaria these circumstances did not result in mass returns (Mintchev, 2016). The

migrants who maintain close relations with family and friends living in the country of origin, who visit them relatively frequently and spend there a large portion of their savings, are more likely to return than the migrants who do not develop such international practices. (Snel *et al.*, 2015; Ruspini *et al.*, 2016).

In reality, the return has multiple dimensions (Cavalcanti and Parella, 2013). A return could be definitive or could mean just a brief break between periods of long stay abroad and, quite often, many migrants alternate periods of emigration with transient returns. The difficulties in finding work or the insufficient salary in the place of origin are motives that drive a new emigration, which is much easier when a part of the family already reside abroad. The money earned helps improve the living conditions and stay for part of the year in the country of origin; but when one runs out of savings, one has to emigrate again. The migrants who leave and return repeatedly become part of a circular migration (King and Christou, 2011; Skeldon, 2012). This is a matter of movements of different duration, repetitive or cyclical, between the place of origin and the place/s of destination, which do not imply a change in the principal place of residence (Zelinsky, 1971; Bovenkerk, 1974). When these migrations are governed by international agreements, the mobility is not yet circular, but temporary, which the States try to encourage in order to make the labour market more flexible, like it occurred with the instances of contracting in the country of origin of citizens of Bulgaria and of other countries for seasonal agricultural work in Spain (Gordo, 2008).

In conceptual terms the distinction between return and circular migration, which means between permanent residence in the country of origin and systematic and repeated emigration, is clear. But one has to agree with Ruspini, Richter and Nollert (2016) that from the empirical point of view it is difficult to trace the dividing line between the two modalities, because it is not possible to observe over the years the trajectories of migrants. No doubt, the studies of migrations in Europe make a distinction between both types of migration and observe an increase in circularity (Engbersen *et al.*, 2013; Mintchev *et al.*, 2016). Some speak of the “liquid” or “fluid” character of the migration of the citizens of Central and Eastern Europe (Engbersen and Snel, 2013). In any case the geographic mobility is viewed as a strategy characteristic of East Europeans, who instead of establishing themselves definitively or for a long period of time in another country, are opting for the mobility with the aim to improve their living conditions in the countries of origin (Morokvasic, 2015; Wihtol, 2016).

Methodology

This article draws on two sources of additional information: the statistics and the accounts of the migrants. Among the statistics special mention should be made of the *Residential Variation Statistics* (RVS), which are being compiled by the National Statistical Institute (NSI) and which we have used in the analysis of extremal migration, the entries into and the departures from Spain. The register of entries (immigration) is of good quality, but the account of departures (emigration) is not very reliable (Arango, 2016). The RVS underestimates the emigration and, in the majority of cases, does not provide information

on the countries of destination, which depends on the will of those departing. The unit of measurement is the migration and not the migrant. The same person may complete various migrations in the course of a specified period. Among the other variables, the RVS includes age, gender, nationality and the place of birth of the migrant.

The data provided by the Occupation Observatory of the State Public Employment Service (SEPE) allows to analyse the internal territorial mobility (among the Spanish provinces) based on labour motives. SEPE considers that mobility exists when the domicile of the worker does not coincide with the centre of work and has kindly provided figures of the contracts entered into by Bulgarian citizens in provinces, different from those of their residence. SEPE registers the information on the number of contracts based on the nationality and the gender of the worker. The same person can accumulate different contracts in the course of one year. Only the lawful contracts are being accounted for; that is why this source does not reflect all movements, since in Spain there are many irregularities in the contracting of the workforce.

Although the statistics have clearly improved in the last few years, the information provided is deficient in many aspects, which necessitates the combining of a quantitative and qualitative methodology. 25 in-depth interviews were conducted with immigrants resident in the provinces of Valencia and Madrid, whose accounts allow an insight into the motives, for which the migrants undertake movement or decide to remain in their places of residence. The decisions they make depend on the economic and labour situation in the countries of origin and destination and on various personal and family circumstances. The accounts were supplemented by information published in the media and by contributions from the literature on European migrations.

Migration patterns of Bulgarians during the crisis

Among the strategies adopted by the migrants for mitigating the effects of the crisis, the geographic mobility stands out, which is characterized by its diversity: migration among different Spanish provinces, emigration to other countries, return to the place of origin and circular migration. The accounts collected by different authors point towards an increase in the mobility in consequence of the crisis: “Many left, we are not that many now ... Some returned to Bulgaria, live there and collect unemployment benefits from Spain... Many left Spain, but did not go back [to Bulgaria] and re-emigrated to France or to other places” (Benlloch, 2016, pp. 198-199). “Many people have left, because here they lost their jobs and now they have returned to Bulgaria and work there and have their home there. And I also know people, who have left Segovia in search of work, because here they can’t find any” (Martín, 2014, 109). “Many people ended up with no job and as a result the Bulgarians, like people from many other countries, returned to their country of origin and to other countries with more opportunities” (Mesa Diocesana, 2015, 38).

Internal mobility for employment reasons

During the phase of economic expansion, the residential mobility of the East Europeans was higher, superior to that among other foreign communities (Reher and Silvestre, 2011), which was related to a greater propensity for mobility of recent arrivals, to employment of temporary nature in activities like agriculture or construction and the desire for improvement of living and working conditions (Recaño, 2002; Miguélez and Godino, 2014). The numbers of change of domicile have declined since the onset of the crisis, the values registered in the last few years are inferior to those for other groups, which reveals the greater impact of the crisis on the workers from Eastern Europe (Gil, Bayona and Vono, 2012).

Nevertheless, Bulgarians, just like Romanians (Viruela, 2016), have shown a great propensity for territorial mobility for employment reasons. In effect, during the first years of the crisis, the Ministry of Employment and Social Security registered a notable increase of contracting of Bulgarian citizens in provinces other than that of domicile (table 1). If in 2007 they held 13,000 contracts with other provinces, in 2011 they were reported as about 20,000. In the next years lower values were registered, except for 2016. The occupation in provinces other than that of domicile is equivalent to about 20% of the contracts. Men are playing the leading role in these movements, but the ever-increasing presence of women, which is currently exceeding 35%, is worthy of mention.

Table 1
Contracts held by Bulgarian workers in provinces different from that of their residence

Year	Number of contracts	MR*	% of women in the total
2007	13,066	15.5	23.5
2008	13,345	16.4	25.8
2009	15,192	17.5	28.8
2010	18,885	20.8	29.3
2011	19,985	21.5	29.1
2012	18,179	18.7	33.8
2013	18,893	20.7	33.4
2014	19,414	20.3	33.9
2015	19,893	19.9	34.1
2016	20,652	19.5	35.2

* The mobility rate (MR) expresses the percentage of contracts in provinces other than those of their residence from the total number of contracts held by Bulgarian citizens.

Source: Ministry of Employment and Social Security. Data provided by the Occupation Observatory of the State Public Employment Service (SEPE).

The geographic mobility for employment reasons is related primarily to the agrarian sector, although activities like accommodation, transportation and commerce are also encouraging mobility: “Now I’m organizing myself on my own, but with difficulties, because it’s hard to be on one’s own, difficult because of the paperwork ... I work in Palma. I go to Bulgaria, sometimes pass via Valencia, on other occasions via Mallorca, this is in fact how my life develops. I am transporting foodstuffs, for supplying stores in Valencia and in Palma, the stores of Bulgarians. We are selling foodstuffs to Russian, Bulgarian, Romanian stores in

the cities of Spain, because there are lots of people from these countries, who would like to buy things from their countries” (male, 38 years of age).

In the last few years, many of those who lost their jobs in the construction, industry and services sectors have transformed themselves into self-employed individuals, like the case referred to or into travelling day-workers and take part in different agricultural campaigns. Among the campaigns which attract greater numbers of workers are notably the harvesting of grapes in Castilla-la Mancha or Castilla y León; of citrus fruits in the Community of Valencia and Murcia; of other fruits, in Aragón and Cataluña; and to a lesser degree, of strawberries and olives, in Andalucía. The harvesting of those products requires great numbers of workers, so that in peak periods the local workforce is being supplemented by day-workers arriving from other provinces (Sánchez and Serra, 2017). Since some of the tasks are of short duration, as is the harvesting of grapes, a worker needs to connect campaigns in different regions in order to remain active for a longer time and the result is movement routes, which on the same dates tend to repeat themselves year after year. On occasion, the immigrants who reside in Spain are joined by compatriots who returned to Bulgaria and who punctually show up each season (Martín, 2014; Benlloch, 2016).

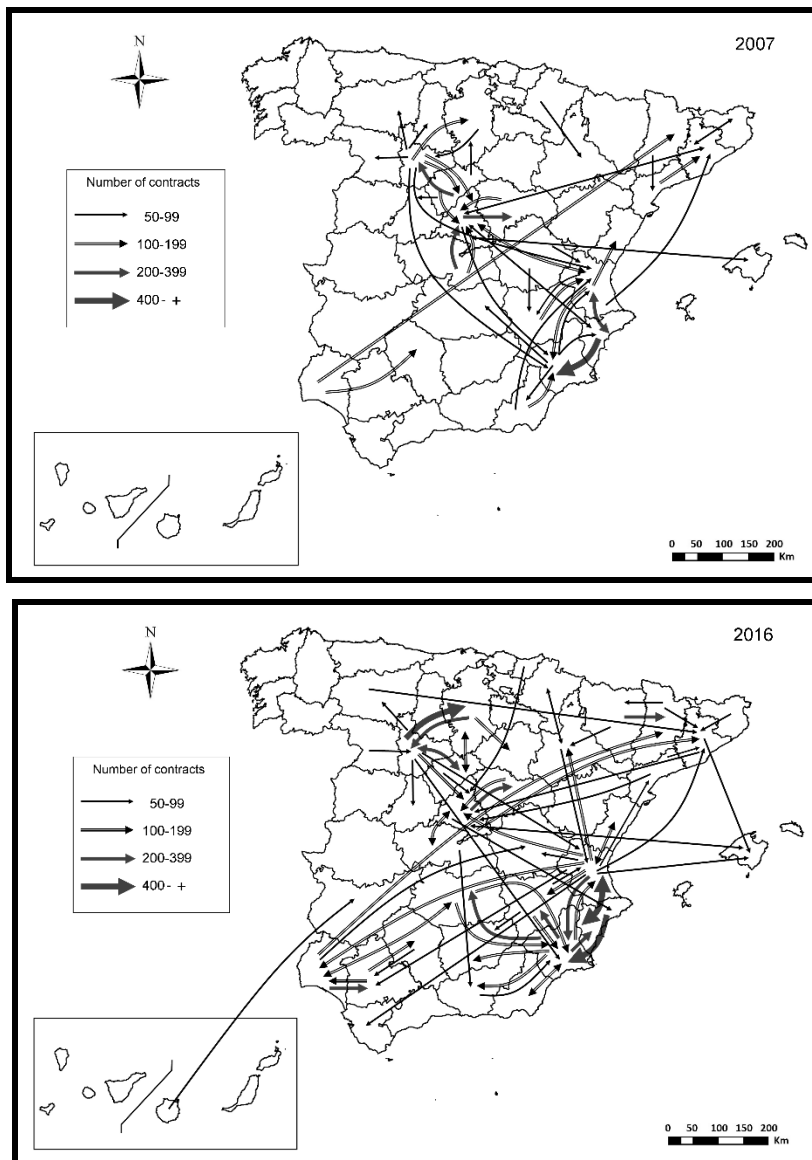
The increase in the internal mobility, which occurred in the initial years of the crisis, was accompanied by an expansion of the area of migration, as it can be observed from the maps on figure 4, on which the flows of more than 50 contracts are shown in 2007 and 2016. More than half of the movements are over short distances, because they are taking place between neighbouring provinces, showing the greatest concentration in the south-eastern peninsula (Valencia, Alicante and Murcia) and in Castilla-León (Valladolid). Over the last decade the transfer of workers has markedly increased in those provinces, at the same time as mobility over larger distances increased, like the movements which connect Andalucía with the Mediterranean coast and those with Aragón and the central part of the country. It should be kept in mind that the data which we are commenting on refers to legal contracts and that therefore the actual mobility should be much greater².

The internal mobility within the agrarian sector is related to the experience, gained by the migrants and to the support of the social networks. It is common for employers to recruit day-workers among people who are known to those who worked in previous seasons and also since some of those day-workers act as intermediaries between the agricultural entrepreneurs and other workers of the same nationality (Sánchez and Serra, 2017). The employer and the worker mutually need each other – the first in order to be able to handle confidently the campaign and the other – for staying active. The circulation between the province of residence and that of work takes place owing to a widely dispersed social network in the territory, which constitutes a key element of the mobility capital of the migrants.

² Reports concerning irregular contracting and work exploitation are relatively frequent. See for example “The Civil Guard break up an organization engaging in work exploitation of Bulgarian citizens”, Press office of the Civil Guard, 2 November 2016. <<http://www.guardiacivil.es/es/prensa/noticias/5988.html>>.

Figure 4

Principal flows of Bulgarian workers among provinces in 2007 and 2016*



* Flows representing more than 50 contracts are shown.

Source: Ministry of Employment and Social Security. Data provided by the Occupation Observatory of the State Public Employment Service (SEPE).

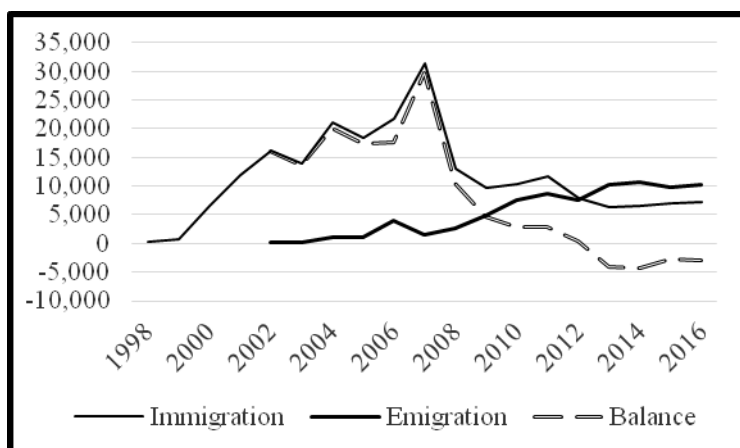
The contracting of Bulgarian workers in provinces other than that of their residence is in a state of stagnation recently, which is related to two reasons. On the one hand, the increases in contracting of Spanish unemployed in construction and industry, who sought refuge in the agrarian sector. On the other hand, as it is commented hereafter, the migration of Bulgarian citizens increased. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that those immigrants remain a fundamental component in the agrarian sector of different regions, as is the case in Castilla and León (Sánchez and Serra, 2017). Although the competencies increased some employers prefer hiring foreigners, because they inspire more confidence than local workers. A vine-grower from Ribera del Duero (in Castilla-León) formulated it as follows: “sad, but Bulgarians, especially women, work well and are capable of sacrifice, which is necessary in the field”³.

Growth in international mobility

The crisis had a strong impact on external flows. The number of arrivals experienced an abrupt and severe slowdown in 2008 (figure 5), demonstrating that Spain was not yet such an attractive destination, as during the phase of economic expansion. The number of departures, clearly and against all projections, were modest in the initial years of the crisis. Emigration intensified more a little later, in connection with the worsening of the economic and labour situation in 2011-12 (Parella and Petroff, 2014).

Figure 5

Spain: External migrations of individuals born in Bulgaria (1998-2016)*



* Data on outbound movements is published since 2002.

Source: NSI, *Residential Variation Statistics*.

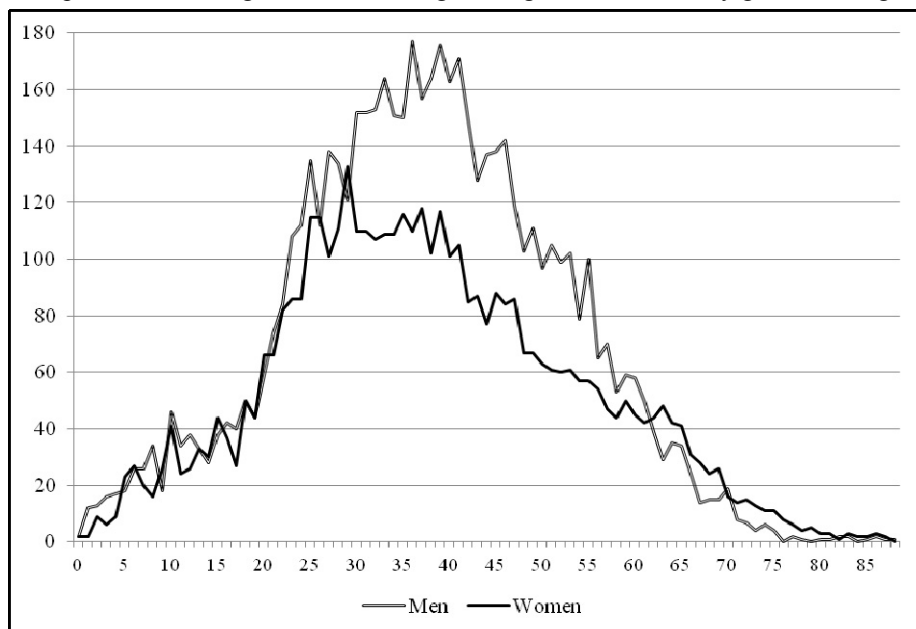
³ Henández, Ana Belén (2012): “Grape harvesting, an immigrant terrain”, *ABC*, 7 October 2012. <<http://www.abc.es/20121007/comunidad-castillaleon/abcp-vendimia-terreno-inmigrante-20121007.html>>

In the last five years the numbers of the Bulgarian community resident in Spain declined by about 50,000 people, which is equivalent to 30% of those registered in 2012. As the situation of unemployment wore on, as the opportunities to find work diminished and the benefits and subsidies ran out, many of those, who earlier opted to resist the impact of the crisis in Spain, reconsidered their options and decided to emigrate to another country or to return to Bulgaria. This is how one of the women, interviewed by Sara Martín (2014, 40), formulated it: “People left, because they didn’t work any more and didn’t receive benefits any more... I have a cousin who was here for more than fifteen years and now they live there. Here they bought a house during the [economic] boom. Both of them were out of a job [because of the crisis] and were unable to pay the mortgage and the bank repossessed the house. They were not receiving any support... and they returned there, because there they had a house”.

Among those who emigrated there is a large share of men, because they were affected most by the loss of employment, due to their clearly expressed dependency on the construction sector. In the outbound flows registered in 2016, the major difference between the genders existed among those between 30 and 50 years of age (figure 6). Those who emigrated more were the heads of family out of a job, while the wives remained in Spain, because they had more options for continuing working and for the socialization of the children, many of whom were born here. It must be noted, nevertheless, that adolescents under the age of 15 also left. This means that there were entire families who emigrated and that a part of the emigration was expected to be permanent or last for a long period of time.

Figure 6

Departures of immigrants born in Bulgaria, registered in 2016, by gender and age



Source: NSI, Residential Variation Statistics (data micro-fiches).

Table 2
Outbound movements of immigrants born in Bulgaria, by destination (2008-2016)

Year	Return	Other known destination	Unknown destination	Total
2008	1,191	51	1,317	2,559
2009	1,201	75	3,655	4,931
2010	1,031	65	6,392	7,488
2011	940	81	7,745	8,766
2012	1,182	93	6,236	7,511
2013	1,037	72	9,229	10,338
2014	1,373	115	9,318	10,806
2015	776	81	9,023	9,880
2016	822	90	9,363	10,275
2008-16	9,553	723	62,278	72,554
% of the total	13.2	1.0	85.8	100.0
% of women	44.4	49.9	42.0	42.4

Source: NSI, Residential Variation Statistics (data micro-fiches).

The statistical information on the country of destination is very incomplete and the latter is not known in 86% of the cases (table 2). But it is estimated that the vast majority have returned to Bulgaria (Domingo and Blanes, 2015), with the prevailing share being of men of working age. Women turn out to be less inclined to return, because many of them continue to be employed in the place of destination and/or because they think that for them the opportunities for employment would be more limited in Bulgaria as a result of the restructuring of the economy, which was brought about by the larger process of economic transition.

The persons interviewed recognized, that the loss of one's job and the difficulties in finding other employment or the economic and labour insecurity were driving them to return, which was in line with the findings of other studies (Eurofoun, 2012; Martín, 2014; Ivanova, 2015; Mintchev, 2016). These motives are reinforced by others related to health, family or problems with integration at the place of destination, as a young family states (the husband aged 33, and the wife - 29), with two young children (the first 1 year old and the other – born just a few months ago) and with a stay of one year in Spain, who decided to return, because “being far from friends and completely unintegrated is saddening us much” and stated that they were doing so now “because it would be more difficult to do it later, when the children start attending school and educating themselves in the Spanish mentality and language”. By contrast, others prefer for their children to grow up in Spain.

As it was already stated, a return does not necessarily mean an end to the migration process, it could serve as a starting point of a new episode of emigration and of frequent departures and returns between the place of origin and that of destination (Mintchev, 2016). The East-West circular migration gained notoriety in the last decade of the XXth century, after the fall of the Berlin wall and intensified in the initial years of the XXIst century, along with the progressive enlargement of the European Union and the opening of frontiers. This phenomenon, which affected a great number of individuals, is also related to the economic

crisis and the difficulties which the migrants encounter in settling down and improving their living conditions in just one place, with the transnationalization of the migration networks and with the opportunity to travel rapidly at a reasonable cost, owing to the development of the means of communication and transportation by road and the onset of *low cost* flights (Favell *et al.*, 2011; Skeldon, 2012; Engbersen *et al.*, 2013; Wihtol, 2013).

The majority of movements between Spain and Bulgaria take place in summer months and reflect basically family- and recreation-related reasons. Migrants use these visits for exploring the opportunities offered by the labour markets at the place of origin, for supervising the process of construction of residential buildings, in which they have invested the majority of their savings or to take care of elderly parents and of children, like various women interviewed were doing, who worked for several months in Spain as housekeepers and then returned briefly to their place of origin: “We, meaning my mother and sister are working in turns in Spain, taking care of an elderly lady. Now it’s me who’s staying here, but after that my mother will come and then my sister. Because in this way we know that our children, who remain in Bulgaria, are taken care of and we are also able to spend a few months in each year with them” (female, 30 years). Others organize schedule vacations from Spain so that they can help their family in Bulgaria, like one of those interviewed is doing, who returns home precisely in May “to help my father plant cherries”⁴ (male, 46 years old).

Both the statistical information and recent studies agree in indicating that few Bulgarian immigrants decide to re-emigrate to another country (Mintchev and Boshnakov, 2016). Those who do prefer Germany, due to the favourable economic and labour situation there. The emigration to another country is a strategy, which is contemplated mainly by young people pursuing university studies, because the salaries in Bulgaria are very low⁵ and because they believe that both there, as well as in Spain, they would have a difficulty in entering into the qualified labour market. When that happens, alternatives are sought: “Perhaps I belong in the United States, not because it’s a better place, but because people there are valued for what they do and not for where they come from ... for me this is a good thing. In Spain they regard with Olympic indifference researchers from Eastern Europe” (female, 28 years old).

The majority of Bulgarians remain in Spain

Several thousand Bulgarian immigrants left Spain during the economic crisis and have chosen primarily to return to Bulgaria or to engage in mobility. No doubt, it is interesting to underline that the majority of those who arrived in Spain remained here and currently there

⁴ The areas planted by cherries, which contracted significantly in the initial years of the XXIst century, are recovering by new plantations in the southern regions of Bulgaria. Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forestry. Republic of Bulgaria. <<http://www.mzh.government.bg/MZH/en/Home.aspx>>.

⁵ Currently (in the first half of 2017) the minimum wage in Bulgaria (235 euros) is 3.5 times lower than that in Spain (825). Eurostat: *Monthly minimum wages bi-annual data*. <http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=earn_mw_cur&lang=en>.

are more than 118,000 immigrants of this origin. An opinion poll conducted in 2011 showed that the majority of the immigrants were reluctant to return to Bulgaria or to re-emigrate into another country (Mintchev and Boshnakov, 2016). Economic and labour success, integration into the host society, above all that of the children, many of whom were born here or were brought here at a very early age, are factors in favour of staying here. This is also the better option for the migrants, who because of the crisis worked less hours and have seen their incomes decline, as one of those interviewed remembers: “The amount of work decreased. Now I clean less, but I have not lost my job. The crisis has affected both Spain and Bulgaria and I find myself in a better situation here” (female, 47 years of age). This opinion is shared by other migrants, who do not see sufficient reasons to return.

In general, family members advise young people against returning to Bulgaria (Mintchev and Boshnakov, 2016). Young people feel disappointed by their country of origin, particularly those, who emigrated at an early age and were educated in Spain, where they have built strong social and friendship bonds. Here is how this is formulated by a university student, who arrived in Spain at the age of six: “No! OK, for vacations - yes. Indeed, this summer I will be going there to see the family. My grandmother tells me not to go back, to stay in Spain or to go elsewhere, but not to Bulgaria. You see, Bulgaria is a sad country, people are very introvert, pessimistic. People are not in the habit to go out, as here... The country has changed somewhat, but very little. I see it every time I return. But... I would not return to live there. The relations with my friends [there] have gradually cooled, while my [knowledge of] Spanish and my social skills improved in Spain. I have always lived in Valencia, I would remain to live here or I would go to Barcelona or some other city” (female, 20 years of age).

Conclusion

The economic crisis, the surge in unemployment, the running out of subsidies and social benefits and the scarcity of jobs have triggered the geographic mobility of thousands of Bulgarian immigrants over the last years. The new movements are marked by diversity: circulation between various Spanish regions, return, emigration to other countries and movements between the places of origin and of destination. Many of those movements are never registered in the statistics and some modalities are completely left unaccounted for, as is the case of circular migration.

The majority of Bulgarians, who came to Spain, remain here. Many of them arrived prior to 2007 and already have stayed for more than 10 years among us, including some of them for more than 20 years and as it is known the likelihood of emigration declines as the years of residence go by, because the bonds to the host place are strengthening. Various factors contribute to the stay of thousands of Bulgarians in Spain: the time elapsed since their arrival, the progress in career, the acquisition of properties and the establishment, particularly that of the children, who have lived here practically their entire life. When all those circumstances concur, a migrant would have no reasons to leave. But also many of those affected by the crisis prefer to remain in Spain. Some work less than they used to and earn less income. Those, who have lost their jobs, work in other economic sectors and in

other provinces and regions. Like we have found, the internal mobility for employment reasons witnessed a considerable increase in the initial years of the recession.

The crisis had immediate consequences for the external flows. The arrivals of new immigrants declined abruptly in the first year of the crisis (2008) and the departures increased, which affected adversely the economic and labour situation in 2012 and led to a negative migration balance in the last few years. The emigration for returning is, clearly, the most important flow. The crisis contributed to making thousands of migrants return earlier than they planned. But some did not undertake new migrations, while other went to and from between the place of origin and that of destination relatively frequently. Just like other East Europeans, Bulgarians have a substantial experience in circular migration. Thousands of migrants have taken up mobility as an alternative to the definitive emigration. This modality of movement was stimulated by the economic crisis, the freedom of movement within the European Union and the advances in and the decline of the costs of the modes of transportation. Some Bulgarians – residents of Spain, very few of them – intend to improve their living conditions in other countries. For them Germany is the most important destination.

Entire families are taking part in the new migration cases, but there is a greater share of young men of adult age. This is not a matter related to gender, but to availability. The males were the most affected by the losses of employment in Spain, while females have maintained certain activity during the crisis (housekeeping services, care of dependent persons, commerce, accommodation etc.). This, in the case of family units, led to an increase in the number of transnational families as a more adequate solution for optimization of the labour resources of the adults and for the socialization of children.

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