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Russian real estate owners on Bulgarian Black Sea Coast: culture and ethnic relations (the case of Tsarevo)

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Lifestyle migration and other lifestyle oriented motilities, such as second home or residential tourism, are usually conceived of as temporary or permanent spatial movement of relatively affluent persons of all ages, who travel and move between meaningful places with an individually imagined and collectively perceived potential to provide a better quality of life (Benson, O'Reilly 2009). Lifestyle migration is privileged as a form of mobility taking place in a contingent relation between the two poles of tourism and migration, because it usually does not occur primarily for economic reasons. Although often not part of the economic and social elite of their home country, lifestyle migrants usually live far above the minimum and medium standards of life in the host country and have frequently been targeted strategically to boost local economic development (Janoschka, Heiko 2014: 2). Russian second home ownership in Bulgaria fits perfectly into this theoretical frame. Russian real estate investments abroad have over the years acquired international significance (Malyschkina 2010). Bulgaria is a top area of Russian foreign real estate acquisition globally, regardless of its low investment rating (Konstantinov 2015). This phenomenon has not been studied until now.

The main aim of this text is to examine the cultural dimensions of Russian presence in one of the Bulgarian Black Sea Coast areas focusing on ethnic relations, the forming and maintaining of ethnic boundaries, and stereotypes and construction of collective identities in the two local

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communities – Russian and Bulgarian, within the frame of complex (and often complicated) historical, political, and cultural relations between Bulgaria and Russia. In terms of methodology, this research is based on qualitative methods – semi-structured interviews with 18 respondents (7 Russians – one permanent resident and six second home owners and 11 Bulgarians – 4 locals and 7 second home owners²), and participant observation conducted in the years 2013–2019 in the old quarter of Vassiliko, part of the town of Tsarevo, Burgas Province in southeast Bulgaria. Media data and literary sources were used as well.

Tsarevo³ is situated on a picturesque peninsula with three bays and attractive beaches. It is a municipal center, and was proclaimed a national resort in the 1960s. Tsarevo has about 6000 permanent inhabitants. Until the end of the 1950s, a Soviet garrison was located nearby – near the Papiya peak, because of its proximity to the border with Turkey⁴.

Finding clear figures about Russian real estate purchases proved to be a difficult task due to high confidentiality and lack of transparency in the field. This information is considered a matter of national security. On the other hand, this type of data (some of it being classified) is scattered among numerous state institutions with no connection to each other, and respectively, no option of cross-referencing. This reflects a specific feature of Bulgaria as the country with the highest level of corruption within the EC, characterized by absence of strong state institutions. Ownership, promotion, and production of second home spaces require complex governance relationships from the macro (supra- and international) to the micro (regional and local) level. It is common knowledge that some countries (like Malta) apply effective policies to attract second home owners, while others (e.g. Australia) tend to restrict and control the phenomenon instead (Åkerlund et al. 2015). No state actions of any kind to either attract or control Russian purchase of second homes (with the exception of a certain visa policy and the ban on buying arable land) are evident and registered in

² The social status of Russian second home owners will be discussed below; they generally belong to a vague category of the Russian middle class. In terms of age, four of them are middle-aged and three are pensioners. Bulgarian second home owners are undoubtedly considered wealthy – owning a rest home at the sea is quite a luxury for ordinary Bulgarians originating from the interior. Bulgarian respondents are 33–73 years old.

³ Between 1950 and 1991 Tsarevo bore the name of Michurin in honor of the Russian botanist V.I. Michurin [editors' note].

⁴ M.H., born 1947 in Tsarevo, remembers that on November 7th – the Day of the October Revolution – school children used to visit the garrisons and Russian ships as well, where they received treats.

Bulgaria. This fact *per se* is indicative of the image of the place as a *territory* rather than a sovereign country where lawlessness reigns. Some behaviors of Russian second home owners⁵ considered as objectionable by the local Bulgarians, which will be discussed below, can be to an extent attributed to this imagery of Bulgaria.

In this context – that is, in absence of clear figures from institutions – the only available data for us is that taken from media sources, however biased and uncertain. Bulgarian and international media regularly report a range of 300,000 to 500,000 Russian properties in the country⁶. This figure exceeds the number of Russian immigrants in Bulgaria from the time period of 1917–1922 by over 10 times. Studies report that those fleeing the Bolshevik terror at the time and finding refuge in Bulgaria were approximately 35,000 persons (Kецева 2008). Moreover, the number of Russian real estate owners in Bulgaria between 2009 and 2013 exceeds the total number of Russian immediate post-1917 emigration worldwide, which comprised 200,000 persons by the mid – 1930s (Hassel 1991). After the Crimean crisis in 2014, followed by international sanctions for Russia and acute economic difficulties, many second homeowners started selling their properties as they found themselves unable to continue managing the estate. Again, clear figures are not available, but this process is accounted for by local observers and was registered by real estate agencies in 2018–2020. Only elderly permanent residents remain while younger ones either settle in the city of Burgas or leave the country⁷.

Second home purchase abroad is a relatively widespread practice among Russians. It may be considered a continuation of the tradition of owning *dachas* (rural second homes owned by wealthy urban residents), which has been “deeply embedded in cultural memory and social practice” (Lovell 2003: 6). Today about half of all city dwellers in Russia have a *dacha*. They form a diversified group of middle and upper class urbanites (Southworth 2006).

⁵ Controversial or reckless behaviors can be observed in a part of tourists coming from the West as well, mainly among young people and driven by the use of stimulants.

⁶ See: <https://news.mail.ru/economics/20651686> [15 Jan 2015]. More than 81,000 Russians purchased estates as physical persons; yet many others bought their homes via companies due to juridical restrictions – an exact number of the latter is impossible to be found. A peak in Russian purchases was in 2012, and these numbers seem to have decreased in the next years. Cf. https://www.capital.bg/biznes/imoti/2019/05/02/3427365_nad_81_hil_rusnaci_sa_kupili_imoti_v_bulgariia./ [14 May 2019].

⁷ Cf. <https://meduzata.com/imoti/29977-2019-12-04-15-27-11> [12 Dec 2019].

The main motives for second home purchase which are constant, that is unchanging over time, are the following: inversion, relaxation, nature, and social status (Jaakson 1986, Hall, Müller 2004), and these needs of course differ among dwellers (Lipkina 2013: 302). Inversion, or leisure, is considered the most significant reason: a second home creates a contrast to “normal life” (Müller 1999), it ensures a specific “vacation” from modernity (Kaltenborn 1998: 124) and a return “back to nature” (Hall, Müller 2004: 12). Inversion involves an “escape” from the busy urban everyday life, so does relaxation. Relaxation and recreation are possible at second home destinations mainly because as familiar places they do not require familiarization or adaptation (Müller 1999). Owning a second home abroad is an indicator of social status (Hall, Müller 2004; Jaakson 1986). These basic motives (typical of second home owners in general) are slightly transformed according to some characteristic features of Russian culture and lifestyle. For example, the “back to nature” motivation takes on a slightly different connotation – Russians tend to look for higher standard dwellings close to lakes (in Finland) or seas (in Bulgaria), but supplied with all the modern utilities (Lipkina 2013: 312), and in the Bulgarian case frequently sumptuously furnished⁸. Among the main motivations of Russian second homeowners is also the search for a “safe haven” abroad, a “socially just place to live”, as Russia is often considered insecure and unstable politically and economically (Shleifer, Treisman 2004: 22; Glinkina et al. 2001). Real estate abroad is often perceived in terms of safe investment in the context of a volatile economy, as is the case of Russia, and an opportunity for permanent or temporary relocation (Malyshkina 2010). This instability is the main reason behind the asymmetry of the phenomenon – Russians are very active second homebuyers abroad, yet reciprocal second home purchases in Russia are not an evident phenomenon (Akerlund et al. 2015: 87).

According to respective distances from permanent residence, second homes can be divided into three zones: day-trip, weekend, and vacation properties (Hall, Müller 2004). In this respect Bulgaria is located in the vacation zone presupposing a rare frequency of visits and long periods of

⁸ This is seen in the informants’ statement: “We bought our apartment from a Russian owner in 2018. It was extremely well furnished. When we entered for the first time we saw that he did not save his money at all – he put the best flooring (...), the bathroom was wonderful. (...) Generally speaking, the apartment was not furnished to be used only one month a year, it was done as if the owner would live there permanently. And we know that they used to come for four weeks in summer only. This was strange from our point of view” – G.T., born 1968 in Sofia.

stay. Yet, some owners coming from Moscow subjectively consider it rather close. Travel takes eight hours by plane to Burgas and transfers – a relatively short time compared to Russian space dimensions. Similarly to Spain, a high rate of return on the second homes in Bulgaria cannot be expected, but there are several non-economic factors stimulating the demand for properties, including the country's EU membership (Malyskhina 2010). Bulgaria is mainly chosen due to advantageous price level, favorable climate, and location. Climate is mild with changing seasons; countries with constantly warm climate are difficult for adaptation for Russians, so they are not considered desirable. The weather proves to be a significant factor especially for the 40+ age group (Hannonen et al. 2015: 8). "Russia is a Northern country and our people need heat. That is why they buy houses in Southern countries – Turkey, Greece, Bulgaria" – says Victor Arhipov from the Association of Russian speaking real estate owners in Bulgaria "Aliosha" (BNR 2013). Sun and the sea are thus important factors for their motivation to choose Bulgaria and hence Russian real estate purchases are concentrated predominantly in the Black sea coast region. Black sea is in fact a border area between Bulgaria and Russia⁹; border areas as such are attractive in terms of second home tourism as they always accentuate cultural differences and similarities (Mol and Law 2005). They provide a sort of balance between the unfamiliar (but not too strange) and the somewhat familiar (but not too well-known – cf. Hannonen et al. 2015: 5–6). These general assumptions are fully applicable in the current case.

The Russian ethnic community which has been formed in the coastal area gradually enlarges and strengthens its presence in the local cultural context. A Russian Consulate is by no accident located in Varna; a Russian TV by the name "Kamchia" was launched in 2016. A Russian magazine "The Sea" with a circulation of 25,000 is distributed in the coastal region. Almost 13% of the population of Burgas are its permanent residents of Russian origin; ca. 1,000 Russian children attend schools in the city; there is a specifically Russian primary school as well. Quite naturally, numerous Russian shops open in Burgas as well, attracting customers from Tsarevo. The largest Russian community of permanent dwellers resides in the town of Pomorie – composed of about 5,000 mostly retirees, but also some young families (cf. picture 1).

⁹ The Black Sea or "unfriendly sea" earned its' name, because of its unpredictability and big waves – it is not suitable for passenger sea transport (a regular catamaran line to Istanbul was expected in 2020, but it was postponed because of Covid-19 crisis).

A characteristic feature of most Russian institutions in Bulgaria and the numerous events they organize is bilingualism. Official inscriptions in both languages – of the host country and the minority – are evident all over Europe in regions inhabited by multiple ethnic groups. As a rule, the more important inscription should be given in the official state language and the second in the minority language. In Bulgaria, this can be observed as a vice versa situation at times. This slight linguistic detail reflects a popular attitude towards Bulgaria encoded in the indicative Russian expression saying *Курица не птица, Болгария не заграница* ('Hen is not a bird, Bulgaria is not abroad'). This adage reflects an outdated image of Bulgaria as an eventual "16th republic of the USSR"¹⁰, the most loyal country to Russia among all former socialist states. The sense of being at home in Bulgaria is common to almost all my respondents, regardless of the language barrier (the latter being less acutely felt due to the two languages' belonging to the same Slavonic language family).

Cultural proximity between Bulgarians and Russians and the local people's attitude, generally perceived as friendly, are crucial determinants of motivation of both second homeowners and permanent residents. The commonly shared Orthodox religious traditions are an important factor in this respect. The picturesque old Greek church of Vassiliko quarter, which had become the most popular landmark of the neighborhood, is the most important place of contact for the two communities (cf. picture 2).

Additionally, a new sort of commodified discourse regarding Russians seems to have appeared at the seaside regions. In this discourse, they are perceived simply as clients whose presence is considered positive for the local economic milieu. This reaffirms the role of local Bulgarians as providers of goods and services and portrays them as happy to give access to local spaces for the newcomers. Inscriptions in Russian are found in menus, names of shops etc. Local people do speak Russian already because of the country's socialist past, when Russian was commonly studied in Bulgarian schools. Significantly, it is still studied in Tsarevo schools as well (unlike in the majority of Bulgarian towns and cities). Most of the Russians in Bulgaria do not speak or do not wish to speak English, as they tend to perceive Russian to be a language spoken internationally, an attitude prone to cause misunderstandings such as this one:

One girl was very surprised that my 8 years old son does not speak Russian – she came to me and said persistently: "Teach him Russian, why

¹⁰ Bulgarian communist leaders had discussed such an idea in 1962–1963 as a way to avoid state bankrupt.

doesn't he know Russian?" – as if knowing Russian language in Bulgaria is unavoidable and taken for granted, as if we are still the 16th republic of the USSR.¹¹

In terms of social status, the Russian residents of Tsarevo represent urban middle class or upper middle class, although the concept of middle class itself is highly disputable and fluid in the context of Russian society. From this point of view, a definitive answer to this question is difficult to obtain. Whatever their social position in their home country might be, they are most definitely considered rich by the locals in Tsarevo – thus their lifestyle migrant status is reaffirmed (Janoschka, Heiko 2014: 2). Economic status is what accounts for the most vividly felt difference between the two groups; some Bulgarians are evidently annoyed by the fact that Russians shop extensively and in big quantities. In one informant's words,

One can easily recognize them in Lidl – the big new store we have here. They shop as if they have to ensure food supplies for years to come. I saw a family with a big shopping cart piled with food stuff to an extent some items were almost falling out. I could not stop myself from asking, 'What has just happened? Maybe I don't know that a war has started?; In this moment a bottle of expensive whiskey was about to fall out and I caught it, as if by instinct. (...) I wanted to prevent it from falling, not so much to help them. But some people in the queue told me that I should have let it fall.¹²

In the early 2000s, Bulgarian estate prices were relatively low for the usual Russian buyers. For example, there are cases of ordinary retirees who exchanged all of their life savings for a lodging in Tsarevo, and according to their own comparisons, this was still at the price of a garage in Moscow. Others claim that prices of real estate in Bulgaria are comparable with those in Spain – a fact that was verified for the present article by a professional broker as well. As Russian citizens are not granted permission to buy property in Bulgaria – all the estates are bought by companies, partly also fictively established for this purpose only. Numerous buyers take loans to purchase the estate; in some cases the debt has remained unpaid with the buyers' disappearance

Russian second home owners first appeared in Vassiliko at the end of the 1990s when mass construction projects were launched. They started buying apartments in the so-called apart-hotels – the same type of estate

¹¹ J.K., born 1970 in Sofia.

¹² M.D., 60 years old, born in Stara Zagora.

exists in Spain, and according to some media publications, this was originally created precisely for Russian owners. These buildings in the area of Tsarevo were located along *Nestinarka*, considered the best beach, and a Russian neighborhood called *gorodok* (Russ. *городок*, ‘small town’) appeared there soon enough as the property owner had a real estate agency in Moscow.

As the number of Russian residents was very high just before the Crimean crisis, a conspiracy theory was registered among local Bulgarians; some of them believed that new residents were sent by their government to “colonize” Bulgaria as an outer boundary of the EU and Russia’s neighbor. This policy, according to these theories, was directed against a perceived Muslim invasion in Europe during recent years. Many Russian real estate owners were imagined as KGB or GRU officers – undercover or not. Evidence was sought in symbols decorating their cars, for example. Local Bulgarians also expressed suspicion regarding the permanent Russian dwellers in Vassiliko – three women living alone and one family with no children. Because the neighborhood is almost entirely empty in winter, the locals keep wondering about the possible reason behind the decision to live permanently in „a place where even if you walk naked in the street no one will see you“¹³. Hence the supposition that such people are to be secret agents, their choice of residence due to the strategic location of the neighborhood. They do not work, so obviously they must be paid by their government; in one way or another, local Bulgarians seem quite assured that “there is something fishy about them”.¹⁴ In social media, claims are expressed that most of the Russian second homeowners are in fact money launderers, predominantly military men, former secret agents, and/or corrupt business people.

The idea of government influence on people’s decisions of buying a second home is reaffirmed by some Russian respondents as well. Some of them mentioned the ban on civil servants obtaining properties abroad. When I asked Y.P., a former military officer, born 1961 in Moscow, to comment on the rumors according to which Putin’s government gave an order to Russian real estate owners not to come to Bulgaria in 2015 (because of the country’s official position regarding the Ukraine crisis), he dismissed those as untrue: “all the people who wanted to come did so, but such state control of who is going where, who is getting property where, etc., is needed. It is important for national security”. To his mind, in Russian discourse

¹³ R.R., born 1958 in Tsarevo.

¹⁴ M.H., born 1947 in Tsarevo.

the trans-border second home mobility does indeed have predominantly political implications.

What is typical for the Russian real estate in the area described is that these homes are used during the entire summer – if the owners are not able to come, they give the keys to their friends and relatives or to strangers found via social media who pay them for their stay, but they do not pay any kind of resort taxes. Some owners are not regular taxpayers in Bulgaria either. Overall, their presence is considered positive for the local economical milieu because of the scale of investment, on the other hand though, local Bulgarians claim that Russians are not very active consumers – cooking and eating predominantly at home and preferring their own devices to loaned ones¹⁵. Additionally, due to their presence, the prices of services in local firms engaged in furniture and interior design business are kept constantly higher, which is disliked by local Bulgarians; “I don’t want to be treated like a Russian, I am not as rich as he is”, says one respondent¹⁶.

Russians easily penetrate the local cultural milieu, but they remain comparatively isolated in their own groups. Close contacts and friendships with Bulgarians – either local residents or second homeowners – are rare. Ethnic boundaries (cf. Barth 1969) are strictly kept and their maintenance runs counter the officially upheld cliché about the tradition of Russian-Bulgarian friendship. Ethnic relations resemble to a greater extent the patterns of relations lifestyle migrants have with locals. Predominantly belonging to wealthy societies, lifestyle migrants choose to relocate partially or permanently to places with lower cost of living, thus possessing a privileged citizenship status and express privileged ways of approaching local inhabitants, especially if compared with other migrant groups (Januschka 2009: 2; Croucher 2009). Some indicative cases of Russians occupying public spaces with little concern about the rights of their neighbors were registered. According to J.K., a 48 years old Bulgarian second homeowner, in their block of flats most of the owners are Russians. One of them, who bought his apartment last of all, is described by the respondent as quite aggressive in his occupying and privatizing public and common spaces around the building, to much dismay of the other dwellers, who, interestingly, remain unwilling to resort to official measures and notify authorities about the nuisance (a common Bulgarian specificity). This case is yet

¹⁵ During socialism USSR was the main buyer of Bulgarian products of low quality, so some Bulgarians expected this tendency to continue among Russian tourists and second homeowners, but their expectations soon fell short.

¹⁶ G.T., born 1968 in Sofia.

another indicator of how Bulgarian territory can be taken for granted as a place where no rules of any kind are universally applicable, as was mentioned earlier with reference to unrestrained alcohol tourism. Those who cause nuisance to neighbors often can be seen taking advantage of that Bulgarian passiveness. S.V., a Bulgarian second homeowner admits feeling quite uncomfortable because of her Russian neighbors' strongly territorial and uncompromising attitude:

We bought an exquisite flat from a Russian family in a very nice building, but almost all our neighbors are Russians. The problems started even before the deal. My husband made the mistake to ring at the door of the neighbor when we were for the first time there with the broker. He wanted to ask a simple question about the water supply, but the lady was unpleasantly surprised that the apartment was for sale. She did not even try to conceal how annoyed she was about it. Then she did her best to persuade the seller that the price he had determined was very low and that we were going to deceive him with his own price. As a result the very day when we were travelling from Sofia to close the deal he tried to double the price. (...) [T]his Russian lady simply did not want us there. (...) We have destroyed her Russian universe there and we still have very complicated relations with her. She lives there permanently and we cannot afford to enter conflict with her.

The church of Vassiliko is one of the main points of both contact and conflict between Bulgarians and Russians. A considerable number of Russian families form the majority of believers attending Sunday liturgies. The level of religious practice among Bulgarians is considerably lower; regular churchgoers among them are less numerous. Russians are easily distinguished visually in this context: they come to Church dressed quite formally, often in their best clothes, and wearing white and light colors. Women and girls invariably cover their heads – this allows for a clear distinction to be observed from the Bulgarian believers¹⁷. Bulgarian women (except for elderly village-dwellers) used to cover their heads only during the sacrament of Eucharist. Some Russian women go to great lengths to

¹⁷ Head cloth is so important an element for Russian women going to church that some of the new migrants to Western Europe tried to persuade older migrant women (descendants of fugitives from the October revolution in 1917) to cover their heads when attending service. K.M., 76 years old, born and living in Paris, answers: *Я не колхозница* – ('I am not a peasant'). She explained to the pious women trying to instruct her that even her mother used to go to church wearing an elegant hat and that she follows her mother's example.

have embroidered head cloths, while seemingly oblivious of the fact that their tattooed legs can be seen as well, which the more traditionally-minded Bulgarians find scandalizing. This visual contradiction implies what the Bulgarian churchgoers perceive as double standards in terms of piousness.

It is also in Church that the “commanding” attitude on the part of Russians manifests itself and is perceived this way by local Bulgarians. The former insist that attention be paid to their traditionally celebrated saints and feasts when the feasts differ because of the different calendar used, a typical divergence between the two churches. An indicative instance was the liturgy celebrating the 1,100 years anniversary of the Dormition of Saint Clement of Ohrid – a Bulgarian national saint, in 2016. Frequently when Bulgarian texts are being read, Russians exhibit lack of interest. At one notable instance, when the sermon was read some of the Russian-speaking attendees engaged in loud conversation. Ethnic boundaries between the two communities are clearly seen during the annual procession with the miraculous icon of Virgin Mary, which is organized on 14-th of August – at the eve of the Dormition of Virgin Mary Day. The route of the procession encircles the neighborhood, stopping at important places where prayers and parts of the Holy Bible are read. Russians used to donate icons of Russian saints to the church – notably sacred images of St. Seraphim Sarovski, icons of Nikolai II, the last Russian tsar, and the royal family killed by the Bolsheviks. They used to take these icons to carry when attending the procession, a practice which the Bulgarians soon started mirroring. These demonstrations of ethnic identity were moderated by Orthodox chants in Church Slavonic, comprehensible to both ethnic groups and thus performed by the whole group. In this way, at least for the time of the procession, Christian identity is able to dominate over ethnic identities.

The Russian “invasion” in the Church seems to annoy some Bulgarian believers. To what extent Russians treat the local church as “theirs” is reflected in the fact that one of the Russians took the donations collected at the Dormition of Virgin Mary Day from the special donation box and brought it to the priest’s wife. She was stunned by this gesture – „he wanted to help me, I know, but there are some inner unseen barriers and he definitely crossed them at that moment (...) because he was not a church servant in any way”¹⁸. There are signs of disobedience of, and criticism towards, the local priest on the part of the Russian attendees. In one instance, they went as far as to reprove him for his wearing sandals, arguing that in Russia such thing would be unacceptable. Although regular churchgoers

¹⁸ Z.K., 45 years old, wife of the local priest.

see each other every week, the two groups rarely communicate. The priest's wife used to treat everyone with sweets and fruit after the end of the liturgy at the benches in front of the church with wonderful sea views. Russians liked this practice and some brought food items as well, but then the two groups ate them in their respective separate circles. The priest's wife expressed a feeling that personal communication is always dominated by national identity and its political implications:

We are not like them. We communicate with someone because of his personal characteristics – not because of his nation or faith. I like you and that is why you are my friend. They always address people according to their national affiliation. This is what is important for them – not what you are, but who you are. They start from this point all kinds of conversations and that is why they don't communicate a lot and sometimes remain isolated in their own group¹⁹.

Bulgarian national collective identity is evidently weaker than the Russian one; this is reflected by the fact that most local Bulgarians try to avoid political conversations which are sometimes inevitable in their contact with Russians. When conflicts ensue, some Russians go as far as to openly claim that Bulgaria is “the 16-th republic of the USSR”, “our territory” etc. and respectively consider Bulgarians “traitors” because of the inclusion of the country in the EU and NATO. Such statements appear especially in critical situations when rules are to be followed and some dweller do not wish to respect them, resulting in outbursts of chauvinist behaviors..

Conversely, as a sign of hospitality, the Russian flag was raised on the top of one of the local restaurants – curiously called “Kabul” – in 2015 (cf. picture 3). On the next day, a Bulgarian flag was raised next to it. Following this, a myriad of speculations appeared, all concerning the way the two flags were situated. The Russian one was on the top (which could have implied superiority and dominance), but on the other hand, it was smaller than the Bulgarian one.

As already mentioned, similarly to Bulgarian second homeowners, Russians prefer home cooking and rarely visit local restaurants; this fact is also prone to different interpretations. One of local restaurants is notably frequently visited by Russians (predominantly “guests” to whom keys were given and short-term visitors), because the wife of the owner is Russian. Reportedly, the owner's wife serves her fellow countrymen first and then

¹⁹ Z.K, 45 years old, wife of the local priest.

all other clients, which became a reason for conflict with the husband who wants to avoid receiving complaints from customers. The level of food conservatism itself, as seen among Russian permanent residents in Bulgaria is illustrated by one example from the nearby town of Primorsko, where a young Russian boy guest refused to taste any of the local home cuisine for several days²⁰. Food is an important part of Bulgarian culture; sharing food is perceived as an inseparable part of social communication in the Balkans (Krasteva-Blagoeva, Bogueva 2020). That is why refusing to taste and eat local food can be symbolically attributed to a refusal to communicate, accept, and incorporate the culture of the host country at large. This insistence on observing Russian customs and traditions only, even when in foreign cultural context, is seen in various feasts and celebrations of the Russian community organized in Burgas, Varna and other cities on the 9th of May, Victory Day of the Second World War and other holidays. As these celebrations were organized even during the Covid-19 lockdown in the spring of 2020, in a situation when all other public gatherings were forbidden, these Russian celebrations strengthened the sentiment shared by the Bulgarian population – that of disobeying local rules and lack of respect to Bulgarian state on the part of local Russians.

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As seen above, the level of incorporation of Russians in the local cultural milieu in Bulgaria is high. Yet, ethnic boundaries are strictly kept (predominantly on the Russian side) and this is a considerable cause for the emergence of ethnic stereotypes (more visible on Bulgarian side). Some Bulgarians express fears of being conquered; this may be interpreted as a kind of local alternative fear, to quote Arjun Appadurai's formula, reflecting the danger of cultural absorption of the smaller neighbor by the bigger one (Appadurai 1996). These local fears, according to Appadurai, are an alternative to the fear of americanization. In this case, the fears concern a political more than cultural kind of absorption. Frequently Bulgarians tend to disregard these fears because of the economic benefits of Russian presence, which accounts for the formation of a commodified discourse in the years 2010–2014. At present, positive effects of Russian presence are not so visible anymore due to the decline of second home buying trend and the advent of a new tendency, that of selling Russian estates to further buyers. As a result, the intensity of Bulgarian-formed ethnic stereotypes

²⁰. Z.K, 45 years old, wife of the local priest.

lowered in 2020 – following a summer season with almost nonexistent Russian presence in Tsarevo due to the COVID-19 restrictions and an official ban on Russian citizens leaving their country. In this inconstant and complicated context, the development and dynamics of ethnic and cultural relations in Bulgarian Black Sea Coast are certainly worth studying in the future.

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Summary

Russian real estate owners in Bulgaria are about 300–500,000 people. This figure exceeds the number of Russian immigrants in Bulgaria in the period 1917–1922 by over 10 times. They are concentrated predominantly in the Black Sea Coast region forming a specific ethnic group gradually strengthening their presence in the local cultural context. The present research is based on fieldwork conducted in the town of Tsarevo, SE Bulgaria (2013–2018), interviews, participant observation, and media data. Ethnic relations between the two communities are analyzed in the context of cultural proximity, shared Orthodox faith, linguistic similarity, and the long and complicated history of Russian–Bulgarian relations. Against the background of these positive factors, strict maintenance of ethnic boundaries, practices of disrespecting local rules, politicizing everyday communication, and strategies of deliberate isolation of Russians from local Bulgarians are registered.

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Photographs:



Fot. 1. "Little Russia" inscription over the façade of a block of flats in Pomorie.
<https://meduzata.com/imoti/29977-2019-12-04-15-27-11> [3 Jun 2020]



Fot. 2. The church of the Dormition of Virgin Mary in Vassiliko,
photographed by Evgenia Krasteva-Blagoeva



Fot. 3. Bulgarian and Russian flags on the roof the “Kabul” restaurant, photographed by Evgenia Krasteva-Blagoeva