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National Case Study

MIXED AND TRANSNATIONAL FAMILIES IN BULGARIA

(GeMIC WP9 National Report)

Bulgaria

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1. Introduction

1.1. Structure of the report

The following report is divided in four main parts: introduction, analysis of the field research on the mixed families, analysis of the field research on the transnational families, and conclusion. The introduction will provide the following information: the outline of the main objectives of the report; the description of the methodology used during the fieldwork; the profiles of the respondents; the definition and explanation of the basic concepts and terms; and some relevant statistical data and background information on the mixed and transnational families in Bulgaria.

The second part of the report will present the main findings and the analysis of the field research on the mixed families (interviews and two focus groups). The chapter is divided in the following sections: the main characteristics of the respondents; integration into the host country; contacts and experience with the official institutions; intercultural aspects of the mixed family life; and gender dynamics in the mixed families.

The third part of the report, presenting the main findings and the analysis of the field research on the transnational families (interviews and one focus group), features the following sections: the main characteristics of respondents from transnational families; aspects of the transnational family life; and gender dynamics in the transnational families.

The conclusion will summarise the main findings of the research, evaluate the potential impact, explore further possibilities for the use of the research, and propose some relevant policy recommendations.

1.2. Goal of the Research

The goal of the present research is to investigate the relationship between gender and migration, and explore their influence on the relations within the mixed and transnational families. The report will analyse the way gender dynamics within mixed and transnational families are conditioned by the existing national policies and institutional frameworks dealing with immigrants, the prevailing traditional patterns of gender relations in families, and by the interactions between people with different cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds. The mixed and transnational families face a very specific set of problems and difficulties, dealing with the citizenship of the migrant spouse and children, unfamiliarity with the official language, social benefits and health insurance, access to kindergartens, employment possibilities for “non-citizen” spouse, and the prevailing attitude in the public sphere towards foreigners from certain countries/regions. All these issues influence their social status and possibilities for integration of such families, and consequently also the gender roles and gender dynamics. The report will also explore the mixed and transnational families as spaces of intercultural interaction and in particular their potential as spaces where both conflict and dialogue can be accommodated in a peaceful context in order to promote intercultural dialogue, hospitality, tolerance and cross-cultural respect.

1.3. Research Methods

The field research was conducted relying on the qualitative research methods. It was divided in three main parts: interviews with the mixed families (in Sofia), interviews with the transnational families (in several small towns and villages in south-west Bulgaria),

and focus groups (two with participants from mixed and one with participants from transnational families). The qualitative research was based on semi-standardized in-depth interviews. The interview guides were prepared in advance in cooperation with the research teams from Greece and Turkey. Before the beginning of the actual fieldwork, the draft interview guides were tested through pilot interviews. The results were analysed and the final versions were prepared and used during the fieldwork stage.

Altogether 30 in-depth interviews were conducted: 12 interviews with respondents from transnational families, and 18 with the mixed families (interviews with both spouses from 9 families). The interviews with the mixed families were pre-arranged – the first contact was established over the telephone or through a mediator, and the time and place were agreed. Interviews with 5 mixed families were taken in the IMIR's office, while in four cases, researchers have visited the families and interviewed them in their homes. The interviews lasted from one hour to one hour and 45 minutes. All but one (for technical difficulties) were recorded. The questions in the interview guides were divided in the following sections: Background on family characteristics; Contacts and experience of mixed families with the official institutions; Intercultural aspects of mixed family life; Gendered dynamics in mixed family life.

The first section focused on respondents' personal data, the history of the relationship, and their social and demographic profile. The second section investigated their interactions and possible conflicts with the official institutions, and the issue of (potential) discrimination. The third section studied the levels of adaptation and the forms of integration in the Bulgarian society of the immigrant spouse, the social environment (including wider family, friends, migrant networks, professional surroundings), religious beliefs and practices, and identity and language issues of the mixed families. The last part focused on the gender relations and identities, social and gender roles, division of labour at home, family decision making, various potentially problematic areas of family life, and the upbringing of children.

The 12 interviews with the members of transnational families were taken during the three field-trips to different areas in south-western Bulgaria. The villages the research team has visited were selected because of the available information that a large number of their residents has emigrated to various Western European countries to work. This presupposed also a large number of transnational families in these villages. The interviews were not pre-arranged and respondents were found and selected on the spot – the information about where to find them was gathered in village shops, bars and other public spaces. The interviews were taken at different places – on the central village square, on children playground, village pub and at homes of the respondents. The interviews lasted less compared to the interviews with the mixed families because they were not pre-arranged and respondents could not devote too much of their time. They lasted from 30 minutes to a bit over an hour.

The interview guides for the transnational families were divided into the following sections: Background on family characteristics and migration history; Aspects of transnational family life; and Gendered dynamics in transnational family life. The first section aimed at collecting data about the respondents' personal and family life, and some basic data about the migration experience of their partners. The second section focused on the experience of the transnational family life: the ways and frequency of maintaining contacts, the changes in the lifestyle and workload, family decision-taking processes, consequences for the children and predictions for the future. The third part sought answers to the following questions: the changes in the traditional family gender roles and duties, the emotional consequences of the transnational family experience, issues of trust and jealousy, the role of the wider family, and the advantages and disadvantages of transnational family life.

After the data from the interview stage has been analysed and it was established, which areas were sufficiently covered and where additional information was needed, the interview guides were revised and shortened. Thus the questionnaires for the focus

groups were designed, consisting of about 10 most relevant questions (each providing space for additional sub-questions if needed). The two focus groups for the mixed families were organised in IMIR's office. The group with male participants included 9 people. Because of the size of the group, it lasted almost three hours. The female group consisted of only 4 participants – 3 out of 7 women who have previously agreed to participate failed to attend excusing themselves with the last-minute unavoidable obligations. In general, finding female respondents from the mixed families proved to be exceptionally difficult. In some cases, their male partners who were willing to participate in the project explained that they were shy, conservative or uncomfortable to speak about personal matters. The female focus group lasted about an hour and a half.

The focus group for the transnational families was organized in the village of Sapareva Banya. It was organised with the help of a local mediator who found six women willing to participate in the discussion. The problem with the transnational focus group was that all six respondents had similar life stories and provided very similar answers. It would be much more productive to organise a focus group with participants coming from different settlements and with a more diverse emigration experience of their partners, however this was not possible from the organisational point of view. The transnational focus group lasted just short of one hour.

1.4. Respondents' Profiles

The mixed families consisted of Bulgarian wives and foreign husbands from the following countries: Iraq (2), Afghanistan (2), Iran (1), Lebanon (1), Zambia (1), Guinea (1), and Austria (1). The focus group for men included participants from Ghana, Guinea, Congo, Tanzania, Togo, Zambia, Syria, Palestine, and Ireland. The participants in the female focus group were married to immigrants from Tanzania, Sudan, Syria, and Ireland.

The respondents from the transnational families included: 10 spouses who have remained in Bulgaria while their partners work abroad and 2 respondents who worked abroad themselves. All interviews but one (which was taken in the town of Blagoevgrad) were taken in villages of south-western Bulgaria: Dolno Dryanovo (3), Dolno Osenovo (3), Sapareva Banya (3), Cerovo (1), Ognyanovo (1). The gender division was as follows: 10 women, 2 men. The focus group was conducted in the village of Sapareva Banya and involved 6 women.

Mixed families:

Interviews:

| |
|--|
| (1) Mohammad, 48, Afghanistan, Muslim and Magdalena, 37, Orthodox: married for 16 years, 1 child |
| (2) Said, 50, Afghanistan, Muslim and Daniela, 42, Orthodox: married for 14 years, 2 children |
| (3) Felix, 38, Austria, Catholic and Diana, 39, Orthodox: married for 8 years, 2 children |
| (4) Lansana, 38, Guinea, Muslim and Petya, 38, Orthodox: married for 7 years, no children |
| (5) Lukman, 75, Iraq, Muslim and Anna, 67, Orthodox: married for 44 years, 2 children |
| (6) Nasir, 50, Iraq, Muslim and Iva, 49, Orthodox, married for 29 years, 3 children |
| (7) Ali, 39, Lebanon, Muslim and Elena, 42, Orthodox: married for 18 years, 2 children |
| (8) Peter, 40, Zambia, Catholic and Elena, 37, Protestant: relationship 6 years, no children |

Focus groups (men):

| |
|---|
| (1) Moussa, 39, Guinea, Muslim, married for 8 years, 1 child |
| (2) Chisse, 45, Ghana, non-religious, married in 1991, divorced since 1996, 1 child |
| (3) Lusien, 44, Congo, Catholic, married for 16 years, 1 child |

| |
|--|
| (4) Daniel, 40, Tanzania, Catholic, married for 6 years, 1 child |
| (5) Hasan, 37, Togo, Muslim, married for 6 months, expecting a child |
| (6) Frederick, 42, Zambia, Catholic, married for 5 years, 1 child |
| (7) Hayri, 48, Palestine, Muslim, married for 26 years, 3 children |
| (8) Jamil, 56, Syria, Muslim, relationship 10 years, 3 children from previous marriage |

Focus groups (women):

| |
|--|
| (1) Maya, 37, Orthodox, married for 5 years, 1 child |
| (2) Zvezdica, 40, Orthodox, married for 15 years, 2 children |
| (3) Fidanka, 32, Orthodox, married for 3 years, 1 child |
| (4) Elka, 38, Orthodox, married for 8 years, 1 child |

Transnational families:

Interviews:

| |
|---|
| Women |
| (1) Aneta, 35, Muslim, married for 13 years, 2 children |
| (2) Ayrie, 31, Muslim, married for 8 years, 2 children |
| (3) Dzhamile, 44, Muslim, married for 27 years, 2 children |
| (4) Silvena, 48, Muslim, married for 28 years, 2 children |
| (5) Nevse, 24, Muslim, married for 5 years, 2 children |
| (6) Gyultena, 26, Muslim, married for 3 years, 1 child |
| (7) Kudrie, 31, Muslim, married for 10 years, 2 children |
| (8) Maria, 34, Orthodox, married for 10 years, 1 child |
| (9) Kristina, 37, Orthodox, has been married for 12 years (divorced since 2002), 2 children |
| (10) Daniela, 36, Orthodox, married for 18 years, 2 children |

| |
|--|
| Men (all Bulgaria) |
| (1) Georgi, 54, Orthodox, married for 30 years, 2 children |
| (2) Borislav, 53, Muslim, married for 28 years, 2 children |

Focus groups:

| |
|---|
| (1) Reni, 50, Orthodox, married for 32 years, 2 children |
| (2) Ginka, 33, Orthodox, married for 16 years, 1 child |
| (3) Spaska, 40, Orthodox, married for 18 years, 1 child |
| (4) Natasha, 39, Orthodox, married for 21 years, 3 children |
| (5) Daniela, 36, Orthodox, married for 10 years, 2 children |
| (6) Snezhana, 19, Orthodox, married for 3 years, 1 child |

1.5. Basic Premises and Concepts

The term mixed marriages is one of the most commonly used (in addition to intercultural families, cross-ethnic families and cross-cultural marriages) for referring to marital unions of partners coming from different countries and belonging to different religions and ethnicities.¹ Such marriages are often in the focus of studies exploring the processes of cultural adaptation, integration of immigrant groups and the power relations between state institutions and different cultural groups.

¹ Rosemary Breger, Rosanna Hill (eds.). *Cross-Cultural Marriage: Identity and Choice*. Oxford, UK: Berg, 1998.

Some authors perceive the mixed marriages as a form of assimilation of immigrants into the dominating culture² while others do not believe that intermarriage necessarily leads to the loss of the cultural identity and is rather a consequence of cultural mix and social tolerance.³ Another group of authors looks at the mixed marriages as a challenge to the prevailing norms of endogamy and points out that as such, the mixed families are often subject to a considerable social pressure.⁴ There are also authors who put their focus on the positive aspects of the mixed marriages – greater degree of tolerance, possibilities for education and growth of children.⁵

Studies of mixed marriages are closely linked with the correlations between ethnic/racial endogamy and social/educational homogamy and with the correlations between gender, race, ethnicity and hypergamy. The number and acceptance of mixed marriages in a given society is thus for many authors an indication of integration of a given minority or immigrant group into the dominating society. The more frequent the intermarriages, the lesser are the structural and cultural distances between different groups. The main factors on which intermarriages depend are identified as ethnicity, race, religion and education. According to various authors, the racial boundaries to mixed marriages are much more substantial and difficult to overcome than for example ethnic or national origin and religion.⁶ This has been confirmed also by the current research, which showed that the mixed marriages involving a black person are socially much less accepted and tolerated than marriages with a Muslim. Consequently, the Bulgarian-African families suffer from a wide range of problems – from discrimination at the hands of the official institutions, through family rejection to verbal and physical abuse on the streets.

The transnational families entered the focus of the migration studies in the early 1990s. The new analytical framework introduced the concept of “transnationalism”⁷ and explained migration as a multi-sited social space, which is simultaneously experienced by communities across borders. Unlike the traditional migration theories that treat the migration phenomena as limited to integration or assimilation in the receiving societies, transnationalism offers an alternative approach, where experiences of migrants are analysed through the prism of multiple attachments and their simultaneous positioning in several social (and territorial) locations.⁸ This change of viewpoint of migration also led to a change of perspective on the traditional understanding of families – from families

² Milton M. Gordon. *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion and National Origins*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1964.

³ Steven Martin Cohen. *American Assimilation or Jewish Revival?*. Bloomington: Indiana University, 1988.

Celia Jaes Falicov. “Cross-Cultural Marriages” in Neil S. Jacobson, Alan S. Gurman (eds.). *Clinical Handbook of Couple Therapy*. New York: Guilford, 1995, pp. 231-246.

⁴ Abe W. Ata. *Intermarriage between Christians and Muslims: a West Bank Study*. Victoria, Australia: David Lovell, 2000.

Walton R. Johnson, D. Michael Warren. “Introduction” in Walton R. Johnson, D. Michael Warren (eds.). *Inside the Mixed Marriage: Accounts of Changing Attitudes, Perceptions of Cross-Cultural and Interracial Marriages*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994, pp. 1-13.

Hilke Thode-Arora. *Interethnic Marriage. Theoretical and Methodological Aspects*. Berlin: Reimer, 1999.

⁵ Rosemary Breger, Rosanna Hill. “Introducing Mixed Marriages” in Breger, Hill (eds.). *Cross-Cultural Marriage: Identity and Choice*.

Man Keung Ho. *Intermarried Couples in Therapy*. Springfield, IL: Thomas, 1990.

⁶ George Douglas, George Yancey. “Taking Stock of America’s Attitudes on Cultural Diversity: An Analysis of Public Deliberation on Multiculturalism, Assimilation and Intermarriage,” *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*. 2004, 35: 1, pp. 1-19.

⁷ Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, Cristina Blanc Szanton (eds.). *Towards a Transnational Perspective on Migration. Race, Class, Ethnicity, and Nationalism Reconsidered*. New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1992, vol. 645.

Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller, Cristina Szanton Blanc. *Nations Unbound. Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments, and Deterritorialized Nation-States*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994.

Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen. “Introduction” in Vertovec and Cohen (eds.). *Migration, Diasporas and Transnationalism*. Cheltenham, UK, Northampton, MA, USA: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 1999.

⁸ Schiller et al (eds.). *Towards a Transnational Perspective on Migration*.

based on co-residency at the same place to ones that are spatially dispersed and fragmented (living in two or more states).⁹

The majority of existing studies on transnational families have focused on separations between family members – between spouses and between parents and their children. Analysing the transnational family life from the gendered perspective, some studies indicate that in the case of families with migrant mothers (the “transnational mothers”), the families come under more pressure and experience more difficulties than in the cases of migrant fathers.¹⁰

There are two general approaches to the study of transnational families. One focuses on the negative and the other on the positive and constructive aspects of transnational family life. The negative aspects revolve around the notion of “care drain” – the global transfer of care work from poor to rich countries, and the consequent transfer of emotional resources, which has exceptionally negative effects on the children left behind.¹¹ Among the positive aspects different authors stress the durable practices of maintenance and reproduction of family ties, which are kept alive despite the great distances and prolonged separations.¹²

1.6. Mixed and transnational families in Bulgaria - background information

During the communist period, both emigration from and immigration to Bulgaria were very limited and strictly controlled. Legal emigration was permitted only to the Bulgarian Turkish community and over 600,000 Turks have left the country between 1945 and 1989. The number of immigrants settling in Bulgaria was relatively small and the majority among them represented those who came to the country either for political reasons (Greece, Chile) or as students from other socialist or communist countries (mostly in Asia, Near East and Africa). The communist authorities made no effort to integrate the immigrants, as they expected that they would return to their home countries and help spread the communist ideology there.

After the political changes in 1989 the migration context has also changed significantly. A strong emigration wave was launched, motivated above all by the economic reasons. The majority of emigrants were highly educated and qualified people in active age, and the young people, attending the universities abroad. Many of these young students did not return to Bulgaria and remained in the host countries, where they built their professional careers. The economic and labour emigration intensified after the

⁹ Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, Cristina Blanc Szanton. “From Immigrant to Transmigrant: Theorizing Transnational Migration,” *Anthropological Quarterly*. 1995, vol. 68, N 1, January, pp. 48-64.

¹⁰ Michele Ruth Gamburd. *The Kitchen Spoon's Handle: Transnationalism and Sri Lanka's Migrant Housemaids*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000.

Rhacel Salazar Parreñas. *Children of Global Migration: Transnational Families and Gendered Woes*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005.

Umut Erel. “Reconceptualising Motherhood: Experiences of Migrant Women from Turkey Living in Germany” in Deborah Bryceson and Ulla Vuorela (eds.). *The Transnational Family. New European Frontiers and Global Networks*. Oxford: Berg, 2002, pp. 127-146.

Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ernestine Avila. “I’m Here, But I’m There. The Meanings of Latina Transnational Motherhood,” *Gender and Society*. 1997, 11 (5), pp. 548-571.

¹¹ Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild (eds.). *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids and Sex Workers in the New Economy*. London: Granta Books, 2003.

¹² Deborah Bryceson and Ulla Vuorela (eds.). *The Transnational Family. New European Frontiers and Global Networks*. Oxford: Berg, 2002.

Jennifer Mason. “Managing Kinship Over Long Distances: The Significance of the Visit,” *Social Policy and Society*. 2004, 3(4), pp. 421-429.

Raelene Wilding. “Virtual Intimacies? Families Communicating across Transnational Contexts,” *Global Networks*. 2006, 6(2), pp. 125-142.

Elisabetta Zontini. “Italian Families and Social Capital: Care Provision in a Transnational World,” *Community, Work and Family*. 2006, 9(3), pp. 325-345.

economic collapse of Bulgaria in 1996-1997 when a large number of state-owned enterprises in industry, agriculture, services, tourism and other branches were closed down. This caused a mass unemployment, especially in the peripheral regions, in the villages, and in the minority-populated areas. As a result, many people left the country in search of a seasonal or permanent employment abroad, leaving their families behind in Bulgaria and thus leading to the appearance of widespread phenomenon of transnational families in the country.

According to the data from the *National Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria on Migration and Integration 2008-2015*, adopted by the Bulgarian government in 2008, the majority of the Bulgarian emigrants live in the following countries: USA – about 200,000; Spain – over 120,000; Greece – about 110,000; Great Britain – over 60,000; Germany – over 50,000; Italy – about 50,000; Canada – about 45,000; Austria – about 25,000; South Africa – 15-20,000; Australia – 15-20,000; France – over 15,000; Portugal – about 10,000; Czech Republic – about 10,000; Hungary – about 5,000; Belgium – about 4,000; Slovakia – about 3,000; Sweden – about 2,000. Altogether between 700,000 and 800,000 Bulgarian citizens have left the country permanently after 1990 and acquired permanent residence or citizenship abroad.¹³

The negative effects of this huge emigration are obvious – the decrease of the population and especially of well-qualified and experienced labour force; brain drain; and potential for future demographic crisis (because of the emigration of large number of young people in reproductive age). The transnational families could also be considered among the negative consequences – especially regarding the upbringing of the children who have to grow up without one or both parents. The positive effects of emigration are mainly economic – remittances and business investments made in the country by emigrants.¹⁴ According to the data of the Bulgarian National Bank, in the period from November 2005 to November 2006, the Bulgarian emigrants have send over 1 billion EUR to the country, which was approximately 5% of the BDP in 2006. However, this sum is much smaller than the actual amount of remittances. It is estimated that about 80% of Bulgarians working abroad do not sent money to Bulgaria through banks, but bring it themselves or send it through trusted persons. The main reasons for this are the traditional Bulgarian preference for cash and the significant distrust in the banking sector (which virtually collapsed in Bulgaria during the 1996-1997 crisis).¹⁵

The influx of immigrants into Bulgaria also increased in the 1990s. Despite the seemingly unfavourable economic situation in the country, the widely unregulated legal and business environment, and a colossal share of grey and black economy attracted many foreign investors who saw countless business opportunities in the given situation. Numerous Chinese immigrants arrived, occupying a specific niche in the market economy, especially in the trade sector where they often stepped across the line separating the legal from the black economy. Many immigrants from the Near East arrived relying on networks and ties set up before 1989. The increasing number of immigrants from highly developed countries (EU and USA) also came to Bulgaria, buying properties, opening businesses and investing. Many of them (especially those from western and near-eastern countries) have started relationships with Bulgarian citizens and formed numerous mixed marriages.

¹³ Ministry of Labour and Social Policy. *Национална стратегия на република България по миграция и интеграция (2008 -2015)* (National Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria on Migration and Integration 2008-2015). 2009. www.strategy.bg/FileHandler.ashx?fileId=570

¹⁴ Katya Vladimirova (ed.). *Имиграция в България: Изследване и политики* (Immigration in Bulgaria: Research and Policies). Sofia: Institute for Post-doctoral Qualification, University of National and World Economy, 2009, pp. 37-38.

¹⁵ Katya Vladimirova (ed.). *Интеграция на имигрантите: Европейски политики и национални практики* (Integration of Immigrants: European Policies and National Practices). Sofia: Institute for Post-doctoral Qualification, University of National and World Economy, 2009, p. 24.

The statistical data about the number and status of immigrants in the country are contradicting and thus unreliable. The data on mixed marriages in the country are even more problematic. The only exact numbers are those about the foreign citizens with permanent residence in Bulgaria. On December 31, 2008, there were 66,806 foreigners with permanent residence in the country. Of this number, 6,904 were from the EU countries, and 40,202 from other European countries (Russia 21,309; Ukraine 5,350; Macedonia 4,375; Turkey 3,828; Moldova 2,203; other 3,137). 9,623 came from Asia and Near East (Syria 1,945; China 1,934; Armenia 1,322; Vietnam 1,043; Lebanon 932; Iraq 437; other 2,010) and 627 from Africa (Egypt 102; Nigeria 92; Algeria 90; Morocco 56; Tunisia 46; Libya 34; other 207).¹⁶ According to the data from the research conducted by the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, the immigrants in Bulgaria have the following status: permanent residence 42.1%, long-term residence 31.2%, short-term residence 8%, Bulgarian citizenship 8%, and refugees and temporary asylum 3%.¹⁷ Their overall number could thus be estimated to be as high as 150,000. Hopefully the actual number will be established on the census planned for 2011.

In 2006, 14,694 foreigners have received the long-term residence permits. Of this number, 2,224 were granted permits because they have married a Bulgarian citizen or a foreigner with the permanent residence in the country. Of 3,099 foreigners who were granted permanent residence, 1,180 were married to a Bulgarian citizen.¹⁸

A typical economic immigrant in Bulgaria is a young male. The gender disparities are strongest in the Arab, African, Turkish, Kurdish, Afghani, Iranian and Vietnamese communities. The reason for this are the prevalent cultural and social norms in countries of origin, where female migration is considered appropriate only in the company of a male family member. Immigration from some EU member states is also predominantly male (UK and Greece). Immigration from China, Armenia and Macedonia is more gender balanced, while in cases of Russia and other former Soviet republics, as well as countries from Central and Eastern Europe, women represent a majority of immigrants (80% in case of Russia). The majority of immigrants are married or have partners (63.4%). Of those who are married, a very large part have mixed marriages with Bulgarian citizens (57.4 %). This percentage is higher for women (61.1%) than for men (55%).¹⁹

2. The mixed families in Bulgaria - analysis of the field research

2.1. The main characteristics of the respondents

By the end of January 2010 the Bulgarian team has conducted interviews with 9 mixed families, consisting of Bulgarian women and men from various foreign countries. The foreign respondents were from the following countries: Iraq (2), Afghanistan (2), Iran (1), Lebanon (1), Zambia (1), Guinea (1), and Austria (1). Two focus groups were also conducted – one with four Bulgarian women married with foreigners (from Tanzania,

¹⁶ National Statistical Institute. *Постоянно пребиваващи чужденци в Р България по гражданство - Данни* (Permanently Residing Foreigners in Republic of Bulgaria According to their Citizenship - Data). 2009. <http://www.nsi.bg/otrasal.php?otr=19&a1=367&a2=375&#cont>

¹⁷ ВНС. *Изследване на правата на мигрантите в България. Финален доклад на Българския Хелзински комитет* (Survey on the Rights of Migrants in Bulgaria. Final Report of the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee). Sofia: Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, 2006. www.bghelsinki.org/upload/resources/MigrantsRightsReportBG-1.doc

¹⁸ Ministry of Labour and Social Policy. *Национална стратегия на република България по миграция и интеграция (2008 -2015)* (National Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria on Migration and Integration 2008-2015). 2009. www.strategy.bg/FileHandler.ashx?fileId=570

¹⁹ This information is not based on actual statistical data, but is a result of a sociological survey. ВНС. *Изследване на правата на мигрантите в България*. (Survey on the Rights of Migrants in Bulgaria), p. 21.

Sudan, Syria, and Ireland) and with nine men (from Ghana, Guinea, Congo, Tanzania, Togo, Zambia, Syria, Palestine, and Ireland).

Although immigrants coming from Africa and Near East represent a relatively small share of immigrants in Bulgaria²⁰ and the more typical mixed families in Bulgaria are those involving foreign spouses from the Western European countries or former Soviet Union, the Bulgarian team decided to focus on mixed marriages between Bulgarian women and men from Near East and Africa for several reasons:

1) Although not the most numerous, marriages involving immigrants from these regions are quite typical, especially for the generations born in the 1960s and 1970s as many of Bulgarians born then studied with and formed friendships and relationships with students from Asian and African countries, who used to come to study in Bulgaria before 1989 in quite considerable numbers.

2) According to the recent studies conducted in Bulgaria, immigrants from Africa and Near Eastern Muslim countries are perceived as the least desired marital partners.²¹ Because of these negative public perceptions, such mixed families are subject to a strong social pressure and suffer from a number of problems - from rejection of friends and families through institutional discrimination to racist attacks.

3) The cultural, linguistic and religious differences between the spouses in such families are much larger compared to families in which a Bulgarian citizen is married to a person from the Western Europe or the former Soviet Union.

All these circumstances make the selected family unions an exceptionally interesting and challenging case study. In addition, such families have been very rarely studied in Bulgaria before and there is very little information available.

Most of the male respondents (both in the interviews and the focus group) were aged between 34 and 50 (with three exceptions - 55, 56 and 75), while all but three women were in their thirties and early forties (the three exceptions were aged 49, 50 and 67). The large majority were therefore born in the 1960s-70s. This predetermined their more liberal perceptions (unlike those of the generation of their parents) regarding the selection of a spouse - even a one with a different national, cultural and religious background. Their generation was also the first to truly have the possibility to make contacts and establish friendships and relationships with people from a large variety of countries (the communist student exchange programs before the fall of the Iron Curtain and the liberalisation of travel after that). The respondents belonging to the older generation have shared that their decision to marry a foreigner was a very difficult and untraditional one, and caused significant friction within their families and social environment. For these reasons, the mixed marriages in Bulgaria before the 1980s were rather rare and when they did occur, they were accompanied by a number of problems.

The majority of male respondents were Muslims (11), while 6 of them were Catholics (one declared he did not belong to any religion). All women except one (who was a Protestant) were Orthodox Christians. However, none of the respondents said he or she was deeply religious. They visit church or mosque from time to time, but do not follow the religious rules strictly (for example, almost all Muslim respondents drink alcohol and some even had problems with other more religious people from their communities). This is a quite typical feature of the generation to which our sample belongs. Many of these men came to Bulgaria as scholarship students, sent to study abroad by leftist and

²⁰ According to the information of the National Statistical Institute, there have been 66,806 permanently residing foreign nationals in Bulgaria on December 31, 2008. Of this number, 47,106 were from Europe (almost one third from Russia), 9623 from Asia (of which 1945 from Syria, 932 from Lebanon and 437 from Iraq), and 627 from Africa. <http://www.nsi.bg/otrasal.php?otr=19&a1=367&a2=375#cont>

²¹ The research conducted by the Open Society Institute Sofia showed that 42.7 % of respondents would marry a person from an EU member state, and 36.9% would marry a person from Russia. In contrast, only 11.4% would marry an Arab, and only 10.3% would marry a person from Africa. Aleksei Pamporov. *Социални дистанции и етнически стереотипи за малцинствата в България* (Social Distances and Ethnic Stereotypes about the Minorities in Bulgaria). Sofia: Open Society Institute, 2009, p. 30.

communist regimes and were as such selected from less religious families, or came to the country as political refugees persecuted for their communist beliefs. Reasonably, a family life with a partner belonging to a different religion also played a significant role in transforming their religious practices.

The majority of the respondents (both from the interviews and the focus groups) have a high educational status, i.e. higher education in Journalism, Economics, Philology, Engineering, Musicology, Law, Political Sciences, Archaeology, etc. Only one was with unfinished university studies and two were with secondary education. They have chosen a partner with a similar education. This selection was an individual act and was hardly at all influenced by their families. The majority of couples have met during their student years through common friends and companies. Only a few of them have met in later periods and under accidental circumstances.

The duration of the marriage or cohabitation of the interviewees and focus group participants was very diverse - one couple has married six months prior to the interview, while the longest-running marriage has been in its 44th year at the time of the interview.

Almost all couples (with three exceptions) have met in Bulgaria. The majority of couples met in the student campus of Sofia and through common friends. The couple, which met in Austria, got together in similar circumstances. One couple met while working in Romania, and one met in Lebanon - the Bulgarian woman lived and worked there. All but two couples have married in Bulgaria.

Many of them had previous relationships with foreigners (Bulgarian women had relations with Americans, Africans or Turks and foreigners - with Bulgarian women). Some men had even failed marriages in their country of origin, or were engaged to be married. They all see their previous relationships as a valuable experience, which helped them to make the best out of their current marriage.

Unlike women, all men named outer appearance (face, body, exotic appearance) as a factor of attraction. Most men and all women mentioned moral and individual qualities: calmness, idealism, modesty, kindness, sincerity, smartness and cheerfulness. All stressed the importance of mutual understanding and common interests - *he is careful, he supported me, I could speak with him, she showed interest in me, we always helped each other at difficult moments.*

Most of them point out that their relationship grew naturally from friendship into "*natural love*" (Anna, 67; Peter, 40, Zambia) and "*chemistry between two souls*" (Hayri, 48, Palestine). Their relationships lasted on average for three years before they decided to get married. During this time, all the partners were evaluating the possibilities for leading a normal family life with their partners. This suggests a significant social resistance against the exogamy in the Bulgarian society.

The majority of couples live in independent households, either in their own apartments or in rented ones. Only a few live with an elderly parent (of the Bulgarian spouse). The interviewees explained this with their desire to be independent, but from the subtext can be seen that another important reason can be the attitude of the parents - namely their sometimes hidden sometimes open resistance to the marriage.

2.2. Integration into the host country

Most of the foreign respondents said that by coming to Bulgaria they encountered a very different cultural environment from their own. They have attended courses in Bulgarian language as foreign students but this was not enough to get acquainted with the customs, habits and traditions of the host country.

Most of the older respondents, who have lived in Bulgaria for over 20 years, have Bulgarian citizenship. Half of the respondents have permanent residence permit, one has a refugee status, one has recently arrived to the country and has applied for the

residence permit, and one has no documents at all²² (he spent several years in the detention centre for illegal immigrants and was released on condition that he presents himself at the local police station daily for signature).

The majority of respondents are well educated (university level), but they rarely work in the fields of their specialisation. The difficult economic situation in Bulgaria in 1990s and in some cases their personal preferences have directed them to other professions – quite often poorly paid and sometimes non-prestigious (construction workers, street vendors, workers on petrol stations).²³ In some interviews and especially during the focus group it was explicitly mentioned that when they tried to find employment in their field, they were rejected because of their origin and/or skin colour, and a Bulgarian candidate was given preference over them. The fact that they were “different” often hindered their professional development. Africans are usually rejected because of their race, and the Muslim respondents because of their names and religion. They point out the social stereotypes and prejudices in the Bulgarian society against Arabs, black people and Muslims, who are often looked upon as “*second class people*” (Mohammad, 48, Afghanistan).

The economic aspect of the mixed marriage is among the most significant factors shaping the family life. In some cases, pragmatic economic reasons influenced their decision to legally marry. Although it is not explicitly mentioned, some of the male respondents (especially those which were at the time or still are with a temporary residence permit) considered the apartment and stable income of their partners as attractive incentives to live in partnership. During the interviews the topics like the family income, the periods of unemployment, the job-seeking strategies, and the plans for labour migration abroad were brought up over and over again. The economic instability of the life in a mixed marriage was the main reason to delay having children in two of the cases.

From the economic point of view the mixed marriages were hypergamous for the males from our sample, i.e. they had improved their social status by marrying women with permanent incomes and housing. For the females, however, these marriages were undoubtedly hypogamous, i.e. they were not conducive for the improvement of their social status.²⁴ As wives of the immigrants, they often had no material and financial stability, they were deprived of the emotional support from parents and relatives of their partners, and in the most extreme cases suffered from the social stigmatisation and isolation.

The Bulgarian female respondents are from families with middle economic class and relatively low social status, but which encouraged their children to study. Most of their sisters and brothers are also well educated. In few cases their parents were separated, which made the respondents’ matrimonial choice even more complicated. They feared not to repeat their parents’ mistakes as the separation in case of a mixed marriage could be fatal (e.g. parting with the children).

Still, it is interesting that regardless of their matrimonial, economic and social status the parents (especially mothers) of the interviewed women accept with tolerance their daughters’ choice. The initial reaction was in most cases cautiousness, accompanied by fear and distrust. Gradually however, the focus shifted from the origin and different cultural background of their daughter’s partner towards his personal qualities (“*they got used to him; they are happy; they accept him; they like him; for them he is made of*

²² His national passport has expired several years ago and because of various problems with the authorities in his country, he was unable to renew it. Until this changes, he is also unable to acquire the Bulgarian residence permit and cannot marry his partner.

²³ This is not the case with both Western Europeans who are well paid and work in the professions they selected.

²⁴ Somewhat paradoxically, this was even the case for Bulgarian-Austrian couple. She was often annoyed and offended by remarks that she has taken care of herself by marrying an Austrian, while in fact at the beginning of their relationship, she already had a good career and a well-paid job, while he was an unemployed student. She said that situation changed only eight years later – while on a maternity leave she became dependent on her husband’s earnings.

gold; I became their favourite son-in-law" - Elka, 38; Magdalena, 37; Anna, 67; Iva, 49; Jamil, 56, Syria) and the mothers accepted the choice of their daughters. The only exception to this was one case from the focus group, where the mother drastically rejected her son-in-law and faced her daughter with an ultimatum: to choose either her husband or her parents. The result was that after five years of marriage and despite having a small child, the couple divorced and the respondent's ex-wife moved to another city to live with her parents (taking the child with her).

The fathers' attitude was usually more reserved, but followed a similar pattern - predominantly (sometimes exceptionally) negative and disapproving in the beginning, and more accepting later. Especially after the birth of the grandchildren, the relationships father-in-law - son-in-law tend to become quite close and warm, although certain reservations remain, especially in cases when the mixed family is facing financial problems. In some cases, female respondents were told (directly or indirectly) by their parents that they would not be in a difficult economic situation if they had married a Bulgarian.

Most of the mixed couples live in their own households (either own apartments or under rent), but there are also cases when they share (or did in the past for a certain period of time) the household with (one or both) parents of the female partner. The majority maintain a regular contact with the family of the female partner - over the telephone and by visiting each other. The male respondents shared that the families of their partners are exceptionally important for them, as they represent a social network they can count on. They also positively evaluated the fact that the parents rarely interfere in the matters of the mixed couples and do not try to influence their lives the way parents usually do in their home countries.

Given the fact that the parents belong to the generation of 1930s-1940s, which has a very conservative mindset and which grew up in an environment very intolerant to the foreigners, these data about the family approval and acceptance are quite a surprise. Obviously, the post-modern situation in which the traditional marriage patterns are disintegrating and the parents' concern for their children's welfare played an important role in their acceptance of the mixed marriage.²⁵

The male interviewees said that their families had accepted calmly the news about the foreign daughters-in-law - Christian women from Eastern Europe. Men who got married as students said that they had presented their families to a *fait accompli*, informing them about the already contracted marriage. These actions are logical given the fact that sons have been separated from their families for the very long time. On the other hand, their decisions were often made in conflict with their cultural environment. A respondent from Guinea said that in his family clan, marriages with Christians were absolutely banned, but his father preferred the French, secular model of relations (Guinea was a French colony) and brought his children up in such fashion.

Most respondents (both in the interviews and in focus groups) talked only about positive reactions from their brothers and sisters. In some cases, they live or have lived together with them and usually try to maintain close ties. Only in one case there was a clear negative reaction ("*Nobody from her family wanted to come to the wedding. Only her sister came, drank one small glass and after two minutes said she had to go.*" - Hasan, 37, Togo).

The circle of friends was also described positively. This is understandable in those cases, where the couple met as students as they shared a wide circle of friends and acquaintances, who have studied with them. Distrust and fear were most clearly expressed in those cases, when the immigrant partner was a Muslim ("*Because we girls in Bulgaria were brought up to believe that Muslims were terrible*" - Magdalena, 37),

²⁵ Of course, we should keep in mind that most of the respondents (especially women) probably preferred not to share with us all of the negative and troubling information and rather presented a "beautified" picture. In contrast, some of the men in the focus group (majority of them were from African countries) claimed that their wives' families were the most destructive factors in their relationship ("*we always have problems*" - Lusien, 44, Congo), especially in times when they shared the household with them.

however they were also well accepted once their partners' friends got to know them. The contacts and ties with friends (both Bulgarian and immigrant ones) represent for the mixed family an important social environment for socialisation and social legalisation of their marriage.

Almost all of the respondents believe that the social environment in Bulgaria is strongly hostile towards the mixed marriages. This is explained through social stereotypes, conservatism and significant social distances towards marriages with foreigners, who are not from Europe and are not Christians. The men believe that their partners pay too much attention to the public opinion and the opinion of people around them (*"What the neighbours would say"* – Moussa, 39, Guinea; Daniel, 40, Tanzania). According to the African respondents, over 80% of Bulgarians reject them – in contrast to the Western European countries, where people are more tolerant because they have a much longer experience with the immigrant communities. Some women shared that on numerous occasions they felt offended by the attitude of others towards them, and in some cases they were even victims of aggressive behaviour. One respondent said: *"I'm ashamed to be Bulgarian, I'm so disappointed by the Bulgarian society"* (Daniela, 42). Another added: *"What I have gone through because of this relationship – I do not wish this to anyone"* (Iva, 49).

A very telling example for the social stigmatisation is the attitude of schoolchildren towards the children from mixed marriages. Most of them are victims of frequent verbal and physical abuse, ridicule and rejection. The children from Bulgarian-African families are attacked and abused because of their skin colour, while those whose father is a Muslim are victimised because of their first and/or family names, which other children sometimes compare to Turkish or Roma names.²⁶ The spreading islamophobia and the widespread prejudice linking Islam with terrorism further increase the stigmatisation of such children. A daughter of one couple was asked by other schoolchildren whether she was *"a Turk, Gypsy or a child of some terrorist"* and was told to *"go back to Turkey"* as *"Bulgaria has been under the Turkish yoke long enough and there was no place for her here"* (Daniela, 42).

The only described cases of explicit exclusion, racism and violent acts were against the Africans. They spoke of the impossibility to find jobs because of their skin colour, and of frequent verbal and physical violence by skinhead gangs (attacks, robberies, insults, etc.). Their partners also talked about almost permanent harassment of their husbands by skinhead and similar groups, who frequently attack their husbands without any reason. Even more worrying is the fact that such attacks (although occurring in public spaces and even in the public transport) are as a rule ignored by the bystanders and even by the police. The women have been also victims of violence and verbal abuse on many occasions. When attacked, such couples usually reply passively – with silence and quick retreat to a more secure place. Many women are literally afraid for the lives of their husbands, who were victims of more violent attacks. They try to explain the rising xenophobia and racism among the younger generations with the lack of proper education and upbringing, and their highly limited exposure to the foreign cultural influences. One of the older respondents said: *"The older people in Bulgaria are very good, but the young – they are terrible"* (Said, 50, Afghanistan).

2.3. Contacts and experience with the official institutions

All the mixed marriages are only civic, which can easily be explained with the differences in the religious affiliations. All are registered in Bulgaria, while registration of the marriage abroad (in the home country of the husband) has been usually done only in

²⁶ Considering Turkish or Roma names as "inferior" shows that the Bulgarian society has deep-rooted prejudices not only against the immigrants, but also towards traditional minorities in the country.

those cases when the couple visits the country relatively regularly. This is not the case with most Africans, Iraqis and Afghans, who for political (and sometime economic) reasons rarely or never visit their home countries. In one of the cases marriage was impeded for administrative reasons – the man has no documents and is actually residing in the country semi-illegally. A religious ceremony was mentioned only in two cases and even then, it was not a proper religious wedding, but rather certain religious rituals were performed during the celebration following the civic marriage.

Concluding a civic marriage between a Bulgarian and foreign citizen was faced with numerous obstacles in the past. During the 1960s and 1970s, such marriages were only exceptionally allowed by the authorities. In the 1980s, there was no official prohibition, but those Bulgarians wanting to marry a foreigner had to deal with a cumbersome and complicated bureaucratic procedure. Those who have married after 1989 do not mention any administrative obstacles. As marriage with the Bulgarian citizen is among the reasons for obtaining a permanent residence in the country or a citizenship, the Bulgarian authorities often make vigorous checks to establish whether the marriage was genuine or fake. Registration of a marriage contracted abroad has been described as a clumsy, slow and corrupted administrative procedure.

Thinking about their civil status and their relations with the authorities (administrative, police, tax, health), most of the interviewed foreign men were unanimous that as a whole they had no problems. Some respondents (most notably those from Africa and to a smaller extent some of the Muslims) however complained that they were occasionally victims of sometimes hidden and sometimes open discrimination. For some of them it was the employment problems (especially in the state administration), for others – the unprovoked police checks of documents and even the violence and abuse at the police stations, with the unavoidable remark “*go back to Africa*” (Daniel, 40, Tanzania). This used to be a permanent problem for the African respondents in the past – they say that the situation has improved in recent years.

The female respondents in general say that they had no problems with the authorities or state institutions. Only one mentioned the problems she experienced during the so-call Revival Process²⁷ (1985-1989) because of her Arabic family name and the names of her children, which were perceived by the authorities as Turkish.

2.4. Intercultural aspects of the mixed family life

Respondents say that life in a mixed family is a challenge. All of them acknowledge its positive aspects, but at the same time they say that their happy marriage is a result of many efforts and that it has its price. Very often one or both partners had to give up their professional career, resulting in a difficult financial situation for the family.

A large majority of men spoke Bulgarian language relatively well when they met their partners and they most often use Bulgarian in the everyday life. The exceptions are the Irish man, who learned Bulgarian later, a man from Togo who is a recent arrival to the country, and a man from Lebanon as he lived with his wife in Lebanon for over 15 years before coming to Bulgaria (they speak Arabic at home). Despite their preference for the Bulgarian, most couples use other languages as well – German, French, English and to a lesser extent Arabic and Persian/Dari. The bilingualism makes the communication easier and is accepted as something natural by both partners. Most of them also prefer bilingual model for raising their children, thus giving them a linguistic diversity and a broader world-view. On the other hand, the male respondents whose

²⁷ The process of forced assimilation of Bulgarian Muslim minorities is known in Bulgarian language as *vuzroditelen proces* (most often translated as the revival process). The Bulgarian Muslims were forced to change their names for Christian/Bulgarian ones and abandon their religious beliefs. See Katerina Popova and Marko Hajdinjak (eds.). *Forced Ethnic Migrations on the Balkans: Consequences and Rebuilding of Societies (Conference Proceedings)*. Sofia: IMIR, 2006. http://www.imir-bg.org/imir/books/Forced_Ethnic_Migrations1.pdf

mother tongue is Arabic or Persian shared that their children speak these languages only superficially and use only Bulgarian in their daily lives. In their opinion, in this way they are giving up on the comparative advantage they could have used to be more competitive on the labour market.

None of the spouses expressed any fears of losing his/her national identity because of the mixed marriage. All foreigners describe themselves as different from the Bulgarians although they declare that they like the country very much and that they feel well here. They preserve their identity through the language and their religious practices. As much as it is possible, they maintain contacts with their families and friends in their home country. Majority also have numerous friends and acquaintances among their fellow-countrymen residing in Bulgaria. This is especially true for Afghanis, Iraqis and Syrians,²⁸ while for Africans it hardly matters at all if a person comes from a specific country – they are all perceived as members of the unified African community (sometimes they also form groups based on the colonial past of their home countries, as they are in this way more closely connected by language – English, French, Portuguese, etc. – and culture). From the responses of the two Western European interviewees it seems that migrants from those countries less often seek the company of their fellow-countrymen. If possible, the respondents also travel to their home countries once or twice a year. For some this has been impossible for various reasons (wars, conflicts, political instability) and they have never gone home since coming to Bulgaria.

Some wives commented on how well their partners have integrated into the Bulgarian society. Two even remarked in a joking tone that they were “*more Bulgarian than Bulgarians*” (Anna, 67; Iva, 49). It does not seem that either women or men are applying pressure on their partners to change and to abandon their national identity.

The religious and cultural differences in the mixed families seem to be deliberately downplayed and pushed aside (this quite obviously seems to be a decision of both partners). The partners try to find a common ground or choose a third, neutral option. None of the interviewees had a religious wedding (only in two cases a small religious ritual was performed during the wedding celebration). Virtually none of our respondents is strongly religious and some are atheists. This is true also for many of those coming from Muslim countries. Most of them grew up in secular families with leftist political orientation, or were themselves active in socialist or communist parties. They therefore do not observe any food taboos (several Muslims said they eat pork, while all admitted they drink alcohol) nor do they strictly keep to other religious obligations.

Most Muslim respondents and their partners were very defensive regarding Islam, emphasising on few occasions that they did not perform any “*extreme*” or “*fundamentalist religious practices*” (Lansana, 38, Guinea; Kalina, 52). None of the respondents visit churches, mosques or other temples regularly. The main religious holidays (religions of both partners are respected) are celebrated in their typical fashion – meals are prepared and certain rituals performed. However the whole celebration is usually looked upon as a national rather than religious holiday. Christmas for example is predominantly seen as a family rather than a religious holiday. The Muslim respondents participate very actively in Christmas and Easter celebrations (for example painting eggs and lighting candles), while the Catholics have started celebrating their name days in an Orthodox way. One of the Muslims said: “*We need to celebrate the Christian way, because I live in a Christian family*” (Jamil, 56, Syria).

Most of the respondents speak about respecting both religions and some pointed out that “*God is one*” (Mohammad, 48, Afghanistan; Iva, 49) regardless of how he is named. They said that they have both the Quran and the Bible at their home, and that both partners have visited a church and a mosque. The question of religious conversion of one of the partners has never been even raised in any of the families. In words of one of the respondents: “*Why should any of us convert – we believe in one and the same?*” (Mohammad, 48, Afghanistan).

²⁸ All the three communities have well functioning clubs and associations.

The social environment is exceptionally important for the mixed families. Most of them speak about having many friends, with whom they maintain close ties, regardless of whether they are Bulgarians or foreigners. The impression is, however, that there are only a few mixed families among their friends and that this is not a factor playing a significant role in establishing friendships. The partners rarely distinguish between old friends they knew before their relationship started and the newly acquired common friends. The old friends are equally welcome at their homes and have in time become common friends of both partners. None of the respondents mentioned any obstacles or demands made by their partners to stop seeing their old friends (the only exception was the respondent from Ghana, who was divorced and who said that his ex-wife was not happy when he went out alone with his friends as she wanted him to spend all the time with her and their son).

The social network of friends is described as very “loose” in the case of African-Bulgarian families. This is to a certain extent a result of the economic problems all such families talked about as the limited financial resources also significantly limit the possibilities for socialising, but it also points to the racism in the Bulgarian society. The responses given by the African-Bulgarian couples point to a certain deliberate alienation of the couples from the social life, probably prompted by an instinct of self-preservation, as well as by hidden mechanisms of the social exclusion, which in certain cases border on rejection.

The mixed families from our sample have from one to three children. In two cases they have no children, as pregnancy was deliberately delayed because of the financial difficulties the family has been experiencing. In one case, the couple has no children together, but have children from previous marriages.²⁹ All Muslim and African respondents come from large families and have many brothers and sisters, however they did not copy this model in their own family. Obviously this is another consequence of the social adaptation and points to the lack of social support for copying the family patterns from their home countries.

Regarding the names of the children, all respondents describe the name selection as a result of mutual consent. Despite that, the impression is that in the majority of cases the father's will prevailed and the child was named after grandfather or other male relative on the father's side. Some families have come to an agreement to choose names with international sounding and some gave them several names (to both parents' taste). There have also been cases when the name of the child carried a national connotation (in relation with the national origin of the father). According to the mothers, foreign sounding and especially Muslim names (this includes not only their first, but also their family names) have been causing a number of problems to the children in the schools as they have been victims of abuse and rejection.

Encouraging children to learn more about the history and culture of the country of their fathers seems to be rare. From this viewpoint, it is not surprising that only in one case, the identity of a child was defined as mixed, while in all other cases it was Bulgarian only.

According to the respondents the number of the children in the family is not influenced by religious reasons, but only by economic ones. The religious affiliation of children is rarely discussed. Most respondents said that their children will choose their religion when they are old enough. In none of our cases but one (where the mother insisted on having all three children baptised in the church) have the parents tried to influence the religion of the children. All respondents said that they raise their children (or would do that when they have children) in universal values without giving priority to a certain religion.

²⁹ Man's three children live with their mother abroad, while woman's daughter lives with the couple.

2.5. Gender dynamics in the mixed families

When speaking about the gender relations in the mixed families, it should be mentioned that the research team experienced numerous difficulties in finding female respondents both during the interview stage and when organising focus groups. The preliminary contact has in most cases been established with the male partner and the arrangements for the interview or focus group participation of the women have been made with men acting as mediators. Some of the Arab and some of the African respondents declined to introduce the researchers to their Bulgarian wives on the pretext that they were either conservative or too shy and did not want to speak. For this reason, it was quite a challenge to conduct the needed number of family interviews. There was also a problem with the focus group for women – despite having promised to participate, 3 out of 7 women, which were expected to take part in the discussion did not come. The discussions we had with these men with whom we tried to arrange interviews and focus group left us with the impression that they have preserved many of the stereotypes from their African and/or Muslim environment regarding the place of the women – hidden from the eyes of the outsiders and positioned deeply in the domestic space. Yet, at the same time there was no doubt that these men tried to present themselves as educated and cosmopolitan persons.

The majority of findings and conclusions in this section should be accepted with some caution and scepticism. In many of the interviews the respondents wanted to present the desired rather than the actual image of their partner and their relationship (the repeating reference to “*understanding and mutual trust*” – Petya, 38).

According to the female respondents their husbands have completely cut with their traditional gender social role (it is difficult to say whether under the influence of the life in the intercultural environment or because of the hypergamous marriage). In some cases the women are those who have jobs and temporarily or permanently provide for the family. The aptitude of the husbands to take on a great part of the domestic work is assessed as chivalry and opportunity to consolidate the relations through common activities. Some respondents have compared this willingness of men to engage in the domestic work with the attitude of Bulgarian men towards the housework – Bulgarians were described as absolutely disinterested in such activities, as lazy and even as prone to domestic violence.

All male respondents have claimed that there is no gender division of labour in their families. They all rejected such division, some because of their personal inclination to engage in domestic work (especially cooking), some because they followed the model inherited from their cultural background. In their families, the work is not divided according to gender, but strictly according to the possibilities, time and preferences of each partner. They believe that Bulgarian women should be reproached because they take too much domestic work upon themselves and thus encourage their husbands to be lazy.

Only in two interviews did the husbands share their disappointment that the traditional model of “male” and “female” work was no longer working and expressed their preference for the re-establishment of the clear gender labour division. One male respondent said that as he was earning the money and had assumed an important “female work” (to take care of the children) he expected that his wife performed all the other “female obligations” (cleaning, cooking, washing and ironing, etc.).

In all interviews and in focus groups, the decision-making processes in the family were described as being a result of mutual compromise, discussions, and negotiations. However, the impression was that in many situations, the wives were at the root of a number of initiatives (buying a house/apartment, applying for citizenship, plans for migration to Western Europe, etc.) and were often the ones who in fact took the actual decision. In some cases, especially among the older respondents, the husbands believed that because of their larger knowledge and experience their opinion should prevail. In

this sense, the consensual management of the family life is more of a desire than a reality in the mixed families, however this is hardly much different than is the case in the majority of ordinary families.

Many of the interviewees said that the mixed marriage has changed their gender and religious stereotypes. One of the men said that he had thrown off the tradition of his homeland where only the women assumed the domestic responsibilities and that he shared them on equal footing with his wife. One of the female respondents said that she was happy that her partner was not jealous and did not look upon her as his ownership, as was the tradition in his homeland, but was providing her with full freedom to work and meet her friends. Another woman said that in the case if her husband ever asked her to wear a veil and tried to limit her freedom of communication with others, she would divorce him.

In most of the interviews the mixed marriage was positively evaluated with words like "support," "confidence," "understanding," "calmness," "safety," and "stability" (Diana, 39; Petya, 38). Both partners spoke about how the mixed marriage has enriched them spiritually - through the contact with a different culture. "*I'm very pleased*" (Nasir, 50, Iraq) and "*I have nothing to complain about*" (Daniela, 42) are the most typical statements.

Despite that, "difficulties" and "patience" (Diana, 39; Elena, 37; Petya, 38) are the key words respondents used to point out the negatives of the mixed marriage. According to respondents the lack of common memories and shared past is often an important obstacle, as the cultural background of the partners is different and can lead to gaps in understanding and perceptions. The pressure from the families and relatives, and the social rejection (especially in cases of Bulgarian-African families) were also named as exceptionally problematic areas. They also complained about the financial difficulties, especially if these were a result of the inability of the male partner to find a (well paid) job because of his race or origin.

When asked what would they advice their children regarding the mixed marriage, most of the answers were evasive and cautious. They offered universal reflections on individual differences and choices, saying that they only want their children to be happy, and said that they would not prohibit such relationships. They would all give their children a chance to decide for themselves.

3. The transnational families in Bulgaria - analysis of the field research

3.1. The main characteristics of respondents from transnational families

The Bulgarian team conducted 12 interviews - 10 with spouses who have remained in Bulgaria while their partners work abroad and 2 with respondents who worked abroad themselves. All interviews but one (which was taken in the town of Blagoevgrad) were taken in villages in south-western Bulgaria: Dolno Dryanovo (3), Dolno Osenovo (3), Sapareva Banya (3), Cerovo (1), Ognyanovo (1). The gender division was as follows: 10 women, 2 men. The focus group was conducted in the village of Sapareva Banya and involved 6 women.

The region where the interviews and the focus group were conducted has been strongly affected by the post-1989 economic problems connected with the painful Bulgarian transition to market economy, and has suffered even more from the current global economic crisis. The marginalised economic situation of this region has been also

a consequence of the strong dependence on the traditional agriculture – especially the tobacco growing, which has in recent years become highly unprofitable. The region has been additionally marginalised because of the ethnic-religious composition of the population (significant number of Pomaks – Bulgarian Muslims, and Roma) and its mountainous landscape.

The age of respondents varied a lot – from 19 to 55. A large majority of them belong to a generation, which was the most strongly affected by the political and economical transition. As they and their partners had no chances of finding proper jobs in Bulgaria and providing for their families, they choose the alternative to look for the employment abroad.

Out of 12 respondents from the interview phase of the research, 8 were Bulgarian Muslims. This proportion reflects well the actual situation for the country. In view of their place on the social periphery, as well as their marginal position in the national economy, the Bulgarian Muslims have a very high emigration rate and there is a disproportionately high number of transnational families among them. All the respondents participating in the focus group were Orthodox Christians, but belonged to two different ethnic groups – Bulgarians (3) and Roma (3).

The main reason for the labour migration in case of all our respondents was the economic necessity. The decision was not influenced by the demographic or social characteristics of the families. Our respondents and their partners who have emigrated have different education levels (primary, secondary and higher education). They belong to different ethnic and religious groups (Bulgarian Christian, Bulgarian Muslims, Roma). Some have been married for only a few years, others for 30 or more years. Some were from nuclear households and had their own housing, and some lived in a collective household together with relatives (parents, brothers, brothers-in-law, etc.). What they all had in common was the fact that they have lost their jobs and had no other options left but for one of the spouses to emigrate in search of a low qualified work abroad – work which as a rule was not linked to their education and specialisation.³⁰ The majority of spouses, which have remained in Bulgaria, also do not work in their fields of specialisation, but either look for a seasonal employment or are permanently unemployed and engage in agriculture (in addition to looking after the children and taking care of the household, which in rural areas where the fieldwork was conducted amounts to a full day occupation).

Majority of the families from our sample have more than one child. Providing for the children is usually named among the most important reasons for emigration of one spouse.

3.2. Aspects of the transnational family life

The majority of partners of our interviewees live and work in Spain and Portugal (two have emigrated to the USA), while those of the focus group participants migrated to Italy. In general, the selection of the emigration destination widely depends on the social network of people from the same town or village who have previously migrated to a given country and thus patterns are formed with people from the same village emigrating not only to the same country, but even to the same area or town.

All respondents said that the migration of their partners was intended to be temporary or short-term, but in some case the separation has lasted up to 10 years and the spouses are still uncertain when the migrant partner would return home. In fact, most of them do not know how long this situation will continue, saying that their partners will not return before the economic situation in Bulgaria improves. All expressed their

³⁰ The emigrants most often work in agriculture, restaurants, construction, take care for the elderly and ill, or work as domestic workers and as drivers.

desire that this would happen sooner than later, yet the majority was quite pessimistic in their predictions.

Most of the migrant spouses visit their families in Bulgaria twice a year (in the summer and for Christmas/New Year holidays). However, in some cases they do not return for several years.³¹ The partners who remained in Bulgaria rarely have the opportunity to visit their partners abroad, despite having a strong desire to do so. The main obstacles are usually the shortage of money and the need to take care of the children, elderly parents and the property.

The communication between the two spouses always directly depends on the way the decision for emigration was taken. If both spouses have agreed that one of them should emigrate to find employment abroad and if this decision continues to be supported by both in the course of time, then the communication is desired and unobstructed. Usually spouses use modern information and communication technologies (Internet, Skype, mobile phones) and often call each other, i.e. every day or several times a week. They speak in details about their life and consult each other when making important decisions. In these cases it is obvious that the confidence between them has been preserved even after many years of actual separation (one woman even spoke of a "*second honeymoon*" (Silvena, 48) when seeing her husband again after several years). Emigrants regularly send money and presents to their spouses and children who remained in Bulgaria, they are open to the problems of the other, they make mutual seasonal visits to each other and make plans for the family reunification (either in the host country or in Bulgaria). It is namely these families who firmly believe that migration is a temporary situation and view it as a necessary but undesired way to solve the present economic problems. Usually such families make plans to have more children.

If, however, the decision to migrate was made against the will of one of the spouses, the consequences for the marriage are fatal. All contacts are interrupted (even on the phone). In some cases partners became openly hostile to each other, they started living with another partner and in one of the cases they divorced. It is symptomatic, however, that the migrant husbands are not blamed by their wives who accept this situation and seek ways of survival for themselves and their children. In the case when the female partner has migrated without the consent of her husband, she is rebuked for everything by him - "*she ignores my opinion*" (Georgi, 54), she is accused of harming the family and the children in particular, although she is the one who provided for the economic resources for the family.

Usually the close relatives (the blood-related micro-group) look at such marriages negatively. The wider community (distant relatives, neighbours, people from the same village) also often has a negative attitude. The negative reaction is exceptionally strong against the women who have gone to work abroad ("*in our village they look down on me with distrust*" - Kudrie, 31). They are seen as violators of several traditions: the woman must not separate from her family, the woman should look after her children, the woman cannot be the "head" of the family and cannot make the money for the family. It is interesting to note that nowhere in the stories it was mentioned how (and if) neighbours or relatives help these families.

3.3. Gender dynamics in the transnational families

Living separately has significantly transformed the traditional gender hierarchy in the transnational families. The decision-taking, which previously used to be the male priority or a result of discussion and mutual agreement, has become almost completely a female responsibility. Although all the female respondents say that they consult their

³¹ This is especially true for the two cases in which the emigrant spouse lives in the USA. In one, the spouse has returned to Bulgaria only twice in 7 years, and in other he has never returned since he emigrated 8 years ago.

husbands over the phone, it can be deduced from their responses that they actually manage their families on their own – they take care of the household, bring up the children and distribute the family budget (“*a woman is in charge of the parade*” – Ginka, 33). For some women, who were previously used to their passive role in the family decision-taking, the new and changed situation came as a burden and caused them a number of difficulties. The most serious complaints refer to the strenuous domestic work (“*I do everything*” – Daniela, 36) and the fact that they have to be responsible for all important family decisions – from education and health care of the children to household repair work and maintenance.

According to respondents the labour migration and the separate life have a very bad effect on the children. Sometimes they do not know their parent, they are in contact with him/her only on the phone or via Skype. This leads to depersonalization of his/her authority, lack of a model to follow, and an interrupted emotional tie, which can hardly be compensated for. The children lack the emotional support that is indispensable in difficult situations in which many of the families from our sample live.

The interviewees said that their children looked upon their parent who is abroad mainly as a financial sponsor from whom they demand and expect presents. The lack of one of the parents loads the other one with too many responsibilities and often predetermines errors in his/her approach in the children’s upbringing. One of the respondents blamed his wife for having “left” their son during his puberty, for causing an emotional deficit in him and having made him closed, alienated and lonely. Such cases of deviant behaviour are rare but most of the interviewees talked about the difficulties of raising children on their own. The possible decisions for a family reunion abroad were most often hindered by the thought of the stress the children would be subjected to (language learning, separation from friends and relatives, getting used to the new environment). The separation from one parent often leads to a too strong attachment of the children to the other parent, which in turn can become a cause for problems between the spouses. The difficulties in the children’s upbringing are also a barrier for some couples to plan more children.

As regards the gains, which the transnational marriage brings to the children, they can be summarized in several directions – financial security, opportunity “to see the world” when they visit their parent abroad or even to live in a new environment in cases if the whole family decided to join the emigrant spouse. If the children are already grown up, they also have the possibility to join their parent to work at the same place.

According to the majority of respondents, their life became very difficult after their partner’s emigration. They had to assume, besides their own obligations, also all of the partner’s duties (“*everything has fallen on my back*” – Reni, 50). Their stories clearly demonstrate that the traditional models of the social gender roles have been preserved along with the division on the “male” and “female” work duties. However, the emigration and the transnational family life have put this preserved model to the test. Such a change is exceptionally dramatic for men as they look upon the domestic work (cleaning, cooking, laundering, ironing, etc.) as an exclusively “female” activity. According to the answers of one male respondent, he realized only after his wife’s migration how difficult it was to combine both work and house obligations.

In the families where the male partner has migrated, his absence is usually partially compensated by the assistance of an elderly parent, relative or the elder child, who help with the household and the upbringing of younger children. In those cases, where such support and assistance is unavailable, the respondents spoke about exceptional difficulties they have in coping with their situation and about feeling desperate, lonely and caught in a situation from which they cannot escape.

A large majority of respondents said that such a family life “*is not normal.*” It has only shortcomings (“*how can you be happy when you are alone*” – Spaska, 40) and that is why it is perceived as a temporary state of affairs (“*until we improve our situation*” – Nevse, 24; “*until the crisis is over*” – Kudrie, 30; “*until the children grow up*” – Maria, 34;

“until her retirement” – Georgi, 54). It is not surprising that in the cases when the relations between the spouses have deteriorated or they have even divorced, the emigration and the separate life are named as the main reason for such a development. In only two cases the temporary separation was described also as a stimulus for diversification of the family relations or for “refreshing” of emotions (“we would probably argue much more if we were constantly together” – Silvena, 48).

The female respondents say that in most cases their husbands have changed as a result of the separation. In some cases the change is perceived as a positive one – the husbands have become more responsible, they have come to appreciate the hardship and the amount of time and energy that needs to be invested in the domestic work (“before he was mama’s boy, demanding and expecting to be served and to have everything prepared for himself, but after living for two years alone, he changed drastically” – Ayrie, 31). In other cases, the change was for the worse. The husbands have become nervous, bad tempered, jumpy, jealous and alienated from their families.

Speaking about jealousy and trust, most female respondents say that to a lesser or larger extent, they feel some jealousy, but are somewhat reassured by the fact that their husbands are usually in the company of other relatives or other people from the same village who “keep an eye on them.” One respondent said that she does not think her husband would be unfaithful to her just because he is far away (“if he wanted to cheat on me, he could do it also here” – Gyultena, 26). Another said that there was no problem as long as she does “not learn about it and he stays with the family” (Aneta, 35). As for themselves, almost all of the respondents said that with all the obligations they have with the children and the household, they do not even have time to think about having an affair, although some admit that they miss human contact.

As a whole, the positive sides of the transnational marriage are limited to its economic dimensions – “It’s not easy but we need the money” (Kudrie, 31). The money earned abroad and the savings in Euros are compared with the salaries in Bulgaria, always stressing on the great difference in the living standard. The separation is most often seen as a sacrifice made for the benefit of the children. Families usually invest most of the savings in the building of a house (for them and for their children) and in their children’s education. This usually prolongs the experience of the transnational family life almost indefinitely – more money is always needed for expansion and maintenance of the house and for further education.

4. Conclusion

The main results of the research can be summarised in the following way:

| Mixed families | Transnational families |
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| Education | |
| The majority are well educated (university level) – most of the couples have met when they were students. | Our respondents and their partners who have emigrated have different education levels (primary, secondary and higher education). |
| Employment | |
| They rarely work in the fields of their specialisation and were often denied appropriate employment – Africans because of their race, and the Muslims because of their names and religion. The fact that they were “different” often hindered their professional development. | The main reason for the labour migration in case of all our respondents was the economic necessity. They have lost their jobs and had no other options left but for one of the spouses to emigrate in search of a low qualified work abroad – in agriculture, restaurants, construction, care for the |

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| | <p>elderly and ill, domestic work or as drivers. The majority of spouses, which have remained in Bulgaria, are permanently unemployed and engage in agriculture (in addition to looking after the children and taking care of the household).</p> |
| <p>Hypergamous and hypogamous marriage</p> | |
| <p>From the economic point of view the mixed marriages were hypergamous for the males from our sample, i.e. they had improved their social status by marrying women with permanent incomes and housing. For the women, these marriages were undoubtedly hypogamous, i.e. they were not conducive for the improvement of their social status.</p> | |
| <p>Official institutions and discrimination</p> | |
| <p>In general, respondents have no problems with the institutions (administrative, police, tax, health), but some (especially those from Africa) were victims of discrimination regarding the employment and unprovoked police checks of documents. In most drastic cases, some were victims of violence and abuse at the police stations in the past (situation has improved in recent years). As marriage with the Bulgarian citizen is among the reasons for obtaining a permanent residence in the country or a citizenship, the Bulgarian authorities often make vigorous checks to establish whether the marriage was genuine or fake.</p> | |
| <p>Racism</p> | |
| <p>Due to social stereotypes and prejudices, many Bulgarians view Arabs, black people and Muslims as "second class people." Africans are having problems finding employment because of their skin colour, and are victims of frequent verbal and physical violence by skinhead gangs (attacks, robberies, insults, etc.). Their Bulgarian wives have been also victims of violence and verbal abuse on many occasions.</p> | |
| <p>Length of the separation</p> | |
| | <p>The migration was intended to be temporary or short-term, but in some cases the separation has lasted up to 10 years and the spouses are still uncertain when the migrant partner would return home. In fact, most of them do not know how long this situation will continue, saying that their partners will not return before the economic situation in Bulgaria improves.</p> |
| <p>Communication and contacts</p> | |

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| <p>If possible, the male respondents travel to their home countries once or twice a year. For some this has been impossible for various reasons (wars, conflicts, political instability) and they have never gone home since coming to Bulgaria.</p> | <p>Most of the migrant spouses visit their families in Bulgaria twice a year, but in some cases they do not return for several years. The partners who remained in Bulgaria rarely have the opportunity to visit their partners abroad. The main obstacles are usually the shortage of money and the need to take care of the children, elderly parents and the property. Spouses use modern information and communication technologies (Internet, Skype, mobile phones) and call each other several times a week.</p> |
| <p>Pluses and minuses</p> | |
| <p>Life in a mixed family has numerous positive aspects (described with words like "support," "confidence," "understanding," "calmness," "safety," and "stability"), but at the same time it is also a challenge. The happy marriage is a result of many efforts and has its price.</p> | <p>The positive sides of the transnational marriage are limited to its economic dimensions. The money earned abroad is essential for the life of the family. The separation is most often seen as a sacrifice made for the benefit of the children. Families usually invest most of the savings in the building of a house (for them and for their children) and in their children's education. The minuses are plenty. Respondents describe such family life as abnormal and full of shortcomings - for this reason they perceive it as a temporary state of affairs.</p> |
| <p>Attitude of the parents</p> | |
| <p>The initial reaction of the women's parents was in most cases cautiousness, accompanied by fear and distrust. In time, the focus gradually shifted from the origin and different cultural background of their daughter's partner towards his personal qualities, resulting in acceptance and (in most cases) good (if not always exceptionally warm) relations.</p> | <p>Usually the parents look at such marriages negatively and despite acknowledging the difficult financial situation believe that the family should stay together. Their main concern are the grandchildren, who have to grow up without one of the parents. On the other hand, absence of the male partner is usually partially compensated by the assistance of an elderly parent (or even a relative or the older child), who helps with the household and the upbringing of younger children.</p> |
| <p>Attitude of other close relatives</p> | |
| <p>Even in cases when parents have certain reservations, brothers and sisters of the mixed couple are usually very supportive. In some cases, they live or have lived together with them and usually try to maintain close ties.</p> | |
| <p>The circle of friends</p> | |
| <p>Friends of both partners usually accept the mixed couple very positively. Certain amount of distrust and anxiety were initially expressed in those cases, where the immigrant partner was a Muslim, but this</p> | <p>The selection of the emigration destination widely depends on the social network of people from the same town or village who have previously migrated to a given country and thus patterns are formed with</p> |

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| <p>changed in time with getting to know each other. The network of friends is exceptionally important for the mixed families. Most of them speak about having many friends, with whom they maintain close ties, regardless of whether they are Bulgarians or foreigners. This network is much "looser" in the case of African-Bulgarian families as a result of the economic problems all such families are facing (the limited financial resources significantly limit the possibilities for socialising). However, it is also a result of a certain deliberate alienation of such couples from the social life, caused by hidden mechanisms of the social exclusion or even rejection.</p> | <p>people from the same village emigrating not only to the same country, but even to the same area or town. The emigrant partners usually strongly depend on the networks of friends and relatives to help them find employment and housing in the beginning, and look at them for emotional and other support later.</p> |
| <p>Social environment and stereotypes</p> | |
| <p>The social environment in Bulgaria is perceived as very hostile towards the mixed marriages because of strong social stereotypes, conservatism and significant social distances towards marriages with foreigners, who are not from Europe and are not Christians. The African-Bulgarian couples feel especially rejected by the mainstream society and in some cases they were even victims of aggressive attacks.</p> | <p>The wider community (distant relatives, neighbours, people from the same village) often displays a negative attitude. The negative reaction is exceptionally strong against the women who have gone to work abroad.</p> |
| <p>Language</p> | |
| <p>Most couples use predominantly Bulgarian to talk to each other and with the children, but use other languages as well - German, French, English, Arabic and Persian/Dari. Most prefer bilingual model for raising their children, thus giving them a linguistic diversity and a broader world-view.</p> | |
| <p>Changes in self-identification and personality</p> | |
| <p>None of the spouses is afraid of losing his/her national identity because of the mixed marriage. There is no pressure from one partner to the other to change or to abandon their national identity.</p> | <p>The female respondents say that in most cases their husbands have changed as a result of the separation. In some cases the change is perceived as a positive one - the husbands have become more responsible, they have come to appreciate the hardship and the amount of time and energy that needs to be invested in the domestic work. In other cases, the change was for the worse. The husbands have become nervous, bad tempered, jumpy, jealous and alienated from their families.</p> |
| <p>Identity of children</p> | |
| <p>Children are raised as Bulgarians and rarely learn about the history and culture of the country of their fathers. Only in one case</p> | |

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| <p>the identity of a child was defined as mixed, while in all other cases it was Bulgarian only.</p> | |
| <p>Religion</p> | |
| <p>None of the respondents is very religious, which is typical for the generation to which our sample belongs. Many of these men came to Bulgaria as scholarship students before 1989 and were from less religious families. The religious and cultural differences in the mixed families are intentionally downplayed and pushed aside, and partners try to find a common ground or choose a third, neutral option. Most Muslim respondents and their partners were very defensive regarding Islam, emphasizing that they did not perform any “extreme” or “fundamentalist religious practices.”</p> | <p>Out of 12 respondents from the interview phase of the research, 8 were Bulgarian Muslims. In view of their place on the social periphery, as well as their marginal position in the national economy, the Bulgarian Muslims have a very high emigration rate and there is a disproportionately high number of transnational families among them.</p> |
| <p>Conversion</p> | |
| <p>The question of religious conversion of one of the partners has never been even raised in any of the families.</p> | |
| <p>Gender relations</p> | |
| <p>Some of the Arab and some of the African respondents declined to introduce the researchers to their Bulgarian wives on the pretext that they were either conservative or too shy and did not want to speak. Although these men tried to present themselves as educated and cosmopolitan persons, the impression was that they have preserved many of the stereotypes from their African and/or Muslim environment regarding the place of the women - hidden from the eyes of the outsiders and positioned deeply in the domestic space.</p> | <p>Most female respondents say that to a lesser or larger extent, they feel some jealousy, but are somewhat reassured by the fact that their husbands are usually in the company of other relatives or other people from the same village who “keep an eye on them.” Some believe that distance is not the most important reason, which could cause their husbands to be unfaithful, while other say that unfaithfulness is not a problem as long as they do not learn about it and husbands stays with their families. As for themselves, almost all of the respondents said that with all the obligations they have, they do not even have time to think about having an affair despite missing the human contact.</p> |
| <p>Gender roles and labour division</p> | |
| <p>The female respondents say that their husbands have completely cut with their traditional gender social role and actively participate in the domestic work, which is assessed as chivalry and opportunity to consolidate the relations through common activities. In some cases the women are the main bread-winners (temporarily or permanently) in the family. All male respondents claim that there is no gender division of labour in their families.</p> | <p>The traditional models of the social gender roles and the division on the “male” and “female” work duties are still well preserved in Bulgaria. However, the emigration and the transnational family life have put this preserved model to the test, significantly transforming the traditional gender hierarchy and changing gender roles. Such a change is exceptionally dramatic for men as they look upon the domestic work (cleaning, cooking,</p> |

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| <p>The work is not divided according to gender, but strictly according to the possibilities, time and preferences of each partner.</p> | <p>laundering, ironing, etc.) as an exclusively “female” activity. The most serious problem for female respondents is the strenuous domestic work and the fact that they have to be responsible for all important family decisions – from education and health care of the children to household repair work and maintenance.</p> |
| <p>Decision-making</p> | |
| <p>The decision-making processes in the family were described as a result of mutual compromise, discussions, and negotiations. However, it seems that the wives were often at the root of a number of initiatives and were the ones who in fact took the actual decision.</p> | <p>The decision-making, which previously used to be the male priority or a result of discussion and mutual agreement, has become almost completely a female responsibility. Although all the female respondents say that they consult their husbands over the phone, they actually manage their families on their own – they take care of the household, bring up the children and distribute the family budget. For some women, who were previously used to their passive role in the family decision-making, the new and changed situation came as a burden and caused them a number of difficulties.</p> |
| <p>Problematic areas of family life</p> | |
| <p>“Difficulties” and “patience” are the key words respondents used to point out the negatives of the mixed marriage. The lack of common memories and shared past is often an important obstacle, as the cultural background of the partners is different and can lead to gaps in understanding and perceptions. The pressure from the families and relatives, and the social rejection (especially in cases of Bulgarian-African families) are also exceptionally problematic areas. Finally, there are the financial difficulties, especially if these come as a result of the inability of the male partner to find a (well paid) job because of his race or origin.</p> | <p>The life of the majority of respondents became very difficult after their partner’s emigration. They had to assume, besides their own obligations, also all of the partner’s duties. The respondents spoke about exceptional difficulties they have in coping with their situation and about feeling desperate, lonely and caught in a situation from which they cannot escape. In cases where the decision to migrate was made against the will of one of the spouses, the consequences for the marriage are fatal. Communication is interrupted, partners become hostile to each other, and can even divorce. The migrant partner is accused of harming the family and the children.</p> |
| <p>Number of children</p> | |
| <p>The mixed families from our sample have from one to three children – a consequence of the social adaptation (the family patterns from the home countries of fathers, where the families are larger, have not been copied). The number of the children is not influenced by religious reasons, but primarily by the economic realities. The economic instability of the life in a mixed marriage is for many couples the main reason to delay having children or for not having more children.</p> | <p>Majority of the families from our sample have more than one child. Providing for the children is usually named among the most important reasons for emigration of one spouse.</p> |

| Religion of children | |
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| The religious affiliation of children is rarely discussed. Most respondents said that their children will choose their religion when they are old enough. | |
| Names of children | |
| The name selection is usually a result of mutual consent, but the impression is that in the majority of cases the father's will prevailed and the child was named after grandfather or other male relative on the father's side to compensate for the fact that the child was brought up in Bulgarian cultural environment and with Bulgarian identity. According to the mothers, foreign sounding and especially Muslim names have been causing a number of problems to the children in the schools as they have been victims of abuse and rejection. | |
| Positive consequences for the children | |
| Children are brought up in a culturally, religiously and linguistically mixed environment, which offers them a broader world-view, enriches them and provides them with a comparative advantage on the labour market. | The transnational marriage brings the following advantages to the children: financial security, opportunity "to see the world" when they visit their parent abroad or even to live in a new environment in cases if the whole family decided to join the emigrant spouse. If the children are already grown up, they can join their parent to work at the same place. |
| Negative consequences for the children | |
| Children from mixed marriages are often stigmatised by other schoolchildren, who often verbally and physically abuse, ridicule and reject them. The children from Bulgarian-African families are attacked and abused because of their skin colour, while those whose father is a Muslim are victimised because of their first and/or family names. | Children sometimes do not know their parent, they are in contact with him/her only on the phone. This leads to depersonalization of his/her authority, lack of a model to follow, and an interrupted emotional tie, which can hardly be compensated for. The children look upon their parent who is abroad mainly as a financial sponsor from whom they demand and expect presents. The lack of one of the parents loads the other one with too many responsibilities and often predetermines errors in his/her approach in the children's upbringing. The separation from one parent often leads to a too strong attachment of the children to the other parent. |

5. Policy conclusions:

After 1989, Bulgaria has experienced an unprecedented emigration wave and for the first time in the history of the modern Bulgarian state, the number of people residing in Bulgaria started sharply to decrease. From 8,948,649 in 1985, the population decreased

to 7,640,238 in 2007.³² The Bulgarian authorities have been slow in responding to this demographic crisis and in creating a modern legislation, consistent with the leading theories on migration and above all to the needs of the country and its residents in the face of profound social, economic and political changes Bulgaria experienced during the transition period.

The National Demographic Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria for the period 2006-2020 was to some extent a good and positive development, as it outlined the tasks the state needs to fulfil to decrease the emigration of young people. These included the reduction of unemployment among young people; improvement of working conditions and remuneration; equal access to quality education; opportunities for relief in crediting; conditions for overcoming poverty and social isolation among disadvantaged youngsters; conditions for adequate social development of young people. However, none of the proposed measures directly targeted the already existing transnational families and completely neglected their genuine and pressing needs and difficulties.

The process of Bulgaria's EU accession has on one hand significantly contributed to the stabilization and gradual decrease of emigration flows from Bulgaria. On the other hand, it made Bulgaria much more attractive as an immigration destination and the number of immigrants in the country is continuously increasing. Unfortunately, the state administration has been again very slow to react to these changes. Although most of the needed and relevant legislation was passed in recent years during the process of harmonisation of Bulgarian legislation with that of the EU, these changes often occurred without taking into consideration specific features of the immigration issues in Bulgaria.

Immigration is still seen in Bulgaria predominantly as something that needs to be controlled and limited by the state, rather than as something which can bring benefit of the country - of course in full compliance with the needs of the immigrants and in respect of their human rights. The responsibilities and tasks related to immigration are dispersed among a large number of state institutions, which is a precondition for low effectiveness. Furthermore, gender is an almost invisible category in the Bulgarian legislation on migration and state institutions only sporadically turn their attention to women immigrants, usually failing to properly address the problems of their social, labour and cultural integration.

Immigrants and refugees are almost completely excluded from the decision-making processes and have no consultative or observation role in any state institution. The mixed families, consisting of Bulgarian citizens and completely integrated immigrants could play an exceptionally helpful role in the process of integration of newly arrived immigrants. Their integration will be a long, dynamic and multi-dimensional process, and the successful and valuable experience of the older generations of immigrants needs to be put to use.

6. Potential impact and use of the research:

The current study has attempted to partially fill the gap in the existing scholarship and shed some light on two important social phenomena, which have so far been rarely studied in

Bulgaria - the mixed and transnational families. The research on the relations and connections between migration and gender in the case of Bulgarian mixed and transnational families has produced original and previously unavailable knowledge, which can be of significant use to the academic community, interested public and the policy-makers. Bringing to the light both the positive and negative aspects of both mixed and transnational family life, the policy-makers can use the generated knowledge to

³² NSI, 2008, *Население и демографски процеси през 2007 година* (Population and Demographic Processes in 2007), (Sofia, National Statistical Institute), <http://www.nsi.bg/population/Population07.htm>

produce relevant legislation and policy programs dealing with the issues of migration, gender, discrimination, racism, and social and demographic policies.

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