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Voice after Exit? Bulgarian Civic Activists between Protest and Emigration

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Historically, civic activists who left their home countries in the wake of protests would either risk disappearing in anonymity or become engaged in political "exile networks." However, since the outbreak of the "global wave" of protest, the ability of activists to take advantage of freedom of movement and technological advances in social media changed the framework and conditions of such "exile." This article addresses the question of what happens when protest activists decide to go abroad to study, work, and build a life. We focus in particular on the case of Bulgaria, the fastest shrinking country in the world. On the basis of structured qualitative interviews with Bulgarian activists who have gone abroad in the aftermath of the 2013 Bulgarian protests, we trace how migration and intra-EU mobility affect the political participation of activists, the ways in which they participate, and their diagnoses of the present. In other words, we explore whether one can speak of "exit after voice," leading in the long run to decrease in activism. We argue instead that we are witnessing a transformation of the dichotomy "exit-voice" into a more complex scale of forms of protest organization and participation, facilitated by social media and the freedom of movement within the EU. Herein, the real risk might be not that migration leads to political passivity, but that the new "voice" found through the experience abroad remains rather marginal as activists' networks are transformed and community building becomes a challenge in an increasingly precarious world.

Keywords: *Bulgaria; migration; activists; protest*

Back in 2013, Bulgaria experienced a year of political turmoil and protest. Three waves of consecutive protests embroiled the country and especially the capital Sofia. Tens of thousands of Bulgarian citizens took to the streets demanding political change, more citizen participation, and an end to the all-pervasive corruption in the country. Though the protests had a national dimension, they also drew in Bulgarians residing abroad to participate. Six years later, the protests' legacy is best described as ambiguous. Bulgaria is experiencing a deep crisis of the judiciary system and a capture of the state by entangled business, media, and political groups.[1]

At present, the country has a regime that can be best described as “stabilitocracy”: the formal appearance of democratic pluralist institutions is maintained, while they are emptied of content.[2] Coined by Srdja Pavlović, and originally used to describe the political situation in Montenegro, the term “stabilitocracy” has been adopted by scholars working on the Western Balkans as an analytical framework to describe “the semi-authoritarian regimes in the region which receive external support, in particular from EU member states, for the sake of the (false) promise of stability.” More concretely, “stabilitocracy” denotes a regime that “includes considerable shortcomings in terms of democratic governance, yet enjoys external legitimacy by offering some supposed stability.”[3]

Despite the lack of deeper change and the consolidation of stabilitocracy after the 2013 protests, for a multitude of people they were a pivotal life experience. For some they were not the first protests they had participated in, while for others they were an initiation into civic engagement. Since the protests, many activists have moved abroad, a choice greatly facilitated by the freedom of movement within the EU. As of 2019, Bulgaria is the fastest shrinking country in the world because of both migration and low birth rates.[4] We aim to explore tentatively whether the 2013 activists who left Bulgaria for abroad have lost interest in changing the political realities of the country or have tried to keep their newfound or rekindled political engagement alive.

Already back in the 1970s Albert Hirschman posited a dichotomy between “exit” and “voice”[5]—discontent people could either leave a firm or a state for that matter, that is, vote with their feet, or on the contrary, choose to stay and voice their concerns, most often out of loyalty, but also because of difficulties to leave. Since the publication of Hirschman’s classic study, many, including Hirschman himself,[6] have emphasized that the two options are not absolutely opposed, but often reinforce each other. We aim to revisit Hirshman’s dichotomy and explore whether and how the possibility of “exit” after the 2013 Bulgarian protests has affected the “voice” of activists. In this way, we aim to bridge an important gap in the literature and triangulate research on intra-EU mobility and migration, on the one hand, and on the latest protests in the shadow of the Great Recession, on the other hand.

The problematic relation between “exit” and “voice” lies at the core of the Bulgarian national imagination. One of the most popular and loved Bulgarian novels of the nineteenth century—Ivan Vazov’s “Chased and Unwanted”—in fact deals precisely with the tension between migration and activism. The emblematic novel describes Bulgarian emigrants who alternate pointless idling abroad with dramatic plots for the country’s liberation from the Ottoman Empire during the Bulgarian Revival period. It is precisely this image that one of our respondents invoked in describing her own experience of political activism in modern day London: “We cannot claim credit for the fact that now we are freer to share our opinions while living abroad. It is just the reality as it is. But, on the other hand, it was also the reality of the previous generation of migrants—those from the Revival period—who managed to use it in their own favour, in favour of their own people, as it was fashionable to

say back then. . . . The new political and organizational experience that we manage to get here in conditions of relative freedom could be later reinvested in Bulgaria" (interview 10, with Maria Spirova). The importance of the exiles' activities for Bulgaria's political liberation has been questioned ever since the nineteenth century but the very fact that Maria Spirova points to it shows that the myth is still alive and that the relation between "exit" and "voice" remains as important for the self-understanding of activists, as it is difficult to test and pinpoint with certainty. Our research aims to go beyond the myth and explore the effects of migration on activism through analyzing the experiences and perceptions of political participation of modern-day Bulgarian activists who live or have lived abroad.

Exit after Voice? Literature Review and Research Questions

The economic effects of intra-EU migration and mobility on both host and home countries have been explored from a variety of perspectives.[7] What is more, moving to the political repercussions of emigration, there has been important research on how emigrants influence the political behavior of those who stay home through remittances, cultural influence, and exchange.[8] In addition, a number of authors have explored how different national parties address emigrants abroad in political campaigns.[9] Nevertheless, the impact of intra-EU mobility on how emigrants themselves seek to participate in their home countries' politics has received less attention. An exception to this trend has been a recent theoretical article on the subversive effects of intra-EU migration on democracy in both host and home countries.[10]

Simultaneously, the growing body of literature on the post–financial crisis protest cycle[11] has rarely explored the influence of youth mobility on biographical availability and incentives to protest. While mass emigration has been singled out as one of the potential reasons for the absence of anti-austerity protest in Ireland and some Baltic countries,[12] the focus of explanation has been respectively the absence of leftist protest traditions and protest policing. Thus, it seems that the majority of authors who discuss intra-EU migration and mobility do not focus on their effects on political participation of emigrants in their host countries, while the majority of authors writing on the latest wave of protests in Europe, do not focus on transnational mobility and its effects.

In the Bulgarian context, research done within the Hirschman paradigm of *Exit and Voice* explored students' attitude to migration and politics back in 1998.[13] This research, however, focused on exploring and explaining mainly intentions to emigrate and their relation to students' views on the political system and identities. It did not focus on the effects that actual migration might have on levels of political participation. Furthermore, there have been no studies exploring the effects of migration on activists' engagement in the aftermath of the 2013 protest wave in Bulgaria, which was shaped by a radically different political situation than the one in 1998.

In 2013, Bulgaria had already been a member of the EU for six years and had just started to recover from the effects of the global financial crisis. Several years of strict austerity politics combined with the entanglement of media, business, and political interests within Bulgaria led to the eruption of popular indignation.[14] While the protests have been analyzed from a variety of perspectives,[15] little has been written on what followed them and how the possibility of "exit" within the EU affected the political mobilization.

We aim to fill this void by exploring empirically the effects of mobility on protest participation in the case of Bulgaria. Our main research questions are as follows: (1) Has "exit" from Bulgaria affected the "voice" of activists from the 2013 protests, that is, has it reduced their participation in Bulgarian politics? (2) How is "voice" itself being reconfigured in an era of social media and freedom of movement within the EU? For our analysis we have drawn upon a group of qualitative in-depth interviews taken at two different points in time. Thirty-five interviews were conducted in December 2013–March 2014 with student activists from four cities who had participated in the Student Occupation of several Bulgarian universities. In addition, eight interviews were conducted during December 2017–January 2018, four years after the 2013 protests. Our original intention was to trace which of the original thirty-five respondents live abroad and to do follow-up interviews with them on their political participation. However, it turned out that, with the exception of two people, the overall majority of the original respondents still lived in Bulgaria in 2017, leading us to search for additional respondents who had been active in the 2013 protests and had afterwards experienced some form of intra-EU mobility. We are aware that our sample is not representative for emigration from Bulgaria, or youth migration as such. Instead, we purposefully focused on activists and protest participants, that is, politically active citizens who resided abroad after 2013. Admittedly, a research of the political activity of people who were not active in the 2013 protests and have resided abroad in the period 2013–2017 would produce different results, but it would answer questions different from the ones we are pursuing in this article. We have not anonymized respondents unless they explicitly requested it. A list of all interviews we drew on when writing this paper can be found in the Appendix.

In order to address our research questions—has "exit" reduced political participation and how "voice" has been reconfigured—we need to first explain what is meant by "voice." In the paradigm of Hirschman, when organizational performance deteriorates, organizational participants have two main choices: exit, by which they cease their participation in the organization, and voice, by which they "articulate their dissatisfaction and critical views in order to change organizational consequences."[16] In the current article, we interpret "exit" as migration or mobility and "voice" as political participation.

Usually participation is defined as "action by private citizens seeking to influence governmental decisions."[17] Participation involves both involvement in formal politics through voting in elections and more informal actions such as activism and political

consumerism. In the current paper, we focus mainly on informal participation—protest, petitions, posting political content online. There is no universally agreed "ideal" benchmark of participation that we can use to "measure" absolute change in activists' engagement. For example, the European Social Survey asks people whether, in the last twelve months, they have contacted a politician or a government or local government official; whether they have worked in a political party or action group; whether they have worked in another organization or association; displayed a campaign badge or sticker; signed a petition; taken part in a public demonstration; boycotted certain products or posted or shared anything about politics online.[18] Going beyond the 12-month benchmark, the World Values Survey asks whether one has *ever* signed a petition, joined boycotts, attended peaceful demonstrations, joined strikes, or participated in any other act of protest.[19] More qualitative approaches towards studying engagement and participation distinguish between short-lived "reactionary engagement" in response to individual issues and crises and "community engagement" as a more sustained fluid and dynamic process.[20] In addition, Rosenblatt's "pyramid of engagement" offers a useful way of conceptualizing activist engagement over time starting from basic acts such as visiting a website or watching a video and then gradually progressing towards the "upper" parts of the pyramid that include, for example, attending public events or even becoming a spokesperson.[21] Interestingly, "the formation of collective identity, a sense of community, and the perception of self-efficacy are more important for understanding movement up and down the pyramid of engagement than is a feeling of urgency, a sense of crisis, or even the perception that others have succeeded."[22]

Considering the fact that our choice of respondents focuses on activists who had already engaged in public demonstrations before migrating, the question is how their type of participation changed once they left Bulgaria. In the next sections, we first briefly outline the Bulgarian political context in light of EU's failed efforts at building state capacities in Bulgaria and provide some general data on emigration from the country. Subsequently, we discuss the 2013 Bulgarian protest wave, paying particular attention to the participation of Bulgarians from abroad. Finally, we present our findings on the dichotomy "exit-voice" in the Bulgarian case, focusing on the role of digital media and freedom of movement for continuous engagement with Bulgarian politics even from abroad.

Failed EU State Building in Bulgaria as a Contextual Setting for "Exit"

As a crucial prerequisite for their access to the large single market of the European Union, Central and Eastern European countries had to engage in a comprehensive effort in domestic institutional change in more than thirty policy fields. The CEE countries "were supposed to make considerable upgrading in three key

groups of state institutions that determine the possible scope of change in all the other institutional arenas: the judiciary, the bureaucracy and competition policy."[23] The outcomes in all CEE countries have been widely diverging. Even at the time when political decisions had to be made to take specific countries in, the evaluation reports done by desk officers at the Commission often still contained a lot of negative evaluations.[24] In 2007, Bulgaria and Romania acceded to the EU, followed by Croatia in 2013. While the preparation for the accession in Bulgaria involved coordinated efforts at building state capacities and reforming the judiciary, public administration, and competition law, since the accession and the 2008 financial crisis these three types of institutions in Bulgaria have experienced a deepening crisis. Moreover, once Bulgaria became a member of the EU, the latter had fewer mechanisms to enforce its rules.[25] If indeed, *freedom from the state* of economic entrepreneurs and *freedom of the state* from the encroachment of private interests are key prerequisites for a functioning market order,[26] in Bulgaria both freedoms are currently lacking. Consequently, even though Bulgaria is a member of the EU, efforts of improving state capacities have largely failed.

While Bulgaria formally shows all the traits of pluralist and democratic structures without any centralized authoritarian consolidation, it has nevertheless succumbed to the partial hegemony of one political party, GERB, which is particularly strong at the local level thanks to its influence over the distribution of EU subsidies. Such a system perpetuates corruption and is characterized by a weak civil society unable to challenge the political status quo. The failed process of developing and improving state capacities in Bulgaria was explicitly addressed during the protest wave of 2013. However, the situation has not seen any significant improvement with the onset of Prime Minister Boyko Borissov's "politics of stability" since the end of the protest wave. Borissov has made "stability" the proverbial cornerstone of his policy and his key slogan, a fact that has not gone unnoticed in Brussels. Unlike other EU member states from the region like Poland or Hungary, Bulgaria under Borissov does not aim to cause problems for the EU and has managed to avoid any friction in Brussels.[27]

The combination between a deepening crisis of the state (and a corresponding stagnating economy) and freedom of movement within the EU has made "exit" a tempting choice for a large portion of Bulgarian youth, both before and in the aftermath of the 2013 protests. In the next section, we provide an overview of patterns of emigration from Bulgaria in the last three decades, paying attention to the ways in which freedom of movement in the EU (after Bulgaria's accession in 2007) has transformed the experience of migration.

Patterns of Emigration from Bulgaria

In twentieth century Bulgaria, both during the periods of the interwar authoritarian regime as well as post-war communist rule, political emigration was rather a

small phenomenon though admittedly among these politically active emigres a few became famous dissidents-in-exile like Georgi Dimitrov or Georgi Markov. While the limited political emigration until 1989 was compounded by the fact that in the communist era people were not free to travel, the lifting of these restrictions after 1989 did not increase political emigration as opposed to a rise in economic emigration due to the new-found freedom of political activism at home.[28] All in all, the population of Bulgaria has dropped from 8,948,649 people in 1985 to 7,101,859 people in 2016; that is, there has been a drop in the population of 1.85 million people,[29] which amounts to a decrease of almost one-fourth. However, more than half of the drop in population can be attributed to the negative rate of natural increase, and only 48 percent of the drop can be attributed to migration.[30]

In fact, migration has been the main factor for a decrease in the population of Bulgaria mainly throughout the 1990s when the economic crisis that materialized produced the largest wave of emigration the country had ever seen, leading to lasting dark-humor anecdotes such as, "What are the only two ways to escape our country's crisis?—Terminal One and Terminal Two (referring to the airport terminals)."[31] In this period, around seven hundred thousand people migrated to the United States, Germany, and other countries in Western Europe.[32] This was a period when migration was perceived to a large extent as a radical choice of moving one's life to a different country and starting anew.

In 1997, the country experienced severe political turmoil as a result of the enduring crisis that led to mass protests, which could be seen as a "second stage" of the events of 1989.[33] The outcome of 1997 protests changed the country's political dynamics. The post-1997 years put the country on its "road to Europe," which involved a series of comprehensive reforms, including improving state capacities, and within a decade led to its accession to the European Union in 2007. EU membership also coincided with a change in migration patterns. The Union's principal pillar of "freedom of movement" allowed for migration to morph into mobility, precipitating permanent changes to the conditions in which "exit" was to be perceived.[34] Interestingly, the accession of Bulgaria to the European Union in 2007 did not lead to massive increase in migration but contributed to the legalization of Bulgarian migrants abroad and the improvement of their job opportunities. More Bulgarians migrated in the preceding period of considerable visa requirements than in the current period of freedom of movement within the EU.[35] The most current data show a decrease of net emigration from Bulgaria: while in the last five years, twenty-five thousand Bulgarians on average have left the country each year, twenty-one thousand on average have returned.[36]

Nevertheless, these numbers should be taken with a pinch of salt, since there might be a considerable amount of missing data. Tracking Bulgarian citizens' movement within the EU is difficult because many EU countries require a compulsory registration only after three months of residence, and Bulgarian citizens could be fined but not expulsed if they have not officially registered abroad. Thus,

their incentive to register is not strong enough, especially if they are not students or officially employed. In addition, with the accession of Bulgaria to the EU, the very nature of migration has changed; rather, there is a lot of seasonal and circular migration from Bulgaria.[37] Finally, when it comes to patterns of youth movement within the EU, the concept of "mobility" seems to provide a more adequate description of short-term educational or work stays in other EU countries, in comparison to the traditional concept of migration that is defined on the basis of a twelve-month residence criterion.[38] Therefore, while net emigration from Bulgaria may have decreased, unregistered migration and short-term mobility should also be taken into account, albeit in the absence of reliable data.

All things considered, it seems that with the accession of Bulgaria to the EU, the very nature of migration has changed—it no longer constitutes a radical break with one's country or past, but is rather a temporary solution, an experiment that does not necessarily lead to tearing family bonds and starting life anew.

According to a survey taken a quarter century after 1989 to probe the gains and successes of the transition, many Bulgarians saw the period as one of overall failure. Freedom of movement, however, was seen as one of the greatest successes.[39] A crucial question that remains to be explored is what have been the effects of the current freedom of movement within the EU on the political participation of activists, especially in the aftermath of the wave of mass protests that shook Bulgaria in 2013.

The Bulgarian "Voice" in the Global Protest Wave

The political history of Bulgaria since EU accession was one of a protracted right-wing turn and austerity policies. In 2013 there was an outbreak of a wave of mass protests that precipitated several successive government resignations. While it is tempting to see these protests simply as part of the larger "global wave of protest" that emerged since 2008, it is important to note the local triggers and particularities involved in the Bulgarian protests.

There were three waves of protests in 2013: the winter protests, the summer protests, and the student occupation. The winter protests had been provoked by rising electricity and heating bills and were initially directed against monopolies in the energy sector. They emerged beyond the capital and coalesced later on Sofia. They involved violence and a series of self-immolations. As such, they were perceived as what can be called a "social" protest that later evolved into a political crisis when the government resigned in response to the escalation of violence. The summer protests were of a somewhat different nature as they were triggered by a political event—the appointment of the media mogul Delyan Peevski as head of the national security agency DANS, and the main mobilization of protesters took place in the capital Sofia. The subsequent student occupation represented rather a continuation and momentary revival of the summer protests.[40] While common grievances could be

discerned among the protesters in the winter and the summer, a domestically fueled dichotomy between the two waves emerged seemingly juxtaposing the protests along various though similar fault lines: social versus moral protests, capital versus countryside, and middle class versus the poor. The emergence of this dichotomy was the effect of a long-established pattern of division and prejudice within Bulgaria's "civil society."[41]

During the final phase of the winter protests in the wake of the government's resignation, several solidarity protests were organized by Bulgarians abroad on 24 February 2013 in Austria, Germany, Greece, France, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom.[42] This instance of Bulgarians who had "exited" expressing their "voice" was to be emulated and repeated during the summer protests.

More significantly, the summer protests saw an additional framing positioning the "moral protest" as an expression of pro-European and in particular pro-EU sentiments. The latter facilitated certain participation from Bulgarians abroad who saw common cause with the protesters in front of the parliament in Sofia. Social and online media enabled solidarity protests to be organized by Bulgarian communities in other EU countries and Bulgarians who lived abroad also commented in domestic outlets during the protests.[43] An additional factor allowing Bulgarians who had "exited" to express their "voice" was due to the timing of the protests. Summertime is a period when many Bulgarians who reside abroad visit the country and thus, they could take part in the daily rallies in Sofia. Given the purported middle-class characterization of the summer protests, it was also easier for some of the "best and the brightest" who emigrated to identify with the "moral protest" and express their solidarity. It was a curious fact that one of the main slogans of the protesters was "we don't want to emigrate" but this did not seem to contradict with the participation in the protests of those who had effectively done so.[44]

This pattern repeated itself during the student occupation, in part because the student activists of the *Ranobudnite Studenti* (Early Rising Students)[45] framed their actions within the same overall discourse as the summer protesters.[46] In addition to Bulgarians abroad commenting on the Occupation in domestic media outlets and actively engaging in related social media discussions, Bulgarian students who studied at foreign universities set up "foreign sections" of the *Ranobudnite Studenti* though they did not participate in the actual occupation movement but communicated their solidarity through social media. Such actions were thus mainly symbolic, in particular since the students involved in the Occupation emphasized in their actions and interviews with us that they were studying in Bulgaria and sought to improve their plight at home and not migrate (interview 1, with Raya Raeva; interview 2, with Ivaylo Dinev).

During the final weeks of the Occupation, when it had already lost its initial impetus and the broader rallies in front of the parliament were once again fizzling out, it was again Bulgarians abroad who gave a boost to the protesters. On 26 December 2013, a "resignation for Christmas" protest rally was organized specifically to

include those Bulgarians who were visiting the country for the holidays.[47] It was the largest rally to take place in that period with Bulgarians who had "exited" carrying flags of the countries they resided in alongside the abundant Bulgarian national flags and EU flags that were mainstays of the daily protest rallies. Some students who had set up "foreign sections" of the *Ranobudnite Studenti* also visited their peers who were still encamped in the university.

Nevertheless, this "voice" resonated weakly in the overall protests. The occupation soon came to an end *en mineur* in mid-January, and while the daily anti-government rallies continued for several more months, they rarely attracted more than two hundred participants. The protests' energy had waned and the main arena had moved to social media where Bulgarians in the country and abroad mingled and engaged in discussions more equally. The last of the protests' dynamism was spent on the elections for the European Parliament, in which the votes cast abroad showed higher percentages in favor of those parties that had aligned with the protesters at home. In the end, the outcome of the European elections probably played a more significant role in achieving the main demand of the protests—the resignation of the government—than the continuing daily protest rallies since the former exposed and exacerbated frictions within the ruling coalition that contributed to its resignation weeks later.

Though the Bulgarian protests were mainly concerned with domestic issues and protesters did not attempt to frame them within a broader global perspective, many shared aspects with protests elsewhere were to be observed, including the use of online and social media as well as the role of diaspora communities. The Bulgarian protests had a lot in common especially with anti-corruption mobilizations in neighboring Romania. In 2018, Romanian emigrants from all over Europe travelled back to oppose changes to the criminal code of the country, longstanding corruption, and low wages.[48] Romanian migrants staged well-attended rallies in the country's capital and tipped election results in key moments, crucially in favor of the center-right.[49] In a sense, the Bulgarian and the Romanian diaspora both intervened in domestic politics, but the latter was much more successful. Why was this the case? First of all, the Romanian diaspora is numerically much bigger than the Bulgarian one. Second, as results from votes in parliamentary and presidential elections have shown, the Bulgarian diaspora is very diverse in terms of both ethnic background, with a lot of Bulgarian Turkish citizens, and class structure, with migrants from both upper middle class and the working class. Finally, Bulgarians abroad hold a variety of political preferences, often depending on the country in which they reside—the socialists for example are particularly strong in Russia, while the center-right GERB is stronger in the United Kingdom.[50]

At present, with the benefit of hindsight, it is possible to state that unlike in the Romanian case, barely any of the demands that were raised during the 2013 Bulgarian protests (beyond the demand for government resignation) have been fulfilled. The protesters' "voice" was not heard. Although protests were still regularly organized in

the following years in Bulgaria, they did not see a repetition of the mass scale of 2013. In part, this may be due to the continuing phenomenon of “exit.” More so, while many protesters in 2013 stated that they did not want to emigrate, some did choose to move abroad, albeit temporarily. Did the temporary “exit” of young activists silence their “voice” or allow them to reconfigure it? It is to this question that we now turn.

Voice after Exit?

In a Connected World, You Don’t Migrate?

One of the principal triggers of our research was the desire to check whether “exit” after the big 2013 protests in Bulgaria could have decreased the “voice,” that is, the political participation and engagement in Bulgarian politics of the individuals who exit. Contrary to our expectations, a common topic that emerged in our interviews was the sustained interest in Bulgarian politics among the Bulgarians living abroad. In fact, all respondents but two followed predominantly Bulgarian politics and had only a general “orientation” knowledge of the politics of the countries they lived in. As Petko Karadechev, currently living in Denmark, stressed: he does not follow closely and participate in the politics of the host country as actively, since he does not have an intuitive deep understanding of that politics similar to the one he has of Bulgarian politics (interview 8, with Petko Karadechev). The respondents gave several mutually reinforcing explanations for this pattern.

To begin with, all were first-generation migrants who still felt closely connected to Bulgaria and engaged in Bulgarian politics. Secondly, an important factor for following Bulgarian politics was the easy availability of Bulgarian online news media and editions. In fact, almost all respondents pointed to Bulgarian news media (most often the liberal right journals *Kapital* and *Dnevnik*, but also the National Radio, the new left magazine *Diversia*, etc.) among the top outlets they use to inform themselves. Interestingly, regardless of whether they lived in an English-speaking country or not, the respondents tended to follow English-language media (most often the BBC, followed by the *Guardian*) for international news. The language factor turned out to play a crucial role in the political awareness of politically active Bulgarians abroad. What is more, five of our respondents had written articles on Bulgarian politics and social issues while being abroad. Maria Spirova had been a regular contributor to *Euronews* and *Al Jazeera* with articles on Bulgarian protests and politics, Ivaylo Dinev was among the co-founders and of the left-wing magazine *Diversia* to which he still regularly contributes, and Raya Raeva and Nikolay Nikolov created and maintained for several years the innovative online youth magazine *Banitsa*. Thus, our respondents found a way not only to read information on Bulgaria but sometimes also to produce important interventions in the public debate in and about the country. Apart from accessing or

contributing to online news media, all respondents underlined the crucial role of social media for receiving daily information on events in Bulgaria. In addition, most of the respondents had shared, with a different degree of intensity, personal statuses, links to articles and posts of their friends related to Bulgarian protests, or politics more in general. In this sense, even though they migrated physically, they did not migrate in the virtual world, where they still participated in debates related to Bulgarian politics.

Thirdly, a crucial reason for retaining a strong interest in Bulgarian politics has been the sheer easiness of mobility and the availability of low-cost flights to Bulgaria in Europe. Many of those living abroad often travelled home for big holidays reinvigorating their connections to family and friends, but in doing so also to local and national political "hot topics." Several of our interviewees shared that they had participated in protests when visiting over the holidays. Nikolay Nikolov, currently living in London, for example, came back to Sofia in December 2013 and participated in the student occupation over Christmas, thus forging new connections with Bulgarian students, despite the fact that he had previously studied abroad.

On a more general level, the freedom of movement meant for most of our respondents that they were not "anchored" in any country. As Raya Raeva answered when asked whether she would live abroad: "I could live abroad and I have thought about that but I could also stay here. Or I could go and then come back. There is nothing absolute in this decision. We are a different generation from the one of our parents" (interview 4, with Raya Raeva). Similarly, Nedelya Gancheva emphasizes that she feels like "a citizen of the world": "I would like Bulgaria to be my home. I would love to travel and see good practices and then bring them back home" (interview 7, with Nedelya Gancheva). In a similar vein, Maria Spirova expressed that "I don't reject the possibility of coming back. I would not say I have planned my life around me remaining in the UK. . . . All options you mentioned—going back home, going to another EU country or staying in the UK—are still on the table. And this is a thing that you understand when you are a migrant for a bit in the context of the EU and globalization. We in Bulgaria continue to think with mutually exclusive paths: that if you do this, all doors close behind your back and you should continue only along this way. For me the EU, Bulgaria, and the UK are one whole. That's why I go to shout in front of Westminster from time to time also for issues related to the European Parliament, that is neither in London nor in Sofia. I live with the conception that many things within one big cultural, geographical and historical circle . . . are related. We can't live on islands separated from each other" (interview 10).

The fact that freedom of movement is so easy contributes both to an understanding of mobility as a temporary situation and to a realization of how things are connected. None of our interviewees living abroad understood themselves as "migrants," they had their options open. "Exit" was not conceived as an absolute, final decision but as one decision among many, it was not conceived as a destiny but rather as an

experience. Thus, the very dichotomy “voice” versus “exit” seemed less pronounced in their answers.

The only exception among our respondents was Vesselin Paskalev, who has stable employment as a university professor in England and started a family there: “People often ask us when would we go back home to Bulgaria. But this is a wrong question. Now, we go back home to the UK and go to an excursion in Bulgaria” (interview 9, with Vesselin Paskalev, 24 January 2018). In this case, the biographical situation in terms of family and job indeed revealed a different picture and raised the question whether our other respondents would answer differently at a later stage in their lives.

Thus, it turned out that, in most cases, a physical “exit” does not imply an “exit” from the political sphere in Bulgaria. Thanks to different types of media and the relative easiness of travelling within the EU, Bulgarians who had been politicized before going abroad, remained politicized and interested in their national politics, often without developing a substantial interest in the politics of their host country.

What Does True Political Engagement Consist Of?

Most respondents had engaged with Bulgarian politics in one way or another in the period 2013–2017. The dominant mode of engagement was the sharing of news or posts on *Facebook*. In some cases, this was accompanied by protests in front of the Bulgarian embassy in the host country. For example, several of the respondents had participated in a protest in a foreign country in support of the 2013 summer protests in Bulgaria. Nikolay Nikolov recalled participating in a solidarity protest for #DANSWithMe in New York. It involved between fifty and one hundred participants who released balloons with the Bulgarian flag from the Brooklyn Bridge (interview 5, with Nikolay Nikolov). Vesselin Paskalev organized a small protest of five people holding the Bulgarian flag in support of #DANSWithMe in Florence. In London, Maria Spirova took part in a series of bigger protests organized by Bulgarians there (interviews 9 and 10).

Apart from the actions related to #DANSWithMe and the protests of 2013, Maria Spirova shared some of her experiences co-organizing a massive campaign in support of voting rights for Bulgarians abroad. This campaign was a response to the government’s plans to amend the voting codex in 2016. In the multiple elections during the preceding years (a side effect of the protests and general political turmoil), the Bulgarian government had delegated the responsibility for organizing the foreign voting sections to Bulgarian citizens living abroad who were willing to act as volunteers. In doing so, these people gained not only considerable experience but also social connections and some prestige. As a result, they had the ability to mobilize Bulgarian communities abroad and they put this to good use in reaction to attempts to curb the latter’s voting rights. As Maria Spirova explained, a common *Facebook* group once used to exchange experiences in organizing the ballots was turned into a platform to co-ordinate the campaign for protecting the rights of emigrants to vote in

national elections. According to her, the organized campaign managed to achieve its remarkable success thanks to the mass coverage it got in traditional Bulgarian media, where successful Bulgarians from abroad spoke and defended their cause (interview 10). Thus, the hybrid-media strategy[51] of using social media to organize while receiving coverage in traditional media led to the success of such actions.

It should be noted that our respondents were not unanimous concerning the usefulness or effectiveness of political participation from abroad. On the one hand, Maria Spirova emphasized the freedom of speech gained by Bulgarians abroad. They could speak out without worrying about losing their jobs or feeling any type of political pressure from the Bulgarian government. She also underlined the media leverage of protests abroad—50 people protesting in front of the Bulgarian Embassy in London against construction works in the natural reserve of Pirin got media coverage that they wouldn't have received if they had been protesting in front of the National Assembly in Sofia. Thus, they were more effective in getting media attention while showing international support for national protests. With the recent ecological protests against construction in Pirin National Park in particular, the protests abroad demonstrated that the issue is of importance to Bulgarians regardless of their place of residence (interview 10).

On the other hand, both Vesselin Paskalev and Petko Karadechev stressed that participation from abroad cannot substitute for physical presence in Bulgaria. Petko Karadechev referred to the "lived and shared bodily experience of protest," and emphasized the role of creating common memories and a lived experience of the political as a form of communication with others. Participating from abroad, according to him, gave an important critical distance for understanding the events, yet it could not be compared to the intense and transformative nature of "actually being among thousands of other people on the yellow pavement stones in front of the National Assembly" (interview 8). Vesselin Paskalev focused more on the effect of protest on those in power. He claimed that protesting with a few other people in a beautiful place like Florence has less potential to affect those in power than protesting with thousands of other Bulgarians in front of the National Assembly. As a lawyer, Vesselin Paskalev pointed out that in the past he could initiate court cases or find other ways to pressure those in power, which is not possible when living abroad. In this sense, he had serious doubts whether signing an online petition, sharing a *Facebook* post, or protesting in front of the embassy could have any long-term substantial effect (interview 9).

Despite their doubts as to what constitutes "effective" or "meaningful" participation, all our respondents had maintained an active interest in developments in the country and tried to engage as best as they could with Bulgarian politics. Ultimately, they still perceive themselves as members of this polity. In light of the above, we would conclude that moving to live abroad has not led to any drastic drop in political engagement and participation of those who were already politically active. There was also no dramatic shift from more intense to less intense type of participation,

since several of the respondents had participated in or even organized protests abroad. Activists who had exited did not necessarily participate less or in less intensive ways but simply participated in different ways, occasionally replacing protests in their home country with protests in the host country, for example.

New Voices: At Risk of Remaining Marginal

One of the main consequences of the student occupation, according to one of the leaders of the occupation Ivaylo Dinev, was that it allowed like-minded people to find each other (interview 5). While cooperating in the different working groups of the occupation dedicated to topics such as education, health care, arts, etc. and discussing proposals for a positive change in the status-quo, the students found new friends with some of whom they kept in touch afterwards. According to Ivaylo Dinev, if the occupation taught him something, “it was the necessity of creating a new political language” (interview 5). Ivaylo Dinev, Neda Guenova, Stanislav Dodov, and several other activists from the 2013 protests created the left-wing magazine *Diversia* with the aim to open up a space for new left economic and cultural debates. The authors of *Diversia*, some of whom had been immersed in left-leaning academic milieux abroad, in a sense, “brought back” and reintroduced leftist discourse in Bulgaria after the post-89 hiatus. But even though *Diversia* has grown and expanded since its founding, it still remains a marginal voice within an increasingly monopolized media landscape in Bulgaria. Thus, the biggest challenge that contributors to *Diversia* now face is to break out of marginality. One of the ways to do this has been through establishing connections with other local leftist groups such as *Solidarna Bulgaria* and the progressive media *Barikada*. It is at the intersections of the work of these three groups that wider social debates on tax reforms, work conditions, and challenges to the EU have slowly gained salience.

Another media project born out of the Occupation was *Banitsa*, created by Nikolay Nikolov, a Bulgarian living abroad, and Raya Raeva, back then a student occupier. Nikolay found Raya thanks to her Twitter feed on the Occupation, they met in person and decided to start a new youth magazine—*Banitsa*. Their idea was to create an innovative media telling the stories of young people in Sofia, who often remain outside the radar of public attention. Despite its innovative forms of journalism, *Banitsa* could not become a sustainable long-term project and could also not reach the wide audience it had initially hoped for. After *Banitsa*, both Nikolay and Raya continued to work in the journalistic field and for social change.

The above-mentioned media projects often crossed the territorial boundaries of Bulgaria. Raya wrote for *Banitsa* while on Erasmus in Bergen, and Nikolay regularly contributed from London. Some of the contributors to *Diversia* still work or study abroad. Such projects prove that geographical distance has not prevented Bulgarians abroad from participating in the public discourse of the country.

Our research on the paths of people who were politically active in the 2013 protests and the Occupation, shows clearly that their "exit" from the country has not meant an "exit" from their social networks back home. Modern-day "exiles" are connected to their friends online, can easily travel to Bulgaria, and are far from lost for political activism. At worst, they represent "sleeping nodes." At best, they are active participants who bring back new ideas into the country.

Nonetheless, considering that the Bulgarian national media and institutions have been increasingly controlled by a small number of players, both Bulgarians at home and Bulgarians abroad find it increasingly difficult to contest the "stabilitoracy" regime in the country. As the case of BiT television, owned by Bulgarians abroad and sold overnight, has shown, once an alternative media manages to achieve certain public outreach, its voice is silenced. Consequently, critical voices both at home and abroad remain marginal.

Discussion and Conclusion

In the current paper, we set out to explore whether "exit" after the 2013 protests has led to a decrease in political participation of former activists and has consequently provided a comfort zone for the further capture of the state by economic groups in the aftermath of 2013. The empirical analysis of our data contradicted our initial expectations.

First, it turned out that only a small minority of the student occupiers whom we had interviewed in 2013 and 2014 had moved to live abroad in the aftermath of the protests. From those who did, most had already returned to Bulgaria or were considering returning at some point. Second, when it comes to Bulgarians living abroad, all of those we interviewed have been following Bulgarian politics much more frequently and carefully than the politics of their host country. In this respect, we found that the role of online news editions and social media has been crucial for maintaining a high level of awareness about current affairs in Bulgaria. Many of our respondents have participated in online and offline actions to influence Bulgarian politicians, ranging from contributing to magazines to sharing news online or even protesting in front of Bulgarian embassies abroad. Another crucial reason for maintaining interest in Bulgarian politics has been the easiness of mobility and low-cost flights. Many of those living abroad could travel to join protests in Bulgaria, especially if these protests took place around Christmas or the summer holidays. The freedom of movement within the EU has also contributed to an understanding of mobility as a short-term situation rather than a long-term destiny. None of the interviewees living abroad understood themselves as a migrant; most of them considered it completely possible to move back to Bulgaria or to a different EU country at some point. Similarly, those living in Bulgaria considered travelling or perhaps even a stint of living abroad, but they emphasized that this is not any kind of radical decision and

they would probably come back afterwards. Third, our respondents differ with regard to their assessment of the usefulness of "distant protest" and social media activity. For some, living abroad provides a critical distance, freedom of speech, and media leverage not attainable within Bulgaria. For others, online actions cannot be compared to being physically present on the square in front of the National Assembly or suing in court. In general, the respondents who had been more politically active and followed Bulgarian politics in 2013 closely continued to do so, albeit in different ways. Finally, the experience abroad, especially in foreign academia, allowed some of the respondents to bring back new ideas and to try to devise new political strategies or a new language of politics. These "mediators" face a hurdle more cumbersome than retreating to passivity—the risk of remaining marginal and being sidelined by the dominant media and political discourses in Bulgaria.

There are several important limitations of the current study that point also to possible directions of future research. First, the study can be further enriched by statistical analysis of large-N samples of activists who have left the country, potentially through survey data. What is more, it may be interesting to compare the levels of participation of emigrants who had been active before leaving the country with emigrants who had not been active in order to take into account the influence of experience in the host countries. In addition, while this article claims that activists who exit retain their voice and remain active, it is highly possible that what we need to explore is change not at the level of the individual activist but at the level of *relations* between activists. As political players migrate, they might retain their characteristics, but the networks they form part of change. It would be important to explore how emigration influences not only particular nodes but also the networks of politically engaged players and the modes of coordination of networks.[52] An interesting possibility for a future article is to compare the trajectories and networks of activists who leave the country with the trajectories and networks of activists who stay. Going back to the literature on "community engagement," we need to explore in more detail how emigration affects local community building beyond protest campaigns and events. Ultimately, a lot of community building and political communication are place-based and depend on face-to-face interactions. As activists emigrate, the types of actions they engage in their home countries are bound to be more reactionary, responding to certain events and triggers, and less community building oriented. Finally, introducing a more temporal dimension, it is crucial to check whether activists' engagement with their home country politics decreases over time the more they stay abroad or, on the contrary, intensifies.

All in all, it seems that migration has not decreased emigrants' "voice," but has simply transformed it: most of the activists we interviewed remain engaged in Bulgarian politics, participate in protests, sign petitions, and share political content online or even in dedicated media. Nevertheless, we want to finish on a cautionary note. "Voice" as defined by Hirschman has a lot to do with protest and expressing disagreement. However, a definition of voice or participation based on protest

overlooks the importance of everyday community building and the everyday conversations and deliberations that take a lot of time, emotional energy, and consistency in order to define what people demand and not only what they oppose. In this sense, activists both at home and abroad need to focus more on community building, acquiring funds, and as one of our respondents suggested, “finding a new language.” There is no dichotomy between “exit” and “voice” but a common challenge ahead for both those who leave and those who stay behind. In fact, the disenchantment and “exit” from politics and community building of those who stay can be as dangerous for the functioning of democracy as the physical exit of those who leave the country.

Appendix

Interviews

1. Interview with Raya Raeva, Sofia, 6 January 2014.
2. Interview with Ivaylo Dinev, Sofia, 30 December 2013.
3. Interview with Neda Genova, Sofia, 18 December 2017.
4. Interview with Raya Raeva, Sofia, 21 December 2017.
5. Interview with Ivaylo Dinev, Sofia, 22 December 2017.
6. Interview with Nikolay Nikolov, Sofia, 22 December 2017.
7. Interview with Nedelya Gancheva, 16 January 2018.
8. Interview with Petko Karadechev, Sofia, 21 January 2018.
9. Interview with Vesselin Paskalev, Sofia, 24 January 2018.
10. Interview with Maria Spirova, Sofia, 25 January 2018.

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Notes

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