



## Article

# Old Ghosts, New Regrets

## Drift and Fragile Life Trajectories in the Context of the Pandemic

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### Abstract

With the onset of the pandemic, the precarious position of Roma communities in Bulgaria, particularly young people and their future prospects, seem bleaker than ever before, reaching new heights with regards to their insecurity. Based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork, conducted prior to and post several lockdowns during the pandemic (2020-2021), this paper will place forward the argument that the crisis we are currently witnessing, the unprecedented levels of multi-faceted social marginalization and exclusion are intensified by 'old ghosts' that have haunted social policy for decades and the withdrawal of the state during the lockdowns will most certainly have a devastating impact – 'new regrets', one's which cannot be overcome by simply providing access to the consumer market economy, the mantra on which the pathways towards revitalization are premised.



## Introduction and Methodology

The last two years have been illuminating in terms of what has been going in Bulgarian society for the past 30 years. As we are heading towards the exit of the pandemic, the country holds the 2<sup>nd</sup> place globally of Covid-related deaths per million<sup>1</sup>, the bottom of the table when it comes to vaccination rates in Europe<sup>2</sup> and the society is polarized even as to what is happening in Ukraine and why. A recent poll conducted by the sociological agency Alpha Research in the beginning of March 2022 has indicated that almost a third of participants (31.8%) still approve of Vladimir Putin, despite the invasion of Ukraine, with another 20% being unable to make up their mind<sup>3</sup>. So what is actually happening? I think the answer is simple: the levels of social division in the country have reached an all-time high, but the roots of these divides, including the framing of the pandemic as the need for social distancing were already there (Furedi, 2020), we simply further intensified certain aspects of these processes – solidifying personal boundaries, privatizing spaces and inflating the individual safety bubbles that we have become so accustomed to. The conceptualization of the pandemic even divided the Bulgarian academia and has further increased the separation that has haunted the field of the social sciences in the country. On one hand, during the first year and two lockdowns that took place in the country, we have witnessed a level of theoretical abstraction by which C.W. Mills would probably be perplexed (Raychev and Stoychev, 2020; Sabeva, 2020; Deyanov, 2020, Raychev and Konstantinov, 2021), seldomly being grounded on empirical data that has to do with the fragility of life trajectories during the lockdowns. On the other hand, as the pandemic progressed, we also saw examples of good empirical research that has attempted to look at the effects of lockdowns of mental health (Bakracheva et al. 2020; Bakracheva et al. 2021), vaccine hesitancy (Mitev, 2021; Kineva 2021a), precarious lives and the impact of lockdowns (Panchev, 2021b; Panchev and Genov, 2021; Venkov, 2020; Tsoneva, et al. 2021), including an assessment of some of the possibilities for overcoming the crisis (Kineva, 2021b).

The study on which this paper is based has been ongoing since 2015 in the form of a long-term ethnographic project, initially funded for six months by Plovdiv Municipality between June and December 2016, after which I have continued my fieldwork independently (Venkov and Panchev, 2016; Panchev, 2019; Panchev, 2021a). The onset of the pandemic and its development necessitated a more unconventional methodology (see Briggs et al., 2020; Briggs et al., 2021a,b; Genov and Panchev, 2021), as I was forced to collect empirical data online through social media such as Facebook in the form of online news articles, and in the form of online ethnographic field notes collected from personal conversations and communications with people who found themselves in a situation of complete lockdown in the ‘Stolipinovo’<sup>4</sup> between March

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1104709/coronavirus-deaths-worldwide-per-million-inhabitants/> (Last accessed on 23.07.2022)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1196071/covid-19-vaccination-rate-in-europe-by-country/> (Last accessed on 23.07.2022)

<sup>3</sup> <https://bnt.bg/news/prouchvane-na-alfa-risarch-za-bnt-63-ot-balgarite-podkrepyat-reakciyata-na-es-na-voinata-v-ukraina-namalyava-odobrenieto-kam-v314959-303679news.html> (Last accessed on 23.07.2022)

<sup>4</sup> As I have argued elsewhere (Panchev, 2021a), the neighborhood of ‘Stolipinovo’, situated in the second biggest city in Bulgaria – Plovdiv, has often been conceptualized as ‘the biggest urban ghetto on

and May 2020. Before the pandemic, some of my respondents had migrated to work and live in England and Germany but returned home before the state borders closed. Online respondents were recruited on the basis of their 'online visibility', i.e. possession of a computer with regular and stable Internet connection and / or smartphones with mobile internet. This is an important criterion to consider, as there are still households in certain parts of 'Stolipinovo' that do not have access to them.

The data collected and the empirical data presented here are complemented by interviews and observations typical of 'conventional' ethnographic fieldwork conducted in July 2021 improvised urban residential areas inhabited by poorer local communities (Panchev 2021a; b). For the purposes of the analysis and to preserve their anonymity, all names of the participants have been replaced by pseudonyms. Although the material presented here is, to put it mildly, fragmentary as to the data collected so far and it is beyond the scope of a journal article to provide an all-encompassing analysis of the processes of social marginalization in Bulgaria and how they are interconnected with ethnicity, the analysis provided here is motivated on the one hand by the urgent need to give a 'voice to the voiceless' in the post-Covid period, something that to date is largely ignored from academic accounts and analysis in my country, apart from the findings of one small-scale unrepresentative survey (Venkov, 2020). On the other hand, I believe that more than ever the emphasis should be placed, and public and academic attention should be focused on current trends not only in 'Stolipinovo', but also in Bulgarian society as a whole, concerning the ongoing fragmentation of the labour market in certain sectors such as construction, a tendency that has disproportionately affected the Roma and Turkish ethnic minorities in the country since 1989 (Kirov, Markova, Peycheva, 2014).

By way of summarizing the introduction, the paper also outlines the new directions and vectors in which modern precarious urban life is moving (Stending, 2013; Briggs and Gamero, 2017), whose precariousness and fragmentation are further intensified in the context of the pandemic, and representatives of various minority groups worldwide have been disproportionately affected by lockdowns (Matthewman and Huppertz, 2020). To put it differently, I am simply stating that what was happening in the context of the pandemic is not an entirely new phenomenon, as far ethnic minorities such as the Roma are concerned but is simply an intensification of processes directly related to neoliberal policies and regimes of governance, which have led to what Loic Wacquant defines as 'advanced marginality' (Wacquant, 2008). It's as simple as that, namely, in trying to overcome the impact of the lockdowns and deterioration of mental health (Briggs et al., 2021b), we resorted back to the same old mantra and messages of consumerism, even engaging in practices of hyper-consumption (Briggs et al., 2020; Angelova et al., 2021) at the expense of producing more and more precarious lives (Tsoneva et al., 2021; Deneva, 2021). Having outlined the some of the issues that the paper raises, the next section will provide a wider literature review context as to where we were before the pandemic with regards to social inequality and marginalization in Bulgaria problems that for

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the Balkans', however such framing and labelling fails to take in account the complex nature of different ethnic and religious communities that reside in the quarter.

three decades have disproportionality affected ethnic minority groups and people living their lives in the city shadows (Briggs and Gamero, 2017).

### **Old ghosts, poverty and pre-pandemic lives on the edge**

Problems related to poverty, social policies and ‘dependence’ on social assistance are linked to heated debates not only in the media and public space, but they have also become part of our daily lives, yet here is often a lack of wider public understanding about the roots of poverty and social exclusion and the handling of available statistical data and indexes is in itself selective and often misleading (Atanasov, 2018a). Therefore, the purpose of this part of the paper will be to initially present a summary of the positions and surveys that indicate how exactly the problem of poverty and inequality has sky-rocketed over the last decade in Bulgaria. The idea for next-to-no interventions in the economy and the advocating for a curtailing of the ‘welfare state’ have long been a part of the discourses of the Institute for Market Economics, for example. Such ideas for less dependence on the state can be compared to discourses that such right-wing think tanks institutes across the Atlantic have propagated and eventually succeeded in bringing it into the form of ‘social policy’. As I have argued elsewhere (Panchev, 2018), whilst hiding behind analytical abstraction and statistics, as well as the representation of poverty in the form of numbers, over and over again the Institute has willingly failed to cover the experience of poverty and tackling it in everyday life, what is left for offering an alternative interpretation of the myth of the ‘generous welfare state’, namely - people cannot survive living solely on social benefits and actually the majority of them rely on incomes generated by their participation in an informal economy that was aggressively dismantled with the introduction of lockdowns. The end result of this is an acceleration of the experience of drift (Ferrell, 2012) which has to do not only with spatial dislocation and the lack of normative stability, as Ferrell argues, but it also describes ontological insecurity and living in a constant fear of falling off the edge of society, a condition that many people, and minority ethnic groups in particular, were already subjected to prior the pandemic.

The main problems of the Bulgarian social assistance system are rooted in the non-existent assessments of the impact of the implementation of a social policy, as well as the lack of focus, consistency and interconnectedness between policies from one government to the next. There is also a need for a number of structural and legislative changes to help both improve public services and optimize public spending. It is necessary to ensure the most effective targeting of budget expenditures to the people who need them most. A similar logic is followed by the analysis of right-wing think tanks in Bulgaria, one of which lobbies for the introduction of an income criterion as a method for allocating the resources of the ‘welfare state’. This in itself would be a temporary solution to the problem but bearing in mind the size of the grey economy in the country<sup>5</sup> and the fact that most residents of the ‘Stolipinovo’ neighbourhood, even if

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<sup>5</sup> For the purposes of the analysis under the term ‘grey economy’ I will refer to economic activities that are not accounted for in official statistics, i.e. they are unaccounted for and are neither taxed, nor monitored by the government. According to data published and discussed in Schneider (2015, pp. 12),

employed by an employer, do not always have employment contracts with them as the forms of employment themselves do not always imply a secure job and income that can be obtained at the end of the month. Here we come across the problem of 'gray poverty', what exactly it is and whether it can be measured. This is a purely defining problem, but it also affects the way we think about 'poverty' in general.

When we talk about poverty, we more often than not consider that it can be objectively measured, i.e. our understanding overlaps with the idea of absolute poverty, it is shaped by numbers presented by economics on different media. Although similar indicators are used by the World Bank to define and measure extreme poverty in the developing world (for example, a poverty line of one or two dollars a day), poverty is measured differently within the EU. The so-called poverty line (in Bulgaria its equivalent is BGN 413 (211 Euros) for 2022) shows how many people fall below a certain level of income. The specificity of this indicator comes from how the poverty line is defined - whether it is a fixed limit of 1 or 2 dollars per day (purchasing power parity, i.e. adjusted for different price levels in the countries concerned), whether it is a line based on a certain minimum consumption (e.g. the amount needed to obtain a certain minimum of calories, etc.) or is a relative line based on income levels in the country (e.g. percentage of average income). In the EU, poverty is defined relatively. So what did the situation look like in Bulgaria before the pandemic?

In 2019, Bulgaria set a new record in terms of economic inequality in the country, and registered a Gini coefficient of 40.8, the EU average being 30.9. This is the highest level, at least since the Second World War, that our country has reached in the international index, and from data available (Bratoeva-Manoleva, 2018; Eurostat 2022), the negative impact of the lockdowns during the pandemic and the ongoing political crisis in the country one can argue that, sarcastically speaking, we will certainly remain a convincing leader on the topic of social inequality in the European Union. Our country has consistently taken first place around 2016, winning the 'battle' for leadership in this negative ranking against other leaders in inequality in the EU - Lithuania, Latvia and Romania. In 2017, for the first time we jumped the Gini coefficient limit of 40, followed by a negligible decline in 2018 to 39.6, as it turned out to be an exception, rather than a long-term tendency (Draganov, 2020).

The problem of economic inequality in Bulgaria has not gone unnoticed by the European Commission, which for years in its reports defines the situation on this indicator in our country as 'critical'. The low budget dedicated to social welfare, which is partly due to the low level of tax revenues and the lack of progressiveness of the tax system, have been cited as the driving force behind the rising levels of social inequality in recent years (Kasabov, Atanasov, Grigorova, 2018).

Eurostat also publishes data on the Gini coefficient before social transfers (pensions, child allowances, social benefits, unemployment benefits), which shows that even highly regulated economies such as those in Europe produce high levels of inequality of about 51 Gini index (54.8 for Bulgaria) in 2018, which is significantly reduced by social transfers. In our country

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the share of the grey economy in Bulgaria amounts to 30.6%, the highest in the European Union, whereas the average of the EU-28 is 18.3%.

such are mainly the pensions, which reduce the inequality to 43.3, and all other forms of redistribution reduce it only to 40.2 (Atanasov, 2018b). In comparison, the average level in the EU of about 51 coefficients before pensions and other social transfers falls to 35.9 after pensions and to 30.8 after other social transfers, which indicates a significantly greater impact of those systems in the EU, which have as their main function namely to balance the inequalities generated by the market (*ibid.*; see also Eurostat, 2022).

The combination of economic growth and high levels of inequality means that newly created wealth is concentrated at the top of the income chain, as evidenced by data presented by the then Minister of Finance Vladislav Goranov to the National Assembly at the end of 2019. They show that more than half of Bulgarians (53.8%) earn up to BGN 500 per month (around 250 Euros), and nearly 80% - up to BGN 900 (450 Euros), not including about 2 million retirees with an average pension of about 370 BGN (180 Euros). At the same time, only 1% of the people in our country earn more than BGN 6,000 per month (3,000 Euros), and in this narrowest group at the top of the pyramid the inequality is even greater. The share of people in severe material deprivation still fell in 2017 from 31.9 to 30%. Given that the EU average is 6.7%, this indicator should fall significantly faster given the free movement of workers and the Union's cohesion policies, but this process is undermined by the lack of social systems (Draganov, 2020).

### **Dispelling the myth of a 'generous welfare state'**

Linking the problem of social assistance, dependence and ethnicity are problems that cannot and should not be limited only to Bulgaria, in fact they have been 'haunting' countries and Eastern and Central Europe (Szelenyi, 2001; Revenga, Ringold and Tracy, 2002; Bodewig and Sethi, 2005). Such trends can be observed in many of the economically developed countries in Western Europe and across the Atlantic (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010). Of course, the debate over the dependence of the poor on the 'generous welfare state and the services provided by social assistance is not new, on the contrary - it underpins Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher's policy of limiting responsibilities that the state has to its citizens. Thus, instead of seeing in the context of a new economic model attempts to save those who are directly affected by the closure of large factories, plants and industrial complexes (as was the case in Bulgaria after 1989), the shaping up of a policy takes place, one that aims to punish poverty, criminalize it and turn those who can barely make ends meet into scapegoats (Wacquant, 2009). Being poor is tantamount to not being able to take responsibility for your own well-being and success. This, in turn, is backed by a strong dose of cheap television and media propaganda which aims not only to gain popularity, but also to provide the public with a generalized and collective image of the Roma ethnic minorities as a 'problem' (Brealey, 2001; Georgieva, 2013; Messing and Bernath, 2017) who should be responsible for what is happening in society, even more so during the pandemic (Georgieva, 2022). This conceptualization of the Roma as a 'social problem' become something of an axiom - a statement that cannot be proven but seems obvious because it is constructed as shared knowledge and the 'ethnicity' card has been played over and over again in both local and national elections by right-wing parties and their representatives.

This negative portrayal of the Roma ethnic minorities is also backed up with the ideas of right-wing economists, who have been imposing the thesis that it is precisely because of social benefits in Bulgaria that the Roma are unemployed - the benefits demotivate people to seek employment, which is not much different from Charley Murray argued decades ago (Murray, 1984; 1990), effectively paving the way for the 'withdrawal of the state' (Bourdieu et al. 1999). A large part of the Bulgarian national budget is spent on social assistance, they claim. Aid for the socially disadvantaged has recently been cited as the reason for the country's growing foreign debt. The consolidated state budget shows that 51.6% of current expenditures for 2014 were used for 'Social Security, Assistance and Care'. But this does not mean that these funds are social benefits. '60% of the costs of social assistance and insurance are actually expenditures for pensions and less than 6.7% are used by the Social Assistance Agency (SAA) for social benefits' (Grigorova, 2016, p. 7). In addition, 'SAA reports show that in 2015, 52,279 people and families were assisted, **with the average monthly amount of assistance per household being BGN 84.67 (42 Euros)**' (ibid, p. 19; emphasis added, D.P.). If we put in in the context of the national average cost of living, a family of four would require **1,757 Euros (without rent)**, whereas a single person would need **at least 567 Euros (without rent)** to make ends meet<sup>6</sup>. In that case, we can hardly speak of an 'overly generous social system'.

One of my previous texts has already talked about how, in the climate of a neoliberal policy imposed for decades, citizens are gradually becoming users of social services, 'clients' (Panchev, 2018). Thus, even those who really need social assistance become 'clients of social institutions'. These customers, after starting to use certain services, become consumers (Bauman, 2004). Here, however, along the path of our logical chain we come across a small stumbling block. Being a consumer means that we have the right to make choices. And do the 'users' of the 'services' so generously provided by the Social Assistance Agency actually have the right to vote and choose? Rather, they are put in a stalemate in which they either have to try to use what they are supposed to do as members of society, and thus inherit a certain stigmatizing label that defines them as dependent, lazy, etc. or to give up the minimum they can get (and it really is the minimum) and look for alternatives to deal with the situation in which they find themselves (Bauman, 2001; 2011; Winlow and Hall, 2013). With the symbolic dimensions of social assistance, the effectiveness of aid in our country cannot be sought, just as we cannot expect that 1 BGN thrown to a beggar will lift him out of extreme poverty. And if there is poverty that is visible, then an even bigger problem are the multiple hidden levels of poverty (Bray, et al. 2019), which remain outside official statistics.

But although it is invisible in documents, these hidden dimensions of poverty undoubtedly exist. Not only do social benefits fail to lift those in need of poverty, but they are also insufficient to provide even food for the final recipients. And the people in the unexplored and uncovered parts into the radar of social workers at all and do not have the opportunity to receive these minimum social benefits. Here we must include the group of the 'working poor',

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<sup>6</sup> Cost of living in Bulgaria: [https://www.numbeo.com/cost-of-living/country\\_result.jsp?country=Bulgaria](https://www.numbeo.com/cost-of-living/country_result.jsp?country=Bulgaria) (Last accessed on 23.07.2022)

and there are some among the people from 'Stolipinovo', with whom I maintain regular contact. What have I learned from them so far about social assistance and lack of access to it? Very often the criteria that need to weed out the needy from those who are doing relatively well financially do not work and as a result, the former sometimes remain invisible to the radar of the social system. In the moments when they have to negotiate with representatives of the SAA, the effect of 'secondary victimization' often appears, where the needy, being victims of the negative effects of an aggressive market economy, fall victim to a structure that should lay the foundations of a way to overcome poverty and extreme poverty. The stigmatization of the poor, the sick and the unemployed leads to the deprivation of social benefits, from which everyone subsequently suffers, a tendency which has been documented both across the Atlantic and in Europe (Wacquant, 2008, 2009; Briggs and Gamero, 2017).

Are we not talking then about poverty which directly affects over 1/3 of the country's population even before the pandemic? According to data published by the National Statistical Institute, the average number of unemployed persons in 2015 was 330,816. Of these, 73% do not receive unemployment benefits - no work experience or the period in which they are entitled to benefits has expired (Grigorova, 2016). This group also includes the long-term unemployed who have not been employed for more than a year. They may have received compensation, but the period has already expired, as the maximum period for which this insurance risk is covered is one year, even for employees with more than 25 years of service. Unemployment benefit in itself, however, should not be thought of as social assistance, because it is directly dependent on what income a person is insured with, in other words, what is withheld in the form of income tax resembles the payment of contributions to an insurance fund, i.e. unemployment is already thought of as a risk against which everyone must insure themselves. Why is this a problem? Some of my contacts in the neighbourhood have been disproportionately exposed to the risk of long-term unemployment for years, at least because the places where they would otherwise work are gone and lost, and the active labour market policies specifically targeting the Roma have amounted to nothing more than a temporary shift 'from benefits to brooms', leading to hyper competition for low-skilled job available on the market (Beremenyi et al. 2013). Since these jobs are gone, then we come to the problem of the need for retraining or working in the informal economy, at least because there are no benefits for the unemployed. This, in turn, requires innovative coping and survival strategies, developing a sense and experience of things that could be done within an informal economy that needs to support people living in a household:

**Yashar<sup>7</sup>:** People are not poor. People want work, there is work, but they do not give it to us. That is why we are poor, that is why we are led by poor people. They are

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<sup>7</sup> At the time of the interview, back in 2016, Yashar was 33-years old and was running his own barber shop in the in the neighborhood. A year later (2017), whilst struggling to get a secondary education diploma from one of the local schools, he decided to move out of the neighborhood and departed with his family of three to Dortmund, Germany. Although he was returning on a yearly basis to Bulgaria for the summer holidays, since the beginning of the pandemic he has decided to settle down permanently in Germany.



all powerful people. Everyone is hardworking. They can do anything. They can do anything and say, one person, right, one person is walking and there is no money. I dream at the moment to say one person has no money. This man is thoughts - Every man here is like that - smart, very smart. However, there are no possibilities. The man thinks. . . I can make a lamp, let's say I can make a lamp. However, I have no money to take a tool to do it. And to sell it. He doesn't have a diploma, he didn't go to school, he didn't have a profession for this job. He learned from somewhere, isn't he, a smart man and he's already caught, he knows how to do it, he knows how to do it. However, there is no money - to take parts to do it. And what does this man do - first he goes down here with his brother: looking for a job. From the rich or goes from the companies where there is work. Do they give him a job - he works for a while, 1-2 years, collects money, leaves work, goes and gets parts, makes a workshop and starts producing stuff. By himself. We are like that.

D: So he prefers to work alone than to work for someone else?

**Yashar:** Because, yes, he shouts, there is work, come, you will work. You go to work and say how much you are getting paid, everyone asks 'How much do you give per month?'. The employer says BGN 300 or BGN 400 per month. This man also has Bulgarians doing the same job - BGN 800-900, at least BGN 800 in salary.

In this case, we can talk about labour market activity, which would be defined as 'unemployment'. In fact, we are talking about innovative forms of entrepreneurship that allow the maintenance of a certain standard of living without leading to extreme poverty and its reproduction in the next generations. Even those who have their own business and pay municipal tax for the use of a certain plot of land in the neighbourhood, also feel the need to work even in two places to be able to support their business in times when it is not profitable:

**Dimitar:** And then was there a lot of money to start the business? Was it difficult in the beginning?

**George<sup>8</sup>:** It was very difficult in the beginning, because I did not have the funds. Just as winter has begun, and no one in the construction sector is working in the winter. And after 3-4 months I rented a new apartment and started working.

**Dimitar:** Construction work again?

**George:** Yes, construction and where I spent that money and put it here in the store. And then we renovated the shop completely. And the business started. 1 year was perfect. For example, I paid 40 leva (20 Euros), I took it here.

**Dimitar:** And how long did it take before you started earning from the store?

**George:** 'It's not over to tell you.' I keep investing my money here. Where I work privately and earn here.

**Dimitar:** Do you work private, extra work?

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<sup>8</sup> At the time of the interview (2017) George was 45 and was residing in the well-off part of the neighborhood, working in construction, and running a shop for home and kitchen utensils. Since the first lockdown he has been unable to re-open the shop and like Yashar, has left with his family for Germany.

**George:** When I find a job, I go, I work.'

In the conditions of constantly disappearing jobs, their replacement with part-time work and the high dose of uncertainty, the search for livelihoods requires relying on a well-established network of contacts among our acquaintances and friends, as well as the constant search for opportunities to benefit some income:

**Dimitar:** Are you worried from now on (I ask his wife). How does she manage when she has no money?

**Atanas<sup>9</sup>:** 'No, I have to find it.' She, my wife, I didn't let her think that way. And I will not leave her. When she sees that she is not ... For example, if I sleep at home and she is not (i.e. meaning he's lazy), this is something else. She's watching me struggle, you know? This is not no. That doesn't mean it doesn't. I can find, I have a chance, right, if I'm struggling while I'm out, I'm trying to find some money. This does not mean that it will not - I will find; I will definitely find. I have no chance to leave this child hungry (points out the little boy, author's note).

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**Dimitar:** Are you officially unemployed? For the state?

**Asen<sup>10</sup>:** I am unemployed. I owe money to a bank, I took out a loan of BGN 6,000 (3,000 Euros). I intended to buy an apartment of my own, then it was very cheap, but I could not find one. And I put the money in the stock market (the vegetable market). I tried this job.

**Dimitar:** Did you win something or lose them?

**Asen:** I just lost them.' I didn't have time to slow down at least a little. So peppers, so potatoes, so I don't know what, I found it, I took it. One third I either took the money or not.

**Dimitar:** You dreamed on the grocery stock market how you will win.

**Asen:** No. When I was looking to buy an apartment, on the one hand I was asking how not to lose my money. To invest them somewhere because money can't sit aside at this time. I withdrew the money; in the third month I was laid off. Otherwise I was fine. BGN 50 salary per day (25 Euros)"

In these conditions, dependence develops and the need to rely on the extended family, as in most cases it is the financial resources available to its retired members (although they themselves are minimal), may to some extent otherwise the detrimental effects of temporary employment:

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<sup>9</sup> Atanas used to have a private glazing shop. Recently, in June, as passed by his place, I noticed his workshop had been demolished in the summer of 2021, forcing him and his family to move out of neighborhood, according to his neighbors. I have been unable to trace his whereabouts.

<sup>10</sup> Asen, in his mid-30s at the time of the interview (2018). As the bank was pushing him to repay the loan, he migrated to Frankfurt, Germany, where he was working unofficially in the construction sector.

**Dimitar:** And how much is your pension here?’

**Hasan<sup>11</sup>:** BGN 160. Is this money!? Should you pay for electricity, should you pay for water, should you eat? Or give the children some money? Those children, the grandchildren want: ‘Grandpa, give 1 lev, grandfather, give 50 cents.’ - Come on, where!? I will not eat! I will sleep, drink a glass of water and go to bed.

**Dimitar:** In my opinion, after a certain age the children should give to you.

**Hasan:** I talk about grandchildren, little ones. The children, you look at them, don't have them tonight, for example. I have BGN 5, BGN 10. Should I eat and should they sleep hungry? I will sleep hungry! I will take a glass of water, tomorrow ‘Allah kerem!’ We say in Turkish ‘Allah kerem!’ God, you trust him. Tomorrow I can earn BGN 20! I can earn BGN 5. Bereket versin!

**Dimitar:** Okay, is this happening?’ With you? Have nothing to eat in the evening?’

**Hasan:** It happens, of course. So many [people like that] are [living] here!

**Asen:** For example, I go around every night. It's not good to say ... And I have boys who, don't misunderstand me, I collect the rest of their food, for example. Well, there are two or three families that I visit and give to them. To have and not to have! I don't ask, I just leave it to them. A shopkeeper, when he saw me, ‘What are you doing?’ And I pulled him aside and explained what I was doing. ‘Every night you will pass from here’ - he is a salesman, he does not mind giving one or two loaves of bread. And I'm struggling ...

Social assistance networks within the community create not only lasting bonds of trust, but also a sense of sharing and cohesion, the need to do everything in your power to ensure your existence in an extremely unfairly ordered economic and social reality, a type of bonding that during the lockdowns served as a safety net for the neighbourhood, as I have shown elsewhere (Panchev, 2021b). If we imagine the world as a poorly designed racetrack with a destination of ‘success and security’, we will actually see that the chances are not evenly distributed. Some start the race with a big lead, simply because for them the distance is much shorter, others try to run the whole destination, but do not always manage to finish, and others do not even have the right to participate in the race itself, they are just spectators of a spectacle to which they have been denied access, even though they have paid for their ticket to the competition in advance. Something similar is happening with unemployment benefit programs (which, as described above, actually act as an insurance mechanism rather than a tool for a fairer distribution of resources and opportunities for reintegration into the labour market). Even within the community itself, the fact that a person can be described as ‘unemployed’ carries a certain stigma, it is a sign of inability to cope with the lack of ways to ‘make a living’, which we must understand quite literally, not as a clichéd metaphorical expression. The dysfunctional system for the ‘unemployed’ is often even more of a hindrance, as it relies on the visibility of ‘unemployment’, without actually taking into account the excessive constraints it imposes in itself, in replacing incomes that are extremely

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<sup>11</sup> Asen's father.

insufficient for a normal existence. Labelling 'unemployed' does not mean that its bearers do not pay their dues to the state treasury:

**Ahmet:** Gypsies didn't pay taxes?' Am I not paying? For the apartment every year tax 130 BGN, for the car 200 and so many lev. I pay BGN 130 for electricity every month. And I pay as much as you pay, and for me the bread is 1.20, not 60 cents! Well, there is someone in the neighbourhood who is socially weak, but I'm sorry, they earn 36 leva for two weeks of work!

**Asen:**... Or receive social benefits, no. He will take BGN 100 or, for example, BGN 150 social assistance, they have to work for 15 days. In my opinion, those 15 days that the job centres make them work, most of them are sure that they do not work. You are on the face; you are at work. It's two o'clock, you're still on the face. And when it's 15 days, it's obvious that you don't work anywhere - and you deserve it.

Even when temporary employment programs at the Labour Office are thought of as something that is 'deserved', at least in the eyes of those who do not depend on them, those who are recipients and recipients of this type of 'social service' share their own your frustration and dissatisfaction with the system. The information about the amount that the locals receive as compensation varies due to their provision, but it is extremely insufficient for survival:

'I sit in front of a coffee-shop kiosk in one of the improvised areas with Manush (about 50 years old, has three sons, two of whom work in France, the third has recently returned from there, and is currently working in construction,) we are sitting at a table in front of the bench closest to his home. Earlier today he went to sign for the benefits he receives as unemployed and passionately tells me about the mandatory 15 days in which he has to work something on the program. 'For 40 leva a month, which one next?' Should I pay for the travel expenses, should I look for them at home? 'Shortly afterwards, at my request, he went to them and brought me his social documents, handed them to me to review and saw that he had been on the stock exchange since September 2015. He had not previously received such benefits. I ask him what he was doing before he was fired: 'Before that I was a security guard at the lung hospital for two years, and seven years before that I was there as a general worker. However, now that this has happened, there is no work anywhere. The woman works for the municipal cleaning company, but the money is not enough, I do not want my sons to send me, they have families, to look after them, I told them - to have for them. Here, the woman will come home from work in a while, I haven't earned anything today, I won't give her a single lev to travel by bus tomorrow, I just don't know how we will manage...' **(fieldnotes, May 2017)**

## **Dead eyes see no future: Drift and Precarious Living in the context of the pandemic**

The more critical analysis of the year of the pandemic have shown that social inequality in Bulgaria is on the rise (Penkova, 2021; Kolluru and Semenenko, 2021) and we can clearly identify the winners and losers. The registered decline in the national GDP for 2020 was -4,2% and the

country found itself in a deeper recession than the financial recession of 2009. How do we conceptualize what is currently happening? Contra popular understanding, instead of more fixation on space, I think the pandemic has exacerbated and already happening process, one that Jeff Ferrell (2012) defines as *drift*, i.e. the constant movement and displacement in space, a consequence of the crisis of modernity, but a crisis that is fundamentally ontological because it is related to the subjective experience of problems that can be registered ‘objectively’, for example the effects of the Transition or the global financial crisis that followed a decade later, which did not pass Bulgaria by, and which also affected the residents of the ‘Stolipinovo’, as many migrated en-masse to Western Europe and became a flow of the cheap labour force that feeds with blood and sweat the German, French, British, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese economies (Deneva, 2021). A crisis that moves on more than one trajectory and that cannot be covered by a single analysis or within a single theoretical plane. It is a crisis that finds its dimensions in refracted biographical stories and experiences and notion of drift seems to have fully embraced current experiences, the existence as a normative and spatial dislocation, the result of both economic development and economic collapse, to develop precisely in these situations, the purpose of which was to prevent drift. Uncertainty and drift go hand in hand. ‘Moving from one house to another, from one country to another, sleeping in cars or temporary shelters, “occupying” streets and railway stations with their presence, those who have been deprived of security find very little of what is offered in the form of spatial or normative stability’ (Ferrell, 2012, pp. 241). This constant state of drift is both a symptom and a strategy for dealing with everything that overtakes us, it can be documented in the form of ‘broken’ narratives and stories of social experience, whose only unifier is the narrator, and through the act of narration itself, an attempt is made to give meaning to the present, which seems to be devoid of such, unlike the past, in which time and its course were ‘lived’. Post-pandemic, for example, even in the centre of Plovdiv, near the Dzhumaya Mosque, men can still be found coming from Sheker Mahala (a neighborhood similar to ‘Stolipinovo’) and waiting every morning for years to be hired for short-term construction work, but their presence remains unnoticed. Thus, one of the planes on which drifters move is presupposed by the unfavourable position they occupy economically in society, even in cases when it comes to labour migration outside Bulgaria. This can be seen in the following two stories:

**Ivan<sup>12</sup>:** I work here in the neighbourhood now, and when Recep calls me something I help him. I used to work in construction companies, and I built hotels by the sea, but there were no contracts, they paid by hand, and the health workers did not pay. I was a general worker, now I put the cards I need. I had to take BGN 3,000 from one of the companies. however, they kept saying that there was no money, I went to their office several times, there was still no money! You can't convict them, can you, because you don't have a contract, what will you tell them in court, if you don't have a document, neither the medical staff paid you, nor anything. And I stopped dealing with them. Otherwise, before that, there was another company, the boss before he died and his daughter to take over the

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<sup>12</sup> At the time of the field work last year, Ivan was 48 years old. During my last visit to the neighborhood in June, I understood from Recep that he had passed away due to Covid complications. Recep himself has closed down his carpenter shop and currently lives in Dortmund with the family of his son.

business - I worked there. They paid for everything from start to finish. Even when his daughter died, he wanted me to go to work for them in Sofia. By the sea, as we were, at least the rooms were covered, but you don't have an apartment for Sofia, you have to find it yourself, you have to pay the rent separately, I can't sleep on the site. And I gave up. Now I don't make a lot of money, but at least that's enough to cover my needs here, do as many repairs as I can. Recep something like he needs help coming, I will call him to help me for the door to install it tomorrow or another and so time passes. I went to France for a while, but there was no work, we went to work for two days and we were out of work for two weeks, I was forced to return. I've been working in construction all my life, now I put drywall in the neighbourhood whoever I want, so I make a little money.

...

**Fikret<sup>13</sup>:** I've been working in France for several years, collecting garbage there, recycling whatever the French give, hauling garbage to Paris,' they say, walking around in a van and sleeping in it at night in the parking lots, but the police are constantly chasing me. allow it to stop in the center and constantly move from one place to another. Now I came home because my father died, years ago we left with him, but he came home here because his health was not good. And now as such - I went home immediately, to arrange the funeral and everything else. I wanted to take the family and the children to study in France, but now it can't happen, we can't all sleep in the van, I have to think about something to rent, rent there and then take them to me. **(field notes, August 2021)**

The above presented personal accounts can be thought of as characteristic of a large part of the life stories of the inhabitants of the neighbourhood. Their respondents' biographical narratives are characterized by frequent refraction of the biographical trajectory, uncertainty, displacement and constant manoeuvring between what is thought 'outside' as a normative order and law and the informal, which is stigmatized and denied. At first glance, however, what is thought to be legitimate must also be problematic so that it can accept the deviant, at least because they both represent the face of the same coin. Such life trajectories are in themselves possible as a direct consequence of the disintegration of public order, the labor market and the various pledges of struggle that have held the boundaries of identity until the beginning of the democratic transition in Bulgaria. Holes, deviations, and contradictions and lack of predictability appear in place of straightforward and relatively earthquake-protected life trajectories, and carry with them a sense of disorientation and dislocation. This problem can also be thought of spatially if we think of 'Stolipinovo' as a failed modernist project of social engineering and the creation of social cohesion based on a common national identity. With the disintegration of the regime, this ideology also disintegrated, and with the closure of many of the factories in the immediate vicinity of the Eastern administrative district of Plovdiv (where the neighbourhood is located), the spatial control mechanisms created to hold this urban space have ceased to function. The situation in which a large part of the residents of the 'Stolipinovo' district find themselves after the mass closure of industrial enterprises leads to their labour migration to Western Europe,

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<sup>13</sup> Fikret, 25 years old at the time of the fieldwork, prior to leaving for France he used to be a barber's apprentice in the neighborhood.

where not all of them manage to establish themselves permanently due to the lack of established social networks. In some of these same transitional populations that are stigmatized, they become drifters that are visible and precisely because of this visibility are thought to be problematic, i.e. they become even more visible: 'closing urban spaces to drifters does not offer a solution to the problem, but exacerbates it' (Ferrell, 2012, pp. 245-248).

Engaging with the idea of drift as an ontological state is an effect of a person's 'being-thrown-into' in the world (in Heidegger's sense) as a founding one, and the way he or she inhabits a space and gives it meaning through its habitus shows that beyond the widespread myths are in fact that the people of 'Stolipinovo' (but not only there) resort to using various innovative strategies to deal with the difficulties faced by the stigmatized residents of the neighbourhood with their limited formal labour market. These are dynamic entrepreneurship, flexibility, network of resources, etc., and most of the locals can be defined as 'ghost entrepreneurs' (Medarov et al. 2015). Indeed - outside of institutions and written contracts - but these are the choices and decisions that people have to make every day, as the local authorities punish and penalize poverty:

As we stand with the former 'owners' in front of the remains of the demolished house a few hours earlier, a 40-year-old man passes by, pushing a smashed shopping cart in front of him. He stops by us, and talks about the demolished houses and how this is a systematic municipal policy, with a mixture of anger and frustration in his voice shows me a few bags of shredded chicken and offal, which he put at the bottom of the cart: 'Here, all one day I wandered around the buckets in Plovdiv to collect some money and buy this meat. For 2 levs per kilo, do you think that this is real chicken meat, which they sell me here is like the one from the shops? We eat garbage, but if you have a family waiting for you - what will you do?!' Without waiting for an answer, he continues to push the cart down to one of the makeshift residential areas. **(field notes, July 2016)**

...

It is very rarely that I get have the chance to hop in the car of an 'illegal taxi driver', but hardly are there any 'legit' such cabs available on the busy weekends, as they are all booked and work with 4 and 5 star hotels at the famous SPA resort. As I sit on the front seat next to the driver, we start a conversation around the usual topics – how's work on the weekends, and the personal story that follows sticks with me throughout the whole day: 'You know, I used to be an electrician by training, and was working as maintenance in the R. 5-star hotel. I was long hours, 12-hour shifts and the pay was BGN 1000, but they have a scheme - you are insured on the minimum wage and the rest you get cash in an envelope at the end of the month, they are evading taxes. And the local owners have established a monopoly, most of the them are also members of the city council, so they have the mayor in their pockets, the wages are fixed, they have reached an agreement among themselves, so that wherever you go – it's the same pay. As the pandemic started, we were also forced either to go on paid holidays, as I did, others we laid off without notice and had to apply for a job seeker's allowance. In the end of May when I returned to the hotel, they asked me "Did you not receive a call by the management?" I told them I haven't. I call the boss, he did pick up his phone, later

the HR told them they have laid me off, effective immediately. So here I am now, driving an illegal cab...' (**field notes, February 2022**)

Such forms of employment are unfortunately for many a normal part of everyday life, invisible forms of work that are directly related to survival every day (see Ferrell, 2006), and in this sense the lives of these drifters are truly life on the border and the edge of the socially acceptable, and their very activities are sanctioned and criminalized, many of them in the context have become 'essential workers with dangerous bodies' (Deneva, 2021), as their work has been of essence to kick-start the economy again. They are despised, considered as a dangerous contagion and threat (Panchev, 2021b), yet their economic exploitation in factories and agriculture was of vital importance, how otherwise could we indulge in the pursuit of our consumer passions when the world stood still? The precariousness of lives on the edge during the last two years has been further exemplified by the plight of Ukrainians toward Southern, Central and Western Europe. Although the majority has been welcomed in host countries, the amount of economic support for them has generated widespread frustration and anger, again of symptom of divided societies, and elsewhere Ukrainian Roma have experienced discrimination in countries such as Moldova and the Czech Republic.

## Conclusion

This paper started out with a bold statement that the pandemic has hardly changed much with regards to the social fabric of Bulgarian society but has rather intensified processes that have already been in place for more than a decade. On the first theoretical attempts at thinking about the pandemic provided by Ivan Krastev - 'Is it tomorrow yet?' (2020) has argued that we were experiencing a sense of déjà vu - the economic crisis of 2008 and well as a refugee crisis of 2013-2015, as we attempted to close down our borders and exclude our own groups of the population that are so essential to the economy, as they collectively have wired more than BGN 8 Billion<sup>14</sup>. Many were afraid they would lose their freedoms related to mobility within the EU, yet Europe seems more connected than ever before, as After the initial moral panics around vaccines and the restrictions premised on the notion of 'the common good', the average consumer became increasingly fed up with being deprived of 'essential rights' such as shopping sprees in malls and began to protest by occupying exactly those same spaces of consumer freedom. A more radical example is the suicide of a heavily in-debt woman in a shopping mall in Plovdiv earlier this year, an act of desperation, maybe even a form of a political protest. against the unfairness of the post-Covid world she has to live in and cannot cope with. I would consider it a reality check, as while we were getting out of the first lockdown, credit companies seized the opportunity and literally began to offer fast-track credits and loans on the streets in Plovdiv, preying on people's debts and precarious positions. A vaccination campaign that failed miserably was re-packaged in consumer vouchers offered by hypermarkets and that was sufficient to make segments of the mistrustful population to get vaccinated. Whilst bingeing on dystopian movies and novels such as '1984',

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<sup>14</sup><https://www.novinite.com/articles/196349/Bulgarians+Abroad+have+Sent+Home+More+than+BGN+4+Billion+in+2018> (Last accessed on 23.07.2022)



'Brave New World, 'Brazil', 'Lord of the Flies', 'Animal Farm', 'A Clockwork Orange', 'Gattaca', 'The Matrix', etc. in our own comfort zones and safe spaces, we willingly denied ourselves the opportunity to make sense of the unfolding crisis before our very eyes. After all, who's actually interested in social suffering, if economic recovery is premised on the spending capabilities of everyone, including the frowned upon Roma communities – we don't want them, yet the money they are willing to spend in expensive holiday summer resorts at the Black Sea are more than welcome? The field of the social sciences is notoriously bad at predicting the future, but the last few months have demonstrated that we are heading into the unknown more socially divided than ever before. The social revolution and global uprising that many commentators so eagerly anticipated and predicted has been postponed indefinitely, but how can one use the same tools and mantra and expect different end results? Contra others, I am not arguing for a new religious ethos and a new world order premised on a different economic model, but rather focusing on basic things such as the rebuilding and reinvestment in communities. Now, more than ever, what seems to be missing is understanding based on empathy, not more sophisticated predictive mathematical models that we have utilized for two years now and that have failed us again and again.

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