
From Zero Migration to Migration Crises and to Local Citizenship: Contrasting Transitions in a Small Town at the Triple Border of Bulgaria, Türkiye and Greece

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The world is a bridge across which the way of the king and the poor man passes.

Saibai

ABSTRACT

The objective is double: to analyse the migration flows, actors, politics and policies in the double perspective of migration crisis and local citizenship, both conceived in innovative ways. The article examines the dynamic processes of de/re/bordering on the case of the town of Harmali and surrounding villages at the borders of Bulgaria with Türkiye and Greece and compares the impact of deterritorialisation (emigration of Bulgarian citizens) and reterritorialisation (by immigrants and refugees) on local development. This study is based on

a multi-method approach that combines various complementary methods. The first part introduces temporality as a theoretical lens for the migration profiles. The migration profile of Harmanli and Haskovo region is characterised by the transition from ‘zero migration’ to mass emigration and diversified immigration profile of refugees and asylum seekers from Syria, Afghanistan, amenity migrants from UK and EU countries, and family migrants from Russia and other former soviet Republics. The second thematic circle examines how two types of crises – migration and populist – shape migration politics and policies, as well as migration-related public images, imaginaries, and mobilisations. The third part introduces the perspective from below in the light of local citizenship for constructing the place and sense-making practices.

Introduction

A magnificent, vaulted stone bridge is the emblem and pride of Harmanli. It was built in 1585 on the orders of the then governor of the province, Siyavuş Pasha, a Croat by birth who converted to Islam and rose to the rank of grand vizier of the Ottoman Empire. The metaphor of the world as a bridge by the poet Saibai is engraved on a large marble slab that adorns the bridge to this day. By the non-coincidental coincidences of the intersection of Harmanli’s cultural calendar and the academic calendar of the study I conducted in the region (2020 - 2023) , at the beginning of our fieldwork the bridge was under repair and closed to the public. By the end of our fieldwork, the bridge shone forth in all its renovated beauty, coming alive with people, and we held some of our final intercultural meetings there.

I have chosen to begin with this brief historical account because it poetically and philosophically combines the central themes of this article: mobility, interculturality, history, memory, identity, difference.

The bridge is a concept, a metaphor, an image. Georg Simmel has left us the classic comparison between a door and a bridge – as two images of the identity/difference relationship. The door may be hospitably open, but it is always asymmetrical, control over the threshold and over movement is on one side. On the bridge, conversely, movement is two-way. Identifying which of the two images dominates local imaginaries, politics and practices of immigrant integration is one of the research tasks of this analysis.

The aim of this article is to analyse the specific case of an abrupt transition from almost zero migration to significant migration given the size of a small town. It is articulated in three thematic circles. The first explores temporality as a theoretical zoom that highlights different dimensions of migration flows in the *longue durée* and in the short term. The second thematic circle examines how two types of crises – migration and populist – shape migration politics and policies, as well as migration-related public images, imaginaries, and mobilisations. The third thematic circle seeks an alternative to the securitisation of migration and finds it in forms of local citizenship.

The small town at the centre of this analysis is Harmanli in the Haskovo region.¹ The town of Harmanli is located near Bulgaria's borders with Türkiye and Greece. It has a population of 18,589.² Harmanli Municipality, which includes the town as well as 24 villages, has 24,947 inhabitants, who make up 11.4% of the population of the Haskovo region and 0.37% of Bulgaria's population. Its population density is 37 people per sq. km, or half the national average.

1 The study in question was conducted within the Matilde project (H2020). Migration Impact Assessment towards Integration and Local Development in European Rural and Mountain Regions (Matilde) has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 870831. The interviews are from the fieldwork analysed in detail in Krasteva 2021b and Krasteva 2021c.

2 <https://www.harmanli.bg/bg/harakteristika-na-naselenieto-na-obshtina-harmanli>.

The research interest in Harmanli is due to four main groups of reasons:

- Harmanli is extremely interesting because of its almost instantaneous transition from a town with almost no migration to a town with significant migration given its size.
- Small and medium-sized towns are relatively less studied in the Bulgarian migration literature because of their specific place in the Bulgarian migration profile. Migration in Bulgaria is mainly concentrated in the capital and large cities (Krasteva 2019a). New migrations, such as those of UK expats, are mainly attracted by rural areas.
- The nexus small town – villages is indicative because of the differentiation of their migration profiles on the one hand, and on the other, because of the interaction between different groups of migrants and locals: for example, business practices in Harmanli of British people from the villages or intercultural practices in villages without their own migrants but with migrants from Harmanli invited to local festivals.
- Despite its modest size, Harmanli occupies a key place in the political geography of populist anti-immigration actors and leaders, and their actions in the town against the Registration and Reception Centre for refugees have national resonance.

Harmanli is not a mini-Bulgaria, which makes it a particularly theoretically attractive case study. Bulgaria's migration profile is asymmetrical and can be summarised in three poles: significant emigration, relatively low immigration, and a very low number of refugees settled in the country. The number of Bulgarians who have emigrated abroad is approximately 1.3 million overall. Regarding the Bulgarian diaspora more broadly, it is estimated that the number of people with Bulgarian ancestry worldwide is well over 2 million. This

huge emigration of Bulgarians, particularly since 1989, is a loss of demographic, social, educational, and democratic capital, but also contributes to the country's development through significant remittances. Remittances from Bulgarian emigrants exceed foreign direct investment: 1,152.6 million euros vs 901.9 million euros in 2017. The number of immigrants in Bulgaria is approximately 150,000. The number of refugees with international protection status who have settled in Bulgaria is very low: 1,000–2,000 (Krasteva 2019a).

Harmanli's migration profile and Bulgaria's national migration profile have an asymmetrical relationship. Harmanli shares the nationwide characteristic of high emigration throughout the post-communist period. However, Harmanli differs significantly in terms of immigration. The key challenge is the high number of refugees. Another difference is that while Bulgaria's immigration in general is mostly urban, Harmanli's immigration is mainly concentrated in the villages surrounding the town.

The conceptual apparatus in this article is structured around three clusters. The first is migration, de/re/territorialisation, agency. E/I/Migration is conceptualised in reference to agency, the dynamics and interference of the opposite processes of de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation, as well as to the emergence of local citizenship. Migration in the asymmetrical flows of emigration and immigration is theorised in reference to the place-based and place-sense practices of de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation. Agency is articulated in different social and political actors: migrants; local residents, populist anti-migration leaders, and activists. The second conceptual cluster is structured around the migration crisis in two varieties: ontological and constructed. It applies to the Harmanli case study this author's provocative thesis: 'If migration crises did not exist, they would have been invented by populist politicians.' The third conceptual cluster introduces local citizenship in the perspective of 'acts of citizenship' (Isin 2008), performative citizenship (Barbera *et al.* 2018), solidary citizenship (Krasteva, Saarienen, Siim 2019).

‘It’s the economy, stupid’ vs places matter

‘It’s the economy, stupid!’ Bill Clinton’s slogan in his 1992 presidential campaign, is the arrogant political translation of the dominance of economic factors in explaining numerous social and political phenomena. Neo-economic migration concepts are their theoretical translation in the case of migration. Do they work to explain migration flows and stocks in Harmanli? I will answer this question in two steps. The first looks at the socioeconomic profile of the region, highlighting the most significant indicators and trends. The second analyses the types of migration in the town and surrounding villages.

The regional profile of the Haskovo region is the socioeconomic context in which the settlement and inclusion of immigrants in local development takes place (IME 2022):³

- Haskovo is the region with the *lowest GDP* per capita in Southern Bulgaria after Sliven, with only BGN 9,100 per capita in 2020 (compared to a national average of BGN 17,300), and has been growing at a rate lower than the national average. The average annual gross salary in 2020 was BGN 11,600 (the national average was BGN 16,700).
- These indicators determine the relatively *high poverty levels* in the region. A total of 27.4% of the population are living with material deprivation (compared to 19.4% on average nationally), and the share of population living below the national poverty line is 32.9% (versus 22.1% on average nationally).

3 The Sofia-based Institute for Market Economics (IME) conducts regular analyses of the regions in Bulgaria. The data and trends in this article are from the IME’s 2022 report (IME 2022) and, unless otherwise indicated, they are for 2021.

- The annual average *economic activity* rate of the population aged 15 to 64 is 67.5% and remains lower than the national average of 72.0%, while the annual average employment rate is 66.3% (compared to a national average of 68.1%). The educational structure of the workforce and population ageing are challenges for the labour market.
- *Investment activity* is low. Foreign direct investment is far below the national average – 794 euros per capita compared to a national average of 3,900 euros per capita in 2020.
- Utilization of EU funds is also relatively poor. By 30 June 2022, payments made in the region to beneficiaries of EU operational programmes amounted to BGN 1,649 per person, which is half the national average.
- The demographic structure is characterized by two trends: a decrease in both the natural population growth and the net migration rate, and *population ageing*. The share of the region's urban population is comparable to Bulgaria's average (71.7% versus 73.1% nationally), but its population density is low: 1,027 persons per sq. km, compared to 1,489 persons per sq. km nationally.
- The healthcare system in the Haskovo region suffers from a shortage of doctors and hospital beds. The number of doctors is below the national average.
- Students' results are low.
- The region's public order and security indicators are average. The crime rate is comparable to the national average, but the detection rate is considerably higher.
- In contrast to its many low socioeconomic indicators, the region's *assessment in the environment category* is high.

It is mainly due to the relatively low volumes of generated household waste – 313 kg/person, compared to a national average of 409 kg/person in 2020; 71.2% of all generated household waste was handed over for recycling and treatment, compared to 69.3% on average nationally (IME 2022).

Table 1. Panoramic overview of the Haskovo region's economic and social development

	Weak	Unsatisfactory	Average	Good	Very good
Economic development					
Income and living standard					
Labour market					
Investment and economy					
Infrastructure					
Administration					
Social development					
Demography					
Education					
Healthcare					
Public order and security					
Environment					
Culture					

Source: IME 2022: 31

The socioeconomic profile of the region is a key factor for explaining the specificity of the local migration profile. The latter cannot be understood within the explanatory scheme of wage differentials, more opportunities for employment, and other classic arguments of

migration theories. It is noteworthy that a key type of migration is absent in Harmanli and the Haskovo region – labour migration, foreigners who have come to the town and region in search of higher wages or more job opportunities. Four different types of migration have been identified: family migration, amenity migration, entrepreneurial migration, and refugee migration. The economic impact and labour integration strategies vary from one group to another.

Family migration easily evolves into labour inclusion. The access to the labour market takes place relatively quickly and easily because of immersion in the husband's circles and neighbourhood and the good knowledge of Bulgarian. The labour integration of Russian women is diverse and successful (Krasteva 2018) – during our fieldwork, we met Russian women teachers, hairdressers, family business owners, doctors.

Amenity migration involves people moving to perceived desirable regions, usually for non-economic reasons, such as a physical or cultural environment that is seen as more beautiful, tranquil, or inspirational than their current environment (Borsdorf, Hidalgo, Zunino. 2012). In Bulgaria and in the Haskovo region, the most typical representatives of amenity migration are the British. Numerous amenity migrants are pensioners, while the rest do not look for jobs on the local labour market – they are self-employed. The impact of this new group of third-country nationals on local development is in creating employment and boosting local business. House renovation provides new clients to building materials companies and jobs for construction workers. Service companies also benefit from the new clients, whose standard of living is higher than that of the local population: *'British families have three or four cars each. They are serviced by the local auto repair shops.'* As a local businessman put it in a nutshell: *'Local business is boosted. The more [migrants] settle here, the more they boost the economy.'*

Turkish immigration is attracted by three pull factors: a border factor, a minority factor, and a business factor. Harmanli is located

close to the border with Turkey. The ethnic Turkish minority is the largest in the Haskovo region and in the country. A specific push factor for the region and Bulgaria is the possibility of setting up a business comparatively more easily, especially at the beginning of Bulgaria's transition to a market economy. Some of the Turkish entrepreneurs in the region are of Kurdish origin. The migrants from Turkey are employed mostly in Turkish companies in the region or are entrepreneurs. As a company manager said, *'The Turks are usually entrepreneurs. My husband [a Turkish citizen] is about to open a kebab shop with a young Turk who will work there but will also be a business partner.'*

Refugees are the latest immigration phenomenon in Harmanli. Their profile differs from that of all other previous groups in several respects. Unlike the other immigrants, they have not chosen Harmanli – they have been placed by the host country in the Registration and Reception Centre (known informally as the 'refugee centre') in the town. The key difference lies in the type of migration – they are not seeking sunlight and family life, but asylum from wars and conflicts. A third difference is that refugees are the most mobile migrant group – for the overwhelming majority of refugees, Bulgaria is a transit country.

Temporality – a theoretical lens for the urban and regional migration kaleidoscope

The temporality and migration nexus is a relatively new arena in migration scholarship (Gardiner Barber, Lem 2018). This nexus forms different conceptual clusters. The biggest cluster is with agency, subjectivity, and capacity to act in migration processes, where the nexus is conceived as a feature of migrant experience shaped

by the political, economic, and securitarian order (Andersson 2014; Gardiner Barber, Lem 2018; Baas, Yeoh 2019). In this article, temporality is introduced in another theoretical perspective. The various temporal perspectives serve as theoretical lenses that offer distinct insights into migration patterns. When we zoom out and adopt a long-term view, we can observe overarching mega-trends. Conversely, when we zoom in and focus on the short term, we can identify emerging micro-trends and specific migration events. This analysis is based on Fernand Braudel's concept of the different types of temporality. Braudel distinguishes two poles of time, two different types of temporality. The first one is the long-time span, the *longue durée*. The second temporality is the instant. The *longue durée* refers to mega-trends and structures; the short-time span is '*proportionate to individuals, to daily life, to our illusions*' (Braudel 1980: 28). The attention of contemporaries is focused precisely on events. These three types of temporality are necessary as a precaution against allowing the theoretical attention to be usurped by the most dramatic events and the loudest actors.

Our temporal zoom-in on migration has identified the dominant migration profile and the corresponding key type of flows. In the *longue durée* of structural history, emigration is at the centre of the migration profile at three levels – national, regional, urban. Conjunctural history, with a mid-term perspective, is marked by refugee crises involving refugee flows that differ in origin, composition, and destination. Episodic history is the relevant perspective for explaining migration or migration policy events. A key event for Harmanli was the construction of the Registration and Reception Centre for refugees.

Table 2. Migration profile according to different temporalities

Type of history	Temporality	Migration profile	Dominant type of migration
Structural	Longue durée	Emigration	Labour
Conjunctural	Mid-term	Migration & refugee crisis	Irregular
Episodic	Events	Construction of Reception Centre	Asylum seekers

Source: Own creation based on Fernand Braudel's concept of plural history, and its application to migrations in Harmanli and Haskovo region

Emigration is the *differentia specifica* of the Balkan, Bulgarian, regional and Harmanli migration profile. In the political, media, and scholarly discourse and public imaginaries, emigration is like Janus and has both a crisis and an anti-crisis potential. The emigration of the best and the brightest, that is, youth emigration, is often experienced as a loss and trauma – as both a family and national trauma. On the other hand, labour migration plays a significant role in reducing unemployment and remains a crucial livelihood strategy for the country and the city (Krasteva *et al.* 2018).

The residents of Harmanli experienced the refugee crisis in a dynamic mix of three different temporalities: the emergency temporality of the Balkan migration route as a state of exception; and the more gradual national temporality connected with the gradual increase in immigration into Bulgaria, from 1,236 in 2008 to 39,461 in 2022.⁴ Of key importance to local residents was the third temporality, a sharp discontinuity associated with the establishment of the Registration and Reception Centre in Harmanli, which opened on 12 October 2013 (Krasteva 2023).

4 National Statistical Institute, www.nsi.bg.

If migration crises did not exist, they would have been invented by populist politicians

Migration crises exist, but the provocative paraphrase of Sartre expresses this author's thesis that populists need migration crises just as much as anti-Semites need Jews. The author has developed the concept of two types of crisis: the classic crisis and the populist migration one (Krasteva 2019b, 2020, 2021a). Agency is different in the two types of migration crisis. In the classic migration crisis, the key role is played by institutions – national, local, and European – and migration management policies. In the populist migration crisis, the key role is played by securitising actors – far-right nationalist parties and organisations and their anti-migration discourses, which often criminalise migration. The securitisation of migration unfolds in two directions, vertical and horizontal – from political actors towards citizens, and from small groups or local communities towards individuals, other groups, and society at large.

Both classic and populist migration crises are at work in this study. The classic crisis describes the institutional unpreparedness and inefficiency in crisis management in the face of the unprecedented surge in refugee flows in 2015–2016. The concept of populist migration crisis is relevant for situations where, with reduced migration flows and functioning institutions, far-right politicians electrify public opinion by inciting fear, hatred, and hostility.

The first crisis is related to the refugee centre in Harmanli as an abrupt transition from small-scale and well-integrated immigration to migration 'imported' by the national authorities and unwanted by either the refugees themselves or the locals.

The refugee centre brought about four important changes in Harmanli. The first was a radical increase in the number of foreign-

ers and a change in the ratio of locals to refugees, with the number of refugees growing to several thousand in a town with a population of fewer than ten thousand. The second was a substantial change in their national, ethnic, language, and religious profile – the asylum seekers came from the Near and Middle East, Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran. The third concerns visibility. Whereas Russian women migrants are more invisible in public because they are well integrated, as are the British migrants because they are scattered across the countryside, with no more than several British families living in one village, the refugees are concentrated in the town. Locals experienced the top-down asylum policy, the opening of the Registration and Reception Centre without sufficient consultation with and preparation of the population, and the sharp increase in the number of refugees as a culture shock. An informant said that she had been out of town for a week, and when she came back, *‘The cultural shock was enormous. ... The whole town was swarming with foreigners. ... The locals were worried about what would happen.’*

Towns with refugee centres are preferred places for far-right parties. Their leaders *‘start their campaign from Harmanli’*. Several informants stressed the role of nationalist parties as organisers of anti-immigrant actions such as rallies against the refugees, *‘at which people from elsewhere outnumber those from Harmanli.’* The electoral cycle, not refugee waves, determines the temporality of the activity of political brokers of hatred. Locals find themselves in a vortex of both crises – the refugee wave and its political instrumentalization by extremist actors – even in periods of significant reduction in-migration flows (Krasteva 2023).

Symbolic politics takes precedence over development politics. The refugee centre is among the largest employers in Harmanli, it is attractive and efficient in retaining a young and educated workforce in the town. This factor is totally ignored by securitarian discourses. Anti-migration politics also impacts the overall policy of the local administration, which is extremely reserved towards activities and projects related to refugees and migrants.

Local citizenship for constructing the place and sense-making practices

The activist understanding of citizenship covers all actors who contribute to ‘constructing the place’, including newcomers and international migrants considered as members of a local community regardless of their legal status (Barbera, Negri, Solento 2018). The emergence of actors and acts of local citizenship is key both for countering the populist securitisation and politicisation of migration, and for including different actors – local and migrants – in practices for constructing the place. Here I will examine several such practices in different spheres: mobility and migration for a spiral of local development, volunteering, innovative intercultural educational practices, and place-based practices promoting the territory’s attractiveness.

Spiral of development. I define as ‘spiral of development’ the phenomenon where each positive change stimulates and brings about another positive change. I will illustrate this phenomenon with a village near Harmanli. The village is small, with only about 100 inhabitants. After a Finn settled there, he was followed by others, and they formed a small community that is now 10% of the local population. They introduce the typical changes that expats make in all villages – renovating houses, improving the look of the village, boosting the local economy through consumption – from building materials to food. They have also made village life more dynamic by getting involved in a range of activities – from painting the church dome to planting trees in the village hall courtyard. The second change has to do with the impact of the village’s new attractiveness on de/re/population. In the first stage the locals who had moved to the big cities were glad to have someone to sell their houses to in the village. The more attractive the village became to foreigners, the more Bulgarians began to rediscover its charm and wish to restore their links with it. In this new stage of the spiral, some sellers pulled their houses off the market. The village is now enjoying a third wave of

change – house owners, although they are not returning to the village, are increasingly involved in development initiatives, multiplying and empowering local agency. At the time of writing, an inspiring recent example is the restoration of a beautiful but abandoned fountain, thanks to the visionary mayor, donations, and volunteer labour of all active fellow villagers – Bulgarians, foreigners, and recent returnees alike (Krasteva 2023).

Volunteering – From Day One. The unexpected first wave of refugees also gave rise to volunteering and solidarity. It is noteworthy that people without any experience in volunteering immediately volunteered and began helping the asylum-seekers. It is interesting that we found volunteers from day one both among the Bulgarians and among the migrants. A woman informant described her personal path to volunteering as an individual civic commitment, not as an NGO activity: *‘I personally have been working with refugees since they arrived in Harmanli not on behalf of a non-governmental organisation but as an individual. They needed to communicate with people in the town, they were looking for support, help, etc.’* This case is interesting also for the transition from volunteer to professional service provider. *‘My office is in the square where the refugees usually hang out and they often came to me for help – for information, help in filling out forms, looking for housing.’* The informant started helping the refugees spontaneously and informally; a few years later, she is working professionally with a big international organisation for their inclusion. A British woman informant told us how her mother had immediately started helping the refugees. Initially, by providing food, clothes, and staples. When the authorities gradually improved the organisation of reception at the refugee centre, the volunteer focused her efforts on the most vulnerable group, children.

Innovative intercultural education practices. Migrants are on both sides of some of the most interesting innovative practices – as initiators and authors, on one side, and as beneficiaries on the other. The best-known innovation is the **PlaySchool** at the refugee centre in Harmanli. It was introduced by a young British woman mar-

ried to a refugee. Its purpose is to form behaviour for learning and emotional skills. Play methods help children to overcome the trauma. All migrant parents I interviewed at the refugee centre praised the PlaySchool. The PlaySchool is a dual educational innovation – in terms both of methodology and of financing. Having started as a volunteer project, it now relies on crowdfunding – ‘Fund a teacher.’ The vast majority of educational and intercultural practices are funded by projects or large international organisations such as Caritas, the Bulgarian Red Cross, and the International Organisation for Migration. PlaySchool is exemplary precisely for its excellence in terms of both agency and sustainability – a young British woman with an elite education, who came with a short-term project to visit her parents, settled permanently in a small town; in a situation of lack of funding from state institutions for innovative intercultural practices, she managed to secure global support through the creative mix of the cause of empowerment of refugee children, information technology, and a network of national and international sponsors.

Place-based practices promoting the territory’s attractiveness

Local identity is promoted as an amalgam of the advantages of the territory, its connectivity with other spaces, and local traditions, on the one hand, and mobilities on the other. An emblematic example in this regard is the festival ‘Na Harmana’ (On the Threshing-Floor): *‘People come from all over the country to attend, it’s a very grand event.’* The image of the region equally valorises the town and the local villages: *‘Every village has a stall [at the festival] and presents its foods and specialties.’* The festival promotes the image of Harmanli as a site of international, national, regional and local mobility. The local mobile people – migrants and refugees – are also included: *‘refugees take part in the folkloric programme, British mi-*

grants sometimes play music live at the wine-tasting events.' The festival amplifies the social capital: the initiators' strategic vision that increasing the territory's attractiveness requires innovative practices; the intensive positive communication between locals and guests, Bulgarians, foreigners, and migrants.

Conclusion

I will summarise the conclusion with two pairs of contrasting trends: de-territorialisation vs re-territorialisation and populist securitisation vs local citizenship.

De-territorialisation is a key challenge for remote regions and small towns with declining populations, but re-territorialisation is assessed in polarised ways. On the one hand, it is experienced as intensifying the trauma of de-territorialisation:

Many young, gifted people are leaving Harmanli to go either to the bigger cities or abroad, while refugees from Pakistan, Afghanistan are coming in their stead. This is very depressing. Young, fine people are going away, to be replaced by others with another culture and religion. This is hard to accept.

On the other hand, the impact of expats on re-territorialisation and on revitalising villages is assessed positively:

The most interesting thing is that even the grandmother in the village, who doesn't depend on the British in any way whatsoever, is delighted at their presence because she wants there to be people in the village.

The second pair of contrasting trends is between the populist securitisation of refugees and its impact on the attitudes of small-town residents and the emergence of actors and practices of inclusive in-

tercultural local citizenship. The bridge, with its metaphor of mobility and two-way movement, holds promise for actors and practices of constructing places that are worth making.

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