

Chapter 15. Transnational Identity among the Bulgarian-Turkish Migrants in Turkey

Özge Kaytan¹

Introduction

Identity is part of the memory discourse (Klein, 2000:143). Identity is made up of multiple constructions, including memories, experiences, observations and many more in the case of migrants. Nevertheless, migration is not a finite event, it is an ongoing process in which migrants deal with different life patterns and social relationships, which have economic, social and cultural characteristics (Basch et al. 1994; Glick-Schiller et al. 1992, Guarnizo and Smith 1998; Levitt 1999, 2001 in Park, 2007:201). The Bulgarian-Turkish migrants have transnational identities, which have multiple attachments to more than one space, and indicate an interplay between ethnicity and nationality. The borders of nation-states do not determine the transnational identity perception of migrants. These borders may only indicate political confinements. However, for Bulgarian-Turkish migrants, the border between Turkey and Bulgaria refers only to a geographical location, which is not related to any political boundary. Hence, a visible interplay of ethnic identity and national identity among Bulgarian Turkish migrants is a significant determinant for their transnational identity. In Bulgaria, they used to have a strong ethnic identity, whereas in Turkey it turns out to be an even stronger national identity. However, they also tend to equalize ethnicity and nationality in Turkey, as they acquired a majority status in Turkey. Nevertheless, they have transnational social attachments between these two political territories, though it does not matter for them if it is a political border or not. Some migrants tend to see these two territories as homelands, depending on the context, since “some migrants identify more with one society than the other, the majority seem to maintain several identities that link them simultaneously to more than one nation” (Schiller, Basch, Blanc-Szanton 1992 in Vertovec 2009:6).

Bulgarian-Turkish migrants have transnational ties with Bulgaria, they are frequently visiting the country and they have dual citizenship, which means they vote in Bulgaria as well as in Turkey. Many of them still have houses and soil in Bulgaria, which reflects a lively connection between Bulgaria and Turkey. The problem is that it is complicated when it comes to defining where the hometown is for these migrants. While they used to hope to migrate to Turkey throughout their lives, -especially the 1989 expulsion made them feel that the hometown is definitely Turkey- many of them imply that they are Turks of Bulgaria. Although Bulgaria is a geographical hometown for Bulgarian Turkish migrants, Turkey has become the political and legal home.

¹ Özge Kaytan is a Ph.D. Student of Sociology at Middle East Technical University, Üniversiteler Mah. Dumlupınar Bulvarı No:1, 06800 Çankaya-Ankara, Turkey. E-mail: ozgekaytan@gmail.com

In this paper I try to analyze the perception of identity among Bulgarian Turkish migrants regarding their dual-citizenship statuses and memories about the migration process. How they perceive homeland is going to be explained in the paper as a reference to their transnational multiple attachments between the two countries, Bulgaria and Turkey. In this paper I ask, to what extent the transnational perspective is embedded in migrants' identities, and in what ways these migrants construct a transnational identity. Hence, this paper explores identity practices and experiences of a group of Bulgarian Turkish migrants. I try to analyze the dynamics, which influence their multidimensional identity construction.

As a method, I conducted in-depth interviews with eight Bulgarian Turkish migrants who migrated in 1989 and after 1989 in İzmir. The migrants are all university graduates. Four of them are between 57-62 and four of them 38-51 years old. Hence, there is a generation difference between my respondents, which influences their perception of migration and of my interview questions. In the interviews I asked about their migration stories, their preferences whether to live in Turkey or Bulgaria, the meanings of homeland, citizenship and minority, their perception of discrimination and the differences between the two societies in Turkey and Bulgaria in order to understand and map their perception of identity.

Identity: A Multifaceted Concept

Identity as a construction of memory is a significant concept for understanding the historical background of migration in the Balkans. Todorova (2004:2) highlights that a popular stereotypes defines the Balkans as a region, cursed with too much historical memory, proliferation of hatred and conflicts between ethnic and religious identities. The things that initiated those conflicts and turmoil in the Balkans were the rapid social change and strong identity transformations (Todorova, 2004:3).

Migrant identity is also shaped by collective memory, which is an important signifier for the case of the Bulgarian-Turkish migrants. Collective memory cannot be reduced to the political interests, as it belongs to the cultural space (Todorova, 2004:3). Alon Confino elucidates that the collective memory that is constructed by politicians and intellectuals is "largely public, often official and narrowly political memory", however, the collective memory which is in the private spheres of family, friends, neighborhoods and workplaces is very likely to be different than what politics offer (Todorova, 2004:3). Confino (in Todorova 2004:5) implies that "collective memory is an exploration of a shared identity that unites a social group, be it a family or nation whose members have different interests and motivations". Appadurai and Breckendridge (1989:i) elucidate that the archeology of collective memory is fractured, since diasporas have traces of collective memory about another place and time in order to construct "new maps of desire and attachment".

How identity becomes a transnational identity is a significant investigation along with the question about the extent to which identity cannot become a non-transnational one. Transnationalism is attributed to "fluidity of constructed styles, social institutions, everyday practices, the production of hybrid cultural phenomena manifesting new ethnicities" (Hall, 1991 in Vertovec, 2009:7). Similarly, Wilson and Dissanayake (1996) explain that "a new transnational imaginary" can occur with the transformations of identity, memory, awareness and consciousness. In

order to construct malleable identities, an “imaginary coherence” is required in the everyday representations of diaspora or transnationalism (Hall, 1990), which shows the importance of collective memory among a migrant group. Furthermore, Schiller (1992:185) elucidates that transnationalism also refers to migrants who are constructing a bridge of social fields between their country of origin and their country of settlement, called ‘transmigrants’. These transmigrants construct and sustain multiple relations, which are familial, economic, social, organizational, religious, and political and they are capable of transiting borders and yet “transmigrants take actions, make decisions and feel concerns and develop identities within social networks that connect them to two or more societies simultaneously”. (Glick Schiller, Basch and Szanton Blanc, 1992 in Schiller, 1992:185).

The ‘old’ features of migrant transnationalism show that migrant families are divided between the countries of origin and destination, while they still have strong emotional ties; many migrants returned to their country of origin or move between the two countries over extended periods of time; many migrant associations are established with the increasing numbers of migrants; migrants keep pursuing their political interests in their homelands by lobbying and funding; some migrant sending countries (migrant-receiving country in the case of Bulgarian-Turkish migrants) sustain concerns about their nationals abroad (Vertovec, 2009:14). On the other hand, there are some characteristics of a “new” migrant transnationalism; technology of contact has developed through TVs, cell phones, the internet; even those who never migrated to any country are strongly influenced by events, values and practices among their transnational relatives and co-villagers; practices of dual citizenship; 25 years of identity politics (anti-racism, multiculturalism, indigenous peoples, regional languages) in many western countries which ease migrants lives in displaying their transnational connections (Morawska 1999; Glick-Schiller 1999; Foner 2000 in Vertovec 2009:15,16).

The Bulgarian-Turkish Migrants

The Turkish minority, which has been living in Bulgaria since the early years of the Ottoman Empire, was periodically exposed to ethnic discrimination in Bulgaria, which led to emigration to Turkey (Parla, 2009:757). The largest emigration flow of ethnic Turks took place during the mass exodus in 1989 with approximately 360.000 people taking refuge in Turkey. This was the largest collective civilian migration after the Second World War, taking place due to the “revival process” of the Bulgarian state (Zhelyazkova, 1998), which included converting and assimilating ethnic Turks (Vasileva, 1992:346). The ideal of a homogenous community peaked in 1984 with the “rebirth campaign”, sparking a systematic oppressive renaming campaign directed against Turks, strictly prohibiting the Turkish language, and denying the existence of ethnic Turks in Bulgaria (Parla, 2006:545).

The migration narratives of migrants reveal that they had very difficult conditions both in the first stages of the immigration and also in the following years of adaptation to a new country. The reasons for migration and how migration took place underlie the stories of the migrants. The social and political environment in

Bulgaria in 1989 was very problematic for Turks as the interviewees stated that there were raids into houses to change the names of Turks, while people were hiding and running outside without coming home for several days. As Emin² puts it: *“Migration is a big chaos. We ran from Bulgaria like cows whose ties are loosened. I never forget that when we were crossing the border I had only my brown coat on me, which I used to wear for 3-4 years in Turkey due to poverty”*. Another interviewee Fuat³ recounts: *“We were not poor in Bulgaria, we had everything. But when we were crossing the border the Turkish state gave us bread, halva, and cheese. If you are a migrant, you become in need of even just a package of biscuits. When we were crossing the Dardanelles, Turkish people were welcoming us, yelling “welcome Turks” and giving food to us”*. Migration came with the increased cost of identity damages, as Ibrahim⁴ puts it: *“I used to have high self-esteem in Bulgaria but when we migrated to Turkey I immediately turned out to be an introverted child”*.

Most of the interviewees underlined that among the Turks, village leaders, engineers, teachers, high school and university graduates were deported at first from Bulgaria in 1989. Many Turkish people who were in leader positions were asked to spy against other Turkish people and the Turkish government. Nevertheless, the Turkish minority protested and arranged meetings against the name changes and the assimilation campaign of the Bulgarian state. Fuat highlights that: *“We organized a human rights campaign, which was supported by many teachers and officers, however the Bulgarian state oppressed it and I was put into jail. The state took my books in my house, I am miffed with that house now”*. Migrants asserted that the assimilation campaign against the Turkish minority was a ten-year process, but it began in 1984, starting in the shore cities and then expanding to the others. The Bulgarian state was sending Turkish people to the Belene prison where mostly the Turkish political prisoners were sent, because they resisted the assimilation campaign.

Migrants who have transnational networks and lifestyles perceive the country of origin as a source of identity, yet the country of residence as a source of right; hence this results in complicated perceptions of identity, culture, rights, politics, states and nations (Kastoryano, 2002:160). Bulgarian Turkish migrants perceive their country of origin as homeland (memleket)-where they were born and raised-, however, they perceive Turkey as motherland (anavatan)- where they ethnically belong and have certain rights. For Bulgarian Turkish migrants having Bulgarian citizenship along with Turkish citizenship mostly refer to their right to possess it since they were born and grew up in Bulgaria. For instance, Murat⁵: *“I still have relatives, houses, and house deeds back there in Bulgaria. I am frequently going to Bulgaria with my old mother, we stay there for several months in summers. I have rights in Bulgaria; I lived there for 35 years. I gave my labor to the Bulgarian state for years”*. On the other hand, Fuat explains: *“I do not have dual-citizenship. Why would I hold it? I*

² Emin migrated to Turkey in 19 June 1989 –at the age of 15- with his core family.

³ Fuat migrated to Turkey in May 1989, as a result of political exile.

⁴ Ibrahim (38) migrated with his family in 1990, one year after forceful deportations.

⁵ Murat (62) migrated in 1989 with his extended family.

have bad memories about Bulgaria, which I do not want to remember". However, holding dual-citizenship is very common among migrants in order to take advantage of Bulgarian's EU membership, which provides freedom of movement in Europe. Migrants also suggest that dual citizenship is useful especially for their children to enter Europe without a visa. To some extent, migrants feel that they belong to both countries; hence it can be convenient to hold dual citizenship. Although feeling of belonging to both countries may at the same time cause feeling of belonging nowhere, migrants have substantial benefits by holding dual citizenship as well.

Bulgarian-Turkish migrants have been still visiting Bulgaria for the purposes of vacation and visiting relatives and in order to make their children see their homeland where they were born and where they spent their childhood, since transnationalism has changed people's perception of space and territoriality, producing transnational "social fields" or "social spaces" which bridges people to more than one single territory (Vertovec 2009:12). Emin states that while he was a student at a university in Turkey, he was bringing goods from Bulgaria to sell them in bazaars in Turkey. He told that it continued for many years, in order to earn money for his studies. Still, many migrants are selling Bulgarian goods – chocolates, candies, tomato pastes- yet consuming these goods reflects nostalgia for migrants in Turkey.

The new patterns of migrant transnationalism indicate that those people who never migrated to any country are strongly influenced by events, values and practices among their transnational relatives and co-villagers (Morawska 1999; Glick-Schiller 1999; Foner 2000 in Vertovec 2009). For instance, in the case of Emin who stated that photos coming from Turkey long before their migration, used to show how beautiful Izmir was –the city that they migrated to- and how they were excited about migrating to Turkey because of these photographs. Nevertheless, Emin expressed that "*it was very disappointing to see that Izmir was not the city that we were excited for, we thought everywhere in Izmir would be like Kordon – sea shore- however, it was not like that*".

Another new pattern of migrant transnationalism provides 25 years of identity politics (anti-racism, multiculturalism, indigenous peoples, regional languages) in many western countries, which eases migrants' lives in displaying their transnational connections (Morawska 1999; Glick-Schiller 1999; Foner 2000 in Vertovec 2009). In that manner, the Bulgarian state apologized to the Turks for the assimilation campaign and forceful name changes between 1984-1989: "*We firmly condemn the assimilation process against the Muslim minority living in the Republic of Bulgaria, including the so called 'Revival Process'. We declare that the expulsion of more than 360,000 Bulgarian citizens of Turkish descent was a form of ethnic cleansing conducted by the totalitarian regime.*"⁶

"Identities and borders are legitimated and reproduced through a system of narratives, public rituals and institutions" (Schiffauer et al. 2003 in Vertovec, 2009:87). The Bulgarian Turkish migrants, mostly cited the ethnic discrimination they experienced in Bulgaria as an important reason for migration, and the migrants explained that the consciousness of being a Turk and speaking their mother tongue was shaped by their subjective experiences of oppression as a minority in Bulgaria.

⁶ <http://www.eurasiareview.com/18012012-bulgaria-apologizes-to-its-turks-for-revival-process/>

Also, in the interviews, it was striking that one of the most common patterns of identifying themselves is emphasis on being a Turk by putting efforts to sustain it. One of my interviewees, Murat explains that: *“Every nation can live only in its own state. Since the Ottoman Empire retreated from Bulgaria, it was our biggest dream to migrate to Turkey, because we were dealing with racist propaganda against Turks in Bulgaria”*. Emphasis on living in their own nation-state is drastically observed in migrants’ narratives.

Name changes in Bulgaria constituted an important case for the Bulgarian Turkish migrants considering their identity perception. The Rebirth campaign held by the Bulgarian state aimed to transform the Turkish minority into Bulgarians; hence, the Turkish minority was forbidden to speak Turkish, their mother tongue in Bulgaria, after 1984. Names reflected people’s identity, culture, religion and their lives; hence, the Bulgarian Turkish migrants felt a significant oppression and exclusion because of the forced name changes in Bulgaria. One of the interviewees, Ismet dramatically recapitulated his situation about forceful name changes: *“We have acquired a new identity in Turkey, because we did not have any identity or self-respect in Bulgaria. My name is Ismet, I used to be Ismet, and one day I became Ivan. They gave us a ‘chance’ to choose a Bulgarian name, I chose ‘Isa’, but they told me that it reminds an Islamic name, so they gave me the name Ivan”*.

Migrants are performing their identity of Turkishness in Turkey. Since they suffer from discrimination against their ethnicity, religion and culture, migrants are mostly glad that they can freely perform their culture, religion and speak their language in Turkey. Although migrants do not go and stay in Bulgaria for longer periods, they live in a transnational social field, which comprises of memories, habits, lifestyle and culture belonging to both Bulgaria and Turkey. Drastically, Ismet states that: *“My dreams still take place in Bulgaria, although I was mostly humiliated there”*. According to Aliye *“we migrants are more Turks than the locals in Turkey, because we made efforts to protect our Turkishness”*. Ibrahim also highlights that Turks are still not welcome in Bulgaria; *“we went on a holiday in Bulgaria, when we ordered some food in Bulgarian, people around us looked and laughed at us, they are still mocking us”*. Moreover, as Emin puts it: *“I am 100% percent Turk. Bulgaria is just a geographical place where I was born. When I say “I am from Koşukavak, Bulgaria, it only represents a geographical place. The place where I belong to is different than where I compose my future. My children also define themselves as being from Koşukavak”*. When I asked him about his thoughts about specific and distinct physical appearances of Bulgarian-Turkish people, he promptly told: *“We want to feel Turk, whether we are purely Turk or not is another question, which we do not want to deal with”*.

Conclusion

The identity of Turkishness is an imagined, desired and constructed identity for Bulgarian-Turkish migrants. Yet, the identity of the Bulgarian-Turkish migrants is a transnational construct because of the discrimination they faced in Bulgaria, of the migration process itself and of what they have been through in Turkey after the migration. Bulgarian-Turkish migrants sustain the transnational bond and perform Turkishness through “a shared imagination” (Cohen, 1996:516). Migrants mostly

consider themselves as minority in Bulgaria, they consider themselves part of the majority in Turkey –though they do not use the exact word of ‘majority’- by claiming “*every nation lives peacefully in their own homeland*”. Further, since migrants can freely practice anything in Turkey, which was forbidden in Bulgaria due to their minority status, - like speaking the Turkish language, practicing their religion- they consider that they now live in their homeland. Bulgarian- Turkish migrants mention that they suffered from defending Turks in Bulgaria; hence, they consider themselves being more Turks than the local people in Turkey. Nevertheless, when it comes to defining ‘homeland’; where they were born, Bulgaria becomes their homeland, although the perception of ‘motherland’ is Turkey. Therefore, the transnational perspective is embedded in migrants’ identities through a shared imagination of performing Turkishness, through common migration narratives, through considering homeland as a complex entity, through having multiple identities.

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