Chapter 25. Crossing Borders-Negotiating Identities in Transnational Spaces: The case of Bulgarian Turks in Germany

Hande Erdem[1]

Introduction

During the process of migration, individuals do not just cross borders of nation-states, but also cultural, social and political boundaries (Faist, 2000). In the case of EU foreigners, along with their home country and destination country, they also reassess their European identities in relation to encounters with other European citizens. Studies based on European identity mostly focus on the majority populations and neglect different ethnic, cultural sub-groups within European societies (Waechter, 2015). The Balkan Peninsula in southeast Europe is one of the most ethnically, linguistically and religiously mixed part of the world (Poulton, 1994). Immigration flows of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria have gained attention among scholars. However, those studies primarily focus on their immigration to Turkey (Eminov, 1999; Parla, 2006). There exist few empirical studies that examine new immigration waves of Bulgarian Turks to Western Europe (Maeva, 2008; Mancheva, 2008). Given these research gaps, this study aims at understanding the reasons and meanings attached to immigration of Bulgarian Turks to Germany and their ethnic, national and European identity (re)negotiations and (re)constructions in transnational social spaces. To achieve this aim, qualitative methodology is applied; in January 2016, 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted in the cities of Frankfurt am Main and Berlin, Germany. Respondents were chosen applying snow-ball sampling, and each interview was recorded, transcribed and then analyzed using open and focus coding.

Transnationalism and Identity

The concept of 'identity' is one of the most elusive concepts for social scientists aiming to understand how individuals perceive themselves and how they are delineated by others (Vertovec, 2001). Identities are always being constructed in relation to history, institutions, memory, power relations, and are deeply embedded into social structures in their time/space framework (Castells, 2004). They are negotiated in intercultural encounters in which social actors "assert, define, modify, challenge and /or support their own and others' desired self-images" (Ting-Toomey, 2005, p. 217). In today's global society, identities have become highly flexible; individuals' social maps and social landscapes no longer match each other perfectly (Jenkins, 1996). Transnational migrants maintain diverse racial, national and ethnic identities which are embedded into their daily lives, activities and social

[1] Hande Erdem, M.A. Sociology-European Societies, e-mail: hande.erdem.fu@gmail.com.
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relationships by linking them simultaneously to more than one society (Schiller et al., 1992).

Social spaces consist of dynamic processes rather than static notions of ties and position, which is crucial to understand changing boundaries through time and space (Faist, 2009). This may be the reason scholars find the concept of 'boundary' highly useful to examine identities of transnational immigrants (Faist, 2009; Dimitrova, 2014). According to Barth (1969), boundaries are constructed through interactions with 'others', which determine the concretization of membership and exclusion. We may also differentiate these as symbolic and social boundaries. When symbolic boundaries refer to social actors' conceptual distinctions to categorize people, objects, and practices, as well as time and space, social boundaries are related to differences regarding unequal access or distribution of material and nonmaterial resources and social opportunities (Lamont & Molnar, 2002). Boundaries represent imagined lines between 'us' and 'them', while addressing certain similarities and differences and notions of 'inclusion' and 'exclusion' in different histories and geographies (Barth, 1969; Jenkins, 1996; Castles & Miller 2003).

In the European transnational space, boundaries are highly fluid and vary from context to context. Inclusion and exclusion are dialectical concepts and multifaceted within Europe: 'we' can become 'the other' and 'the other' can become one of 'us'. In the case of migrants both within and outside of the EU, their position within the society is highly fluid, flexible and altered by certain authorities (Konsta & Lazaridis, 2010). The EU has replaced the nation-state-based idea of equality with transnational equality. As stated in EU legislation, citizens of EU countries, regardless of their country of origin, must be treated equally in other member states (Gerhards, 2008). However, formal equality in the form of citizenship rights rarely provides equality in practice (Castles & Miller, 2003). Different nation-states interpret the meaning of EU citizenship differently based on their experiences within the framework of free movement of citizens (Pullano, 2014). It enables individuals to transcend their social and cultural identities and to find themselves in different power relationships both on the supra/sub-national level and in the public/private sphere (Castles & Miller, 2003).

Transnational Identities of Bulgarian Turks

The Turks of Bulgaria settled in the Balkans as a result of the expansionist strategies of the Ottoman Empire. However, after the establishment of the Bulgarian nation-state in 1858, they became a minority in Bulgaria and were exposed to repressive and assimilative politics of the communist regime, including forced emigration from Bulgaria. Previously, their migration flowed primarily to Turkey, which they perceived to be their true, ancestral homeland (Parla, 2006). After the fall of the communism, the liberalized regime and the economic transformation of the country caused high inflation rates, unemployment and political instability (Mancheva & Troeva, 2011). This economic situation of Bulgaria has affected Turkish minority and Bulgarians alike because of discrepancy between regions and its impact on economic activities. Bulgarian Turks are predominantly have resided in the mountain and rural areas of the country. After 1989, most of the industrial enterprises, agricultural cooperatives closed down and especially closing of many

tobacco factories which were the valuable resource for the livelihood of Turkish community had a profoundly negative impact on the community. Since then, Bulgarian Turks have channeled in two directions to emigrate: southward to Turkey and westward to the countries of the EU (Maeva, 2008). It was the abolishment of visa requirements in 2001 for Bulgarian citizens traveling to Schengen countries in particular and EU accession in 2007 which motivated for immigration to Western Europe (Mancheva & Troeva, 2011). Previously, Bulgarian Turks' migration pattern was primarily individual, temporary and illegal; however, the introduction of EU citizenship triggered them to settle permanently with their families. Also, those who had immigrated to Turkey in recent years and had acquired dual citizenship (Bulgarian-Turkish) started to emigrate from Turkey to EU countries, as well. Besides the economic opportunities in Europe, their motivation for emigration is political and social conflicts in Turkey.

Germany has been the most preferred destination for the majority of Bulgarian Turks for several reasons: Firstly, they perceive Germany to be the most economically and socially developed country among the European countries. Secondly, the existing Turkish minority in Germany (German-Turks) is seen as an advantage for finding a job easier without having to speak the German language (Maeva, 2008). Thirdly, transnational networks play a significant role in these migration choices. Labor migrants during the transition period established primary migrant networks in Germany and contributed to the migration and settlement of the newcomers as EU citizens (Mancheva, 2008). Bulgarian Turks are already familiar with transnational connections; their identities are shaped in relation to both Bulgaria and Turkey, but their migration to Germany has brought about the reconstruction of their identities.

Negotiating Turkish-Bulgarian Identity Across Borders

Pre-migration context and the (re)formulation of boundaries in migration experiences are crucial for understanding the transnational identities of immigrants (Faist, 2009). The nation building process in the Balkans was induced by the 'millet system', introduced by the Ottoman Empire. It represented a type of hierarchical social organization of various populations based on their religious affiliation, of which the Muslims were situated on the top (Merdjanova, 2013). Besides, as Ghodsee (2009) notes, the 'Eastern Orthodox' doctrine by which church and state collaborate for the common good led to the equation of religion with ethnic identity. She calls this process in Bulgaria 'symphonic secularism'. The symphonic secularism and the millet system led Muslim minorities to view Islam as an ethnic identity instead of spiritual commitment. The repressive, assimilative policies of communist regime such as name changing campaign, language restrictions, and regulated control over religious practices also gave way to the unintended repercussion of a strengthened Turkish ethnic-religious identity (Eminov, 1999). Although their position in Bulgaria was improved during the post-socialist period, they are still exposed to discrimination given the backward image of Islam, which persists within the society (Liakova, 2012). This is likely the reason for their racialization in Bulgaria and the salience of their ethnic-religious identity.

For many years, Bulgarian Turks have perceived Turkish population in Turkey as their ethnic kin (Parla, 2006). This 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1991), which crosses Bulgarian-Turkish nation-state borders, is disrupted by encounters with Turks from Turkey in Germany. Most believed the presence of a Turkish community (German-Turks) in Germany would be an advantage for finding a job among ethnic kin (Maeva, 2008). Contrary to their expectations, Bulgarian Turks experienced discrimination and exploitation through low payments and long working hours; and are perceived as 'cheap labor' rather than 'ethnic kin'. These experiences with German-Turks can be interpreted by Norbert Elias, and John L. Scotson's (1994) the established-outsider figuration. They state that 'established' group sees themselves superior and exclude the members of another group who are 'newcomer'. The 'established' group do not see 'newcomers' as part of them and perceives its members as 'outsider'. In this case, Turks who emigrate from Turkey since the 1960s have already become 'established' in Germany. Throughout long years they had the opportunity to learn German, make their own businesses and be familiar with German system. On the other hand, Bulgarian Turks are perceived as 'newcomers' who are not familiar to Germany, and much more disadvantaged. Furthermore, German-Turks considered them to be 'Bulgarians'. As a Turkish minority who fought for their ethnic-religious rights in Bulgaria throughout history, such discourse causes a questioning of their proper place within the different societies.

> *We are the society which could not find where we belong. In Bulgaria, we are Turk, in Turkey, we are Bulgarian. Here, both Germans and Turks perceive us as Bulgarian. Where can we go then?* (Murat, personal communication, January 14, 2016).

Turkish ethnic identity has always been the primary identification of Bulgarian Turks while living in Bulgaria, however, their immigration to Germany induced more awareness of the religious, linguistic and cultural differences between them and their ethnic kin from Turkey (Mancheva, 2008). According to Bouragel (2005), Balkan Muslims living in Western Europe are in a 'semi-diasporic' situation due to previous experiences of being a religious minority in a secularized society in their home country. Following their immigration to Western Europe, they did not need to renegotiate their religious identities, but rather they highlighted their European origin, which is the major distinction between Balkan Muslims and other Muslim populations in Europe. Hence, Bulgarian Turks in Germany "position themselves between the Western European societies of non-Islamic tradition and the Muslim populations of non-European origin" (Bouragel, 2005, p.156).

> *I drink wine, I go out, such things are not seen as good in their eyes (...). For them, it is sin, wrong (...). We got used to the free life in Bulgaria; nobody asks you why you wear this* (Nazan, personal communication, January 15, 2016).

Bulgarian Turks have realized that their Bulgarian origin highlights certain cultural and world-view differences between them and the 'Turks from Turkey'. They perceive themselves more modern, educated, cultured, and hardworking. Some of them have even attributed these differences to the socialist past and its contribution to education, gender equality and work discipline. As Bulut (2008) notes, 'kin' is a fluid concept which changes over time and space across countries

within certain political and social conditions. There are overlaps as well as distinctions regarding culture, practices, and traditions. These encounters have brought drawing certain boundaries and led the reinforcement of Bulgarian civic/cultural identities. Many respondents (except those who emigrated from Turkey) shared having close friendships with ethnic Bulgarians; they find more commonalities with them than with Turks from Turkey. Many are in contact with the Bulgarian-Turkish Association (EU Verein für Türken aus Bulgarien), but also enjoy being a part of Bulgarian associations where they meet other Bulgarians. They also reported feeling close to Bulgarian nationals, connecting especially due to shared discrimination experiences in Germany.

Negotiating Bulgarian-European Identity Across Borders

It is assumed that social interactions with other European citizens strengthen European identity (Fligstein, 2009); but, it is important to examine the content of these interactions. Bulgarian Turks' contact with German natives in everyday life is highly limited due to language restrictions and spatial segregation within the cities with locals and immigrant groups; so their encounters remain mainly in institutional level. They are perceived by the German state, as well as by the other EU member states, principally as Bulgarian passport holders, and their ethnic identity is irrelevant to them (Mancheva, 2008). As transnational immigrants, Bulgarian Turks create various linkages based on their class background and racial positioning and produce new awareness of whom they relate to in hegemonic contexts (Schiller et al., 1992). The newest EU citizens work primarily in the lower class occupations, showing more similarities to third country nationals than nationals from older EU member states (Currie, 2008). Bulgarian Turks also mostly attribute their low employment position with their lack of German language proficiency. 'Deskilling' then occurs, which describes the phenomenon of highly educated workers being forced to work in low-wage occupations (Bauder, 2003). For example, the respondents who possessed a university degree in Bulgaria could only find employment in cleaning, construction or transportation sectors. There may be several sociological explanations for this labor market segregation and deskilling; however, what is important regarding their identities is the production of new awareness based on their placement within different societies.

> *The only good side of EU citizenship is the removed borders, but I think that this policy was not intended for ordinary people. It exploits the richness of small Balkan countries. We are slaves, white slaves. In the past, they were black people. Today, we are the slaves of the 21st century. For example, Germans do not clean toilets, but we do* (Tülay, personal communication, January 17, 2016).

According to Kofman et al. (2000), migrants as non-nationals experience exclusion due to perceived racial 'otherness' by the majority in the given society, especially if a race is the 'visible' marker for the minority group. However, relatively 'invisible' communities such as Eastern Europeans in Western Europe may also be racialized due to public perceptions linked to their welfare state. Respondents complained that Bulgarian citizens are often associated with the 'Romani population' by German natives. This perception by locals has affected the migration experience of Bulgarian Turks in two ways. Firstly, respondents

considered Romani immigrants to have undermined the image of Bulgarian citizens, which is problematic for finding housing and employment in Germany. Secondly, experiencing discrimination targeted at the Romani population has triggered the process of 'othering' within the Bulgarian community. Respondents highly emphasized their differences from the Romani population and tended to perceive this community as uncultured, uneducated and fraudulent. Hence, Bulgarian Turks in the context of Germany (re)draw their boundaries through a strengthened process of 'othering' towards the Romani population.

Furthermore, Bulgarian Turks negotiate their European identities in relation to the position of their homeland within the EU and believe that Bulgaria is not seen as wholly European. Todorova (1997; 2005) elucidates on the perception of Balkan countries as the 'incomplete other' of Western Europe or its characterization as being 'semi-developed' or 'semi-civilized'. This attitude is explained by the 'Ottoman' and 'Eastern' legacies of the region. Ottoman rule, which spanned over a half millennium, has impacted the Balkans not only politically and institutionally, but also, religiously and culturally. This non-European legacy plays an important role for stereotyping of the region. Secondly, its 'Eastern legacy' has influenced the Balkan societies regarding their political, social, and economic structure, as well as the mentality that is often shared with other post-communist societies.

> *During socialism, we were sleeping, while they moved forward (...) The Balkan countries are "the East" of Europe. None of the Balkan countries would be accepted as an equal by modern Western Europeans (...) Even I would say that if Europe would not have interest in the Balkan geography, they would dispose of us without hesitation. However, the reality is that Western Europe needs slaves for their own welfare who can work in hard jobs employment* (Fatih, personal communication, January 14, 2016).

Hence, Bulgarian Turks as Bulgarian citizens are a part of 'us' in regarding being EU citizens; however, in practice, one notes that their 'us' position has transformed into 'them' in Germany. Their migration experience brought the reality of 'inequality' between EU citizens and unfavorable image of Bulgarian citizens in Western Europe. As opposed to strengthening European identity, their encounters with other citizens reflect back to hegemonic relations within the European transnational space.

Conclusion

Bulgarian Turks in different locations and historical periods have (re)negotiated and (re)constructed their ethnic, national and European identities through various social encounters and sociopolitical structures. When their transnational identities were previously shaped in relation to their ancestral homeland (Turkey) and Bulgaria, following migration to Western Europe, their European identities were also negotiated within the German context. In the encounters with Turks from Turkey, Bulgarian Turks experienced exploitation and discrimination, as well as perceived cultural differences, which led to the reinforcement of their Bulgarian identity. Their experiences as 'EU foreigners' in Germany shows the reality of the EU as a hierarchical space between individuals and countries based on their nationalities (Pullano, 2014). Although EU law guarantees equality between 'EU

foreigners' and nationals, in practice, the transnational understanding of equality is not internalized by German society. Deskilling in Germany, stigmatization of Bulgarian citizens and the overall perception of Bulgaria as an underdeveloped country are all reflected in the European identity negotiations of Bulgarian Turks and lead to the drawing of boundaries between them and Western Europe.

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