

URBAN–RURAL LIFESTYLE MIGRATION IN SEARCH OF THE RURAL IDYLL: KEY CONCEPTS AND EXAMPLES FROM THE BULGARIAN VILLAGE OF JELEN

Petya Dimitrova

Introduction

In their key article published in 2009, sociologists Michaela Benson and Karen O'Reilly define lifestyle migration as: “relatively affluent individuals, moving either part-time or full-time, permanently or temporarily, to places which, for various reasons, signify for the migrants something loosely defined as quality of life” (Benson, O'Reilly 2009: 621). They particularize three types of lifestyle migrants, namely *the residential tourist*, *the rural idyll seeker*, and *the bourgeois bohemian*.

In this article, I'm focusing on urban–rural internal lifestyle migration of the second type: in search of the rural idyll. I consider the phenomenon as conditioned by the characteristics of modernity – individualism, consumption-oriented society, etc. I fully agree that lifestyle migration is related not only to the act of resettlement (how it happens, where and why), but also to post-migration experiences (Benson, Osbaldiston 2014: 3). Therefore, I'm interested in what values have guided these lifestyle migrants in the rural environment and how do they entwine these values in it?

To find the answer to this and a couple of interconnected questions, I've conducted a long-term fieldwork in the Bulgarian village of Jelen in 2019–2021 as a part of my dissertation on urban–rural lifestyle migration. During the fieldwork, I've combined the methods of participant observation and engaged learning of production and consumption practices to profoundly understand the migrant's behavior and attitudes. I've volunteered, visited local events, taken long walks on my own or in a group, taken semi-structured interviews and, last but not least, I've also been living for some time with some of the respondents. As a result, what can I state about Jelen?

Situated just 50 km away from Bulgaria's capital Sofia, this is a village preferred by urban–rural lifestyle migrants. Another crucial reason for them to settle there is that for more than two decades Jelen's consolidating people interested in living in harmony with nature. The first urban–rural lifestyle migrants settled around 2005 and in 2021 there are more than 10 individual eco-projects in there. By using the term “eco-project” I mean a personal project of an urban–rural lifestyle migrant (or a family of migrants) whose objective and attitude is to live outside of the big city and in harmony with nature to a certain degree. Even though there's a community

of lifestyle migrants sharing such a common alternative lifestyle in Jelen, it's not an eco-village itself as the community lacks communal buildings/institutions and the development of each project is being planned individually.

The following parts of this article summarize some of my key findings on urban–rural lifestyle migration in Jelen. I'll discuss how do my interlocutors interpret a couple of key concepts of urban–rural lifestyle migration some of which I've already mentioned: community (how do they contribute to its functioning); individualism; downshifting; autonomy (to what extent do they live off the grid and to what extent are they still dependent on the city); rural environment; multilocality.

Community vs. individualism

All my respondents often speak about *community* and *living in community*. Still, they build narratives that do not always overlap with and sometimes even contradict reality. For example, their constant emphasis on community life contrasts with the fact that the community in Jelen which is better to be defined as *quasi-community* functions with extreme and deepening difficulties due to differences in peoples' objectives, tasks and, therefore, daily routine.

S. (male, 30, Jelen) concludes the situation in Jelen as follows: “Well, we are split into many communities. Here with F. and B. we are one community, and there, in the center, the others are another community, and where is M. – they are another community. There's this moment of mutual aid, for example when K., in the center, had been building a house, we went and helped him with something, or they came here for something to help. (...) The thing is that in the summertime we have a lot to do, there's not so much time to go down to the center and meet. We'd like to, but everyone has their own duties.”

After staying a couple of seasons in this quasi-community of like-minded people, the individual could possibly find out it does not meet his/her expectations for common goals and lack of problems. One might find it not so inspiring or discover that one has just a short-term need to be a part of it. In such cases one might prefer to dedicate him/herself to his/her own project mostly or even leave the village.

In Jelen, an individualistic migrant quasi-community is formed of individuals who consider firstly their personality. For them, fitting into anything (not only in the local community, but even in the quasi-community of migrants) is a continuation of their individualistic trajectory. They are not ready to sacrifice even minimal independence. They set mostly individualistic and to a much lesser extent collectivist goals.

On the other hand, my respondents are firmly convinced that their needs are significant and that they are doing something necessary not only for themselves, but also for consumer society in general. Thus, their individualism overflows into reflecting on the collective and common welfare.

What do my respondents lack in urban areas? They're lacking enough physical and social space to unleash their individualism and authenticity. At the heart of their desire for autonomy, however, lies the need to differentiate themselves from other classes.

Downshifting and autonomy

When moving to the countryside, urban–rural lifestyle migrants unwittingly transfer some urban practices and models. At the same time, in the process of the transition, many of them are changing their lifestyles, bringing more free time and awareness into it. In my dissertation I define downshifting as going beyond socially accepted models of success by distinguishing from a developed/developing career and/or intensive consumption. Lifestyle migrants assess their importance not based on profession or financial status, but on the fact that they have free time to carry out activities that inspire them, contrary to developing a career, and possessing many belongings and big homes.

Even if they decide to start a business in the countryside, it's small, and the leader identifies as a person whose dream is coming true and not as an entrepreneur; a person looking beyond the financial dimension and focused mostly on providing good quality and inspiration for the clients.

Stone and Stubbs (Stone, Stubbs 2007: 445) emphasize in most cases the objective of such migration is not to start a business in the countryside and that business is just a means of earning some money to finance the lifestyle longed for. The cases in Jelen corroborate this theory. The small-scale entrepreneurs in the village are careful not to get sucked into the desire to constantly grow, knowing that the result would be too much work and not enough leisure time. Hence, if constantly growing their small-scale business, they'd come back to the status quo before their migration.

Commenting on what they think of the term “economic growth,” the hosts of one of the houses offered on AirBnB in Jelen reply: 'You either grow or you die. And we see that too - either we put more effort into making it nicer here and attracting more people, or we simply cannot continue' (B., female, 30, Jelen). They believe growing is useful to a certain point, and that after reaching the optimal size and quality, the service should be characterized with "economic stability because otherwise entrepreneurs who are very rich (...) damage their health,

damage their psyche, friendships and so on" (F., male, 39, Jelen). Another lifestyle migrant who plans to open "a forest restaurant" in Jelen also points out that he does not imagine it becoming a large one and that he will focus on developing the quality, not the size.

Coming back to the topic of downshifting, it is rarely driven by economic needs. Lifestyle migrants who decide to downshift aim to slow down, be more connected to each other and to the place where they settled, to have their time at their disposal instead of selling it to an employer, to live more simply (Vanini, Taggart 2014: 191). But "This simpler way of life is quite simply not as simple as they had at first imagined", as Benson and Osbaldiston inform (2014: 16) and as lifestyle migrants find out after gaining experience in the new environment.

Simplicity is sometimes mistaken with autonomy of the system, with living off-grid. If for the individual "a simple way of life" means to provide food self-sufficiently, he/she should expect an unexpected amount of work to achieve this, or various problems due to unfavorable climate.

One of the people who's living the most off-grid (compared to all other lifestyle migrants in the village) owns a small house partly made of natural materials. It's on two levels, not exactly floors, and it's about 100 cubic meters (but just 35 square meters). In the wintertime, the owner (K., male, 50, Jelen) and his partner heat it with a wood stove with a 7 m long stovepipe, this being one of their various ways to stay off-grid. The needs for electricity are met by solar panels and UPS and the hosts are doing their best to use as little electricity as possible. There's no running water inside, but as they grow a lot of plants both inside and outside, they irrigate them with rain harvested water from the roof and from some local springs.

Affirming the importance of living in harmony with nature, these respondents take it as their mission to grow something called a *food forest* (also known as a *forest garden*). In the yard there's a variety of edible plants planted in such a way as to mimic the patterns and ecosystems found in wild nature. He and his partner are vegetarian and feed themselves with the spelt, sunflower seeds, potatoes, tomatoes, plums, hawthorn, berries, and some spices they've produced; they also make flour from acacia flowers. The forest garden is grown with natural fertilizers only.

K. and his partner are vegetarians, eating dairy products occasionally and proudly declaring "We aren't predators". She speaks about herself as an "ex computer and alcohol addict" but since she's been living in Jelen she believes she's outgrown her addiction. In the beginning of 2020, they told me they're spending 60-75 euro for food monthly and that they're growing or gathering all the rest. In contradiction with their off-grid values and lifestyle though,

to generate the income needed, they go to Sofia two days a week to work as flyer delivery people for one of the biggest hypermarket chains in Bulgaria.

Rural environment and multilocality

Lifestyle migrants' models for rural life are often unfeasible, as these are caused by the construct of the "rural idyll." Bell (2006: 150) describes "the rural idyll in its current (Western, or Euro-American) packaging" as follows: "The farm is isolated, remote; the landscape wild (or at least 'managed wild', since much of it is farmland). Life is 'simple', rustic; farming is the dominant economic activity (though tourism is rapidly catching up). There are animals (wild and farmed), fine vistas, peace and quiet, traditional foods at the market, workers in the fields. Kids can roam free, climb trees, watch cows. Rural pastimes – walking, bird-spotting, sight-seeing – are abundantly available."

The wish to escape from the suffocating status quo to such a promised rural paradise is evident in lifestyle migration. The paradox is that although the rural idyll proclaims authenticity, it is inauthentic, and more precisely fabricated according to the needs of citizens and materialized only in some tourist sites and eco-villages with strict rules (and not fulfilled even there). This construct attracts lifestyle migrants, because it consists of deep and traditional values such as being close to the land, the nature, and the community, and therefore provides them with a refuge from (post)modernity. Theoretically, the countryside lacks the various difficulties that migrants face – financial, cultural, social, material, etc.

So, they move to the rural environment but soon find out it differs a lot from what they have imagined. Soon most of my respondents insist on introducing elements of the urban environment into the rural one, thus improving it, on the one hand, but sharply distinguishing it from the local rural community, on the other. In a rural environment, where more urban migrants are gathering, a clear distinction is made between local and lifestyle migrant groups, and the latter are being taken as foreigners.

From a local perspective, identity based on locality is key. My observations show that locals look back to the past, when the village was "nicer" and "better." They do not find the newcomers particularly necessary and useful for the improvement of Jelen, as these newcomers are too busy with their own projects and aren't living there permanently. The individualism of the lifestyle migrants is again emerging through the lens of the locals.

A local man called A. (male, 40, Jelen) considers all the lifestyle migrants there as individualistic and not contributing enough to the flourishing of the village. "There are some crazy people, you know, but in the summertime mostly... They're building traditionally, in an

old-fashioned way, that's simply what they fancy, using mud, using straw bales, just like in the old times. But these people do nothing for the village - they create their family comfort and that's it."

The locals aren't initially negative to the lifestyle migrants, but they feel that the new settlers are not committed to the village, as their personal well-being does not depend on the prosperity of Jelen as a whole. In the locals' ideas, there are right and not right lifestyle migrants. In order to fit into the first type, the migrant should be permanently committed to Jelen, somehow bound to it, be it only by everyday traveling to the village and away (hence caring for the good condition of the local roads and other infrastructure).

When analyzing the answers and attitudes discussed in the previous parts of the article, one should not get the impression that once they have moved from an urban to a rural environment, migrants necessarily spend all their time there. Apart from some exceptions such as F. (male, 39, Jelen) and B. (female, 30, Jelen), few of my respondents spend the winter in Jelen. Hence, it's more correct that we speak about seasonal lifestyle migration/mobility. A constant movement between two or more settlements is apparent; a never-ending journey consisting of different, sometimes international points. It is a subject to discussion whether this is a hardship for the lifestyle migrants, or it's the way they themselves have chosen to live. I'd consider it a difficulty as it's often conditioned by a lack of sufficient funds or a comfortable enough place for them to settle permanently without having to return to the urban environment they are discontented with.

In relation to that constant fluidity, it's important to outline that very few of the interlocutors develop the identity of *jelentsi* (people who live in Jelen, residents of Jelen). They don't call themselves like this even though when they are in a civic environment, they maintain their appearance of *selyani* (villagers in spirit). They do not build an identity based on locality, most likely because they are in constant transition. They are multilocal in the sense of Weichhart's definition: "a common socio-economic practice performed by individual or collective actors to carry out their intentions and achieve specific goals (e.g., improving personal living conditions or raising profits; see Figure 1) because goods, resources, and utilization potentials are unequally distributed across the world" (2015: 62).

In a recent issue of "Bulgarian ethnology" journal on the topic of urban-rural migration (2022) Desislava Pileva writes about *jiveeshtite pomezhdu* (those who are living in between), also sharing some examples from the village of Jelen. She observed how these lifestyle migrants "split their time spent on a weekly, monthly or yearly basis between two places for years". In

that sense, being multilocal demands the ability to deal with one's absence from one's home and with the constant mobility between various places and environments (Pileva 2022: 80).

Conclusion

The urban–rural migrants in the village of Jelen are global middle-aged people. They'd like to live in a semi-urbanized environment combining some urban comfort with some wilderness, some rural idyll. They move to change their lifestyle and often to downshift, they adopt new identities or strengthen identities they already have. In recent years, their community has weakened due to their individualism. A common perception is that acquiring a property in Jelen means starting a long-term personal project on changing and developing both the property (and even the village) and the owner's lifestyle and identity.

Lifestyle migrants do not usually build an identity based on locality (in contrast with the locals). This is due to the fact they are multilocal and in constant transition (physically and spiritually).

Due to variety of reasons - including disappointment with what the countryside and the quasi-community offer, a person who had been determined to live in Jelen could eventually transform into an owner of a second home where he/she periodically escapes becoming just another "cool villager" as one of my respondents calls such temporary lifestyle migrants. However, such a shift should not be interpreted as a failure, as lifestyle migration is primarily a project in development, not an action with a beginning and an end.

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**Миграция от град към село в търсене на селска идилия:
ключови понятия и примери от българското село Желен
Петя Димитрова**

Резюме

Статията представя някои ключови изводи от дисертацията „Миграция от град към село: примери от България, Словакия и Белгия“, като на фокус е Български пример – село Желен в община Своге. Преселниците в Желен са глобални хора на средна възраст, които биха желали да заживеят в умерено урбанизирано село – там да са налице както необходимите удобства, така и умерено дива природа и селска идилия. От какви ценности ръководят те и какво съдържание влагат в следните понятия:

- общност – помагат ли за функционирането ѝ;
- автономност – доколко живеят извън мрежата и доколко все още са свързани с града;
- мултилокалност;
- индивидуализъм;
- дауншифтинг;
- селска среда – каква е визията на преселниците за имота и селото?