

Family Strategies for Coping with Precarisation in Post-Socialist Bulgaria – Between Retraditionalisation and Transformation

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31577/SN.2024.2.15> © Ústav etnológie a sociálnej antropológie SAV
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In the period of post-socialist transformation, precarity is becoming the new normal for Bulgarian society. The precarisation of a large part of the middle generation (people born between 1950 and 1980), which met the end of the communist regime hoping for a radical change, became a source of disappointment and led to a loss of people's hope for a better life. In this article, I address the issue of how people of this generation experienced and reflect on the changes in their lives due to precarisation and what their coping strategies are. My thesis is that the precarisation of one or more family members causes uncertainty for the present and the future of the entire family household. In this situation, individuals act according to their own coping skills and their personal and family financial, social and cultural capital. In many cases, the choice of strategy is motivated by kinship ties and the best interest of the family. Focusing on the family reveals it, on the one hand, as a resource for coping with precariousness through family solidarity and assets. On the other hand, it can also represent a field of tension, demanding navigation between the positions and perceptions of its different members. The analysis of the ethnographic material suggests that there is continuity as “traditional” strategies for coping with precarity, familiar from the era of state socialism, are updated – a process I define as retraditionalisation.

Keywords: precarisation, care, social reproduction, post-socialism, retraditionalisation, Bulgaria

How to cite: Luleva, A. (2024). Family Strategies for Coping with Precarisation in Post-socialist Bulgaria – Between Retraditionalisation and Transformation. *Slovenský národopis*, 72(2), 162–178. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31577/SN.2024.2.15>

In 1998, Pierre Bourdieu wrote: “precarity is everywhere now” (Bourdieu, 1998). These words were spoken in the context of the changes taking place in France and in the Western economies in the last decades of the twentieth century. Bourdieu was referring to the flexibilisation and disintegration of the Fordist model of economy and its so-called standard employment model, characterised by full-time and long-term employment with a single employer, providing a satisfactory standard of living and consumption opportunities for the family, leaving women who were mainly engaged in domestic work to maintain the household and to take care of family members. Although precarity is seen as the opposite, as the deviation from this model, it is also present in the Fordist model through the precarious work of women and migrants (Kallenberg, 2018). Historically and globally, the Fordist model has been more of an exception that was applied to the industrial sector for the Global North in the last quarter of the twentieth century and not valid for the Global South, where the informal economy has always been dominant and a constant source of uncertainty (Kallenberg, 2018; Cassiman, Eriksen, Meinert, 2022). Moreover, as Eloisa Betti argues, historicising precarious work in the history of global capitalism implies acknowledging job stability as an exception and job precariousness as its norm (Betti, 2018).

If we paraphrase Pierre Bourdieu’s words about the Bulgarian case, it might be more appropriate to say that precarity (*nesigurnost*¹ in Bulgarian) has always been here. It was here in pre-modern times, during early capitalism and the inter-war years of the 1920s, defined as a time of economic growth; it was also here in the years of state socialism, now nostalgically remembered as “secure and stable”. Precarity is also here in the era of post-socialist transformation, which has been accompanied by new forms of precarity that are characteristic of the global neoliberal economic order, and has a specificity due to the contemporary state of the Bulgarian economy – in transition from state-regulated to market economy, characterised by sharp deindustrialisation, controversial privatisations and the decollectivisation of agriculture. The economic reforms in the first two decades of the transition were conducted under the declared aim of making Bulgaria a “normal” country, taking as a model Western liberal democracies of the 1980s with functioning market economies and high living standards. The result, however, turned out different – controversial reforms, a state dominated by clientelist corruption networks, high levels of social inequality and poverty (Seleni, 2002) (the highest in the EU), dissatisfaction with life of a large proportion of Bulgarians,² high levels of social distrust (Luleva, 2021) and a neo-patrimonial political regime (Chavdarova, 2021). The completely changed economic environment arose in the context of the new neoliberal global values and notions of success as being linked

1 In the Bulgarian language there is no term analogous to the English “precarity”. All three meanings of uncertainty, which in English are transmitted by differentiated concepts – uncertainty, insecurity, and precarity – describing the perception of security and insecurity in different contexts language are expressed in the Bulgarian in only one word – *nesigurnost*. From an anthropological perspective, however, all three concepts affect not just one aspect of social life – they touch upon all sides of human existence.

2 <https://worldhappiness.report/ed/2020/> (accessed February 2, 2024).

to the meritocratic individual achievement of an autonomous subject with high consumer capabilities and a fulfilled family life. This replaced the previous collectivist, class-party and nationalist discourse that was dominated by dependency culture and the paternalism of the state. The negation of this paternalistic dependency and the valorisation of free individual initiative, enterprise and responsibility became an integral part of the political discourse motivating reforms in the transition years. These values were shared by the majority of citizens, who supported the democratic transition in the hope of changing the “system”.

However, the precarisation of a large part of the middle generation (people born between 1950 and 1980), which had welcomed the end of the communist regime with hope for radical change (cruel optimism after Berlant, 2011), was a source of disappointment and caused people to lose hope of experiencing a better life.

In this paper I will highlight how this generation experienced and reflect on the changes in their lives due to precarisation and what their coping strategies are.

My thesis is that the precarisation of one or more family members leads to uncertainty for the present and the future of the whole family household. In such situations, individuals act according to their own coping skills and their personal and family financial, social and cultural capital. In many cases, the choice of strategy is motivated by kinship ties and the best interest of the family (children, elderly parents and spouse). In this sense, the actions of social actors are more a manifestation of relational autonomy (Millar, 2014) than of the desire for self-realisation, individualism and autonomy. Focusing on the family reveals it, on the one hand, as a resource for coping with precariousness through family solidarity and assets. On the other hand, it can also represent a field of tension, demanding navigation between the positions and perceptions of its different members. Gender perceptions and power relations in the family are of crucial significance when it comes to the choices and actions of individual members.

Further analysis of the ethnographic material revealed that there is continuity as “traditional” strategies for coping with precarity, familiar from the era of socialism, are updated – a process I define as retraditionalisation. The hope was that with the end of state socialism households would no longer need to cope with the problem of making a living by producing the foodstuffs they need and combining low-paid work with domestic self-exploitation; reality has proven otherwise. The prolonged economic crises and precarisation of former employees, as well as low pensions of pensioners, forced them to mobilise all family members and return to home farming in order to survive and make a living. Land restitution has also contributed to the revitalisation of small family farms, but overall decollectivisation and land restitution have not led to a great revitalisation of the Bulgarian village, as initially expected. The “revival” took place only in villages located close to towns, thanks to the possibility of maintaining so-called rural-urban households.

There has, however, been a big change in terms of freedom of movement. After the fall of the Iron Curtain, Bulgaria became part of the global world. This situation

has opened up new opportunities and prospects for people seeking solutions to their economic problems. In the period prior to Accession to the EU and after 2007, when the country became a member, the facilitated mobility regime made it possible to move freely and find work abroad. This proved to be a very popular strategy, widely practiced in areas that had lost their former livelihoods.

In short, it can be argued that families use a wide range of strategies to cope with precarity – some of them updated old, familiar, traditional ones, while others adopted new ones, leading to a transformation of family relations. Ultimately, the choices people make will depend on the phase of the family cycle; the age and stage in the life course of social actors; personal and family social, cultural and financial capital; place of residence among other factors, besides the macro-economic, cultural and political context.

The ethnographic study

The picture I present is based on an ethnographic study carried out in the capital city of Sofia and in two other towns located in Western Bulgaria in the period 2020–2023, complemented by continued observation over the last two decades. The town K. is a district centre with 38,000 inhabitants, located close to the western Bulgarian border, 100 km from the capital city. In recent years K. district has been among the regions with the lowest average salary in the whole country. The other town, S., is a municipal centre with 27,000 inhabitants, situated near a mountain resort, 60 km from the capital. Both towns have experienced a profound demographic collapse since the 1990s, due to low birth rates and, more significantly, family labour emigration to the capital and especially abroad. The majority of inhabitants are of Bulgarian ethnic origin; a common trend is the increase in the populations of Roma communities. The towns experienced depopulation after people abandoned them following the closure of the factories that had once given them their industrial character and provided the main source of employment – including for employees who migrated in from neighbouring villages during the years of state socialism.

The research was conducted through informal conversations, biographical and in-depth interviews (about twenty in number) with men and women born between the 1940s and 1990s, belonging to different generations, with different biographical experiences. All of them have had experienced precarity as a brief phase or permanent condition in their work life. Comparisons of working conditions before and after 1989 for people born in the late 1940s and 1950s came up spontaneously in our conversations. This made it possible to outline the changes and continuities in making a living in the two periods, as well as people's reflections in light of their own situation of precarity.

Theoretical notes and state of research

The ethnographic material is analysed within the framework of anthropological theorisations of precarisation, precarious work and precariousness, moral economy and care. The anthropological perspective reconciles the two concepts: (i) precariousness as the ontological experience of human existence and a core element of human relations, after Judith Butler (2004) (Berlant, 2011; Puar, *Ed.*, 2012; Lorey, 2015) and (ii) precarity as historically specific work that is precarious, unstable and insecure and where workers bear the risks of work (as opposed to businesses or government) and receive limited welfare benefits and legal rights (Kallenberg). Research in a variety of contexts shows that precarisation has far-reaching consequences for people's lives (Allison, 2013; Kallenberg, 2018; Standing, 2011; Choonara, Murgia, Carmo, *Eds.*, 2022).

As Narotzky and colleagues' research has shown, the effects of the economic crisis in Southern Europe have changed the economic and social order, with moral economy and care of family members taking centre stage as most important for intergenerational relations of inequality (Narotzky, *Ed.*, 2020). In her study of employment precarity in post-socialist Bulgaria, Kofti shows that the moral economy provides an appropriate analytical lens to study the dynamic relations of values, ideas and political and economic practices, as well as everyday lives and struggles in relation to inequality and precarity (Kofti, 2016, 2018). Luleva (2019) considers the moral economy of care following the example of labour migrants working as domestic workers (*badanti*) in Italy and reveals the moral aspects of their motives for emigration to undertake this kind of work – playing dual role as caretakers both for their family and for their elderly clients in Italy.

Caring is at the core of relationships between family members, both from parents to children and vice versa. In the perspective of the moral philosophy of Tzvetan Todorov, care is a virtue (Todorov, 1996); in the anthropological concept of Borneman, care is a “principle of human affiliation” and a “fundamental human need: the need to care and be cared for” (Borneman, 2001). Care ethics scholars propose a moral concept of care that guides ethical behaviour and thinking towards recognising mutual dependence and caring actions in order to address inequalities and define care as a processes of creating, sustaining and reproducing bodies, selves and social relationships – dialectical processes in which aspects of competitiveness and solidarity, anxiety and solicitude are interchangeably present and continually struggle with each other (Nguyen, Zavoretti, Tronto, *Eds.*, 2017). In the perspective of strategies for coping with precarity, care is seen as a resource, action and labour (Kay, 2012; Thelen, Cartwright, Sikor, 2008).

Further, I accept a broader concept of caring that includes not only emotional attitudes (caring about) but also caring for children, elderly and sick family members; housework and subsistence farming (the latter two were defined by Federici as reproductive labour – Federici, 2012); and even labour migration. Care is related to

social reproduction – the desire in people to maintain or increase their social status to ensure the continuity of the family, including the education and prosperity of the future generations. The concept of social reproduction, not just for material survival in times of crisis, gives a broader perspective to the actions of social actors, providing an opportunity for better understanding of the motives and choices and for overall understanding of social relations. Social reproduction can also be defined as a continuity that brings generations together around micro-projects for making a living and enhancing the future opportunities, as well as macro-projects of social configuration of power and asset distribution (Narotzky, Besnier, 2014). This has been emphasised by Narotzky and Besnier through their claim that making a living is about “making people” in their physical, social, spiritual, affective and intellectual dimensions (Ibid., 2014). Viewed from such a perspective, as an element of social reproduction, economic activities and care have important moral and value aspects attached to them.

In this essay, retraditionalisation in the Bulgarian context is used in two senses. The first sense is ideological, and can be found in the increasingly dominant public discourse as revitalisation and return to the imaginary tradition of the strong Bulgarian (patriarchal) family, essentialised as consisting of mother, father and children. This “natural” family, based only on biological bonds, is imagined as threatened by liberal ideas, same-sex marriages, LGBT rights and a range of policies related to children’s rights (Nenova, Luleva, Kotzeva, 2023). The second meaning, which is precisely what I am addressing in this text, is moral-economic – seen as a return to traditional economic (cultural) models which have never been completely abandoned but in crisis situations are actualised – such as domestic farming, or mobilising the family with all its assets (forms of capital) for social reproduction of the next generations, that is, applying familiar practices and reproducing generational hierarchies and values in new conditions. One of the central questions of this study is whether the updating of traditional economic strategies to cope with the crises caused by the precarisation of family members leads to the revitalisation of traditional moral norms and intergenerational relations within the family, or whether a process of transformation and cultural change is underway. The economic strategies are culturally embedded; they are seen as relationships between family members and between generations. Moral ties such as responsibility, duty, affection and love are central to intergenerational relations. They describe family relationships as relationships of mutuality (Sahlins, 2013) and caring.

In the following pages, as “strategies” for coping with precarisation, I define the sequence of decisions that an actor makes while pursuing a certain goal according to a set of rules or restrictions, trying to predict the future consequences of specific steps and taking into account the reaction of other social actors (Fontain, Schlumbohm, 2000). In reviewing these strategies, emphasis is placed on the person – that is, the agent with their experiences, views, motives, reflections and actions in response to a specific current situation. This does not mean, however, that it presupposes the agent’s freedom

of choice or that they are a completely autonomous, sovereign, independent, self-reliant individual, having a new kind of (neoliberal) subjectivity; an entrepreneur of themselves and for themselves (Makovicky, 2014). In a study of social security after socialism, based on her ethnographic work in a Bulgarian village at the beginning of the new millennium, Zlatina Bogdanova revealed the importance of kinship and family networks for social integration and family security. According to her observations, the traditional understandings of kinship solidarity affirm the interdependence between family members and do not encourage individual life strategies (Bogdanova, 2018). In the cases that I have observed, especially in the practices of care, the behaviour of social actors (women) testifies to their relational autonomy – autonomy determined by belonging to the family household, insofar as “autonomy is always already woven into relationships and forms of social belonging” (Millar, 2014: 47).

The ethnographic research conducted by Luleva, Benovska and Nedin in villages of the Western Rhodopes (Satovcha municipality) in 2016–2018 was aimed at analysing the coping strategies against poverty in the region. It was found that the precarity caused by precarious work and low income was a new phenomenon that had emerged in the post-socialist market regime. Precarity is a cause of impoverishment, anxiety and deprivation. It is also a challenge to find new solutions: combining different types of employment – formal and informal, maintaining a family farm in the village (managed by women and elderly parents) combined with transnational labour mobility of men. Thus the new phenomenon of the transnational family has emerged (Bulgarian–German, Bulgarian–English). The research also revealed that individual strategies for coping with poverty are subordinate to family ones. The family is a source of security, solidarity and support, but also of dependence and obligations. Emigration or work away from home is undertaken in the name of the family. Women are important contributors to the family budget and, being aware of this, displayed self-esteem as economically active subjects. Their autonomy, workload and responsibility increased when they had to look after the household and the farm in the absence of their husbands. These findings, mainly concerning the villages in the Western Rhodopes inhabited by Bulgarian Muslim population, are comparable with and correspond to observations I have made among Christian Bulgarians in the capital city and in the two towns in Western Bulgaria.

Strategies for coping with precarisation in post-socialism

The layoffs of workers and employees in enterprises that rapidly went bankrupt following the end of state socialism marked the end of secure work and the previous way of life. Workers who had lost their jobs also lost their professional identity. They experienced as a dispossession the loss of the social status and recognition they had acquired in the socialist period. The feeling of relative security and stability arising from a permanent job, the associated access to social services and relatively secure

prospects has been replaced by a sense of uncertainty, dispossession and inability to undertake (long-term) planning. The uncertainty stems from the new, previously unknown situations people encountered – temporary employment, frequent changes of workplace and employers, and working without a contract or with a semi-legal employment contract in which the salary is only partially declared. In the latter case, the minimum wage on which the employee is insured is entered in the employment contract, and the rest of the orally agreed amount is received (regularly or otherwise) without being declared. This practice harms workers and has a negative effect on their pension insurance. Everyone who has experienced this is dissatisfied. Some said that they did not know they had been insured in that manner and only found out when it was time for them to retire, in contrast to others who knew but had resigned themselves to the situation so as not to lose their jobs. As Kallenberg writes, precarious work reflects both the changing employment conditions and the loss of conditions held or aspired to (Kallenberg, 2018). But it is not only the former working class that lost their permanent jobs and social protection. Precariousness has also become a living condition for the next generations, for people with different qualifications and employment experience who work under temporary contracts, have involuntary part-time work schedules, engage in irregular and casual employment or are self-employed. Many of these people belong to the big group of the so-called “working poor”. Limited choices and a shrinking labour market are most often cited as determinants of the new economic situation. Different complementary activities and sources are combined to provide income.

Vignette 1: Vera's Family – precarisation and disappointment

Vera is 70 years old, with a university degree in engineering, born in K. Her narrative of how she and her husband survived the years of transition is dominated by disappointment and distress: their expectations and hopes for a better life after the end of communism were not fulfilled, they experienced material losses, their son did not achieve the professional success he dreamed of. After graduating with a degree in nuclear power engineering (a prestigious and well-paid job in the years of socialism) at the beginning of the new millennium, he could not find a suitable job for his specialty. According to Vera, the state should have taken care of qualified personnel, as it had done in the previous period when she and her husband graduated to become engineers. At that time, they were immediately given jobs and housing in a nearby mining town. They felt professionally fulfilled and had an upward career. In contrast to her professional experience, her son remained unrecognised professionally and was forced to settle for a low-paying, unqualified job. His precarious situation has affected his whole way of life and view of the world, which was marked by disappointment, frustration and illness.

The story of Vera and her husband is an example of how the transition from a state-planned economy to a market economy in Bulgarian conditions, characterised

by a lack of formal rules and legality, and the great importance of informal networks, connections and corruption, transformed them from well educated professionals with high professional statuses into precariat. The factory where she had worked was in decline before privatisation and closed down. The same picture can be observed anywhere else: production was cut, there was no money for paying wages, some were paid in kind, and finally the workers were sent to the unemployment office. During the last years of her employment at the factory, Vera took on additional informal work for the first private newspaper in town, retraining as a typesetter. After being laid off from the factory, pagination became her main source of income. She admits that she was trained for a new profession but had practiced it informally, without an employment contract or insurance. At the same time, she started working for a foreign investor, again on the edge of the law. However, his business proved unstable so she left and retired on a very low pension. She devotes herself to caring for her family and grandchildren. Despite the family's difficult economic situation, Vera stated that she has never thought of emigrating to become a care worker, like many other women in the town did. She explains that this is due to her strong emotional attachment to her children and her need to be close to them. Her husband, an engineer with a high position in the 1980s, decided after the end of communism to use his expertise to develop a private business. His attempt proved unsuccessful – the market had been captured by the former communist and State Security nomenclature; corruption networks combined with the racketeering of powerful groups made free competition impossible. Drawing on their own failed attempts to make it in the new post-socialist situation, Vera, her husband and son are disillusioned with the transition, with the way it has taken place, and with its injustice. Her daughter, born in the 1980s, has a different evaluation. She successfully combines employment in the cultural department of the Municipality, albeit low-paid, with work in the private sector. Her husband similarly combines paid public employment with a private business, working in the municipal forestry agency while at the same time managing his private company. They both manage to cope with the economic situation. The young woman notes that she spends less on living expenses in the town than in the capital, and besides, the family household is run quite economically, making use of products obtained from her parents-in-law's household, buying second-hand clothes and utilising her parents' help in taking care of the children.

Vera's narrative, which describes in detail the precariousness of the family's life after 1989, leaves the impression that the optimism of her generation for a better life has not been justified. The dominant discontent gives way to nostalgia for the previous way of life – seen as more secure, more settled and more relaxed. She mentions in passing that their life was not easy back then either: she lost her second child due to premature birth caused by overwork and the daily commute on the workers' bus. Her dissatisfaction with the way the transition took place makes her extremely critical of the political class. She describes herself as a "leftist", even though before 1989 she hated the Bulgarian Communist Party and the party careerists. Vera

and her husband experienced the precarisation after the end of communism as a traumatic period in their lives, which they remember with frustration and sadness. As retirees, they feel more relaxed and secure, no longer pressured and in need of resources compared to the years they needed money for their children's education and during a period they experienced extreme difficulty. Today they rely on the help and care provided by their children – care that is mutual and creates security for both generations. Vera and her husband have no connection to a village, unlike most of their fellow residents who have either inherited or purchased property in the surrounding villages. Instead, the family of their brother-in-law maintains a farm in a nearby village and supplies them with fruit and vegetables.

Vignette 2: Ivana's Family – precarisation, care work and self-sufficiency

The combination of paid labour with the home production of food, for personal needs and for sale, was for decades practiced as a well-known and proven strategy for economic survival (and prosperity). It was widespread in both towns during the socialist period, reflecting the characteristic feature of the state socialist economy: full employment, the need for two salaries to support the nuclear family, and the need for additional sources of income from the domestic economy in the form of produce for personal consumption and the market.

Self-sufficiency with homegrown vegetables, fruit, meat and dairy products was essential due to shortages of food on the market and the need to save on all costs (Gudeman, Hann, 2015; Gudeman, 2018; Creed, 2000). This was the economic rationale for having a strong connection between families in the city and parents' households in the countryside. In the case of the second town, S., the surrounding villages make it possible to maintain a domestic farm with labour provided by the older parental couple, while their children and grandchildren work and live in the town. Thus, in the period of socialism, the so-called "neo-extended family" (Konstantinov, Simić, 2001) functioned well as the two households were closely integrated into a system of economic reciprocity. According to Konstantinov and Simić, the neo-extended family has proven remarkably adaptive to the present depressed economic conditions in Bulgaria due to its ability to provide a nearly autonomous subsistence base while simultaneously drawing on urban resources.

The extended family household proved to be effective as a strategy for dealing with the economic crisis and offered a source of security in the first years of the post-socialist transformation, when purchasing power declined sharply in the face of a drastic inflation and rising unemployment. In the following years, for some of my respondents, maintaining a rural household was not only an economic necessity, it was perceived as a sign of good social status and a moral obligation.

The example of Ivana, a seventy-year-old woman born in one of the villages close to S., is illustrative. She completed her secondary education at the mechanical–technical school in the town and immediately started working at the design department of

a textile factory. Her entire career was spent in this factory and this department, which she headed until the factory was privatised in the 1990s. Soon after this, production decreased, workers were laid off and machinery was sold off. Ivana worked for some time as a warehouse manager, selling the remaining produce accumulated from previous years, then she left. She tells of a strong sentimental connection to her workplace and the years when she felt professionally satisfied. She says that working two shifts did not bother her and lists the social benefits that the workers enjoyed: a canteen for the staff, a kindergarten for their children and a prophylactorium – a recreation facility with mineral baths – not far from the town. Her husband worked at another textile factory in S. The family lived in the town and had three children. Ivana's husband died 20 years ago of a lung disease caused by the dirty air at his workplace. While working in factories, both spouses supported a big farm in her native village. They raised pigs for the market, turkeys and chickens for their own consumption, a cow and goats as well as vegetables. Some of the milk was sold and the rest was made into cheese. Her family, along with that of her brother and their parents, used to plant large quantities of potatoes for years. This production was organised by the Agro-Industrial Complex and the farmers were given plots to use in the lands of the surrounding villages. Profit from the potatoes was invested in the construction of Ivana's family house and her brother's house. The produce from the domestic economy created a sense of security for Ivana, in the sense that her family did well, both in the period of socialism and during the crisis years following it, providing all that they needed on their table despite their relatively low wages. After the death of her husband, Ivana reduced production on the farm and now only keeps chickens. She continues to work in the garden and produces large quantities of vegetables, fruits and canned food. This produce provides enough for the three households – hers (she lives with her son's family) and those of her two daughters and grandchildren, who help with harvesting and canning.

For a long time, self-sufficiency has not been an economic necessity for the maintenance of the three households, but Ivana did not give it up. She invests a lot of time and effort in this work, but it makes her feel useful to the family; through it she fulfils her desire to care for her children and grandchildren, providing them with "clean" food. A few years ago the work in the garden was taken over by her daughter and son-in-law because Ivana was in poor health. They have planted a large quantity of tomatoes which the son-in-law intends to sell on the market, taking advantage of his connections with shops in the capital. Ivana participates by passing on her experience in growing vegetables.

The maintenance of a vegetable garden (up to one acre) in which potatoes, beans, peppers, tomatoes, cucumbers, zucchini and pumpkins are planted is considered to be the norm in the villages around the two cities and an activity inherent to good farmers. For some, it is a habit that they acquired as children due to an economic need to secure food supplies, or a means of maintaining physical and emotional well-being. The villagers do not cultivate the fields that were restituted in the

decollectivisation process post-communism en masse; divided between the heirs, the plots of land are small. In addition, the lack of machinery and available labour, as well as the low purchase prices of potatoes (the major crop in the area) has discouraged small-scale farmers, who prefer to lease their land to registered farmers who receive EU-subsidies. In return, the owners receive a small amount of rent. It can be argued that land as a source of security has lost its value. If this was true in the capitalist period, when wealth was measured by the land owned, then after collectivisation in the 1950s, the village and the land were slowly and constantly devalued. The way in which decollectivisation was carried out and the land was restituted did not lead to the expected revival of family farms. On the contrary, the big tenants – recipients of Euro-subsidies – benefited and rural communities experienced these changes as a new injustice and a victory for the party–clientelist networks (for the similar processes in northeast Bulgaria – cf. Giordano, Kostova, 2001).

Vignette 3: Gergana – precarisation, family support and dependency

Gergana is forty years old, lives with her mother (who is sixty-four and works as a dentist in an municipal polyclinic in Sofia). She graduated from a Spanish language school, has a Bachelor's degree in Business Administration. After graduation she worked as an administrator in various places on temporary contracts. Her last job was in a money transfer company with Polish owners, subcontracted to a large multinational company. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Gergana realised that layoffs were imminent. She did not feel threatened because she suffers from a chronic illness and is protected from redundancy under employment law. In the meantime, she decided to build a small house on a plot of land in a village near Sofia that Gergana's parents bought with the intention of moving there. After the death of her father, this project fell through. Upon finding a good offer for a prefabricated house, Gergana and her mother decided to carry out the project and Gergana took out a bank loan. The uncertain future at her company did not discourage her because she had added an unemployment insurance clause to her loan contract. Soon after the contract was signed and construction began, the company closed down and Gergana lost her job. With the help of her mother, she found a new job as an administrator at the municipal polyclinic, a job far below her qualifications but desirable because of the lack of other opportunities. This job, however, proved to be similarly desirable to people close to the management of the polyclinic. So after only a month Gergana was forced to resign, contrary to employment law, and subsequently agreed to humiliate herself and waive her rights by signing a document with false content, according to which she was not categorised as chronically ill. Since then, her attempts to find work through official announcements and with the help of friends have been unsuccessful. She is registered with the labour office and receives the compensation due in such cases. Her sources of income are very limited. She makes *martenitsa* on order for family and friends. It is a short-term work commitment in February each year, linked

to the folk tradition for exchanging *martenitsa* – twisted white and red threads, in different figurines, exchanged with a wish for good health – on the first of March. On this occasion, the city is flooded with *martenitsa*, which are sold on street stalls. They are made and sold by men and women for whom this is a way to make a minimal addition to their income. Gergana also makes wedding cards ordered by her friends. She has started giving Spanish lessons to the child of a family she knows. These informal activities take up almost all of her time but do not bring in an income she can rely on to pay off her loan. The bank asked for additional guarantees – besides taking out a mortgage on her small inherited flat, she was required to make a cash deposit at the bank give cash. The only possibility for this appeared to be her grandfather, a 93-year-old pensioner, who had recently sold his villa in the countryside. He agreed to become a guarantor to save his granddaughter, despite family tensions and resistance from Gergana's grandmother. The inherited apartment could be rented out to help bolster the family budget, but this has also proven a difficult task with an uncertain outcome. Gergana feels supported by her family, but also feels she is too dependent, increasingly losing the self-esteem and confidence of an independent person able to cope with life's challenges. Family assets (the home and her grandfather's financial capital) are the only sources of security and support for her. In this situation of uncertainty about the present and the future, Gergana does not make long-term plans and has given up hope of having a lasting relationship or a family of her own.

Undoubtedly, the precariousness into which one family member falls affects the whole family. Precarisation, as other studies have shown (Allison, 2013; Lorey, 2015; Narotzky, *Ed.*, 2020), is not just expressed by precarious work and income; it is also manifested in uncertainty in the present and uncertainty about the future, which affects subjectivity, personal identity, self-esteem, intergenerational family relations and moral obligations. The family, with its assets accumulated by past generations, is a source of security and support, but at the same time it creates a new dependency, placing those in need in a position of subordination that can sometimes be experienced as a form of humiliation. In such situations, family power hierarchies are rearranged.

The elderly (typically the grandparents) are sometimes, as in Gergana's case, the "fittest" in economic terms, taking care of their grandchildren – a situation experienced as a deprivation of autonomy and a life failure on the part of the mother and granddaughter. They, in turn, take care of elderly relatives, visiting them in the countryside, helping them with daily activities, looking after their health and planning to reside with them when they can no longer manage on their own. To the extent that precarity affects the middle and younger generations, it is the elderly pensioners who can take on part of the burden of social reproduction – feeding, housing, educating children and so on. A similar situation has been observed in Southern Europe since the 2008 crisis when, as anthropological research has shown, the Fordist model was overturned and the younger generation, falling into precarity,

became dependent on their elderly parents (Narotzky, *Ed.*, 2020). However, while in Southern Europe this situation could be defined as a new phenomenon, it is not so in the Bulgarian case. The link between generations, the dependence of the young generations on their parents has never been broken. And this concerns not only times of crisis, when the family resources have to be mobilised. This dependence – the limited autonomy of the younger generation from elderly parents – existed throughout the whole period of state socialism, due to the specifics of the socialist economy and social order. The standard model of employment under state socialism was characterised by long-term employment and the dual-earner family. However, with the exception of certain categories of workers and the high nomenklatura, ordinary workers, employees and those employed in the sectors of education and healthcare had low salaries that were barely enough to support a four-person family. Functioning in the context of an economy with basic food deficits required self-sufficiency as a widely practiced livelihood strategy, coupled with regular low-paid employment. This was the economic rationale behind extended family households in which at least three generations coexisted in rural and urban areas, united by the common goal of making a living and achieving successful social reproduction. This is the reason for the long-standing intergenerational dependency, care exchange and limited autonomy of young families. For my respondents born between the late 1940s and the 1970s, hierarchical power relations changed dramatically and painfully in the direction of increasing autonomy, but the economic crisis of the 1990s brought them back to the need to mobilise rural–urban households.

Conclusions

The post-socialist transformation and neoliberal market order resulted in the de-industrialisation of the Bulgarian towns. In these new conditions, precarisation has increased sharply and the nature of work changed – from a source of stable professional identity secured through a permanent contract and carrying certain social benefits, to a temporary, insecure, often informal state lacking guaranteed workers' rights. These form the conditions for massive precarisation, leading to dispossession, family crisis, trauma and disappointment. The situation of uncertainty is exacerbated by a lack of trust within society for state institutions and limited confidence that they are working in the interest of citizens. Faced with an uncertain future, social actors seek to control the uncertain present, guided by their past experiences. These experiences suggest that one can safely rely on personal networks of trust established between relatives and friends, and very rarely on public institutions. It is also worth highlighting that in order to deal with a crisis, it is necessary to mobilise the resources of the family household and its social capital. Social actors deal with uncertainty and domesticate capitalism depending on their economic, social and symbolic assets. In the countryside, a connection with the village and the practice of self-sufficiency as

a strategy for providing food for the family is being updated again. The vitality of this relationship is maintained not only by economic necessity but also by the moral expectation that pensioners must work if they have a vegetable garden, and their children must also be involved in this effort. Thus, knowledge and skills are passed on in farming and running the household; social reproduction is carried out, but at the same time dependence on the family household is sustained.

The discussed strategies for coping with precarisation and uncertainty in post-socialist everyday life show that rapid political change and economic transformation do not automatically lead to a dramatic social transformation. It is true that the social structure of the Bulgarian society is changing, the dominant class of workers has vanished, and villagers have long lost their rural ways of life to merge into the new (controversially defined as class) precariat (Standing, 2011). Social relations, however, are strongly determined by past experience, and turn out to offer a rescue strategy in the examined cases of coping with precarisation and uncertainty. Perhaps this is why large sections in contemporary Bulgarian society, seeking support and security, turn to the past and support right and left populists. Thus, in a paradoxical way, the neoliberal order has led to a process of retraditionalisation in Bulgaria.

Acknowledgments:

The study was carried out in the framework of the research project "Anthropology of Uncertainty. Continuities and Changes in Post-socialism", supported by the Bulgarian Science Fund (KP-06-N55/12).

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