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Holiday Location or Agricultural Village? British Property Owners in Rural Bulgaria

Abstract

During the last 4–5 years the property market in Bulgaria has attracted considerable foreign investment. This paper focuses on the growing market in the rural region of Veliko Turnovo and on the British who are buying property and moving to the area. Foreign ownership, that draws local land into a global property market, is resulting in a change in property relations; once exclusively a site for agricultural activities, the land is now being redefined as an investment opportunity and a place of recreation.

Keywords: rural Bulgaria, property relations, British, land ownership, globalisation.

Introduction

Last year while in Bulgaria I learnt that a relative was selling his village house. I was even more surprised to learn that the prospective buyers were British. Asked to help with translating, I became involved in the event. When the middle-aged British couple arrived by taxi to view the rural property, they roamed through the rooms commenting on their size and outlook, as one would expect of a prospective buyer. Upstairs on the first floor, the husband walked out onto the terrace and said 'this must be the balcony,' then added 'nice view.' 'There's a view?' I wondered, never having looked at the surroundings from the perspective of a holiday maker or tourist. And 'no,' I wanted to explain, 'this isn't the balcony. This is where, after gathering walnuts from the tree, you spread out some newspapers on the floor and arrange the walnuts in their shells to dry. It is also where, after a long summer season of cultivating peppers, garlic and other produce, the crops are strung into long necklaces to dry, protected from the rain.

At this moment I realised the different significance this property held for the two parties – Bulgarian and British – brought together through the activity of selling and buying a rural property. For the Bulgarians, this was a home where parents and grandparents had toiled the land, married, given birth and died. The household plot provided a focal point for the generations: a vital part of the family's survival through the food that was produced from the land. Now, with the grandparents dead and the younger generations all living in the nearby town – and more distant cities – and unable to maintain the property, it was up for sale. On the other hand, for the British couple, the site was a holiday home, a place to relax in the sun, sit on the 'balcony' and look across at the vineyards and fields while sipping iced cool lemonades in the early evenings. In short, an escape from the drudgery of the often damp grey British climate.

In this largely ethnographic account, I focus on the changing significance of Bulgarian rural land which is being bought by foreigners. Central attention is given to property relations and the new (global) significance of land.[1] When property relations are discussed in terms of globalisation, it is usually in the context of new forms of property – such as ownership of body parts or cultural property (e.g. see Humphrey & Verdery 2004; Kaneff & King 2004; Kasten 2002). To date the revaluation of 'old' forms of property (land) through foreign investment has not been given academic attention. I look at property sales in the region of Veliko Turnovo, Bulgaria,[2] and how land is being attributed a new significance; with people and capital from the West coming into the locality and in the process establishing very different notions about property and its uses. This is a new phenomenon in the country. While international players have indirectly influenced the rural region through government policies and credit institutions for many years, foreigners are now becoming much more visible as they buy and move in, quite literally, next door! Further, while the sale of properties to north Europeans in southern Europe has a long history (e.g. see Sharpley 2004; Waldren 1997[3]) there are significant particularities in the east European context: postsocialist reforms that involved a movement away from a centralised economy have included the establishment of a new property market which is open to internal as well as foreign investment, extending beyond national boundaries, integrating local land into the global property market.

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[1] In a forthcoming paper I look more directly at transnational aspects of foreign property ownership.

[2] Although I have worked in this area of Bulgaria for 20 years, fieldwork for this specific topic was carried out in 2004 and 2005, in the city of Veliko Turnovo and surroundings. I interviewed estate agents, prospective buyers and sellers, as well as Britons and Bulgarians already living in the area.

[3] Sociologists and geographers have also worked on this topic, e.g. Dwyer 2000.

Engagement with this market is one particular means by which Bulgaria is being incorporated politically, socially and economically into the expanding new 'Europe.'

Foreign investment in rural Bulgaria influences the use to which land is put as well as the meanings associated with it: agricultural activities now exist alongside a growing concern with land as an investment opportunity and/or recreation site. As discussed below, these changes are bound to a variety of economic and ethnic factors and ultimately can be understood only when considered in terms of a global system of property that connects the locality with foreign buyers, transnational lifestyles and international capital.

Background

Although not yet officially confirmed, 33,000 Britons live permanently in Bulgaria and many thousands of others are spending the summer months in their newly acquired properties. Following the trend of other migrants in other parts of the world, British buyers tend to stick together, buying in the same village or area. While I focus on the British in the Veliko Turnovo region, it is important to note that other nationalities are also buying property in Bulgaria and so forming their own communities within the country e.g. there are Belgian settlers also living in the Veliko Turnovo region, while a settlement of Japanese near Shipka in the mountains has been widely reported in the Bulgarian media.[4] The areas that are proving most popular are the Black Sea (now reaching western/Spanish prices) and Bansko (in the mountains). But there are other pockets of interest, including Veliko Turnovo. In fact, as the former become so expensive that they are moving out of the price range for some westerners, Veliko Turnovo, amongst other places, is increasing in popularity.

The way in which prospective buyers first became interested in Bulgarian property is an important feature of the growing transnational dimension of the local property market. In an age of globalisation where the media and internet are increasingly shaping social relations, it should not be surprising to learn that the migration of British citizens to Bulgaria can be traced back to one TV programme on Channel 4 called 'A Place in the Sun' which followed a British couple who were looking for a place to buy in a foreign country.[5] The programme was screened on British TV in September 2001.

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[4] For example, see: http://ide.li/modules.php?name=News&file=article+sid=40, www.chambersz.com/old/index.php?option=news&task=viewarticle&sid=435&Itemid=2, www.standartnews.com/arcdhive/2005/03/03/reportage/index.htm).

[5] Sharpley 2004: 24 & 30 also notes the importance of TV programmes in influencing British tourism.

Later the information was published as a book and this led to a flurry of other TV programmes specifically on Bulgaria as well as numerous articles in newspapers and journals (including The Times and Guardian in Britain, but also The Wall Street Journal, Newsweek, and even the 'British Airways' in-flight magazine[6]). The prospective British buyers and present owners to whom I spoke, named these particular TV programmes as the source of their knowledge about Bulgarian property.

Of course other considerations are also important. After 20–30 years of investment in Spain, France and Italy – the more traditional locations for British property buyers – these areas have become too expensive for many Britons. At the same time, Bulgaria's sunny climate, red wine, beaches and skiing facilities, as well as its looming accession to the EU, has given it a reputation as a new, relatively cheap and desirable location, making it attractive to British buyers.

The British buyers

In Bulgaria, the ownership of land by foreign individuals is illegal.[7] However, there are ways around this: foreigners can establish companies which can legally own land. This is common knowledge and most estate agents provide an all-inclusive service that sorts out such legal technicalities for the buyer.[8] With no *individual* property rights, it is the companies – with individuals behind them – who are, strictly speaking, the property owners. Thus to focus solely on legal criteria would not reveal much about the particularities of land ownership.[9] Based on my research I identify three categories of British buyers, who maintain different interests in, and understandings of, property.[10]

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[6] More recently books on the topic have also been published, e.g.: J. Losack & J. Gregory, *How to buy property in Bulgaria: everything a Brit needs to know about buying, investing and enjoying one of the world's fastest growing property markets*, Lean Marketing Press, 2005.

[7] Entry into the EU is expected to bring about a change in ownership laws.

[8] In this respect, Nijman (2002) is correct to remind us that *local* factors such as state intervention – or the lack of it as in my Bulgarian case – as much as transnational influences, need to be considered in any particular context.

[9] Hann (1993; 2003) reminds us, when writing about a very different situation and context, that it is useful to look at land use in addition to legal ownership when considering property relations. This appears equally relevant in privatised Bulgaria.

[10] A breakdown of the socio-economic background of British buyers is also significant, although there is no room to go into the topic here in any detail. Those buying in Veliko Turnovo are not usually from the southeast, but from the more economically and geographically peripheral areas of Britain – Scotland, the Midlands and Wales. A future topic for research would be to investigate the British end – are buyers from these peripheral areas experiencing an economic boom and thus able to engage in a foreign market that to date

a) The first group comprises investors/developers. One British estate agent in Veliko Turnovo stated that properties are not only 'homes' to the British, but that they are also 'investments' – security for the future. He explained that given the 'British obsession with property' there is a lot of capital in the British real estate market and, convinced that Bulgarian property is a good investment, investors are taking out some of this money, in order to buy in Bulgaria. Unlike the other groups described below, with this group investment appears to be the sole purpose of property buying; property is simply a commodity and opportunity to maximise personal profit. I have not carried out research with such people except on the internet where they unashamedly state their interest in Bulgaria to be purely in order to make money (and to hell with any social or other consequences). To carry out face to face research with such people would require a trip to Britain as many of them have never been to Bulgaria. They buy, to use their term, 'blind,' over the internet, never leaving the confines of their computer desk! One man writes: 'We bought quite a few properties in and around Varna, all purchases were blind. This is not because we could not afford the trip in monetary terms, it is because we could not afford the time.' He boasts that since they bought their properties in April 2004 they have doubled in price.[11] Some estate agents encourage this type of investment by offering 'bulk buying' deals where if you buy 2–3 properties, the agent's commission is reduced by a certain amount and if you buy 4–5 properties the reduction increases even more. For these investors making money is the goal. One 24 year old writes: 'I want to freely admit that I'm interested in Bulgaria purely from a financial aspect. I'm not ashamed of this... If I went out there, bought properties, sold them and made a fortune – great. If that means that locals can't afford the properties us "greedy Brits" are snapping up – such is life. Sorry to sound quite blunt, but that's the way it is.'[12] 'Profit,' another internet user adds, 'is not a dirty word...'[13] Responding to criticisms aimed at 'greedy, land-grabbing Brits,' another retorted that investors benefit Bulgaria in that they bring money into the local economy in a variety of ways – such as through using local lawyers and agents.[14] In my experience the local economy does not gain as much from such investors as

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was only accessible to the wealthy English? Or are they being pushed out of the British market, with eastern Europe the only place they can afford to buy property at all?

[11] www.mybulgaria.info/bulgaria-property-forums.html, buying blind: 7.10.04, 11.17 am.

[12] www.mybulgaria.info/bulgaria-property-forums.html, 26.4.05, Daily Torygraphs, p. 13, 12.42 pm.

[13] www.mybulgaria.info/bulgaria-property-forums.html, 26.4.05 Daily Torygraphs, p. 15, 3.00 pm.

[14] www.mybulgaria.info/bulgaria-property-forums.html, 28.4.05, Daily Torygraphs, p. 16, 8.45 pm.

some internet writers suggest. This is because British buyers tend to use British rather than Bulgarian estate agents who have unfamiliar business practices and often don't speak English (language is a vital resource). Trust is shown along ethnic lines, with British buyers trusting other Britons and preferring to work with them. And if the local economy does make gains, it is often a particular group within the local economy that gains the most, i.e. the *British* members of this community (such as the British estate agents now living in Veliko Turnovo) or those Bulgarians who speak fluent English and work with the Britons.

b) The second group constitutes what I call seasonal (regular, short term) migrants. Usually retired people, or those close to retirement, they are searching for a good investment while also planning to live part of the year in their holiday homes until they sell them sometime in the projected future. Many people in this category have bought houses in villages surrounding Veliko Turnovo. One of the couples looking for a place in rural Veliko Turnovo (November of 2004) made it clear that their reason for buying in Bulgaria was that it was far cheaper and less commercial than Spain or Portugal. The Black Sea, they complained, was already becoming so expensive that it was out of their price range and too developed for their tastes. So, they were now investigating the possibility of Veliko Turnovo. The woman, in her 50s, a solicitor from Manchester, and her retired husband, had been to Bulgaria only once before when they had come on a 'two day viewing package' a couple of months earlier. Now, in this second four-day trip to the country they were determined to buy something. The plan was to come back in the summer of 2005, renovate the house and then return every summer over the next years. Eventually they hoped to sell the place at a profit. In the meantime, she and her husband would enjoy their summer holiday home. 'And you never know,' she added, 'perhaps we may end up retiring here.' A spacious rural property (something they couldn't afford in the UK) is what they wanted. Further, unlike most of the British people interviewed, this couple planned to plant fruit trees and grow vegetables in their garden and during their long absences they intended to 'pay someone to look after the garden.'

The couple knew next to nothing about Bulgaria in terms of culture, language or its history. But as investors they had done their economic homework: they knew that Bulgaria is currently a good place in which to invest. And they had also researched other practical issues such as the cost of flights to Bulgaria and ways of accessing this provincial region from both Sofia and Varna. When I asked them how they intended to travel backwards and forwards from Sofia airport (over 200 km away) when they owned no car, the woman replied: 'taxis are cheap, we'll use them.' They

were also hopeful that cheap airlines would start operating from Bulgaria once it became an EU member.

Permanent migrants to Bulgaria are critical of such seasonal migrants who 'are just out to get cheap property and live in a nice house.' The former view the latter as maintaining lifestyles that are primarily driven by economic factors. It is this which separates temporary migrants from both the Bulgarians (for whom the land is primarily of agricultural significance) and more permanent UK migrants.

c) This brings me to the third category: permanent migrants, who are usually younger people in their 30s or 40s and fed up with life in Britain. They distinguish themselves from the seasonal migrants and pure investors on the basis of their commitment to Bulgaria. For this group, Bulgaria is their new, permanent home.[15]

Ben[16] is a retired policeman from Scotland in his mid-late forties (retired due to illness and receiving a full pension). After his divorce he said he 'wanted to move on and make a complete change' and so after seeing a TV programme about people moving to Bulgaria and carrying out some of his own research on the internet, he sold his house in Scotland, bought a caravan and set off. He had never been to Bulgaria when he made the decision to move permanently. It took him two weeks to find the appropriate house, which he spent a further two months renovating. He moved into his new home in a village some 40 km from Veliko Turnovo in February 2004, and has been living there ever since. He said he had chosen his present house because 'this is the only one I found with big rooms of the kind I was used to back home.' The renovations clearly reflect the different meaning and use this property holds for Ben with respect to local understandings. The house, for example, was chosen specifically because it had conveniences similar to his previous Scottish home: big rooms, and the potential to accommodate a large bathroom with an inside toilet. Apart from adding an internal bathroom, he also modernised the kitchen. The garden also reflects Ben's attempts to replicate things as they were 'back home.' He told me 'I didn't want land' but that with the help of neighbours he established a vegetable patch measuring a few square metres (as opposed to the half hectare that is usually worked by villagers). 'That' he said 'is enough for me' because as he explained vegetables are cheap to buy. On the rest of the land he has planted a lawn and in the middle placed a rotating clothes line

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[15] A question may be raised as to how 'permanent' the move is. It is likely that as in other cases of northerners moving to southern Europe, if/when health declines, migrants return to their original home in order to make use of the better medical services (Dwyer 2000).

[16] Names have been changed to protect anonymity.

for hanging up the washing – creating a landscape that resembles Scottish suburbia in the heart of a Bulgarian village!

Ben's garden is in stark contrast to the Bulgarian household plots, where decorative flowers are planted around the periphery of the house, while the majority of the land is used for the production of vegetables and fruit (the produce is preserved in jars for the winter). Bulgarian household plots are part of an economic strategy for survival. But more than this, village family relations are centred on working this land, and consuming the produce, together. That is, for Bulgarians, land – or rather working and sharing the produce from it – underpins close social relations between family, neighbours and the community at large (Kaneff 2002). This is not the case for Ben, whose social relations do not revolve around his household plot. It is true that he has set up a hobby vegetable patch and this necessitated interactions with his neighbours. But, it is non-agricultural activities that are more important to him and take up most of his time: for example, he is learning Bulgarian through taking lessons from a village school teacher; he accompanies the school folklore group to music festivals and plays the bagpipes; and watches football matches on TV with other villagers in the local café. He also runs a business over the internet, making bagpipe reeds. In other words, Ben's attempt to integrate and set up social relations with the people is not carried out, predominantly, through his land and agricultural activities (as is the case with Bulgarians). The land surrounding his home, despite its rural location, is attributed a set of western, suburban meanings.

The Bulgarian owners

Veliko Turnovo is not a tourist centre of the magnitude of the Black Sea or some of the major ski resorts, however, it is an attractive town (population 75,000) with historical significance – it was the medieval capital of the country between the 12th and 14th centuries. The citadel dating from this time remains a popular attraction. Tourism is an important part of the city's economy: e.g. some 1000 US tourists are bussed in every week from the Danube River boat cruises. They spend a day visiting the old part of the city – souvenir shops and the citadel – before returning to the Danube to continue their cruise. While the town was a tourist location throughout the socialist period (if not before) there is nothing particularly spectacular in the surrounding agricultural villages except that they offer the peace of rural life within commuting distance of the provincial capital. But the sloping plains and fertile soil make the area particularly good for the production of grain crops and grapes for wine.

Land in the villages is worked by, now privatised, cooperatives or agricultural firms, which much like their socialist predecessors, do not employ the vast majority of the villagers. But villagers are nevertheless engaged in agricultural activities in their half hectare household plots. These plots, always necessary to a household economy, have become even more important after 1989 when unemployment and low wages/pensions means that food produced from the plots is a valuable way of making ends meet. Jars of preserves prepared in the summer constitute an important part of winter food for the families. Indeed it is not only rural villagers but also their city based kin who depend on the produce from the village household plot (Smollet 1989).

While the northern-central part of Bulgaria is a wealthy agricultural area, industrialisation from the 1960s onwards has resulted in depopulation, as young people moved to the cities to work in factories. Those that migrated short distances – for example to Veliko Turnovo – are able to return on weekends and work the land. But for those who migrated further, to Sofia or Varna for example, the house and plot have not been maintained. Villages in this area have been in decline for the last 30–40 years as houses are left empty. Talpa, the village where I have carried out research, represents a typical picture. Located some 35 km from Turnovo, it has seen a massive fall in population over the last 50 years; now only one-quarter of the inhabitants live in Talpa compared to World War II.[17] Not only has the population significantly declined, but it has also aged. Since the 1980s Talpa residents are predominantly elderly – two thirds of the village's residents are pensioners.

The result of this is that there are many houses that over the years have been left empty as the older generations die and the younger generations either return to the villages seasonally or not at all. While there was some talk of the area being officially designated a villa zone (in the 1980s), nothing eventuated. Unofficially, the village is a part-time residence for many: elderly people often move back to Talpa after they retire from their city jobs in order to maintain the house and household land; younger generations spend the summer holidays or weekends working the land. Those houses that remain unused have degenerated over the years. This reflects more generally the fate of community buildings. As the number of inhabitants has continued to decline, public resources have also been reduced

[17] At the end of WWII the population was almost 2000 (in 1946 Talpa had a population of 1935) but this declined to half of that by 1975 (i.e. to 1075). In 1985 the population was approximately 750 (Republica Bulgaria, Natzionalen Statisticheski Institute, Tom: III: 90, Sofia 1994). By 2001 it had fallen to 520 inhabitants (a figure provided by the village Mayor).

dramatically resulting, after 1989, in the closure and increasing ruin of a number of public buildings, including sections of the *Chitalishte* (cultural house) and kindergarten.

As so many other villages in the Veliko Turnovo region, in Talpa the problem of empty houses has been partly addressed by the influx of Roma. It was at the initiative of the Mayor, some 5 years ago, that Roma were offered free housing in empty houses in Talpa as a way to repopulate the village. Numbers of Roma in Talpa – as in many other villages in the region – have climbed steeply. From the two families that lived there some 20 years ago, there are now over 100 Roma residents. The influx of these settlers has created new problems. As they do not maintain the house or work the surrounding plot of land, the property soon goes to ruin. Once this happens the Roma inhabitants simply move on to another empty house. Further, as the first to suffer unemployment after 1989, the Roma population have been forced into working in the marginal and frequently illegal activities that make up the informal economy. Activities include stealing internal contents (furniture etc) from empty houses and the dismantling of the houses themselves, with building materials such as roof tiles being removed and sold off as building materials. Other crimes, of which the elderly residents accuse the Roma population, involve stealing livestock and crops. Occasionally elderly inhabitants who have tried to defend their property have also been attacked. In short, as unemployment has become endemic and resources are reduced, the local crime rate has skyrocketed. As a result both prejudice and tensions are increasing between the elderly villagers and new Roma settlers.

Relations Between British and Bulgarian Rural Inhabitants

In this context the sale of properties to Britons is seen, by elderly rural residents, as a welcome event. When villagers speak about such sales the stories are presented as ones of hope; here at last are people not from the very bottom of the social ladder (as in the case of Roma), but wealthy foreigners, whose presence is viewed as a reflection on the worth and true value of their community (usually devalued by urban Bulgarians). Rumours in the village about which houses have been sold and which are up for sale are always couched in an aura of excitement and expectation that the presence of these foreigners will turn around the decline of the village, that they will 'save' the village from further decay and ruin. And economically the sale of empty houses appears as advantageous to the Bulgarians as to British citizens. In fact Bulgarians are clamouring to sell their unused properties. In the process land is taking on a new significance as a valuable commodity.

At the heart of Bulgarian understanding about property is the idea that at all costs the land and house must be preserved, looked after and used 'properly,' which means not dismantling the buildings or allowing them to go to ruin. How the property is treated and how it is used is at the centre of why British buyers are accepted as suitable village neighbours (despite their interest in land as recreation/investment rather then agricultural production) while the Roma population, which has apparently no respect for the property, is not deemed acceptable.[18]

To date I have witnessed no problems *between* British buyers and Bulgarian owners/rural residents.[19] Nevertheless, within both groups – British buyers and Bulgarian owners – tensions are evident. I have already pointed to the tensions that exist within the British community as permanent migrants express resentment towards those who are driven to buy property by purely economic motives. Problems are also evident within Bulgarian families as a result of the developing market.

The selling of a family property often brings with it squabbles, as family members argue about how the profit is divided. For example, the house that was for sale in the village where I was asked to act as a translator (mentioned at the beginning), was sold to a Scottish brother and sister in the winter of 2005. The Bulgarian seller was a man in his 60s who has lived most of his adult life in the neighbouring town of Pavlikeni. While his sister had legally disclaimed any ownership rights to the house many years earlier, the huge sum the house sold for, and the good relations between brother and sister meant that the brother willingly shared his profit with her and her family. He sold the house for 18,000 euros and gave his sister's family 2500 euros. The sister was more than content with the gesture, but her husband and children were not. An argument ensued that resulted in the sister's husband and children not speaking to her, as she defended her brother in the face of criticism from them. After two months of heated arguments (during which time the sister was accused by her husband as being foolish, years earlier, to have disclaimed her legal 50% inheritance

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[18] The preference for British owners may also reflect a conflict of interests between 'property owners' and 'rentees' rather than being simply of an ethnic nature. A further interesting dimension, which cannot be explored here, is the underlying issue of morality that is reflected in understandings about what are 'acceptable' uses of land. I thank Christian Lund for bringing this point to my attention.

[19] Information gathered about the Black Sea suggests a different situation. In this prime location where property is sought by both Bulgarians and foreigners, the former express dismay and annoyance at the over development of the area and the huge rise in prices that excludes many of them from the property market. It is possible too, that attitudes in rural Bulgaria will change as the number of foreign property owners increases, as Waldren reports happened in Mallorca (1997).

entitlement to the house) emotions subsided. The family was pacified in part when the brother eventually gave another 2500 euros to his sister and her family.

With such different uses and understandings about rural property, it may seem odd that there is no evident tension between Bulgarian and British land owners. I suggest that the reason for this can be found in the fact that rural properties are not a scarce resource and therefore there is no competition between the two groups. Bulgarians sell only if the village household is a second home and cannot be maintained by the family. Only empty houses that would otherwise fall into ruin (as so many in the village already have) are up for sale. If anything, Britons are welcomed, and seen as preferable to Roma residents, since they are believed to maintain, even improve, the property.

It is far too early to comment further on the different groups and how they will fare together; how the social and physical space will be transformed, and what sort of interactions and tensions will develop between the new and old owners. Perhaps the presence of Britons will, in the longer term, become a source of conflict as poor villagers and even poorer ethnic Roma become antagonised by the evident differentials in wealth. For the present, however, there is no evidence of such problems and foreign buyers are welcomed as bringing prestige to the rural community.[20]

Conclusion

Bulgarians give considerable attention to British citizens buying local rural property – both informally in everyday conversations and in the media – attesting to the impact this phenomenon is having amongst the population. Locally, at least, the reaction is largely positive, as the predominantly elderly villagers, fearful and negatively predisposed towards the growing Roma population, welcome the arrival of foreign residents.

The presence of British property owners in Bulgaria is resulting in local changes in property relations; bringing together groups of people with very different understandings and uses of property. For the British buyers, rural property is important both as a recreation space and sometimes investment opportunity (most recognise that rural Bulgaria has not the same investment potential as the Black Sea or ski resorts). For many it is also their – often second – home. But in each case, unlike the situation for the Bulgarians (Roma or elderly pensioners), Britons have economic security and so even if they work the land, it is a choice and a hobby, not something on which

[20] I have not carried out research amongst the Roma and therefore cannot comment on their views concerning the new foreign owners.

their survival depends. For now, the Veliko Turnovo area displays a mixture of land uses that exist side by side: land as an agricultural asset still predominates, but land as recreation and investment is gaining in importance.

Finally, I return briefly to the new significance of land which underpins emerging property relations in rural Bulgaria. My case study suggests that rural property can no longer be seen as having only local or national importance, for in some parts of Bulgaria (as in other select regions of eastern Europe) global interests – and the particular form that they take in any local context (Nijman 2002) – are clearly also at play. This incorporation of land into a global system requires further study. For transnational players are becoming central figures in the way in which rural land is now bought and sold, how it is conceptualised, valued and used. The intensification of mobility and world interconnectedness (where borders and boundaries, at least for the wealthy, pose few barriers) is transforming parts of Bulgaria into a space where land has multiple uses and divergent cultural communities converge. The British buyers first gained knowledge about Bulgaria through the media (TV and publications), and they conduct further information gathering and research on the internet. Some buy during organised package buying trips where they whiz in and out of the country in a matter of days. Others don't leave the comforts of their home, but buy over the internet. In this way Bulgarian property is incorporated into a global process that involves a movement of both people and finances – as wealthy westerners seek a 'good investment' as well as their 'place in the sun.' Notably the movement is in the one direction only; rural Bulgarians, at least, are not equally mobile or able to enjoy the same benefits of globalisation.

This case has some parallels with other European locations where western investors (not only British) have become property owners. In much the same way that Spain was at the forefront of property investment by the Britons some 20–30 years ago, now, Bulgaria (along with other east European countries, in particular Croatia and Montenegro) is being incorporated in the global property market. But there are also important differences. Of course more efficient and faster communication and transport mean that this incorporation is being carried out in quite a different pace and manner from three decades ago. But it should also be seen as a further step in the dislocation of Bulgarians from rural areas, a process begun in earnest during socialist industralisation which resulted in the migration of young people from rural areas and which has continued since the 1989 reforms (see also Hann 1993 and Verdery 2003 for parallel observations of rural dislocation in other parts of eastern Europe). For many Bulgarians their final links to the village – the empty family home – is now also severed when sold to a foreign buyer. As for Bulgarians left in the villages; it

remains to be seen how the relationship between them and their new British neighbours will be played out in the years to come; and what the long term implications will be for local understandings of property and for property relations more generally.

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