Educating From Scratch: Toward a Revitalized Bulgarian Village

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How might the absence of appropriate resources be a barrier to migration?

How do migrants enact futurism in difficult situations, and with what consequences?

Often, migrants relocate because of acute disruption: war, disaster, or persecution. Slower forms of violence, however, can lead to lifestyle migration, at once a response to nostalgia and an unsatisfying present. Some young urbanites in Bulgaria seek new possibilities in heavily depopulated rural settings. While rural revitalization is generally viewed across the country as desirable, most rural communities are ill-equipped to receive new arrivals. As a result, urban-rural migrants turn to local and foreign models to remake village life in accordance with their needs, drawing on a mix of traditional lifeways, New Age spirituality, and Western project models to facilitate educational opportunities nearly from scratch.

This article investigates village revitalization efforts in Oslen Krivodol, Bulgaria, a village of fewer than 150 residents. We seek to understand how young newcomers use cultural exchange, heritage, and alternative educational programming to initiate change in rural spaces, and with what impacts. We closely describe two events in Oslen—"Oslen Fest" and "Oslen Weekend – Education in Nature"—whose focus on culture and education are exemplary of broader ideological threads present in revitalization initiatives. Through these prisms, we explore the role of immersive participatory events alongside the slower efforts of young families who make homes in this heavily depopulated community.

About the photo: Bass Naroden play Oslen Fest in the rain on the improvised stage. All photos and captions courtesy of the authors.

We suggest that such events perform an important sort of futurism, implemented through continuous, collaborative learning: a simultaneous reaction to out-migration and a hope to lay the foundation for in-migration. We also point out that in such situations, educators are not only mediators of or responders to social change; they can also be agents of social change, in which transformation involves layers of learning, teaching, and collaborative exchange, for newcomers and receiver communities alike. We gesture to links between these village projects and others like them in Western European and American contexts (such as settlement schools, folk schools, and Waldorf schools), nodding to the complicated realities and "politics of culture" (Whisnant 1983) produced by outsiders who bring new models to local problems.

As culture workers—an American folklorist and a Bulgarian anthropologist—we are cautiously supportive of this work. Petya attended Oslen Weekend in Fall 2023[1], we both attended Oslen Fest in Summer 2023, and we have both collaborated with one of the partner organizations that supports revitalization efforts for more than five years. We want to see villages thrive, but we're also conscious of the negative impacts of similar historical and contemporaneous "helpers" in other locales (Whisnant 1983, Robie 1991, Borland and Adams 2013). We note in our work (Craycraft 2022b, Dimitrova 2022a, Dimitrova 2022b) that rural revitalization in Bulgaria is occurring on many different fronts, toward many different goals, and with a wide array of impacts. At the same time, certain factors hinder villages and would-be migrants from (re)building community. A central factor in this regard is education, referring both to the presence of adequate or merely functioning schools and access to broader and/or alternative types of education that might facilitate the transmission of cultural knowledge in ways that are additive, rather than disruptive, for both receiving community members and newcomers alike. Rather than approach these conversations from a stance of distanced critique, we encourage scholars and culture workers to become involved in similar efforts as thought partners, asking how our distanced perspectives might afford space for reflexivity that would otherwise be lost through "boots to the ground" efforts. In this way, we advocate for the continued involvement of scholar-activists (when invited) in any context in which locals and migrant-newcomers work to build new futures together.

Urban-Rural Migration in Bulgaria

For decades, media and everyday discourse have constructed the rural as a symbol of timelessness, silence, and idyll, a stronghold of tradition and life close to nature in opposition to urbanity (Williams 1973, Creed and Ching 1997, Caldwell 2010). Folkloristic conversations have, at times, contributed to these dialogues (Abrahams 1993, Bendix 1997). Coining the term "lifestyle migration," sociologists Benson and O'Reilly describe such migrants 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 and O'Reilly 2009, 621), often in pursuit of a "rural idyll" (Bunce 2003, Bell 2006, Halfacree 2014). Lifestyle migrants generally aren't nostalgic for the places they have left, as these places symbolize a life of stress and obligation, deprived of community spirit and freedom. In contrast, they characterize receiving environments with a slower pace of life, lower expenses, climatic and health advantages, and a sense of community (Benson and O'Reilly 2009, 609-10). The power of the term "lifestyle migration" lies in its ability to shift the focus from the mobility of individuals to their agency to make choices: to start anew, to build new identities, to reinvent oneself, and to be aware of what one is consuming and producing (Benson and O'Reilly 2009, Hoey 2014).

It is perhaps easy to write off urban-rural migrants as hipsters, back-to-the-landers, or rural gentrifiers. In the Bulgarian case, though, urbanites and villagers alike are observing rapid rural depopulation take place before their eyes. Their motivations often align with the lifestyle migrants described above while also containing a sense that the fate of rural Bulgaria hangs in the balance. Nevertheless, the imagined possibility of diving into romanticized rural traditionalism is something of an illusion, as such lifeways are simply no longer present in Bulgarian villages, or at least not in the ways they are sometimes presumed to exist. The story of rural transformation in Bulgaria is long and beyond the scope of this paper, but it is worth mentioning a few key factors.[2]

Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Bulgaria experienced waves of nation-building and identity formation throughout the early 20th century as artists, intellectuals, leaders, and everyday people alike sought to find their place alongside their European counterparts. Experimental cooperatives and visions of a prospering agrarian nation gave way to full-scale collectivization and industrialization of the countryside during the Communist period (Yancheva 2015), complete with the nationalization of folklife and top-down ideological efforts to transform peasants into workers. The Communist regime essentially seeded the first waves of contemporary rural depopulation, exacerbated during the transformations of the early 1990s. As Bulgaria found its footing as a postsocialist, democratic, capitalist nation, villages experienced devastating levels of depopulation as well as the immediate closure and gradual decay of key infrastructures like schools, shops, and cultural centers. Urban hubs absorbed massive waves of migrants as young families moved to cities or abroad, seeking work and viable living conditions. Bulgaria's incorporation into the European Union in 2007 carried hopes of much-needed change for the better, but the unfulfilled promises of EU membership instead left a bitter taste in the mouths of many. Bulgaria is currently projected as one of the fastest-depopulating countries worldwide.[3]

One effect of this history is the production of a generational gap, in which many young urbanites are dissatisfied with contemporary city life *and* curious about traditional practices perceived to be lost because of socialist and postsocialist transformation, in opposition to older generations. This leads some to seek village life as an alternative path in the face of a disappointing present. Consciously or unconsciously, they become a vehicle or medium of the civic. Urban-rural migrants often claim that they've escaped a pointless lifestyle—office jobs, consumerism—which was suppressing their individual needs and talents. Paradoxically, because of such lifestyles they've assembled the resources (education, entrepreneurial skills, access to like-minded networks) to attempt the transition to a new environment and to influence their new communities significantly. Thus, access to educational resources enables lifestyle migration and positions successful newcomers to serve as links for those following in their footsteps. These efforts sometimes draw on neoliberal tactics of intervention, such as grants and project competitions. Such tactics require intrepid young newcomers to adhere to project cycles and sometimes reify narratives of place (see Craycraft 2022a, Bendix et al. 2017, Gavrailov 2019). Migrants might combine such resources with lifeways based in New Age spiritualities and alternative educational philosophies, both of which have seen a resurgence in postsocialist Bulgaria (Creed 2024, Manova 2022, Stancheva 2023). To sustain the cultural heritage of rural Bulgaria, then, is to find ways to meld the old and the new, salvaging a foundation for new lifeways to simultaneously mix with and depart from the old.

Education From Scratch in Oslen Krivodol

The story of rural transformation and the role of newcomers differs from village to village, based on a variety of factors including nationality, ethnicity, class, gender, and age of migrants. We focus here on Oslen Krivodol, where the "rural renaissance" of this community, as those in the village call it, is a growing, collaborative, and sometimes contentious effort between a variety of actors: newcomers with and without ancestral roots in the village, the village mayor, NGO project initiatives, and local residents.

In 2017, Roman and Diana, a couple in their early 50s, sold their ceramic tile business, paid off their bank debts, and relocated to Diana's ancestral home in Oslen, in the northwestern foothills of the Balkan Mountains. They devoted three years to renovating the house, and Roman's positive reputation and handyman skills caught the attention of locals. In 2019, he was offered the role of mayor. Over the next four years, aided by local municipal funds and plenty of volunteers, Roman took on the mission of revitalizing the infrastructures and community life of the neglected village. Meanwhile, Kiril, a local man in his late 20s, had been residing in the capital and regularly visiting his grandmother in Oslen. He took notice of the ongoing positive changes and launched his own initiatives in the village. With his partner, Nevena, he moved into his grandmother's house in 2022, and the two soon became social entrepreneurs. They secured international funding, attracted media attention to Oslen's transformation, and co-organized an alternative local festival (Oslen Fest) with the mayor's eldest daughter, B.[4]

Inspired by Nevena and Kiril's social media updates about Oslen, St. and C. (a Bulgarian and an American who has been living in Europe for over a decade) visited Oslen in search of a quaint and idyllic community where they could settle down and raise their child. As of 2024, they are still living in a rental property with their baby while waiting to repair an old house they recently acquired. Another international couple in their early 40s (Welsh and Bulgarian) have been living in Oslen for almost a decade, raising and homeschooling their two children. Encouraged by the influx of many active newcomers, two more families in their late 30s recently bought second homes: the mayor's youngest daughter, M., and another family inspired by a publicized interview with Nevena and Kiril.

This emerging community of newcomers largely follow the teachings of Peter Deunov (1864-1944), a renowned spiritual leader who taught "parallel spirituality based on Orthodox Christianity and on the culture of new-age," as described by the anthropologist Anelia Manova (2022, 55). As with other village revitalization efforts (collective and individual), shared ideologies and spiritual practices unite this group and draw fellow practitioners into their circle.

We now discuss two events that demonstrate how education of various sorts is used by lifestyle migrants as both motive and tactic for cultural, social, and spiritual revitalization.

"Oslen Fest: Village Renaissance," June 15-19, 2023

It's rare to see a 100 percent weather forecast for rain, but on the weekend of "Oslen Fest 2023" in Oslen-Krivodol, it was absolutely accurate. Running for the second year, "Oslen Fest: Village Renaissance" gathered artists, homesteaders, urban progressives, alternative lifestyle advocates, and local villagers to foster the cohesion and skill-sharing that urban-rural migrants seek. Oslen Fest is "a festival with a cultural, ecological, and educational mission for social transformation…

supporting conscious and sustainable living… close to nature" (Rural Renaissance), one aspect of a broader international initiative, "Rural Renaissance."[5] As such, the festival aims to foster development of the self *and* (re)development of the village as the best place for self-development and conscious living.

Oslen Fest is not *of* the village, but rather adds a new layer to village life. Neither a commemoration nor a celebration of a singular event, custom, or person, the festival might best be understood through the lens of cultural display (Abrahams 1981, Bendix 1989), in which an aspirational version of Oslen is staged for locals and visitors alike. It is a project in development that draws on the traditional and the alternative. What's more, it is not a unique phenomenon for Bulgaria; we might think of Oslen Fest as one of many "village projects" that can be understood through a folkloristic lens, as genres employed to communicate particular visions of revitalization and particular performances of "rural."[6]

Although the festival was physically dampened by unrelenting rains, organizers Kiril and Nevena managed to facilitate a weekend of festivities in the meadowed foothills of the Balkan Mountains. In 2023, the program featured several bands, workshops, and activities for those who stuck around in spite of the mud and mess. Musical groups such as Bass Naroden, a musical project combining electronic vibrations with folk music, brought soundscapes to the village that exemplified the spirit and fusion aesthetics of revitalization projects. A pre-festival volunteer camp of domestic and international volunteers constructed facilities to host the workshops and musicians, building benches, "geospheres," pop-up compost toilets, open-air sinks, and other DIY infrastructures necessary for a fully outdoors, eco-friendly festival. These new structures, built specifically for the festival, remain in the meadows for other seasonal gatherings and complement efforts to repair the local cultural center and crumbling homes.

Through display, cultural education, and exchange, three layers of communication gave shape to the festival: local-to-outsider, local-to-local, and outsider-to-outsider. Attention to these different layers points out how newcomers switch between different positionalities as village hosts, village newcomers, and village network nodes.

DIY structures at the festival.

"Let's Build with Hemp" workshop.

Local-to-local exchange

On one level, the festival curated exchange between people who already call the village home. The pre-festival mediation work done by Roman in his role as mayor, for example, helped ease the balance between newcomers and long-time residents. This bridge work and other relational work manifested in at least two festival performances: a folk choir from the neighboring village, and a children's puppet show. The puppet show, *Male Male,* orchestrated by Roman and Diana's daughter and stepson, Mila and Kole, featured five local children who performed oral histories collected from village elders. The show is an example of intergenerational bridge work. As a local organic farmer put it, "The theater workshop is a wonderful example [of a bridge between generations], because the grandmothers and those whose stories were performed, they were very happy. [It was] for the 'local market,' as they say, for the locals." Such performances within the performative frame of the festival played a double role: entertaining visitors while also communicating to locals how the slow, intentional efforts of newer villagers, although somewhat unfamiliar, can lay the groundwork for meaningful intergenerational exchange.

Local-to-outsider exchange

In their roles as hosts, Nevena and Kiril built programming that showcased the village. Outside of festival time, Roman and other younger, able-bodied locals have maintained beloved, sacred sites in and around the village. Guided festival hikes to a nearby megalith sanctuary and natural springs invite visitors to learn about the history and environment of this particular community. Local hospitality, too, is on display. As Diana explained, "Last year, at the festival, every morning we got together and the grandmothers made some mekitsi [fried dough], some banitsi [cheese pastry], some cakes, sweets. And in the morning they waited for us and we drive around to them, each one has made something. We come with the trays and that was the breakfast. We sold it and then gave the money to them—they didn't want to take it, they said 'No.'" Refusing the money, local women also fulfilled the role of host to welcome visitors but declined the commodification of their lifeways. In this way, they also claim a stake in the success of the festival.

Outsider-to-outsider exchange

Perhaps the most prominent layer of exchange took place between "outsiders" through cultural practices not local to the village, aimed primarily at the urban-rural migrant network. Because newcomers straddle a line between "local" and "outsider," we discuss the practices they brought to the village as outsider-to-outsider exchange. At its simplest level, impromptu exchange was an unplanned, although hoped-for, outcome of the festival. Over meals, during breaks, and while sheltering in place from the heavy rains, festival goers exchanged life stories. While seated on damp benches one morning, for example, Sarah engaged in a lively conversation between homesteaders regarding the limits and potentials of permaculture gardening, and they continued to deepen their relationships throughout the festival.

Structured sessions created opportunities for skill-building and life-building. Each morning started with spiritual, embodied exercises following Peter Deunov's paneurhythmia method. As such, the workshops fit within a broader framework of spiritual, interconnected living, training both the body and the mind for a revitalized way of life. Practical sessions equipped visitors with new skills inspired by traditional lifeways. For example, Dimitur Mihailov's "Let's Build with Hemp" taught participants how to mix mud, hemp, sand, and other elements to reconstruct old homes, as an energy efficient twist on the more common mud-straw kirpich often found as a covering for brick

and/or wooden structures. Participants were able to troubleshoot attempts at working with vernacular building techniques while sampling ideas they might incorporate back home.

As a whole, the festival programming was open to locals, and certain activities (in particular, the concerts and staged performances) offered cultural immersion for guests of all sorts. Oslen Fest displayed a sampling of aspirational village dwelling: tactics for living a presumably cleaner, healthier life, in community with others who are trying to initiate such lifestyle changes in other locales. At the same time, it offered locals an opportunity to see the breadth of people interested in new rural living beyond those who had already made Oslen their home.

"Oslen Weekend: Education in Nature," September 31-October 2, 2023

If the festival was a celebration of community and possibilities offered by village life, Oslen Weekend served as a direct promise to provide high-quality education for newcomers' children and as an invitation and call to action to build educational systems not provided through state support. Anthropologist Atanaska Stancheva (2023, 218 and 223) argues that urban-rural migrants view the education of children as an opportunity to change the status quo by teaching them commitment to nature and appreciation for life on the edge of "the system" through a variety of methods such as Lozanov's Suggestopedia and Rudolf Steiner's Waldorf pedagogy.[7]

For more than two decades, urban-rural migrants in Bulgaria have labored to implement these beliefs in the communities they join (or plan to establish). Such is the case in Oslen, where proactive newcomers are working to create a children's cooperative. As of Spring 2024, they are revitalizing one more hall in the abandoned, decaying village school for this purpose. A "children's cooperative" requires intensive participation of parents in daily activities and shared views on the "right way" to raise young

children. Hence, a cooperative is a mix of the values of freedom and control, in which *freedom* conveys the sense of the parent being free to educate their child(ren) almost outside the system and the sense of the child being encouraged to develop their individual talents and characteristics. *Control* conveys putting one's children in an alternative environment that the parent believes is suitable, although distanced from both urban opportunities and challenges (Koleva 2022, 273).

Children's cooperatives are usually located in urban areas, with financially stable, time-rich parents. In contrast, cooperatives in rural areas promise lower or nonexistent expenses and presume that the educational quality will exceed that of the nearest town school. Most importantly, newcomers presume that cooperatives strengthen community, as they enable both parents and children to build friendships and regularly exchange experiences with one another. Assigning one's children to a cooperative is a protest against contemporary mainstream education as well as the system that prevailed in late socialist and early postsocialist Bulgaria. As summarized by the Welsh resident of Oslen, "What we're trying to do is to create the best environment we can to maybe make a better job of parenting than our parents did." Paradoxically, these parents are nostalgic for the same past they critique and generally "depict their childhood as more free and 'natural' than what they feel able to offer their own children" (Clemensen 2020, 483).

These exemplify the issues and values discussed during the Oslen Weekend in Autumn 2023. According to the Facebook event description, the event was for "families and future parents; teachers wishing to teach close to nature; people ready to share their experience in organizing educational spaces; children; just curious people" interested in the topic of "…*human pedagogy* which places the individual as a whole person at the center. The teacher supports the child and their needs, talents, choices, self-esteem development, and active learning through experience." Thus, the event points directly at a certain type of person who is welcomed not only for this weekend but also to stay in Oslen as thought partners/future actors. The event attracted roughly 20 parents, plus their children.

The weekend's primary organizer, Nevena, has a strong background in alternative education, having trained in pedagogy, arts, and Waldorf education and having worked in urban-based children's cooperatives. During the first day, two renowned founders of such cooperatives in Bulgaria shared their experiences. The creator of "Sweet Honey" children's center explained the main methods of Peter Deunov's "sun education" and how they teach it in his center, followed by the creator of "SunRay" suggestopedia school in Plovdiv, an eco-school for one hundred children (1st through 7th grade) consisting of five decares of a school yard, open-air classrooms, and greenhouses where children raise food and eat it for breakfast and lunch.[8]

Most noteworthy for this article is the practical session on the second day of the retreat. Together, participants first discussed and then mapped the values they wish to bring to alternative educational experiences for their children, planned or already present. The small groups summarized their highest priorities for a children's cooperative, writing these values in shiny colors on big sheets of paper. Their question "What shall there be in the Oslen cooperative?" transformed to become "How do I imagine everyday life going on for my child in a cooperative?" Six points were outlined on a list titled "DAILY SCHEDULE": 1) time spent in nature–there should be a garden where children grow food and have their breakfast and lunch; 2) they should also spend time with animals; 3) physical activity; 4) high-quality food; 5) free play–including games for recognizing emotions,

mixed-aged groups; 6) creativity–creating objects with natural materials with a focus on the process and not so much on the perfection of the results.

Another list titled "OBJECTIVES (what skills do we want the children to develop?)" outlined musical intelligence, creativity, independence but also understanding of boundaries and rules, balance between mind, heart and will; reasoning and cause-and-effect relationship, motor skills; love for nature, emotional intelligence, healthy self-esteem and tolerance to making mistakes; healthy habits. The third list, "VALUES," emphasized respect, love, health, living in nature, community, joy, play, peace, security, independence, freedom while respecting boundaries, selflessness, honesty, determination. As a conclusion, participants outlined the importance of "environment as a teacher," meaning that education should follow a rhythm related to the seasons and natural cycles; "the triangle formed by a child, a teacher and a parent"; and "the relationship of the child with its internal world." Interestingly, no one mentioned academic achievements in typical subjects like math, writing, reading, English language, etc.

Like many traditional forms, these lifestyle migrants carry the educational pedagogies (often alternative but institutionalized) they learned from origin communities into new locales, either as teachers or parents-to-be. The values outlined above are reflective of meanings steeped in Bulgaria but also shaped by models beyond its borders. By collaboratively adapting these models to the needs and capacities of receiver communities, they implement educational programs quite literally in the ruins of schools abandoned and left to rot, aimed toward future communities they imagine together.

Conclusion

As we have heard time and again in our work, schools are the heartbeat of small communities, an issue facing communities beyond Bulgaria. The idea of cultural education in Oslen extends beyond the two events described here. Weekends with similar topics (healthy lifestyle, singing/dancing together, etc.) are organized regularly and serve as continued points of engagement. As Nevena explained to a woman who asked in the village Facebook page whether any houses are for sale, "Usually we first meet face to face, invite you to some event, spend time together, volunteer together, the family gets to know the community, and then we enter the topic of buying a property." The advocates for urban-rural lifestyle migration use education and culture to facilitate and mediate the attraction and arrival of newcomers, and they also use these events to intentionally rebuild their community.

While this article has focused primarily on the short-term events hosted by newcomers, their experiences, and their goals, the above statement makes clear that more work remains. A deeper inquiry into the perspectives of the receiver community, in addition to the stakes of selective repopulation (especially in terms of who is excluded and why, a topic that points potentially toward issues of race, ethnicity, and class dynamics at play), are necessary next steps to understand better the ways that newcomer tactics interact with already-existing lifeways. What's more, ongoing conversations with newcomers in Oslen Krivodol, as well as with village activists in other places and projects, should consider the consequences of viewing and building community through the lens of projects.

Festive forms, display, and educational training are intricately enmeshed in Bulgarian village revitalization, as are spirituality and aesthetics. Other models of and values for village living exist, of course, but these entanglements are especially common throughout the homesteader network. Whereas custom and top-down transformation heavily shaped the village culture of their predecessors, young urban-rural migrants encounter the complex opportunity to fashion different ways of life within, around, and apart from the piecemeal traditions they're inheriting.

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Endnotes

[1] Petya Dimitrova's study on Oslen is part of the ongoing research project "The Neighbour from Sofia, the New Villager from Germany: Counterurbanisation, Sociocultural Interactions and Local Transformations" funded by the National Science Fund of Bulgaria (КП-06-Н70/10).

[2] For a more detailed overview of these histories, we recommend Silverman (1983), Creed (1998), Duijzings (2013), and Pileva et al. (2023).

[3] https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/countries-with-declining-population

[4] Some names are shortened to first initials, as preferred by interviewees.

[5] See report by Nevena Yovcheva: Rural Renaissance—A Tool for Revitalising Villages, https://creativeimpact.eu/wp-content/uploads/231122_yovcheva_nevena_public_version.pdf?fbclid=IwAR2XTkAeEKI_S5dBf0y4ODKoeB2bGi8VdBu5bxXbZKVn6yFZ2ClHplMZEu4_aem_AUHfATcBi9KjkcU_obUbEp6XkWfX7lmyTM9cu5Ps7TX7MN6ZesOW71Von44jd2uC5Fg4b4hH1g7Nv3iqQTETOy0D

[6] Projects like Residencia Baba, Selo Nazaem, the Goat Milk Festival of Memories, Beglika Free Fest, and Staro Zhelezare offer similar, but distinct, peeks at attempts to revitalize or reimagine rural life in Bulgaria.

[7] Suggestopedia is an approach developed by the Bulgarian psychiatrist Georgi Lozanov to teaching a foreign language that helps pupils pick up new skills rapidly by making them feel at ease, motivated, curious, and happy. The strategy is based on the notion that pupils naturally experience psychological impediments to learning. The learning process in a Waldorf school involves the use of the mind, heart, and hands, in other words: thinking, feeling, and doing, based on the philosophy of Austrian esotericist Rudolf Steiner.

[8] One decare is a metric unit roughly equivalent to 0.2471 acres.

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