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LIFESTYLE MIGRATION IN IGNATITSA VILLAGE, BULGARIA

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**Abstract.** The article examines the phenomenon of lifestyle migration in Ignatitsa, a village in northwestern Bulgaria. Drawing on theoretical perspectives on lifestyle migration and, empirical data collected from in-depth interviews with migrants, the study explores motivations, socio-economic backgrounds, and settlement experiences. The findings indicate that lifestyle migrants in Ignatitsa, predominantly from the UK and Germany, are driven by a desire for a better quality of life, lower living costs, and the opportunity to engage in self-sufficient living. The paper further situates these findings

within broader discussions of lifestyle migration and its implications for rural communities.

**Keywords:** lifestyle migration, northwestern Bulgaria, rural transformation, Ignatitsa.

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In recent decades, researchers have become increasingly interested in lifestyle-led forms of mobility, primarily performed by relatively privileged individuals, whose mobility choices are driven by individualistic motives related to the search for a, “better quality” of life<sup>1</sup>. This better quality of life is often perceived to be accessible somewhere else than where the individual is currently living, and hence a move would ensure this access.

Commonly, these flows are directed from the North to the South, with motives related to warmer climates, a more relaxed way of life, escaping the “rat race”,<sup>2</sup> flexibility and freedom of choice, and lower costs of living implying greater consumption space.<sup>3</sup> The ways in which places are perceived, represented, and given meaning play a crucial role in mobility decisions. Representations of places are socially constructed<sup>4</sup> in interactions between individuals and, in the context of lifestyle-led mobility, imaginaries of places are mediated not only by migrants themselves but also by agents who seek to promote and encourage relocation in various ways.

Lifestyle migration as a field of study has evolved from broader inquiries into privileged mobility,<sup>5</sup> expatriate experiences,<sup>6</sup> and transnational retirement migration.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> BENSON, Miriam; O'REILLY, Karen. Migration and the search for a better way of life: A critical exploration of lifestyle migration. *The Sociological Review*, 2009, 57, no. 4, pp. 608–625. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2009.01864.x>. [Accessed: 2025-06-17].

<sup>2</sup> The term “rat race” refers to the highly competitive, fast-paced, and often stressful nature of modern urban life, where individuals feel trapped in a cycle of work, financial obligations, and social pressures with little time for personal fulfillment or leisure.

<sup>3</sup> BENSON, Michaela; O'REILLY, Karen. *Lifestyle Migration: Expectations, Aspirations and Experiences*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2009 (Studies in Migration and Diaspora). ISBN 978-0-7546-7567-9.

<sup>4</sup> MASSEY, Doreen. *For Space*. London: SAGE Publications, 2005. ISBN 9781412903622.

<sup>5</sup> O'REILLY, Karen. Intra-European migration and the mobility-enclosure dialectic. *Sociology*, 2007, 41, no. 2, pp. 277–293. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038507074974>. [Accessed: 2025-06-17].

<sup>6</sup> FECHTER, Anne-Meike; WALSH, Katie. *Examining “expatriate” continuities: Postcolonial approaches to mobile professionals*. Oxfordshire: Taylor & Francis, 2010. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691831003687667>. [Accessed: 2025-06-17].

<sup>7</sup> CASADO-DIAZ, Maria A. Retired and expatriate lifestyles. In: *Lifestyle Migration*. M. BENSON; K. O'REILLY (eds.). Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2009, pp. 87–102. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315592398>. [Accessed: 2025-06-17].

The conceptualization of lifestyle migration by Benson and O'Reilly<sup>8</sup> distinguishes it as a specific category of movement distinct from economic or forced migration. These scholars emphasize that lifestyle migrants actively pursue their vision of an ideal life, shaped by aspirations that differ from conventional economic imperatives. Additionally, O'Reilly<sup>9</sup> classifies these migrants into three broad categories: residential tourists, seekers of rural idyll, and bohemians.

A crucial aspect of lifestyle migration research is the notion of privilege. While lifestyle migrants often relocate to destinations that offer economic advantages, they may also face forms of marginalization. Hayes<sup>10</sup> discusses how lifestyle migrants in Latin America are sometimes perceived as outsiders who disrupt local cultural dynamics. Similarly, Hoey<sup>11</sup> highlights how privilege operates differently in diverse socio-economic and cultural contexts, where lifestyle migrants' economic and social capital can both facilitate and hinder integration.

## LIFESTYLE MIGRATION IN BULGARIA

Since the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, Bulgaria has become an increasingly popular destination for lifestyle migrants, particularly from Western Europe. According to several studies, this trend can be driven by a combination of factors, including the country's natural environment, historical heritage, and favorable legal conditions for foreign property ownership.<sup>12</sup> Particular attention has been given to British and German migrants, who predominantly settle in small villages in central and northwestern Bulgaria, where they renovate old houses and establish self-sufficient farms.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>8</sup> *Lifestyle Migration: Expectations, Aspirations and Experiences*. Miriam BENSON; Karen O'REILLY (eds.). 1<sup>st</sup> Edition. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2009. ISBN 9781315592398.

<sup>9</sup> O'REILLY, Karen. *Key Concepts in Ethnography*. London: SAGE Publications, 2009. ISBN 9781412928656.

<sup>10</sup> HAYES, Matthew. We gained a lot over what we would have had: The geographic arbitrage of North American lifestyle migrants to Cuenca, Ecuador. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 2014, 40, no. 12, pp. 1953–1971. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2014.880335>. [Accessed: 2025-06-17].

<sup>11</sup> HOEY, Brian A. From Pi to Pie: Moral narratives of noneconomic migration and starting over in the postindustrial Midwest. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 2005, 34, no. 5, pp. 586–624. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2014.880335>. [Accessed: 2025-06-17].

<sup>12</sup> *Lifestyle Migration: Expectations, Aspirations and Experiences*. Miriam BENSON; Karen O'REILLY (eds.). Imprint Routledge, 2016. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315592398>. ISBN (Online) 9781315592398. ISBN 9781138251946.

<sup>13</sup> DIMITROVA, Petya V. *Urban-rural lifestyle migration in search of the rural idyll: key concepts and examples from the Bulgarian village of Jelen*, pp. 27–34. Online. 2022. Available from: <https://www.academia.edu/116477933/>. [viewed 2025-06-17].

In recent decades, lifestyle migration to Bulgaria has unfolded within the broader context of socio-economic transformations, rural revitalization efforts, and demographic challenges. Lifestyle migration, as defined by Benson and O'Reilly<sup>14</sup>, refers to the movement of “relatively affluent individuals, moving either part-time or full-time to places that, for various reasons, signify for the migrants something loosely defined as quality of life”. In the Bulgarian context, this movement often includes both international migrants and domestic residents relocating from cities to rural areas, frequently motivated by aspirations for a more ecological, self-sufficient, and slower-paced lifestyle.<sup>15</sup>

An important factor influencing this process is long-term demographic decline, particularly in northwestern Bulgaria, which ranks among the least developed and most rapidly depopulating regions in Europe.<sup>16</sup> Many villages today are either entirely abandoned or predominantly inhabited by elderly residents.<sup>17</sup> While younger generations continue to migrate to cities or emigrate in search of better employment opportunities, new trends have emerged, with some Bulgarians choosing to return to rural areas due to lower living costs and affordable housing.<sup>18</sup> Simultaneously, an increasing influx of foreign migrants – primarily from the United Kingdom, Germany, and the Netherlands – has been observed, as they perceive Bulgaria as an ideal setting for realizing self-sufficient and environmentally conscious lifestyles.<sup>19</sup>

## THE CASE OF IGNATITSA

Ignatitsa is a small village in northwestern Bulgaria, located approximately 50 kilometers from the capital, Sofia, and about 35 kilometers from the regional center of Vratsa. The village is indirectly connected to Sofia by rail, as a train line runs through the nearby village of Zverino, just 5 kilometers away. The proximity to Sofia, combined with the village's remote and quiet setting, makes it an appealing

<sup>14</sup> BENSON, Miriam; O'REILLY, Karen. Migration and the search..., p. 621.

<sup>15</sup> PILEVA, Desislava. Village-City Mobility in the Everyday Life of the “New Villagers”: Practices and Specifics. *Bulgarian Ethnology*, XLVIII, 2022, pp. 71–91. ISSN 2367-6892.

<sup>16</sup> СУГАРЕВА, Марта; ЦЕКОВ, Николай; ДОНЕВ, Доньо; БОШИКЬОВ, Димитър. *Демографската ситуация в районите на депопулация (на примера на Северозападна България)*. София: Академично издателство „Проф. Марин Дринов“, 2008. ISBN 9789543221578.

<sup>17</sup> MLADENOV, Chavdar; ILIEVA, Margarita. The depopulation of the Bulgarian villages. In: *Bulletin of Geography. Socio-economic Series*, no. 17. D. SZYMAŃSKA; J. BIEGAŃSKA (eds.). Toruń: Nicolaus Copernicus University Press, 2012, pp. 99–107. ISSN 1732-4254. DOI: 10.2478/v10089-012-0010-8.

<sup>18</sup> NATIONAL STATISTICAL INSTITUTE. *Population by Permanent and Current Address, Bulgaria: Report Generator*. Available from: [https://infostat.nsi.bg/infostat/pages/reports/query.jsf?x\\_2=1962](https://infostat.nsi.bg/infostat/pages/reports/query.jsf?x_2=1962). [viewed 2025-06-17].

<sup>19</sup> *Understanding Lifestyle Migration: Theoretical Approaches to Migration and the Quest for a Better Way of Life*. Miriam BENSON; Nicholas OSBALDISTON (eds.). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. ISBN 9781137328670.

destination for those seeking an alternative to urban life without complete isolation. In addition to its accessibility, the village is situated in a picturesque natural environment, lying near the Iskar Gorge and at the foothills of the Vratsa Mountains. This setting provides stunning landscapes, opportunities for outdoor recreation, and a sense of tranquility that is highly attractive to those seeking a slower-paced lifestyle. According to the most recent demographic data, Ignatitsa had 439 registered permanent residents, a decline of 185 over the past decade.<sup>20</sup> This pattern reflects broader depopulation trends in rural Bulgaria, where aging populations and the migration of younger generations to urban areas have left many villages sparsely inhabited.<sup>21</sup>

Despite this decline, Ignatitsa has attracted a small but distinct group of foreign lifestyle migrants. This research, based on fieldwork conducted between 2022 and 2024, includes interviews with six individuals – two couples and two single men – from the UK and Germany, ranging in age from 30 to 69. The respondents represent different phases of settlement and adaptation. A British couple, aged 65 and 69, has lived in the village for over 16 years and even purchased a second home in nearby Lyutibrod. A German couple, aged 55 and 60, arrived two years ago and is in the process of self-renovating their house. Two single men, one British and one German, have also made Ignatitsa their home. The British migrant has lived in the village for over a decade while working remotely in the financial sector, whereas the 30-year-old German migrant, who has been in Ignatitsa for one year, works remotely for an international corporation.

My selection of Ignatitsa as a research site was not accidental. While conducting earlier fieldwork in the region, I repeatedly heard about the presence of foreign migrants in the village from locals in neighboring communities. However, no previous research had explicitly focused on this group, and little was known about the extent of their settlement, their motivations, and their experiences of integration (or lack thereof). This gap in scholarly attention, combined with my curiosity about the scale of the migrant community, their reasons for choosing Ignatitsa, and the specific challenges they encounter, made the village a compelling case for further investigation.

Between 2022 and 2024, I visited Ignatitsa multiple times, initially as part of a student fieldwork program and later independently. My research combined semi-structured interviews with participant observation, allowing me to engage directly with both the migrant community and local residents. I attended village events,

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<sup>20</sup> NATIONAL STATISTICAL INSTITUTE. *Population by statistical regions, age, place of residence and sex*. Online. Available from: <https://www.nsi.bg/en/statistical-data/206/650>. [viewed 2025-06-16].

<sup>21</sup> СУГАРЕВА, Марта; ЦЕКОВ, Николай; ДОНЕВ, Доньо; БОШИКЬОВ, Димитър. *Цит. съч.*

including a traditional folklore festival and a local football match, both of which provided valuable insights into social dynamics within the village. Additionally, my connection to the nearby Cherepish Monastery played a key role in facilitating introductions to key figures in the village. The monastery's abbot personally introduced me to the mayor and local residents, including individuals from neighboring villages who frequently visit Ignatitsa. One of these individuals, Boris – affectionately called “Bay Boris” by locals, using a regional variant of “Uncle” – is a well-known community activist and local patriot. Conversations with him, as well as with other long-term residents, helped contextualize the presence of foreign migrants within broader regional and demographic shifts.

This multi-method approach allowed me to collect data not only through direct interviews but also through informal conversations and firsthand observations of daily life in the village. By interacting with both foreign migrants and Bulgarian residents, I was able to compare perspectives on migration, integration, and the village's future. The findings shed light on how and why migrants arrived in Ignatitsa, their perceptions of the local community, and the extent to which they engage with or remain separate from it. These insights form the foundation for the following discussion on lifestyle migration in the village and its implications for the broader rural transformation of northwestern Bulgaria.

What sets Ignatitsa apart from other lifestyle migration destinations is that, despite the presence of foreigners, there is no real expatriate or migrant community forming. The migrants themselves view this as an advantage. Unlike other rural areas in Bulgaria that have seen an influx of foreigners creating close-knit communities, the individuals in Ignatitsa prefer the solitude and independence the village offers. They value the fact that Ignatitsa has not become a well-known settlement for expatriates and hope that it remains that way. Many expressed relief that they are among the very few foreigners in the village, emphasizing that the absence of a larger expatriate presence helps maintain the authenticity of the place.

A major factor in choosing Ignatitsa was affordability. Housing prices in Western Europe have made homeownership nearly impossible for many, leading to increased interest in alternative destinations. One of the German migrants noted:

*“To just be clear, houses in Germany are not affordable at all, especially for people my age, and I didn’t want to have a big loan for the rest of my life. So, I looked on the internet to see which European country had cheap houses, and then I ended up here”.*

Another respondent described the process of searching for property:

*“We found it on the internet. We were going from village to village, and before we made a plan in Germany about which regions could be interesting. But when we came here, we knew we didn’t need to see more. We had a good feeling about staying here”.*

However, affordability is not the only reason migrants are drawn to Ignatitsa. The natural environment and peaceful atmosphere are equally important. One resident described the stark contrast between his previous life in Berlin and his current experience in the village:

*“Berlin is too loud, too dirty. Now I need landscape, fresh air, freshwater, and this I found here”.*

Others see their relocation as a precautionary measure, securing a rural retreat in uncertain times:

*“It’s simple and friendly, and it’s enough. And it’s like plan B for us—no one knows what will happen in central Europe”.*

Self-sufficiency is another key theme among the migrants. Some of them have adopted off-grid solutions to reduce reliance on state infrastructure. One German migrant stated:

*“I’m not connected to electricity. I have a solar panel”.*

Yet, despite the advantages of affordability and tranquility, life in Ignatitsa is not without its challenges. Many of the houses require significant renovation, which can cost far more than the initial purchase price. One migrant, who bought his home for €20,000, shared:

*“We bought a house for €20,000, but we must reconstruct it for €60,000. That’s one of the reasons we are here. We don’t have enough money to buy a house in Germany”.*

The lack of services, particularly in winter, also influences the way migrants structure their lives. Some, like a British couple who have been in Ignatitsa for 16 years, opt for seasonal migration:

*“We go away normally for three months in the winter. We travel to Turkey, Greece, Italy”.*

Their decision is partly driven by practical concerns, such as rising energy costs:

*“You know, electricity is expensive”.*

While some migrants stay in Ignatitsa year-round, others treat it as a seasonal retreat, spending the warmer months there while avoiding the harsher Bulgarian winters. This further reinforces the non-community nature of the migrant presence in the village, as there is little interaction between the foreign residents, and they do not form a cohesive social group.

Ignatitsa presents an intriguing case of lifestyle migration where individualism, affordability, and nature are prioritized over social integration and community-building. The migrants enjoy solitude, and rather than seeking to create an expatriate enclave, they actively prefer that their settlement remain unnoticed by other potential migrants. Their experiences illustrate the complexities of lifestyle migration, where the search for a better quality of life does not necessarily entail a desire for social belonging. In contrast to many other rural areas experiencing foreign in-migration, Ignatitsa remains a place where lifestyle migrants seek refuge, not collective engagement.

## LIFESTYLE MIGRATION IN IGNATITSA IN COMPARISON TO OTHER BULGARIAN VILLAGES

While Ignatitsa has attracted a small number of foreign lifestyle migrants, it stands in contrast to other Bulgarian villages that have experienced more pronounced waves of in-migration. Notable examples include Veliko Tarnovo, a historic town that has drawn a considerable expatriate community, particularly from the UK; the village of Jelen, known for its eco-conscious lifestyle migrants; and settlements in the Rhodope Mountains, where alternative and nature-based living have appealed to a growing number of Western Europeans.

A significant distinction between Ignatitsa and these other locations lies in the degree of community formation among migrants. In Veliko Tarnovo, a well-established expatriate network has developed over the past two decades. The town's historical charm, accessibility, and relatively developed infrastructure have facilitated the integration of foreign migrants, leading to the creation of social networks, businesses, and organized events catering to the foreign community.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, in the Rhodope region, lifestyle migrants, often motivated by ecological concerns, have established cooperative farming projects and intentional communities that emphasize sustainability and shared resources.<sup>23</sup> In Jelen, the case is somewhat different; while the village has attracted migrants seeking a more self-sufficient lifestyle, its com-

<sup>22</sup> *Lifestyle Migration: Expectations, Aspirations and Experiences*, 2016.

<sup>23</sup> PILEVA, Desislava. *Op. cit.*, pp. 71–91.

munity functions as a quasi-community rather than a tightly-knit social unit, due to differences in individual objectives and approaches to rural life.<sup>24</sup>

In contrast, Ignatitsa remains a place where foreign residents live in isolation from one another, deliberately avoiding the formation of a foreign enclave. The migrants who have settled in the village express a preference for maintaining a low-profile existence, often citing concerns that an increased expatriate presence could alter the character of the area. This perspective aligns with observations from respondents who explicitly stated that they appreciate being among the only foreigners in the village and hope that Ignatitsa does not become a more popular destination for lifestyle migrants. Similar attitudes have been observed in other cases of rural lifestyle migration, where some migrants prefer solitude and individual autonomy over community engagement.<sup>25</sup>

However, this avoidance of an expatriate enclave does not necessarily mean that all foreign migrants remain completely detached from the local community. The level of integration varies among individuals. Some, particularly the British couple who have lived in the village for over 16 years, appear to be well-integrated. They are widely known among locals, frequent the village shop and tavern, and have learned Bulgarian, allowing them to communicate effectively and participate in local social life. In contrast, newer arrivals, especially those who work remotely, tend to maintain a more private existence, engaging minimally with local residents beyond practical necessities.

This suggests that while Ignatitsa does not have a structured expatriate network, integration occurs on an individual basis. Some migrants establish meaningful local connections and become recognized members of the community, while others prioritize solitude and self-sufficiency over social engagement. Thus, rather than viewing lifestyle migrants in Ignatitsa as a homogenous group, it is more accurate to understand their settlement patterns as diverse, shaped by personal choices, length of residence, and motivations for relocation.

This resistance to forming a community among migrants is a notable departure from the trends observed in other Bulgarian villages with significant expatriate populations. While many lifestyle migrants in Bulgaria seek both a change in environment and a sense of community with like-minded individuals, those in Ignatitsa appear to prioritize solitude, self-sufficiency, and the ability to shape their rural existence without external social pressures.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> *Understanding Lifestyle Migration: Theoretical Approaches...*

<sup>25</sup> HOEY, Brian A. *Op. cit.*, pp. 586–624.

<sup>26</sup> HAYES, Matthew. *Op. cit.*, pp. 1953–1971.

Despite this divergence, lifestyle migration to Ignatitsa shares some commonalities with other Bulgarian destinations. Like Jelen and the Rhodope villages, the migrants in Ignatitsa are drawn by the affordability of property, the opportunity to live closer to nature, and the potential for a slower-paced lifestyle. They also share the broader motivations of lifestyle migrants elsewhere in Bulgaria, such as disillusionment with urban life in Western Europe, the desire for a financial reset, and the search for autonomy in daily living.<sup>27</sup> However, the absence of a structured expatriate network and the reluctance to develop one sets Ignatitsa apart as a case where individualistic migration patterns are preferred over collective settlement.

## CONCLUSION

The case of lifestyle migration in Ignatitsa challenges dominant narratives of expatriate community formation, highlighting the role of individualism, affordability, and rural solitude in shaping migration decisions. Unlike many other rural settlements in Bulgaria, where lifestyle migrants form structured communities, the migrants in Ignatitsa actively resist collective engagement. Their preference for isolation over social integration underscores the diversity of settlement strategies among lifestyle migrants and questions the assumption that shared motivations necessarily lead to cohesive expatriate enclaves.

However, the findings must be interpreted with caution due to the limited number of respondents. While the study provides valuable insights into an alternative model of lifestyle migration, the small sample size may not capture the full complexity of settlement patterns in rural Bulgaria. Nonetheless, it confirms that lifestyle migration does not always lead to community formation, even when migrants share similar aspirations. Ignatitsa exemplifies a scenario where lifestyle migrants seek personal autonomy rather than collective belonging, demonstrating that the pursuit of a “better life” can take highly individualized forms. This challenges prevailing paradigms in lifestyle migration research and invites further inquiry into the conditions under which migrants choose solitude over social networks.

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<sup>27</sup> McINTYRE, Norma; WILLIAMS, Daniel R.; McHUGH, Kevin E. Multiple dwelling and tourism: Negotiating place, home and identity. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 2006, 22, no. 4, pp. 385–396. ISSN 0743-0167. ISSN (Online) 1873-1392.



*View of Ignatitsa village, Bulgaria, April 2022*

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ЛАЙФСТАЙЛ МИГРАЦИЯ  
В СЕЛО ИГНАТИЦА, БЪЛГАРИЯ

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**Резюме.** Статията разглежда феномена на лайфстайл миграцията в село Игнатица,  
Северозападна България. Въз основа на теоретични перспективи за лайфстайл  
миграцията и емпирични данни, събрани от подробни интервюта с мигранти, про-  
учването изследва мотивите, социално-икономическия произход и опита в засел-  
ването им. Наблюденията показват, че мигрантите в Игнатица, които са предимно

от Обединеното кралство и Германия, са водени от желанието за по-добро качество на живот, за по-ниски разходи и от възможност да развият самодостатъчен начин на живот. В допълнение статията разглежда тези наблюдения в рамките на по-широката проблематика на лайфстайл миграцията и на нейните последици за селските общности.

**Ключови думи:** лайфстайл миграция, Северозападна България, трансформация на селските райони, Игнатица.