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Original article

Vanya Ivanova

**Initial Impact of COVID-19 on the Professional Trajectories  
of Highly Qualified Bulgarians**

Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic Museum,  
Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (IEFSEM – BAS)  
1000, 6A Moskovska St., Sofia, Bulgaria  
[vanya.ivanova@iefem.bas.bg](mailto:vanya.ivanova@iefem.bas.bg)

**Abstract.** Within the context of COVID-19 globally affecting labour migrants and observed return tendencies in different places all over the world, the article addresses three main questions, focused on the impact of the pandemic on the professional trajectories of highly qualified mobile Bulgarians living in different countries in the European Union and beyond: (1) How the pandemic influenced the daily professional routine of the respondents? (2) Whether the pandemic made the respondents think of returning to Bulgaria? (3) Whether the pandemic made the respondents change their current job or made them think of professional change? The virtual ethnographic research was performed with a small number of respondents as an initial step of exploring and reflecting on a two-fold hypothesis, e.g. building up on previous observations of the highly qualified mobility dynamics, in comparison with the impact of the Global Economic Crisis from 2008, the article explores whether the pandemic of COVID-19 provokes further movements in professional trajectories of the respondents and potential intentions to return to the country of origin considering the changes in the daily routine and possible interruptions of their professional realization and developments.

**Keywords:** highly qualified; COVID-19; Bulgaria; professional trajectories; return; migration

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Оригинальная статья

Иванова В.

**Первоначальное влияние COVID-19 на профессиональные  
траектории высококвалифицированных болгар**

Болгарская академия наук  
Институт этнологии и фольклора с Этнографическим музеем  
1000, Болгария, София, ул. Московска 6А  
[vanya.ivanova@iefem.bas.bg](mailto:vanya.ivanova@iefem.bas.bg)

**Аннотация:** В контексте глобального воздействия COVID-19 на трудовых мигрантов и наблюдающихся тенденций возвращения трудовых мигрантов во всем мире в статье рассматриваются три основных вопроса,

посвященных влиянию пандемии на профессиональные траектории высококвалифицированных мобильных болгарских граждан, проживающих в разных странах Европейского Союза и за его пределами: (1) Как пандемия повлияла на повседневную работу респондентов? (2) Заставила ли пандемия респондентов задуматься о возвращении в Болгарию? (3) Вынудила ли пандемия респондентов сменить текущую работу или заставила задуматься о смене профессии? Виртуальное этнографическое исследование было проведено с небольшим количеством респондентов в качестве начального шага изучения и размышления над гипотезой: основываясь на предыдущих наблюдениях за динамикой мобильности высококвалифицированных специалистов во время глобального экономического кризиса 2008 года, в статье исследуются вопросы вызывает ли пандемия COVID-19 дальнейшие изменения в профессиональных траекториях респондентов и потенциальные намерения вернуться в страну происхождения с учетом изменений в повседневной жизни и возможных перерывов в их профессиональной реализации и развитии.

**Ключевые слова:** высококвалифицированный мигрант; COVID-19; Болгария; профессиональные траектории; возвращение; миграция

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**Introduction.** The World Health Organization declares COVID-19 a pandemic on 11<sup>th</sup> of March 2020. By April 2020, more than 120 countries close their borders. In the end of April 2020, 68% of the world's workers live in countries „with recommended or required workplace closures, raising the prospect of massive job losses”, an estimation done by International Labour Organization<sup>1</sup>. Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic leads to a global economic recession (Bondarenko 2020, Grigoryev, Pavlyushina, Muzychenko, 2020). Researchers immediately start surveying and observing the global economic crisis in various aspects, including the impacts on the global labour migration and the influence of the pandemic on the remittance flows of migrant workers – back to their countries of origin or to remittance recipient countries (Bondarenko, 2020). Bulgaria is one example of such country, researched by K. Bondarenko (2020) and classified by the World Bank

as “low- and middle- income country” with low dependency on remittances, with the EU and USA being the largest senders (Ibid, 11) and one of the three most dependent countries from international remittances in 2019 within the European Union<sup>2</sup>.

Labour migrants are considered to be within the most impacted groups, as they are concentrated in industries that are highly affected by pandemic, like tourism, public catering, retail, transportation and logistics, construction and manufacturing, agriculture (Kartseva, Kuznetsova, 2020; Mukomel, 2020). In the last year, migrant workers in different sectors who were not that visible before, are recognized as “essential workers”, “key workers”, “working in critically affected areas”, being on the “front line”, etc. – delivery drivers, food producers, and supermarket staff (Gamlen, 2020; Meer, Villegas, 2020; Rupani, et.al. 2020). In a discussion paper, Fasani and Mazza (2020) present the largest

<sup>1</sup>UNDP (2020), “Human Mobility, Shared Opportunities. A Review of the 2009 Human Development Report and the Way Ahead”.

<sup>2</sup> The other two being Croatia and Latvia, available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Personal\\_remittances\\_statistics](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Personal_remittances_statistics) (Accessed 28 February 2021).

five categories of key workers in the EU being: teaching professionals (14,5%), skilled agricultural workers (11,9%), science and engineering associate professionals (11,1%), personal care workers (10,3%) and cleaners and helpers (9,9%). In regards to qualifications, the emerging key workers in the crisis situation are highly skilled (doctors or medical researchers) and low skilled (refuse workers or drivers) (Ibid, 2020). Another study, revealing the impact during the first lockdown in Germany, shows that low-wage workers are heavily affected by leave and job loss, while highly qualified employees are able to work from home (Möhring, et. al., 2020). For many migrants the loss of job means loss of legal status as well as access to services.

Another important impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on international migration is the return movements to the countries of origin. On 23<sup>rd</sup> of March 2020, only 10 days after the announced state of emergency in Bulgaria (13<sup>th</sup> of March 2020), newspaper titles in Bulgaria indicate a huge numbers of return, such as “23 000 only for the last 24 hours”, quoting publicly announced data by prof. Ventzislav Mutafchiiski, the head of the Operation office coordinating the COVID-19 crisis in Bulgaria (Nova.bg, 23<sup>rd</sup> of March 2020). Based on the same sources of information, the newspapers summed up the approximate number of returnees from the beginning of March up to 23<sup>rd</sup> of March, to be around 200 000<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> MASS RETURN: 200,000 Bulgarians have returned to Bulgaria in recent weeks, available at: <https://nova.bg/news/view/2020/03/23/282467/%D0%BC%D0%B0%D1%81%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%BE-%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%B1%D0%B8%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B5-200-000-%D0%B1%D1%8A%D0%BB%D0%B3%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%B8-%D1%81%D0%B5-%D0%B2%D1%8A%D1%80%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%85%D0%B0-%D0%B2-%D0%B1%D1%8A%D0%BB%D0%B3%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%8F-%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%B7-%D0%BF%D0%BE%D1%81%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5-%D1%81%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%BC%D0%B8%D1%86%D0%B8/> (Accessed 28 February 2021).

Within this context of globally affected labour migrants and return tendencies, I would like to situate my research and further explore the professional trajectories of highly qualified mobile Bulgarians in three aspects – (1) the impact of COVID-19 on the professional trajectories of highly qualified people, (2) their potential intentions to return to Bulgaria and (3) to what extent and in what ways their work routines are affected.

**Methodology and methods.** In the focus of this article are the highly qualified mobile Bulgarians who live in different countries around the world – in Europe (Germany, Malta, the Netherlands, Sweden, United Kingdom) and beyond (USA, Canada, Qatar). The time span of their life abroad is from 4 to 22 years, some of them have already become citizens of the destination country, others are in a procedure to acquire citizenship or have acquired permanent residency status, and there is one respondent with dual citizenship, having the foreign one from a country, which is not the current destination country. There also are people, who live in another member state of the European Union, and say that their Bulgarian citizenship is enough for them for the time being, in terms of mobility and needed rights. The common denominator for all these Bulgarians is that they are highly qualified. In this article I will use the term “highly qualified” instead of “highly skilled”, because they have completed a university degree either in their country of origin (Bulgaria) or in the destination country, or in another country where they have lived before going to their current country. The respondents for the study have different backgrounds and are currently employed in different sectors (academia, IT, tax, pharmaceuticals, library, research and PR).

As a researcher, dealing with different aspects of highly qualified migration and mobility of Bulgarian citizens abroad (Ivanova, 2015a; Ivanova, 2015b), the pandemic of COVID-19 and the lockdowns around the world provoked me to address these highly qualified Bulgarians and explore the impact of the pandemic on their professional trajectories and possible intentions to return to Bul-

garia. The ethnographic virtual study was done in April – May 2020 via Internet, based on semi-structured interviews. To aspire deep and meaningful conversations and sincere answers, the people I selected to interview were people I knew from before and I have already established trustworthy connection with, based on personal or professional encounters. For the purpose of the study, I conducted single or multiple virtual interviews with some of the respondents, with others we have exchanged messages along the interviews, and with most of them the communication continues up to now. The interviews cover broader biographical aspects of the migration story of each of the respondents, but for this article I will focus on three main questions connected with the professional realization and possible professional changes, triggered by the pandemic:

- How the pandemic influenced the professional routine of the respondents?
- Whether the pandemic made the respondents think of returning to Bulgaria?
- Whether the pandemic made the respondents change their current job or made them think of professional change?

The virtual ethnographic research was done with a small number of respondents (ten), as an initial step of exploring a two-fold hypothesis as premises for a follow-up broader research. On one hand, building up on previous observations of the highly qualified mobility dynamics, I wanted to question whether the highly qualified intend to initiate a next step in their migratory and professional trajectories, being the first ones to move in a time of crisis (an observation made in previous studies in regards to the Global Economic Crisis from 2008 and its impact on the highly qualified migration (Cerna, 2010)) – I wanted to validate whether this tendency is also accurate in time of a health and social crisis, like it was during economic turmoil. The other aspect of this two-fold hypothesis, was exploring whether the pandemic could trigger movements among the highly qualified professionals of returning back to their country of

origin, to be closer to their families and relatives.

The limitations of this qualitative study are that (1) it is based on a limited number of respondents, (2) it is focused on the specific case of Bulgaria (all interviews are done in Bulgarian language with Bulgarian citizens, some of whom have dual citizenship at the time of the interviews) and (3) is limited to secondary sources and analyses in Bulgarian and English only – predominantly recent studies and reports, because the topic is very new, and there aren't many books yet available in English and Bulgarian. Nevertheless, the article's originality stands out in the chosen topic, approaching the specific group of the highly qualified professionals – analysing their experiences and perspectives in different contexts, in different countries around the world, representing different professional sectors, which brings a variety of approaches to the questions listed above. Thus, the professional multiperspectivity and the diverse multilocalities are another core lens of the article. The empirical material serves to induce some initial conclusions and trends for further research, and some of the stories are used to illustrate the terrain in the style of A. Favell and his book "Eurostars and Eurocities. Free movement and mobility in an integrating Europe", where short stories are integrated along with the main analysis.

**Research Results and Discussion.** The results of the research are organized in three thematic analysis groups, based on the three main questions. Being an ethnographic study, the core of it is how the respondents describe and perceive the changes in their professional daily routine because of the pandemic and the lockdown, that is in place in all the countries mentioned in the research, when the interviews are conducted. The second aspect that is analysed is whether the COVID-19 crisis made the respondents think about / have intentions to return to Bulgaria and the third one – whether there is a need for job change or other professional possibilities in the times of pandemic.

### *1. Changes in the professional daily routine.*

Several tendencies of changes in the daily routine are observed because of COVID-19, and particularly because of the lockdowns, and they could be summarized in the following way:

- From office to home office, without the need to make any changes in the professional trajectories, with or without COVID-19;
- From home office to home office, with no need to make any changes;
- From office to hybrid office / home office, and postponed professional changes because of the COVID-19 situation;
- From home office/freelance to home office/freelance, with many professional projects cancelled in the art sphere;
- From office to home office, with a contract that is finishing within the same year and in need to make a professional step forward, with COVID-19 making it more uncertain and difficult, depending on the country of residence.

The major difference for most of the highly qualified respondents is the fact that they moved from office work to home office or remote work. This change leads to increase of the workload because of the intense formal communication via email in place of the easy and quick on-site working meetings. It is also observed that this leads to decreasing the amount of content work, due to the increased communication.

Another major change in the daily routines is observed with the people who have to combine remote work and take care of their children at home. Several of the respondents explained that they have to finish their work early in the morning or in the evening when children are sleeping, and during the day to only attend important meetings and calls that cannot be postponed. Respondents observe that work quality was not negatively impacted, but the possibility of being with their children during the day is very rewarding.

A. leaves Bulgaria more than 20 years ago with a student visa and is now settled in

the USA. After finishing her education, she obtains a work visa through the company where she does her internship and gets her first labour contract. Currently, she is an American citizen and works in the tax unit of a US company with offices in 24 countries around the world and is satisfied with her professional development. After graduating, she has done only one major company change and works in her current company for 10 years now. She likes the flexibility in doing her job, the possibility to be involved in various activities of the company work as a tax expert and that there is just the senior vice president of tax above her in the corporate structure, which makes doing her work easier. She explains that not much has changed in terms of work content due to the lockdown, “the business is going on, most of our clients are on contracts. During the day I am trying to finish all that is needed, but I am also with the kids, so usually in the evening I do big amount of my working tasks”. She does not have plans to return, but keeps and sustains intensive contacts with her family in Bulgaria. She sees the possibility to work from home as a chance to spend more time with her children – two little ones and a teenager. She is also satisfied with the purposeful efforts of her company to take care about the people during the lockdown – to regularly meet virtually with the team, even for some chat and drinking coffee together, to keep the connections alive and to sustain good relations among the people, as well as from a technical point of view, all employees got the possibility for a financial support for organizing their home office.

The focus on online communication and how it affects the actual work is part of the core change in the daily routine of another highly qualified Bulgarian. B. lives in Qatar for two years, where she works at the Qatar National Library and has a very interesting migration story. She leaves Bulgaria right after finishing her BA in Political Science and moves to Berlin to pursue her dream to study Egyptian studies, with a second major in Arabic studies. After working in various high qualified and high ranking positions, because

of her expertise in rare languages, she moves to work in the Oxford Library. There comes the opportunity for professional development in Qatar. She is a manager of a team dealing with Manuscripts and the archives in the library. At the time of the interview, their work has moved entirely from office to home, because the library is entirely closed for disinfection. The lack of direct contact with her colleagues slows down the work, along with the cancelation of many events that are organised on a regular basis. She does not have any plans to return to Bulgaria, but has intentions to move to a next destination, because of the cultural differences in the region and the fact that there are no possibilities for further professional growth. She explains “in reality 80% of my work I can do from home, except the direct work and consultation with the material”. She explains that the work quality also depends on the remote connection. “Everything is happening via e-mail, the workload increased immensely in that regard. There are days when I am doing only this – replying to emails from my team of five colleagues, without any content work”.

Moving from office to home office work could be challenging in terms of timetable, the intensity of work and the fact that the actual work had to become digital, as well as increasing the social responsibility in times of pandemic. A respondent who lives in London and is in the arts sphere explains:

*“It was very difficult in the beginning, we are already working remotely from home for one and a half months. We all have been engaged digitally before the start of the pandemic and this helped us a lot. But after the beginning of the pandemic all our activities had to have a digital aspect, that was very difficult for the digital team, to do work that was not planned before and how to make our activities meaningful again, for example, we had a sale of photographs and to make it more meaningful during the pandemic, it was decided that part of the money gathered will be donated to Doctors without borders, so this sale has a higher purpose, beside the financial one. The intensity of the work is the*

*same, maybe be even more, because after supporting the digital team, now I support the educational one, because we have a new product for online trainings/workshops. These products were part of the work plan for the next two years and now we have to realize them in days, and this is very intense. What changed in my daily routine is that I don't have a strict start and finish of the working day. I start working sometimes earlier and finish later, sometimes even do not take a lunch break, because I think as I am at home, I don't need it. Before when I finished work and went home I didn't think of work, now I think in the evening. I am very grateful that I have my job, many people lost their job and I feel privileged”.*

Setting borders in the daily routine is one of the difficult aspects of working remotely because it could become a non-stop work process. At the same time, especially in the art sector, the uncertainty increased due to many activities and events being cancelled. Another respondent in the art sphere explains that all his professional plans were either cancelled or postponed, and actually what happens especially in this sphere is that this is a time of professional vacuum that could be used for reflections, personal projects, but this does not decrease the sense of tension because of the unknown. The most vulnerable in that case are the highly qualified freelancers with no permanent or long-term contracts, or who have their contracts ending in the coming months, and especially the ones in the art sector with many cancelled events. An important aspect in that regard is the security that the country where you are currently living provides. A highly qualified respondent who lives in Germany and is approaching the end of her contract explains:

*“Since the end of February, I work from home. At the beginning I was worried because of no clarity whether I will manage with all technical stuff, access to server and all the documents, but after a week, I saw that everything is going on well and that there is no need to work from the office, because all I need for my work I have it here. What I need*

*is one computer and connection and I am online. With the colleagues we organize twice conference calls and we see each other. With the manager we talk additionally, she distributes the tasks to everyone. The developments are not negative. The social contacts are entirely limited and that is the big change for me. Before I was meeting a lot of people. All the time I have the feeling that I live in state that will manage with this crisis. And although my contract is coming to an end, I have paid taxes the last ten years and I know that I will be financially secure in the coming months, even if I do not quickly find something new”.*

Another interesting and less challenging case are the highly qualified people who have worked remotely before the pandemic and there are no major changes observed in their daily routine and the way they implement their job tasks.

C. lives and works in Canada, she is a manager of an IT team that monitors the quality of various software projects in a big IT company. She moves to Canada after finishing high school to continue her studies, and follows the path of making an internship in the company where she is currently working, where she receives a labour contract and gradually raises in the company to her current position. For 6 years she works from her home office, because her work involves an international team that is geographically spread around the world and their actual work is happening virtually and it is not connected with a physical office or place. She says: “I do not feel any difference with how work was happening for me before.” She explains that the attitude of the company management since the start of COVID-19 and the lockdown is that the main priority should be the family, however she is regularly checked when missing online for ten minutes being shortly with children. She does not see huge changes and even feels relieved because there is no need to bring the children to regular activities outside, that allows them to spend more quality time together as a family. She feels grateful in that regard, she says that she

is an exception, and sees how her colleagues who had to do the change from office to homework struggle, explaining: “I have my home office set up, I did not have to create anew at home as many others did”.

Another possible change of the daily routine is when there still is a need to go to the office and there is a need to combine.

E. moves from Bulgaria to Malta aiming to find work about 15 years ago. Her chemistry and biology background helps her start working in a laboratory and currently she is a manager of a team in a pharmaceutical company. Even during the lockdown, she says that some days she goes to the company because she has to sign contracts and all the projects continue work. The onsite staff in the company is limited, the sanitation measures are good and there is care about the staff from the very beginning (masks, disinfection). Being a factory, they have observed decreased capacity of the production as a whole, because all the staff that are part of vulnerable groups (chronical illness, elderly people) have moved to work entirely from home. Before the pandemic she was in a situation of searching for new professional realization because of accomplishing everything that she could at the current position and in need of a challenge, but this process has stopped because of the pandemic. An interview for a new position was postponed and some positions were closed. Another event that couldn't happen because of the pandemic was a certification training she was supposed to attend abroad, but because of the closure of the borders it was postponed as well. She does not have plans to return to Bulgaria due to the political situation in the country and the lack of really good professional opportunities, compared to her current destination.

The stories and challenges of the respondents are different; however, some common trends could be synthesized. In most cases of the highly qualified, remote work is possible and does not decrease work quality. Remote work challenges the communication in the teams and more time is devoted to e-mails that could shift the focus from the actu-

al content work. The new digital reality requires reconsidering the meaning of the work, especially struggling is the situation of the highly qualified in the freelance art sphere where many events are cancelled. At the same time the new routine requires setting boundaries in the work-life balance, because it is not easy to set a clear start and end of the working day, and especially when the work is combined with your family in home, some tasks are moved to early mornings and late evenings, which could be challenging in the long run.

## II. Intentions to return to Bulgaria or to previous country of destination.

The quick predominant answer to this question for most of the highly qualified is: visits – yes, return – no. Only two from the respondents think and have intentions to return to Bulgaria, but temporary or in the form of commuting living and working for some periods “here” and some periods “there”. In one of the cases, the return is seen as a temporary option with the argument to spend more time with the family during the pandemic, because of having the possibility to work remotely. In the other case, the professional and personal plans were cancelled because of the spread of the virus and the restrictions to travel and there is no major reason to stay. The respondent that considers moving for a period of time explains:

*“I am thinking now exactly on this possibility – whether go back in Bulgaria just for two months, I work from home now, we won’t go back in the office by the end of September and I do not see any need to stay in London. I do not see the point to generally go back to Bulgaria, but for some time, to be together with my family, yes. Especially with this situation now that I would like to spend more time with my parents and grandparents, to communicate more with them. I could work from home and be in Bulgaria and make some interviews with my relatives as well for my personal projects. I do not know actually what to do whether to go or not. At the same time, I am afraid flying whether I could catch the virus and is it good for my family to go back,*

*because I do not want to put my family at risk and this stops me for the moment”.*

In general, there is more uncertainty in the case of highly qualified respondents who are in the early stage of their professional development (making paid internship right after finishing university, for example) or making additional MA and approaching the end of the student visa. In these cases, an interviewee responds: “My internship is finishing in September and after that I do not know what will happen and whether I could continue working for this company or I have to find another job”.

A recent study called „The Big Return. Covid-19 and the return migration to Bulgaria”, done in October-November 2020 through online survey in Facebook and some in-depth interviews explains the group of the highly qualified specialists who have settled abroad as the most difficult to attract back to Bulgaria (Georgiev, 2020: 17). The two main reasons of return because of COVID-19, given within this survey in the period March-May 2020, are “to be close to family and relatives” and “because of loss of a job”. For this period March-May 2020 government data gives an approximate number of over 550 000 Bulgarian citizens registered entering Bulgaria by air or land, excluding crossing the Bulgarian-Greece border<sup>4</sup> (Georgiev, 2020).

Regarding the two main reasons of the study, none of the highly qualified Bulgarians have lost their jobs because of the pandemic, two would like to change it, but these processes have started before the pandemic and are frozen for a moment, because of the pandemic. There is one respondent who is approaching an end of her contract but does not consider Bulgaria as an option for future professional development. For one of the respondents “to be close to the family and relatives” is a reason for temporary return, but not a permanent one. He explains:

*“Here I value the opportunities I have, in Bulgaria such organization as the one I am working in now does not exist, also I do not*

<sup>4</sup> Mainly tourist traffic.



*have the freedom there as I have here, I mostly value the professional development I have here, including the freedom of the people with different sexual orientation”.*

Another respondent explains why she does not see Bulgaria as future professional realization destination saying:

*“The everyday life in Bulgaria is a fight for survival. What I see in the streets, poor people, stressed people, I do not want to be such a person. Every time I visit I am happy that it is for a little while. There are poor people in Germany too, but much more relaxed, there is no way to fail entirely, there is always a way that the country will take care of you, if you get sick that there won't be a chance to pay your bills. The social state is felt in everyday life”.*

All respondents communicate intensively with their parents and families in Bulgaria and for some of them the possibility to be an additional source of support to their families from abroad is an additional reason not to initiate return and the COVID-19 situation does not change that intentions, on the contrary, most of them feel safer and more secure where they are currently living.

### *III. Job change and professional possibilities in times of pandemic.*

Most of the respondents feel stable and secure on their current positions and do not consider changes. The ones who have considered such, have started these processes before the pandemic and the COVID-19 situation actually stopped or postponed the actual change. Two of the respondents were considering moving internationally, but at the time of interviews did not see it as a viable option due to the closure of the borders, as well as due to the economic impact of the COVID-19 on the labour market in general. Thus, COVID-19 is seen by several respondents as a limitation to their professional trajectories and realization. A respondent who was considering professional development in the academia, applying for PhD positions in Canada and having passed all selection rounds, received a negative answer, because the new academic year is currently closed for international stu-

dents due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A study of Triandafyllidou and Nalbandian (2020) explains that workwise “Canada temporarily stopped processing work permit or permanent residency applications from March until the end of June 2020”. Another respondent who was considering moving internationally explains:

*“COVID-19 is limiting me because I cannot apply to all the places I wanted to. My initial plan was to try to find something new in USA, but at the moment the economy in the States is going down along with the fact that they are not that open for foreigners. I would like to live in a bigger city. My manager said that I could continue working in the same institute but for the administration office, but this is not creative enough for me and this is not an option”.*

It could be concluded that for the highly qualified who were in search for further professional development, the pandemic situation serves as a stop in regards to postponed interviews or no possibility to move globally, while at the same time it is not a trigger to move back in Bulgaria.

**Conclusions.** The initial analysis of this new virtual ethnographic study exploring the professional trajectories of the highly qualified Bulgarians and the impact of COVID-19 on them shows that all respondents with minor exceptions pass through change in the everyday routine in the way how they implement their job duties, most of them moving from office to home office work. Major challenges are experienced by the highly qualified Bulgarians who work freelance and in the art sphere. An important aspect for the ones who are in a position to make professional changes is the security of the country of destination they live in, regarding social security system, rather than the option to return in Bulgaria. Although the connection with Bulgaria is intensive in most of the cases, to return to be close with their family is given as a possibility by only one of the respondents, and is considered as a short term, temporary period of time. All highly qualified respondents miss the possibility to travel abroad, but leading

reason for possible professional change remains the opportunities for professional development and the standard of life the destination country is providing. Whether the changes in the daily routine of highly qualified mobile people influenced by COVID-19 will sustain in time, and to what extent the dynamics of the professional trajectories will be modified by the pandemic, are interesting topics that could be a focus for future research. To what extent the COVID-19 pandemic will influence the global migration and mobility dynamics, how far we are moving away from the “age of migration” (Castles, Miller, 2003) are interesting phenomena to observe.

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**Конфликты интересов: у автора нет конфликта интересов для декларации.**

**Vanya Ivanova**, PhD, Researcher, Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with

Ethnographic Museum, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia, Bulgaria.

**Иванова Ваня**, PhD, исследователь Института этнологии и фольклора с Этнографическим музеем Болгарской академии наук, София, Болгария.