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Belonging and European social membership: Legitimations and contestations in Bulgarian and German social policy expert interviews

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Introduction

The recent EU enlargements and increased mobility between ‘new’ and ‘old’ member states have raised important questions concerning mobile EU citizens’ access to social security rights. The nexus between European social citizenship and the concept of belonging constitutes a vital point of reference for analysing the current debates and narratives regarding mobility and social security in the context of European social security coordination, a system designed to guarantee access to social security and assistance for movers by drawing on Regulations (EC) 884/2004 and 987/2009. We conducted interviews (n = 11) with 15 Bulgarian and German social policy experts within the framework of the TRANSWEL project (a transnational NORFACE research project that aims to explore the social rights of EU citizens in their sending and receiving countries). The results were then analysed using an integrated dataset, overruling the possible influence of methodological nationalism by applying critical discourse analysis (CDA), as developed by Norman Fairclough (2003). In this paper, we scrutinize narratives of belonging within the context of European social citizenship, as articulated by the Bulgarian and German experts.

Current movements within the EU, as well as movers’ access to social security, can be explored by considering three different perspectives: (i) the regulations regarding European social security and their governance (Carmel et al. 2016), (ii) movers’ practices in accessing and porting social security rights from one country to another (EP 2014), and (iii) narratives of legitimation in European social security coordination (Bruzelius et al. 2016). In this paper, we focus on the third category by exploring how social policy experts both frame and (de-) legitimize European social citizenship/membership. In doing so, we addressed the following questions: How do social policy experts conceptualize and articulate narratives of European social membership/citizenship? And how do they relate these narratives to the notions of belonging in the context of current intra-EU mobility?

The subject of mobility between Bulgaria and Germany is a salient choice for addressing these questions, because Germany took longer than other EU countries (such as Sweden and the United Kingdom) to open its labour market to Bulgarian movers. In fact, mobility between these two countries is relatively recent. Although such movement had taken place in the past, it was minimal compared with the significant increase that occurred soon after Bulgaria's transition to a democratic political system in 1989 and then later, in 2007, after Bulgaria joined the EU (Fingarova 2017). Here, we will explore how Bulgarian and German social policy experts consider and frame EU mobility and mobile Bulgarian citizens' access to social security rights by conceptualizing EU mobility and the movers' subsequent access to social security as a right of European social membership and its nexus with belonging to an 'imagined community' (Anderson 2006). In other words, we aim to analyse how those experts (de-)legitimize movers' access to social security rights and what narratives they refer to with regard to not only belonging to a national or transnational entity, but also the intersectional categories of belonging (e.g. gender or class). The question of legitimation, however, is not solely an academic or theoretical one. The expert interviews and the inscribed narratives are part of a greater discourse on intra-EU mobility; in fact, the right of access to social security for EU movers and European belonging both (a) shape regulations and governance decisions and (b) have an immediate impact on movers' practices and subsequent welfare opportunities.

Country background and media debates: From resentments to reflections on movers' utility

Conducting interviews with Bulgarian and German experts offered a convincing approach to exploring the nexus between European social citizenship (in terms of Bulgarian movers' access to unemployment, family, and health insurance benefits) and belonging (in terms of naturalized assumptions about the nation state or intersectional categories). As noted above, Germany did not open its labour market until 2014, and despite some previous movement between Bulgaria and Germany, this east-west migration had been relatively limited. Bulgaria's membership in the EU was highly conditioned, and along with Romania, Bulgaria is one of the so-called 'new EU-2' member states at the centre of public debates on 'benefit migration' in Germany (but also in Bulgarian media narratives). These debates have expanded to include possible restrictions on child benefits for movers' children who live in Bulgaria (or any other EU sending country).

The coming accession of Bulgaria in 2007 was debated with great enthusiasm in the media and the public arena. In recent years, however, alarmist demographic concerns have entered the media accounts in response to the dramatic increase in emigration. Owing to fears about low birth rates and a brain drain, Bulgarian authorities have encouraged migrants to return to their home country (Council of Ministers 2015). In addition, Bulgarian newspapers reproduce the strong German resentment toward Roma, who allegedly move to Germany for the ‘benefits’. The Roma are depicted in negative terms and as living in troubled neighbourhoods in Duisburg or Dortmund, whereas the non-Roma movers in Germany are depicted as ‘second-hand Europeans’, being discriminated against and disadvantaged by the German population.¹

In comparison, German media accounts reflect some similarities and some contrasts with respect to these debates. Following its accession, Bulgaria was dubbed ‘*Armenhaus Europas*’ (Europe’s poorhouse), a corrupt country that would not be able to handle EU funds and thus needed more time to meet EU standards. When Germany opened its labour market to Romanian and Bulgarian citizens in the beginning of 2014, the debate was dominated by racist campaigns, especially by the Christian Social Union (CSU) in Bavaria, the counterpart to Germany’s Christian Democratic Union (CDU). The CSU opposed freedom of movement, using the slogan ‘*Wer betrügt, der fliegt*’ (Cheaters will be expelled²) and hinting that movers from Bulgaria and Romania were so-called ‘benefit migrants’. Here, as in Bulgaria, the focus was on the supposed movement of Roma or ‘*Armutsmigranten*’ (‘poverty migrants’), who were said to move to Germany solely for the purpose of gaining access to social benefits of any kind. Furthermore, mobile EU citizens from the new EU-2 member states were characterized as being less well educated and lacking language skills. Rejecting those positions, other media outlets proclaimed the importance of intra-EU mobility for economic reasons, in that such an influx would address Germany’s need for qualified foreign labour, and declared the notion of ‘poverty migration’ a myth.³ Similarly, Bruzelius et al. (2016) demonstrated that many German politicians also called for EU enlargements and subsequent labour mobility, pointing out that the media debates were

¹ <http://www.duma.bg/node/43827>

<http://www.duma.bg/node/125291>

<http://www.duma.bg/node/53456>

http://www.dnevnik.bg/sviat/2016/04/29/2752289_germaniia_obmislia_5_godini_da_ne_dava_pomoshiti_na/

http://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/bulgaria/2013/06/20/2086336_germaniia_niama_svedeniia_bulgari_da_se_vuzp_olzvat_ot/

http://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/sviat/2014/01/08/2216250_germaniia_suzdade_sPECIALNA_komisiia_za_imigranti_te_ot/

² This translation, although not precise, sufficiently conveys the meaning of the German expression.

³ <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/wegen-bulgarien-und-rumaenien-csu-plant-offensive-gegen-armutsmigranten-1.1852159>,

<http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/csu-vorstoss-wer-betruegt-der-fliegt-wie-das-netz-die-csu-verspottet-1.1852323>

<http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/aufnahme-zum-januar-rumaenien-und-bulgarien-koennen-der-eu-beitreten-1.838332>

<http://www.sueddeutsche.de/wirtschaft/einwanderer-aus-osteuroopa-mythos-armutsmigration-1.1854451>

centred mainly on court cases for means-tested unemployment benefits (Hartz IV) but did not entirely reject the decision to open Germany's labour market.

Therefore, it can be concluded that in some respects the media debates in the two countries concur, especially considering that the Bulgarian media, drawing in part on the debates in Germany, reiterate the sentiments against the Bulgarian Roma in Dortmund or Duisburg.

Theory: Conceptualizing European social membership and belonging

Academic discussions about 'benefit migration' (Ehata et al. 2017) often refer to the 'welfare magnet hypothesis' of Borjas (1999), who was interested in how human mobility is linked to mobile citizens' access to state support in the receiving countries. On the other hand, many scholars, in critically evaluating the nexus between welfare and migration, have questioned the notion of 'benefit migration' by referring to 'welfare chauvinism' on the part of the receiving countries (Kymlicka 2015; Mewes & Mau 2013).

In contrast, we conceptualize such mobility and the access to social security rights within the EU as *European social citizenship* (Kivisto & Faist 2007), because the EU cannot be understood as a single nation state but rather as a cross-border entity that includes transnational regulations that govern the provision of social security rights to 'economically active' EU citizens (Carmel et al. 2016). In a nutshell, the notion of European social citizenship presupposes that the boundaries of social membership are not limited to the territory of a single nation state (whether it be the sending or the receiving country); European social citizenship is instead organized according to multiple scales of *social security governance*. The supranational scale includes the EU regulations on social security coordination, which guarantees the right to use vested entitlements in another EU member state. A nation state's institutions and the way they implement these EU regulations exemplify the national scale, while the transnational scale is revealed through the linkages between the sending and receiving countries in terms of their institutional practices regarding access to and portability of social security.

This 'nested' organization of social citizenship (Kivisto & Faist 2007) enables EU citizens to be members of the cross-border European community, thus overcoming national boundaries and going beyond national social membership. However, European social membership is also characterized by specific institutional selectivity criteria – for example, movers must meet certain residency requirements (such as the centre-of-life tests) and certain employment requirements (with preference being given to those with continuous, regular employment) – as

well as by institutional complexity and discretion (Carmel et al. 2016). Thus, providing social security access/portability to mobile EU citizens can be described as stratified and as shaping the boundary-making of European social membership (Zabransky & Amelina 2017), as will be further revealed below through the discourses of belonging that we have identified.

Along with a consideration of social security governance, an analysis of European social citizenship must include the *participatory dimension*, namely the ways in which mobile EU citizens access social security and interact with social security authorities during the formal application process. Because social citizenship involves multiple scales, EU mobile citizens find it difficult to untangle their rights and obligations. As part of the TRANSWEL project, we showed in other studies that movers whose mobility projects are permanent in character and those with the experience of regular employment tend to be more successful in accessing social security rights across borders. Other types of social categories, such as gender or education level, also play a role in movers' welfare opportunities (Zabransky & Amelina 2017).

The other dimension in our conceptualization refers to the *legitimation basis* of European social citizenship. To address this dimension, we built on the notion of the politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis 2011), which refers to the naturalized assumptions about membership in a national community, boundary-making, and the construction of the 'Other'. In this respect, the following questions were addressed: Are EU migrants seen as (non-)belonging to the EU social community in terms of social membership, and are they constructed as the 'Other'? What are the legitimations behind these naturalized assumptions?

Our analysis of the legitimation basis of European social citizenship is the subject of this paper. To address the nexus of European social citizenship and belonging, we focused on narratives that touched on phenomena articulated by policy experts in Bulgaria and Germany. We studied particular aspects of these narratives, such as references to mobility and migration (e.g. the categories of permanent and temporary migration), boundaries or borders, the role of migrants in the EU, and the constructed national (i.e. Germany) and supranational (i.e. EU) entities, among others. Furthermore, in order to conceptualize the processes of inclusion/exclusion or *othering* in the narratives of the Bulgarian and German social policy experts, specific notions of mobility and sedentarism were taken into account, as well as the hierarchization of migrant categories and intersectional categories (such as gender, class, and ethnicity) (Amelina 2017).

Methodology: Transnational discourse analysis

As part of the TRANSWEL project, the Bulgarian–German research team conducted 11 interviews with a total of 15 experts (i.e. some interviews included two experts) (see table 1 for the interviewee’ areas of expertise). Most of the interviews took place in the experts’ offices, where the atmosphere was informal and friendly. In some cases, the sessions were interrupted by phone calls or when additional interviewees joined in. In a number of their statements, the experts tried to distinguish between official responses and their personal opinions. In addition, the interviewees sought to maintain control over the dialog and interspersed information they had prepared in advance. In general, the experts spoke clearly and distinctly, emphasizing certain words to clarify content. In all cases, the distinction between expert and researcher became evident. To give an example, when we asked questions on the topic of intra-EU movements and welfare about which we were not well acquainted, the experts relied on their own knowledge and experience to explain ‘what was going on’ and ‘how things are’. In this regard, the German experts tended to speak confidently about their work and the regulations, implicitly reflecting Germany’s more powerful role in the EU and the influence of German institutions, whereas the Bulgarian experts offered information and expertise concerning the practices and procedures of EU social security coordination while also reflecting Bulgaria’s peripheral position within the EU.

Table 1: Areas of expertise of the 15 experts interviewed in Bulgaria and in Germany (Source: Authors’ own research, TRANSWEL project 2015–2016)

Bulgaria (n = 8)	Germany (n = 7)
Senior expert on migration at Agency for Bulgarians Abroad	Senior expert on unemployment benefits
Senior expert #1 on labour and social policy	Expert on unemployment
Senior expert #2 on labour and social policy	Two senior experts on pensions
Two senior experts on European regulations	Two experts on family benefits
Two senior experts on social policy and European regulations and SOLVIT	Expert on general social security regulations
Senior expert at EURES	

EURES = European Employment Services.

Expert interviews can be viewed as social events, and because the texts have social effects and shape discourses, we chose critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough 2003) as an appropriate tool for studying these narratives. We paid particular attention to assumptions (i.e. comments left unsaid, implicit meanings, or topics avoided or glossed over), to declarative sentences (such as explicit statements), and to intertextuality (such as references to other voices

and texts) (Fairclough 2003). However, our goal was to identify various types of assumptions to reveal how the experts referred to notions of belonging in expressing their views concerning European social citizenship. Fairclough distinguishes among *existential assumptions* ('what exists'), *propositional assumptions* ('what should exist'), and *value assumptions* ('what is desirable'), thus making CDA a useful tool for analysing the narratives and the meanings of the experts' texts. Moreover, detecting assumptions, hints, or implicitness turned out to be another relevant tool, because such forms of expression indicated what the experts took for granted or considered 'common ground' (Fairclough 2003: 55) in their argumentation. Using these instruments, we conceptualized the expert interviews as texts that included several narratives, which ultimately formed larger discourses. Thus, we aimed to explore how notions of belonging, social citizenship, and intra-EU mobility are narrated by social policy experts and what legitimation basis of European social citizenship these experts created, contested, or (de-)legitimized.

Methodologically, we did not view the Bulgarian and German texts as nation-specific datasets but instead approached them as an integrated dataset. Thus, by contrasting the narratives of Bulgarian and German social policy experts, thereby including the perspectives of both mobility-sending and mobility-receiving state actors, we were able to reconstruct articulations of a unique, integrated discourse of European social citizenship.

Empirical results: Narratives of belonging and European social citizenship in social policy expert interviews

In this study we identified three main narratives in the Bulgarian and German contexts: mobility, European social citizenship, and belonging. The mobility narrative of the Bulgarian experts depicted a process of normalizing emigration from Bulgaria to other countries. Similarly, in the German context, mobility as such was normalized. The narrative on European social citizenship revealed that the Bulgarian social policy experts depict a hierarchization of emigration and create the notion of self-victimization, whereas the German experts hierarchize mobility. In the narrative of belonging, we found that the Bulgarian experts contested the concept of 'benefit migration', whereas this concept was reproduced by the German experts.

Normalizing emigration (Bulgaria) – Normalizing mobility (Germany)

Bulgarian and German social policy experts articulated their understanding of cross-border social security rights and belonging both implicitly and explicitly.

With regard to the normalization of emigration in the Bulgarian context, the experts perceived Bulgarian movers as being highly mobile and, according to some accounts, often economically motivated.

I think we [Bulgarians] are moving towards greater mobility, but I think that at the moment we are mobile. Quite mobile! What hinders mobility now is dealing with minor administrative procedures such as diploma acknowledgment, portability of rights, and other things that make them uneasy. Europe has already done a lot to facilitate this mobility.... What more can Europe do? To me, everything has been facilitated to the maximum extent possible. There is mutual acknowledgement when it comes to education degrees. As for some procedural requirements, these are also acknowledged. (Senior expert, 2016, pp. 10–11)

These existential and propositional assumptions about highly mobile Bulgarians and the facilitation of requirements were combined intertextually with the EU debates about promoting mobility for workers within the EU. The representation of Bulgarian citizens as highly mobile further recasts their image as the ideal European who is governed by the principle of free movement. Nevertheless, along with the desire to present Bulgaria as a country that shares this principle, more critical points of view were only implied, such as the acknowledgement of a diploma or portability rights. However, to steer clear of expressing negative sentiments, the Bulgarian experts did not mention fears of a brain drain in this context, although the topic was implicit in one of the interviews:

What we discuss unofficially among ourselves is that many of those with good qualifications, professional experience, education, and good language skills already succeeded in finding a job [in Germany] during the initial years after the border was opened (Senior expert, 2016, p. 6).

The term ‘brain drain’ was never used, but this concern was evident in some of the experts’ thoughts and expressions. Some referred to the fact that many Bulgarians are leaving the country, with the exception of IT specialists, who have no reason to migrate because they are well paid in Bulgaria.

To put it bluntly, salaries in the IT sector in Bulgaria are quite high and there is no reason to emigrate. At least the initial salaries that are offered in Germany often resemble the salaries in Bulgaria, the difference being the former are in euros. (Senior expert, 2016, p. 6)

Because the Bulgarians who are highly qualified and have experience have already found jobs in Germany, there are ‘not so many [of them] left [in Bulgaria] to migrate’ (Senior expert, 2016). This narrative contains existential assumptions of emigration as normalized and economically motivated, with a hint of controversy in the background about a brain drain.

According to another expert, some Bulgarian citizens will return, because everyone is free to make this decision and Bulgarians should not forget their country and their national identity. Bulgarian migrants could act as a ‘bridge between the [two] cultures’. ‘We should make use of that’, because ‘...after all, the Bulgarian state provided the resources for their education’ (Senior expert on migration, 2015, pp. 20–21), thus suggesting that the movers are indebted to the sending country and should therefore promote the specific cultural identity of their national entity.

Similarly, German social policy experts normalized mobility within the EU through the use of certain semantics. Two of the experts used the term ‘*Wanderarbeitnehmer*’ (‘mover-worker’) to describe current mobility patterns within the EU (Expert on pensions and Expert on unemployment benefits), thus conflating mobility with work. Also, mobility was strongly perceived as a contradiction to migration.

Migration? I never looked at [mobility] as migration (...). And mobility doesn’t imply that the employee would move into another member state permanently. Some just look for temporary work and then return. Thus, in this sense, it is not migration if they change the state where they live, sometimes for just a short time, and then return. (Expert on unemployment benefits, p. 2)

This expert continued:

To me, migration sounds like the directed movement of workers from one member state to another and then another. In this case, [mobility] is not directed, not a specific flow in one direction. (Expert on unemployment benefits, p. 2)

These existential assumptions, put forward in declarative sentences, construct a normality of mobility within the context of the EU. The way in which ‘migration’ or the term ‘migrant’ has been removed from the rhetoric of the EU is further revealed in the EU regulations, which avoid using the word ‘migrant’ (Expert on unemployment benefits) – a clear indication that, from a linguistic point of view, a shift in terminology occurred in the decision not to label EU citizens ‘migrants’. In short, the desire and support for work-related mobility within the EU have normalized mobility. In the expert narratives, this normalization also became evident in the identification of motives for mobility within the EU; in this existential assumption, mobility is solely for work: ‘I don’t just move to Italy because the weather is better there, but because I am looking for work and want to secure my living’ (Expert on unemployment, p. 20).

Moreover, EU enlargements have also led to juridical equality regarding the social security rights of residents who hold European citizenship:

So now, with the EU accession of Bulgaria, one cannot discriminate against Bulgarian citizens. It is simply not done. And clearly, because of that, Bulgarian citizens who receive two types of benefits [e.g. child and maternity

benefits (*F.Z.*)] are also entitled to basic [social] security if the other benefits are not sufficient. (Expert on pensions, p. 9)

This equality for citizens was confirmed by another expert: ‘Differentiation according to citizenship is illegal – Romanian equals German’ (Expert on general social security regulations, p. 8). In citing this ruling the German expert created a narrative of equivalence: the regulations grant all EU citizens the same (social) rights. As long as EU citizenship exists, mobile Europeans may not be disadvantaged or subject to discrimination, because it would contradict the principle of equality among European citizens.

Finally, mobility was normalized within the context of free movement within Europe. This was affirmatively articulated in the value assumptions made by the German experts, as follows: ‘This is why the EU exists, so that people can be mobile’ (Expert on unemployment, p. 29). Free movement was further described as the EU’s ‘most constitutive achievement’ (Expert on pensions, p. 6). Other experts stated the following: ‘It is not a question of nationality [to be able to be mobile (*F.Z.*)]’ (Expert on family benefits, p. 9), and ‘mobility doesn’t lead to the loss of rights, and this is a major development’ (Expert on general social security regulations, p. 1). These existential and value assumptions illustrate the unquestioned reasons for the existence of the EU, that is, that its citizens can be mobile. The German experts further described a utopian view of equal rights for all EU citizens, depicting the EU as something desirable or needed and at the same time legitimizing the existence of the EU as an institution. Thus, we can detect an inclusionary narrative of sameness and the promise of ‘no loss of rights’ through free movement. And lastly, free movement was also seen to offer economic advantages to the receiving countries:

Of course, one can’t foresee how long an individual will live, right? If he dies before reaching retirement age, Germany might have already received his contributions but doesn’t have to pay the benefits. Statistically, this happens frequently, so the bottom line is that the contributions exceed what must be paid out in benefits later. (Expert on pensions, p. 7)

These existential and value assumptions about work and the possibility of free movement in the EU as the reasons and motive for migration normalize mobility and illustrate its importance for the economy of the receiving country. In supporting the economic needs of both the movers and the EU nation states (in this case, mainly the receiving ones), it is shown that mover-workers are desired and will be included as mobile actors in the regulations and respective societies.

Thus, in answer to the question we posed about European social citizenship and belonging, an overall narrative in the Bulgarian–German context can be visualized in the following diagram:

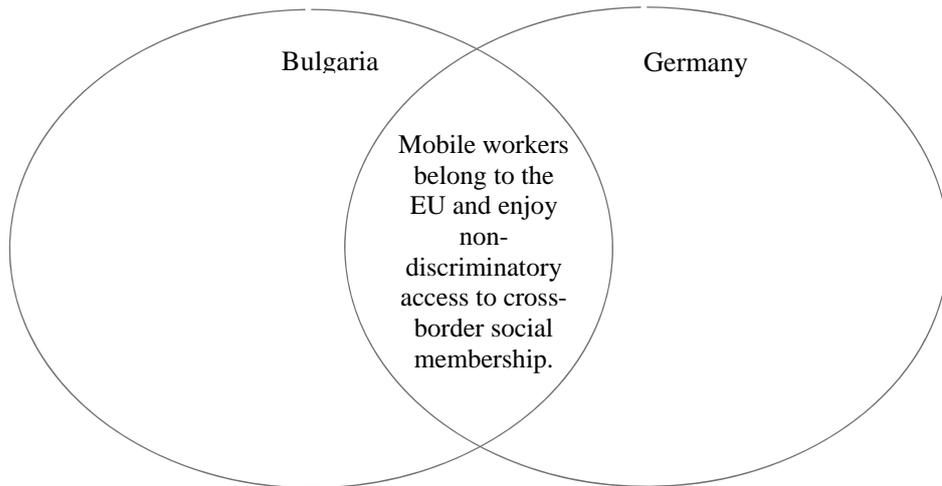


Figure 1: The overall mobility narrative, normalizing emigration – normalizing mobility (Source: Authors’ own research TRANSWEL project 2015–2016)

Thus, it becomes clear how, in their narratives, the experts legitimized European social citizenship with a notion of belonging that includes all citizens. Just as the Bulgarian experts normalized emigration, the German experts normalized work-related mobility, especially by their use of certain semantics. In fact, the Bulgarian experts transnationalized mobile citizens by means of the bridge metaphor, creating a vivid example of European social membership. For the German experts, non-German EU citizens would not quite belong to Germany but, within the framework of the EU, would enjoy equal rights and free movement and therefore non-discriminatory access to social security rights.

Self-victimization and hierarchization of emigration (Bulgaria) – Hierarchization of mobility (Germany)

In the second narrative analysis, the creation of mobility-related hierarchies, the experts used intersectional stratifications to contest and scrutinize the normalizing aspect of mobility and belonging.

The theme of belonging to Europe was very strong, as was revealed in the narratives about how the Bulgarian community in Germany is constructed. The image of Bulgaria abroad appears to be an important aspect of Bulgarians’ intention to gain respect and recognition among the rest of the European member states. Prominent in one expert’s narrative was the question of who

would be considered a desirable member of the Bulgarian community in Germany and who disrupts the favourable image of this community that has been established through the continuing efforts of Bulgarian movers (Senior expert on migration, 2015). Bulgarians who contribute to the positive image of the Bulgarian community abroad were highly praised, and these included members of Bulgarian–German cultural, student, and religious organizations; the Bulgarian consulate; and individuals who have improved the standing of Bulgarians in Germany in some way.

In practically every major city in Germany we have Bulgarians who, having settled there a while ago or even recently, are doing some kind of creative work. Here we can be proud of the accomplishments of our artists in Germany. (...) Several times we in Bulgaria featured a book by an opera singer, and we have also published several poetry books. She lives in [city name]. I think she became a member of the integration committee in [city name]. She is a chair of the syndicate of the [city name] Opera. (Senior expert on migration, 2015)

According to the Bulgarian experts, this constructed desirable group is to be distinguished from other groups that are supposedly responsible for generating a negative image of the Bulgarian community in Germany. According to one expert (Senior expert on migration, 2015), Bulgarian Roma belong to this latter group; in reference to antiziganist articles that accuse them of ‘flooding’ German cities (as shown in the chapter on media debates), the Roma are believed to be responsible for allegations of ‘negative tendencies’ within the Bulgarian community in Germany. One expert, distinguishing personal opinion from that of the institution represented, spoke of ‘some negative developments in the Bulgarian community as a whole’ (Senior expert on migration, 2015) and referred to Roma who are concentrated in some German cities such as Duisburg, Frankfurt, and Dortmund as ‘represent[ing] Bulgaria with a bad image in German society’ (Senior expert on migration, 2015). By contrast, these negative value assumptions serve to demonstrate who would be desired as a Bulgarian ‘image maker’ – namely non-Roma and highly qualified movers who engage in positive ways in German society, such as the aforementioned opera singer.

On the other hand, in both the Bulgarian and the German societies, Roma are seen as victims and disadvantaged movers. The narrative of such victimization became evident in another interview in which the Roma were portrayed as objects of deceitful practices. ‘The Germans too want to cash in on them’ (Expert #1 on labour and social policy, 2015a, p. 10). This expert argued that some German citizens take advantage of Bulgarian Roma who need an address in order to register in Germany:

The Germans are no angels either. Let’s say that a German equips a room with five mattresses (...) and rents the room at €200 per mattress, which is a €1,000 income per room. (Expert #1 on labour and social policy, 2015a, p. 10)

In the emerging hierarchy of migrant categories, intersections of class, education, and ethnicity were evident in the narratives of different experts. Not only Roma were considered uninsured, but also Bulgarians who became self-employed by closing down their firms and therefore stopped contributing to social security (Expert #2 on labour and social policy, 2015b, p. 7). In addition, often uninsured are those less qualified or unqualified Bulgarian migrants who may be subject to bad living conditions and unfair working conditions (e.g. exploitation, non-payment of salaries, and non-payment of contributions), mostly in the fields of construction, transport of goods, meat processing, and eldercare.

These existential assumptions by the Bulgarian experts were evident in the narrative of self-victimization. Movers in disadvantaged positions were considered victims:

And this happens in the centre of Berlin, the seat of the government and of the Federal Chancellor; [the scandal involving the new mall] took place only 500 meters away. With regard to the protection of workers' labour rights, the situation is dire.

That's why, when I give presentations, I give an example [of such victimization]: "At the supermarket, when you see meat that costs only €3, you should know why it is so cheap! It is because the production price has been reduced to the minimum". (Expert #1 on labour and social policy, 2015a, p. 10)

At the other end of the hierarchy are the highly qualified Bulgarians such as doctors and engineers – professionals that presumably do not have these kinds of problems (Senior expert, 2016, p. 10).

The combination of value assumptions and existential assumptions was also related to the movers' intelligence and education level, thus creating further hierarchization of emigration and introducing a neoliberal *utility* aspect. In the words of an expert, no person of average intelligence with a secondary or tertiary education would be found working and not being socially insured at the same time: 'Such a person I haven't seen!' (Expert #2 on labour and social policy, 2015b, p. 8) In other words, educated migrants who are working and have social insurance are more capable of ensuring their well-being. If a mover lacks insurance, he himself can be blamed for his situation. This argument further suggests that it is the individual and not the state or other institutions that is solely responsible for organizing his own social welfare. To add to that, qualified movers who are proficient in the language of the receiving country should not encounter any issues being mobile; as one expert stated, 'The employed should not have any problems' (Expert #2 on labour and social policy, 2015b, p. 11).

Summing up, the desired Bulgarian abroad is characterized as an ‘intelligent and highly qualified and responsible professional’. The highly skilled movers are preferred because they appear to be more responsible and self-sufficient.

In line with the intra-Bulgarian hierarchization, German texts (re)produced such differences in the process of ‘Othering’ non-German nationals and in degrading them in a way that puts German nationals at the top of an imagined hierarchy. The hierarchization of mobile subjects can be shown in the analysis of personal utility choices, intersectional migration/mobility-related hierarchies, and the construction of dichotomies regarding different groups of movers. Migration/mobility-related hierarchies were only implicitly acknowledged by the German experts. In answer to the specific question about whether greater mobility leads to disadvantage, one expert responded, ‘Of course, this is no institutional disadvantage; it is just a personal decision to migrate...’ (Expert on pensions, p. 14). Also, the following quotation reinforces the narrative that mobility within the EU is not subject to stratification: ‘But this is not the case, and it has been statistically verified that [mobility] is no more difficult for specific groups’ (Expert on unemployment, p. 33).

Interestingly, even in answer to direct questions about disadvantaged groups, the only category mentioned was age (by the German expert on unemployment). Propositional assumptions are a way of speaking that makes social inequality invisible and puts a strong focus on the individual’s life-choices: from the experts’ point of view, no one is forcing social actors to migrate; they do so out of their own free will and opinion, and, as mobile subjects, they should take responsibility for their decisions.

Gender, the next category of stratification, was also implicitly referred to by the German experts:

After 3 months in Germany, movers have the right of residency according to the free movement regulations. If they are employed, the right of residency is assured; if they are just looking for work, then they are not entitled to ALG-2 [i.e. means-tested unemployment benefit type 2⁴ (*J.F.*)], although they might be entitled to social assistance. (Expert on unemployment, p. 20)

Another narrative referred to the male, less well educated (adding the category of class) construction worker as a hypothetical example of a typical mobile citizen seeking work in Germany: ‘A normal craftsman in Bulgaria who is self-employed as a floor-tiler will come to Germany for 4 months as a subcontractor on a construction site’ (Expert on pensions, p. 5). (See also the Expert on family benefits, p. 8.)

⁴ The ALG-2 is the social benefit (means-tested) designed to secure a livelihood for people between the ages of 15 and 65/67 who are able to work and who are eligible for the benefit.

Thus, impressions about who these movers actually are appear to ignore both those who are female and those who are highly skilled. The fact that women were excluded in the narratives through existential assumptions leads to two phenomena: Female migration is made invisible and is discounted, whereas the androcentric view of the world, with men being superior, is affirmed. Therefore, male construction workers represent a less educated (lower-class) example of mobile individuals who may come to Germany for a while but don't stay permanently and thus don't entirely belong to the German society. Further examples highlighted the androcentric and heteronormative aspects of mobility in the field of employment, such as the use of the ALG-2 (*Arbeitslosengeld II*), the means-tested unemployment benefit type 2. According to the lateral approach taken by the ALG-2, the families of movers who are working but who do not earn enough to support themselves and their family are entitled to receive the so-called complementary unemployment benefit (type 2) (in German, this process is called *aufstocken*, and the benefit is called *ALG-2 ergänzend*):

If the father has worked and acquired this entitlement, he receives the money – not his family and not his dependents (*Bedarfgemeinschaft*) [the benefit to cover the family/community needs (*F.Z.*)]. (Expert on unemployment, p. 24)

The father is depicted as head of the family and is also seen as the breadwinner when it comes to the insurance-based unemployment benefit. Interestingly, in the narratives of the German experts, Roma were mentioned only once with regard to their disadvantaged mobility position.

Figure 2: The narrative of European social citizenship, hierarchization of emigration – hierarchization of mobility (Source: Authors' own research, TRANSWEL project 2015–2016)

Bulgaria

Germany

Roma don't belong to the Bulgarian community. Highly skilled movers are responsible for shaping the image of Bulgaria abroad.

Movers are acknowledged as only temporary and are always subject to return. The ideal-typical mover is male and less educated.

The narratives concerning hierarchizations provided relevant findings on the question of belonging. Bulgarian experts advocated the presence of 'image makers', that is, movers who, through their activities, act as unofficial ambassadors for their country. These are predominantly highly skilled, non-Roma movers, whereas Roma are supposedly responsible for engendering a negative image of mobile Bulgarians, although the experts did acknowledge that Roma are in a disadvantaged position. In the end, we can show how arguments of utility are mixed with intelligence and the access to social security rights.

Utility considerations were also relevant in the German experts' narratives, in that they attributed movers' decisions solely to free choice and the possibility of easily returning to their countries of origin. In contrast to the Bulgarian experts, the German experts ignored highly skilled movers and focused on male breadwinners, thus gendering their narrative of who is actually moving. Interestingly, the German experts avoided the question of ethnicity, which might indicate a reluctance on the part of the interviewees to reproduce anti-Roma sentiment. This omission clearly shows how, through hierarchization, Bulgarian Roma should not belong to the Bulgarian community and that their mobility within Germany is only temporary. In the same fashion, the narratives made it clear that less well educated movers do not belong to the German community and blatantly ignored both women and the highly skilled.

Challenging 'benefit migration' and claiming recognition (Bulgaria) – Reproducing public debates on 'benefit migration' and protecting national boundaries and welfare (Germany)

Bulgaria's claim to be recognized as an equal member of the EU was mirrored in the Bulgarian experts' attempts to challenge the public debate on 'benefit migration'. Expert #1 on labour and

social policy (2015a) negotiated and countered the German debates (see chapter on media debates), claiming that ‘benefit migration’ does not exist. In this regard, the expert referred to statistics from Germany’s own Institute for Employment Research (*Arbeitsmarkt und Berufsforschung*), citing only 194 cases of ‘probable misuse of social assistance’ in 2013 involving Bulgarian nationals. The reliance on statistics obtained from a German institute to affirm that the supposed ‘benefit migration’ does not exist is an example of interdiscursivity. This expert also cited media reports, quoting the German CSU party slogan of 2014 (*‘Wer betrügt, der fliegt!’*),⁵ suggesting that German authorities specifically target Bulgarians and Romanians: ‘In principle – [and] in my experience it is so – there is, so to speak, a tacit agreement not to give social assistance to the Bulgarians and the Romanians’ (Expert #1 on labour and social policy, 2015a, p. 6).

Expert #2 on labour and social policy (2015b) also contested the recent public debates regarding possible reductions in the child benefit for movers’ children who remained in the sending country. In this expert’s view, regulations and social policy propose equality for all citizens of the member states (Expert #2 on labour and social policy, 2015b, p. 7), but a dichotomy was revealed between ‘old’ (West) and ‘new’ (East) member states with regard to the debates concerning cuts in child benefits. Before Brexit, Britain – but also Germany, Finland, and other (old) EU member states (Expert on family benefits, p.8.) – expressed a desire to reduce the child benefit to levels that would resonate with the sending country’s standard of living. Two of the Bulgarian experts considered such a step to reflect ‘absolute discrimination’ (Senior experts on social policy and European regulations, 2016, p. 18), because it contradicts the contract of the foundation of the European community.

Expert #2 further stated that

[such a reduction would be] in favour of Germany and France, because their family benefit systems are almost identical [in terms of the level of benefit]; it does not matter whether the child is here or there, but you can imagine how the Bulgarians, the Romanians, and similar migrants would be cut off. (Expert #2 on labour and social policy, 2015b, p. 18)

In this existential assumption, the supposed dichotomy between new and old member states is constructed so that, according to the expert, Bulgaria would be placed in a disadvantaged position. The narrative of self-victimization is also evident in the narratives contending that the old member states are in no hurry to expedite improvements of Regulation 883/2004. According to the Bulgarian experts, the ‘biggest problem’ with this regulation is the lack of deadlines,

⁵ <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/wegen-bulgarien-und-rumaenien-csu-plant-offensive-gegen-armutsmigranten-1.1852159>, <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/csu-vorstoss-wer-betruengt-der-fliegt-wie-das-netz-die-csu-verspottet-1.1852323>

which leads to delays in the practical implementation of the rules. Moreover, they claimed that most of the old member states are the ones that interfere with the processing of e-documents:

Most of the old member states intrude more [in the process]. I see it as the biggest problem of this regulation. In reality, the lack of deadlines hinders the practical application of the rules. Theoretically, one has some rights, but in practice gets nothing. (Senior experts on social policy and European regulations, 2016, p. 16)

Thus, the movers are disadvantaged. In tackling the narrative of ‘benefit migration’, such comments would suggest that the Bulgarian experts are rationalizing their desire to prove that Bulgaria is in an unfair and weak position and does not deserve such ‘absolute discrimination’, because it aspires to be equal and recognized and not different or thought of as the ‘Other’.

Another Bulgarian expert’s narrative reinforced the argument that Bulgaria does in fact belong to the EU, which could be considered one justification for its claim for recognition as an equal EU member state by the old member states. However, other experts expressed existential assumptions, defining the Bulgarian national legislation as ‘rigid and sedentary’ and not in harmony with the rest of the EU member states and thus failing to promote mobility. Although at first glance this view might appear to contradict the other experts’ narratives, it actually reveals another aspect of Bulgaria’s desire for recognition, namely that if Bulgaria would make more of an effort to be a ‘European country’, it would eventually be recognized as such. For example, in the following quote, one expert offered assurance that Bulgaria has always given priority to the European regulations: ‘Our Bulgarian legislation was harmonized even before Bulgaria became an EU member state. We did not have legislative contradictions, because our laws in the area of social security never gave rights to only Bulgarian nationals’ (Senior expert on social policy and European regulations, 2015, p. 11). The expert continued, ‘Even if there exists a right in the 883 regulation that is not established in our legislation, the regulation is being applied’ (Senior expert on social policy and European regulations, 2015, p. 11). But the opposite view was also expressed. According to one expert, Bulgarian child benefits are paid only if the child stays in the country of origin, because the national legislation does not consider the fact that children might require medical treatment or might have to visit parents and/or grandparents abroad. This narrative reflects the notion of not quite belonging to the EU and the need to do something about it and not hinder mobility.

However, the narrative of de-normalizing ‘benefit migration’ was also evident in the way these experts challenged the German government and negotiated the perceived unfair treatment of Bulgarian nationals in Germany, thus responding to the general debate about supposed ‘benefit migration’ in Germany.

In the German interviews, some of the experts' narratives were strongly influenced by allegations that 'benefit migration' exists, reflecting the perception by some that mobile subjects migrate to obtain benefits through the German welfare system (although, according to the German experts themselves, that belief is not supported by data or social reality).⁶

This reproduction is contradictory, because the German experts also referred to statistics, pointing out that a phenomenon such as benefit migration does not exist: "So, ... it appears that misuse [of benefits] is no more frequent among [the migrant] groups than among Germans' (Expert on unemployment, p. 13). The expert continued with another existential assumption:

The numbers disproved the perceived injustice (that migrants come in order to claim benefits), because in reality the number of claimants is actually low. Hardly any [migrants] were receiving benefits who could not also impute some income and who were also actually working. (Expert on unemployment, p. 14)

By referring to statistics versus public opinion ('perceived injustice'), this expert used intertextuality to make clear that, despite the discourses in the media, no benefit migration exists, so the debate is moot. Regarding the transfer of child benefits, one expert pointed out that hardly any money for child benefits is transferred to Bulgaria (Expert on family benefits). Another expert also emphasized that Bulgarian and Romanian migrants are well integrated in the German labour market (Expert on general social security regulations).

Nevertheless, the question remains, how do the German experts actually construct the concept of 'benefit migration', even though they claim that it doesn't exist? Mainly, it is based on several propositional assumptions that 'benefit migration' could exist given the public debates: First, the authorities are afraid of scam labour contracts and of top-ups (*aufstocken*) on welfare benefits (i.e. the unemployment benefit type II), although such instances have been rare, with a few exceptions (e.g. the barber who hired 10 people) (Expert on unemployment). Second, despite official statistics to the contrary, the experts strongly reproduced public discourses concerning 'benefit migration' as if it did exist (especially in the case of child benefits for children not living in the country of destination). As one expert put it, "With €180 of child benefits, [the benefit goes] further in Bulgaria than in Germany" (Expert on unemployment), implicitly suggesting in this declarative sentence that such benefits constitute a reason for people to be mobile but to leave their children behind to benefit from the higher welfare payments in Germany.

These views are also built on narratives of fairness. Thus, the public debates were presented to convey the notion that some mobile individuals move to Germany solely for the higher welfare

⁶ Only one expert did not want to be quoted on the question of the welfare state and insisted that public discourses do not affect daily work (Expert on unemployment benefits). Furthermore, the expert states: 'About the welfare state, this would be a political expression; I don't say anything about that' (Expert on unemployment benefits).

benefits: ‘Whether this [arrangement] is fair is discussed again and again’ (Expert on family benefits). Furthermore, the expert remarked, “Concerning the current debates, the matter is principally a question of justice; for many [Germans], it seems unjust’ (Expert on family benefits, p. 9), pointing out that some of those in German politics and in parliament consider the situation unfair:

Yes, this is unjust. For children who live in Bulgaria we pay the same amount as the German child benefit even though, based on the standard of living there, providing for a child in Bulgaria requires less. (Expert on family benefits, p. 8)

This expert therefore used intertextuality in referring to politicians and ‘public debates’ on ‘benefit migration’. With such expressions as ‘discussed again and again’ and ‘for many, it seems unjust’, the expert tried to make it clear that this was not a personal opinion but was based on statements made by other politicians or on the perceptions of a majority of the public, leading to the assumption that national citizens in general are opposed to migration. The narratives of fairness with respect to immobile German citizens who are allegedly disadvantaged because of the presence of mobile citizens from the new EU member states were also used to combat the alleged ‘benefit migration’ by attempting to exclude foreigners from Germany (i.e. to alleviate the burden they impose by disagreeing with changes that will ultimately limit social rights):

Discussions are under way to completely change the rules of priority.⁷ This would certainly limit the free movement principle, if you think about it (Expert on family benefits, p.8)

Furthermore, the idea that the child benefit entitlements embedded in the EU regulations regarding social security coordination are ‘fair’ was confirmed by the following statement:

Someone who comes to Germany from Bulgaria for work does not have to think “if I take my children along, I will receive more money and family benefits than if the child stays in Bulgaria”. Those considerations are not a concern because the current regulations [require that benefits be paid for movers’ children living in the country of origin (*F.Z.*)]. (Expert on family benefits, p. 8)

Strategies for preventing ‘benefit migration’ rely on collected data and statistics to control and discipline non-German citizens. At the same time, mobile EU citizens are seen as the ‘Other’ – that is, they do not belong to the imagined German community. Because the management and organization of welfare benefits are driven by public discourses (Expert on unemployment), the Federal Employment Agency created a task force to look into this matter after the German

⁷ For example, in the event of overlapping, the rules concerning priority could be as follows: rights are available ‘first, ...on the basis of an activity as an employed or self-employed person; second, ... on the basis of receipt of a pension; and finally, ...on the basis of residence’ (Article 68a, Regulation [EC] 883/2004).

labour market was opened to Romanian and Bulgarian citizens in 2014. However, the task force realized (in what is here defined as an existential assumption) that “an abuse in this sense was not detected” (Expert on unemployment, p. 4).

Nevertheless, practices to prevent alleged ‘benefit migration’ have been put in place. Regarding child benefits, the German Family Benefits Department (*Familienkasse*) sometimes gathers data on suspicious cases, but it often has too little information to proceed (Expert on family benefits). In addition, to prevent double or triple paying, security systems have been implemented (Expert on family benefits). Data security precludes the exchange of certain information. Although there have been few instances of such abuse (e.g. a pension from Russia, which the providers did not know about), the legislation would need be changed to prevent such problems (Expert on unemployment).

Additional activities include the exchange of information and data regarding child benefits to find out who is responsible for paying the benefits (Expert on family benefits). Such cases reveal that, from the point of view of the experts, statistics or data and regulations are used to control and discipline non-German citizens, although this was not explicitly stated. Mobile individuals are subject to observation and control in the daily practice and implementation of new regulations (e.g. by task forces). As mentioned, the actual results contradicted the public discourses; still, it appears that patterns of thinking or work processes have not changed in the daily routine of the institutions.

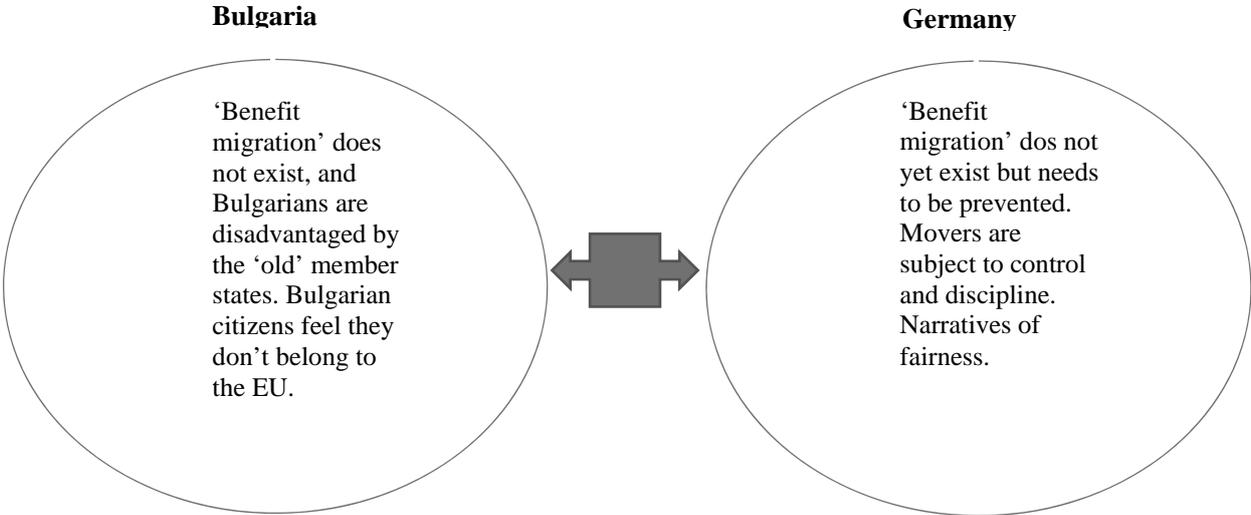
Neoliberal arguments were also used in the examples above. Because hardly any benefit is paid to children residing in their countries of origin, it might be cheaper to continue this practice than to have the children reside in Germany (Expert on child benefits). In fact, implicitly, the argument was used as a legitimation to prevent the children of mobile actors from migrating to Germany, not only because it is cheaper in the end, but also because (as was implicitly stated) these ‘Other’ children don’t belong to the German community and should stay in their country of origin.

This view is also evident in the regulations on welfare benefits for EU citizens who do not receive social assistance in Germany for the first 6 months (i.e. EU citizens are entitled to welfare benefits only after residing for 6 months in the receiving country) (Expert on unemployment). One expert (referring to a court ruling) explained that the reason for this regulation is that ‘for EU citizens, it is possible to go home again’ (Expert on unemployment, p. 21).

In addition, certain suspensions of benefits (*Leistungsausschlüsse*) are considered just for non-German citizens. Upon their arrival, EU citizens can import entitlements for unemployment in

Germany for 3 months (up to 6 on an individual basis) but are excluded from unemployment benefit type II (Expert on unemployment) unless they have permanent residency status,⁸ although they might be entitled (on individual grounds) to social welfare, which is regulated at the community level. Such a distinction (dichotomy) between German and non-German citizens makes it clear that the latter do not belong to the German society and have fewer rights and entitlements when it comes to asking for welfare benefits.

Figure 3: The narrative of belonging, ‘benefit migration’ in German-Bulgarian context (Source: Authors’ own research, TRANSWEL project 2015–2016)



The prevalent debate on child benefits demonstrates the existence of a European social membership that is heavily contested by some member states and rigorously defended by others. The German experts’ objections draw on public debates and rely on the semantics of fairness to show how Bulgarian citizens and their children are considered to be outside a common community that does not subscribe to the shared idea of welfare state recipients. According to the experts’ narratives, even though the European social security coordination system exists, European social membership should, for protection, be complicated in order to maintain the difference between ‘Us’ and the ‘Others’ who do not belong to the German community.

⁸ Permanent residency is granted after 5 years of legal residency in Germany, but EU citizens can lose this status after 2 years of non-residency in Germany. For example, an EU citizen (without permanent residency rights) who returns to Germany after being away for more than 2 years cannot receive unemployment benefit II in the event of unemployment.

Conclusions

This working paper analysed narratives of belonging and European social membership in the context of current intra-EU mobility. Regarding the debates concerning ‘integration’ and social security rights for migrants (as well as refugees) that began after the ‘summer of migration’ in 2015, this study is the first to offer some background on how these issues are being legitimized and contested on a transnational EU scale.

As was shown in the first narrative, on ‘normalization’, experts in both countries conceptualized the right to cross-border social access within the EU and considered it a framework that should be addressed on a supranational (EU) level rather than on a national one. In creating this EU level, all citizens would be legally equal and have the same social rights. In the second narrative, such ‘legitimization’ was contested by all the experts, because hierarchization leads to the exclusion of such groups as Roma and highly skilled women, who were ignored in the German experts’ narratives. The third narrative showed how Bulgarian experts contested the ‘myth’ of ‘benefit migration’ and expressed their aim to improve Bulgaria’s image within the ‘old’ member states. The German experts argued against the gradual belonging of Bulgarians to the EU cross-border social community based on the narrative of ‘fairness’, implying that Bulgarian citizens (and their children, with respect to the debate concerning a possible reduction in child benefits) are not worth as much as German citizens and do not belong to the German community.

To be precise, our analysis of this integrated set of interviews did not clearly reveal whether citizens are fully included or excluded with regard to their rights. Rather, one could interpret the results to mean that there is at present an insubstantial line between inclusion and exclusion. Although the regulations grant legal rights to Bulgarian citizens and enable them to be European social members of the EU, these rights are susceptible to change, as expressed by the Bulgarian experts, because they are being contested in public debates, thus slowing down reforms and favouring the ‘old’ member states.

Methodologically, this study was based on an integrated transnational dataset of 11 social policy expert interviews, and the results were relevant in demonstrating the significance of belonging in the context of European social citizenship. Further studies might be carried out to explore the possible connection of our results to recent refugee movements.

Empirically, we were able to show the relevance of *belonging* when it comes to European social membership. When such belonging is denied – on the grounds of nationality, gender, or class – ‘lived’ European social citizenship is difficult to attain, according to the experts’ narratives, despite the existing legal right to access on the supranational level.

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