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BULGARIAN MIGRANT CUISINE: BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY

Abstract

This study explores how Bulgarian migrant communities in Argentina and Canada shape and sustain their culinary identities under conditions of distance, substitution and generational change. Drawing on fieldwork conducted between 2011 and 2022, combined with an analysis of archival materials, migrant publications, and digital platforms, we trace how 'traditional' Bulgarian cuisine functions as a dynamic mediator between cultural memory and adaptation. Our findings show that festive food proves significantly more resilient than everyday cooking, while ethno-entrepreneurship and digital networks provide new channels for preserving and reformulating culinary traditions across generations.

KEY WORDS: culinary memory, Bulgarian diaspora, food and identity, festive cuisine, ethno-entrepreneurship.

Anotacija

Šiame tyrime nagrinėjama, kaip Bulgarijos migrantų bendruomenės Argentinoje ir Kanadoje formuoja ir išlaiko savo kulinarinį tapatumą atstumo, laikmečio ir kartų kaitos sąlygomis. Remiantis 2011–2022 m. atliktais lauko tyrimais ir archyvinės medžiagos, migrantų leidinių bei interneto svetainių analize, atskleidžiama, kaip „tradicinė“ bulgarų virtuvė veikia dinamiško tarpininko tarp kultūrinės atminties ir adaptacijos kontekste. Mūsų išvados rodo, kad šventinis maistas yra gerokai

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atsparesnis nei kasdienis gaminimas, o etnoverslumas ir skaitmeniniai tinklai suteikia naujų galimybių kulinarinėms tradicijoms išsaugoti ir perteikti ateities kartoms.

PAGRINDINIAI ŽODŽIAI: kulinarinė atmintis, bulgarų diaspora, maistas ir tapatybė, šventinė virtuvė, etnoverslumas.

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Introduction

The modernisation of national cuisine is a broad topic, part of which extends beyond national borders and encompasses the diaspora. Insofar as migrants constitute a significant and vital part of the national fabric, their food practices are essential for a comprehensive understanding of cuisine, in terms of its content, structure, meanings and dynamics. In migration, the meanings of own/other and domestic/public, and ultimately of traditional/modern, are profoundly reshaped, not only with regard to cuisine, but across all national aspects.

‘Food is a physical manifestation of memory that connects immigrants to geographically and chronologically distant family members, experiences and communities,’ write Daniel Weller and David Turkon (Weller, Turkon 2014, 15). Placed in a new social and cultural environment, migrants are compelled to adapt their eating habits rapidly; over time, they reassess, rediscover and reinvent what they have ‘brought’ as ‘traditional’ cuisine. Food thus emerges as a dynamic medium through which migrants maintain connections to the homeland, while also interacting with other local communities. They face a dual challenge: to preserve their culinary memory, while adapting to available local ingredients, regional tastes and economic constraints. Recipes evolve across generations and within mixed marriages, combining nostalgia with practicality. Festive food acquires a particular significance, further elaborating its ritual dimension, and functioning as a symbolic culinary code that brings together cultural memory, nostalgia, the perspective of future generations, and expressions of identity.

The focus of our study, grounded in numerous examples from the Bulgarian diaspora, is the movement of so-called Bulgarian cuisine between tradition and modernity, and its function as a significant mediator between past and present. Alongside folk dances and costume, ‘traditional’ food is preserved as one of the visual markers of national belonging in the multiethnic societies that host Bulgarian migrants, and as a principal trajectory for participation and self-expression.

In this study, we draw on classic approaches to the analysis of food: as a ‘social fact’ encompassing rituality and functioning as a transformative agent in migrant communities (after Émile Durkheim 2001), and as a symbolic code reflecting social hierarchies and boundaries (after Mary Douglas 1972). More specifically, our work is situated within the framework of ‘gastropolitics’ (after Arjun Appadu-

rai 1988), which considers food practices as instruments of identification and for coping with cultural uncertainty. Research on diverse migrant groups suggests that there is no universal approach to food and eating in migration: depending on generational, temporal and geographical parameters, as well as intra-community politics and economic conditions, such practices may serve, for some, as a strong model of internal consolidation (especially at the level of family and kin), while for others they function as ethnic display (cf. Diner 2001). The development of these practices unfolds in parallel with the construction of national cuisines through concepts such as the 'authentic' and the 'traditional' (cf. Dechev 2010).

In the literature on migrant cuisine, greater attention has been paid to well-known migrant culinary communities (Italians, Chinese, Lebanese, etc), and to family food practices, while the significance and transformation of traditional food in new contexts and for new purposes remain comparatively underexplored (Kaller et al. 2017). A central focus in the scholarly literature on food in migration is its function as a marker of identity, and as a means of sustaining cultural belonging, maintaining ties to the homeland, and fostering a sense of community in the new environment (Ray 2004). At the same time, the integrative role of food has also emerged as an important theme, alongside the processes through which migrants' culinary traditions adapt to those of the host society, as well as the culinary and dietary challenges posed by the new socio-economic context (Kershen 2002). Food practices have pronounced economic dimensions, and often find both their expression and, in some cases, their preservation in entrepreneurial initiatives, such as shops, restaurants, street food or catering services, where migrants frequently draw on their skills to create business opportunities (Abranches 2023). Equally significant are the policies of the host society that enable the expression of ethnocultural diversity, as well as regulations that, at times, constrain and even hinder the preservation of the culinary heritage (Social Research 2014).

As for Bulgarian migrants, the scholarship has shown greater interest in so-called traditional communities (Bessarabian Bulgarians, Bulgarian gardeners), which, due to their relatively closed ways of life and earlier migration, are assumed to have preserved the largely traditional profile of the 'national' cuisine. In this article, we focus instead on more recent migrant communities, those of the past century, with a particular emphasis on the new globalised waves after the 1990s. Our primary concern is with the notion of a 'national', 'traditional' and 'authentic' cuisine, both festive and everyday, as it takes shape across different channels, such as the family, educational and cultural institutions, and ethnobusiness (see also Matanova, Penchev 2017).

We have been working with Bulgarian migrants and their institutions and communities since 2011, conducting fieldwork in a number of countries across Europe, North and South America, and the Middle East. Our methodology combines personal narratives and fieldwork observation of everyday and festive practices with the analysis of archival materials, social media, and digital platforms. Although we have a basis for a diachronic approach that would trace the culinary repertoire across generations, from the struggle for survival among the first migrants to the symbolic role of food among their descendants, we focus here on the functioning of ‘traditional’ food within contemporary Bulgarian migrant communities.

The relevance of the study is determined by the fact that the Bulgarian diaspora, unlike the better-studied Italian, Chinese or Lebanese culinary communities, has so far received relatively little scholarly attention, and the impact of the legacy of socialism on the construction of ‘traditional’ cuisine in the diaspora remains poorly studied.

The study is based on the results of expeditionary work carried out in Toronto, Montreal, Buenos Aires and Berlin between 2011 and 2022. Qualitative methods were applied: semi-structured interviews, participant observation and commensality with the research participants. These methods were supplemented by the analysis of archival sources – migrant newspapers and association documents – as well as digital platforms and social networks. Such a diachronic approach allowed us to trace the development of the culinary repertoire from the first generation of migrants to the present day.

About contemporary Bulgarian migrants

The migration of compact Bulgarian communities dates back to the 17th century, with the movement of large groups of Bulgarian Catholics into the Habsburg Empire, specifically the region of Banat, today divided between Romania, Serbia and Hungary. This community has maintained its identity to the present day, and sustains a vibrant cultural life, supported both by its religious distinctiveness within the surrounding environment, and by its local concentration. Other similar groups of early migrants living in compact communities include the Bessarabian and Tavrian Bulgarians in Ukraine and Moldova. These communities are of particular interest for the preservation of archaic language and customs, including gastronomic ones (Georgiev 2022). At the intersection of traditional and modern migration stand the groups of Bulgarian gardeners, professional migrants who left Bulgaria in the 19th and the early decades of the 20th century, primarily reaching Central Europe, but also more distant desti-

nations, such as Brazil and Australia (Penchev 2023). More significant waves of labour migration date from the 20th century, with particularly pronounced peaks in the 1920s, 1930s and 1990s, as well as in the first decades of the 21st century. Waves of political migration are also evident, especially in the 1940s and 1950s, following the establishment of the socialist regime in Bulgaria.

Today, significant Bulgarian migrant presences, with visible cultural activity, established institutions and internal community life, can be found in almost all European countries (especially Germany, Spain, the United Kingdom, Greece and Italy), as well as in the United States and Canada, Brazil, Argentina, and sporadically in other Latin American countries, in the Middle East (the United Arab Emirates, Jordan and Kuwait), as well as in China and Japan, Morocco, and South Africa (Penchev et al 2023). In most of these countries, there are institutional structures dedicated to maintaining the Bulgarian language and traditions (as they have been constructed in recent decades in the homeland). In Western and southern Europe, and in North America, we also find numerous Bulgarian shops and eateries offering Bulgarian food, either imported from Bulgaria or produced locally according to Bulgarian recipes.

The migration of the ‘traditional’ canon

Over time, particularly in recent decades, a relatively stable repertoire of dishes has taken shape, perceived as emblematically ‘traditional’, regardless of the actual historical transformations of Bulgarian cuisine. Several factors contribute to this, foremost among them, in our view, the ease of communication with the homeland, the source of ingredients. This is followed by the cumulative presence of migrants who grew up under socialism, a period that established a national culinary narrative.

The specific dishes vary. In Argentina, for example, these most often include *moussaka*, *kavarma*,¹ *kebapche*² and *Shopska*³ salad. In Canada and the United

¹ *Kavarma* is similar to gyuvech, see above.

² *Kebapche* is grilled minced meat, emblematic of Bulgarian restaurant and fast-food culture, although it is also frequently prepared at home. It is comparable to Serbian ćevapčići and Romanian mici. The recipe is very similar to grilled meatballs, but it has a certain symbolic prominence over them, even though the two are usually served and consumed together.

³ *Shopska* salad is the most popular Bulgarian salad, both in restaurants and in the home. It is made from tomatoes, cucumbers, roasted peppers, onions, and grated white brined cheese. Although it was developed after the 1960s (cf. Dechev 2010; Gavrilova 2015), it is regarded as traditional and emblematic of Bulgarian cuisine. Its colour composition, which coincides with that of the Bulgarian national flag, reinforces this status.

States, dishes such as lamb with rice, *sarma*,⁴ *lutenitsa*,⁵ *banitsa*,⁶ *baklava*, and various cured meats (*lukanka*, *sudzhuk*) are considered 'traditional'. In Western Europe, Bulgarian restaurants and ethnic shops (in Germany and the United Kingdom, for instance) regularly offer *moussaka*, *sarma*, *kebabche*, *gyuvech*,⁷ *Panagyurski* eggs, *Shopska* salad, and *tarator*,⁸ thereby consolidating this set as the core of the diaspora's culinary identity. Thus, migrant communities construct and maintain a model of 'traditional Bulgarian cuisine' that functions more as a symbolic resource for cultural belonging than as a direct continuation of historical gastronomic practices. This process of 'canonising' a selection of dishes is intensified in a migrant context, where the need for cultural markers is more tangible. The dishes listed above are characteristic of both everyday domestic meals and of restaurant menus in the homeland, particularly in so-called traditional-style establishments offering 'authentic' Bulgarian cuisine.

Despite often being perceived as authentic, many of the dishes most widespread among migrants, such as *Shopska* salad, *Snezhanka* salad⁹, *tarator*, *ke-*

⁴ *Sarma* is a type of dish consisting of a filling rolled in cabbage or vine leaves. The main variation lies in the filling itself: sometimes it consists of rice and minced meat, at other times it is made only with rice. Meatless *sarma* is particularly characteristic of Christmas Eve, when strict fasting is observed. The dish is mainly consumed during the winter season, and is more typical of home cooking.

⁵ *Lutenitsa* is a traditional Bulgarian vegetable relish made from ground tomatoes and roasted red peppers. The recipe has numerous regional variations: in some areas, roasted eggplant, boiled carrots, sugar or honey are added. Differences also appear in the preparation methods (frying or simmering), as well as in the texture, ranging from a smooth purée to coarsely chopped. It is typically prepared in late summer and early autumn, and in some regions festivals dedicated to *lutenitsa* are held. It is an essential part of everyday eating, and one of the main foods people make and store at home.

⁶ *Banitsa* is a baked dish made of thin sheets of pastry and a filling usually prepared from eggs and white brined cheese. Numerous local variations exist, particularly in the filling, which may be salty (eggs, cheese, spinach, mushrooms, meat, curd cheese) or sweet (apples, pumpkin, walnuts, lokum [Turkish delight], halva). *Banitsa* is one of the most characteristic and widespread quick breakfast foods in Bulgarian cuisine. At the same time, it is a central element of the table for many calendar feasts (Christmas, New Year, St George's Day, St John's Day, etc) and family celebrations (baptisms, weddings). Traditional bakeries in Bulgaria are called after *banitsa* (*banitcharnitsa*).

⁷ *Gyuvech* is a slow-cooked dish, typically prepared in a clay pot, combining meat and vegetables. It has a variety of local versions, and is characteristic of home cooking. The term *gyuvech* refers both to the dish itself and to the earthenware pot in which it is prepared.

⁸ *Tarator* is a cold soup made from yogurt diluted with water, finely chopped or grated fresh cucumbers, garlic, dill, and often walnuts. It is regarded as a typically Bulgarian dish, widespread throughout Bulgaria, prepared both at home and in most Bulgarian restaurants. It is especially popular in summer.

⁹ *Snezhanka* (milk salad) is one of the most common Bulgarian appetisers or side dishes, closely resembling *tarator*, but in a much thicker form. It is prepared from strained yogurt and cucumbers (fresh or pickled), seasoned with garlic, dill and walnuts. It is particularly characteristic of formal and festive tables, but is also frequently prepared at home.

bapcheta and *moussaka*, are in fact products of cultural standardisation under socialism, shaped by the state company Balkantourist. The notion of authenticity in Bulgarian cuisine is frequently constructed through institutional and media discourses, and does not represent a direct linear continuation of pre-socialist culinary practices (cf. Dechev 2025).

Overall, even though many of these dishes were codified under socialism, they follow a dietary pattern typical of Bulgaria, shaped by northern Mediterranean, Oriental and Balkan influences, with an emphasis on dairy products and meat; therefore, it cannot be claimed that they differ qualitatively from the traditional (festive) cuisine of the late 19th century. Their use in restaurant settings, of course, requires both structural and compositional differentiation in order to fit into a coherent menu.

Adaptation in new contexts

Food is one of the first elements that migrants are compelled to adapt in response to changing climatic, cultural and economic conditions. These changes affect not only the content of the food, but also food practices as a whole, including their social dimensions. At the same time, food is one of the most readily recoverable elements of cultural memory, as it is embedded in everyday life from birth, and contact with it during return visits is easily re-established. Recipes display a high degree of flexibility in relation to the available ingredients, new culinary frameworks, social conditions, and cultural tastes.

With the first generation, the lack of key products and ingredients necessitates the adaptation (and sometimes the abandonment) of recipes cherished in childhood and youth. Yoghurt, for example, is usually replaced by Greek or Turkish varieties, while in more distant locations such as Argentina, locally available yoghurt, often a significantly different dairy product, is used. White brined cheese (*sirene*) is replaced with feta, Greek white cheese, or even enthusiastically prepared homemade versions. This cheese is particularly important for making *banitsa*, a Bulgarian pastry comparable to Turkish *börek* and Greek *pita*. Pastry sheets for its preparation are available almost worldwide, but their differing texture and thickness, compared to those in Bulgaria, alter the final product. Another dairy staple characteristic of Bulgaria, *kashkaval*, is easily substituted with other softer cheeses that melt at higher temperatures.

Lutenitsa undergoes changes in taste, even when the recipe itself remains unchanged, as it is prepared domestically using local varieties of peppers and tomatoes. Classic dishes such as *moussaka* and stuffed cabbage leaves also undergo transformation, for example, eggplants in South America differ significantly

from European varieties, and moussaka is often prepared in a simplified version using only potatoes and minced meat. Stuffed cabbage leaves are made with fresh cabbage, as fermented cabbage is unavailable, and migrants have lost the habit of preparing it at home. Alternatively, the dish may shift to stuffed peppers.

Even meat products undergo adaptation: *lukanka* and *sudzhuk* are made at home using blends of locally available spices, since the traditional ones are not accessible, effectively turning them into quite different types of sausage. *Rakia*¹⁰ is distilled from locally typical grapes or apples, rather than from Bulgarian varieties, or from plums and apricots, which are also characteristic of the homeland.

In Canada, transformations follow a different path, because of the access to large markets and international foods, so migrants create new hybrid variants of some Bulgarian recipes; for example, *Shopska salad* with avocado or with local varieties of tomatoes that are sweeter, the Lenten Christmas *sarma* is made with brown rice, pickled cabbage is bought Korean (*kimchi* without the spices) and used as a substitute. The younger generations combine Bulgarian practices with global ones: *banitsa* with phyllo and spinach following the Greek model or *ba-klava* with Western nuts, rather than walnuts. Thus, migrant cuisine becomes an area of creativity, but not of forced changes. Tradition is reformulated through modern gastronomic influences, and these initiatives are part of the global trend for rethinking and recycling the traditional.

The culinary habits of Bulgarian migrants in Western Europe are characterised by far less significant adaptations, where there is a large variety of European foods close to Bulgarian ones, mainly Greek, Turkish, Romanian, etc, as these communities were already established before the Bulgarians started opening shops and restaurants and importing goods. In Europe, and to some extent in North America, Bulgarians have greater access to Balkan stores, which offer a variety of products from the region. Although some 'Bulgarian' products, like *lutenitsa*, cheese, or various sausages, might be produced in countries neighbouring Bulgaria, such as the Republic of North Macedonia or Serbia, their availability leads to the realistic recreation of traditional recipes.

However, local variants of familiar products change the taste characteristics of traditional dishes. Feta-type cheese replaces Bulgarian white brine cheese, but is fattier or saltier. Yoghurt in Germany, France and Spain is runnier and softer, which changes the texture and taste of *tarator* and *Snezhenska* salad. Ready-made dough sheets for *banitsa* are thinner (Italy, Spain) or too moist (France), which

¹⁰ *Rakia* is an alcoholic beverage obtained through the distillation of fermented fruits such as plums, grapes, apricots, quinces, cherries and pears. Each region in Bulgaria has developed distinct production techniques, resulting in numerous local varieties. In addition to industrial production, it is often home-made. *Rakia* occupies a central place in social life, everyday practices and festive occasions.

necessitates changes in the technique of preparation for both *banitsa* and *ba-klava*. The different textures of vegetables, in turn, change the taste of *Shopska salad*. Varieties of green and mature beans characteristic of these countries also alter stews traditional to Bulgaria.

From the second generation on, recipes, seasonings and cooking techniques are adapted in response to tastes formed in the new environment, through schooling, new mixed families, and related influences. For example, garlic is reduced or omitted in *tarator* and *Snezhanka* salad, roux-based techniques are often avoided, and vinegar is minimised in salads, which are instead dressed with other, less typical, oils (such as sesame oil or pumpkin seed oil).

An important means of obtaining products and Bulgarian goods is through gifts brought by visiting relatives, particularly valued are spices, as they are lightweight, as well as packaged foods, and above all Bulgarian *rakia*. This exchange works both ways: when returning to the homeland, migrants also bring back local food products, making them available even before their wider import following the opening of the Bulgarian market over the past two decades (e.g. various types of cheese and cured meats, unfamiliar spices, including Eastern ones, pasta, cooking mixes, etc.).

Preparing Bulgarian dishes for sale at festivals, in restaurants, or small shops, requires adapting the recipes to the taste of the wider public, but also provides an opportunity to maintain cultural memory and the economic sustainability of the community.

Festive cuisine and cultural visibility

Changes in recipes and ingredients often have a symbolic significance. Even when traditional products are replaced, the very act of preparing and consuming a 'Bulgarian' dish maintains the cultural identity and the connection with the homeland. This is especially visible in the context of festive gatherings, when the preparation and consumption of traditional Bulgarian dishes acquire a central importance. These events construct a culturally concentrated version of traditional Bulgarian cuisine, which in emigration is adapted according to local specificities.

In the analysis of food practices, two interrelated yet functionally distinct uses of food stand out, festive and public. Festive cuisine occupies a central place in the cultural life of Bulgarian migrant communities, and plays a key role in the construction of the collective memory, ritualisation, communal belonging, and intergenerational continuity. Unlike everyday eating, which is often adapted to local conditions and tastes, festive food is characterised by a greater stability

and symbolic density. It no longer functions as a means of subsistence, but as a structural element of communal rituals associated with calendar holidays and family events.

For example, Bulgarians organise communal meals for 3 March, Easter, Christmas, St George's Day and 24 May, at which *kebapche*, *Shopska* salad, *banitsa* and *rakia* are almost invariably present. In Bulgarian restaurants in the United States and Western Europe, festive menus often include stuffed vine or cabbage leaves (*sarma*) and *banitsa* with fortune slips for Christmas and New Year, or lamb with rice and sweet Easter bread (*kozunak*) for Easter and St George's Day, dishes perceived as emblematic of these celebrations. In domestic settings, menus tend to follow those typical for such occasions in Bulgaria: stuffed peppers with rice, meatless cabbage or vine-leaf rolls, ritual bread with a coin and bean stew for Christmas Eve, homemade *banitsa* with fortunes for New Year, *kozunak* or sweet rolls, and lamb for Easter. Abroad, these dishes function not merely as traditional, but as essential and irreplaceable elements of the festive script.

Festive food changes far more slowly than everyday food, and proves significantly more resilient. Even when access to 'authentic' ingredients is limited, the act of preparing the dishes remains indispensable, for without them the festive table cannot be realised. While some ingredients are substituted or recipes adapted to local conditions, such as using local variants of cheese, pastry sheets or fermented cabbage, festive cuisine preserves the structural and symbolic elements that define the cultural experience. This creates a sense of a particular conservatism, in which tradition is maintained regardless of the absence or transformation of material resources. In this sense, what matters most in festive food is not so much the preservation of 'authentic' recipes, as the reproduction of experiential models associated with notions of 'home' and the 'homeland', and the creation of a tangible link between migrants and their cultural heritage despite the spatial distance. Food often acts as a symbolic medium through which a 'sense of home away from home' is produced (Koç and Welsh 2002, 47), while simultaneously reinforcing belonging and sustaining cultural identity.

An especially important dimension of festive cuisine is its role in the intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge and practices. The preparation and consumption of food are both physical and symbolic acts, often used to communicate individuality or belonging to a larger group (Wilk 1999, 244). For migrants, holidays constitute key moments through which younger generations, whether born in Bulgaria or abroad, are introduced to Bulgarian culinary traditions. In this process, not only family or 'traditional' recipes are transmitted, but also knowledge of the symbolic elements of the festive calendar, and the distribution of family roles in preparing the festive table. In many of the Bulgarian communi-

ties we have observed abroad, weekend schools organise workshops during major holidays that emphasise children's active participation in preparing festive foods, ranging from dyeing eggs and decorating *kozunak*, to kneading Christmas breads and sweets. This participation is not merely formal, but constitutes an active initiation into community rituals, in which food plays a central role. Through these activities, children acquire both practical skills and an understanding of the social and symbolic meanings embedded in festive practices, with food acting as a mediator between generations, and ensuring continuity despite the cultural distance from the homeland.

At the same time, festive cuisine is closely tied to specific spaces: home, school, church, cultural clubs and associations, and restaurants. In domestic settings, the festive table is typically organised within a limited circle, usually family or relatives, where dishes follow established family recipes, and the emphasis is on intergenerational transmission. Many Bulgarians in mixed families, for example, particularly miss the meatless Christmas Eve dinner abroad, as in Western Europe and America meat is typically consumed on the evening of 24 December. It is not uncommon for different traditions to be alternated or combined in order to honour those on the Bulgarian side of the family. When celebrations extend into migrant institutions, the festive table becomes collective in character. While the social context influences the mode of celebration, it does not fundamentally alter the nature of the food itself. Even outside the home, where it may take on a more representational character, it remains grounded in what is perceived as traditional Bulgarian festive cuisine. In a migration context, festive food can thus be understood as a symbolically charged layer of food practice that supports the reproduction and maintenance of the cultural memory, identity and community cohesion.

In contrast to festive cuisine, which centres on ritual and the transmission of the cultural heritage, 'public' food, visible at ethno-festivals, fairs and events organised by Bulgarian migrant communities or their institutions, primarily fulfils a communicative and representational function, communicating an image of Bulgaria to a broader audience, and taking on a more performative character. At such events, food is typically reduced to a limited set of easily recognisable and visually appealing dishes, *Shopska* salad, *kebapche*, *banitsa* and *lutenitsa*, which function as symbols of the national identity. This selection is shaped by visitors' expectations, and by the practical requirements of rapid preparation and serving, leading to the simplification and standardisation of recipes. Under these conditions, the preparation of food shifts from a culinary practice to a cultural product that sustains memory within contexts of visibility and intercultural communication.

In Argentina and Brazil, ethno-festivals are very widespread, and bring together the full diversity of migrant communities in these countries. They are organised on various occasions and in different formats, but what they share is that each community is invited to present itself through its food, using its sale as a means of financing other cultural activities. In São Paulo, for example, such markets take place once a month. In Berisso (Argentina), a month-long festival is held in the spring, featuring a wide range of events, including the offering of specific ethnic foods. In addition, any organisation there that has access to a kitchen may offer food for delivery or takeaway throughout the year.

In such contexts, the assortment of food on offer is determined first by the conditions of preparation and sale, and second by the surrounding environment, namely, which other communities are participating, and what they are offering. In Berisso, for instance, *kebabche* are traditionally grilled, but there have also been cases in which dishes such as *gyuvech* or *kavarma* are served, as indoor settings allow for the advance preparation of portioned dishes. Other typical products on sale at ethnic festivals in Latin America include pastries such as *banitsa* and *mekitsi*, and various sweets, as they are easy to consume on the go. Food may be prepared in the organisation's kitchen, but when such facilities are unavailable, it is often made in participants' homes. Beverages characteristic of Bulgaria, such as *rakia*, wine and *ayran*,¹¹ are also commonly offered.

Ethno-festivals and ethno-bazaars held in countries with active Bulgarian communities show how food fulfils a representative role in public and cultural contexts, demonstrating the 'Bulgarian' face of the community, and transforming the culinary tradition into an effective tool for cultural communication in a multicultural environment.

Culinary ethno-entrepreneurship

Beyond its cultural and symbolic value, food also plays an economic role in migrant communities. Functioning as culinary ethno-entrepreneurial initiatives, Bulgarian shops, restaurants and small businesses abroad offer traditional products and dishes, now reframed as commodities that generate income and ensure material sustainability. As Mroczek (2014: 125) notes, the primary function of Bulgarian restaurants abroad is not to attract foreign customers, but rather to appeal to the Bulgarian diaspora itself, highlighting the economic niche in which these establishments operate, and their role as spaces for preserving and disseminating the culinary tradition.

¹¹ A beverage made from yogurt, water and salt.

Within migrant economic initiatives, Bulgarian specialities gradually become recognisable and highly valued products that bring together nostalgia, cultural memory and market value. A telling example is the company Karlovo, founded in 2001 in Toronto. Initially offering Bulgarian sausages and meat specialities, it later expanded its activities to include a production workshop and two shops, whose assortments feature cheese, *kashkaval*, *lutenitsa*, Turkish delight (*lokum*), honey, halva, spices, and even its own homemade *boza* (a fermented beverage). The company also maintains an online store, serving customers across Canada and the United States. On the eve of Bulgarian holidays, Karlovo offers seasonal items such as *martenitsi*, egg dyes, and freshly baked *kozunak* for Easter. The presence of these foods at communal tables on 3 March, Easter, St George's Day, 24 May and Christmas serves to institutionalise the culinary tradition within the framework of the market economy, thereby ensuring both cultural sustainability and economic viability for the community.

The importance of food for migrant communities is well illustrated by the chain of Bulgarian shops in London called Bulgarian Food, around which three schools and folk dance clubs were subsequently established. It appears that the mere presence of a shop offering Bulgarian food products can be sufficient to foster the formation of a community that seeks to develop, not only socially but also educationally and culturally. With the changing market conditions, the chain now operates primarily through online orders and home delivery; however, the three schools it established continue to function, along with their associated clubs. In other words, migrants no longer depend on the shop as a physical space or a driver of community formation, as cultural and educational structures are already in place. At the same time, migrants continue to seek out Bulgarian food products, not only those mentioned above, but also items such as Bulgarian wafers, candies, biscuits and breadsticks, which they associate with childhood, as well as ready-made canned or frozen dishes. Thanks to its extensive range of products and everyday pricing, the shop is able to fully sustain the kind of daily diet characteristic of Bulgaria in the British capital.

Conclusions

The culinary memory of Bulgarian migrants is not stored in recipes alone; it lives in the act of cooking itself, in laying the table, in the distribution of roles within the family, in the smell of *kozunak* in a Toronto kitchen on Easter morning. Even when original products are unavailable or substituted, the gesture of preparation carries the weight of belonging and cultural continuity. What migrants preserve is rarely an 'authentic' cuisine in a strict historical sense. The

‘traditional’ that travels is already a construction, and migration adds yet another layer to it. The interesting question is not whether the *banitsa* made with French phyllo sheets is ‘really Bulgarian’, but what work it does: who makes it, for whom, for what occasion, and what it means to those who eat it. Migration does not freeze the culinary tradition; it forces it to negotiate. Everyday food adapts quickly, absorbs local influences, and gradually shifts towards the tastes formed in the new environment. Festive food resists for longer, carrying the structural and symbolic elements of the cultural script even when the ingredients change. And public food displayed at ethno-festivals, sold at bazaars or served in restaurants performs identity outwardly, communicating ‘a Bulgarian face’ to the wider world.

Across the generations, these three registers diverge further. What began as a daily practice becomes, by the third or fourth generation, a ritual reserved for specific occasions, something performed, rather than lived. But this is not a loss but a transformation. Children dyeing eggs at a weekend school in Rome, or kneading Christmas bread in Montreal, are not replicating the past; they are constructing their own relationship with it, on their own terms. In this sense, modernity does not erode the culinary tradition, but provides new channels for it: digital platforms, global supply chains, ethno-entrepreneurship and hybrid recipes. Bulgarian cuisine outside the homeland continues to adapt and to mean something, and that capacity for reformulation may itself be the most consistent feature of any living culinary tradition.

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Appendix:



Figure 1. A reconstruction of a Christmas Eve table.
The St Great Martyr George the Zographer Bulgarian Sunday School, Thessaloniki, Greece.
Photograph: the school's Facebook profile, 2011.



Figure 2. Easter refreshments.
A Bulgarian Orthodox church community, Rome, Italy.
Photograph: Yana Gergova, April 2015.



Figure 3. Lamb with rice and green salad for Easter. A gathering of the Bulgarian community in Athens, Greece.
Photograph: Yana Gergova, May 2019.



Figure 4. A tasting of different types of *banitsa*: a celebration on the occasion of 24 May (the Day of the Bulgarian Alphabet).
The Kanev Bulgarian Sunday School, Toronto, Canada.
Photograph: Yana Gergova, May 2022.

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BULGARŲ MIGRANTŲ VIRTUVĖ: TARP TRADICIJOS IR MODERNYBĖS

Santrauka

Kulinarinė atmintis ir su ja susijęs tradicijų tęstinumas yra vienas iš svarbiausių kultūrinės tapatybės elementų migracijos kontekste. Maistas dažnai tampa tiltu tarp praeities ir dabarties, tarp nostalgijos gimtinei ir būtinybės prisitaikyti prie naujos aplinkos. Šiame straipsnyje nagrinėjama, kaip Bulgarijos migrantų bendruomenės Argentinoje ir Kanadoje formuoja ir išlaiko savo kulinarinę tapatybę geografinio atstumo, ingredientų pakaitalų ir kartų kaitos sąlygomis. Tyrimo aktualumą lemia tai, kad bulgarų diaspora – skirtingai nei geriau ištirtos italų, kinų ar libaniečių kulinarinės bendruomenės – iki šiol sulaukė palyginti nedidelio mokslininkų dėmesio, o socializmo palikimo poveikis „tradicinės“ virtuvės konstrukcijai diasporoje išlieka menkai nagrinėtas.

Tyrimas grindžiamas ekspedicinio darbo, vykdyto 2011–2022 m. Toronte, Monrealyje, Buenos Airėse ir Berise, rezultatais. Taikyti kokybiniai metodai: pusiau struktūruoti interviu, dalyvavimo stebėjimas ir bendras valgis (*commensality*) su tyrimo dalyviais. Šie metodai papildyti archyvinių šaltinių – migrantų laikraščių ir asociacijų dokumentų, skaitmeninių platformų ir socialinių tinklų ana-

lize. Toks diachroninis požiūris leido atsekti kulinarinio repertuaro raidą nuo pirmosios migrantų kartos iki šių dienų.

Tyrimo rezultatai atskleidžia kelis svarbius dėsningumus. Pirma, bulgarų migrantų virtuvė, laikoma „tradicine“ jų virtuve, iš tikrųjų dažnai yra socializmo laikotarpio kultūrinės standartizacijos produktas – valstybinės įmonės „Balkantourist“ suformuotas kanonas, vėliau eksportuotas į diasporą per valstybės finansuojamą spaudą. Antra, kasdienis maistas prisitaiko greitai ir lanksčiai, įsisavindamas vietinius ingredientus ir skonius, tuo tarpu šventinis maistas išlaiko struktūrinius ir simbolinius elementus net ir tada, kai originalūs produktai neprieinami. Trečia, etninės verslininkystės iniciatyvos – parduotuvės, restoranai ir internetinė prekyba – bei skaitmeniniai tinklai sukuria naujus kulinarinės tradicijos išsaugojimo ir perteikimo kanalus, mažinančius priklausomybę nuo fizinio artumo su gimtine. Ketvirta, etniniai festivaliai ir „bazarai“ (tradiciniai turgūs, mugės) atlieka reprezentacinę funkciją – ne tik išlaiko kulinarinę atmintį bendruomenės viduje, bet ir perteikia „bulgarišką veidą“ platesnei visuomenei.

Apibendrinant galima teigti, kad modernybė nekeičia kulinarinės tradicijos – ji suteikia jai naujų galimybių. Bulgarų virtuvė už gimtinių ribų išlieka gyva ne dėl to, kad yra įšaldyta, o dėl to, kad nuolat dera tarp atminties ir prisitaikymo – tarp to, kas paveldėta, ir to, kas sukurama iš naujo.