Anthropology of Work Review

Navigating Postsocialism: Bulgarian Seafarers' Working Lives before and after 1989

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Abstract

The collapse of state socialism in 1989 reshaped the maritime industries in East European countries. Based on an ethnographic study of Bulgarian maritime and waterfront workers, this article examines how shipping mobilities changed after 1989. This case study provides a unique vantage point for understanding the experiences of two generations in a stormy world of work. Before 1989, many countries in the Soviet Bloc had successful merchant navies. Fleets and transport infrastructures were owned and managed by each state, but also coordinated transnationally via the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON). Seafarers were a unique occupational group under state socialism. While they had more access to international mobility than other occupational groups, their economic and political freedom was still limited. After the fall of the Iron Curtain, the Bulgarian shipping industry joined the global market almost overnight. The profound social, economic, and political transformations unleashed by the change of regime coincided with the rapid internationalization, technological and security innovations, and marketization that were reshaping the maritime industry worldwide at the time. These overlapping transformations radically changed the working lives of Bulgarian seafarers, opening new opportunities for some, but also creating dramatic social inequalities in the formerly tight maritime community and shifting the balance between mobility and fixity of maritime labor. Bulgarian seafarers found themselves "at sea" in two ways simultaneously: not just employed in mobile and international workplaces, but also adapting to a society and job market in flux.

Keywords: Bulgaria, Eastern Europe, fixity, maritime labor, mobility

Anthropology of the Aqua Incognita

Cargo shipping is the lifeblood of today's global economy. Ninety percent of all material goods reportedly travel by sea (George 2013). Sea transport remains the cheapest way to move vast amounts of cargo across long distances. In 2017, over 55,000 merchant ships, manned by over 1.5 million seafarers of all nationalities, carried some 1772.4 million deadweight tons of cargo worldwide (Marine Flottenkommando 2018). Despite attempts by maritime organizations, port authorities, and seafaring unions to publicize its importance, the industry has remained hidden from the public eye, and seafarers remain a neglected professional group. To most landlubbers—including scholars of work—the ocean remains "invisible" (George 2013), a "forgotten space" (Burch and Sekula 2010), an aqua incognita.

Seafarers' Rights International (SRI) acknowledges seafarers as an "invisible workforce […] vulnerable to exploitation and mistreatment."[1] Seafaring is a viscerally physical activity subject to uncontrollable natural elements (Walters and Bailey 2013). Weather, rarely more than an inconvenience on shore, is an ever-present concern on board even the largest and most modern cargo vessels. Profession-specific problems include modern-day piracy (Kozlowski 2013), fatigue and sleep deprivation (Hystad and Eid 2016; Pauksztat 2017), occupational injuries and mortality (Walters and Bailey 2013), and marital problems (Thomas et al. 2003). Shipping takes place in a "denationalised maritime space" (Borovnik 2004, 39). This makes it resistant to effective national and supranational legal regulation and exacerbates the insecurity of seafarers' working lives. Precarious employment and short-term contracts of one year or less, with no social security between contracts, are the norm (Dacanay and Walters 2011; Standing 2011). Seafarers are subject to multiple, often conflicting, national legal regulations. A seafarer may be a citizen of one country and hold a seafarer's passport from another. They might sail on a vessel registered in a third country, under the flag of still another (ships frequently change flags during voyages). The cargo they carry might be owned by merchants from any one of dozens of countries.

Clearly, then, seafarers are "mobile workers," but labor on board also has a peculiar fixity (Monios and Wilmsmeier 2018; Peters 2014). Since seafarers are anchored to ships that double as workplace and place of leisure and rest, many researchers see

cargo vessels as "total institutions" (Rojek and Urry 1997; Zurcher 1965, 106). Work takes place in small, mixed-nationality crews communicating in English, a foreign tongue for most (Alderton et al. 2004), in an intensively masculine environment (Kitada 2013). The temporal rhythms of labor at sea differ from those on shore: weekends or evenings off and the opportunity to physically leave the workplace are unavailable luxuries. Working lives are spent away from families, partners, and children. This interplay of mobility and fixity in jobs at sea, in the context of radical political and economic change, is the focus of this article.

Over the past three decades, a sociological and ethnographic understanding of seafarers has emerged. Scholars have described seafarers as "global citizens" (Lane 1988), as "pioneers of global citizenship" (Borovnik 2009), as "global villagers" (Alderton et al. 2004; Wu 2002), as "transnational actors in the global economy," and as subjects caught between "host" and "home" societies (Sampson 2013). More recently, scholarship on "maritime mobilities" has begun to tackle the specifics of labor on floating workplaces, examining traditionally neglected extraterritorial spaces such as cargo, deep sea fishing, cruise or research ships, and oil platforms, as well as auxiliary maritime industries. Strongly influenced by social geography and sociology, the concept of maritime mobilities emphasizes the centrality of movement and flows (Hannam et al. 2006; Urry 2007). Seafarers differ from other transnational workers because they engage in "circulatory" or "transversal" labor migration that leads to a specific social identity (Borovnik 2011). Onboard ethnography explores the tensions created by different working and employment conditions, and how seafarers create new networks and identities based on ethnicity, nationality, and gender (Bunnell 2007; Liu and Chiang 2012; Markkula 2011).[2] Maritime studies, however, remain something of a blind spot in postsocialist ethnography (Brunnbauer 2007; Cottam and Roe 2004; Ghodsee 2011; Kremakova 2011, Forthcoming) and maritime history (Krátká 2015). In what follows, I chart what I call a postsocialist "sea change" (Kremakova, Forthcoming), in order to understand how a major industry transitioned from one socioeconomic order to another. My ethnographic material reveals how two generations fared when they found themselves "at sea" in two ways simultaneously: employed in mobile international workplaces while also adapting to a rapidly changing world of work.

This article draws on an ethnographic and oral history of Bulgarian maritime and waterfront workers' experiences of postsocialist transformations. My fieldwork lasted a total of 11 months between 2008 and 2010, with numerous follow-up visits between 2011 and 2018. Fieldwork took place on shore, in Bulgaria's two port cities, Varna and Bourgas. When away from the field, I monitored local and international maritime news and maintained online contact with several participants. The research approach included participant observation and more than sixty interviews with Bulgarian nationals employed in the maritime industry. Two-thirds of the interviews were biographical. In these interviews, respondents were prompted to reflect on their lives and careers and to draw "life charts" depicting key events. The rest were semi-structured and focused on current developments in the maritime sector. Participants included merchant and Navy seafarers from all ranks and professions, as well as shore-based professionals ranging in age from 26 to 78 years of age. Most had specialized secondary or higher maritime education and worked, or had worked, on the high seas on cargo, deep sea fishing, or oil tanker vessels.

The study also had an autoethnographic element. I grew up on the Black Sea coast, in a family in which most men worked at sea. During my childhood in the 1980s and 1990s, most Bulgarians could not travel abroad, first because of the restrictions of the state socialist regime, and later because of visa restrictions and financial hardship. I grew up familiar with seafarers' work and leisure on ships, in port, and on shore leave, and I spent most summers traveling with my father. Being female ruled out a maritime career because the Naval Academy did not accept women as cadets until 2001. Research participants often recognized my distinct surname and associated me with my seafaring relatives. Many were willing to talk because they saw me not as an outsider, journalist, or commercial spy, but as a captain's daughter giving publicity to their profession.

The autoethnographic positionality of a "returning insider" (Kremakova 2014) was more than a conversation starter or tool for gaining fieldwork access. It was what made this study possible in the absence of other available sources. Under state socialism, commercial shipping had been part of the national military-industrial complex, and both the merchant and military navies were centrally governed by the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON). When I began this study in 2007, maritime archives were unavailable to either researchers or the public. They were either classified or held by private companies, or had simply been misplaced and lost in the chaos of early post-1989 years. Some interviewees even suggested that archives may have been relocated to Moscow. Contemporary statistics on Bulgarian maritime employment were barely better: patchy, existing only locally on paper records, and inaccessible without the personal cooperation of the maritime authorities. Since my last voyage in 1998, I have visited many other Bulgarian ships in port and on roadstead in an informal capacity; however, after 9/11, port security became stringent, and it was no longer possible to travel by sea or easily access port

areas, either as family member or as researcher. This and other organizational reasons made an offshore ethnography unfeasible.

Iron Curtain, Slightly Ajar

Many Soviet Bloc countries had merchant navies, which served as national cargo carriers and were strategic sources of foreign currency for national budgets (Cottam and Roe 2004). Their fleets and transport infrastructures were owned, managed, and heavily subsidized by each state. Fleets were coordinated transnationally through COMECON. The Bulgarian state owned and managed several fleets which had been developed almost from scratch after the World War II. These included the main cargo fleet, Bylgarski Morski Flot (also called Navibulgar), successor of a shipping company founded in 1892, and the ocean fishing fleet, Okeanski Ribolov. The agreements after World War II initially forbade Bulgaria to keep a military navy, and having a well-developed merchant marine was a way to retain skilled staff and infrastructure. The flow of labor between the two fleets continues to this day.

By the 1970s, the modernization of the Bulgarian maritime industry was complete, but, unlike their West-European counterparts, socialist merchant fleets functioned exclusively as national flag carriers, strongly opposing the increasingly common system of Flags of Convenience (FoC).[3] Until the late 1970s, socialist fleets had followed the international trends of automatization and containerization, but as the centrally planned economies in COMECON states began to stall, fewer funds became available for maintenance and innovation (Ivanov 1996).

Ships carried patriotic names, for example, those of revolutionaries from the national liberation struggles of the 19th century, partisans from the communist resistance movement during the World War II, or of historically important Bulgarian towns, mountains, and rivers. Navibulgar operated seven lines: Libya, Egypt, West Mediterranean, the Black Sea, Western Europe, Cuba, and the Far East. The liners in general, and the Mediterranean and Western Europe liners especially, provided "nice jobs" for a number of reasons. Voyages were of a fairly predictable length (50-60 days to Western Europe, six weeks to the Adriatic Sea, three months to Cuba, and nine to 10 months to the Far East). As one bosun I interviewed put it, Western Europe and Mediterranean lines were preferable because they were "more intellectual." Seafarers could visit interesting historic cities, and many social and cultural activities were organized by seafaring unions and port clubs (known as "interclubs"). As one captain explained:

> Dobrudja, Balchik, and three others were the best ships because they went to Western Europe. […] There were group museum and cinema visits, bus trips to historic and cultural sights, football and basketball matches… we even had sport uniforms because we regularly played football with the locals!

Since most Bulgarian seafarers lived in the two port cities on the Black Sea coast, they enjoyed the fact that liner ships docked in Varna or Bourgas at least once every few months for several days. The liners were thus seen as "luxury" ships, preferred by family fathers, current or former Navy officers, or on-shore maritime officials "who wanted a sniff of salty air," as the captain quoted above put it. Liners were more easily accessible for seamen and officers who had good connections with Navibulgar's personnel office.

Navibulgar's tramp division was larger than the liner division, with around 60 ships of bigger sizes and worldwide coverage. These ships would often be chartered by foreign companies, and their voyage schedules were far less predictable. In a typical example of social control exercised by state socialist enterprises, a captain's mate remembered that "On the tramp ships you didn't know where you'd be sent. You worked six months and changed over by plane in some random location. Sometimes being sent to a tramp ship meant being demoted or punished for a wrongdoing."

Seafaring professionals, especially officers like navigators and engineers, were highly respected. They were somewhat better paid and had better social benefits than most professionals on shore. Pay was comparable with the hardest industries such as oil refinery, atomic engineering, and mining. Seafaring jobs provided a lucrative mechanism for upward social mobility and a powerful leveling board accessible to young men from all social strata. And, unlike most other prestigious jobs under state socialism, seafaring offered the opportunity for a range of exciting and well-paid occupations both at sea and on shore, without requiring links to the nomenklatura, a system in former socialist countries whereby influential posts in government and industry were filled by Party appointees. A former captain and manager at local branch of international shipping firm recalled that:

> When I applied for the Naval school in 1989, three months before the regime collapsed, it was still the hardest and most prestigious university course. Boys from the country's best schools competed to get in. You needed higher entrance exam marks than for International Relations! Understandable: you didn't even need an uncle in the diplomatic service and you were promised a great job!

Most importantly, seafarers were practically the only professionals who had regular access to international travel. *V chuzhbina* ("abroad") or, informally, *navynka* (lit. "outside") was an imaginary place of aspirations. Of course, "abroad" was not

a uniform space. Western Europe and the United States were more prestigious and desirable, but even visiting other countries from the Eastern Bloc was a luxury reserved for a small privileged minority. An older captain summarized the enticing possibilities offered by "abroad":

> I studied at the Naval Academy, together with a cousin of mine who had persuaded me with two strong arguments: "We will be able to travel around the world and buy our own cars." In those days, going abroad was almost unheard of for mere mortals, and getting a car, even if you had money, took years of waiting (quoted in Dimitrov 2011, 98).

While seafarers have always suffered a degree of alienation from their families and home communities, under state socialism, this alienation was somewhat compensated. At a time when the rest of the population led entirely fixed lives, seafarers' "hypermobility" (Karaboeva 2011) made them slightly open to the world. This openness extended to the coastal cities and towns in which seafarers were concentrated. In a closed country, this openness afforded seafarers an important material, social, and symbolic resource, which elevated them to the top of the social privilege ladder alongside elites like diplomats, top-level scientists, and artists. Ivan Evtimov (2010), a seafarer turned sociology professor, describes seafarers and the shipping industry as a window into the world: "The Iron Curtain was hanging here [on the coast] too, but thanks to the sea it was slightly ajar."

Socialist seafarers may have been hypermobile in comparison to their compatriots, but they were highly disciplined. In the state socialist integrated system of welfare and work, losing your job was a profound social catastrophe because all social benefits (child care, healthcare, disability and old age pension, holiday resorts, and much more) were tied to the workplace. Any misdemeanor was a risk of losing these benefits with no possibility of alternative employment of similar quality. Retraining was possible, but mainly within the auxiliary maritime industries on shore, which offered a less professionally exciting and challenging environment, less lucrative employment conditions, and a worse welfare package.

Authorities remained suspicious of those citizens who had, or attempted to have, any contact with foreigners. Among the few successful defectors from socialist countries, some were seafarers. Special institutional and legal frameworks existed to control the mobility essential to working in international shipping. Potential defectors—particularly single men without family connections, or those with "unreliable" (*neblagonadezhni*) family members—were screened out from sensitive jobs at the point of application, or even before university. In practice, very few seafarers tried to defect because citizens were legally prohibited from leaving the country to settle elsewhere, and breaking this law would have turned them into "enemies of the state" and "traitors." Defection endangered family members in Bulgaria who would have been branded "unreliable citizens," refused entry to university or jobs, or worse. In foreign ports, seafarers left ships only in groups, with at least one senior officer among them. An additional crew member, the assistant commander for political work, or *pompolit*, was responsible for maintaining morale, political education, and cultural life on board. The *pompolit* organized ideological training, film screenings, and social events for the crew. The *pompolit* also served as an informant to the authorities on shore, reporting wrongdoers who engaged in disrespectful or suspect behavior unsuitable for a "worthy representative of Bulgaria in foreign ports, without being susceptible to the influence of capitalist propaganda" (Kostov 1967, 388). A *pompolit*'s report could make and break careers, and *pompolits* were, understandably, distrusted by the crews.

The socialist state tried not only to prevent any potential westward migration of seafarers but also to recreate and maintain—legally, symbolically, and culturally—the fixed world of the homeland. Although each ship was physically moving across the globe and visiting places forbidden to the rest of the population, the vessel remained a strictly national space. All ships flew the Bulgarian flag, crews were strictly national, the language of communication was Bulgarian, the cuisine on board was Bulgarian, and so on.

A 78-year-old captain who was still working at sea recounted being headhunted while his ship was in Canada. This was a dangerous encounter for a socialist citizen, which he had to keep a secret until after 1989:

> I asked the ship owner how much he offered me. The sum sounded so big I decided this was the annual salary, so I told him my annual salary rounding it up. It turned out he had told me the monthly wage. When I refused, he couldn't believe that I wasn't free to choose which company to work for.

Despite having traveled the world, he remained a "localist" worker (Ferguson 1999), who never considered living abroad or even elsewhere in Bulgaria:

> I see myself nowhere but in my home town. I told this early on to my Russian wife. She knew she had to come live here with me. You may think this sounds lofty or sentimental, but I really feel I have become part of the town's history, one of the

> city's paving stones. I can't explain to you why, I have travelled the world, but this place is where I belong.

The aquamobility of seagoing professions could sometimes be successfully traded for upward social mobility on shore. Seafarers call this permanent change of career *slizam na brega* (disembark, go on shore), using the same verb as for "shore leave." Settling into a second land-based career was a logical choice for many of my interviewees, like the radio communication officer who moved into the port radio service after his wife died in childbirth, or the ship engineer who left seafaring life to save his marriage and became a manager in an international logistics company.

Wind of Change: Navigating Postsocialism

The social, political, and economic transformations at the end of the Cold War were dynamic, unexpected, and unpredictable. They brought eastern Europeans both the exhilaration of developing a new democratic system and the distress of intensifying poverty and deepening social inequalities (Brunnbauer 2001; Burawoy and Verdery 1999). Despite the formidable drive for change unleashed by the fall of the Iron Curtain, and contrary to neoliberal predictions, the removal of the totalitarian state apparatus failed to cure all the ills of state socialist regimes and planned economies. The transformation shook up the moral landscape of postsocialist societies. Political and economic freedom came at a cost: pervasive uncertainty replaced the safe and secure but unfree life under the socialist regime. Along with a tremendous mobilization of hope and collective energy, the events of 1989 to 1990 also caused a collective trauma (Svašek 2006), disenchantment with the new market economy (Müller 2007), and a wave of nostalgia best understood not as a simple lament for the past but as an attempt to come to terms with loss of dignity and the new inequalities of postcommunist neoliberal capitalism (Ghodsee 2011; Todorova and Gille 2010).

Shipping is a particularly striking example of this reconfiguration. Communism's fall marked an abrupt leap from near-absolute job security in the maritime industries into the chaos of an emerging international job market. The shipping industries joined the global market almost overnight, faster than any other industry. Foreign ship owners, as one manning agent I interviewed told me, "suddenly discovered Bulgarian seafarers" who were well qualified and employable for much lower wages than western seafarers. After only 15 years of great interest from global ship owners, the new trade and labor regulations that EU candidate-member states accepted once again reclassified east European mariners, this time as part of the expensive Western labor force. The sector globalized at a rapid rate, repeating in a condensed period of time the developments that had taken place in Western Europe throughout the second half of the 20th century.

The Bulgarian fishing fleet Okeanski Ribolov went bankrupt in 1998, leaving several thousand seafarers and on-shore administrators jobless. Bulgaria's national cargo fleet, Navibulgar, remained in state ownership until 2008, after a lengthy and controversial privatization procedure. The formerly homogenous job market split into workplaces providing employment of radically different quality. The best-paid officer posts appeared in established multinational shipping companies, and were mainly available to young but experienced and non-risk averse officers prepared for long voyages in multinational crews and little shore leave. The rest found less lucrative employment in smaller companies operating older ships, many using cheaper open registries that afforded little social protection, discouraged union membership, and paid poorly, less regularly, and occasionally not at all.

Three decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, privatized shipping no longer pays into Bulgaria's public purse, but it still remains economically important because seafarers' wages form a large, if hard to measure, contribution to the GDP. Ex-socialist member states are the major suppliers of seafarers within the European Union (Loik 2013, 32). A small country of 7.3 million inhabitants, Bulgaria is the world's 10th biggest supplier of seafaring labor, providing 2.1 percent of all ratings worldwide and a comparable share of officers (UNCTAD 2018). Bulgarian crew form the world's seventh largest national group (3.9 percent) on bulk carrier ships (Ellis and Sampson 2003).

In the course of 62 days in the summer of 1998, the 10,000-ton Bulgarian-flagged m/v *Dobrudja* took us to Spain, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Tunisia, Israel, and Romania before returning to Varna. It was a typical summer journey of the West-European line—the same line that had existed before 1989—particularly suited for taking family along, and two other seafarers had also brought their children and spouses. Unlike most ships in the world ocean, everyone spoke Bulgarian and only used English, or rudimentary Spanish, Arabic, or German, with officials and agents in foreign ports. The chef cooked Bulgarian food and told Bulgarian jokes. The ship sailed under the Bulgarian flag. The ship was manned by 24 people, generous for her class by contemporary global crewing standards. All 24 were of Bulgarian nationality, in accordance with the Bulgarian law governing ship crews. I knew several crew members from previous voyages or as

neighbors in town. The crew felt, and behaved, like an extended family.

Dobrudja was named after a region in northeast Bulgaria and southeast Romania. When the Iron Curtain fell, she was one of Navibulgar's fleet of almost 200 ships. Built in 1986 as a multipurpose RoRo vessel in the Spanish shipyard Astillero Barreras, she belonged to Navibulgar until 2011, three years after the company itself had already been privatized. The ship's last recorded appearance in Bulgarian waters was in 2011. In that year, her new owner renamed her ECS *Isabel I*. In 2013, already a decade older than the average ship in the global fleet (20.8 years, according to UNCTAD 2018), she was reflagged to Panama, renamed *Flower Of Sea*, and used for short-distance voyages in the Red Sea. Her last known owner in 2014 was a company registered in the Marshall Islands. For a few years, she was hard to track. The information above comes from a news article (Panayotov 2014), but thanks to new technology, such as the Marine Traffic website, anyone can see that she is still in service and track her current location. The "career" of this ship—the sequence of changes in her trajectory over the course of her working life—and that of many others like her, maps fairly well onto the transformation of the Bulgarian maritime industry itself and illustrates the course of many seafaring careers after 1989.

Throughout the 1990s, socialist societies suffered a debilitating economic crisis, hyperinflation, political instability, and waves of painful mass privatization. In the first 15 years after 1989, seafaring jobs offered stability. The reason lay in a crucial detail of labor law. While seafaring wages were composed of a basic salary in Bulgarian currency—which in the 1990s shrunk rapidly to well under the poverty line—seafarers were compensated for daily expenses in U.S. dollars. Having lost the monopoly on international travel and the provision of black market goods in the first decade after 1989, seafarers were nonetheless better off than many of those back on shore. Until 9/11, Bulgarian seafarers could take spouses and underage children along on voyages for a small fee covering onboard meals and health insurance, and family and close friends frequently visited ships in home ports. Such perks were one reason why, in the 1990s, the fleet was jokingly known among Bulgarian seafarers as "an oasis of socialism." The stability afforded by the low but regularly paid wages, the uninterrupted accrual of a state pension, the ability to work with familiar crews and in your native tongue, and the danger of remaining jobless on the savage job market were some of the reasons many older seamen and officers were reluctant to leave the sinking ship of the state company. Those seamen and officers who sought jobs with foreign companies on the liberalized job market for seafaring labor were mainly young (under forty), healthy, without family commitments, and spoke English very well.

Compared to the full social security of contracts under state socialism, seafaring employment became increasingly precarious during this period. People who had spent their careers in state-run industries suddenly had to learn how to "sell their labor," and to many, this did not come easily. With the increasing marketization of the national economy and the expanding market for foreign goods, seafarers lost their special status as world travelers or purveyors of black market commodities and cultural artifacts. New business and job opportunities opened up for the entrepreneurially minded, but the redistribution of wealth in the maritime industries, as in the rest of the economy, was directed by Bulgaria's former political and economic elites. Personal connections with this erstwhile nomenklatura became essential for business success. This effectively excluded many older seafarers, known as the "fathers," from the process of market formation.

The fathers bore the brunt of marketization and the economic crisis in the early years after 1989. For example, V. S., interviewed in the film documentary *Memories about Okeanski Ribolov* (Georgi Djulgerov 2006), sailed as trawl master with Okeanski Ribolov for 28 years before retiring at fifty-two. His experience was similar to that of his colleagues in Navibulgar. In 1980, he was the first Bulgarian to buy a Japanese motorbike: "Nobody had seen anything like it. The customs officers weren't even sure how to tax it." The only places he had not visited were Japan and Australia. His favorite time was the five years he spent in the middle of the Pacific. Yet his life had a certain fixity about it as well. He only ever worked for one company, and he often spent nine months at sea consecutively, almost all of that on the high seas, "not seeing land for months on end." His wife joked that he had spent more nights on board than at home. Like almost all his colleagues, his retirement brought with it poverty and destitution. His pension was around 100 Euros per month in 2005, well under the poverty line. The company still owed him 5,000 U.S. dollars, but he told the filmmakers that that amount was "nothing." According to V.S., some colleagues were owed 20,000 or more, and nobody was getting their money.

The "sons," seafarers born in the 1970s and early 1980s whose careers began around or after 1989, benefitted the most from the transition and were generally not as paralyzed as their fathers by the competitive job market. Their age and life stage during the political shift allowed many to catch the window of opportunity that opened during the 1990s and closed soon after. Unsurprisingly, their attitudes to marketization are, on the whole, the most positive and espouse the new postsocialist spirit of capitalism (Kremakova 2011). Still, many are disillusioned by capitalism's

apparent lack of justice and transparency. They voice concerns similar to their parents' generation, namely, that something important is missing, perhaps a sense of dignity and pride in their work, community, or country. Their sentiments align with the current resurgence of nationalism in Bulgaria (Latcheva 2010).

Compare the stories of two young officers, P. and E., both born in the 1970s. P.'s main job is as an army clerk. His military unit will be dismantled in the next decade, and his job will most likely disappear. Thinking of the future, he earned a second degree in navigation. During his leave from the army, he makes short-distance voyages of 20 to 40 days in the Black and Mediterranean seas. This is risky because the voyages at sea rarely conclude on schedule, mostly due to unpredictable weather, but also because of how fast contracts can change. But if he does not sail, he will lose his sailor's license. Relicensing is complicated and expensive. If the ship ever returns late, or his replacement doesn't arrive on time, he will be late coming back to his army unit. He is happy juggling the two for now. For him, the sea is a backup option, tempting but too perilous to become his main career. "I don't feel like moving around too much any more," P. told me, "this is my third garrison in ten years, I have moved house three times, and cities twice. […] Sailing is a nice job, the only bad thing about it is that you don't have a family. You don't see your family. Or if you are like me, you might never even create one!" He looked at me and shrugged: "I don't know how you do this, living abroad thing. Don't you want to come back home? I really don't get it how people can even do that."

P.'s friend, E., strikes a sharp contrast. A 38-year-old first mate, he recently got his full captain's license. When I asked him to draw a life chart, his career appeared uncomplicated and clear, with just a few dots and educational and professional key events, and only three companies, Navibulgar and two Greek ship owners. E. enjoys the technical and managerial aspects of his job, and the pay that allows him to take long holidays. But unlike most of his older colleagues, he failed to mention exciting foreign destinations. In our interview, the geographical mobility intrinsic to his job melted into the background. Instead, his narrative was pragmatic, fixed mostly around the working conditions in his company, opportunities for career advancement, shipboard life, teamwork, and psychological challenges of managing a crew. He sounded almost like a manager on shore.

Conclusion: Staying Afloat in a World of Work in Flux

We can theoretically disentangle the impact of the postsocialist transition and the transformations within the global shipping industry, but for Bulgarian seafarers, these changes occurred simultaneously. With the end of the Cold War, seafarers faced the fall of a regime, EU accession, and changes in the global maritime industry. At first, the sudden flood of globalization propelled them away from stable and prestigious employment in national fleets and into the global pool of cheap, waged maritime labor dominated by supra-national ship owners, mixed-nationality crews, and a foreign working language. This transformation radically changed working lives, opening new opportunities for some, even as it created dramatic social inequalities in the formerly tight maritime community.

Although the nature of their work stayed the same, seafarers' lives and biographical trajectories changed. Some seafarers learned to swim in the new global labor market. Others found refuge in dwindling islands of local workplaces and in localist and even anti-transnational employment practices. Seafarers who lost their jobs due to illness, company bankruptcy, or retirement plunged into destitution, along with the rest of the Bulgarian unemployed and retired population. Sociodemographic research specifically on Bulgarian seafarers is sadly lacking, but if we consider the well-known health risks of seagoing professions (Hystad and Eid 2016; Pauksztat 2017; Walters and Bailey 2013), it is clear that the life expectancy and quality of life for the seafaring population suffered greatly in the post-1989 period. Some 10 percent of my roughly 60 respondents are no longer alive, 11 years after the research started.

In many ways, postsocialist seafarers' experiences echo those of all seafarers in the global ocean. They coexist in multiple places at once, never completely leaving their place of origin, yet rarely feeling "at home" either on shore with their spouses and children, or on board their ship, or least of all in the foreign countries that they visit. Because of their "transversal" migration patterns (Borovnik 2011), some of the seafarers I interviewed felt that they lived, as one captain put it, in "a no man's land," or, to use the words of a ship cook, that "[t]here is no life at sea, real life is on shore!" Many regretted missing the births and birthdays of their children. As my parents joke, they have been married for about 15 years since 1980, if you count only the time my father has spent on shore. Some of my interviewees also felt that the job restricted their participation in important public aspects of shore life, such as local and national politics. For example, several interviewees recalled being far across the globe when they got the news that socialism had ended, and how it was not until many months later that they came home to a new political regime.

It is not surprising that many of the "fathers"—those who are approaching the end of their working lives or are already retired—can be described as localists. The fathers bore the brunt of the economic crisis

caused by marketization in the early years after 1989. They lost the most, benefitted the least, and consequently as a group tended to voice the most pessimistic assessment of the transformation. Their nostalgic voices unmask inherent injustices on the postsocialist job market (Todorova and Gille 2010). More surprisingly, many young seafarers are also localists, perhaps less by conscious choice and more as a consequence of being excluded from becoming global. Familial ties remain important for both generations, especially for those who are less competitive on the global labor market—or perhaps the other way around, those with closer ties on shore no longer feel at home in the global profession that seafaring became after 1989.

The mix of mobility and fixity typical of work on the high seas became further complicated when the entire society on shore and its labor regime underwent a sea change after the fall of the state socialist system. Seafarers found themselves "at sea" in two ways simultaneously: not just employed in mobile and international workplaces, but also adapting to a society and job market in flux. Postsocialist seafarers are just one reminder of the fact that the global maritime market has many local pockets and fringes that remain in the shadows but which ought to attract more attention from scholars of labor.

Notes

1 http://seafarersrights.org/frequently-asked-questions/.

2 Terminology ranges from "watery mobilities" (Cresswell 2010, 555), "marine" or "maritime" mobilities (Borovnik 2011; Monios and Wilmsmeier 2018; Vannini 2012), and "shipped mobilities" (Anim-Addo et al. 2014) to "aqua-mobilities" (Kesselring 2014, 22), or "mobilities of ships" (Peters 2014).

3 Flags of Convenience (FoC), also called "open registry," is a business practice whereby a merchant ship is registered in a shipping register of a country other than that of the ship owners, and the ship flies the flag of that country. The term "FoC" is often used pejoratively, and the practice is regarded as contentious.

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