



Leaving, returning, staying: The complex geopolitics of political transformation

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Abstract

Recent political protests in Bulgaria, led in part by Gen Z students, workers, and unemployed young people, have sharpened popular demand for a rethinking of both public services and national identity. In the face of continued emigration of young people concerned about the nature of opportunities in Bulgaria, the protesters asked, in part, for a renegotiation of Bulgarian identity. In this context, Kapka Kassabova's trilogy of biographical family explorations of the experience of the émigré, border lives, and shifting geopolitical landscapes have much to teach us about the interweaving historical geographies of the region. Kassabova's writing both foreshadows and illuminates Bulgaria's ongoing struggle about staying, leaving, and renewal.

Key words: Border, emigration, émigré experience, Gen Z, geopolitics, protest, regional identity

1. Introduction

2025 ended with many Bulgarians exhausted yet newly energized by the anti-government demonstrations that swept across the country. In the process, a new political subject, Gen Z activists, emerged as a central figure of national politics. Their calls for governmental reform and national renewal placed at the heart of public debate demographic and moral questions of staying and leaving. Students and Gen Z activists exposed what Bechev (2013) identified a decade earlier as “the bankruptcy of an entire political system in desperate need of renewal”.

Protesting the draft 2026 budget, corruption, and deteriorating life chances, demonstrators articulated demands not for another election cycle but for what protestors called “Change to Come” with structural renewal and a break with Bulgaria's post-1989 oligarchic order. This was not a question of whether Bulgaria needs “yet another election”, but expressed itself in terms of demands for deeper political restructuring and renovation in ways that would address the fundamental problems of demographic decline, political corruption, and ongoing emigration (Kulbaczewska-Figat 2023; Detev and Kirkova 2025; Ivanov 2025). At its core was the kind of future Bulgarians, especially young Bulgarians, could hope for. Their slogans, “ostanete tuk” (stay here) and “promianata



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e sega” (the change is now), encapsulated a struggle over both their own future and the wider community. What kind of future could Bulgarians build that no longer depended on the sense that young people had to leave the country for opportunities elsewhere. Protestors called for a different governmental model that worked—not for its own enrichment—but to create conditions for young people to stay in or return to the country. It was, in part, recognition of the depth of the organic crisis these demands reflected that led to the government stepping down.

In following the mass protests and street demonstrations that developed, I have been reminded of Kapka Kassabova’s ‘trilogy’ of travel writings—*Street Without a Name* (Kassabova 2008), *Border* (Kassabova 2017), and *To the Lake* (Kassabova 2020)—in which she explored the experience of exile and longing, return and belonging, through her personal experiences and the life stories of those she met on and around the borders and borderlines of late-communist and post-socialist Bulgaria. In light of the mass protests to protect the possibility of lives remaining and returning in the country, Kassabova’s personal reflections and travel biography offer a rich cultural geographic exploration of what it means to leave and return to Bulgaria.

Kassabova is a poet and writer, born in Sofia in 1973. She grew up in a family of scientists until they emigrated in the early 1990s, first to New Zealand and later to Scotland, where she now lives. English is her primary literary language, and her books are widely recognized for exploring the relationships between place, identity, and the legacy of geopolitical borders, especially in the Balkans.

2. Home

In *Street Without a Name: Childhood and Other Misadventures in Bulgaria*, Kassabova (2008) reflects on her youth growing up in late communist and early post-communist Bulgaria, leaving with her family to live in New Zealand and later in the UK in the early 1990s. Her return to Sofia’s suburbs after years abroad provides a rich ethnography of Sofia through its “nameless” street on which she grew up, the events of 1989, and the various fascinating, poignant, and at times hilarious retellings of life experiences of family and friends who stayed, left, or left and returned. Exploring what was lost and what persists, Kassabova is, above all, navigating her experiences and understanding of late socialism and post-socialism and the kinds of ways of living Bulgarians experienced, whether in the grey suburbs of “modern” Sofia or the provincial small towns and villages of her grandparents and extended family of the Balkan-foothill and Danube-plain. Exploring late socialist modernity and post-socialist decline from small industrial towns, spa resorts, and rural settlements, the consequences of an aging population and a depopulated countryside become ever clearer. Return is one of intense restlessness, of recognition and surprise, and a struggle to express what staying has meant to those she visits, what living away has meant to her voluntary exile, and what return means for both.

For those who lived in Central or Eastern Europe in the 1970s and 1980s, *Street Without a Name* is a nostalgic revisiting of the micro-pleasures and frustrations of life under central planning and state socialism. For those born after the 1980s, it will be a rich social history of the tensions and ambiguities their own parents and grandparents lived and the contradictory daily experiences

they encounter in the bifurcated life-paths of young and old in the new Bulgaria. It will be a “strong recommendation” on my Europe course reading list for my students to better understand the transformations of socialist and post-socialist Eastern Europe.

3. Border

In *Border: A Journey to the Edge of Europe*, Kassabova (2017) revisits her exploration of return and the kinds of encounters she has with family, friends, and strangers throughout the region. Turning to borderlines and borderlife, she travels through the Rhodopes and Strandzha mountains, and across the shifting frontiers of Bulgaria, Greece, and Turkey, in areas once closed to all except the military but which remained transborder locales and, in recent years, have been active sites of renewed and expanded border crossings. The book’s geography of frontier life, populated by smugglers, shepherds, refugees, and border guards, reveals the persistence of invisible boundaries long after the fall of the Iron Curtain. In these places, Kassabova’s “borderlanders” occupy a liminal position between worlds, what Entrikin (1991) called “betweenness” and Fortuné (2019) refers to as “inbetweenness”. The individuals she encounters each have their own stories of trauma and hope within the wider shifting economic, political, and social geographies of border life. She visits family members, often ones who are now isolated in rural areas and small towns bereft of services, adjusting only in part to the wider transformations of post-socialist Bulgaria and still rehearsing the practices and dialogues of a now bygone past with lost hopes for the future.

Exploring the invisible lines of everyday lived experience amidst rapid national transformation makes the book a landmark in contemporary travel writing and a riveting social geography of regional change. *Border* evokes forgotten places in rich detail and gives voice to their often marginalized, even discarded, inhabitants. The book won the 2018 British Academy Prize for Global Cultural Understanding, the 2018 Stanford Dolman Travel Book of the Year, the 2017 Saltire Society Scottish Book of the Year, and the inaugural Highland Book Prize in 2018, and will make rich and enjoyable reading for young and old, geographers and others.

4. Region

To the Lake: A Balkan Journey of War and Peace (Kassabova 2020) brings Kassabova’s explorations to Bulgaria’s western neighbors, interweaving her matrilineal family migrations with the deep time of Balkan history. Beginning with the family trajectory across Macedonia, Albania, and Bulgaria, and centering on Lakes Ohrid and Prespa, she renders the region as a palimpsest of exile and reconciliation, widening the horizon of émigré experience by exploring the complex and changing nature of both her family geographies and the shifting geopolitical landscapes in which they unfolded. The book begins: “It so happens that I am the fourth generation in a female line to emigrate. A hundred years ago, my great-grandmother emigrated from the Kingdom of Yugoslavia to the Kingdom of Bulgaria. Her only daughter, my grandmother, emigrated from the Federative People’s Republic of Yugoslavia to the People’s Republic of Bul-

garia. My mother, an only child, emigrated with her family from Bulgaria to New Zealand, and I emigrated from New Zealand to Scotland” (Kassabova 2020). As with her earlier books, she weaves together personal identity and sense of belonging with family history, local legend, and the dislocations brought by war, shifting borders, population decline, and out-migration. Conflict and displacement are situated in contexts of imperial, national, socialist, and post-socialist transformation and most recently Europeanization. Layering the palimpsest of history, place and experience, she leaves us with some insights and many questions about the future of what she calls “a confluence of exile” (Eleanor 2021).

5. Conclusion

If a new politics of home and belonging is to emerge for young Bulgarians as they navigate the aftermath of the 2025 revolt, Kassabova’s writing offers more than memoir—it’s personal insights and lessons embrace the complexity of regional identity and experience in the current conjuncture. Her books vividly demonstrate the value, perhaps the necessity, of situating the dynamics currently underway in terms of what Valiavicharska (2021) calls the political imaginaries of restless history. Kassabova provides rich imaginaries to navigate the exile experience, the hopeful project of renewal, and attention to the deep ecologies of the complex dynamics of community restructuring. Her own restless journeys make visible the long cartography of hope, exile, and return upon which any genuine national renewal must be built.

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Additional information

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