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THE ETHNIC CHURCH AND ITS ROLE IN THE SHAPING OF AN IMMIGRANT COMMUNITY:

ST. JOHN OF RILA BULGARIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH IN CHICAGO

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Abstract: The big industrial cities in Canada and the U.S. Northeast and Midwest became the home of many Bulgarians already by the beginning of the twentieth century. The fall of communism ignited new waves of migration across the Atlantic. Today Chicago, Illinois is reported to be the host of the largest Bulgarian diaspora. The diaspora has its "ethnic" spaces on the host city map: churches, clubs, restaurants, etc. This paper presents a case study focused on *St. John of Rila* Bulgarian Orthodox church in Chicago. It discusses the role of the church in immigrants' lives, as well as in the formation of a Bulgarian migrant community on American soil. The discussion is based on the concept of the *ethnic church*, designating the particular function which places of worship of different denominations play in the lives of first-generation immigrants in the U.S. The various functions of the church are described and analysed: as a place of worship, of religious and secular celebrations, of weekly community gatherings, as well as a place where newcomers look for vital information and support. The focus is on how immigrants view the church as a significant site on their personal life trajectories.

Key words: *St. John of Rila*, Chicago, migration, ethnic church

Introduction

Based on anthropological research conducted among Bulgarians living in Chicago, Illinois, this article discusses the making and sustaining of an immigrant community in the United States, with particular regard to the role of the

ethnic church in these processes. The church is regarded here as a congregation, that is a local, face-to-face religious assembly, initiating particular (ethnically oriented) activities and developing an institution of, by, and for itself (Warner, 1993). Stephen Warner defines the congregation as "a local *voluntary religious association*, usually culturally homogenous and often legally constituted as a non-profit corporation controlled by its laity and administered by professional clergy" (Warner, 1998, p. 21). The term ethnic church, which is central to the present discussion, refers to the oftentimes ethnic or cultural homogeneity of religious congregations formed in immigration. This term does not characterize a specific religious denomination but rather describes the characteristic traits of various immigrant religious institutions under certain circumstances. The functions of the ethnic churches are particularly visible and well-studied in the context of U.S. society, conspicuous for its exceptional religious diversity. In the American context, the church understood loosely as the center of religious and social life of various local bodies, representing a huge variety of religious denominations, plays a crucial role in the process of migrants' adaptation into the receiving society, paradoxically, by sustaining their ethnic specificity. However, this is a transient feature as far as congregations are of shifting significance for the migrants of different generations. Hence, immigrant congregations may gradually lose their ethnic character in order to meet the needs and expectations of the second, third, etc. generations (see for examples Warner & Wittner, 1998).

My observations are focused mostly on first-generation migrants from Bulgaria in Chicago and on the *St. John of Rila* Bulgarian Orthodox Church in the city, which still operates as an ethnic church. The following discussion seeks to highlight the functions of the ethnic church in immigration, some of which have little to no relation with religious faith and practice. Moreover, it seeks to reveal how the religious gatherings of the members of a particular Bulgarian Orthodox Christian congregation nurture the formation of an immigrant community and catalyze processes of differentiation within it.

Quite untypically for an anthropological work, this study seeks to trace the transformations of the *St. John of Rila* congregation within a relatively long span of time – from 2006 onwards. The fieldwork methods applied vary a lot throughout the period. The bulk of my fieldwork among Bulgarian immigrants in Chicago took place between February and July 2006 as a fully-fledged participant observation. In my frequent visits to the church and in my contacts with Bulgarian immigrants at that time, I was equally driven by my scholarly intentions and my needs as a person living away from home in an unfamiliar place. Although I always expressed my position as a researcher, more often than not my interlocutors regarded me as one of them – a newcomer from Bulgaria, trying to find her way in the U.S., and were willing to help me and share their experiences with me. Thus, I acquired a vast amount of information through my direct involvement in numerous informal talks, family gatherings

and public events, ceremonies and celebrations. In addition, I used online and printed sources, including the church website and bulletin (St. John of Rila Church, 2021), as well as the Bulgarian-language newspapers published in Chicago. In addition to my systematic field notes, video and photo documentation, I made seven in-depth interviews with members of the *St. John of Rila* congregation (three of them with multiple interlocutors). The two priests at *St. John of Rila* at the time, a teacher at the Sunday school, regular members of the congregation, as well as a person who had left the congregation were among my interviewees. Those exhaustive on-site observations allowed me to achieve a thick description (Geertz, 1973, pp. 3-30) of the Bulgarian immigrants' life in Chicago and to see processes and trends hidden below the surface level. My subsequent observations were not that systematic. I continued my research mainly through examining online sources concerning the *St. George of Rila* congregation and the Bulgarians in Chicago. The current discussion is also informed by recent anthropological and folkloristic research, conducted among Bulgarians in the U.S., including Chicago (for example, Vukov & Borisova, 2017; Mihaylova, 2017; Ivanova, 2017; Pirgova, 2017). Albeit based on different research methods, some of these publications provide valuable information about the religious organization and practice of the Bulgarians overseas. The increasing number of publications on Bulgarian immigrant communities across Europe and their religious life form a comparative framework against which the case of *St. John of Rila* in Chicago can be studied more thoroughly.

An important aspect of this article is that it deals with the role of the church in community formation under the condition of transnational migration. This brings forward such issues as: the transformation of Bulgarian Orthodox Christians' life under the impact of the specific context of U.S. society, the "adoption" of particular religious organizational strategies from other denominations in multicultural Chicago, the increased significance of the church and religion in immigration, etc. The size of this article does not allow for an elaborate analysis of the transnational condition, nor of the relevant terminology. Here, I use migration related terms as defined in the Glossary on Migration (2019).

The term "ethnic" appears below mostly as part of the concept of the ethnic church and refers to the tendency of ethnic/cultural homogeneity in the congregation in focus. I will not delve into the complex and complicated debate on ethnic groups and identities but will elaborate a little bit on how the members of the *St. John of Rila* congregation perceive and speak of their ethnic (i.e., Bulgarian) roots. On the one hand, they speak of the churches in ethnic terms (e.g., Bulgarian/ Serbian/ Greek/ Polish etc. churches in Chicago). On the other hand, despite the ecumenical mission of Orthodox Christianity, they consider their faith as their cultural property – hence, the correlation between religion and other cultural (specifically Bulgarian) traits, as well as the numerous non-religious functions of the ethnic church. My interlocutors perceive their congrega-

tion in terms of an ethnic community and articulate their identity very much in line with the ethno-symbolic conceptions: in addition to their common name (Bulgarians), they have a common homeland and ancestry, share the same historical fate, the same culture (language, religion, folklore, cuisine, etc.), as well as a sense of solidarity toward their fellow countrymen (cf. Smith, 1983).

It is worth specifying that I use the term "community" here in order to emphasize the high degree of commonality and connectedness (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, pp. 19-20) that many members of the *St. John of Rila* congregation perceive to share with each other. This is not to say, however, that this community is static and unified. On the contrary, as will be shown below, under the surface level it is quite diverse, fluid, and full of contradictions: "old" vs "new" immigrants, older vs younger generations, qualified vs unqualified workers, "elite" vs "ordinary" members.

In building up my argument about the role of the ethnic church in the formation of an immigrant community, I will, first of all, present a brief description of the Bulgarian immigrants in the U.S. I will then describe the Bulgarian Orthodox Church St. John of Rilla in Chicago, including the structure and activities of its congregation. In the following section, I will give a closer look into the functions of the church in immigrants' lives, discussing its ethnic character. Furthermore, I will discuss the stratification of the ethnic congregation, delineating possible perspectives of transformation of the ethnic church.

The Bulgarian Immigrants in the United States

There were three major waves of Bulgarian immigration to the U.S. (cf. Altankov, 1979; Bodnar, 1977; Carlson & Allen, 1990; Prpić, 1978; Karamihova, 2004; Stoianova-Boneva, 1991; Balikci & Stoianova-Boneva, 1993; Traikov, 1993; Migration Movements, 1993; Vassileva, 1999; Stoilkova, 2001). The early immigration from the end of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century consisted of economic migrants of rural background, who arrived in the big industrial centers of North America with the mindset to earn money and return home. Eventually, many of them settled down and brought their families overseas thus laying the groundwork for the beginning of a new immigrant community. Their successors are now fully incorporated into the host society.

The political immigrants from the communist era formed the second wave that was relatively small in scale. Those were people of different social background, who defected from Bulgaria because of being discontented with or persecuted by the communist regime. Their children and grandchildren have by now also become insiders in the country of immigration.

The last big wave is the post-1990 immigration. It forms the most numerous and diverse cohort of Bulgarian-born immigrants who left their home country for the U.S. after the fall of state socialism. They were driven mostly by economic reasons and left their home country in search of better life. This group continues to expand and is therefore still dominated by first-generation immigrants. Immigration from Bulgaria to the United States still continues but at a low pace and includes migrants of socially diverse backgrounds – students, highly qualified professionals, as well as unskilled workers.

The post-1990 immigrants are the subject of my study, as they form the majority in both the observed congregation, and in my interviewees. In order to distinguish them from the migrants of the earlier waves, I will call them Bulgarian immigrants, whereas I will use the term "Bulgarian-Americans" to refer to those who came with the first and second waves, as well as their offspring. This terminological distinction is in fact in use among the earlier immigrants (Stoianova-Boneva, 1991). When speaking of "the Bulgarian immigrants in the United States", I do not overlook their inner diversity (see also Pirgova, 2017). On the contrary, my aim is to delineate and discuss particularly the inner differentiation among the Bulgarians in the U.S.A. – one that goes beyond the three cohorts of immigrants outlined above.

Bulgarian immigrants are more often than not Green Card holders, arriving in the U.S. with the idea of staying.[1] In some cases, the entire family leaves for the U.S., in others, one family member goes first, and the rest join later. These people send money to their relatives back home, but they also invest in the host country (pay rent, tuition fees, federal and state taxes, buy homes, cars, furniture, go on holidays, etc.). Most of them (if not all) apply for American citizenship after the required period of stay in the U.S. The successful applicants usually keep their Bulgarian citizenship as well.

Allegedly, today Chicago hosts the biggest Bulgarian community abroad. It owes this particular status above all to the post-1990 immigrants. The steady increase in the number of Bulgarian nationals there has led to the opening of a General Consulate of the Republic of Bulgaria in Chicago in 2004 which serves the needs of the ever-increasing Bulgarian diaspora in the Midwestern United States. There are no official statistics about the number of Bulgarian immigrants in the city. In 2006, the estimates varied between 70 and 100 thousand people, with an additional 20 to 50 thousand unregistered migrants. As of today, the estimated number is already above 150-200 thousand people (Ivanova, 2017, p. 285). The internal mobility between Chicago and other U.S. cities also influences the fluctuation of this number, alongside transnational migration.

[1] Referring to statistics publicized by the U.S. State Department, M. Karamihova (2004, p. 275) claims that between 1999 and 2002 Bulgaria has been the third sending country in the Green Card Lottery Program.

The number of men and women among Bulgarian immigrants is proportionate. The size of the community in Chicago and the intensity of chain migration sustains in-group marriages. Marriage patterns among these immigrants are still to be studied but there is evidence that the second-generation migrants are more likely to find spouses outside the Bulgarian immigrant community in comparison to the first generation (see also Karamihova, 2004, pp. 109-153).[2] In socio-biological terms, the Bulgarian immigrants in Chicago consist of people from three generations. However, in terms of migration generations, there are representatives of two generations among them.[3]

As it has been said above, the Bulgarians in the Windy City do not form a uniform community. In addition to the differentiation between "old" and "new" immigrants, there are two more distinctive categories with regard to immigrants' education and professional qualification. The majority of post-1990 immigrants are people, who graduated from high school or professional schools, or have university diplomas, but who have poor to no command of English. Because of their limited English language skills, they have access only to unqualified jobs. A considerable number of my interlocutors in 2006 provided cleaning services or were household assistants; many men worked as truck drivers or in construction, others were factory workers or self-employed. Recent studies reveal that the occupational opportunities for first-generation immigrants have not changed much (Vukov & Borisova, 2017). Better command of English guarantees better job opportunities, e.g. teachers, travel and real estate agents, etc. Those migrants, who have improved their language proficiency, enjoy upward social mobility, thus contributing to the further differentiation within the immigrant community.

The highly qualified professionals with good command of English among the Bulgarian immigrants are a small group. Many of them arrived in the U.S. upon invitation by an American university or other institution and work on a contract (usually in the sciences). There are also doctors, dentists, lawyers, nurses, who have acquired American certificates and are able to practice their profession in the host society. Those who run their own small business are usually involved in construction, advertising, travel and tourist services, and real estate services.

Even though this kind of stratification among Bulgarian immigrants still exists, their level of education and professional skills have risen on average during the last 15 years. This holds particularly true for the second-generation

[2] For comparison, intermarriages were more common for the political immigrants, due to the fact that they were predominantly male (Stoianova-Boneva, 1991, p. 81).

[3] Quite often, Bulgarian immigrants with young children invite their parents to the United States, in order to look after their grandchildren. Thus, both parents are able to go to work and to save from babysitting. Sometimes the grandparents stay in America for only a few years, sometimes they stay for good.

immigrants, who were either born in the U.S. or arrived there in their early childhood. Educated in the American schooling system, they have good command of English and many of them go to college and find good jobs afterwards. Thus, the generational division among Bulgarian immi-grants in Chicago is gradually shifting into a socio-economic one, further con-tributing to the inner transformation of the immigrant community. The bigger entrepreneurs and employers, such as truck company and construction compa-ny owners are at the top of the economic hierarchy of the Bulgarian communi-ty in Chicago.

The categories outlined above are by far diverse in themselves; however, there is a good reason to group them so, as far as people belonging to them differentiate between each other. The most salient differences between them are to be seen in their socialization projects – the majority of unqualified workers tend to socialize predominantly within the immigrant community, whereas the qualified professionals strive to socialize with wider American society. Curiously, some people see socializing in the immigrant community as an obstacle for successful socialization with greater society. I have heard quite a few stories about fellow countrymen who ridicule or try to discourage immigrants who are diligent in improving their English or in obtaining better professional skills. No wonder that most of the highly qualified migrants I met have been estranged from the Bulgarian congregations in Chicago and preferred to go to other Orthodox churches (Greek, Serbian, or Russian). A conclusion can be drawn that English proficiency and education/ qualification are the most important social stratification factors among the Bulgarian immigrants in Chicago that have led to the formation of two distinctive albeit disproportionate in size socio-economic categories of immigrants. The boundaries between these categories are often rigid but, in the long run, fluid.

The socio-economic differentiation among the Bulgarian immigrants in Chicago intersects with the one between "old" and "new" immigrants. On the whole, the Bulgarian-Americans are better off in comparison to the Bulgarian immigrants, as well as better integrated in U.S. society. In addition to the differences in their socio-economic status, there are often cultural collisions between the representatives of the two groups that could be explained with their quite different experiences in both Bulgaria and U.S.A.

Seen from the outside, the Bulgarian immigrant community looks relatively small, dispersed, and not as self-sufficient as some of the bigger communities in the ethnic landscape of Chicago appear to be.[4] There are a few neigh-

[4] For instance, the Polish community in Chicago (see for details Erdmans, 1998), which is among the largest in size, offers possibilities for many of its members to spend most of their time among ethnic "kin" – in the store, at the hairdressers', at the doctors' or dentists', at school, and even at work. Communication often goes in Polish that is why young Poles, including American-born, speak Polish fluently, unlike Bulgarian children who speak in English outside the family circle and are not fluent in their mother tongue.

borhoods with higher concentration of Bulgarians (Ivanova 2017, 286), but the tendency is to buy apartments in affordable, yet gentrified parts of Chicago or the city suburbs, rather than to cluster in ethnic enclaves. Nevertheless, the Bulgarian immigrants have their ethnic sites – churches, cultural centers, Sunday schools, restaurants, cafes, and grocery stores. These ethnic sites have multiplied over the years, contributing to the growing visibility of the Bulgarians in the urban landscape (Vukov & Borisova, 2017, pp. 31-32). There are also Bulgarian-language newspapers, TV channels, and online media based in Chicago (see for details Ivanova, 2017, p. 287), as well as several dance groups and a theatrical troupe that contribute to the salience of the Bulgarian community in Chicago.

St. John of Rila Bulgarian Orthodox Church in Chicago

There are four Bulgarian churches on the territory of Chicago and its suburbs: two Orthodox and two evangelical[5]. St. Sophia Bulgarian Orthodox Church was established in 1947. It belongs to the Bulgarian Eastern Orthodox Diocese of U.S.A., Canada and Australia at the Holy Synod in Sofia. In 2005, it moved to a new building in Des Planes, Illinois, one of the suburbs preferred by Bulgarian immigrants. *St. John of Rila* church was established in 1995. It is under the umbrella of the Bulgarian Diocese at the Orthodox Church in America (OCA).[6] When *St. John of Rila* was founded, it had a small congregation. The church was located on rented premises in the city – at first in a kindergarten, and later in a small chapel. Since 1999, the church has a home of its own – the old building of a former German Lutheran church in North-western Chicago. The property consists of two semi-detached buildings, hosting the church, the Bulgarian-language school at the church, offices and living premises. The very foundation of the church and its subsequent enlargement testify to the rapidly growing number of Bulgarian immigrants in the city during the 1990s.

Inside, the church looks somewhat different from the typical Orthodox churches in Bulgaria. There are rows of benches which are usually absent at the Orthodox churches in Bulgaria, the places for candles are differently arranged, and, most importantly, the altar is oriented to the west instead of the

[5] More about the religious institutions of the Bulgarian émigré communities in the U.S.A. see in Altankov, 1979, pp. 98-107; Gardev, 1992; Karamihova, 2004, pp. 76-80; Stoianova-Boneva, 1991, pp. 53-54; Mihaylova, 2017, pp. 242-243.

[6] OCA was established in 1794 as a mission of the Russian Orthodox Church in Alaska. In 1970 it was declared autocephalous by the Patriarch in Moskow. Currently, it has 15 dioceses, some of them defined along ethnic lines. More about OCA see in Karamihova, 2004, p. 78; Mihaylova, 2017, pp. 243-244; History & Archives, 2001.

east as it should be according to the Orthodox canon. Its richly decorated iconostasis is made by an artist of Bulgarian origin, and the icons are donated by other artists or by members of the congregation. There are two more premises in the basement. The big hall serves as a dining room with a small kitchen. This is where the congregation gathers after the Sunday mass, as well as during the regularly organized evening celebrations, concerts, and dinner dances. There is a small podium in the hall, where plays, concerts, dances, and recitals are performed on particular occasions. A smaller hall is organized as a bar, where smokers gather to drink coffee, refreshments, and even alcohol. The small corridor, connecting the two halls, is used as an information center: there one can find Bulgarian-language newspapers, as well as various announcements and advertisements (about forthcoming events, apartments and houses for rent or sale, job vacancies). People from the community advertise their businesses there. Photographs of important events, celebrations, or visits of U.S. and Bulgarian officials to the church are exhibited in the hallway, too. Certificates confirming the legalization of the church and the Bulgarian-language school, as well as official addresses and honorary diplomas are also displayed there. The next-door building hosts classrooms, the priest's office, as well as an apartment for the priest. There is also a small courtyard, where the barbecue for the church picnics is prepared. In 2015, a bust-monument to the Bulgarian national hero Vasil Levski was unveiled in the courtyard. It became a place of veneration during Bulgarian national holidays and other commemorative occasions (Vukov & Borisova, 2017, p. 24).

The priests at the church are appointed by the head of the Bulgarian Diocese at OCA. Until now, all of them have been of Bulgarian origin.[7] The financial and property matters of the church are run by a 12-member Board of Trustees. The members of the Board are elected every year by the General Assembly of the church members. Although everybody who joins the church services and other activities is considered a member of the church, the General Assembly consists of a smaller number of people (reportedly, 125 at the time of my fieldwork). They are all baptized Christians, who pay an annual membership fee. Each of the church members can be elected as a member of the Board on equal footing, provided he or she is a respected member of the congregation, gets recommendations from the priest, and is of Bulgarian origin (the latter is not mentioned anymore in the OCA statute but is still important for the parishioners). There are no special requirements for the President of the Board, who is usually a respectable member of the congregation, active in all church initiatives. There is also a Control Committee, which monitors the expenditures made by the Board.

[7] In 2015, the congregation remained without a Bulgarian priest for nine months (Petrova, 2015).

The church gets no external financial support – neither from the Bulgarian state, nor from OCA. Its income is formed by donations, membership fees, sale of candles, lunches, dinners, picnics and other events organized by the church (the food is cooked by volunteers and sold for a reasonable price, and the profit remains for the church). People support the church by voluntary labor, as well. The church income covers the salaries of the priests, the bills, the mortgages, the purchase of furniture and equipment, repair jobs, etc.

The Bulgarian-language school at the church exists since 1999 and offers classes from first to seventh grade. It is licensed by the Bulgarian Ministry of Education and Science (MES). The subjects taught include Bulgarian language, history and geography of Bulgaria, as well as religion. Classes take place every Sunday from 9 am to 1 pm. During my on-site observations in 2006, there were seven teachers (two of them in religion), all volunteers[8], and about sixty children at the school. Education is free of charge, except for a small annual fee that covers some of the current needs for stationary and other materials. Pupils get the textbooks for free at the beginning of the school year and give them back to serve the next-year students. The curriculum complies with the requirements of MES, and after successfully passing the final tests, the students get their certificates at the end of each year and diplomas at the end of the 7th year.

Apart from the school, since 2002 the church hosts a theatrical troupe and the "Horo" folk dance group. The troupe gives performances in Bulgarian, and the dance group regularly participates in the concerts and celebrations, organized in the church. Currently, a few more groups (modern dance, ballet, etc.) rehearse and perform on the church premises (Vukov & Borisova, 2017).

In addition to the religious ceremonies, performed by the church, there are two annual picnics (such is the limit set by the city authorities), organized by the church – on Prophet Elijah's Day (July 20) and Dormition of Our Most Holy Lady the Mother of God and Ever-Virgin Mary (August 15). There are also a number of "vecherinki" (dinner dances) throughout the year – on the church patron's day on October 14, on St. Nicholas' Day (December 6), on the New Year's Eve, on March 3 (the Liberation Day), and on May 24 (the Day of the Slavonic Alphabet and Bulgarian Culture). Occasionally, the Board organizes performances of popular Bulgarian artists, such as pop, jazz, opera, and folk singers, theatre artists and movie actors. These visits are usually organized together with the General Consulate of Bulgaria in Chicago and are co-sponsored by wealthier Bulgarian Americans.

[8] All the teachers had other jobs to provide for their families. In 2009, MES launched the Native Language and Culture Abroad Program, aimed at providing financial and other forms of support to the Bulgarian schools abroad. As a result, the number of the schools have jumped up. In Chicago, for example, the current number of Bulgarian schools is 12 (against 4 in 2006) (Borisova & Koulov, 2017, p. 401).

All these activities make the church an important factor in immigrants' lives.

Functions of the Ethnic Church in Immigration

Compared to the practice in Bulgaria, it is surprising how often Bulgarian immigrants in Chicago refer to the church in trying to solve different problems, most of which with no relevance to religion. On Sunday mornings a fluctuating but significant number of people go to *St. John of Rila* to join the mass, and to meet friends and acquaintances after that. At noon, the number of visitors increases and this leaves the impression that many people go to the church only to meet friends and acquaintances and/or to have "typical" Bulgarian dishes for lunch. Everybody, who is looking for a job, flat, or some other service, goes to the church in search of information, obtainable from the advertisements, or from other people they meet there. Apparently, the church not only meets the religious needs of the diaspora but serves a wider range of functions. I will briefly discuss below some of these functions, with particular regard to the role of the church in forging and negotiating immigrants' identities, and in being the arena of in-group collisions and divisions. In doing so, I will also try to show how the church has adapted itself to the new social environment, obtaining the features of an ethnic church.

In 2006, one of the priests at the church described its mission as a spiritual, cultural and educational center, a fortress of national identity,[9] a place of hope and trust for the newcomers in the foreign land, and a servant of the growing Bulgarian community in Chicago. This description summarizes the various functions the church has in the life of this community and reveals the complexity of the institution. In all observations and interviews I made, the relationship between the church and its congregation was invariably brought forward, at the expense of presenting the church as a religious institution (i.e., belonging to a particular hierarchical structure, being in relation with other religious institutions and with the civil administration, propagating a certain religious doctrine). Moreover, many of my interlocutors have confirmed that they refer to the church much more often than they used to in the home country.

Besides the Sunday mass, religious ceremonies are performed on the bigger holidays in the Orthodox calendar. These include Easter, Dormition of Our Most Holy Lady the Mother of God, St. George's Day (May 6), Christmas, and St. Basil's Day (January 1). Other popular religious ceremonies include baptizing, weddings, and funerals. Most of the time, the church is locked, but

[9] He used the word "bulgarshtinata", which can be translated as "everything Bulgarian".

the priest who lives next door is always available to let in late visitors who need to say a prayer and spend some time in privacy with the Lord.

Religious service, dissemination of Orthodox faith, observance of orthodoxy and orthopraxy are undoubtedly the major mission of the church and its priests. However, for many parishioners this is not the only (not even the most important) function of the church in immigration.

There are inevitably personal, as well as generational and gender differences in the immigrants' motives for church attendance, but in this case I will argue that it is driven primarily by the non-religious activities taking place at *St. John of Rila*. This is not new for the American context. Most probably it originated from the practice of the Protestant churches but spanned over other denominations in their competition to attract more and more believers. Sociologist Stephen Warner (1993) points out that religion in the United States operates under market conditions (pp. 1053-1055). In contrast to Bulgaria, where the status of Orthodoxy is, so to speak, taken for granted (it is usually described as the traditional and leading denomination in the country), in the U.S. it has to "market" its ideas, and make efforts to better satisfy the needs and expectations of the "customers" (see also Kurien, 1998, p. 58; Karamihova, 2004, p. 72). In seeking to achieve this, *St. John of Rila*, as well as the other Bulgarian churches in Chicago, have become not only a place for worship, but also an educational center, a stage for various cultural performances, a club for fellow countrymen, an information center, a dining place (even a bar), and a charitable agency. It is exactly this combination of functions, which has makes the churches the most popular "Bulgarian" sites in Chicago. Obviously, this is all the result of the process of adaptation of the Bulgarian Orthodox churches to the conditions in the host society, as well as to the specific needs of the immigrant community. Historically, the first Bulgarian churches in North America, established in the early twentieth century, functioned as immigrant integration centers, rather than as solely places of worship (Mihaylova, 2017; Traikov, 1993). This corresponded with the immigrants' need to have a place of their own, where they can gather together with co-nationals, preserve and express their specific cultural identity. Other factors should also be taken into consideration here. One of them is the socio-political role of Orthodoxy and the Bulgarian Exarchate (yrs.1870-1953) during the second half of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century, especially in the geographic region of Macedonia, from where the early Bulgarian migrants to North America predominantly originated.[10] Another factor is the impact of the host society, namely the place and role of religion and religious institutions in it.

[10] I refer here only to immigrants who defined themselves as ethnic Bulgarians and who called their churches in America "Bulgarian-Macedonian" (Mihaylova, 2017, p. 242). At the turn of the twentieth century the ethnically diverse region of Macedonia was part of the Ottoman Empire, so all migrants who came from there possessed Ottoman passports.

The interior changes (the seats), the facilities at the church area, the replacement of the traditional "kurban" (votive meal) with picnics, the online dissemination of the church bulletin, etc. – these are all outcomes of the process of adaptation to the local context. Many of my interlocutors were ironic about the efforts of the priests at *St. John of Rila* to make things look more "like the American churches". Apparently, however, these efforts were a good strategy as they had achieved the intended effect of keeping people's attendance of the church high.

In the competition at the religious "market", the Bulgarian Orthodox churches in Chicago have directed their efforts to a particular target group – the immigrants of Bulgarian origin.[11] They have been successfully exploiting a consumer niche, formed by the enlarging Bulgarian community in the city. Accordingly, they have developed a strategy adjusted to the specific features of the target community. I will only mention two of these features – the big number of non-religious people among the immigrants from Bulgaria[12] and the prevalence of unskilled immigrant workers with poor command of English, who need assistance in making their first steps in U.S. society. The practice of chain migration,[13] which is common among the Bulgarians in Chicago, implies a relatively high degree of connectedness among them, which justifies the interest of the Bulgarian Orthodox churches solely in them. The result is the *ethnicization* of the Bulgarian Orthodox churches on American soil.

Religion in Bulgaria is often interpreted in ethnic terms. It is often regarded as cultural (family, ethnic) tradition, rather than as faith in God or a system of worship (Elchinova, 1999). In official and everyday discourses alike, religious affiliation is regularly described as an attribute of the ethnic group and is named accordingly: e.g., an ethnic Bulgarian is "by definition" Orthodox Christian, and an ethnic Turk is "always" Muslim. Consequently, in the vernacular these denominations may appear respectively as "Bulgarian" and "Turkish" faith (Elchinova, 2001, p. 65). The roots of this mixing of ethnicity with religion can be sought in the millet system of the Ottoman Empire and its transforma-

[11] In 2006, the bulk of the congregation of *St. John of Rila* were ethnic Bulgarians, with rare exceptions – a few Greeks, married to Bulgarians, a few Ukrainians from the neighborhood, occasional guests of another origin, usually invited by Bulgarian friends to particular events.

[12] It is hard to provide statistical evidence in support of this statement. In national censuses, for example, most respondents define their religious affiliation – Orthodox Christian, Sunni Muslim, or other. However, studies focused on religiosity, especially qualitative ones, reveal that more often than not respondents in Bulgaria belong to a certain religion only nominally, in terms of heritage or tradition, and not in terms of faith (Fotev, 2000; Elchinova, 1999). Of course, the degree of religiosity among Bulgarian nationals varies, but it is particularly low among people who grew up under state socialism, i.e., between 1944 and 1989.

[13] This calls for further exploration, but almost all my Bulgarian interlocutors in Chicago (except for students and professionals who came on a contract) described their experience as chain migration, usually following the steps of relatives, friends, and/ or residents from the same town.

tions under the impact of nationalist ideology, which gained momentum in the Balkans in the nineteenth century. One of the results of these transformations was that Orthodoxy became a major marker of national belonging in the Christian dominated Balkan states (Roudometof, 2001). In the course of time and in the context of changing national ideologies, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC) has affirmed its position as one of the pillars of the Bulgarian nation and national identity (Fotev, 1994).

In immigration, BOC becomes a powerful symbol of the society of origin, of everything Bulgarian – the state, the nation, and the *ethnos* (Borisova et al., 2015). In Chicago, the Bulgarian Orthodox churches act as representatives of the Bulgarian community, alongside the Bulgarian Consulate and the Bulgarian-language press. Some of the biggest sponsors of *St. John of Rila* are Bulgarian-born Turks and Muslims. The church welcomes all Bulgarian citizens to its activities, regardless of their ethnic and religious affiliation. However, the association of the Bulgarian church with the Bulgarian ethnicity prevails. And it is worth reminding that *St. John of Rila*, as an OCA member, plays such a role, even though it is fully independent from the Bulgarian state and Patriarchate.

In the case of the *St. John of Rila* in Chicago, the church is the driving force behind the construction of a Bulgarian community in immigration – something observed in the U.S. in regard with other churches and denominations, too (Warner & Wittner, 1998; Kasinitz et al., 2004; Kennedy & Roudometof, 2002). The evidence for this is plentiful.

First of all, the service and sermon are held in both Bulgarian and Old Church Slavonic, with the occasional insertion in English. This means that the service is oriented exclusively to a Bulgarian-speaking audience (on occasions of intermarriages, the English-language part in the wedding ceremony is expanded).[14] Furthermore, the institutional hierarchy is organized along ethnic lines. It is still a practice at *St. John of Rila* to appoint priests of Bulgarian origin;[15] the same requirement applied to the members of the church Board. Another marker of the ethnic character of the church is the establishment of the Bulgarian language school, whose maintenance and improvement are considered a priority by the church Board. Moreover, the school is highly valued by the congregation. All the other cultural-educational activities organized by the church (celebrations, concerts, and picnics) are Bulgarian-specific. They are focused on Bulgarian folklore, national holidays, national heroes, traditional cuisine, etc. The number of national symbols (portraits, monuments,

[14] With the increasing role of the second generation of immigrants and the possibility to have non-Bulgarian priests, the use of English in liturgy and ceremonies increases.

[15] This requirement used to be included in the statute of the Bulgarian Diocese at OCA. Even though it has been removed a few years ago, the congregation members still prefer priests of Bulgarian origin.

memorial plaques) displayed on church property increases in time (Vukov & Borisova, 2017, pp. 22-27). Thus, the church simultaneously plays the role of a temple, a school, a Bulgarian club, and even that of an ethnic restaurant. In other words, it is a place of structured relations between co-ethnics, where everything specifically Bulgarian is put forward and praised – language, music, food, interior.

Therefore, it can be claimed that the primary function of this church is to structure a Bulgarian ethnic community within the larger American society and to foster a sense of belonging and self-esteem among the members of this community.[16] At the same time, the church activities are not meant to hinder the process of integration in the mainstream identity, they are rather aimed at preserving the ethnic origin as a significant side-stream identity. It is exactly in this position that *St. John of Rila* exists as a congregation and succeeds to motivate a large number of people to attend to, participate in, and identify with its activities.

Despite its community-structuring role, the BOC in Chicago becomes an arena of inner differentiation and contradictions. Thus, for example, in 2006 the congregation at *St. John of Rila* consisted for the larger part of first-generation immigrants, for most of whom immigration was related to downward mobility. For them the only opportunity for upward mobility was within the immigrant community itself and obtaining a prestigious position in the church administration (becoming a Board member or a renowned sponsor or activist of the church initiatives) was a marker of success. This had fostered infighting and struggle for influence, and gave rise to rumors of scandals and corruption, which were favorite subjects of discussion among all my interlocutors. Those contradictions appeared to be gender specific: more often than not men got involved in the inner power struggles within the Bulgarian immigrant community.[17] There was also tension between the "old" and the "new" immigrants. "Old" immigrants were already well-established, emphasized their higher social status in comparison to the recent immigrants, and expected respect and recognition from the "newcomers". The latter tried to compensate for their unsatisfactory position in wider society by making money and fighting for prestige and respect within the Bulgarian immigrant community at large, and the church congregation in particular. Those in the Bulgarian immigrant community, who were skilled professionals with university degrees, had other options

[16] Most researchers who study the role of the Bulgarian Orthodox churches abroad, point out their function as national-consolidating centres (see for example Vykov & Borisova, 2017; Borisova et al., 2015; Mihailova, 2017). This observation refers to post-1990 migrants, among whom the representatives of the first generation are still the majority. With the increasing participation of the second and the third generations, who are better integrated in the host society in comparison with their parents and grandparents, the ethnic character of the churches tends to fade away.

[17] For parallels with other religious congregations in U.S.A. see for instance Kurien, 1998.

to achieve prestige in American society, and often preferred to socialize outside the Bulgarian churches, disappointed with the conflicts within.

Currently, it is not only the number of Bulgarians in Chicago that has grown bigger, but so has the diversity within their church congregations. Dilyana Ivanova, who is a researcher of Bulgarian origin living in Chicago, speaks about the community elite (Ivanova, 2017, p. 287) – something that supports my observations about the inner differentiation among the immigrant community in the city. How did this elite emerge, how did it get recognition, who and why does belong to it – these and other questions are still to be examined. Their answers will help outline the possible trajectories of the future transformation of the Bulgarian ethnic churches in Chicago – towards religious institutions with a multi-ethnic scope, or towards insular congregations.

Conclusion

The discussion about the role of the *St. John of Rila* Bulgarian Orthodox church in Chicago reveals that the church functions as a typical ethnic congregation, whose major goal is the construction and maintenance of the Bulgarian immigrant community in the city, as well as its adaptation to the host society. In this process the church itself has significantly transformed and adapted to the American context. The multiple functions and activities that the church performs have turned it into a preferred meeting point and place of socialization for the Bulgarian immigrants in the city. In this, the church competes with other "ethnic" sites in the city: two cultural clubs, the General Consulate, several Sunday schools, Bulgarian cafes and restaurants. Whereas in 2006 the church seemed to be the most preferred center of community consolidation, currently it has lost its leading position in favor of the Bulgarian schools and other cultural organizations. Particular supporting policies of the Bulgarian state regarding the schools abroad and the concurrent negative trends within the umbrella Orthodox institutions to which the Bulgarian churches in Chicago belong, have catalyzed a process of emancipation of the schools from the churches, as well as the growth of their number and significance for the immigrant community. Nevertheless, the opportunities for community activity and upward social mobility, which the church offers, help it preserve its role of a focal point in immigrants' lives. Yet, the inner differentiation and the emphatically ethnic character of the church pose questions about its ability to meet the needs and expectations of a wider number of Bulgarian immigrants, and especially, of their more Americanized second and third generations.

Unfortunately, the most recent news from the *St. John of Rila* Orthodox church in Chicago are pessimistic. The congregation is not in favor of the new head of the Bulgarian Diocese at OCA Bishop Alexander (of Russian origin),

who in 2007 replaced the late Archbishop Kiril, who was Bulgarian. They accuse him of being too estranged and insensitive to the needs of the Bulgarian congregation. As a result, voices are raised to leave the OCA and join the Holy Synod in Sofia. However, the relations with the latter are not easy either.[18] In addition, the church faces serious financial issues, because one of the former priests took out a huge bank loan which he guaranteed for with the church property. All these problems are leading the church to the worst possible scenario about its future, as there is a risk of it closing down.

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[18] See for example https://www.eurochicago.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/letter_in_english.pdf (accessed March 16, 2021; Hotinova, 2015).

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