

“It Helps for Our Pensions over Here” International Retirement Migration to the Northeastern Bulgarian Countryside

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Abstract

This article explores international retirement migration to rural Northeastern Bulgaria – an understudied but growing phenomenon in the country within the context of the contemporary European mobility patterns. Based on ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with 21 persons of 11 families, the study examines the diverse motives and settlement strategies of foreign retirees, situating their movement within wider debates on counterurbanisation, ageing, and spatial inequality. While affordability is crucial – summed up by one participant as “It helps for our pensions over here” – the findings reveal a more complex interplay of economic, environmental, socio-political, and affective factors. Beyond lifestyle aspirations or amenity-seeking, we argue that this migration is shaped by strategies for navigating structural insecurity in later life, including discontent with welfare retrenchment, political instability, and socio-cultural shifts in home countries. Drawing on the concepts of geographical arbitrage and precarity in later life, the article shows how global asymmetries intersect with post-socialist conditions to shape Bulgaria as a space of alternative ageing. The study contributes to wider debates on international counterurbanisation and the changing geographies of ageing. It also reveals how foreign retirees are reconfiguring the meaning of rurality in contemporary Europe.

Keywords: retirement migration, structural insecurity, international counterurbanisation, post-socialism, Bulgaria

Introduction

Over the past two decades, the landscape of international migration processes in Bulgaria has become increasingly diverse, as reflected by the growing variety of research topics, subjects and questions. There are simultaneous and often opposing flows of people, goods, objects, capital and ideas. According

to Krasteva¹, “the Bulgarian migration phenomenon” is no longer – and increasingly less so – encapsulated by the previously dominant narrative of large-scale emigration from Bulgaria to Western European and North American countries. Since the beginning of the new millennium, and particularly following Bulgaria’s accession to the European Union in 2007, there has also been an increase in the number of foreign nationals settling in the country². While most foreigners in urban areas are students, labour migrants (including expatriates) or asylum seekers³, the majority in rural areas are retirees.

Indeed, Bulgaria has emerged as a new and, at first glance, somewhat unexpected destination for international retirement migration, given its consistent ranking as one of the poorest countries in Europe based on economic indicators. Traditionally, international retirement migration has been associated with Mediterranean countries such as Spain, Portugal, France, Italy and Greece. In earlier studies in particular, it has often been conceptualised as a form of lifestyle migration in which relatively affluent, middle-class retirees, motivated by a desire for a change of lifestyle, choose destinations characterised by favourable climates, coastal access, picturesque landscapes and a rich cultural heritage – places offering a comfortable environment and opportunities for leisure and recreation, as well as a high quality of life⁴.

However, in recent years, a growing body of research has empirically demonstrated that the boundaries of such mobility are expanding. It has become evident that the process involves not only retirees with a high socioeconomic status (‘white-collar’ professionals) but also individuals engaged in manual labour (‘blue-collar’ workers), as well as more broadly those who are not particularly well off financially after retirement⁵. Secondly, the geographical scope of these movements has widened, with foreign retirees now settling not only in areas adjacent to popular Mediterranean destinations where property prices are comparatively low, but also in a range of other countries within and beyond Europe where the cost of living is significantly lower. Among these new destinations is Bulgaria. The country, however, differs from other emerging retirement destinations in key respects: it lacks institutional policies aimed at attracting foreign retirees, and does not offer the same level of infrastructure and services.

¹ Krasteva, Anna. 2005. *Imigraciata v Balgaria [Immigration in Bulgaria]*. Sofia: MTSIMKV.

² Iorio, Monica. 2020. Italian retirement migration: Stories from Bulgaria. *Geoforum* 111(2), 198–207.

³ Although research on contemporary immigration to Bulgaria is still less extensive than studies of Bulgarian emigration, it has been growing steadily. Rather than providing a comprehensive review, we highlight two key publications that may help to orient the reader. The first, edited by Anna (Krasteva, *Imigraciata v Balgaria*), introduces a variety of new immigrant groups in Bulgaria, including individuals from the Middle East, North Africa, Vietnam, China, the Kurdish diaspora and Russia. The more recent publication classifies immigrants according to their reasons for coming to Bulgaria, such as labour migrants, expatriates, international students, foreign marital partners, asylum seekers and refugees (Hristov, Petko / Markov, Ivaylo / Periklieva, Violeta, and Desislava Pileva (eds.). 2023. *Coming to, and staying in, the poorest country in the EU: immigration to Bulgaria*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.)

⁴ Repetti, Marion / Phillipson, Christopher, and Toni Calasanti. 2018. Retirement migration in Europe: a choice for a better life? *Sociological Research* 23(4), 780–794; King, Russell / Cela, Eralba, and Tineke Fokkema. 2021. New frontiers in international retirement migration. *Ageing & Society* 41(6), 1205–1220; Repetti, Marion, and Toni Calasanti. 2023. *Retirement migration and precarity in later life*. Bristol, Policy Press, 15–16.

⁵ King, Russell / Cela, Eralba, and Tineke Fokkema. 2021. New frontiers in international retirement migration. *Ageing & Society* 41(6), 1205–1220; Bender, Desiree / Hollstein, Tina, and Cornelia Scheweppe. 2018. International retirement migration revisited: From amenity seeking to precarity migration? *Transnational Social Review* 8(1), 13–38; Repetti, Phillipson and Calasanti, *Retirement migration in Europe*, 787–788; Hayes, Matthew. 2014. ‘We gained a lot over what we would have had’: The geographic arbitrage of North American lifestyle migrants to Cuenca, Ecuador. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 40(12), 1954.

To date, foreign retirees in Bulgaria have attracted more media than scholarly attention. Existing academic studies are limited and largely general in focus, most notably concerning British⁶, German⁷ and Italian⁸ settlers, where retirees are not the central focus, but are presented as one of the main types. Only one article has so far specifically examined Italian retirees in Bulgaria⁹.

It is important to note that the concept of retirement is not entirely unambiguous. In its narrowest sense, international retirement migration refers to individuals who relocate abroad at or shortly after the point of retirement. However, some people purchase property abroad and begin spending increasing amounts of time there well before they officially retire. Furthermore, the official retirement age varies between countries and professions. It can range from the mid-forties – for example, for police officers and military personnel – to extending one's professional activity into one's seventies or beyond, particularly in academia or freelance professions such as the arts, business and consultancy¹⁰. At the same time, health issues affecting a person's ability to work can significantly lower the effective retirement age. In this study, retirement migration is understood in a broad life-course perspective that extends beyond the narrow definition of relocation at or after the official retirement age. Following King et al. (2021), we include individuals who have formally retired and those in pre-retirement stages who organise their mobility in anticipation of retirement. This inclusive approach allows us to capture the diverse temporalities and family configurations that characterise contemporary retirement mobility.

This article explores the specific characteristics of international retirement migration to Bulgaria. It focuses particularly on one distinct dimension of this phenomenon: foreign retirees and individuals approaching retirement age who purchase property and settle either permanently or seasonally in rural areas in the northeastern corner of the country. Many of these individuals express a sense of disillusionment with the fast-paced life of large cities or smaller settlements near metropolitan centres. However, the majority do not fall into the category of affluent retirees or pre-retirees seeking a luxurious lifestyle. Instead, they are individuals formerly employed in the service and public sectors, such as social and healthcare services, education and law enforcement, as well as small-scale entrepreneurs. While they are not facing extreme poverty, they often experience financial constraints and structural insecurities, as well as rising living costs in their countries of origin, which in some cases are already evident prior to retirement.

This text addresses the following research questions:

⁶ Kaneff, Deema. 2006. Holiday location or agricultural village? British property owners in rural Bulgaria. *Eastern European Countryside* 12, 79–92; Kaneff, Deema. 2009. Property and transitional neoliberalism: the case of British migration in Bulgaria, in *Accession and migration: changing policy, society and culture*, edited by Eade, John, and Yordanka Valkanova. Farnham Burlington: Ashgate, 59–74. Ivanov, Zhivko. 2009. Britons in the Bulgarian countryside: social and cultural aspects of adaptation and intercommunication, in *Accession and migration: changing policy, society and culture*, edited by Eade, John, and Yordanka Valkanova. Farnham Burlington: Ashgate, 93–106. Elchinova, Magdalena. 2010. The British are coming! A Bulgarian village facing EU integration, in *Migrations from and to Southeastern Europe*, edited by Krasteva, Anna / Kasabova, Aneliya, and Diana Karabinova. Ravenna: Longo Editore, 177–190. Rangelova, Desislava. 2016. *Britanskata obshtnost v Balgariya v nachaloto na XXI vek* [The British community in Bulgaria at the beginning of 21st century]. PhD-thesis. Veiko Tarnovo: Velikotarnovski universitet.

⁷ Matanova, Tanya. 2019. *Nemtsi v Balgariya* [Germans in Bulgaria]. Sofia: Paradigma. Matanova, Tanya. 2020. German migrants in Bulgaria and their social networks. *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore* 79, 137–156.

⁸ Domozetski, Valentin. 2024. Mobilnost i migratsii na italiantsi v Balgariya: sotsialni profili i mezhdukulturni sravneniya [Mobility and migration of Italians in Bulgaria: social profiles and intercultural comparisons]. *Balgarski Folklor* 50(3). Online first.

⁹ Iorio, *Italian retirement migration*.

¹⁰ King, Cela and Fokkema, *New frontiers*, 1209–1210.

- What role does structural insecurity, manifested in areas such as deteriorating pension systems, high living costs, social isolation, socio-political upheaval and environmental concerns in countries of origin, play in shaping life trajectories before, during and after retirement?
- What attitudes, desires and expectations shape the search for a new place to live?
- What are the key motives and factors that prompt foreign retirees to choose Bulgaria, and in particular its rural areas, as their new permanent or seasonal home?

Theoretical framework

As outlined above, international retirement migration has most commonly been analysed through the lenses of lifestyle and amenity migration, emphasising the pursuit of a better quality of life, favourable climate, and attractive natural and cultural environments. Within this perspective, mobility is framed as a life change, driven by the desire to achieve a slower pace of life or to realise an idealised “rural idyll”. While these perspectives retain explanatory power, a growing body of research has demonstrated that the phenomenon has outgrown these frameworks. The geographical scope has expanded, the social profiles of participants have diversified, and the motives for moving have become more complex, often entangled with economic constraints and structural insecurities rather than lifestyle aspirations alone¹¹.

Following King, Cela, and Fokkema¹², we situate international retirement migration within the broader framework of global social transformation as defined by Castles¹³, which foregrounds the importance of shifting political, economic, and social conditions in shaping the phenomenon. From this perspective, it cannot be reduced only to individual preferences or lifestyle choices, but needs to be understood in relation to wider structural changes, including welfare restructuring and increasing socio-economic inequalities¹⁴.

One conceptual approach that aligns well with this transformative perspective – yet remains underexplored in the study of international retirement migration – is counterurbanisation. Originally developed to describe the domestic movement of people from large cities to smaller towns and rural areas, counterurbanisation has more recently been extended to encompass the international dimension of counterurbanisation, without which the picture would remain incomplete¹⁵. Among the examples that Halfacree lists in his seminal article are the international flows of the retired. Therefore, we apply the concept of international counterurbanisation to the case of retirement migration we examine.

However, while (international) counterurbanisation is generally conceptualised as escape from urban stress and search for rural idyll, these classic motives alone cannot fully explain the contemporary dynamics of retirement migration to a country like Bulgaria. What is missing is an analytical framework that accounts for the structural economic and social vulnerabilities that drive retirees to cross borders not only in search of a better life, but also as a strategy for coping with insecurity in later life. Rather than replacing lifestyle-oriented explanations, here we reframe them, demonstrating how

¹¹ King, Cela, and Fokkema, *New frontiers*, 1211–1212. Bender, Hollstein, and Schweppe, *International retirement migration revisited*. Hayes, Matthew. 2015. Moving south: The economic motives and structural context of North America’s emigrants in Cuenca, Ecuador. *Mobilities* 10(2), 267–284.

¹² King, Cela, and Fokkema, *New frontiers*, 1211.

¹³ Castles, Steven. 2010. Understanding global migration: A social transformation perspective. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 36(10), 1565–1586.

¹⁴ Hayes, *Moving South*, 270.

¹⁵ Halfacree, Keith. 2008. To revitalise counterurbanisation research? Recognising an international and fuller picture. *Population, Space and Place* 14(6), 479–495.

aspirations for a slower pace of life and rural tranquillity are often inseparable from more pragmatic concerns related to economic security, welfare conditions, and future uncertainty. To capture these dynamics, we draw on two complementary concepts that have emerged from recent scholarship on retirement migration: precarity in later life and geographical arbitrage.

The concept of *precarity in later life* has been proposed as a way to better understand the growing role of insecurity in shaping retirement trajectories within the framework of neoliberal restructuring and post-welfare transformations, which have reshaped the conditions of ageing across Europe in recent decades¹⁶. Rather than viewing migration primarily as a lifestyle choice, this approach highlights how increasing economic uncertainty, welfare retrenchment, and rising living costs transform mobility into a strategy for coping with unpredictability and maintaining living standards. Precarity is conceptualised not simply as poverty, but as a condition of structural vulnerability and unpredictability affecting even middle-income groups in advanced economies. It may stem from multiple sources: deteriorating pension systems, rising healthcare costs, prolonged unemployment before retirement, and the erosion of social safety nets under neoliberal welfare reforms. Importantly, precarity is understood here not only in economic terms, but as a multidimensional condition shaped also by the interplay of social, political, and geopolitical processes, which have intensified in recent decades. In this sense, movement may emerge both as an expression of preference and as a response to structurally produced insecurity.

Within this context, the concept of *geographical arbitrage* provides a complementary perspective by focusing on how individuals respond to these conditions. While in its more conventional usage it has been associated with rational economic optimisation, recent work has redefined it in more critical terms. Hayes, for example, conceptualises geographical arbitrage as a form of transnational agency that is structured by historically produced inequalities and shifting socio-economic conditions¹⁷. From this perspective, relocation to lower-cost settings is not merely the outcome of individual calculation, but also a socially embedded strategy that becomes meaningful and viable only within specific structural conditions.

Bringing these perspectives together, we argue that retirement migration to Bulgaria can be understood as a process in which strategies of geographical arbitrage are deployed in response to conditions of structural precarity, and take the spatial form of international counterurbanisation. Geographical arbitrage explains the rationale of the move – the calculation that a pension goes further elsewhere. Precarity in later life explains the urgency and the vulnerability behind that calculation – why retirees are willing to uproot their lives, leave behind family and familiar environments, and start anew in an unfamiliar rural setting. Within this framework, the binary between lifestyle choice and structural constraints becomes blurred – rather than replacing lifestyle-oriented explanations, this approach reframes them, demonstrating how aspirations for a slower pace of life and rural tranquillity are often inseparable from more pragmatic concerns related to economic security and future uncertainty.

¹⁶ Phillipson, Christopher. 2013. *Ageing*. Cambridge: Polity; Bender, Hollstein, and Schweppe, *International retirement migration revisited*; Repetti and Calasanti, *Retirement migration and precarity in later life*.

¹⁷ Hayes, *We gained a lot over what we would have had*. Hayes, Matthew, and Rocio Pérez-Gañán. 2017. North–south migrations and the asymmetric expulsions of late capitalism: global inequality, arbitrage, and new dynamics of north–south transnationalism. *Migration Studies* 5(1), 116–135.

Building on these insights, the question then becomes how such dynamics are spatially articulated within the European context. We suggest that, rather than unfolding primarily along global North-South divides, the patterns observed in this study are better understood as embedded in a landscape of uneven development and internal stratification within Europe itself, shaped by post-socialist transformation and differentiated trajectories of EU integration. In this context, Bulgaria occupies a specific position as a relatively affordable destination within the EU, characterised by lower living costs and ongoing processes of economic convergence. This positioning enables it to function as an “internal retirement periphery”, attracting retirees not only from Western Europe but also from other Central and Eastern European countries.

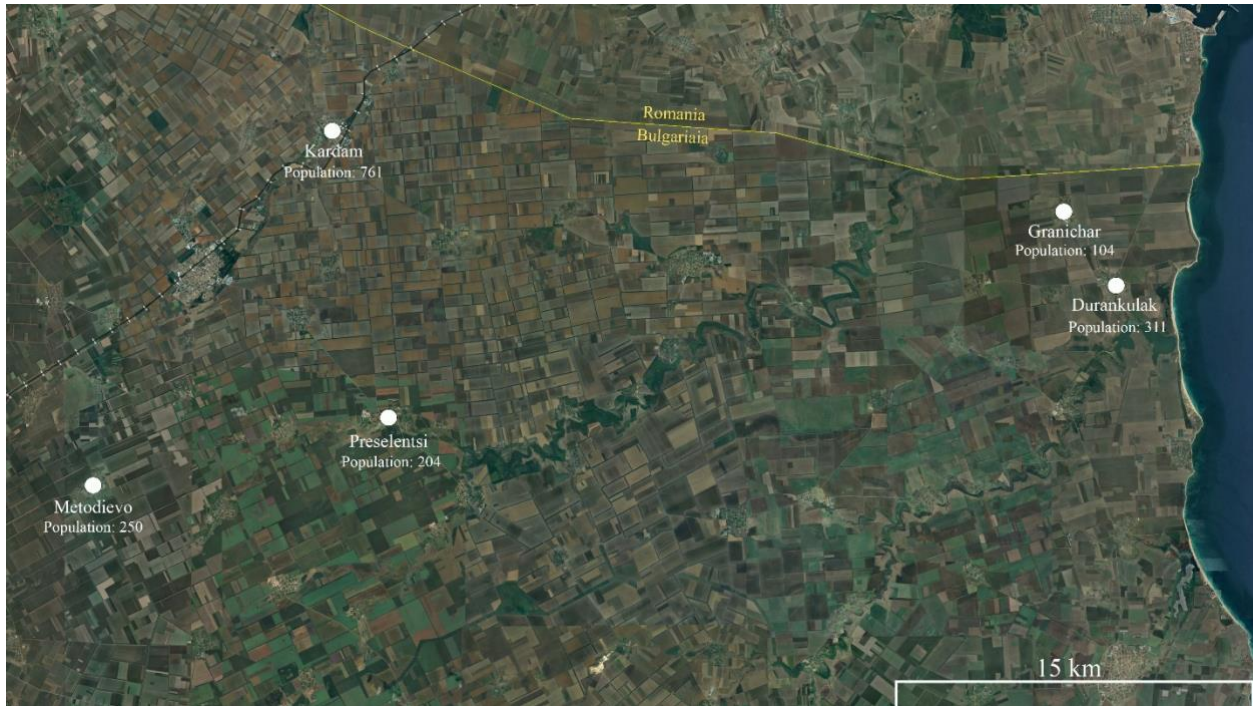
Importantly, post-socialist Europe should not be understood as a homogeneous space. Significant differences persist between countries that integrated earlier into the European Union and achieved relatively stronger economic growth, such as the Central European countries, and those positioned more peripherally within the European economic landscape. These internal stratifications generate new forms of mobility, in which retirees engage in downward spatial mobility in search of affordability and stability in later life. From this perspective, geographical arbitrage within Europe is not simply a matter of individual optimisation, but a practice made possible by these structural differentials. It reflects the ways in which retirees navigate a hierarchically organised European space, repositioning themselves across internal gradients of cost, security, and quality of life.

Methodology

The research is based on semi-structured ethnographic interviews conducted around a set of pre-identified key thematic areas. These were then tailored to the individual life histories, experiences, and specific activities of each interlocutor. All conversations took place in the participants’ homes, which enabled additional observation and photographic documentation of domestic spaces, thereby further contextualising the research. The interviews were conducted in English, Bulgarian and Russian, the latter two languages were often interwoven by the participants themselves. Follow-up conversations were held with some participants, and in several cases, multiple meetings took place.

When identifying potential interlocutors, we relied on locally embedded individuals recognised for their authority and influence within the community for assistance – village mayors, community centre (chitalishte) secretaries and local and foreign residents. We also employed the snowball sampling method. Fieldwork was conducted across five villages in Northeastern Bulgaria in July 2023 and July–August 2024. These villages are situated between 5 and 45 kilometres from the nearest Black Sea beach and between 60 and 100 kilometres from Varna Airport.

Figure 1: Villages, where the research took place



Source: Google Maps. Screenshot of Romania (accessed: 15 June 2026).

Our primary research destinations were the villages of Kardam (General Toshevo Municipality) and Granichar (Shabla Municipality). Kardam is the largest settlement included in the study and has been home to people of various nationalities since Bulgaria joined the EU, mainly British, German, Russian and Russian-German¹⁸ people, as well as individuals from other European and non-European countries. Over the past four to five years, Granichar has become known locally in the Shabla region, as well as among newly arrived Bulgarians and foreign residents, as the ‘Polish village’ due to the recent influx of Polish settlers and seasonal residents who have purchased old houses in the area.

During the course of the fieldwork, we added three more villages to the study: Durankulak (Shabla Municipality), Preselentsi (General Toshevo Municipality) and Metodievo (Dobrich Municipality). Durankulak is the only coastal, tourist-oriented village included in the research and attracts particular interest from Central Europeans. In contrast, Preselentsi and Metodievo are more remote and located away from major transport routes and property prices there are considerably lower than in coastal areas. These villages have proven especially attractive to British nationals who arrived around the time of Bulgaria’s EU accession. In recent years, they have also attracted interest from German citizens. All of the villages in the study are significantly smaller in terms of both population and territorial extent than the urban areas from which the foreign participants originate.¹⁹

¹⁸ The Russian-Germans denotes ethnic Germans from the former Soviet Union who migrated to Germany under repatriation legislation after the collapse of the USSR. The Russian Germans interviewed in this study are part of this post-Soviet migrant population.

¹⁹ According to data from the Civil Registration and Administrative Services (GRAO), the current number of residents registered at their present address in the studied villages as of 15 December 2024 is as follows: Kardam – 754; Granichar – 105; Durankulak – 300; Methodievo – 254; and Preselentsi – 199 (https://www.grao.bg/tna/t41nm-15-12-2024_2-4.txt, accessed: 28 May 2025). At the time foreign nationals began purchasing property, village populations were typically 10–50 residents higher, with sharper declines in Kardam (over 200 fewer) and Preselentsi (more than halved) (<https://www.grao.bg/tables.html>, accessed: 28 May 2025). These shifts, however, do not significantly alter the overall settlement profile.

The sample uses a qualitative, exploratory approach to examine the migration experiences of retirees and pre-retirees with diverse national and professional backgrounds. By highlighting this heterogeneity, the analysis captures the varied ways retirement migration to Bulgaria is articulated, showing how mobility, ageing, structural insecurity, and lifestyle aspirations intersect in shaping transnational counterurban moves.

The inclusion of a small number of more affluent participants helps show that retirement migration is not driven solely by economic necessity, but may also involve differentiated strategies of spatial repositioning. This helps to nuance the concept of precarity in later life as a perceived vulnerability linked to future uncertainty, welfare transformations, and changing socio-political environments.

At the same time, this approach limits the generalisability of the findings. The results should therefore be read as a context-sensitive, in-depth account of meaning-making in specific migration processes rather than a comprehensive overview of transnational settlement in rural Bulgaria.

Table 1 summarises the key data of the families included in the analysis of the current text – 21 migrants of 11 families. In six cases, both partners are pensioners; one case involves a retired mother and daughter; another a single retired woman. In two couples, men retired early in their forties while their partners remain employed. In another case, both partners are still in the pre-retirement stage.

Those who purchased property around the time of their retirement moved into their rural homes shortly after renovation, typically within six months to a year. Two cases stand out: Giovanni (IT) and Alina (UA), who lived in various rented properties across Bulgaria from 2014 before buying a rural home in 2023; and Anya and Igor (former USSR/DE), who arrived in 2021, rented in Varna for two years, purchased a village house in 2023, and moved in immediately.

Three families initially acquired rural properties in Bulgaria as holiday homes. Karry and Cristian (UK) bought a house in their late twenties and spent several months there each year for nearly two decades before relocating permanently in 2023 after retirement. Similarly, Damian and Marcelina (PL) purchased a summer home in 2012 and used it seasonally until moving permanently in 2024.

Ten families sold their properties in their countries of origin due to the financial impracticality of maintaining two residences while pursuing permanent relocation. The exception is Arseni and Polina (USSR/DE), who retain multiple properties and two businesses in and around Hamburg managed by their sons, indicating a comparatively higher socioeconomic status.

Table 1: Participants in the study

participants	sex	age	sending country	occupation	family status	retired (R)/ preretirement age (PR)/ working age (WA)	year of rural property purchase in Bulgaria	year of permanent settlement in Bulgaria
Giovani	male	early 60s	Italy	Interior designer	Married to Alina	PR	2023	2014
Alina	female	late 50s	Ukraine/Italy	Interior designer	Married to Giovanni	PR	2023	2014
Donna	female	late 60s	United Kingdom	Social worker	Married to Paul	R	2010	2012
Paul	male	late 60s	United Kingdom	Mailman	Married to Donna	R	2010	2012
Manny²⁰	male	late 60s	Zimbabwe/ United Kingdom	Pastor	Married to Kathy	R	2012	2012
Kathy	female	early 70s	United Kingdom	Pastor	Married to Manny	R	2012	2012
Karry	female	late 40s	United Kingdom	IT specialist	Married to Cristian	WA	2004	2023
Cristian	male	late 40s	United Kingdom	Military personnel	Married to Karry	R	2004	2023
Chip	male	late 70s	United Kingdom	Businessman	Married to Edyt	R	2007	2007
Edyt	female	late 70s	United Kingdom	Businesswoman	Married to Chip	R	2007	2007
Charlotte	female	mid-60s	The USA	Social worker	Divorced	R	2023	2023
Elke²¹	female	late 50s	Germany	Teacher	Divorced	R	2005/ 2023	2005
Brigit	female	early 80s	Germany	Unknown	Widow Mother of Elke	R	–	2024

²⁰ Manny is of English descent. He was born and raised in Zimbabwe and moved to the UK as a student.

²¹ In the mid-1990s, Elke married a Bulgarian, and the couple lived in Germany. In 2005, following her early retirement due to illness in her late 30s, they relocated to a village near Dobrich. After their separation in 2023, she purchased a house in another village in the region.

Anya	female	late 50s	USSR/Germany	Teacher/ Nurse	Married to Igor	R	2023	2021
Igor	male	late 50s	USSR/Germany	Construction worker	Married to Anya	R	2023	2021
Arseni	male	mid-60s	USSR/Germany	Businessman	Married to Polina	R	2021	2022
Polina	female	mid-60s	USSR/Germany	Unknown	Married to Arseni	R	2021	2022
Damian	male	late 40s	Poland	Policeman	Married to Marcelina	R	2012	2024
Marcelina ²²	female	late 40s	Poland	Teacher	Married to Damian	WA	2012	2024
Beka	female	late 50s	Poland	Accountant	Married to Jacek	R	2020	2021
Jacek	male	late 50s	Poland	Policeman	Married to Beka	R	2020	2021

Source: Illustration by authors.

²² The present publication also includes Marcelina's relatives – Katarzyna (early 40s), who is not retired and does not own property in Bulgaria, and Ola (early 70s), who owns a seasonal house in the same village.

Reasons and motives for relocation

Broadly speaking, the main reason for moving is a desire for ‘less’: fewer expenses, fewer people, less noise, less stress and less cold winters. Regardless of their country of origin or social background, all of the newcomers conveyed a shared sense of urban fatigue. Overcrowding, rising living costs, noise, pollution, and the accelerated rhythms of metropolitan life were repeatedly cited as pressures that had “forced [them] out of the cities”, creating, in some cases, “distaste” to urban living²³. Many participants also expressed a broader dissatisfaction with the direction in which their home societies were developing, perceiving a gradual decline in overall quality of life and limited prospects for improvement.

These perceptions are reflected in Giovanni’s (IT) account of life in Milan:

I come from the centre of Milano; my region is of 24,000 people, five minutes from Duomo di Milano. [...] always running, people everywhere, it’s full of stress. It’s: go, go, do, do, money, money. It is not the life that I want; I’m a quiet person. I’m finished with Milano!

Similarly, Paul (UK) recounts how intensifying work pressures eventually prompted him to move abroad:

I was working for Royal Mail, a postman. I thought to myself, ‘I can’t do this until I’m 66!’ It was getting worse there: new younger managers, making the realms bigger and bigger and bigger, more work. I said, ‘I’ll quit, I’ll try Bulgaria!’ There was an old manager there at the time; he said, ‘Why don’t [you] take one year off, a sabbatical? If it is not for you in Bulgaria, you can come back’. [I thought] it is a good offer, I’ll take it. I never went back [laughter].

In addition to the pressures of urban life, environmental concerns also featured prominently in many narratives. Issues such as polluted air, degraded soil and water resources, and declining food quality were perceived as integral to the deterioration of living conditions in large industrialised regions. These concerns were particularly salient among the Polish participants from Silesia, an area historically associated with heavy industry. For the families of the sisters Marcelina and Katarzyna, environmental risks were not merely abstract considerations but were linked to the experiences of illness among relatives and acquaintances.

Marcelina: A problem in Poland is the polluted air during wintertime. It’s really hard to go outside, for the children – to play or even go to school. [...] The houses are densely placed, and each house has two stories, and they have to be heated.

Katarzyna: There are coal mines everywhere; people working in the coal mines get coal for free. And not only do they burn coal [for heating], they also burn trash. And this is very toxic! [...] A paediatrician researches children with brain cancer, and she has proved that there is a connection between air pollution and the high number of children with brain cancer in our region. A researcher from Belgium came to our city and tested our children and found black carbon in their urine.

These concerns intensified with age, as health, environmental quality, and everyday tranquillity became central to migrants’ aspirations. Relocation was framed not only as an escape from urban pressures but also as a response to perceived risks of ageing in strained urban and social environments. Migration decisions were also shaped by financial considerations: most respondents described modest

²³ Kala, Lukas / Galčanova, Lucie, and Vojtěch Pelikan. 2016. Residential preferences in the context of voluntary simple lifestyles: What motivates contemporary Czech simplifiers to reside in the countryside? *Human Affairs* 26(4), 410–421.

circumstances, often marked by mortgages and limited savings, with housing pressures especially evident among several British participants.

Paul (late 60s) and his wife Donna (late 60s), for instance, recalled that prior to leaving the UK they were working up to 67 hours per week to support themselves and pay off their mortgage. Cristian (late 40s) and his wife Karry (late 40s) were among the few respondents who did not own a property in their home country due to a lack of financial means. As a result, they spent over 15 years living in a caravan.

The rising cost of housing and everyday living expenses was frequently described as a key factor motivating relocation. The German Elke illustrates this dynamic through the example of her family in Berlin: “I was paying rent. My mother was also living in a rented flat – EUR 500, which is low for Berlin. My daughter lives in a three-room flat – EUR 1200 a month, in one of the outer districts of Berlin, not in the centre.²⁴”

Two decades earlier, Elke and her Bulgarian husband decided to leave Berlin – and Germany altogether – motivated by his wish to return to Bulgaria and by financial difficulties following her early retirement on medical grounds. After their divorce in 2023, Elke chose to remain in Bulgaria rather than return to Germany. The following year, she invited her mother, who had been retired for over fifteen years, to join her, both to provide daily care and to reduce living expenses. “Now she has her entire pension at her disposal here,” Elke notes.

Advancing age and the prospect of imminent retirement provoke a range of questions and concerns among our interlocutors, particularly those originating from Western countries. The prospect that retirement income might not cover housing costs, utilities, and everyday expenses generated a sense of financial vulnerability that encouraged the search for more affordable living environments abroad.²⁵

Charlotte’s (USA) reflections illustrate these anxieties:

I was wondering... if I could actually afford my house payment, food, gas and everything. It would have been really tight on my retirement, on my money. [...] So, no. I couldn't stay in America and live a decent life, a happy life.

Prior to relocation, Charlotte – a divorced woman – lived alone in a three-storey house in an attractive neighbourhood in a large city in Wisconsin. Faced with a relatively low expected pension after years of non-specialised employment, she anticipated a significant decline in her standard of living, including the possible loss of her home. Migration thus emerged not only as a pathway to a quieter and healthier lifestyle but also as a pragmatic strategy for maintaining financial stability and dignity in later life.

Beyond economic concerns, several migrants pointed to political and social developments in their countries of origin as shaping their sense of long-term security. Particularly in later life, when stability and predictability are highly valued, perceptions of increasing political polarisation and social volatility may prompt reconsideration of ageing in place.

²⁴ The prices mentioned in the citation are valid for the first half of 2024.

²⁵ Repetti, Phillipson and Calasanti, *Retirement migration in Europe*, 8–10; Iorio, *Italian retirement migration*, 202–203. Nedelcu, Mihaela / Tomás, Livia / Ravazzini, Laura, and Liliana Azevedo. 2024. A retirement mobilities approach to transnational ageing. *Mobilities* 19(2), 208–226.

For Charlotte, the political climate during Donald Trump's first presidential term (2017–2021), which she described critically, further intensified her desire to leave. By July 2024, she expressed concern that his potential re-election²⁶ would render any return to the United States increasingly unthinkable.

For migrants from Central Europe, political and social developments in their home countries also played an important role in the decision to relocate. Some Polish interlocutors expressed concern about restrictions on women's and LGBTQ+ rights, as well as increasingly hostile attitudes toward Muslims and refugees, viewing these as signs of a broader shift in the political and social climate. These issues were particularly salient in conversations with Marcelina and her mother Ola, a political activist, during our first meeting in summer 2023.

Marcelina: The political situation in our country is very bad. Abortions are banned!²⁷

Ola: The police are everywhere, and it is frightening – for homosexuals it is a real problem in our country.

Marcelina: Immigrants are also a problem for our government now. [...] Far-right politicians tell people that if Muslims come, we will lose our freedom and identity... that women will have to wear the burka...

Ola: The government is fascist!

Some newcomers viewed rising nationalism and social conservatism in their countries of origin as a reason to relocate, while others cited concerns in the opposite direction, framing migration as a response to liberal policies and what they saw as insufficiently regulated migration. As Arseni (USSR/DE) reflects on Germany: "Germany before the euro was Germany. After that, it wasn't anymore... It's become an Arab emirate. Now it's not Germany." Despite these differing interpretations, both positions point to a shared dynamic: migration as a search for environments perceived as more orderly, secure, and predictable.

Overall, relocation abroad is rarely driven by a single factor. It reflects a combination of financial, socio-political, and environmental concerns that together produce dissatisfaction with previous life trajectories. Retirement is often seen as a final opportunity for lifestyle change, with migration offering relief from the pressures of demanding urban lives marked by speed, work intensity, and financial strain.

Where to? Bulgaria on the map of retirement migration

European retirees generally prefer to remain within the borders of the European Union due to the advantages of free movement, the absence of significant restrictions on settlement²⁸, and the possibility of continuing to benefit from social entitlements in their countries of origin, such as health insurance and access to superior or free healthcare services²⁹. While not all interviewees expressed this preference explicitly, the fact that they confined their search for a second or permanent home to

²⁶ In the United States presidential election held on 5 November 2024, Donald Trump indeed won the contest against the Democratic candidate Kamala Harris and assumed office for his second presidential term on 20 January 2025.

²⁷ BBC News. 2021. *EU-UK post-Brexit trade deal: What is in it?* BBC News, 28 January 2021; European Parliament. 2021. *European Parliament resolution of 11 November 2021 on the strengthening of democracy and media freedom and pluralism in the EU*. P9_TA(2021)0455, 11 November 2021.

²⁸ European Parliament, and Council of the European Union. 2004. *Directive 2004/38/EC of 29 April 2004 on the right of citizens of the Union and their family members to move and reside freely within the territory of the Member States*. Official Journal of the European Union L 158, 30 April 2004, 77–123.

²⁹ Gehring, Anoeska. 2019. Mobile pensioners: Retirement migrants' perspectives of EU citizenship and free movement. *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research* 32(2), 255–257.

destinations within the EU speaks volumes. Two key factors appear to narrow the range of possible countries: proximity to the sea and limited financial means.

The cost of living and property prices in traditional seaside destinations for retirees and those approaching retirement in Europe – such as Spain, Portugal, Italy, Greece, or even Croatia – and further afield in the Caribbean, have become increasingly unaffordable for the sample discussed here.

We looked in Croatia, but... an old house without windows – 250,000 euros! There are a lot of Poles in Croatia [...] once, houses were cheap, and many were being bought, but over time the prices went up a lot. (Beka, PL)

Although financial considerations are central to property choice, some destinations are rejected when they are seen as heavily populated by expatriates, especially compatriots. Such places are often associated with rising prices, tourism pressure, and environments that resemble those migrants wished to leave. As Charlotte (USA) notes: “[My] original country was Portugal [...], but there’s too many Americans moving there [laughter]. Too many Americans are trying to turn it into California. So that was out.” Beyond economic reasoning, this reflects a preference for less internationalised, rural destinations, with many migrants favouring more affordable areas in Southeastern Europe.

Climate is another key factor, with a strong preference for warmer, drier, and more stable conditions.³⁰ This is not only about “living on holiday” but about everyday well-being, outdoor life, and activity levels. Ideal destinations are seen as offering a balance – warmer than Northern Europe but not as hot as parts of the Mediterranean.

We first moved to Cyprus, but it was very hot, and the language was also very difficult. Even though we studied it and could already speak a little Greek, we thought the island wasn’t the best place – it felt a bit too isolated. (Igor, USSR/DE)

When evaluating destinations, migrants consider economic factors, as well as cultural and practical aspects of everyday integration. Language is key for some: Slavic speakers are often drawn to Bulgaria due to linguistic proximity, which eases communication, administration, and daily life. In contrast, non-Slavic migrants frequently cite language as a challenge, though it rarely determines their decision to settle; many English-speaking participants retain only basic Bulgarian even after years in the country.

The landscape of rural Bulgaria, often seen as reminiscent of the late socialist period, is another attraction. For Slavic migrants, it evokes familiarity and nostalgia tied to childhood and rural life. The prospect of a kind of ‘journey back in time’ is a central part of the idealised vision of rural life – one of tranquillity. As Marcelina (PL) notes, “It reminds me of my childhood in Poland. [In Bulgaria] I adore the fact that my kids can [ride] bikes [...] they can go to the shop or go for a walk in the evening, I don’t have to worry. I am calm here.”

For some, migration also reflects a search for connection or contrast. Paul (UK) links his move to his Eastern European roots, “my father was Ukrainian. I’ve always wanted to visit a country in Eastern Europe [...] it is not Ukraine, but it is near enough [laughter]. Similar [way of] life”. Other English-speaking settlers are drawn by the perceived “exoticism” and lack of urbanisation, enabling a desired

³⁰ Rodriguez, Vicente / Fernandez-Mayoralas, Gloria, and Fermina Rojo. 1998. European retirees on the Costa del Sol: a cross-national comparison. *International Journal of Population Geography* 4(2), 184; King, Russell / Warnes, Anthony M., and Allan M. Williams. 2000. *Sunset lives: British retirement migration to the Mediterranean*. Oxford: Berg, 93–102; Casado-Díaz, Maria. 2006. Retiring to Spain: An analysis of differences among North European nationals. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 32(8), 1321–1339.

change of environment and a sense of detachment. For Charlotte (USA), life in a small Bulgarian village represents a deliberate break from decades spent in large, densely populated environments: “[I’m] from just outside San Francisco. I lived all over California, in cities, country, wherever. And then I moved to New York State, in the country, right outside of town, and then Wisconsin, in the city”, even if her relatives view such settings as overly rural.

Newcomers sought an “ideal alternative” defined by non-negotiable criteria: a quiet, sparsely populated rural setting with low living costs and no large expatriate enclaves. As Chip (UK) put it, “We just wanted a village [...] quiet, we’ve been used to rushing around, thousands of people, 100 miles an hour.” Bulgaria stood out as an accessible coastal option offering small, private settlements.

The preferred area became the northern Black Sea coast, especially north of Varna. Unlike the highly developed and expensive southern coast – with dense resorts, tourism infrastructure, significantly increased cost of living, and rising property prices – the north has only a few modest seaside resorts, none of which are located as far north as the studied area. Its settlements remain village-like, with limited tourism and significantly lower costs for housing, food, and services.

In pursuit of home

Most families initially visited Bulgaria as tourists, often staying in major Black Sea resorts. For many Central Europeans, these brief early visits – sometimes dating back to the 1990s – offered a fleeting impression of the heavily advertised and curated areas of the country and had little influence on much later relocation decisions.

However, visits later in life, especially once the idea of owning property abroad emerged, took on new meaning. For example, Polish nationals Beka and Jacek first visited in 2012. Impressed by the tourist infrastructure, prices, and linguistic similarities, they returned the following summers. Thus, the couple gradually decided to purchase a home, even though Bulgaria had not been their original plan for post-retirement relocation.

In some cases, the idea arose more spontaneously through exposure to advertisements promoting affordable seaside properties. The British couple Chip and Edyt, for instance, encountered Bulgaria while contemplating the sale of their caravan cleaning business and the possibility of retiring abroad in southern Europe, motivated by the appeal of a quieter lifestyle in a warmer climate.

Chip: We watched television and Bulgaria was on.

Edyt: “A Place in the Sun”³¹. And that’s how we came.

Chip: We came here for a holiday in 2006.

Q.: You came with the idea to look for a house?

Edyt: Yes.

The following year, they bought a house in a village 35 kilometres from the nearest beach, and it has remained their home ever since.

Damian (PL) first visited Bulgaria in the late 1990s on a family holiday with his parents. “Later on, we travelled to many places around the world, but we always referred to our vacation in Bulgaria as

³¹ “A Place in the Sun” is a lifestyle television programme that has been broadcast on the British Channel 4 since 2000. It focuses on British couples seeking property in seaside destinations, both within the United Kingdom and abroad, including countries across Europe as well as further afield in the United States and the Caribbean (A Place in the Sun. *About us* (accessed: 28 May 2025)).

the best one we've ever had. We wanted to come back", he recalls. Years later, Bulgaria became the preferred summer destination for his extended family.

Damian: We were looking for a house to rent [near the beach] for the entire summer, and it turned out it was more expensive to rent than to buy.

Katarzyna: Then there was a report on a Polish TV about Bulgaria about very cheap houses for sale. [...] My parents bought a house first.

Marcelina: Then Damian and I did.

Damian: A couple of days ago I bought our fourth house here in the village!

The process of finding a suitable settlement and property is usually planned in advance, with buyers often viewing multiple houses across several villages within one or two weeks. Unlike Bulgarian urban–rural migrants, who tend to rely on local networks, foreign buyers mostly use estate agents. As Italian Giovanni notes, choosing a property based only on online listings is “too risky unless you find the right people.” In his view, estate agents provide key advantages by ensuring accurate descriptions, arranging viewings, checking legal documents, and managing the purchase process.

Arseni (USSR/DE), for example, initially found a house through an online ad posted by a Russian woman returning to Russia. “I waited two months for her”, he recalls. “She was in Moscow – she would call me when she arrived [back to Bulgaria]. But she phoned to say she had already sold it”. He subsequently turned to an estate agency, and the search for another house took several more weeks.

Foreigners typically use small agencies based in nearby coastal settlements such as Varna and Balchik, which have experience of working with international clients. Often, the brokers themselves are of foreign origin.

We found a Polish woman online who lives in Balchik. She used to live in Russia and the UK, speaks Russian and English, and has also learned Bulgarian [...]. She helped us find our house. We lived with her for a week while completing the purchase. (Jacek, PL)

The properties on offer are mostly old, single-storey houses with an average of four rooms, typically dating from the mid-twentieth century. They often need substantial renovation, extension, or partial rebuilding, though full demolition is rare. Plots are usually spacious and flat (600–1,500 sq m), often with orchards, vineyards, vegetable gardens, and sometimes outbuildings for agricultural or storage use.

In 2010, an English couple bought a house in Kardam for appr. EUR 7,500; by 2023, a similar property sold for appr. EUR 25,000. In 2012, in Granichar, foreign buyers purchased a house with at least twice the land and additional agricultural structures for nearly EUR 10,000. “Houses at that price are not available anymore; the asking price is [at least] 30–40,000 EUR, and in Durankulak [the neighbouring village] it's 60,000 EUR”, remarked Damian (PL). Despite rising prices – especially near the coast – such properties remain relatively accessible, though bringing them up to modern standards often requires at least tens of thousands of euros in further investment.

Some estate agencies offer additional services such as sourcing builders and coordinating renovation work. This form of mediation was considered by many as indispensable support. Some of the earliest British settlers in the region shared the following:

Edyt: [Our real estate agent] dealt with [the renovation], and then just wrote everything down.

Chip: We were in England while they were doing the house. We'd just send money over. She'd send photographs.

Edyt: I had everything itemised. And how much it cost.

Chip: And she stuck to it. She was absolutely spot on. She didn't charge a penny over.

Expats from Central Europe prefer to coordinate construction themselves, both to monitor expenditure and to ensure the quality of the work. The couple Jacek and Beka sold their property in Poland shortly after buying their Bulgarian home in the countryside. They lived in a temporary shack in the garden while a team of local builders constructed their new house over a three-month period. Damian (PL) took on the major renovation of his in-laws' house himself after having a negative experience with local contractors, bringing two workers from Poland to assist him. He subsequently undertook the principal renovation work on additional properties acquired by his family in the same village.

Settling in a rural area – particularly the prospect of owning a house with private outdoor space, free of mortgage obligations and with manageable maintenance costs – is frequently framed by migrants as part of a broader aspiration for lifestyle transformation. A quieter setting, removed from industrial pollution and the sensory intensity of large cities, is perceived as enabling greater engagement with outdoor activities, including gardening, and supporting a more balanced rhythm of everyday life. In this sense, the rural context serves as a counterpoint to previously work-centred and accelerated urban lifestyles, marking a symbolic and practical shift between life 'before' and 'after' retirement, offering conditions that migrants believe can mitigate the pressures accumulated during decades of intensive professional and urban experience.

Conclusion

The research on international retirement migration presented here shifts the focus away from the well-documented movement of relatively affluent retirees from industrialised countries to perceived 'retirement paradise' in the Global South. Instead, it explores the more complex, multidimensional process of new points of departure, novel destinations and emerging social groups of retirees. This process is closely linked to broader global transformations that have occurred over the past two decades. While climatic, environmental and cultural factors still play a role, retirement migration is increasingly shaped by structural inequalities, social insecurity and strategic economic decision-making. In this shifting landscape, the categories of choice and constraint have become increasingly blurred.

Studies within this emerging paradigm have thus far primarily approached insecurity and unpredictability through economic and social lenses, focussing on deteriorating pension systems, rising costs of living and healthcare uncertainties. However, drawing on empirical examples, this article demonstrates that socio-political upheavals and geopolitical transformations also constitute significant sources of insecurity that influence migratory decisions. The findings suggest the need to speak more broadly of structural insecurity in all its dimensions – economic, social, political, and geopolitical – which intersect and reinforce one another. We argue that this more complex explanatory model represents a key contribution of the study. It broadens the scope of the concept of precarity in later life, moving beyond strictly economic considerations and enabling a more nuanced and in-depth exploration of the factors, causes and motivations underpinning retirement migration.

At the same time, the article offers new insights into the ways in which global economic, social and political processes drive transnational migration from urban centres to smaller, more isolated rural communities. This expands our current understanding of counterurbanisation. While most studies approach counterurbanisation as internal migration from cities to the countryside, we focus on rural areas in northeastern Bulgaria as a destination for foreign retirees, demonstrating that international

migrants can be key actors in reshaping rural spaces. This process is not only a movement away from urban centres, but also a repositioning within broader spatial hierarchies.

The choice of particular villages can be explained by a combination of diverse factors, including their proximity to the Black Sea coast, the absence of large-scale tourism comparable to other coastal regions, relatively low property prices and the lack of large foreign enclaves. Together, these features create a sense of seclusion and tranquillity that many participants described as an antithesis of the stressful and costly urban environments they had left behind.

Although Bulgaria has been part of European integration since the late 1990s and an EU member for nearly two decades, its uneven development has made it a ‘space for alternative living,’ especially for people with external income such as pensioners. Low living costs, favourable climate, and relative stability make it attractive to retirees from diverse backgrounds. In depopulated villages, affordable housing allows foreign pensioners to live comfortably on incomes that would be insufficient in their home countries. The neoliberal welfare system restructuring and the market-driven fragmentation of social services (including healthcare and elder care) mean that some retirees can access superior private services in Bulgaria compared to those available in their home countries.

In this context, the study also highlights the importance of internal European stratifications. While post-socialist Central European countries have achieved relatively strong economic performance and institutional stability, they have also experienced significant socio-economic and political tensions in recent years. These dynamics help explain why some of their retirees seek alternatives abroad. The shared socialist and post-socialist past plays an important role in shaping these new migration flows. Bulgaria is both economically accessible and offers cultural and social parallels, as well as linguistic similarities with other Slavic countries. These factors are crucial to understanding why the country is chosen as a destination by pensioners from other former socialist states, emerging as an ‘internal European retirement periphery’ Ultimately, what this spatial configuration represents is a form of international counterurbanisation: retirees move from higher-cost urban centres in more affluent regions to rural peripheries in lower-cost parts of Europe. The search for rural idyll is thus inseparable from the economic logic of geographical arbitrage and the structural condition of precarity in later life, embedded in a broader, multidimensional landscape of insecurity.

The present study uncovers the motivations for migration and the structural conditions that shape it. At the same time, it points to avenues for future research: (1) the long-term adaptation of retirees in their new environment, including how they form social ties, navigate healthcare and administrative systems, and how their mobility evolves over time; (2) the impact of this migration on host communities, such as how local residents perceive foreign retirees and the resulting economic, social and cultural effects; (3) it considers the transformation of retirement mobility patterns in the context of ongoing global crises, examining how factors such as climate change, economic, social and political instability, and geopolitical conflicts influence and reshape the trajectories and characteristics of retirement migration.

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