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Research article

Bulgarian community in Chicago: A model of development

Dilyana Ivanova Zieske[1] and William F. Zieske[2,*]

[1] Anthropology Department, The Field Museum of Natural History, 1400 S. Lake Shore Dr., Chicago, IL 60605, USA
[2] Zieske Law and Fine Arts Legal, 701 N. Blanchard St., Wheaton, IL 60187, USA

* **Correspondence:** Email: divanova@fieldmuseum.org; Tel: +1-773-987-5806.

Abstract: This paper presents the first comprehensive model of development of the Bulgarian settlement in the Chicago area from its earliest traces to the present day, from historical and anthropological perspectives. In the process, we distinguish five periods of Bulgarian presence spanning more than a century and discuss the patterns of Bulgarian settlement, economic profiles and community life for each of those periods. The paper highlights the struggle for survival and recognition of early Bulgarian migrants during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the political rivalry of the Cold War Bulgarian refugees preventing their consolidation and the contemporary, post-1989, Bulgarian economic mass migration which becomes increasingly visible and emancipated, claiming Chicago as the *Bulgarian City*. In the process, we seek to explain why this long history of Bulgarian immigration has not resulted in the community's overt visibility, either in the literature and studies of Chicago's ethnic landscape or through the creation of an ethnic enclave with vernacular urban centralized space distinct from other ethnic migrant groups and their neighborhoods such as Little Italy, Ukrainian Village, Greek Town and Chinatown.

Keywords: Immigrant community; Bulgarian Americans; Bulgarian Chicago; ethnic enclave; Chicago boosterism; identity; cultural heritage; urban subgroups; community visibility; Little Bulgaria

1. Introduction

This joint paper is motivated by the authors' ongoing interest in understanding the evolution and societal impact of the population of Chicago's Bulgarian immigrant community. Our model of the

development of Bulgarian immigration and settlement in Chicago distinguishes five periods, as follows (Figure 1).

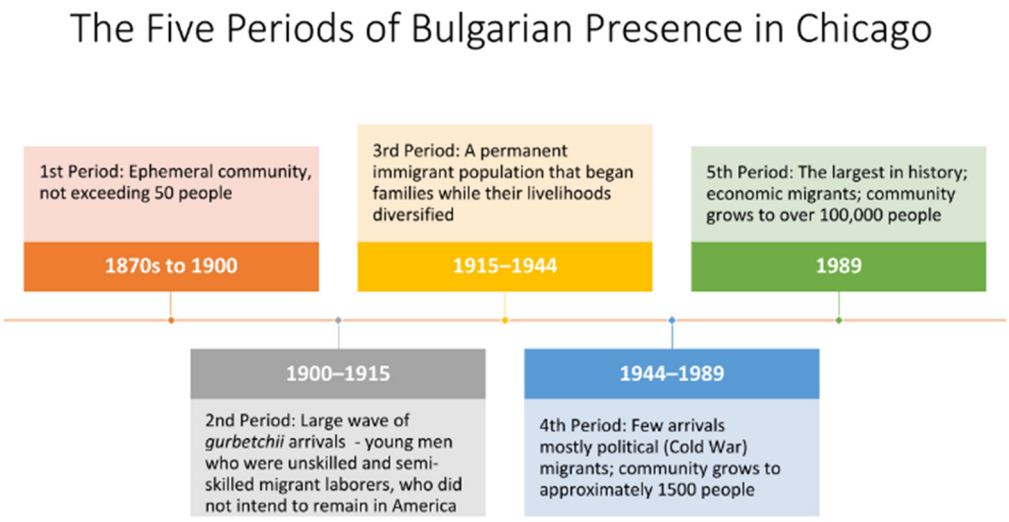


Figure 1. The five periods of Bulgarian presence in Chicago.

- The last three decades of the nineteenth century is the first period, in which the total city population of Bulgarian birth was ephemeral and did not exceed fifty.
- The second period, from 1900 to 1915, is defined by the first large wave of Bulgarian arrivals in Chicago, mostly comprised of young unskilled and semi-skilled laborers, *gurbetchii* who did not intend to remain in America.
- From 1915 through World War II, the third period, immigration numbers greatly decreased. However, Chicago's population of Bulgarians became a permanent immigrant population that began families, while their livelihoods diversified. During the first half of this period, until 1930, this community was concentrated largely within a small enclave on the near west side of Chicago, which after 1930 dispersed throughout the city and somewhat into a few suburbs. Meanwhile, cohesion was maintained by the formation of institutions and organizations within the community. At the same time its population grew, mainly from immigrants gravitating there from smaller communities throughout the Great Lakes region and the increasing American-born generation of ethnic Bulgarians.
- In the fourth or Cold War period, few Bulgarians arrived, mostly refugees. This period is marked by political divisions within the community, but also common motivations that resulted in purchasing a building for a Bulgarian Church and participating in civic events.
- The fifth period, since 1989, brings us to the second large wave of immigration from Bulgaria, motivated by finding financial security and establishing a new permanent home.

During this fifth period, Chicago has come to be referred to as the *Bulgarian City* of North America [1]. Recently, references to Chicago as *Little Bulgaria* have become common. The pride and boastfulness of the claims inherent in these self-applied titles evince the subcommunity's absorption of a defining sociological trait of Chicago as a whole. Boosterism – publicly vaunting its importance with self-applied

superlatives – has been a defining characteristic of the city since the mid-nineteenth century. These appellations assumed by the city's Bulgarian community are its own extension and expression of Chicago's brand of boosterism, which encompasses two internal aspects, pride and aspiration, in addition to the external practical goal of promotion.

2. Sources and methods

The two authors have merged their ethnographic and historical perspectives in this paper, using an historical-anthropological approach. For the first three periods of Bulgarian settlement in Chicago, the second-named author relies mainly upon primary sources, including data from immigration and census records, directories and newspaper accounts of people and events. Many of these types of sources supplement the ethnographic data collected by the first-named author in the form of first-hand accounts, upon which the discussion of the two most recent periods is principally based. Sociological studies and previous compilations of census, newspaper and community information also inform this paper throughout.

We approach the entire span of Bulgarian settlement in Chicago "by adopting a holistic and in-depth approach to data gathering" ([2], p. 171). Our work employs critical historiographical analysis (particularly newspaper sources and institutional records) and cultural mapping in a broad sense, both by assimilating large data sets of historical information (particularly from census and immigration records and city directories) to trace arrival and settlement patterns spatially and temporally; and through relating and digesting broad ethnographic data from observers of events within Chicago's community across the last two periods of Bulgarian settlement.[1]

For these last two periods, the authors employ multi-site ethnography methods, primarily the first-named author's seventeen lengthy semi-structured biographical interviews (recorded and transcribed between 2015 and 2017) and hundreds of unstructured conversations over the course of seventeen years. These are augmented by participant observation, self-reflection, photo-interviewing and study of material culture, events and social media. This ethnographic data is considered and structured within a broader historical context ([3], p. 6) and informed by primary and secondary historical sources.

3. The Bulgarian presence in Chicago

3.1. Early Bulgarians in Chicago (late 19th century—1944)—striving for survival and recognition

The first three periods of the Bulgarian settlement in Chicago correspond to the developmental stages distinguished by migration theory: the pioneer stage, marked by the arrival of a small number of innovators; the takeoff, or early adopter stage; and the mature, or late adopter stage [4], after which the migration stream was interrupted by World War II and the restrictive policies of Bulgaria's post-war socialist regime.

The earliest evidence of Bulgarians in Chicago appears in 1876, when an author of a letter to the editor of one of the city's daily newspapers identified himself as a Bulgarian [5], working as a waiter in a boarding house on State Street ([6] 1877, pp. 432, 1127). Among the city's half-million residents,

[1] All providers of personal ethnographic data and participants in interviews have provided consent for use by Dilyana Ivanova Zieske in scholarly writings, without name attribution, with the exception of those persons posting social media materials (particularly on Bulgarian community group pages and groups), which have been accessed and considered by the authors. The authors keep all social media contributors' identities strictly confidential.

the Bulgarian population was about fifty, employed primarily in restaurants and saloons [7]. Only the sparsest documentation of Chicago's Bulgarian settlement exists during the first period, up to the early twentieth century.

In 1902, at the beginning of the second period of Chicago Bulgarian settlement, the total number of Bulgarians in the United States numbered about five hundred, with fifty or sixty in Chicago ([8], p. 13). This was larger than New York City's community, which may be attributable to Aleko Konstantinov's travelogue *To Chicago and Back*, written of his visit to Chicago's 1893 World's Columbian Exposition and read widely throughout Bulgaria ([9], pp. 560, 564–565); [10]. This World's Fair had brought Chicago its first meaningful exposure to Bulgarian culture. Bulgaria won its own representation at the fair over opposition by Turkey and Russia and displayed its traditional costumes and principal products, including rose oil, wines, textiles and carpets in a modest pavilion in the Manufactures Building ([9], p. 562); [11,12].

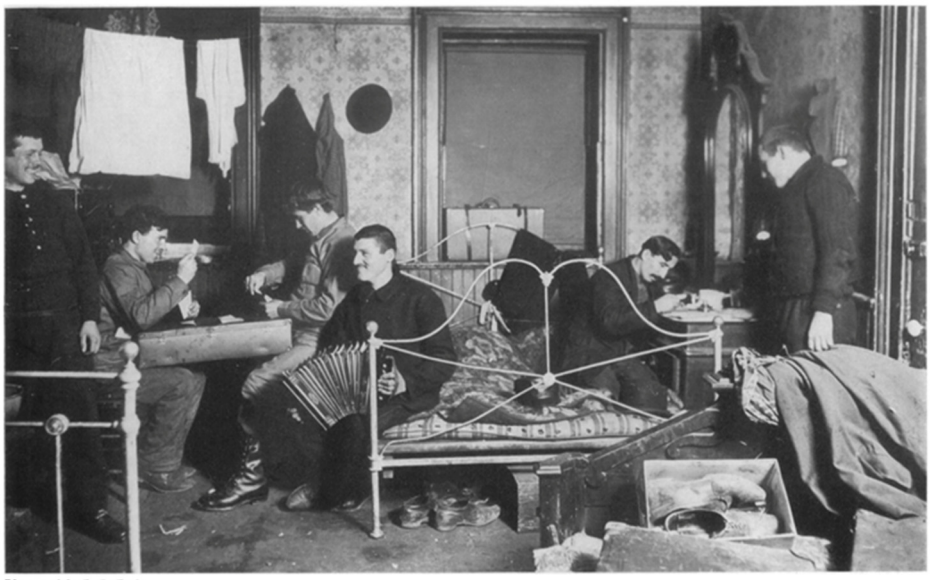
The first major wave of Bulgarian immigration was from 1903 to 1913 with its peak in 1907, just as the United States entered an economic depression. During this second period of the city's Bulgarian settlement, Chicago became a common destination for these arrivals, most of whom are properly categorized as *gurbetchii* – young men who came to America on borrowed funds, seeking money and adventure, intending to send home money and return before long to Bulgaria. The vast majority of Bulgarians arriving in the first great wave of immigration made their homes in the states bordering on the Great Lakes, from New York to Minnesota, many laboring in automobile plants in Michigan at the end of this period and in mines in the upper Midwest ([13], p. 7); [14]. Those who made Chicago their home or the base to which they returned were principally employed in seasonal work across the continent in railroad construction and in steel mills [14].

Bulgarians in Chicago at the beginning of the twentieth century faced a strong nationwide opposition to the sudden wave of "undesirable" immigrants from eastern and southern Europe, as well as the general populace's ignorance of Bulgarian identity [15,16]. During this period, the lives of these workers in Chicago were defined by a struggle for survival and for recognition among the greatly diverse constellation of Chicago's immigrant communities. These goals were best served by living in close enclaves. Bulgarians formed two such settlements in Chicago: one on the near west side centered at Adams and Green streets and another appearing on the far south side, next to the South Chicago steel mills, which were a principal source of employment for immigrant Bulgarians [14] (Figures 2 and 3).

Photograph by R. R. Earle

TYPES OF HOUSES NEAR THE STEEL MILLS IN SOUTH CHICAGO
In such as these Bulgarian, Servian, and Croatian lodging groups were found

Figure 2. The area of Bulgarian settlement near the steel mills of South Chicago, ca. 1910. ([17], p. 146a).



Photograph by R. R. Earle

BULGARIAN LODGING GROUP ON THE WEST SIDE
Nine men in two rooms

Figure 3. Housing quarters of Bulgarians in Chicago's west side settlement near Adams and Green streets, ca. 1910. ([17], p. 164a).

A more imminent threat to the community came from the economic depression of 1907–1908, which impacted Chicago's Bulgarian workers severely. In the spring, out-of-work, destitute Bulgarians marched from their west side immigrant colony to Chicago's city hall. The photographs and stories that followed in many newspapers marked the first major press coverage for Bulgarian-Americans (Figure 4). This also served as an impetus for two sociological studies of Chicago's Bulgarian population, published in 1909 and 1910 [17,18]. The sudden attention in the media and scholarly

journals succeeded substantially in altering the prevailing attitudes in Chicago toward its Bulgarian population from distrust and misapprehension to sympathy and respect [14].

Figure 4. Chicago City Hall, April 8, 1908. Ivan Doseff, a young Bulgarian student, football player and recent graduate of the University of Chicago, orchestrated the march that brought his countrymen's suffering to light in the national press [19].

Bulgarian immigration slowed to a trickle in the teens, with some Bulgarians returning to their homeland when Bulgaria became involved in conflict for nearly a decade during the Balkan Wars and World War I. Those who remained in Chicago entered increasingly diverse occupations ([13], p. 8) and began to bring their families to America or start families here with wives of other ethnic groups, signaling the transition to permanent immigrant status. This trend marks the beginning of the third period of Chicago's settlement [14]. In 1919, Chicago celebrated its internationalism with the All-American Exposition, at which the city's Bulgarian community exhibited its handicrafts, costumes and art, further increasing its visibility in the city ([20], p. 9).

The next two decades were marked by a slow decline in official totals of foreign-born Bulgarian residents in America. Between the world wars, there was also a gradual trend toward Chicago as a primary destination of Bulgarian immigrants. The reading room and community center anchoring the small colony on the west side became known as the "Second Ellis Island" ([21], p. 372) as Bulgarian-American immigration concentrated around it. Despite the density of the community in this tightly formed urban enclave, it did not grow to such proportions or survive cohesively long enough to become known by its own neighborhood moniker. Surrounding it were the Czech/Slovak/Bohemian neighborhood, which came to be known as Pilsen, the Polish Patch or Polish Downtown, Ukrainian Village, Little Italy and Greek Town, all established and fueled by the turn-of-the-century influx of southern and eastern European groups. There is no evidence that in the first half of the twentieth century, Bulgarians laid claim to or inherited a neighborhood named and identified as their own, that could later be consumerized for tourists' immersion in an ethnic experience. Instead, their tight-knit community during this period has been virtually lost to history and can only be reconstructed through

painstaking analysis of a multitude of immigration and census records, city directories and fire insurance maps.

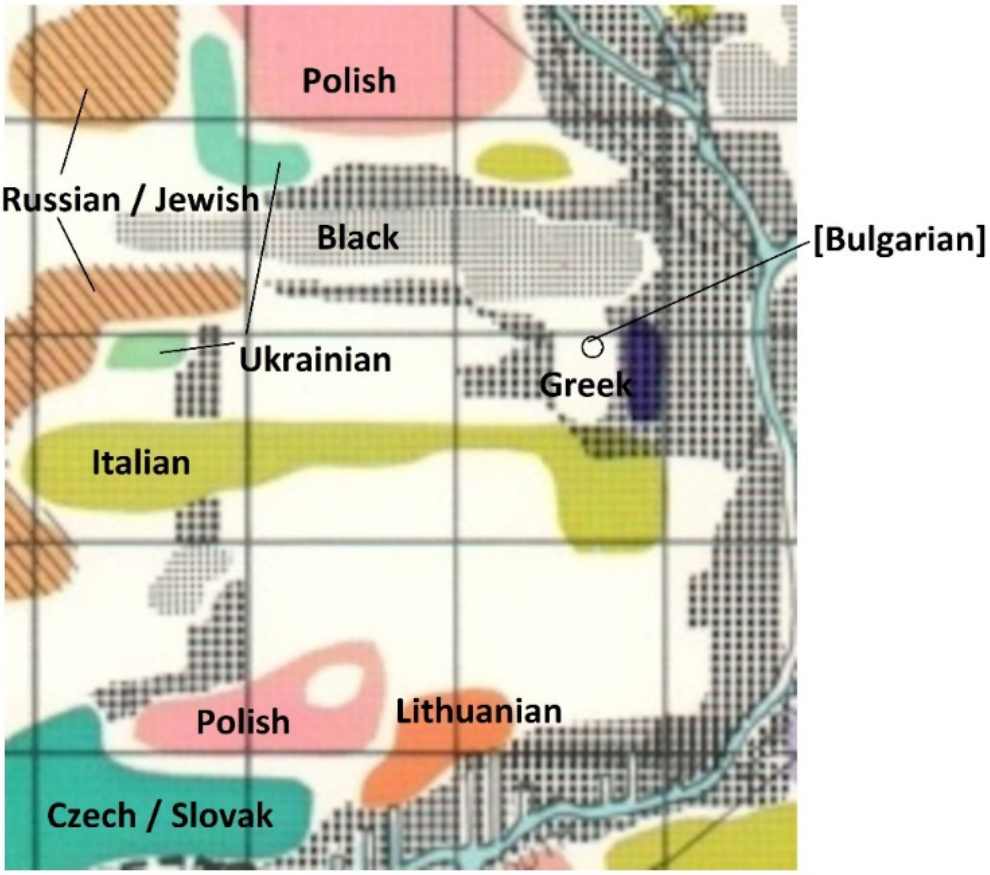


Figure 5. Bulgarians were omitted from the color-coded map of 1920 immigrant community settlements, created in 1976 by the City of Chicago. The small early-century Bulgarian enclave has been added in this detail of the map, showing the near west side of Chicago ([22], p. 80; map annotated by the authors).

In 1976, Mayor Richard J. Daley directed maps to be prepared as snapshots of the city's geography of ethnic enclaves at six points between 1840 and 1950, perhaps partly from these same primary sources. Although not very precise, the 1920 community map shows the approximate areas of eastern and southern European immigrant enclaves of the near west side but omits the relatively small Bulgarian community amidst them [22] (Figure 5).

During the interwar period, Bulgarians were not concentrated in America's largest cities. In 1930, they were scattered across the smaller industrial cities of the northeast quarter of the United States, particularly throughout the Great Lakes region. The nationwide Bulgarian immigrant population of 12,128 in 1930 was scattered among about 700 "large and small Bulgarian colonies in America." Of the 1,374 Bulgarian immigrants counted in Illinois (as determined by first language), just 577 were in Chicago. Still, Chicago's Bulgarian population greatly exceeded New York's and only Detroit and Toledo contained larger communities ([13], p. 7); [21].

Beginning in the 1930s, perhaps due to the Great Depression, migration and settlement trends changed. As Bulgarian immigration reduced to a slow trickle, the population of Bulgarian-born in

America gravitated to the largest cities and particularly to Chicago, the largest and most heavily industrialized urban area within the Great Lakes industrial belt [23].

But just as Bulgarians consolidated into Chicago in the 1930s, the population of three to five thousand persons ethnically and linguistically identified as Bulgarians in Chicago dispersed, not only throughout the north side of the city, but into Chicago's suburbs as well ([24], p. 50). The west-side concentration of Bulgarians and their businesses around Green and Adams streets evaporated, never again to coalesce as it had in the beginning of the century.

In the early 1930s, Chicago's Bulgarians began to form their own organizations. No specifically Bulgarian-run church congregation had even formed in Chicago until this time. Instead, during the early years of the twentieth century many Bulgarians were welcomed into a protestant evangelical organization with their own countrymen running its Bulgarian reading room and leading services in a nearby church on the west side, and many burials were presided over by a Russian Orthodox priest [14]. In contrast, the much smaller downstate Illinois towns of Granite City and Madison had already built Bulgarian Orthodox houses of worship decades earlier ([21], pp. 353–356). The Bulgarian-American Club of Chicago was formed in 1931 ([21], p. 425). A few years later, St. Sophia Church became the first Bulgarian Orthodox congregation in Chicago [25,26]; ([27], p. 24) though it would not consecrate its own church building until the 1970s [26]; ([27], p. 24); ([28], p. 132).

This fluorescence of community organizations coincides with the Great Depression, the gravitation of Bulgarians to Chicago from less urban locations and the dispersion of the west-side Bulgarian enclave, all of which are likely forces motivating increased structural cohesion to compensate for the loss of geographic cohesion. The protestant Chicago Tract Society's Bulgarian Reading Room that had anchored the settlement socially and spiritually since 1907 closed around 1930 ([29], p. 57). Without a tight-knit community set in a compact neighborhood, clubs and organizations were necessary to keep the community together. These organizations also worked to represent their nation of origin at the Century of Progress, Chicago's second World's Fair, in 1933. Bulgaria did not send an official delegation and exhibit to this fair, so it fell to Chicago's community to represent their homeland ([30], p. 94).

At the start of World War II, Bulgarian immigration came to nearly a complete halt, bringing to a close the three-stage migration pattern and the third chapter of the Bulgarian settlement in Chicago [23].

3.2. Cold War refugees - political rivalry versus community consolidation

Following the war, the closure of Bulgaria's borders kept emigration to a minimum. The few Chicago arrivals from Bulgaria during the fourth and longest period, lasting from 1944 to 1989, consisted mostly of political migrants. Predominantly men, they came to America fleeing the repressive communist regime in Bulgaria following World War II. They were encouraged by the American government's U.S. escapee program (USEP), created to inspire people to flee from communist nations. For the U.S. government, these escapees were viewed as "a gold mine of vital information" on real life behind the Iron Curtain ([31], p. 921); also see ([32], pp. 231–232). Although our Cold War migrant respondents generally cite political reasons for emigrating, their vocal self-identification as political refugees was influenced by the American government's conditions for accepting migrants from communist nations, as well as a wish to avoid suspicion or rejection in America after they arrived. Economic considerations and access to the opportunities presented by life in the United States certainly played a role in Bulgarians' emigration to America during this period as well ([33], pp. 45–46).

A significant group of these Cold War immigrants came to Chicago and located in small colonies throughout the city's north side, where the post-Cold war immigrants would also settle later. Among the neighborhoods of settlement were Lincoln Square and Irving Park, where earlier immigrants from Bulgaria, the Balkans and Greece could already be found (Figure 6). According to older political immigrants in Chicago, the Bulgarian community then counted between 1000 and 1500 people [34].

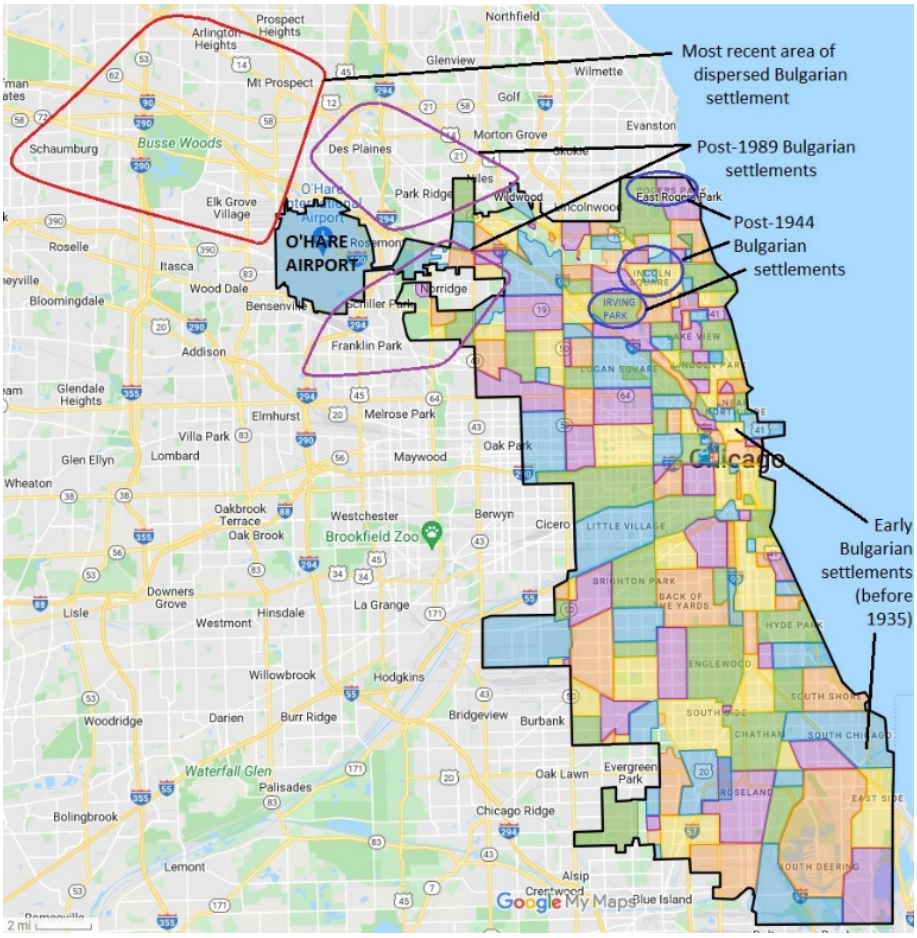


Figure 6. Pre-1935, Cold War, post-1989, and the most recent areas of Bulgarian settlement in Chicago's neighborhoods and suburbs. Composite map overlay by the authors.

This decline from over 3000 in the Chicago area during the 1930s to less than half that number of Bulgarians discernible by Cold War immigrants was due greatly to cultural assimilation, interethnic marriages and generational loss of ethnic identity among the families of early twentieth-century Bulgarian immigrants. While some families stayed in Chicago and maintained their Bulgarian identity, such as that of Dosu Doseff (born 1882, Gabrovo; emigrated to U.S. 1900; Chicago physician and president of local Bulgarian League chapter; died 1965) and his two sons (one of whom moved to California, while the other stayed in Chicago) [35], others lost their ethnic identity or moved away. Ivan Tonov (born 1885; emigrated to U.S. 1908; railway worker; died 1989), for example, served as president of St. Sophia Bulgarian Orthodox Church and visited Bulgaria in 1960, but his four daughters married non-Bulgarians and Tonov and his wife retired to California [36]. Due to these factors and reduced immigration, the Bulgarian-born population of Chicago proper, as well its total "Bulgarian

foreign stock,"[2] remained almost entirely constant in U.S. census data from 1930 through 1970. ([37], pp. 35, 38, 46). Greater assimilation and generational attrition rates can be reasonably posited among suburban families of the early Bulgarian immigrants, further reducing the number of those with whom the Chicago Bulgarian community identified over these decades.

Cold War Bulgarians in Chicago belonged to two main rival political divisions: the Bulgarian National Front or monarchists who sought the reestablishment of the parliamentary monarchy; and the Bulgarian National Committee (mostly comprised of agrarians, seeking the establishment of a parliamentary republic working for the interests of the Bulgarian rural population). Both movements were established in 1948 by escapees from communist Bulgaria and the Bulgarian National Committee was succeeded by the Bulgarian Liberation Movement after 1974 ([38], pp. 80–82). Despite being political opponents, they both aimed to "liberate" the Motherland from communist "slavery" and "to support/raise the spirit of the Bulgarians in America" ([28], p. 126).

Both groups published materials to influence public opinion and organized local events. Each organized their own New Year's parties, celebrations of Bulgarian national and public holidays, dance gatherings and picnics and theater and dance performances ([28], p. 126).

Figure 7. Bulgarian National Committee New Year's celebration, Chicago 1981. Courtesy of Iliya Konsulov.

[2] "Foreign stock" was the United States Census Bureau's designation for the total of foreign born, native-born children of parents born in the same foreign country, native-born children of parents born in different foreign countries (according to the father's country of birth), and the native-born children of one native-born and one foreign-born parent (according to the foreign-born parent's country of birth), but not including "non-white" individuals.

Figure 8. Bulgarian dance group performs at the Bulgarian National Committee gathering in 1980 celebrating May 24, the Day of the Slavonic Alphabet "Saints Cyril and Methodius." Courtesy of Iliya Konsulov.

To increase their visibility in American society, the agrarian and monarchist groups each organized their own public activities and participated separately in civic events. Members of the monarchists met with Mayor Richard J. Daley in 1960 to make Bulgarian Liberation Day on March 3 an official Bulgarian day in Chicago, and ceremoniously raised the Bulgarian flag on Daley Plaza downtown to mark the occasion. In 1967, they assembled an exhibit of Bulgarian history for display at the Chicago Public Library [39]. In the 1970s, the agrarians participated in a demonstration organized for Eastern European migrant groups, called by one of our respondents the "Protest of the Nations Enslaved by the Communist Dictatorship." (G.M., male, born 1933) In the 1960s, both groups exhibited their own display booths at exhibitions of the city's nationalities at Navy Pier in Chicago [40,41].

Figure 9. The booth of the Bulgarian National Front, Navy Pier Chicago Nationalities Exhibit, November 1962. Former President Harry Truman and Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley (third and second from right) appear with two Bulgarian women, one of whom is Dr. Stanka Paprikova (left). Courtesy of Boyanka Ivanova.

Figure 10. The booth of the Bulgarian National Committee, Navy Pier Chicago Nationalities Exhibit, November 1969. Courtesy of Boyanka Ivanova.

Despite their rivalry in the Cold War years, the monarchists and agrarians were both active in the Saint Sofia Bulgarian Orthodox Church. The two groups collaborated to raise funds and purchase a house in 1974 at 3827 North Lawndale Avenue in Chicago's Irving Park neighborhood, to serve as the congregation's first church of its own [26]. However, because of the rivalry between the political

groups in the Bulgarian Cold-War community, the collection of money for the physical building of this church in Chicago took a very long period of time:

> *When we came to Chicago in 1955, there were only about 10 of the old Bulgarian families. There was no church, only a Bulgarian ecclesiastical municipality. And in 1957, maybe 50-60 people already came to Chicago [...] And then we held a meeting in the fall of 1957. People from the monarchists also attended this meeting […] And we started talking about how to make a church and unite the Bulgarians here. And a proposal was made to open a fund and start collecting money for the construction of a church. Then Doctor Paprikov [the Chicago leader of the "monarchists"] gave $500, I gave $100, others gave some $20, some $10, because when we came, the minimum wage was 95 cents per hour […] We weren't making much money. I don't remember how much we collected at that meeting, but we continued collecting money after that to build a Bulgarian church. However, it took many years until we collected enough money. There was a big disagreement between the monarchists and the agrarians, which got in the way […]. Eventually in 1974 we purchased a house for a church.* (G.M., male, born 1933)

Bulgarian immigrants during the Cold War maintained a strong identification as Bulgarians, through their cultural, religious and political associations. Their political views were entirely oriented in reference to Bulgaria and did not extend to an interest in local or national American politics ([33], pp. 50–51). Through their institutions and political groups, their active participation in civic events as well as organization of their own protests and cultural celebrations, they achieved a measure of separate visibility in Chicago as a Bulgarian community. This general resistance toward integration in American culture and their establishment of distinct cultural associations and visibility, under other circumstances, might have favored their coalescence into a vernacular and consolidated Bulgarian enclave. However, this was counteracted by their small numbers, as well as their internal divisions. The pervasive tension between agrarians and monarchists and the general distrust between individuals (since everyone could be a spy sent by the communists) stood in the way of the Bulgarian political immigrants' consolidation into a neighborhood of their own. Instead, their energy was focused on working toward the liberation of Bulgaria from communist "slavery."

3.3. Post-Cold War immigrant wave

After the communist regime in Bulgaria was toppled in 1989, the greatest wave of migration from Bulgaria to America began, continuing up until the present day. This defines the continuing fifth period of the Bulgarian settlement in Chicago.

Despite Western nations' limitations on immigration, the elimination in 1989 of travel restrictions imposed by Eastern Europe's former totalitarian regimes unleashed a wave of migration to the West and America ([42], pp. 251–252). A principal factor in the intensity of this flow was the start of the US Diversity Immigrant Visa Program in 1990, which allowed not only individuals but also entire families from selected countries to live and work in the USA ([43], pp. 39–41, 51, 275). This post-1989 migration is essentially an economic migration, heightened by the economic crises that have gripped Bulgaria for the past three decades ([2], p. 172).

Since 1989, the Chicago metro region has increasingly attracted Bulgarian migrants through diverse employment opportunities and the existence of Bulgarian social networks formed during the previous migration periods, which permit migrant individuals and families to fit smoothly into their new immigrant life in American society. The Bulgarian social (and social media) networks appear to provide information that the immigrants trust more fully than the information provided by general

media channels. Through their networks, the newcomers receive everyday support and gain social capital and tools to avoid social isolation ([42], p. 255).

4. Contours of Chicago's contemporary Bulgarian community

4.1. The spaces of Chicago's Bulgarians

In the particular case of Chicago and its suburbs, the contemporary Bulgarian immigrants can be registered in clusters within specific buildings, neighborhoods, or suburbs. However, they do not establish the typical ethnic enclave with their own streets of houses, stores, restaurants, other businesses, cultural centers, churches, etc. which could be called the *Little Bulgaria* or the specifically Bulgarian neighborhood.

Within the city of Chicago, small scattered Bulgarian groups live in areas across the city's north and northwest neighborhoods. A compact Bulgarian population occupies neighborhoods and suburbs close to O'Hare International Airport. According to a respondent this has happened "because 90 percent of the new arrivals […] worked at the airport" and the airport still employs many Bulgarians (D.K., male, born 1947). The airport is even called "the most Bulgarian place in Chicago" because Bulgarian speech readily can be heard there ([1], pp. 46–49). This claim finds support in the oral testimony of our respondents from Chicago, one of whom observed:

> *When I got off the plane for the first time in America, the first person who spoke to me at the airport in Chicago was Bulgarian...and he asked: "Do you have Bulgarian newspapers?"* (I.S. female, born 1966)

The airport's location at the northwest extremity of the city pulls the dispersed Bulgarian population to surrounding communities. O'Hare and the confluence of highways around the airport are a center for the intermodal freight and trucking industries, in which a large number of post-Cold War Bulgarian immigrants find work, often leading to ownership of their own trucking and freight logistics companies. Chicago and its near suburbs around O'Hare are also preferred destinations for the new immigrants because their populations are more open to cultural differences.

Large but more dispersed groups live in specific northwestern suburbs such as Des Plaines, Mount Prospect, Arlington Heights, Elk Grove Village and Schaumburg. The largest of the Bulgarian population centers in Chicago and its suburbs can be discerned not only by ethnographic data, but by the geography of businesses owned by Bulgarians and businesses that employ principally Bulgarians. Des Plaines in particular boasts multiple Bulgarian businesses, services, grocery stores, bars and restaurants. Across the urban and suburban Bulgarian areas are twelve weekend schools, at least four churches ([44], pp. 285–287) and three highly active cultural centers, all catering to the Bulgarian community.

Figure 11. The Bulgarian Orthodox Church St. Sofia, Des Plaines. Courtesy of Boyanka Ivanova.

Figure 12. The Bulgarian Orthodox Church St. John of Rila, Chicago. Interior, 2022.

In the Chicago neighborhoods and in Des Plaines, the new Bulgarian immigrants tend to live in the same buildings known by the Bulgarian community as "the Bulgarian buildings" ([44], p. 286). The buildings in north Chicago's Budlong Woods neighborhood are within easy walking distance of public transportation, a Greek Orthodox church and Balkan ethnic stores with Bulgarian products. St. John of Rila Bulgarian Orthodox Church is geographically central, equidistant from these buildings to the east and other clusters of Bulgarian buildings near O'Hare in Chicago and the suburbs of Schiller Park and Norridge, to the north and west. As the Bulgarian population has shifted increasingly to the suburbs, this church has declined [45], as has the former cluster of Bulgarian shops and services in Norridge directly to the west, where only a Bulgarian pharmacy and Bulgarian travel agency can still be found.

The buildings in suburban Des Plaines are in the proximity of Saint Sofia Bulgarian Orthodox Church, the Bulgarian Evangelical Church, Bulgarian stores, restaurants, businesses and O'Hare International Airport, at and around which many new Bulgarian immigrants find employment. There is also a complex of buildings in Des Plaines with apartments owned by established Bulgarian immigrants and other Eastern Europeans who rent them out to more recent Bulgarian arrivals.

In these complexes and buildings, new Bulgarian immigrants often are surrounded by other Slavic speaking neighbors from former Yugoslavia with whom they have easy communication because of the

languages' similarities, and find mutual assistance among them, as well as their Bulgarian neighbors. Recent Bulgarian arrivals often live temporarily in these buildings until they achieve a better command of English and feel more acculturated and financially independent. Once they become ready, they often move to suburbs, mostly farther to the northwest where a growing population of dispersed Bulgarian groups are found.

Despite often living next door to their relatives or fellow citizens in "Bulgarian buildings" during their early years of immigration, they do not tend to create an "ethnic urban village" or ethnic enclave ([46], p. 17) such as those the older inner-city communities such as Italians (Little Italy), Polish (Polish Downtown), Chinese (Chinatown), Ukraine (Ukrainian Village) or other ethnic communities succeeded in establishing ([47], pp. 100–101).

According to our respondents in the last decade of the 20th century, most of the Bulgarian immigrants were still living mainly in the city Chicago. Then, in the decade leading up to the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, the banking industry in the United States eased credit restrictions, allowing more consumers to buy homes. Many Bulgarian immigrants used this opportunity to achieve the "American Dream" by purchasing homes in the suburbs of Chicago.

> *To buy houses - for them this is the American Dream. And these houses are scattered far and wide, and the great distances mean that there cannot be frequent meetings between the friends and the people of the community. [...] In my opinion, it had driven people apart. And the fact that they say there were 100, 120, 200 thousand Bulgarians is of no importance to me. It will matter to me when I see here in Chicago or in one of the suburbs a street, like Milwaukee Ave [in Chicago][3], for example, full of Bulgarian shops, with Bulgarian travel agencies, with Bulgarian law offices. And why not with a Bulgarian company. And then I will say: "Dilyana, there are many Bulgarians, and we are strong!" For now - we are weak, we are few and there is still more to learn. And that's normal.* (H.T., male, born 1965)

The Bulgarians in Chicago also often characterize their community as young in comparison with the older and more established immigrant communities that also typically disperse toward Chicago's suburbs but at the same time retain their well-defined inner-city enclaves. For example, the Polish neighborhood extends along Milwaukee Avenue, the Mexican neighborhoods of Pilsen and Little Village extend west from the Chicago's Near South Side. ([47], p. 101). This same tendency is not shared by the Bulgarian community. Within the city, we currently observe patches of new arrivals who live there only temporarily until they become more acculturated and financially independent, then move to suburbs where Bulgarian clusters already exist. Significantly, some of the most recent arrivals from Bulgaria have even started their immigrant lives in those suburbs.

Bulgarian immigrants' self-perception of being a young community requires some clarification. It does not mean that Bulgarian immigrants are new to Chicago. It is an observation that only the most recent immigrants are recognizably Bulgarian in culture, language and community. This is a result of several factors. First, the initial wave of migrants in the early twentieth century did not reach the critical mass to form an inner-city dense and permanent enclave; and by the 1930s had already begun to disperse across the city and into the suburbs. Second, the Cold War decades of minimal migration from Bulgaria resulted in significant integration of this already dispersed community, and the widespread loss of earlier migrants' cultural and linguistic identification with their Bulgarian roots. This is evident from the identifiable Bulgarian community's strength of three to five thousand in the 1930s dwindling

[3] The respondent refers to the area with predominantly Polish population. The area around where Division, Milwaukee, and Ashland Avenues intersect in Chicago on the city's near Northwest side was long identified as Polish in ethnicity [48]. Milwaukee Avenue is also called the "Polish Broadway" ([37], p. 101).

to "about 10 old [ ] families" (G.M., male, born 1933) in Chicago identifiable by our respondents as Bulgarian in the mid-1950s. Third, despite the Cold War migrants' strong and enduring identification as Bulgarians, their internal factions and small numbers prevented their coalescence. Finally, when the resurgence of Bulgarian immigration occurred after 1989, the opportunity for forming a recognizable ethnic enclave had already passed.

It has been observed that Chicago's existing ethnic enclaves trace back to migration waves in the post-war period or earlier, and "the formation of dense networks of ethnic- or immigrant specific businesses within extensive residential areas dominated by the same population groups is not typical for contemporary Chicago" ([47], p. 104). Despite the recent Bulgarian migration in numbers sufficient to establish and sustain such a dense enclave in Chicago, the dynamics and conditions since 1989 have not favored such a coalescence. Particularly after 2000, with the opening of more job opportunities in the suburbs ([47], p. 101) and the affordable rental housing and "easy" home loans given by the banks, prevailing economic conditions intensified the dispersal of the Bulgarian community to the northwest inner-ring suburbs. This process prevented the community's urban consolidation and created a more dispersed pattern of settlement in suburban clusters ([47], p. 104).

This lack of a distinct ethnic enclave – or even a neighborhood in which Bulgarians figure as the dominant population – is echoed by the extremely limited profile of Chicago's Bulgarian community in the literature about Chicago's diversity and ethnic landscape. While social and cultural studies of ethnic Chicago describe other contemporary Eastern European groups, these do not include the Windy City's Bulgarian community. The 1976 City of Chicago publication and maps of ethnic concentrations throughout the city's history included Czeck/Slovak, Ukrainian, Lithuanian, Yugoslav and Hungarian groups and even mentions the Burmese population of approximately 200 families, but omitted Bulgarians [20]. The fourth edition of *Ethnic Chicago: A Multicultural Portrait* (1995) [49] and *The New Chicago: A Social and Cultural Analysis* (2006) [50] do not contain a single reference to the Bulgarian community, which is similarly excluded from ethnic guidebooks to the city. Although the comprehensive *Encyclopedia of Chicago* includes a brief entry for "Bulgarians," the community [51] is not represented in the Chicago History Museum's exhibits highlighting the city's ethnic diversity.

4.2. Bulgarian organizations in Chicago since 1989

In spite of their dispersed pattern of settlement, the significant increase in the number of Bulgarians in Chicago has resulted in the community becoming more organized and increasingly visible in the host society. In 1994, a *Chicago Tribune* reporter interviewed Simeon Todorov, a Bulgarian immigrant working as a skycap at O'Hare airport, during a Bulgarian picnic in suburban Schiller Park. Todorov was quoted as saying, "nobody knows anything about Bulgaria. People here know more about Albania" [52]. Since the 1990s, the community's visibility has increased through the founding of multiple Bulgarian community organizations. Some of these played an active role in the community's life and have ceased to exist while others, particularly more recent organizations such as the cultural centers and schools, continue to play a growing role in Bulgarian community life in Chicago and the suburbs.

The Bulgarian community of Chicago and its near suburbs support at least four churches having their own permanent places of worship: the Bulgarian orthodox churches of St. John of Rila, in the northwest Chicago neighborhood of Portage Park, and St. Sofia, which began in Chicago and has since moved to the suburb of Des Plaines; a Bulgarian Evangelical Church New Life also located in Des Plaines; and a Bulgarian Church of God in the neighboring suburb of Park Ridge.

After 1989, the Bulgarian government started actively to communicate with the Bulgarians in Western Europe and the United States and even began financing Bulgarian education abroad, including in the United States. Under the *Native Language and Culture Abroad National Program* of the Ministry of Education in Bulgaria,[4] established in 2009 and introduced in 2011, licensed schools abroad can receive funding from the Bulgarian government ([53], p. 108; [54], p. 88; [55], p. 400). This state subsidy program has fueled a significant increase in the number of schools in Chicago and the suburbs. Between 2015 and 2022 the community maintained a stable number of 12 private Bulgarian schools offering weekend language and cultural classes, including those affiliated with the community's churches. Some of these schools enroll more than 100 students, and the Little Bulgarian School along with its branches has currently more than 600 students.[5] M. Borisova and B. Koulov explained this large number of schools (and the sizable number of children enrolled in some of them) with the fact that the post 1989 Bulgarian migration in Chicago and the metro area largely "consists of young migrants, mostly families, and naturally includes many school age children" ([55], p. 401).

Figure 13. Little Bulgarian School, Des Plaines. Courtesy of Konstantin Marinov.

During the past 10 years, new institutions have appeared on the Bulgarian community life scene. These recent organizations are Magura Cultural Center, Bulgarica and the Little Bulgaria Center, all located in near suburbs. Some of the activities of these organizations are similar, such as organizing dance lessons, art classes, art exhibits, book premiers, films screenings and observation of Bulgarian official holidays. Each center has become known for its own signature features and activities. For example, Magura maintains a free Bulgarian library and organizes book fairs and art classes. Bulgarica

[4] *https://web.mon.bg/bg/100292*, retrieved on June 28, 2023.

[5] According to M. Borisova and B. Koulov, "the first Bulgarian school abroad licensed by the Bulgarian Ministry of Education and Science [was the] Little Bulgarian School, which, together with its branches, is in school year 2016/2017 the largest Bulgarian school in the US with over 400 students" ([55], p. 401). On its Facebook page, the Little Bulgarian School announced that in October of 2017 (school year 2017/2018), the children enrolled in the school number more than 600: *https://www.facebook.com/mbuchicago/?ref=embed_page.*

acts as a Bulgarian dance school and art gallery. The Little Bulgaria Center offers a Bulgarian school on the weekends as well as a dance school.[6]

Figure 14. Book Fair at the Bulgarian Cultural Center Magura Arlington Heights. Courtesy of Magura Cultural Center.

Figure 15. Bulgarica Cultural Center, Mount Prospect. Celebration of the March 3 Bulgarian National Holiday in 2022. Courtesy of Bulgarica.

4.3. From "Chicago – the Bulgarian City" to "Little Bulgaria" – community boosterism, self-study, self-reflection and the community ideal of cohesion

It could be stated that the economic capital of Chicago's Bulgarian population has increased with the emergence of a growing middle class and the appearance of a group of successful businesspeople,

[6] Growing out of the Little Bulgarian School in Elk Grove Village, the organization purchased the building of a Lutheran Church in Des Plaines in 2019 to enlarge the school into a cultural center there [56].

especially engaged in the transportation of goods. The attainment of economic capital leads to the need for expression and visibility in the receiving community. Within the framework of Bourdieu's (1986) theory of the different types of capital, including financial, cultural, social and symbolic, we conclude that economic prosperity has determined the efforts of the Bulgarian community to gain other forms of capital: specifically, cultural, social and symbolic [57]. The drive to acquire these additional forms of capital is palpable in the dynamics of Bulgarian community life, various events and self-presentation of the group through the media and publications.

In 2014, community activists and organizations with the patronage of the Consul General in Chicago published the first encyclopedia of essays about the contemporary community's individuals, organizations and events, entitled *Chicago – The Bulgarian City* [1]. This volume demonstrates the ability of the diaspora for boosterism, self-reflection, and self-study. This self-reflective narrative, published in bilingual form, reveals the ambition of active members of the community to construct an attractive community image for presentation to both Bulgarian[-American] and general American audiences. By including English translation, this volume becomes a part of North America's and Chicago's history of immigration ([58], p. 8). *The Bulgarian City*, as presented in the volume's essays, has its own leaders, places and organizations that gather the community together. However, the fact remains that these do not constitute a monolithic body; rather, the Bulgarian groups and institutions are dispersed and do not command the consciousness of the metropolitan area's general populace.

Insight upon the creation of *Chicago – The Bulgarian City* was provided to us by one of the volume compilers, Dinko Dinev. During an interview with Dinev in 2016, he shared:

> *I came up with the name – "Chicago - the Bulgarian City" [...] It is a combination of everything that has been superimposed in my life during the last 16 to 17 years in Chicago. The number of Bulgarians increased so much! Seventeen years ago you couldn't hear Bulgarian speech – you had to go to certain places, and now you're walking along Michigan Ave [in downtown] and suddenly someone is talking in Bulgarian. From all these things that happened in the Bulgarian community in recent years, the idea was formed that Chicago is the largest Bulgarian city outside of Bulgaria [...]And out of 176 nations that live in Chicago, the Bulgarian community finds its place with all that it does and has done – schools, churches, cultural events, publication of newspapers, restaurants, shops, companies – everything that has been happening lately is shaping Chicago as a Bulgarian city. I wanted to emphasize with the title that there are so many Bulgarians in Chicago that it is turning into a Bulgarian city. Of course, I cannot compare with the Polish people, who are 3.2 million among 11-12 million in Chicago, but still, against the background of the number of people who live in Bulgaria – 7 million, 300 thousand outside [in Chicago] – this is something very substantial.* (D.D., male, born 1960).

Figure 16. The cover of *Chicago – the Bulgarian City* (2014), the first collection of essays about the Bulgarian contemporary community in Chicago and the metro area [1].

Lately, the community's perception of Chicago as the *Bulgarian city* is a postmodern and imaginary product where Bulgarians are intertwined with American social structures, but maintain their own parallel structures [44, p. 294]. This concept appears to be evolving. If in 2014 the community was claming Chicago as Bulgarian, in present days the community demonstrates the aspirations of having a vernacular focal point called the *Little Bulgaria* similar to ethnic centers such as Little Italy, Ukranian Village, Greek Town and Chinatown. This phrase was already suggested in *Chicago – The Bulgarian City* ([1], pp. 73, 129). Since then, the organization running the Little Bulgarian School in Chicago (actually located in the suburb of Elk Grove Village) opened their Център „Малката България" (Little Bulgaria Center) in Des Plaines, which includes a branch of their Bulgarian language school. This adjustment in nomenclature is significant. From a diminutive phrase, little Bulgarian, it has been reconstructed into a parallel of Little Italy, suggesting a grander alignment with the designation of Chicago's Italian ethnic enclave and neighborhood.

However, the existence of a community center and school named Little Bulgaria does not in itself create an ethnic enclave. A single institution does not create a vernacular ethnic landscape. Nevertheless, the image conjured up by this institution's name does express the community's hopes for greater cohesiveness – an aspiration which, if achieved, would usher in a new distinguishable period of Chicago's Bulgarian settlement.

Figure 17. Little Bulgaria Center, Des Plaines. Courtesy of Little Bulgaria Center.

5. Conclusions

Margarita Karamihova stated that in the first years of the twenty-first century, Bulgarian immigrants in the United States have no clear strategic need of visibility in the American society with their own face and distinct voice ([43], p. 269). However, if this was accurate at the time – even specifically for the Chicago community (then and now, the largest) – two decades later we can definitely state that the community has demonstrated great effort and significant success in acquiring visibility, as well as cultural and social capital.

The Bulgarian community model of development we present here differs in significant respects from those of other migrant groups that can claim a vernacular urban centralized space in Chicago. During the early periods of immigration, despite the close concentration of their settlements, the Bulgarians in Chicago did not manage to establish a permanent ethnic enclave recognized by both Bulgarians and other members of American society. Due to their small number and low economic profile; their widespread intentions to stay only temporarily; and their seasonal dispersion to find work, often far from Chicago, the early Bulgarians in Chicago remained substantially invisible. Only later, motivated partly by their participating in the 1933 Chicago World's Fair, did these migrants and their descendants who had kept their Bulgarian identity manage to establish lasting community organizations and greater recognition.

However, the St. Sofia Bulgarian Orthodox congregation, established in 1938, appears to be the only Bulgarian organization in Chicago that has existed continuously throughout the last two periods of Chicago's Bulgarian community. The dramatic reduction in new Bulgarian migrants beginning in the 1930s and lasting until 1990, in conjunction with the spatial dispersion of the community across northern Chicago and the northwest suburbs and the temporal passage of generations, caused the population self-identifying and outwardly identifiable as Bulgarian to dwindle. The few new migrants during the Cold War were divided sharply between the agrarians and monarchists. These factions

competed for leadership in the church, and their rivalry was counterproductive for the consolidation of the Bulgarian community as a whole. The church was the only unifying factor for the Bulgarian Cold War immigrants, who managed by sustained efforts to collectively purchase a house to serve as a church.

The Cold War division within the community was augmented by the Bulgarian communist state's intervention in the life of the Bulgarian refugees through surrogates, especially in the jurisdiction of Church matters, seeking to create tension between immigrant groups and divide them. This stands in contrast with the present period, in which the Bulgarian state engages in a productive way (even though not sufficient) in favor of consolidation of the Bulgarian communities abroad, including Chicago. These efforts are particularly focused through funding provided for the Sunday schools and recognizing the diplomas issued by these schools, organizing voting sections abroad for Bulgarian elections, and the Bulgarian Consulate in Chicago's support of local Bulgarian institutions. As other scholars observe, the Bulgarian government realizes the performative and representative potential of the Bulgarian communities in their host countries, and encouragement of this potential gradually becomes part of the state policy of Bulgaria ([59], p. 37).

Despite this support and the community's strengthened networks and institutions, the new immigration since 1989 arrived without an established enclave of their own in Chicago and the only previous large wave of Bulgarian immigration had ebbed more than sixty years before. The dispersion, attrition and internal divisions of the identifiable Bulgarian community of Chicago during those decades did not offer an established foundation for the formation of a well-defined *Little Bulgaria* in Chicago when the new wave of post-Cold War migrants arrived. Although the area is now home to the largest Bulgarian population outside of Bulgaria according to unofficial census data – in the range of 150,000 to 200,000 and estimated by some authors at up to 300,000 people ([55], p. 400) – Chicago's Bulgarian community has not realized its own ethnic enclave. Rather, after 1989 we observe Bulgarian "dispersed ethnic organizational networks" ([46], p. 10) and clusters of Bulgarians across Chicago and the suburbs. The Bulgarian immigrant ethnic model has not reached the stage of "spatially defined immigrant consumer centers" ([46], p. 10), characterized by a neighborhood where both immigrant newcomers and more or less assimilated ethnics are expressed in vernacular landscapes.

Echoing other immigrant groups from Europe, for which Chicago is often characterized as a Polish city, a Russian city or Ukrainian and so on, the Bulgarians also claim Chicago as their *Bulgarian City*. However, this claim is more of an aspiration and a desire for visibility that is slow in coming. During an official meeting at the White House with the Bulgarian prime-minister Boyko Borisov in 2012, American President Barack Obama observed, "Obviously, there are very strong bonds between our two countries, including many Bulgarian Americans in my hometown of Chicago" [60]. Despite this recognition, the increasing number of Bulgarian-Chicagoans and their rising aspirations, Chicago has not been identified yet by the host society as "Bulgarian" to the extent that it is identified as being "Polish," "Russian," "Ukrainian," "Greek," or a host of other ethnic identities.

Existing within the conditions of contemporary globalization, the Bulgarian community in Chicago from the largest and most recent immigration wave is still young (compared to other ethnic communities), transnational, mobile and dynamic. It is actively searching for a place in the postmodern world where the secret to successful community development is the ability for intercultural communication. To achieve this intercultural communication, the Bulgarians in Chicago present themselves through events and traditions that are recognized by the group as important for the maintenance and explication of group and individual identity. Due to this fact, our future work on Bulgarian migrants in Chicago and the wider area will extensively discuss the topics of public life and

the identity of the Bulgarians who live in their *Bulgarian City* of Chicago ([32], p. 272) and dream about recognition of their own *Little Bulgaria* within it.

Use of AI tools declaration

The authors declare they have not used Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools in the creation of this article.

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Conflict of interest

All authors declare no conflicts of interest in this paper.

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