

FUNCTIONS OF THE SCHOOL AS A SPACE FOR PRESERVING ETHNOCULTURAL IDENTITY IN A FOREIGN ENVIRONMENT (ASPECTS OF THE WORK OF THE BULGARIAN SCHOOL IN CYPRUS)

**Vanya Dobрева, Boriana Buzhashka, Roumen Draganov,
Nina Debruyne, & Ventzislav Veleв**

Department "Culture, Historical Heritage and Tourism", ULSIT/ Sofia (Bulgaria)

Abstract

The first mass migrations of Bulgarians date back to the period of Ottoman rule in the 17th century, continuing in the 19th century in two directions: northwest (present-day Austria, Hungary, and Romania) and northeast (present-day Russia, Moldova, and Ukraine). In the 20th century, Bulgarian migration was directed towards Central and Western Europe, South and North America. Migration processes were particularly intense after the changes in 1989, with Bulgarian communities now found in various countries and continents. In Bulgarian academia, emigration is usually divided into two groups: historical and contemporary, with the latter including emigration after 1989, which is also referred to as new emigration. One of the defining characteristics of this new emigration is the organisation and development of separate schools in the host country. The example of Bulgarian emigration to Cyprus is indicative of the approaches applied in schools, which, on the one hand, preserve the ethno-cultural identity of the community, but also facilitate the community's more immediate adaptation to the host country. The focus on two of the ten schools is not accidental. One school is located in the capital Nicosia, the other in the smaller town of Paralimni. A comparison between the programs and initiatives of the two schools highlights the importance of creating a cultural space as a place for expression, preservation, and development of ethnocultural identity. An important factor in the development of the schools is that their development is supported by Bulgarian organizations: in Nicosia, this is the Union of Bulgarians in Cyprus, and in Paralimni, it is the Bulgarian Cultural Association "Atanas Shabanov." This, in turn, further establishes schools abroad as cultural spaces for the expression of ethnocultural identity in a foreign environment.

Keywords: *Contemporary emigration, school, culture, identity, Bulgarian emigration to Cyprus.*

1. Introduction

It is well known that the process of globalization, associated with the intensification of migration processes and the movement of compact masses of population from one region or country to another, has an impact on the creation and development of ethnocultural communities within the host country. Analysts define this phenomenon as diasporization, which has its own characteristics and peculiarities. Research shows that in the course of its formation, each ethnocultural community uses cultural experience acquired from the country of origin and applies approaches that ensure both the preservation of national identity and support adaptation processes in the host country. This leads to the creation of cultural spaces for the manifestation of the ethnocultural nature of the community, for the restoration of historical memories and cultural meanings that bind its members together.

The example of the Bulgarian diaspora is indicative of the way in which the ethnocultural community has organized itself over the centuries, and the forms through which it has established itself and its identity. At the same time, examples from the present existence of the Bulgarian diaspora reveal new approaches not only to preserving but also to manifesting the ethnic uniqueness of the community through the creation of cultural spaces saturated with historically significant national symbols. A characteristic feature of these spaces is that they function as imagined in the sense of Benedict Anderson's classic formula: they become a concrete sign of the constructed national society (Anderson, 1998), united—regardless of their location—into a single cultural whole, with a common memory and collective recollections.

Researchers usually divide the Bulgarian diaspora into two groups: historical and contemporary. The formation of the historical diaspora dates back to the period of Ottoman rule—the first mass emigration of Bulgarians, who organized their communities in foreign territories, took place between the 17th and 19th centuries. The migration processes covered two directions: northwest (the territories of present-day Austria, Hungary, and Romania) and northeast (present-day Russia, Moldova, and Ukraine). During these centuries, communities of Banat Bulgarians (present-day Romania) as well as Tavrian and Bessarabian Bulgarians (present-day Russia, Moldova, and Ukraine) were formed. The historical communities also include the hundreds of Bulgarians who, as a result of international treaties and border changes at the end of the 19th and during the 20th century, found themselves within the borders of neighboring countries. Such are the Bulgarian communities in Serbia, Albania, Greece, and Turkey. The case of the so-called Macedonian citizens in North Macedonia is different, as the majority of them are genetically and culturally identical to the Bulgarian ethnic group.

The second group – the modern Bulgarian diaspora – formed at the end of the 19th and during the 20th century (particularly intensively during the first half of the century). The direction of migration was to Central and Western Europe, South and North America. Bulgarians, renowned for their agricultural skills, the so-called Bulgarian gardeners, settled in Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Austria, where they established their communities. In South and North America, immigrants of Bulgarian origin found their new home from the beginning of the 20th century and especially after the end of World War I. The migration processes following the political and economic changes in 1989 were particularly intense. Over a period of nearly thirty years, almost two million Bulgarians left their homeland and settled in various countries and regions. Researchers also define this diaspora as contemporary or new, thus linking its consolidation to the processes of community development in host countries that were characteristic of the 20th century (Borisova et al., 2017).

According to data from the State Agency for Bulgarians Abroad, today the largest Bulgarian communities are in the USA, Ukraine, Moldova, Greece, Spain, Germany, Austria, and Italy (IACB, <https://www.aba.government.bg>). Researchers of this type of newest Bulgarian diaspora define it as a contemporary or new Bulgarian diaspora. This includes the Bulgarian community in Cyprus, the study of which provides grounds for developing approaches and tools specific to the new Bulgarian diaspora for preserving ethnocultural identity and developing successful integration strategies for adaptation to the host country.

2. General information about the Bulgarian community in Cyprus

Bulgarians who have migrated to Cyprus rank third in terms of numbers among ethnic groups. The proximity of the island to Bulgaria, the similarities in terms of culture and civilization, and the climatic conditions favor the settlement of Bulgarians in Cyprus. Field research conducted by the authors in September 2025 (interviews and questionnaires) shows that the formation of a Bulgarian diaspora began after 1989, when, for economic reasons, hundreds of Bulgarians linked their future to the island. Bulgarians who settled in Cyprus work mainly in the tourism and restaurant sectors, as well as in the service industries.

Some of these Bulgarians retain their Bulgarian citizenship and do not plan to settle permanently in Cyprus. The interviews show that there are cases where one member of the family (most often the man) works in Cyprus while the woman remains in Bulgaria. In her 2013 study, S. Antova points out that it is common for Bulgarians who have been working in Cyprus since the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century to define themselves as mobile migrants – they work temporarily in a foreign country and then return to their homeland. Their families and/or children remain in Bulgaria, and their upbringing is entrusted to their closest relatives (grandparents) in cases where the family (mother and father) works on the island. (Antova, <https://www.academia.edu>).

This highlights a serious problem for the ethnocultural identity of Bulgarians in the first decade of the 21st century—the lack of opportunities to learn the Bulgarian language is perceived as an obstacle to the consolidation of the diaspora. It is no coincidence that Antova emphasizes that, apart from financial and economic factors, another serious reason for the separation of families is the lack of Bulgarian language education. The field research conducted by the authors of this article in September 2025 outlines a new situation. Firstly, Bulgarians have built their own communities, whose interests are institutionalized through the creation and development of Bulgarian non-governmental organizations: the Union of Bulgarians in Cyprus (based in Nicosia), the Bulgarian Cultural Association "Atanas Shabanov," the Union of Bulgarians in Paphos, Association of Bulgarian Teachers in the Republic of Cyprus – Larnaca, Union of Bulgarians in Limassol "Vazrazhdane," Association "Bulgarians Abroad" – Limassol, Bulgarian Cultural Center "Cyril and Methodius" – Nicosia, Bulgarian Organization "Rodna Stryaha." The main task of these Bulgarian organizations is to contribute to the preservation and development of the Bulgarian language, traditions, and culture.

The first organisation of Bulgarians in Cyprus was the Union of Bulgarians in Cyprus (UBC), which was founded in 1989 but only became active later, after it was established in the capital Nicosia in 1999. In the second decade of the 21st century, the UBC initiated the creation of five Sunday schools: "St. Clement of Ohrid" (Limassol), "Narodni Buditeli" (Paralimni), "Bulgarian School in Paphos," "Azbukarche" (Polis Chrysochous), "Nikola Vaptsarov" School (Nicosia), with a branch in Dali. The chairman of the BCC is Mr. Kalin Stoyanov (BCC, <https://bguc.org/>), and during the field research period, the BCC focused mainly on the development of the "Nikola Vaptsarov" school, headed by Ms. Lidia Stefanova.

Another organization representative of the Bulgarian community in Cyprus is the Bulgarian Cultural Association "Atanas Shabanov" (BKA), which carries out its initiatives and activities in the Famagusta region, with its center in the town of Paralimni. In 2020, the organization's activities included supporting the Saturday-Sunday school in Paralimni, "Narodnite Buditeli" (IABCH, <https://aba.government.bg>). The chair of the BKA is Ms. Maria Mavroudi, and the school's director is Ms. Zhivka Milova.

We focus our attention on these two Bulgarian organizations in Cyprus because of our focus on the schools that they develop and support. However, it should be noted that the other Bulgarian organisations in Cyprus also consider teaching the Bulgarian language and culture to be a key task in their work, supporting and developing Sunday schools. The total number of Saturday-Sunday schools in the Republic of Cyprus where Bulgarian language, Bulgarian history, and Bulgarian geography are taught. Firstly, the establishment of Saturday-Sunday schools is certified by their recognition by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Bulgaria, which also supports their work with teaching materials – textbooks and teaching aids, as well as with a state subsidy. Every year, the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria approves a budget to support Bulgarian schools abroad in two areas. The first is the national program "Native Language and Program Abroad," in which all schools abroad are eligible to apply for support for their immediate needs to improve and expand their knowledge and skills in Bulgarian language and literature. The second is a specially adopted Decree of the Council of Ministers, which annually determines the subsidy for schools abroad as state aid for the implementation of their tasks (Ministry of Education and Science, <https://world.mon.bg/>).

3. The functional significance of the school's name

It is indicative that all Sunday schools abroad, like the schools in Cyprus, bear names that are emblematic of Bulgarian culture. This also applies to the two schools in Nicosia and Paralimni. The patron of the school in Nicosia is the great Bulgarian poet Nikola Vaptsarov. In his classic poem "Letter," he sings of the big stars above Famagusta, the pearl of the Mediterranean. For every Cypriot, the name Famagusta is symbolic, carrying deep historical and contemporary meaning. So it is no coincidence that Vaptsarov's name was chosen for the school. In 2013, a bust-monument of Nikola Vaptsarov, created by Bulgarian sculptor Ivan Ikov, also an emigrant to the island, was placed in front of the school building. Vaptsarov's name has also become an opportunity for students to further study his work and poetic legacy, to organize recitals of the poet's poems and commemorative evenings.

His birthday and the day of his tragic death (Vaptsarov was a victim of Bulgarian fascism) are solemnly commemorated. On the other hand, the emphasis on Bulgarian poetry is an occasion for poets and writers from Bulgaria to visit the school during the educational process. Creative activities are initiated by the students, who try their hand at poetry and fiction. Therefore, in addition to the compulsory educational programs, the school also takes on additional functions as a guardian of ancestral memory, a creative laboratory for artistic innovation, and a communication center for the exchange of ideas and opinions between the children of migrants and representatives of the Bulgarian artistic and scientific-humanitarian intelligentsia. These initiatives strengthen and reinforce national identity and support the development of creative individuals who have the skills to engage in dialogue on key issues from history and the present day.

The second school is called "National Revivalists." In Bulgarian cultural memory, national revivalists are those representatives of literature—clergymen, writers, teachers—thanks to whom the Bulgarian people built themselves as a cultural nation in the 18th and 19th centuries. The name "revivalist" comes from the verb "to revive" and represents the personification of the act of activating the people's energy and will to create after centuries of slavery. In this school, along with the compulsory subjects of Bulgarian language, history, and geography, additional tasks are also accomplished. During their studies, students learn about Bulgarian awakening figures, reconstruct cultural memories, compile biographies, and draw parallels with similar cultural phenomena in Cypriot history. The Narodni Buditeli School also organizes a variety of events. Books from Bulgaria are presented, as well as exhibitions showcasing key national events. In September 2025, students attended the opening of the exhibition "155 Years of the

Bulgarian Exarchate" and received additional information about the enlightening and fundamental role of the Exarchate in maintaining and developing national identity. So here, too, the additional focus on cultural facts, cultural events, and the opportunity to understand them through the creation of a broader historical and cultural context is striking.

Both schools have signed cooperation agreements with schools in Bulgaria. Under the Erasmus program, students from the schools visit their Bulgarian partners, thus further consolidating their Bulgarian language skills and competences through observation and direct practice.

4. The school as an imaginary space for the development of ethnocultural identity

Studies show that the construction of the new emigration in Cyprus is also linked to the development of strategies for preserving and developing identity. Moreover, the establishment of schools where Bulgarian language, history, and geography are taught contributes to the fact that more and more mobile migrants prefer to be accompanied by their families during their commitments on the island. The schools are called Saturday-Sunday schools because the educational process takes place on the last two days of the week. The students are divided into classes according to age and are taught according to programs approved by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Bulgaria. Along with studying Bulgarian language, history, and geography, students are encouraged to look for analogies and comparisons—both diachronic and synchronic—with events and circumstances characteristic of Cypriot culture and history. In this way, the school begins to play an additional role in helping students adapt more quickly to their new environment.

The organizations responsible for the school's development further support the development of reading and writing skills and organize public exams where students demonstrate their knowledge of Bulgaria to their parents. The school grounds are filled with national symbols—copies of historical documents, portraits of important figures in Bulgarian culture, and paintings depicting the beauty of the homeland. In this way, the school fulfills two functions. On the one hand, it is a high-level educational space—students are taught on site, in specially designated classrooms - their workspaces, where they acquire the required competencies and develop skills in their native language, history, and geography. The teacher-student dialogue is conducted in the formal written Bulgarian language. On the other hand, the school is also establishing itself as a place for informal communication, where everyday life with its mundane details is also present. During breaks between classes, students freely communicate in Bulgarian, play, and develop their imagination, achieving the symbols of ethnocultural community. But the school also brings together parents and representatives of the Bulgarian community, who make important decisions about their activities and consolidation here. It turns out that Saturday-Sunday schools are beginning to fulfill the role of the imagined national territory. It is embodied both by the students and their parents, as well as by other representatives of the diaspora. On another level, it is the school that turns out to be the invisible thread that binds the nation into an indivisible whole, regardless of whether Bulgarians live abroad or in their homeland. Consequently, it acquires additional communicative, socializing, and cultural significance, which strengthens and develops the community in the host country.

5. Conclusion

The examples from Cyprus show that the creation and development of educational forms such as Saturday-Sunday schools, where the native language, history, and geography are taught, are of crucial importance for the preservation and development of ethnic and cultural identity and, in general, for the preservation of ancestral memory. On the one hand, Saturday-Sunday schools are the most appropriate form for learning the curriculum established by the country of origin and for applying established pedagogical approaches and methods of teaching the native language in a foreign environment. On the other hand, however, the school expands its territory, becoming a place for maintaining and developing ethnic and cultural identity. It is no coincidence that it embodies the idea of the Bulgarian nation, Bulgarian culture, and history with its specificity.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to the Scientific Research Fund of the Ministry of Education and Science of Bulgaria for the support of the research under the project "Bulgarian Communities Abroad after 1989: Return to the Roots," contract No. KP-06-N90/3 of December 10, 2024.

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