

Original Article

# “Left Like Stones in the Middle of the Road”: Narratives of Aging Alone and Coping Strategies in Rural Albania and Bulgaria

Nina Conkova, MSc,<sup>1,2,\*</sup> Julie Vullnetari, PhD,<sup>3</sup> Russell King, Professor,<sup>4</sup> and Tineke Fokkema, Professor<sup>5,6</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Public Administration and Sociology, Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands. <sup>2</sup>Leyden Academy on Vitality and Ageing, The Netherlands. <sup>3</sup>Geography and Environmental Sciences, University of Southampton, UK. <sup>4</sup>Sussex Centre for Migration Research, University of Sussex, UK. <sup>5</sup>Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute (NIDI-KNAW), University of Groningen, The Netherlands. <sup>6</sup>Department of Public Administration and Sociology, Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands.

\*Address correspondence to: Nina Conkova, MSc, Department of Public Administration and Sociology, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Burg. Oudlaan 50, 3062 PA Rotterdam, The Netherlands. E-mail: [conkova@essb.eur.nl](mailto:conkova@essb.eur.nl)

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## Abstract

**Objectives:** We explore and compare older adults' lived experiences and coping strategies in two postcommunist countries—Albania and Bulgaria. Wholesale youth outmigration and economic and institutional regional decline have led to decaying rural areas where older adults become “abandoned.” Aging alone, as couples or widowed, they are socially marginalized and in constant search for coping mechanisms which enable them to survive.

**Methods:** We adopt a social-psychology theoretical framework which distinguishes between problem-focused and emotion-focused coping. Data include 28 in-depth interviews with older residents and participant observation in selected rural areas of the two countries.

**Results:** In both countries, rural social isolation is expressed as a lack of close family ties—mainly due to the removal through outmigration of children and grandchildren—and detachment from society at large. The most prevalent coping mechanism consists of practical and emotional support from non-kin ties, especially neighbors. Remittances help to resolve material needs, especially in Albania, where most rural young people migrate abroad. In both settings, a range of emotion-focused coping strategies were identified, including perceptions of decreased needs, lowered expectations about relationships, and satisfaction at the achievements of the younger generations.

**Discussion:** Similarities between research findings in Albania and Bulgaria reflect their shared political and institutional history. Although few, differences relate to a combination of contrasting migration and cultural patterns. In both settings problem- and emotion-focused adaptive strategies are overlapping, and successful aging efforts seem to be of a communal rather than an individualistic nature.

**Keywords:** In-depth interviews, Loneliness, Migration, Rural aging, Social support

Two important processes are currently fundamentally reshaping European population structure and distribution, and have been for several decades: migration and aging

(Chłoń-Domińczak, 2014; King & Lulle, 2016). These two processes are also complexly interlinked in what has recently been termed the aging–migration nexus (King,

Lulle, Sampaio, & Vullnetari, 2017). Older people face challenges and vulnerability in a range of migration-related scenarios, including labor migrants and refugees aging abroad, retirement and lifestyle migrants, and nonmigrant older people left behind by the outmigration of younger generations.

This paper focuses on the last of these three scenarios. Its general departure point is that most studies of migration concentrate either on the migrants themselves and their “migration process” or on the problems they face in the destination setting (Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2014). Insufficient attention is paid to the impact of migration on the nonmigrants in the “home” setting; to quote one author (Xiang, 2007), research on the “left-behind” has itself been left behind, although there are some exceptions (see Cong & Silverstein, 2011; Fuller-Iglesias, 2015 for studies on left-behind parents). Most of the extant knowledge on those left behind is produced indirectly by studies on transnational family relations privileging the perspective of migrants as active agents and their ongoing links to “home” (e.g., Treas, 2008). This research shows that family members transcend physical distance through their continuous practices of providing care transnationally (Baldassar, 2007; Zechner, 2008), though with a decreased frequency as compared with nonmigrant families (Baykara-Krumme & Fokkema, 2018), (indirect) contact (Heikkinen & Lumme-Sandt, 2013) and/or the provision of remittances—financial support and gifts to those left behind in the origin context (see Connell & Brown, 2015 for a recent collection of key papers on remittances, and King, Castaldo, & Vullnetari, 2011; King, Dalipaj, & Mai, 2006 for Albanian case studies). Remittances and transnational contacts and support apart, the human and emotional consequences of living in a rural society denuded by the outmigration of the younger-age cohorts and, in particular, the challenges and coping mechanisms of older people who must “age alone,” remain far less researched.

We extend the aging–migration nexus to include a third element, the spatial dimension of rurality. Wholesale outmigration, abroad and/or internally, leads to depopulation and rural decline, with a residual population dominated by older people suffering social hardship. Although also present in Western Europe, where it is paralleled by renewed inward migration or “counterurbanization” (Champion, 1998; Halfacree & Boyle, 1998), rural population decline is a much more pervasive problem in Central and Eastern Europe. Rural decline in this region began already in the communist era but intensified drastically in the transition period when the centrally planned economy and state-run rural welfare systems collapsed, leaving the infrastructure in tatters and resulting in social isolation and a retreat to subsistence cultivation. The economic and institutional decline in rural areas resulted in weak employment prospects for young adults and was followed by mass outmigration, leaving the older-age cohorts to fend for themselves, deprived of hands-on support from the younger generations (Tsekov,

2017). Studies on rural depopulation and the social challenges faced by the rural elderly in Eastern Europe are few (but see Kay, 2012), but work on Albania and Bulgaria (King & Vullnetari, 2006; Sugareva, 2006) suggests a high prevalence of hardship, including loneliness and social exclusion. As with other consequences of the transition to a market economy, these social hardships are not unique to rural areas (see de Jong Gierveld, Dykstra, & Schenk, 2012; Dykstra, 2009) but, due to the sheer intensity of youth outmigration and economic decline, they are much more strongly perceived in the villages than in the cities (Nedelcheva, 2005).

In this paper we explore and compare how signs of hardship materialize in the perceptions of older adults left behind by youth outmigration in rural Albania and Bulgaria and the coping strategies adopted by those left to “age alone.” The justifications for choosing Albania and Bulgaria as case studies are twofold, resting, like the general philosophy behind case study comparison, on a combination of similarities and differences (Barglowski, 2018; Bartram, 2012; FitzGerald, 2012). The similarities are clearly apparent. Located on the southeastern periphery of Europe, these two countries were and still are among the continent’s poorest on most indicators of material and social well-being (UNDP, 2016), and this is especially true in rural areas where the majority of older people live below the poverty line (Eurostat, 2017; Meçe, 2015). Both countries are furthermore characterized by traditional patriarchal values and family norms of support, which have become even stronger in the transition period (Calloni, 2002; Lobodzinska, 1996; Meçe, 2015). Again, this is particularly true in rural areas where multigenerational living and support have been the norm and where the older generations expected that, like the generations before them, their mature years would be spent surrounded by family—especially children and grandchildren (Robila, 2004). Thus, the psychosocial impact of “aging alone” in these two regional settings is likely to be all the greater because of the combination of poor economic circumstances and the sudden, unexpected, and simultaneous removal of family members and formal support institutions. Second, regarding differences, our a priori thinking was to compare and contrast a setting where nearly all rural outmigration was internal (Bulgaria) with one where most outmigration was to abroad, although with some internal migration too (Albania). Emigration has taken place from Bulgaria, especially since the country joined the European Union in 2007 and after the transition period expired in 2014, but most of this movement consists of young people from urban areas.

## Theoretical Framework

Academic discourse on postsocialist rural space has been dominated by approaches favoring the role of new market ideologies and structural transformations, painting what Kay and colleagues (2012, p. 55) term “a rather

monodimensional picture of rural people and places as losers.” Hence, the experiences, thoughts, and feelings of rural people as active agents in multiple processes of transformation tend to be ignored. Yet, adaptation and coping with the stresses and changes of life are key elements in sustaining mental and emotional health in people of all ages, and the potential and preparedness for dealing with a variety of demands is nowadays seen as a criterion of successful aging (Coleman & O’Hanlon, 2008). In our own work, we recognize older adults’ ability to develop adaptive strategies and coping mechanisms to what they perceive as hardship and examine those mechanisms by employing a social-psychological theory on coping.

Lazarus and Folkman, two of the main theorists in this field, defined coping as “the constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (1984, p. 141). Despite a wide variety of ways of reacting to and dealing with situations appraised as stressful, there seems to be a consensus that there are at least two higher-order types of coping: problem-focused and emotion-focused. Problem-focused or active coping includes those efforts that are aimed directly at solving the problem or changing the sources of stress. Emotion-focused or regulative coping includes efforts to deal with the problem emotionally, such as cognitive reappraisal (a form of cognitive change that involves constructing a potentially new reality) and emotional disclosure (an act involving the expression of strong emotions by talking or writing about negative events).

At first glance, one might expect that problem-focused coping is more effective than emotion-focused coping as it attempts to overcome the problem that is causing distress and accordingly provides a long-term solution (Carstensen, Fung, & Charles, 2003; Folkman & Lazarus, 1985). However, which type of coping strategy will be dominant depends on the appraisal of the problem and its consequences as stress stimuli, as well as on the coping resources available to the individual. When resources are scarce and the problem and its consequences are evaluated as difficult to change, emotion-focused coping is expected to prevail. On the other hand, when the problem and its by-products are viewed as controllable by action, problem-focused coping will prevail (Lazarus, 1993).

## Method

This research draws on two village case studies, one in each country. In Albania the field-site was a village in the southeastern part of the country. At the time of the research (2004) the village had a population of 1,300 residents, about 500 of whom were pensioners. The village fitted a countrywide pattern of fast-declining overall rural population since the 1990s. Given the proximity of the Greek border, most outmigration is to Greece but migration to Tirana and the regional capital Korçë also occurs. We found much

of the village infrastructure dilapidated, with services either shrunk or shut down. The preschool and the primary school continued to operate, but with reduced pupil and teacher numbers. The general practitioner was shared with other villages, and visited only on certain days of the week, while the local nurse and midwife operated mainly from their own homes. The local library had shut in the early 1990s, while the space used to show films had been turned into a community hall, mainly let out for weddings and other private gatherings. On the other hand, small grocery shops were present in centrally located streets, and the village had a handful of café/billiard clubs, some operating out of small rooms illegally. Transport has expanded greatly since the communist years; private minivans were quite frequent, and many villagers have private vehicles.

The second field-site consisted of a village of around 700 inhabitants in south-central Bulgaria, in which around 250 people were aged 65 or more according to the 2011 census. In the rural Bulgarian case, most outmigration is to big cities, either Sofia or other nearby regional towns. At the time of the interviews (2010–2011), many of the facilities in the village—two schools, the hospital, the pharmacy, the library, the cinema, and the bus line—were shut down, leaving its residents with a commuting general practitioner, a private shuttle service offered only in the morning and in the evening, two coffee shops, two small universal shops, and a post office which opened once a week. Many of the houses were furthermore empty and left to ruin.

Semistructured in-depth narrative interviews were conducted with 28 older people, either individuals or in couples (13 in Albania, 15 in Bulgaria). The recruitment of the interviewees was initially facilitated by key informants and subsequently through snowballing. The interviews were conducted in the local language by the first and the second authors, respectively, of Bulgarian and Albanian origin. The interviews took place in the homes of the participants and were recorded, when permission was given. When the participants were reluctant to be recorded (this usually reflected their experience under communism and fears of being “reported”), detailed notes were taken. Actually, reassuring participants of the academic and “nonpolitical” nature of the research helped to establish good rapport. In both studies, interviewees’ ages at the time of interview ranged from late 50s to late 80s. We use pseudonyms to disguise their identity.

Although we followed a policy of avoiding sensitive or invasive topics in the interviews, which were designed around questions relating to everyday practices and experiences, relations with family members and neighbors, and means of support and care, nevertheless the participants in both field areas often became very emotional, reflecting their isolation as older people living in rural spaces distant from their children and grandchildren. In both sites, formal interviews were supplemented by periods of participant observation—chatting with older people and other villagers, observing their daily lives, sharing drinks, sweets, and

meals, sitting with them outside their homes, and strolling around the villages.

The interview transcripts and field notes were analyzed with MaxQda and Nud\*ist (precursor to NVivo) software. Textual segments were categorized with deductive (theory-driven), inductive (data-driven), and in vivo (using participants' own words) codes in order to prepare the analysis. In the next sections, research results are presented under two main headings: *experiences* are based only on the inductively derived codes, whereas the section on *coping strategies* is based on inductive, in vivo, and deductive codes. Quoted extracts from the interviews were translated into English by the first and the second authors.

## Results: Experiences

The rapid demographic decline evident in both field locations was commented on by both sets of interviewees in a tone which ranged from profound sadness through resignation to anger. The common narrative was that all or most of the young people have left, and "us old folk" are left to eke out our lives on our own. Ferit, aged 70 at the time of the interview in the Albanian village, echoed many of his co-villagers:

All the young people have left. ... For us, this is harsh, this is not a good life, not a normal life. ... It's a very difficult life, a monotonous life ... the older people have been left like the stones in the middle of the road.

In Bulgaria, too, all participants lamented the departure of the young people, often expressed through the phrase "All the young people have fled." Georgy, a 75-year-old married man whose two children have moved to live in the city, said:

There are no people here anymore, no-one to exchange a word with. Two years ago I sat on a bench here, and told myself 'I am not going home until someone passes by'. I waited an hour, then a second hour; nobody came and I went home. What is life in this village? Only loneliness...

As the quotes above reveal, the lack of young people is strongly associated with feelings of loneliness and abandonment—this is the case whether the children have migrated abroad or have moved internally to the major towns. Compared to their own memories during communism of growing up in compact multigeneration families, with the parents, grandparents, and their own children all close at hand, they find it very hard to adjust to the new social reality. Put simply, they desperately miss their children and grandchildren, having them around and being able to see and touch them "on demand." Ivan (86), whose children have lived for many years in Sofia, became very emotional when talking about the migration of his children:

It's different when you have close [family] people around [crying], but my children have been away for

many years. I see them from time to time, but they are not here. I still miss them so much. I think about them all the time and feel so lonely.

If, in Ivan's case, his children could visit "from time to time," this is often not possible for those rural elderly in Albania whose children have all emigrated, particularly if they are very far away (in the United States) or are, or were, in an irregular situation in Europe. Serjan (65) and Burbuqe (63) have two sons, both married and living abroad. Their son and his wife in Chicago are only able to visit every two years, while their son in Greece had just had a son—their first grandchild—whom they had yet to see.

*Burbuqe*: Emigration is fine, it's necessary, but the separation ... the grandson who is born now, I would have liked to have had him here, to hold him and enjoy him. When he is able to come here, he won't know who I am.

Another prominent concern in the rural space of both countries is the provision of intergenerational care. Prior research on family support in migratory contexts has persistently shown that—despite increased geographic distance—regular contact and financial support between family members continue to occur, the latter benefitting older generations' material well-being (Baldassar, 2007; Cong & Silverstein, 2008, 2011). Yet there seems to be a trade-off with "hands-on" care. Nearly all participants in both Albania and Bulgaria reported receiving frequent phone calls and financial support from their children, yet they also voiced worries about how they would receive care at difficult times.

I have children, but they are not with me, they fled like the other young people. And now, everyone [the children] looks after themselves while we [with my wife] look after ourselves now, alone (Milko, 73, Bulgarian).

The challenges of living alone and accessing care are even greater for widows, of whom there were several in our samples. Selvie (63) lost her husband 10 years prior to the interview. All their eight children live far from the village: five in Italy, one in Greece, and two in Tirana. While she expressed satisfaction that all her children were doing well and had given her lots of grandchildren, she complained that, when her husband died, her son in Greece and some of the children in Italy were not able to come to the funeral because they were still undocumented at that time. Like many others, she articulated the trade-off between material help via remittances on the one hand, and loneliness and lack of care assistance on the other:

I am alone here since my husband died ... my children and grandchildren are all scattered. ... My children send me money ... I have Xhafer's [her husband] pension, because I don't have one myself ... because I had eight children, a very hard life. ... I am not so old now, but the difficulties of life ... for now I can deal with

things myself ... but in the future I am worried that I will fall ill and die and not see them [her children and grandchildren].

The broken intergenerational chain is also visible in the case of older people themselves being able to provide care. In fact, one of the most distressing aspects of Albania's mass emigration of young adults is that the older generation has been denied the right to be caregivers to their grandchildren—a role which, for them, is the very reason for their existence (King, Cela, Fokkema, & Vullnetari, 2014). This is well illustrated by these lines from the interview with Rakip (76) and Zarife (72):

*Rakip:* Emigration, emigration [crying]: it has brought good things from the economic point of view. But our children are shedding their blood in Greece. ... We don't even know our grandchildren there, our grandsons and our granddaughters.

*Zarife:* When we put our heads on the pillow, our minds are always where the children are, and the grandchildren – we miss them so much [crying]. How did they start their day, how did they end their day?

In Bulgaria, on the other hand, it is less the perceived deprivation of childcare provision possibilities and more the feeling of being abandoned as the grandchildren have grown older. Maria (71) is a Bulgarian widow whose only child and two grandchildren live in the nearby town:

I took care of them [the grandchildren] until I was around 60 years old, but now they are grown up and do not come. Grandma is not needed any more. Now I am alone.

Feelings of being abandoned are exacerbated by perceptions of geographical isolation, the physical decay of village infrastructures, and detachment from society at large. As a consequence of rapid outmigration and population loss, buildings have fallen into ruin and streets are overgrown with grass. State and local efforts to provide support to those left behind have been cut to a minimum, leading to further deprivation and pessimism over the future. In the colorful words of one Bulgarian interviewee, "The village is the arse of geography" or, from an Albanian interviewee, "The villages are rubbish."

## Results: Coping Strategies

Based on the narratives of older-age villagers left behind by the outmigration of the younger generations, the previous section documented the most prominent social problems of older adults in rural Albania and Bulgaria—feelings of being abandoned and detached from "modern" society at large, a lack of intergenerational care in terms of both receiving and giving, and a generalized sense of loneliness due to the loss of close family relations. How do elderly villagers cope with these conditions and challenges?

One of the most logical and widespread problem-focused coping mechanisms is social support from non-kin ties. Being in close proximity for many years, even decades, neighbors have developed a family-like relationship, allowing them to rely on each other for many things. Social support from neighbors is perceived by virtually all interviewees as essential for survival. In the tearful words of Elena (71), a Bulgarian widow:

I rely on Ginka [the neighbor] for all kinds of support. Without her [pause], I do not know how I would manage my life.

Neighborly support was widely mentioned by the Albanian participants too, who would recount how neighbors would pop by to check on them or help them with heavy tasks now and then.

Broadly speaking, social support was divided by participants into three kinds: material support, including remittances; practical, "hands-on" support; and emotional support. We found that remittances were far more important for Albanian than Bulgarian villagers mainly because most rural elders in Albania have children earning (by Albanian standards) much higher incomes abroad; therefore, remittances are a vital sustaining mechanism for many. However, remittances are not just financial; they have social and symbolic significance too. They are part of the package of support by which the older generation can appreciate that their children still care for them and have not forgotten them. Selvie (63) related how her many children would call her almost every day: "Mom, how are you today? Are you OK? Do you need us to send money or not?" Moreover, remittances consisted not just of regular sums or of money sent when needed (e.g., to pay for medical treatment) but also of in-kind remittances in the form of gifts of clothes, consumer goods, or even food. In the words of Serjan and Burbuqe whose son is in Thessaloniki: "They send us food from over there – pasta, salami, cheese etc; we don't lack anything."

Practical support includes the provision of sporadic care when needed and, much more often, small services such as a lift to the local town or a neighboring village, house maintenance, gardening, and help with harvesting fruit and field crops, or the preparation of winter supplies of wood. For instance, Xheviko (70), widowed and dressed all in black, described how her neighbors were her main support in the Albanian village, more helpful than her brother who lived on the other side of the village. Her neighbors help her with things she cannot manage on her own, such as pruning the apple trees, spraying the vines, and cutting the grass.

Emotional support and companionship were highly appreciated by virtually all participants as essential elements to reduce loneliness and to diversify everyday life. In the context of deficient formal social gatherings, meetings took place in the street or in people's homes, sharing coffee or watching TV. Ivan (86) described his experience with a traditional rural Bulgarian custom known as

*sedyanki* (literally “working-bee” gatherings), which have a very long history. In the 19th century, such meetings were mainly attended by young, single villagers looking for a mate (MacDermott, 1998). Nowadays they are frequented by older villagers, who see them as a good opportunity to meet and discuss various things:

We gather every evening on the bench, we organize senior working-bee gatherings [smiles]. ... We talk about who has done what during the day, about what we have eaten; sometimes we discuss politics or reminisce about the past ... it depends on the mood.

Meanwhile, over in Albania, rural social life seems more limited. Ferit complains:

Life here is monotonous ... because everyone is closed in on themselves, within their families; there is no communication. ... There are no social activities, no place to hold a meeting or a celebration, to create an environment where people could spend time together. ... There is none of this. ... Who will organize such a thing? The elderly, us who are in our 70s?

Social interaction in Albanian villages is also more gendered: older men gather outside on benches to sit and chat or play dominoes, while older women might meet in smaller groups in each other's homes. In Albania, village weddings play to some degree the role of the Bulgarian “working-bee” gatherings, especially in the context of opportunities for young people to spot potential future spouses. With such large-scale migration, these too take place less often, and are usually concentrated in the summer months when most migrants can visit during their annual holidays. Older Albanian villagers often reflected on the organized or “collectivized” nature of leisure time during communism, whereas nowadays nothing remains to fill the vacuum left by the disappearance of such communal life, and this is lamented.

Finally, in both settings, a range of emotion-centered coping strategies were identified, including expressions and perceptions of decreased needs, lowered expectations about relationships, and satisfaction at the achievements of the younger generations. Older villagers repeatedly said that they have accepted that life is what it is. Or, in Ferit's words, “We were born here, we have always lived here, we will die here.” Although experiencing a sense of loneliness and abandonment, the older adults interviewed seem to have internalized the idea that “modern life” is for their children and grandchildren elsewhere, who have inevitably become too busy to spend much time in the village. Ivanka (71), a widow, put it like this:

I have four granddaughters, but I do not see them. One of them lives in Sofia, two are in Bourgas, the other in the provincial capital. ... They do not really come to the village. They are busy, they have their own lives. Even if

they lived here, I couldn't expect them to come to visit me. That's life now.

Perhaps the ultimate emotional coping mechanism is pride in the achievements of their children and grandchildren. Old age is made bearable by their success and the belief that they maintain “good behavior.” A closing duo of quotes reinforces this point.

I miss my children and my only grandchild. But I understand that they have their own life now. And they make me so proud. My grandson became a doctor two years ago. And I hung a copy of his diploma on the wall, and I look at it and kiss it, and I wish him to be ‘healthy and alive’ [Bulgarian saying for ‘all the best’] (Tzveta, 75, Bulgarian grandmother).

Now they are there [her two sons, in Chicago and Thessaloniki], they work, they are married, they are doing fine. When they are well, we are well too. Because if there is some little problem, we are worried and we don't sleep at night. ... I thank God and am grateful for what we have (Burbuqe, 63, Albanian grandmother).

## Discussion

In an effort to rectify the lacuna in research on the “left-behind,” we posed several key questions: How do signs of hardship materialize in the perceptions of older adults left behind by migration in rural Albania and Bulgaria? What coping mechanisms do they adopt? And to what extent do these differ across regions? Extending the aging–migration nexus to include the spatial dimension of rurality, we demonstrated that older people left to age alone in rural areas experience multiple social hardships, including feelings of loneliness and abandonment as well as deprivation of intergenerational care in terms of both giving and receiving.

These first findings of our study have implications for furthering our understanding of loneliness and spatially stretched family ties. Loneliness has been shown to be a more widespread and pervasive phenomenon in familialistic Central and Eastern Europe than in the individualistic West, yet it has not been well understood why this is the case (de Jong Gierveld et al., 2012; Dykstra, 2009). Our findings suggest that a great part of the feelings of loneliness experienced by participants in our study are engendered by the departure of their children and grandchildren, either abroad or to distant cities within the country. On the one hand, this corresponds with the theoretical notion of loneliness being determined by the composition, size, and width of individuals' social networks; on the other it hints at the role of normative expectations in Central and Eastern Europe (Dykstra, 2009). Loneliness in rural Albania and Bulgaria seems to be experienced all the greater because of the sudden and unexpected familial change, leaving older adults' expectations of aging in a multigenerational household of close family members unfulfilled.

Prior research privileging the perspective of (older) migrants suggested that care—though with a reduced frequency—remittances and transnational contacts continue to occur despite geographic distance separating family members (Baldassar, 2007; Heikkinen & Lumme-Sandt, 2013; Treas, 2008; Zechner, 2008). Taking the perspective of those left behind, our study reveals similar findings with the notable exception of transnational care. Nearly all interviewees in both settings highlighted their worries about receiving insufficient care at difficult times, especially in cases of long-distance and irregular migration. Their worries are all the more real and deeply felt because these rural areas are devoid of formal support institutions.

Beyond the similarities in the experiences of those left behind in rural Albania and Bulgaria, one difference warrants mentioning: whereas in Albania older villagers suffer from the inability to provide care to children and especially grandchildren, in Bulgaria the villagers' perceptions revolve more around feelings of being abandoned as the grandchildren have grown up. This contrast can be attributed to a combination of different migration and cultural patterns: in Albania the problem being a long-distance separation rather than unwillingness to actively engage in family relations, whereas in Bulgaria the opposite seems to hold true. This finding contradicts to an extent prior literature which suggested that both countries are characterized by traditional gender values and family norms of support (Lobodzinska, 1996; Meçe, 2015). Given that entrenched gender roles also seem to play a greater role in Albanian than in Bulgarian social life, we can conclude that traditionalism might indeed be found in both countries but it is much more strongly experienced in rural Albania than in rural Bulgaria. This conclusion finds some support in Kera and Kessler's (2008) observation that, among its southeast European neighbors, Albania maintains the largest multigenerational households in both rural and urban areas, as well as in the continuation of traditional gender roles among Albanian communities abroad (King et al., 2006). It also finds support in the Bulgarian discussion of intergenerational conflict, which has led to the devaluation of (grand) parents' knowledge and experiences and a detachment between the rural elderly and the urban youth (Galabov, 2010; Sugareva, Tsekov, Donev, & Boshikiov, 2008).

With regard to coping mechanisms, we demonstrated that social support—material, practical, and emotional—is one of the most pervasive strategies in both rural settings. We interpreted social support as a problem-focused form of coping because, in both countries, it is directly aimed at solving the perceived problems, that is, loneliness and the lack of intergenerational “hands-on” care. However, it was also noted that many of the problem-focused coping mechanisms, such as remittances, have, in addition to their practical value, a symbolic significance which thus incorporates an element of emotional coping. This implies that the firm separation between problem-solving and emotion-focused coping strategies proposed by Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) social-psychological theory on coping is

not fully applicable in the rural contexts of these postcommunist countries. Another interesting observation is that, while problem-focused coping generally conjures up positive associations, it may not always lead to a complete resolution of the problem (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). This is clearly the case in both settings where, despite the presence of social support, older adults left to age alone continue to experience feelings of loneliness and abandonment. Finally, since social support is provided by non-kin ties, who themselves are likely to be left behind, coping mechanisms seem to be of a communal rather than an individualistic nature. This means that adaptive strategies and successful aging efforts in rural Albania and Bulgaria not only have an overlapping practical and emotional nature, but are also created and perpetuated as a common good.

Regarding variations in coping strategies between the two study-villages, the key elements revolve around the differential importance of remittances and social gatherings. In the Albanian village, where international migration prevails over internal, remittances are a vital sustaining mechanism for many older residents. Remittances are an indication of the strength of transnational family ties and to some extent compensate for the dismemberment of multigenerational families and the relative lack of formalized social support and communal life in the village. In rural Bulgaria, rural–urban migration has fractured intergenerational solidarity; here a tradition of senior gatherings within the neighborhood is seen as an essential element to reduce somewhat the feelings of loneliness and diversify everyday life. Of course, social life in Albanian villages is not entirely absent, but this tends to be more informal, on a smaller scale—more around extended kinship and immediate neighbors—and more clearly gendered, with males socializing within the outside spaces and bars/cafés of the village, and women within the domestic sphere.

We conclude by reemphasizing the three key contributions that our paper makes to the field of aging alone and coping strategies. First, in the context of studying the impact of migration on spatially dislocated family relations, it highlights the importance of listening to the voices of those left behind rather than focusing exclusively on the migrants as active agents maintaining links to “home.” Secondly, we have revealed the relevance of cultural and geographical differences in migration patterns in helping to explain intercountry differences in aging processes, even when the countries being compared share a similar political and institutional history. Finally, our study demonstrates that problem- and emotion-focused adaptive strategies in these rural areas of Albania and Bulgaria overlap, and successful aging initiatives tend to be of a communal rather than an individualistic nature.

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## Conflict of Interest

None reported.

## Author Contributions

N. Conkova and T. Fokkema initiated the study. N. Conkova and J. Vullnetari collected the data and performed the analysis. N. Conkova, R. King, J. Vullnetari, and T. Fokkema wrote and revised the paper. R. King edited the language of the manuscript.

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