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Mis*trusting as a Critical Intervention at a Bulgarian Service Area and Beyond

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 Abstract (English)

In post-Soviet Bulgaria, the state is often perceived as unreliable and self-serving. Therefore, ordinary citizens resort to mis*trust as a powerful source of agency when navigating the challenges of a fragile democracy. While still willing to extend trust in certain contexts, they developed critical interventions that employed mis*trusting to navigate uncertain situations, secure resources, and challenge those in power. This proved crucial in dismantling structural weaknesses, as evidenced by the appropriation of state assets by well-connected individuals that depleted public resources and deepened the sense of inequality. Furthermore, it revealed the fragility of democracy and the overcompensation of well-connected elites and how these reinforced simplistic narratives of decline and eroded public trust in institutions.

This dissertation explores the concept of mis*trusting as a ubiquitous and dynamic complementary intervention that allows individuals their say. Specifically, I ask how people mis*trust and to what extent this mis*trusting challenges or reinforces hegemonic narratives. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork at infrastructure sites in Bulgaria, particularly a service area near Vidin (Видин), and using examples of coercive and arbitrary interactions to deconstruct trust and its collocations, I argue that mis*trusting inspires people to expand their autonomy and freedom, prompting a reinterpretation of obligations and responsibilities in the context of contemporary power structures. By focusing on everyday practices of mis*trusting, I illuminate the ways in which individuals negotiate power, resist constraints, and create meaning.

This dissertation contributes to anthropological understandings of trust and mistrust by revealing mis*trusting as a resource for (re)gaining agency. By examining how practices of mis*trusting challenge layers of dominance, I develop mis*trusting as a methodological concept, an analytical lens, and a basis for critique within anthropology that is key to understanding not only individual agency and resistance but also the broader socio-political landscapes of societies. Through this analysis, I add nuance to understandings of social dynamics in post-socialist contexts and beyond through the role mis*trusting plays in navigating the complexities of a changing world.

Keywords: mistrust, responsibilities, post-socialist societies, Bulgaria, infrastructure

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Abstract (Deutsch)

Im post-sowjetischen Bulgarien werden staatliche Strukturen oft als unzuverlässig und eigennützig wahrgenommen. Bürger*innen misstrauen diesen, um mit den Herausforderungen einer fragilen Demokratie umzugehen. Während sie in bestimmten Kontexten weiterhin bereit sind, Vertrauen zu schenken, haben sie zugleich Mechanismen entwickelt, um in Zeiten der Ungewissheit Ressourcen für sich zu sichern und jene in Machtpositionen herauszufordern. In der jüngeren Vergangenheit spielte Misstrauen eine zentrale Rolle, indem es strukturelle Ungerechtigkeiten sichtbar machte und die unrechtmäßige Selbstbereicherung durch die Eliten anprangerte—Entwicklungen, die Niedergangsnarrative verstärkten und das Vertrauen in die Institutionen untergruben.

Diese Dissertation untersucht Miss*trauen als allgegenwärtige und dynamische Intervention, die Individuen eine Stimme verleiht. Konkret frage ich, wie Menschen miss*trauen und inwiefern sie dadurch hegemoniale Narrative herausfordern oder verstärken. Auf Grundlage ethnographischer Feldforschung an einem Rastplatz und einer angegliederten Straße nahe der Stadt Vidin (Видин) argumentiere ich, dass Miss*trauen Menschen dazu befähigt, ihre Autonomie zu erweitern. Diese Erweiterung erfordert zugleich eine Neubewertung von Verpflichtungen und Verantwortlichkeiten innerhalb bestehender Machtstrukturen. Durch die Untersuchung alltäglicher Praktiken des Miss*trauens zeige ich, wie Individuen Macht aushandeln, Zwänge umgehen und Sinn stiften.

Diese Arbeit leistet einen Beitrag zur anthropologischen Erforschung von Vertrauen und Misstrauen, indem sie letzteres als komplementäre Ressource zur (Wieder-)Erlangung von Handlungsfähigkeit begreift. Durch die Analyse von Miss*trauen als Form der Herrschaftskritik entwickle ich es als methodologisches Konzept, analytische Linse und Grundlage für Kritik innerhalb der Anthropologie. Dies trägt zu einem differenzierteren Verständnis individueller Handlungsfähigkeit, Widerstandsformen und der sozio-politischen Landschaften postsozialistischer Gesellschaften bei. Indem die Rolle des Miss*trauens bei der Bewältigung einer sich verändernden Welt beleuchtet wird, trägt diese Arbeit zu einem differenzierteren Verständnis sozialer Dynamiken weit über den postsozialistischen Kontext hinaus.

Schlagwörter: Misstrauen, Verantwortlichkeiten, post-sozialistische Gesellschaften, Bulgarien, Infrastruktur

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Note on Names, Language, and AI

The Vidin region of north-western Bulgaria, where I conducted most of my research, has a long history as a crossroads of cultures and languages that required navigating a complex linguistic landscape. Bulgarian was the official language, Romanian was spoken just across the Danube, and the cultural exchange characteristic of such border regions was evident in their shared vocabulary and concepts. As my research was primarily conducted in and my interlocutors identified as Bulgarians or Balkan people, I foreground Bulgarian terminology and linguistic conventions. Where I quote an interlocutor who was speaking Bulgarian (but not other languages), I first give the untranslated statement in Cyrillic and then provide an English translation. This is because Bulgarian was the primary language of my interlocutors, and they thus used more emic terms that required both translation and explanation than in their secondary or tertiary languages. While I use the standard English transliteration for names without giving the original spelling, I add the original Cyrillic designation to the English transliteration for place names to avoid misinterpretations that might arise from different translations.

My research environment was unusually multilingual and interactions and conversations with my interlocutors took place in languages including Bulgarian, Italian, German, and English. While I had used English, Italian and German in previous research projects, I had never used Bulgarian in similar situations before. To prepare, I attended language courses in Austria and Bulgaria but mostly learned during my fieldwork in the region. I am especially grateful to Radostin and Natalia for their patience and guidance throughout my learning process: both were always willing to explain when I had difficulty understanding their words and to correct my errors. On the other hand, my friends from Sofia (София) and Veliko Tarnovo (Велико Търново) claimed I spoke Bulgarian with a Serbian accent. While this teasing reflected the linguistic fluidity of the region (Vidin Province is bordered by Serbia on the west as well as Romania on the east), they were also subtly distancing themselves from a region stereotyped as economically struggling. It took a while for me to realise that my friends were demonstrating their cultural, political, and social superiority over the region and people I was working with.

Beyond the human linguistic landscape, I also acknowledge the use of artificial intelligence (AI) language tools at certain stages in refining this dissertation. After initial data analysis and completing a first draft, I employed DeepL Write and Google Gemini 1.5 Pro for two distinct purposes: to refine grammar and style and ensure clarity and precision and to identify weaknesses in my arguments, enhancing the dissertation's

overall coherence and rigour. This conscious integration of AI was limited to the development of the third draft of this thesis. To avoid potential inaccuracies or 'hallucinations' that can arise from over-reliance on such tools, I did not use them in the final stages of the writing process.

Although I tried to preserve the anonymity of those mentioned in this dissertation by using pseudonyms, additional measures were necessary in the case of the Sunny Oil service area, a prominent local employer with a relatively small employee population. However, the high employee turnover rate and the round-the-clock schedule meant at least three individuals were doing almost every job. This enabled me to combine statements from different individuals or remove identifying details as needed to protect anonymity. While the service area employees I describe are not only pseudonymous but sometimes composite, they are representative of the various roles and positions held by individuals working there. The only interlocutors outside the service area whom I offered anonymity were private persons such as my host, his family members and the taxi driver. I identified public figures by their institutional positions rather than pseudonyms.

The complexities of language and naming in this border region highlight the importance of carefully considering these factors in ethnographic research. By acknowledging the complexities of the linguistic landscape and prioritising ethical considerations, this dissertation offers a comprehensive and accurate portrayal of the perspectives and experiences of individuals living in this unique context.

Prologue

With a knock at the door, my dissertation supervisor at the University of Vienna's Department for Cultural and Social Anthropology entered to discuss revisions to my first draft. This had mainly discussed how my interlocutors waited for decisions, instructions, new travellers and customers, news about the motorway, and economic improvements. However, my professor confirmed my growing suspicions that a focus on waiting was not enough. A tense experience Radostin and I had at a police checkpoint, where our differing responses revealed a complex interplay of trust and mistrust, offered some concepts for understanding this society I had come to meet at the service area and beyond. Even when still in the field, I had slowly started to recognise how most things that were going on around me could be better grasped through ontologies unfolding around trust, sincerity and affection, mistrust and distraction, doubt, fear, and suspicion. Our conversation made it clear that to come to terms with my emotional reactions I should write about mis*trusting[1].

Anthropologists' focus on trust has long shaped their thinking about a world without trust. A neglect of mistrust as a research topic, which stemmed from the positive connotations of trust as essential for social stability, led to mistrust often being dismissed as an unproductive product of ignorance or a lack of empathy. However, in recent years perspectives have shifted. Research drawing on a growing body of empirical evidence (Mühlfried 2018a; Popa 2014; Sitkin and Bijlsma-Frankema 2018), has begun to explore mistrust and other negatively connotated concepts of trust in new ways (Bruun, Andersen, and Mannov 2020; Carey 2018; Mühlfried 2019). For the first time, anthropologists have debated how far mistrust, distrust, and trustless societies can be read as independent concepts from trust (despite their etymological derivation from it) and freed from negative connotations. For the first time, mistrust and distrust have become their own actions and forms, related to one another and forming the social contexts of meaningful relationships. I argue that mis*trust, as a complementary and creative action arising from the interrelationship of trust and mistrust, is the next step in this debate, not only as a critique but also a marker of taking responsibility.

During my research, I mostly found my co-workers and interlocutors to be welcoming. However, despite their initial friendliness, it took time for them to open up about their private lives. Only after some time did they invite me into their homes and, eventually,

[1] I use the nonstandard punctuation "mis*trusting" rather than "mistrusting/trusting" to signal that both meanings—trusting and mistrusting—are equally weighted and should be read simultaneously, rather than treating mistrust as a mere parenthetical possibility. This formulation avoids privileging one interpretation over the other and emphasises the intrinsic tension between the two.

to visit their weekend cottages. These invitations marked a deepening of our relationships. At the cottages, we might weed, plant onions and tomatoes (in the spring), or pick elderberries; at Miki's we chopped wood before eating. Their homes, on the other hand, were merely points of departure or arrival. We met at Veli's before going to the gym or out for a drink and occasionally dropped off Emi and her husband at home after meeting in the city for coffee. Initially, private spaces and matters remained distant, but I gradually noticed patterns in what they talked about. Politics, especially the minimum wage and border controls, was an early topic; after a while we began to discuss interpersonal relations at work, including firings and lay-offs. However, it was only towards the end of my stay that it became possible to address more existential concerns like financial issues and loneliness. One of my early interlocutors, who was a cadet with the border police, broke off all contact after initiating contact with me and inquiring about my activities and views. Perhaps he just got busy or did not get along with me and I should not take it personally; maybe talking to me would have hurt his career. In any case, after a while people became more trusting of me and more recent arrivals became the ones to be mis*trusted.

A focus on mis*trusting also has methodological implications since it challenges traditional ethnographic approaches that prioritise trust-building and intimacy (Hamal 2020; Zadrożna 2016). However, I integrated moments of irritation and rejection in recognition that ethnographic research relations are not linear at all. By situating mis*trusting outside the traditional ethnographic epistemologies (Shehata 2006), I argue that it can be a source for inspiration and a tool for interrogating intimate relationships. Specific changes in the social or political environment, such as the introduction of a minimum wage or the outbreak of a pandemic, can have far-reaching effects on the dynamics of trust and mistrust. These shifts can create opportunities for researchers to capture moments of productive mis*trusting and attain a deeper understanding of another person or group of people.

My co-workers at the service area and elsewhere along the European Transport Route E-79 mis*trusted the promises of modernity. They mis*trusted the institutions that were supposed to deliver them, and they mis*trusted their co-workers and most of the customers passing by at the service area. They mis*trusted themselves, as well as mis*trusting me. Through these experiences, I came to recognise the role of mis*trusting in social interactions and decision-making, including the significance of subjectivities that are difficult to fully grasp. Radostin's perceptions, meanwhile, had been shaped by decades of working abroad in the USSR, Spain and Germany, as well as by conversations with caregivers and following Bulgarian and Russian news programmes. Natalia's were shaped by her experiences as a female taxi driver and local politician, two fields that were dominated by men. Emi had her perceptions as a woman

and mother, as the boss's partner, and as one of three chefs in the service area's kitchen; Rumi as a waitress with no children; Moni and Ivailo as ordinary employees and young parents who knew that at least one of them would have to work abroad if their child wanted to attend university. Dani and Miki had their own subjectivities, but both constantly compared their current situations with their previous lives abroad. I, too, had my own subjectivities, shaped by my age, that I was unmarried and had no children, and voluntary departure from home. Recognising the methodological importance of mis*trusting in light of these diverse subjectivities, I emphasise the value of open dialogue and reflection on positionality.

My evolving understanding of trust and mistrust also impacted my research process: coming to mis*trust my original research proposal and some of the paragraphs I had written about waiting and attending proved useful once a new central action-oriented category had emerged. I could now embrace these concepts and interpret the tensions arising from unfulfilled promises of systemic change.

Mis*trusting, I argue, offers the possibility of rethinking the complexity of social interactions and processes in the empathic participation in the lives of others as well as the production of knowledge and thus avoiding hasty generalisations. An anthropology of mis*trusting challenges traditional notions of ethnographic intimacy, offering a more nuanced understanding of social interactions in unequal societies. I interpreted my ethnographic task as seeking to gain new insights based on the relationships and actions that I sought to record, interpret, and reproduce, as well as the subjectivities inscribed in them. With this self-understanding, I observed trusting and mistrusting unfold as people navigated the tensions defined by what they understood, learned, observed, and felt. The most crucial lesson was the importance of acknowledging and navigating subjective experiences of mis*trusting. This involved reflecting on my own positionality, differentiating my interpretations from those of my interlocutors, and carefully considering the language used to convey these complex emotions and experiences. These methodological ideas have already been discussed by proponents of the Writing Culture Debate (Clifford, Fortun, and Marcus 2011; Geertz 1973) and their successors (Starn 2015; Wulff 2021) but are gaining new momentum in the context of constructive mis*trusting.

1. Opening: A Service Area in Northern Bulgaria

Some people came to the service area daily, usually for work-related reasons. These included my co-workers, as well as various sales representatives, suppliers, and tradespeople. The latter came at regular intervals that depended on the products or services they offered. Newspapers and fresh pastries were delivered daily and cigarettes, coffee capsules, and canned and bottled drinks several times a week, but the coffee capsules came in a fancy compact car and the drinks on old flatbed lorries. Once a week, suppliers stocked the refrigerators with fruit and vegetables, meat, and dairy products. Other deliveries, less frequent and more irregular, depended on when the deep freezers, car accessories and souvenirs needed restocking. In addition to those who provided the service area with goods and services, it was also frequented by government workers like border patrol and state police officers and subcontractors for law enforcement agencies, who among other things were responsible for collecting tolls on secondary roads within and outside of the municipal borders of Vidin. Unlike suppliers, neither police officers nor their subcontractors had to sign in at the service area. They brought no packages or cardboard boxes, and did not care if their products looked good: they just parked their cars immediately in front of the shop, went in, and had a coffee. At least, that was what a casual observer would see: what they were really doing was gathering information about conditions along the road. They also sometimes took the opportunity to inform the service area employees about speed traps, road closures, and traffic congestion, a kind of informal exchange that materialised at the coffee counter in the service area's shop.

While many other people did work at the service area, those who stopped for a break were the ones who legitimised its business model. Of course, there were other travellers, but these were not the main clientele. This was not only reflected by the parking provided for lorries but also a customer loyalty promotion scheme based on the amount of fuel purchased. When a customer purchased at least one hundred litres of fuel at the pumps, the attendant would notify the cashier, who would call the restaurant staff and say just two words once they picked up. Depending on the amount of the sale, these were either "един бонус" or "два бонус*"* ("one bonus" or "two bonus"). Then, the conversation ended and the server on duty typed "*2 BONUS*" into the computer. The printer in the kitchen chattered and a ticket, once again with only two words: "*Bar*" and *"2 BONUS"*. "Bar" referred to the destination of the food and indicated it was for takeaway. Two bonuses meant two hot dog buns stuffed with four *cevapcici* (oblong patties of grilled minced meat). Unlike the other dishes the kitchen prepared, the bonus was wrapped in a napkin so customers could eat it while driving. While the *cevapcici* was being prepared, workers in the shop put some other products in a plastic bag. A

driver who bought hundred-and-fifty litres or more of fuel would get a bottle of water, two packets of wafers, a cup of *aryan* (a yoghurt drink similar to Turkish *ayran*), and a pine-tree-shaped air freshener with their *cevapcici*. However, the exact list was kept secret from the drivers and stored behind the counter, and the cashier indicated to the other workers what items should be added to the bag. This was to maintain some flexibility in case a particular item was out of stock and thus helped in navigating the relationship with each customer. This customer loyalty programme was not advertised, but when new drivers became eligible for a bonus (or the pump attendant thought a driver had never received a bonus before), the attendant would explain the system and accompany them into the shop. Drivers of cars and other small vehicles would never receive a bonus as their tanks were too small for the minimum amount of fuel. I will focus on the relationships between lorry drivers and my service area co-workers in more detail later.

The diversity of the people who stopped at the rest stop and their needs and obligations—ranging from finishing their shift, putting in some overtime, restocking, eating, or just resting and using the toilet—allowed for numerous interactions between people who sometimes had met before, sometimes were completely unknown to other, and sometimes who had extra challenges in interacting like language or other cultural barriers. In the multi-faceted encounters facilitated by the service area, I argue that the significance defined by functionality provides a perfect setting to explore mis*trusting as situational interactions dominated by adherence to multiple alliances, which may be constructed and deconstructed both within moments and on the mid- and long-term, based on ideology and grand visions as well as expectations and attitudes towards life and specifically travel. Before reflecting on my methodology and ethnographic practices, I will address the characteristics and functionalities of the service area itself and how its various roadside roles and services and its customer loyalty programme can be theorised. Together, the road and the service area, which I understand as both a place and an infrastructure, form a condensed image of multiple mobile societies whose progress depends on small-scale mis*trust understood both literally and figuratively.

1.1Service Areas: Places of Minimised Waiting Time

Sunny Oil was a small, independent company[2] with several locations and thirty to fifty employees, not an international brand or a franchise. Unlike more prominent European

[2] The Sunny Oil service area is the core business of a joint-stock company, Sunny Oil Ltd, with a basic capital of 50,000 leva (approx. EUR 25,000). Founded by its current owner, Stefan

highway chains like Autogrill (Desideri 1997; Giovannoni 2016), the business specifically catered to long-distance lorry drivers. As such vehicles contained sleeping space for drivers, the service area provided no overnight accommodations and had a drive-through layout with separate buildings housing different functions. Many other service areas, restaurants and video-monitored car parks could be found near the road through northern Vidin, at the time of my research a largely derelict industrial zone. However, Sunny Oil was unique in providing a wide range of services just off the motorway with no further travel required. (Although the service area is still open, I use the past tense to acknowledge the changes—physical, operational, and managerial—that occurred during my research and reflected the dynamic nature of the human relationships I observed).

As is typical of such service areas, the main buildings were connected by a canopy to protect customers from the weather. This area included seven fuel pumps, for cars and other small vehicles, buses, and lorries, as well as the shop, the cashiers, and the restaurant. Opposite the restaurant, a large lorry park provided an essential rest area for long-haul drivers. This had twenty-four-hour security, an added benefit even for carriers who were not transporting high-value cargo. There were separate fuelling stations for lorries and smaller vehicles, as well as one for liquified natural gas. (Due to the risk of explosion, the last was located some distance away and required a special key to operate). The separation of lorries and cars served two purposes, accommodating different pump sizes and optimising traffic flow. The three lanes closest to the northbound lane of the E-79 were all for cars, but the first was twice as wide because it also served as a 'drive-through' lane for those who didn't need fuel and were stopping to shop, to check the air pressure on their tyres, or had taken the wrong exit. Occasionally, carelessly parked cars blocked this lane. The fourth and longest lane, furthest from the road but closest to the shop, was for lorries. Its pumps offered various nozzle sizes and it was designed to allow articulated lorries with one or more trailers to queue without disrupting other traffic and then return to the road with as little manoeuvring as possible. The separate lanes for cars and lorries thus both minimised manoeuvring for lorries and allowed cars to quickly return to the road.

Given transport and logistics' vital role in modern society, many previous studies have examined places where people work to support others who are interrupting their mobility projects for sustenance and information. Research on mobility infrastructures has been inspired by several bodies of literature. Following the 'spatial turn' initiated by Edward Soja's work on the "spatiality of social life" (1985) and Michel Foucault's

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Dimitrov Kamenov, in 1998, it operates the service area in Vidin as well as two filling stations in Dimovo and Bregovo.

studies on power and space (1995), scholars have explored the social and political dimensions of spaces. Such themes also are found in early analytical approaches towards infrastructural spaces which focus on material and technical aspects and emphasise engineering, economics, and political will (Appel 2012; Carroll 2006; Carse 2017; Collier and Ong 2003; Penny Harvey and Knox 2012; Mitchell 2009; Stoler 2008); with roads and bridges becoming sites of passionate engagement with transformative potential (Penny Harvey and Knox 2012, 2015).

A second body of literature has developed alongside studies on infrastructure because of how the "spatial turn" stimulated the new focus on mobility and everything that moves. The concept of the "mobility turn" (Timothy Cresswell 2006; Sheller and Urry 2006) was introduced and represented a significant shift for social science, enabling new decolonial approaches and perspectives in an anthropology that had previously been limited to describing seemingly closed and immobile communities, goods and ideas (Adey 2006; Amselle 2002; Fabian 2014; Faist 2013; Greverus 2003). Starting from these new possibilities, the study of how societies are entangled with mobilities has intensified and anthropologists have begun examining the intricate relations of people and groups of people engaging with transportation infrastructure. Airports and railway stations soon became especially well-researched places of departure and arrival (Adey 2004; Elliott and Radford 2015; Giuliani 2021; Korstanje 2015; McFarlane); roads and rail tracks became a place and metaphor for spatial and political transition (Dalakoglou and Penny Harvey 2012; Deoancă 2020; Penny Harvey and Knox 2015).

Service areas have received less attention from scholars from social sciences and humanities, who have chosen to explore roadway mobility infrastructures and mobilities through ethnographic methods but not necessarily as ethnographers starting by describing the qualities of social relations ascribed to roads and parking and service areas (Giovannoni 2016; Kunstler 1994; Merriman 2004; Pearce 2017). On the other hand, anthropologists have done interesting conceptual work on the significance of service areas to the social fabric and local subcultures and on service areas as iconic cultural places where flows of people, goods, and money merge (Desideri 1997; Giovannoni 2016; Jakle and Sculle 1994; Normark 2006). Others have characterised service areas as "technospaces" like internet cafés that bring together different technologies as well as cases and competences (Lægran 2002). Throughout, the service area has remained a place understood as an interruption in the modernity-driven linearity of mobility projects rather a substantial part of it.

However, Sunny Oil had evolved into more than just a utilitarian stopover. Thus, looking at the affordances of mobility was not enough: its diverse functions and spaces

hinted at a complex social world extending beyond the immediate needs of mobile travellers. By focusing on the service area as a microcosm of these encounters, I illuminate how mobility infrastructures shape and are shaped by human relationships, trust, and mistrust. Sunny Oil included a restaurant and bar: spaces designed for lingering and socialising and seemingly at odds with the transient nature of travel. Other facilities, like the laundry room below the administrative offices, hinted at longer stays and a more settled presence. Even an area with gambling machines that was hidden in the car park and only accessible to those staying overnight suggested a desire for entertainment and escape beyond the necessities of travel.

To fully engage with the social and cultural dimensions of Sunny Oil, I needed to move beyond a purely mobility-focused approach and consider the ways people make place through meaningful experiences (Myers 2002), where they are not only transient but "dwell" (Ingold 2005, 2011 (2000)) and where the interplay between movement and stasis plays out. Thus, I had to move away from a focus not only on infrastructure and space but also on mobility and towards theoretical approaches that accepted the interdependence of the mobile and the sedentary. Overcoming mobility as an ideology and bias (Mincke 2016; Schewel 2020), such approaches have started to set in motion personal relations with previously unnamed and 'exotic' people and societies—as Beck puts it (Beck 2013, 434–35), linking the "mobile and the sedentary, the transient and the local", with service areas being "gateways to small towns" that "cater for the needs of transit travellers and vehicles". Service areas, he argues, "provide the space for secure relationships between travelling and roadside folk mediating between residents and stranger". as well as spaces where "the passengers and crews of the motor lorries—who may be on the road for a number of days or, depending on their destination and progress, even for weeks, can count on the offer of food, shelter and repose" (Beck 2013, 426). Furthermore, to overcome the mobility bias I integrate Agata Stanisz's and Waldemar Kuligowski's attribution of new analytical meanings to places of "standstill" in mobility projects (Kuligowski 2019, 4; Kuligowski and Stanisz 2015) that allow a critique of modernisation processes.

This desire for a more holistic understanding of service areas leads to my final point, which addresses the complexity and temporal aspects of people and their work to restore the drivers' fitness to continue their ride (Hage 2009a; Molz and Gibson 2007a, 2007b). This idea has ancient precedents such as caravanserais, which like service areas were places where travellers replenished their supplies and then departed (Al-Sulaiman 2018; Blom et al. 1997)[3]. However, service areas provide fuel instead of water and animal

[3] Blom et al. analysed early satellite imagery and argued that the placement of caravanserais along the caravan route between Beijing and Kyakhta served a dual purpose: to facilitate

fodder; safeguard electronic devices rather than organic products from thieves; change tyres rather than repairing saddles. These points emphasise how not only infrastructure and technologies, but their physical contexts have changed to reflect the faster pace of life while remaining basically the same. Just as in caravanserais, daytime customers often only stopped in to refuel and maybe use the restrooms; then paid and continued their journey. Just as at the service area, people's individual biological needs and those of the mobility project defined all interaction at the caravanserais. They might have even had customer loyalty programmes for preferred customers like the bonus Sunny Oil and other service areas (including franchises) offered with large fuel purchases. While I will later discuss the importance of hospitality in the contexts of trust and mistrust in more detail, I want to emphasise one complication here: what might appear to outsiders as an interruption can also be integral to a driver's mobility. Getting back on the road may require waiting and a temporary loss of control over one's progress and movement (Dwyer 2009; Tan 2009, 66–67), but I highlight this aspect to show why I focus not on the desire to resume travel as quickly as possible but on the opportunities this offered to compare experiences, synchronise and coordinate with other drivers in the context of individual driving rhythms (Anranter 2024b). Under normal weather and road conditions, it never actually saved time to stop and interrupt one's journey, and minimising the time drivers spent at the pumps was as important to the service area's management as the drivers using or waiting to use them. However, hours or even days could be spent there with friends, celebrating birthdays or waiting for the road to be reopened.

So why Sunny Oil? Why this seemingly mundane site for an ethnographic exploration of mis*trust? This question, posed by co-workers, interlocutors, and even friends and family, echoed throughout my research. Their curiosity mirrored my own initial feeling of uncertainty, which evolved into fascination over the months I spent immersed in the rhythms and routines of the service area.[4] My answers became more nuanced over time,

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connections with local communities while avoiding the "dangers and expense of travel through more populated areas (thieves and taxes)". (Blom et al. 1997, 19–20).

[4] The notion of 'uncertainty', used not only in the social sciences and humanities but also to explain quantum mechanical phenomena appears repeatedly in my work, particularly in its theoretical aspects. The term has been used in anthropology to address contexts where instability, violence, and unpredictability have become commonplace, producing specific forms of experience and governance (Boholm 2003; Bauman 2017; Perkins 2022), this has also introduced ambivalences that have diluted the precision of the term. Importantly, however, scholars who adhere to a narrower, often trauma-focused definition of uncertain terrain have demonstrated that uncertainties provide generative spaces where modes of resistance can flourish (Povinelli 2012), where people proactively adapt and develop skills while striving for predictability (Christiansen, Utas, and Vigh 2006; Archambault 2015; Knight and Stewart 2016; Jansen 2016; Knight 2022). However, the uncertainties I am discussing do not arise from war or physical violence but from a fundamental condition of neoliberal systems of production, so some might argue that they are precarious rather than uncertain. The relative emptiness of the concept

shaped by the countless interactions and observations I had made. The logistics industry was increasingly pushing for efficiency, seeking to minimise downtime and human interaction. Modern long-haul lorries are designed with sleeping cabins, entertainment systems and even internet access to allow extended periods of autonomy. If it were not for regulations, they could travel for thousands of kilometres with no need for services.

Fuelling the lorry and feeding the driver are the last non-negotiable 'human factors' in an otherwise automated system. While many conflate the two, service areas offer a wider range of amenities than filling stations. Beyond fuel and basic supplies, many like Sunny Oil include restaurants, shops, and even overnight parking. Filling stations, on the other hand, typically offer a more limited selection of goods and services, making them less conducive to the kind of extended interactions I sought to study. Sunny Oil's numerous amenities and social spaces made it stand out among the more than 3,200 service areas in Bulgaria (Voynov 2020) and an ideal site to investigate the nuances of trust and mistrust where logistical efficiency increasingly prioritises speed and automation over human connection. It was like a small ecosystem that included both daily passers-by and people who only dropped in occasionally or even only once. Despite the industry's push for efficiency, the service area remained a site of social interaction, albeit often brief and transactional. Within these interactions, I observed how trust and mistrust were constantly negotiated and expressed through language, behaviour, and assumptions about the infrastructure itself.

1.2Sunny Oil: Embedded in a Roadside Network

Sunny Oil was the last service area for travellers crossing the northern border to Romania and the first for those entering Bulgaria and headed to the south of the country, Greece, Turkey, or Iran. North of the service area and after a long straight stretch, there were two exits, one for to the port and the Serbian border and the other for the Golden Horn area in the north of the Vidin district. The road then gradually curved to the right to reach the bridge over the Danube and divided into several lanes at the Romanian border checkpoint. At Sunny Oil, this embeddedness was palpable. For people heading north, it offered a last chance to stock up on Bulgarian groceries and perhaps take a brief rest before facing the possibility of delays at the border. For Bulgarians returning south, it marked the beginning of a familiar landscape with Bulgarian tabloids and souvenirs that were priced in the comforting currency of the lev.

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has led me to largely avoid the term, using it only to either highlight the ambiguity of responsibility behind an uncertainty perceived and assumed by interlocutors or when directly referring to other authors who use the term.

The northbound border control queue on the E-79 transport corridor linking Igoumenitsa/Patra-Athina-Sofia-Budapest began just outside the service area.[5] Locals saw the this motorway—with shipping on the Danube shipping and the railway line, one of three major transport corridors that converge near Vidin—as “bypassing” the city, which underscores how it facilitated transit without fostering direct engagement with the local community. While the official objective is to stimulate both local and national economies across Europe (European Commission et al. 2019) and ensure a return on investment in transport infrastructure (Reeven 2005, 707), the metaphor of the ‘bypass’ underscored a perceived disconnect between these grand objectives and the lived realities of those living in Vidin.

The choice of words reflected the neo-colonialist character of such corridors, which prioritise efficient connections between hinterland production sites and global centres over the needs of local communities (Hesse and Rodrigue 2004; Notteboom and Rodrigue 2005). The emphasis on efficiently extracting resources for, transporting products to, and mobilising labour in central hubs echoes historical patterns of exploitation and unequally distributed benefits (Anand, Gupta, and Appel 2018; Bebbington et al. 2018; Rogers 2015; Schweitzer, Povoroznyuk, and Schiesser 2017; Spice 2018). With such harmful effects in mind, the genealogy of the service area reveals its embeddedness not only in a physical network of national and European roads, but also in economic and ideological networks. Wherever travellers came from and wherever they went, the service area existed only as part of a formal and informal network of not just transport routes but also ideas and narratives. In what follows, I will try to offer some insights into what belongs to this network, which included not only an interconnected system of roads, both physical and metaphorical but also cultural and linguistic, economic, and ideological advantages that made the service area a place of fluidity.

The road and the service area, located at the intersection of mobility and stasis, infrastructure and its possibilities, became sites of encounter and interaction. Along the E-79, drivers, passengers and residents were all affected by the occasional expansion of the road into the service area (particularly in the event of road closures; see Chapter 5)

[5] The E-79, an intercity highway, represents the European Union’s commitment to integration through its development as part of the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) initiative. Established in 1996, this ambitious project aimed to break down barriers to movement and trade across the continent by connecting major cities and regions. Funded primarily by the European Investment Bank (EIB), the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), and EU Structural and Cohesion Funds, the TEN-T initiative is a physical manifestation of the EU's vision of a unified Europe, fostering economic cooperation and cultural exchange by facilitating the seamless flow of people, goods, and services. The E-79 serves as a vital artery within this network, symbolising the transcending of national borders and creation of a single truly integrated market.

and engaged in verbal and non-verbal exchanges. On a routine level, however, it was all about navigating the service area's entrances and exits while recognising standstills as well as specific manoeuvres, particularly during periods of heavy traffic. When approaching the service area from the E-79 and the south, it was enough to get into the right-turn lane and drive off the main road and onto the service area premises; an apparently safe manoeuvre if you used your indicators and looked out for cars approaching from the north. Drivers coming from the north had to first move their vehicles into a too-short centre left-turn lane and then cross the northbound lane to enter Sunny Oil's premises. Depending on the traffic situation, this could be dangerous and was sometimes impossible. You had to merge from the access road into the regular southbound lane and then the turn lane at speeds as high as sixty to seventy kilometres per hour within two to three hundred metres and with the cars on the busy main road travelling over the speed limit of ninety kilometres per hour. It was even worse when leaving the service area and re-entering the E-79 towards the south: then, it was necessary to cross the northbound lane and get into the southbound one with other drivers travelling at ninety kilometres per hour in *both* directions. Alternatively, a narrow, unmarked, and unpaved driveway connected the outskirts of the city to the rear of the service area and allowed drivers to avoid traffic congestion during peak hours.

Estimating the speed of cross traffic while entering and leaving the service area required unspoken communication, sometimes (depending on geometries and speeds) without even making eye contact. The decision to initiate a manoeuvre was based on an assessment of road conditions, ones driving skills, and the driving behaviour of others. In a matter of seconds, drivers had to decide whether they had enough tyre traction to get into or out of a lane quickly. They had to avoid merging without warning and assess whether it was necessary to use their amber warning lights or flash their headlights. Driving skills and behaviour became a complex language to decipher. My co-workers at the service area, along with a wide variety of others—maintenance crews carefully gauging the speed and distance of oncoming traffic, mechanics assessing vehicles' conditions based on the sounds it they made, or sex workers observing the type of car and its driver's demeanour—learned to interpret clues to whether the next vehicle might represent an opportunity or a threat. Individual drivers were sometimes accused of being careful or careless regarding others' wellbeing based not only on their driving but also stereotyped based on indications of nationality on their licence plates. In addition, the E-79, especially around Vidin, was considered part of the border infrastructure and therefore a site for such criminal activities as smuggling and human trafficking (Dimovski, Babanpski, and Iliyevski 2013, 206).

Despite acknowledging the challenges associated with the E-79 and increased traffic, many locals embraced the road's internationality, saw it as an opportunity to align local

infrastructure with European standards, and adapted to the new rhythms and routines brought about by intensified traffic. To my surprise, most of my interlocutors reproduced the arguments of local business interests when discussing the motorway: the roads might have become more crowded and dangerous, but Vidin had become a transport hub and people just needed to learn to manage that (Staiykova et al. 2007; Witte et al. 2013). At the same time, however, most of my interlocutors downplayed their city's importance. Many argued that other cities like Montana (Монтана) or Vratsa (Враца) were more important hubs in north-western Bulgaria due to their economic strength and proximity to Sofia, despite not connecting multiple transport corridors. Here, they referred to the jobs available in those cities and, more importantly, their social and economic status and vibrancy. It was clear that these were the real centres of the region, something confirmed by interlocutors from other European cities in Spain, Germany and the UK who were also travelling along the E-79. Meanwhile, however, the intensification of river traffic along the Lower Danube and continued cross-border passenger and goods trains increased the number of encounters with strangers from ever more directions and with various destinations.

Drivers and travellers, as well as residents and my co-workers who earned their living at Sunny Oil had a variety of reasons for stopping at the service area, which they transformed into a vibrant place of activity along the transport route. For lorry drivers navigating the complexities of transnational routes, Sunny Oil offered not only the fuel they needed and the rest stops mandated by regulations,[6] but also a chance to connect

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[6] In accordance with Regulation (EC) No. 561/2006, professional drivers may not drive for more than ninety hours within two work periods, with a maximum of fifty-six driving hours in the first week. Additionally, they may not drive more than nine hours per day and must take a daily rest period. However, there is some flexibility: under certain conditions, they may extend their daily driving time to ten hours (European Parliament and the Council 2006). In addition to prescribing maximum driving hours per day, the regulation also details the required breaks and pauses. Drivers must take forty-five minutes off every four-and-a-half hours, but the driver may decide whether to take one long break or two shorter ones. During this time, the driver must rest and refrain from any other activities. Drivers are permitted to take a rest period of between nine and eleven hours, in accordance with regulations governing the distribution of work hours over a two-week period. The weekly rest period must last a minimum of forty-five hours; if it is shorter, it may be taken within the following three weeks. (European Parliament and the Council 2006, 7). All driving and resting times must be logged and available for police inspection.

Although the decision of when and where drivers take a break is a personal one, dispatchers direct them to secure parking lots for insurance and risk-management reasons. Additionally, all drivers depend on the national and regional authorities to select sites for car parks and service areas, as well as unstaffed lay-bys on highways or international roads and on weekends make use of low-traffic roads in the outskirts of industrial and commercial cities. Agata Stanisz notes that drivers must frequently exceed their driving periods to reach a car park with available spaces or else arrive at their desired location at the last minute. Often, they are obliged to park in undesignated areas (Stanisz 2015).

with a transient community of fellow travellers. Tourists and private motorists, drawn by word-of-mouth or spontaneous decisions, sought a respite, some refreshment, and perhaps a glimpse into the local culture. Residents also frequented the service area to make use of its amenities or simply observe the ebb and flow of travellers from across the continent. Even sex workers, navigating the margins of this international network, found a strategic foothold at Sunny Oil and their presence added another layer of complexity to the site's social dynamics. Initially, I assumed that the interactions I observed there were typical of service areas along major routes. However, my fieldwork revealed the unique character of this site and how it was shaped by its specific location and the different people it attracts. Embarking on my own journeys along the road, I also became a customer and driver myself. Some service areas beckoned with promises of comfort and convenience, only to be shuttered upon arrival. Others, while functional, left me with a sense of unease. I realised that my judgement was subjective, shaped by my immediate needs and the urgency of the moment. If I wanted to clean up, I was happy to find a clean and well-equipped bathroom; if I just wanted to relieve myself quickly, basic toilet facilities sufficed; but each encounter highlighted the relativity of needs and expectations within this transient world.

In each facility I visited along the E-79, I tried to strike up a conversation with the staff and obtain some information about the condition of the roads and traffic. Sometimes, I asked political questions: nothing sensitive, but people still had to either dismiss my question or take a stand. This was sometimes explicit and sometimes employed more subtly. For example, "все още (still)" referred to an undesirable condition and "брате бойко (Brother Boiko)" alluded to the clientelistic leadership style of the prime minister at the time. I usually stayed only a few minutes in most cases, just long enough to get some new impressions that I could discuss with my interlocutors at Sunny Oil. Near Dimovo (Димово), about twenty minutes south of Vidin, I once struck up a conversation with the owner of a small bar and shop that sold cold drinks, potato crisps, and sundries. Because it was located in a village with no proper carpark or easy pedestrian access, she had not benefited from the reclassification of E-79 and consequent growth in traffic. On the contrary, she said: most older people no longer dared to come to her business because crossing the road had become dangerous with so many cars and lorries speeding through the village. Vendors along the road near Mesdra (Мездра) told similar stories. All day long, they sold honey and home-made jams to passers-by and locals from their cars. However, since the traffic had sped up, fewer vehicles stopped. As I worked my way along the road to Sofia, spending a few days each at different rest areas and stopping points and meeting people, I found that the networks and relationships along the road varied. I once stayed in a motel near Montana and wondered why so few people were speaking Bulgarian. Finally, I noticed the

inexhaustible samovar in the lounge and realised that this establishment catered to Turkish long-distance drivers. A walk through the adjacent car park to check licence plates confirmed my suspicions.

This dissertation does not aim to stereotype the road or the service area as sites of unmitigated mis*trust but rather to examine the nuances and limitations of mis*trust as a critical intervention. By focusing on a service area embedded within a transnational transport network, this research explores how mis*trust operates in the context of the movement of people and goods between European core and peripheral regions. It is in this very setting, I argue, that service areas are characterised by fluidities and interchangeabilities that cannot do anything but render mechanisms of mis*trust visible, as they are not only linked to roads, but sometimes even integral to them. Of course, one could find evidence of the additional traffic lights and one-way road signs and dirt-covered access roads to construction sites dominated by the noise of jackhammers and concrete saws—like the entire motorway expansion— not only along the road and at the service area but also on social media and in historical documents. Nevertheless, I had decided to focus my mind and body on the road and the service area.

For days, I travelled along the road, stopping and taking part in life along the road. Later, when I returned to the service area, I was able to use my experiences to discuss them with my co-workers in the service area. Another issue that took place on the roads and at the service areas, but could have been equally reconstructed by analysing social media and newspaper articles solely and without myself travelling along the road in that very period, was how locals were confined to their homes during the pandemic while truck drivers and other travellers along the highways were allowed to continue driving as long as they stayed afar from the city borders. All these subjects were experienced and discussed by not only my co-workers and myself (because we were on the roads and at the service area) but the population in general. But the road and the service area had become a kind of catalyst for me.

1.3What is to Come?

The eight chapters of this thesis investigate mis*trusting as a critical intervention and its uses for anthropological research and thinking. This introductory chapter offers a portrait of my field site in Bulgaria, embedding it in a larger network of roads, but also ideas and limitations. Chapters 2 and 3 then lay the groundwork for this investigation by setting out the theoretical basis for my thinking and analysis and outlining the ethnographic methodology I employed in the field. These chapters also address some

practical considerations encountered during fieldwork and the complexity of translating lived experiences into written ethnography.

Building upon the theoretical foundations established in the previous chapters, Chapter 4 explores the complexities of trust and mistrust at the Sunny Oil service area. Through an analysis of materials and actions present in ethnographic observations, this chapter explores how standardisation, while intended to provide security and facilitate a swift return to the road, can paradoxically foster mis*trusting. By examining customers' diverse needs and expectations, I show the various ways that individuals navigate and negotiate these norms, sometimes complying with and sometimes subverting them, in their pursuit of a sense of security and control.

Chapter 5 investigates how the contexts of mis*trust shift during moments of disruption, such as travel interruptions due to Covid-19 checks, a road closure during a snowstorm, and difficulties using an e-vignette toll payment terminal. These disruptions serve as a natural experiment, highlighting how unexpected events can expose and reshape the dynamics of trust and mistrust within a community. By examining crisis management routines and strategies employed by various actors, the chapter explores the challenges posed to seemingly stable hierarchies, revealing the fluid boundaries between mistrust and trust and their impact on attitudes and actions: mis*trusting, characterised as a 'flickering' interplay and a subversive act of rebellion, emerges as a temporary yet powerful force driving independent action. Furthermore, this chapter demonstrates how seemingly minor logistical changes, such as the relocation of a payment terminal, can have effects on trust relationships of imagined communities within the logistics regime.

Chapter 6 explores how residents navigate a landscape marked by decaying infrastructure and unfulfilled promises and the complexities of agency and mis*trust in socialist, post-socialist, and democratic Vidin. Through ethnographic vignettes featuring derelict sites, a controversial highway project, and a revealing Facebook survey, the chapter examines how mis*trusting is intertwined with everyday language, political rhetoric, and individual strategies for navigating uncertainty. Starting from "Приватизация" (privatisation), I reveal the many ways they can grapple with disillusionment, challenge dominant narratives, and seek to reclaim agency in hegemonically structured societies. This shows how mis*trusting can foster collective action and fuel a sense of hope, even in the face of setbacks and ongoing challenges, and highlights the importance of understanding local narratives and perspectives when analysing processes of social and political transformation.

Chapter 7 describes how a walk across the new bridge connecting Vidin to Romania with Radostin led me to reflect on how Schengen membership and a complex interplay of trust and responsibility were a prerequisite for such a large-scale infrastructure

project. By tracing the history, planning, and construction of this controversial bridge and drawing extensively on archival material, the chapter explores the links between mis*trusting and varying forms of responsibility. The controversial naming of the bridge also served as a lens to examine attempts to evade responsibility and liability, highlighting how mis*trusting can be directed towards institutions and their actions. The chapter ultimately argues that mis*trusting, regardless of the form of social organisation, necessitates some kind of target, whether it is an individual, an institution, or a system.

Chapter 8 concludes the thesis by weaving together insights from preceding chapters to provisionally address the central research question of how people engage in mis*trust. Advocating a more prominent role for mis*trusting in anthropological inquiry, the chapter proposes bringing it out of the shadows as a lens to examine social, cultural, and political conventions across historical and contemporary contexts. Following anthropology's mandate for critical engagement, it calls for integrating mis*trusting into the discipline's conceptual repertoire when analysing underlying knowledge, behaviours, and shared understandings, particularly within their specific contexts. The chapter ultimately argues that if the concept of mis*trusting is to serve as an effective critique of social values it demands openness and visibility.

Finally, an epilogue reflects on the possibilities and limits of mis*trusting decoupled from time. There, I envision an alternate reality where societal opening did not occur within a neoliberal paradigm but one prioritising environmental protection. This thought experiment applies the forms and practices of mis*trust observed in Bulgaria to potential future power structures or dominant ideologies and transcends entrenched narratives of modernity.

2. Theoretical Considerations on Trust, Mistrust, and Mis*trusting

I had only been in Vidin for three days when my host Radostin's daughter Dani called, the day before I was to start my participant observation. "We'll pick you up tomorrow morning at nine o'clock and take you to the service area," she said, she and her husband would stop by after dropping their children off at school. I was quite relieved: I had by then realised that I was much further away from the service area than I had expected to be staying, there was no direct bus connection, and it was a ten to fifteen minute drive. Dani may not have known, but it is also likely that she had overstated the distances to keep me from worrying. The next morning, she and her husband Miki arrived in his brand-new, metallic-yellow taxi: he had become a cab driver after their return from almost a decade living and working in Germany. I was glad to see them approaching: everything seemed to be going according to plan. Radostin and I got in the car and after a few minutes, Miki, who was probably worried about having to drive me back and forth between the service area and village every day, asked how I planned on commuting. I had considered bicycling, but Miki immediately dismissed that idea: it was not only too far but it would be too dangerous. The winter mornings were dark and the roads slippery, and even once the weather improved most drivers would still ignore the unenforced speed limits. Here, Miki seemed to be describing the road as a kind of lawless space, but he also warned of other dangers: watchdogs and venomous snakes that crawled out onto the road to shed their skins. (However, the latter were only dangerous in certain seasons). To travel comfortably and avoid being injured by lawless humans or dangerous animals, you had to have grown up in the Bulgarian hinterlands. Radostin nodded in agreement, adding that "everyone here had to look for themselves and their own family." And since I was now living with him and Dani had helped me organise my stay at the service area, it was important that we always be able to trust each other: I should be able to trust them and they me whenever we made a decision.

Trust—what was that, anyway, and what made it so important? What happened in the car when Miki brought up commuting? Why did he point out that I didn't know the area? And why did I suspect that Dani had misinformed me about the place before I arrived? Why did Radostin feel it was necessary to point out that we were now about to take decisions together? Many have emphasised or critiqued trust as a central component of ethnographic research (Koepping 1994; Rappaport 2008; Celestina 2018; Weichselbraun, Galvin, and R. McKay 2023), and the relationship between the researcher and the interlocutor is therefore not my priority. However, since the question of trust and mistrust came up so often in my research and in such a wide variety of contexts and personal constellations, I decided to explore what dominates social

interactions between trust and mistrust. My idea was to gain a deeper understanding of how relationships are created and maintained in mis*trusting, how they are used to navigate rules and orders, and how they become a common interest for people organising themselves in alliances meant to challenge hegemonic systems.

Starting from my early thoughts provoked by the experience of discussing how to get to the service area, and keeping in mind my aim to elaborate on the future-oriented critical intervention that I call mis*trusting, I nevertheless propose to first consider trust and mistrust as a condition, before discussing the limits of the term as a concept and result of experiences and local knowledge along with overarching contexts such as neoliberal agendas. My approach to mis*trusting starts from the work of Simmel ([1978] 2005) and Luhmann ([1968] 2014, 2018). While Simmel focused on trust between people, Luhmann analysed its function in facilitating society by reducing complexities. Despite criticisms, both authors not only initiated but significantly shaped how trust and mistrust are understood in more recent scholarly publications (Corsín Jiménez 2011; Di Somma 2022; Saraf 2020). In this initial subchapter, I aim to demonstrate the analytical advantages of an approach oriented towards action rather than description.

Second, starting from the etymologies of mistrust and distrust and both terms' dependence on trust, I discuss the long-standing neglect of mistrust in scholarly debates (Durkheim 2014; Wiegratz 2016). After deconstructing the various reasons that may have led to this neglect and negative associations with mistrust (Schiocchet 2018; Mühlfried 2018b), I then continue with the role of mistrust in different political contexts and traditions, examining how it operates not only as a disruptive force but also as a potentially productive element in political and social dynamics. By referring to anecdotes (Nietzsche 1881) as well as thinking based on contemporary examples (Carey 2018; Mühlfried 2019), I explore how mistrust shapes governance, public discourse and civic engagement, particularly in societies where institutional trust is either eroded or strategically withheld. Furthermore, I consider mistrust as a practice of forming alliances that challenge dominant systems and power structures (Mühlfried 2022). Rather than being purely destabilising or corrosive, mistrust can function as a tool for marginalised groups, activists, and dissidents to forge solidarities, reconfigure relationships, and contest authority (F. Osella 2022; Saraf 2020). I conclude this second subchapter by distinguishing conspiracy theories from mis*trusting. While both involve skepticism toward official narratives, mistrust—when situated within reflexive and analytical frameworks—can foster critical engagement rather than retreat into speculative or unfounded beliefs and conspiracies (Quinn 2000, 2002).

The final subchapter, on trust and mistrust as a framework for theory, discusses four bodies of literature that I use to clarify and delineate actions of trust and mistrust in particular contexts. Starting with my thoughts on the relation between hospitality and trust and mistrust, I explore the role and limitations of standards, norms and numbers at the service area (Candea and Da Col 2012; Molz and Gibson 2007b; Shryock 2012) I also offer preliminary thoughts on why human-centred studies of the crisis of mobility (Ayaß 2020; Ghannam 2011; Stanisz 2015; Tan 2009; Vannini 2011a), decolonial approaches towards post-socialism (Benovska-Sabkova and Vrzgulová 2021; Cervinkova 2012; Cervinkova, Buchowski, and Uherek 2015; Humphrey 2002; Müller 2019), and on how responsibility studies—or, better—competing responsibilities (Burnyeat and Sheild Johansson 2022; Demian, Fumanti, and Lynteris 2023; Rose and Lentzos 2017; Trnka 2017; Trnka and Trundle 2014) have a stake in making mis*trusting more understandable and leveraging it as a critical intervention that may be extended to a broad range of settings.

2.1Trust and Mistrust: Grasping Social Relations

The terms trust and mistrust are familiar because they have now been at the centre of attention for quite some years, not only in Bulgaria as recently shown in cases by Ana Luleva (2021), but on a global level. One of the largest vaccination campaigns in history had demanded trust but often received only mistrust. The ongoing wars in Ukraine and Gaza require complex decisions and an emotional realignment that is impossible if not based on trust. But even when there is no crisis, we are used to being confronted with both trust and mistrust. Political parties vie for the trust of their voters before every election. In business, a whole field, customer relations, is dedicated to building customer's loyalty and retaining them through bonus programmes and/or open communications regarding production and supply chains or even salaries. Politicians and businesses are not the only entities that solicit for trust: scientists, educational institutions, and doctors ask to be trusted, as do would-be friends and romantic partners, hosts, and even anthropologists! Political scientists and economists want to know how trust reflects to the way particular societies are organised and, if it is lacking, to explain why people have turned to another state, party, or economy, or even voted with their feet by migrating. However, the multitude of applications—often simplistic—and contexts—often lost in particularities—blur the boundaries and make it almost impossible to define exactly what trust and mistrust, and in such consequence mis*trusting may be all about. If that was my aim, I had to clarify the terminology I would use. Thus, I decided to start with Simmel.

The German philosopher and sociologist Georg Simmel was among the first modern European social scientists to explore the concept of trust. In *The Philosophy of Money*, first published in 1900, he described trust as the one significant interpersonal basis for trade and exchange, since "very few relationships would endure if trust were not as strong as, or stronger than, rational proof or personal observation" (Simmel [1978] 2005, 177–78). For Simmel, trust bound relationships together without the need for evidence and first-hand knowledge and allowed transactions to be decoupled from mathematical calculations and proofs. Conceding such a role to trust, a word with religious associations in most European languages (including Bulgarian "доверие" (trust)) thus neatly preserved a small yet fundamental role for the spiritual aspects of contacting, discussing and making decisions with and about other people and other ideas. It is with pleasure, therefore, that I read Ana Luleva's introduction to *Culture of (Un)Trust in Bulgaria*, first discussing Diego Gambetta's definition of trust,[7] which emphasises 'believing in' and 'hoping for' probabilities in the definition of trust (and distrust) and then offering critical perspectives on how practices of trust have shaped people's coexistence in Bulgaria. Based on ethnographic data collected over more than 20 years from the last century, Luleva points out that trust (and especially distrust) had a significant impact on the relationship with state institutions, shaped the lives of young and experienced scientists at Sofia University in the 1940s and 50s, and continues to have an impact today in the context of economic processes and interpersonal relationships in the field of tourism (Luleva 2021).

Simmel's argument, for its part, laid the groundwork for a more strategic examination of trust as a social practice supporting the establishment and maintenance of lasting relationships. Some started to investigate the role of trust and trusting as a social function and sought to distinguish its sources from those of other social phenomena like hope). Sune Lisberg, Esther O. Pedersen and Anne Line, for example, have compiled a thought-provoking anthology of philosophical and anthropological dialogues in which the benefits and limitations of 'trust' and 'hope' based on experience or knowledge, or standards and routines are eagerly discussed. Indeed, the dialogues first deconstruct our respective understandings of what trust and hope deserve to make us more receptive to new ideas that may be less familiar in Western societies, such as certain socio-cultural, ecological and cosmological conditions that may encourage trust (2015).

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[7] D. Gambetta defines trust as the subjective assessment of the probability that another person or institution will act cooperatively or benevolently in a given situation. He emphasises that trust is not solely based on rational calculations but also involves an element of believing—a cognitive and sometimes even emotional commitment to the expectation that others will act as anticipated. Trust, in this sense, extends beyond strategic reasoning and incorporates beliefs about the intentions and reliability of others (Gambetta 1988).

Another compelling example of how Simmel's work continues to resonate today is provided by the systems theologist Emilio di Somma, who explores how people are born into (and raised in) constellations in which trust develops its effectiveness and thus perceive it as meaningful "because we engage, from the moment we are born, with related sets of values and institutions that we can perceive their history and draw on that past, which is part of our story, to build our sense of trust in them" (Di Somma 2022, 156). Di Somma starts from the assumption that coherence and consistency are more important than objectively verifiable knowledge in achieving trust, arguing that they depend on combining different dimensions that are relational, based on stable factors such as value systems and institutions, and also volatile, because they are experienced in personal stories and episodes. While this argument is generally sound, there is an interesting turn here. Di Somma is arguably making the unexplainable, the believing, less dependent on belief and faith by adding 'meaningfulness' to trust "because it is imbued with a sense of coherence and consistency provided by its past" (Di Somma 2022, 156). He thus allows for a new interpretation of what is happening, reducing the religious and mystical element and trying to replace it with potentially measurable entities (coherence, consistency).

However, in weakening trust's links with the mystical and religious, di Somma and other scholars take for granted several other factors that I think are more relevant, perhaps because it is my purpose to discuss mis*trusting rather than trust. Specifically, in explaining where it comes from, he assumes its existence. I am making this point for a reason: looking at the development of the academic debate on trust in the first half of the twentieth century in Europe, it turns out that socio-philosophical deliberations about trust were superseded by deliberations about hope. Was there no trust or was there no writing and thinking on trust? From João Feres Jr. and Jose Eisenberg's analyses of modern Brazil, we learn that there was hope for interpersonal trust but little reason to believe that it could flourish in the context of social segregation and the decline of democratic culture and rising authoritarianism (Feres and Eisenberg 2006, 145). It is likewise hard to imagine that relations of trust were particularly flourishing in Europe at the time, as that continent was facing the worst economic depression in a century, several epidemics, and the two deadliest wars the world had ever seen. Returning to Luleva and di Somma, one might first question whether there is any certainty that trust is a given factor for interpersonal relations, although sometimes there might be hope. I would then argue that hope is when there is still an interpersonal relation but at the same time a lack of coherence and consistency, which I do not read as experience but as a pattern. Do people born and raised in a similar region at a similar time trust and mistrust in a similar way because they were educated to define trust along similar lines?

It was only after the two world wars and with the establishment of democratic structures in Europe and elsewhere in the world that scholars like the systems theorist, Niklas Luhmann began to study trust again. Luhmann, who was mainly concerned with the abstract rationality of trust in complex social orders rather than describing the characteristics of interpersonal trust (1995, [1968] 2014, 2018) argued that that trust reduces social complexities in order to predict possible future actions in existing social orders, an idea that remains influential today. The strength of this argument derives from the logical connection of the individual premises, but also from the fact that, however imprecise the specifications of a particular social order may be, there is sufficient room for manoeuvre to respond to uncertain specifications and include the good, or expectations of the good, without previous knowledge or experience (Luhmann [1968] 2014, 34–43). Dissociating trust from knowledge and experience by reducing complexity inspired anthropologists as well as other scholars to use the concept to help define societal, including economic, behaviours in stable societies (Gambetta 1988; Ostrom 2003) and characterise relationships between human actors, people and things and animals and technologies (Ruh 2018; Bognitz 2018; Weichselbraun, Galvin, and R. McKay 2023). One particularly good example is Jan J. Pawlik's argument that Luhmann allows for partially trusting relationships where one or more variables remain untested and unconfirmed, an exception to a strict logical approach (Pawlik 2018).

However, Luhmann's ideas have not remained unchallenged. Just as di Somma merely built on Simmel, Luhmann and his followers have themselves faced the limits of their assumption of stable societies. For example, Janne Jalava (2003) and Susanne Holmström (2007) point out that trust not only may prevent the imagination of possible and necessary alternatives to societies but also hinder the development of social relations necessary to form alternative, more unpredictable and therefore negatively weighted 'unstable societies', provoking the question of whether there can be stability in complexity.

While some scholars have limited themselves to critique, others have developed their own ideas. Florian Mühlfried, for instance, focuses on mistrust and questions trusts overall capacity to resolve complexities by showing that neither the stability nor instability of a society is a prerequisite for trust or mistrust. Instead, he introduces the concept of active, passive, or neutral "duplications", in which superficial trustworthiness conceals underlying mistrust. In active duplications, people use conventions to decouple their mistrustful thoughts and feelings from their words and gestures, while in passive ones they avoid making decisions or commitments without explaining and subtly trying to avoid interactions. Finally, the neutral mode is expressed by making caveats where thoughts, feelings, and concerns stay with the mistrustful to

minimise possible losses (Mühlfried 2019, 17–18). Thus, Mühlfried concludes that mistrust is cultivated to gather and evaluate impressions of a situation, which makes it difficult to argue for an absolute reduction of social complexity building on stability. Trust and mistrust that neglect relational forms of engagement, he concludes, support the idea that they are used to manage rather than reduce complexities (Mühlfried 2019, 57–58; 70).

While Mühlfried's elucidation of trust have helped me understand trust (and mistrust), I must now return to the works of Luhmann and Simmel, whose influence in application-oriented contemporary definitions of trust is so pervasive that it would be ill-advised to completely neglect their notions of interpersonal and abstract trust. Indeed, there have been attempts linked to both authors to eliminate all uncritical reproduction of histories and experience and presumed knowledge that comes with trust. For example, Alberto Corsín Jiménez has suggested compressing the epistemic distances at which knowledge, trust and reciprocity converge by dismissing as obsolete any view of trust as an organising category, as a moral obligation, or as a character trait and intrinsic interest. To be of interest to anthropological knowledge production, he argues, trust should not be considered as a secondary phenomenon but accepted as a concept with future- and action-oriented qualities (Corsín Jiménez 2011, 178–79).

The focus on people who live in the present but express a desire to experience the future through trust is also present in the approach taken by Margit Ystanes and Vigdis Broch-Due (2016), who start from Simmel and Luhmann but argue that trust relationships that are interested in a not-yet-defined future cannot be understood in terms of past knowledge and experience. Understanding trust in a future-oriented way, they urge scholars to understand trust not as a noun, which "tends to emphasize an individual subject's deliberation to enter a contract or take a risk", but as a verb, which creates a "space of social anticipation binding subjects together." (Ystanes and Broch-Due 2016, 24) The writings of Jiménez, Ystanes and Broch-Due converge on the concept of seeing trust as taking place over time, with the latter adding a focus on *trusting* rather than on moments of *having trust* or *being trusted*. It should thus be understood as firmly embedded in the present while unsure of the future and as unclassifiable as negative or positive. Thus, as much as I am interested in advancing Mühlfried's approach of mistrust having a role in counter-hegemonic action (Mühlfried 2022), in this thesis I am trying to decolonise 'trust' as a term and concept and thus follow Broch-Due and consider trusting, mistrusting, and mis*trusting not as nouns but social practices and critical interventions. Focusing on trusting as an action operating over time marked a milestone in responding to the pressing need for equal language and collaboration, as well as the decolonisation of existing theories of trust to avoid any involuntary comparisons of ideal-typical states of being.

Before returning to mis*trusting, I will conclude this preliminary exploration with the concept of 'trustless trust' (Bruun, Andersen, and Mannov 2020). This neologism was inspired by recent observations about algorithms and how trust among people using cryptographic protocols for smart contracts, currencies and data security is created exclusively by probability calculations, eliminating once-trustworthy actors and replacing them with cryptographic trust. By linking this work to the value of money, the framework of 'trustless trust' offers a fascinating and fundamental critique that was perhaps unimaginable only a few years and technological innovations ago. Its first and most dramatic insight is the rejection of trust as a prerequisite of not only interpersonal (Simmel [1978] 2005) but also abstract relationships (Luhmann [1968] 2014) between two or more entities. Cryptographic protocols that do not request trust by themselves and are marked by the simultaneous possibility and impossibility of securing, monitoring and approving lightning-fast arithmetical processes deny a respective reading of trust. The construction of the phrase, through its double reference to trust, starts from the possibility of error and by referring to probabilities as the highest measure removes individual interactions as the subject of trust relationships. Second, 'trustless trust' emphasises a hegemonic shift in a world that we have born into and raised in. To illustrate this point, the authors refer to the unknown founder(s) of Bitcoin, which is perceived as reliable by millions of people. Although its originator is only known by a pseudonym, its history since 2009 has demonstrated that it makes little difference whether powerful entities such as central banks are replaced by cryptographic protocols and mathematical rules (Bruun, Andersen, and Mannov 2020, 13).

Unlike those scholars who continue to focus on interpersonal relationships and struggle to solve the dilemma of untested and unconfirmed knowledge that seems to persist regarding interpersonal relationships (Pawlik 2018; Sundberg 2020; Yellinek 2021), for the originators of 'trustless trust' trust no longer depends on the trustworthiness of any entity or person. Instead, the 'trustlessness' of trust indicates a yet unknown state of erosion of dependencies that has been widely discussed as a marker of functional egalitarian and communal societies (Etzioni 2014; Putnam 2007; Sciulli 2011) but never borne fruit. These concerns, which are most prominent in the work of Bruun et al., are not limited to deconstructing trust as a defined size in the field of social science and humanities. Nicolai Ruh (2018), for example, has argued that developers who are particularly aware of the power of digital tools seek to use mathematics to remove fundamental ontological uncertainties that affect the intentions, decisions and implementation of decision-making and other situations when trust is constituted from social relations. This new field of 'technologies and infrastructures of trust' not only calls for critically questioning dominant power relations in ethnographic engagements

(Weichselbraun, Galvin, and R. McKay 2023) but also bringing a new awareness to what is understood, framed, and processed in a social ontology that is implicit and invisible to many and sometimes closer or more distant to one's interests and ideas.

While I am not convinced that it is necessary to discard all the other work on and notions of trusting to understand the relations among researchers and interlocutors, among people at a service area, and among citizens of a state, thinking along the lines of Ruh and Bruun et al. still leads to some productive theoretical conclusions. The oxymoron of trustless trust poses a limit of what is relevant for social relations by suggesting that certain transactions, in this case defined by mathematical protocols, may no longer be perceived as social practices. This does not mean that trust and mistrust, or even mis*trusting, are disappearing as practices, only that they have left certain fields of application for others. In any case, the debate on cryptographic trust initiated by Ruh and Bruun et al. shows the extent to which mis*trusting, together with protocols, norms and standards requires specific contexts to be applied at all.

I have not offered this preliminary account of the historical development and critique of the concept of trust to provide a definition but to discuss it as an interpersonal relation no longer dependent on verifiable facts yet still based on experience and knowledge (Simmel [1978] 2005), as a reduction of complexity (Luhmann [1968] 2014), and as a practice oriented towards the future and interested in decolonisation (Coates 2018; Corsín Jiménez 2011; Ystanes and Broch-Due 2016). The digression about trustless trust, which positioned trust as a concept in the process of self-referential dissolution (Bruun, Andersen, and Mannov 2020), should add to our awareness of the potential pitfalls of any discussion of trust in contemporary societies, where accepting our lack of knowledge and also hoping for the good are not necessarily goals we should strive for. Otherwise, the dissolution of trust into trustless trust will only lead to endless but unrepresentative description. This brief account of a history of trust as a temporarily-suspended concept was also intended to open various possible anthropological approaches to it, that—whether seen as active, passive, or neutral (to follow Mühlfried, for instance)—involve perceiving, grasping, analysing and reflecting on trust and its semantic equivalents as a critical intervention and practice. This aspect will be addressed in the following subchapter: first as 'mistrusting' and then as 'mis*trusting'.

2.2 Understudied Mistrust: A Blind Spot of Social Theory

Social scientists interested in the cohesion of societies have traditionally focused on positive social interaction, neglecting the study of mistrust. According to Émile Durkheim, such gaps in sociology and ethnology came about because social scientists

were drawn to phenomena that promoted positive social interaction, rather than those causing social disunity, such as isolation and detachment. In other words, because social scientists tend to focus on positive aspects of social interaction, they might neglect the importance of studying how people distance themselves from each other, even though that can also be a crucial aspect of social life (Durkheim 2014). A century later, one would think there would have been some constructive response to Durkheim's critique. Nevertheless, the focus on pro-social activities has persisted: even as scholarship has broadened to encompass non-human actors and the environment (Franklin 2023; Ingold 2011 (2000), 2013; Kirksey and Helmreich 2010), the focus has largely remained on positive aspects of these interactions and the pro-social bias still seems to discourage scholars from reflections that might subject their knowledge, actors and practices to substantive scrutiny. As a scholar invested in the analysis of capitalist dependencies and fraud in Uganda, Jörg Wiegratz argues that this bias limits our understanding and emphasizes the need to analyse the "morals of actors and practices that are regarded by such approaches as bad, harmful, immoral or amoral" (Wiegratz 2016, 8–9). However, this is not an invitation to judge behaviours and practices such as mistrust but to engage with them scientifically and clarify their role in social relationships.

Mühlfried, among the first to take up this topic, offers two more explanations for why social scientists have long avoided discussing the roles and meanings of mistrust and distrust. His first resembles those of Durkheim and Wiegratz, but posits that mistrust and detachment have both been neglected because they refer to absence rather than presence. In the case of mistrust, trust is missing and in that of detachment, relationships, and these absences are equated with social failure. In order to resolve this dilemma, he suggests accepting mistrust and distrust as terms for concepts without an imperative relationship to trust, but placing them at the epistemological centre of cultural and social anthropology (Mühlfried 2018b, 9). His second explanation focuses on the essence of both concepts. Researchers, he argues, have shown little interest in discussing either because of their everydayness: it is difficult to tease out the particularities of these two concepts that compete with trust because the less visionary or exceptional attracts less of our attention. In other words, for someone to engage with and argue about mistrust, it must attract their interest by being remarkable. To scholars who only superficially discuss them, mistrust and distrust appear to be simply the normal everyday state of societies (Mühlfried 2018b, 7). The two terms have similar etymological roots, but the 'dis-' in distrust indicates the antithesis of trust and the prefix 'mis-' in mistrust, indicates its misinterpretation or misapplication of trust (Schiocchet 2018, 93).

To get past such negative notions by deconstructing the romanticised idea of an optimal state of trust as primary, I follow Mühlfried and Schiocchet: mistrust cannot lose its negative connotations unless it is made independent of trust and defined as a substantive concept. Claiming such a conceptual independence for mistrust and distrust complements trust and forms the basis of all interpretations contributing to mis*trusting as a critical intervention. Disentangling mistrust and suspicion from entrenched assumptions is not new: indeed, Nietzsche formulated a similar idea in 1881. In this aphorism, an old man asks the character Pyrrhon about the certainty with which he intends to teach philosophy. As the dialogue progresses, Pyrrhon replies that he will encourage people to mistrust, as this is the only path to truth and thus to further philosophy (Nietzsche 1881). This demonstrates how the powerful generative and productive practice of mistrust cannot be underestimated. Once the social benefits of mistrust are emphasised, there is no alternative but to see it in a more positive, constructive light. Consider how during my ride to the service area Miki's mistrust prevented me from being too optimistic about road conditions. Although this may seem like a minor point, confronting these theoretical questions has been critical. Only once the semantic and conceptual relations that had previously been a problematic constraint had been discussed did mistrust emerge as a complementary but independent concept coeval with trust. With all judgements removed, there was no reason to insist that there is trust without mistrust (and vice versa).

Having shown how mistrust has been misunderstood—and not only in the past—I will now show the role of mis*trusting power relations. I approach this issue by highlighting the formation of alliances and groups of people and in the context of changing power relations. I use alliances to indicate that I am talking about groups of people who not only share a particular interest but are prepared to act collectively and have the capacity to make it matter. Two authors, Carey and Mühlfried, have made important contributions to this discussion. Carey discusses the links between mistrust and power in a complex society in the High Atlas. He suggests that such "systems, insofar as they are concerned with the coordination of people and things, necessarily sediment and reproduce particular configurations or dispositions of trust and mistrust, which in turn foster or stymie different patterns of cooperation" (Carey 2018, 63). While he notes that most governmental systems are suspicious of people and their behaviour, the particularly interesting thing about his analysis is that not all political systems are equally mistrustful. Carey argues that aristocracies and technocracies (I would add dictatorships) mistrust the potential of the masses. The list of rulers and systems that have been overthrown by the people seems too extensive and too long. In contrast, liberal democracies are concerned about the inappropriate actions of individual for multiple reasons: as their institutions are designed to protect the rights and freedoms of

all citizens, there is not only the danger of individuals corruptly abuse their power, but also acting to undermine the rule of law or endanger public safety (Carey 2018, 63). It seemed to me that Miki was accusing the drivers on Bulgarian highways of this.

On the other hand, Mühlfried discusses mistrust and political relations with an ethnographic vignette of how he and his audience experienced the power of autocratic mistrust at a talk he gave at a conference in Kazakhstan. The key parameters that he introduces are the invisibilities of political mistrust and its openness under autocratic relative to other political conditions. In deconstructing openness, he separates the liberal from the democratic and revolutionary traditions. Mühlfried identifies a "liberal tradition" of mistrust as a regulatory mechanism to limit the concentration of power in the hands of the few to protect the freedoms of all and a "democratic tradition" where it is directed against the elites who, because of their power, can place their own interests above the common interests of all and helps to encourage public pressure and reminds those in power to keep their promises. A "revolutionary tradition" of mistrust, furthermore, challenges and transforms prevailing conditions that are assumed to be unjust and immoral. This last form of mistrust is challenging, however: while it begins as a catalyst for criticism of the system, it subsequently evolves into a misguided attitude that is perceived as a civic duty where the fear of enemies lurking everywhere limits possibilities for the creation of one's own utopia (Mühlfried 2019, 21-22; 29-34).

For all traditions and relations of power, a focus on mistrust and power structures addresses when and where it may emerge and whether it culminates in a loss of control. However, this focus also emphasises people's limited capacity to anticipate whether others—be they citizens of a state, passers-by or the attendees of Mühlfried's impromptu guest lecture on surveillance and systemic mistrust in Astana (Mühlfried 2019, 21-22; 29-34)—share the same notions of trust or mistrust. This limitation leaves room for rejection and dissociation, but also for critical discussion and persuasion. The concept of mistrust developing not only through existing and streamlined networks and relations, but also through the creation of new, cross-competing ones, as is noted by Carey and Mühlfried and others such as Aditi Saraf, who examines relations of trust among mercenaries who are friendly rivals in war-ridden Kashmir (2020) or Filippo Osella in demonstrating how Indian exporters in Yiwu, China cultivate mistrust to compensate for market volatilities and survive in a global hegemonic competition for goods (2022, 1246–47). When responding to my proposed commute from the village to the service area and back, Miki was not only doubted my cycling skill but concerned with two other issues: the majority of drivers who flouted the speed limit and other traffic rules, and aggressive animals, domestic as well as wild, that could not be trusted. We had to identify, recognise and learn to control these various challenges as we formed

a contingent alliance in the car. In coming together to confront the risks of my planned commute, we quickly recognised we would each have to confirm that we would assume and respect certain responsibilities—an important aspect of forming an alliance that should also be taken into consideration when looking at mistrust in state-dominated power relations.

On the other hand, it was quite clear that we were experiencing asymmetrical power relations and dependencies in the car because they were less formalised than in other cases. Carey and Mühlfried describe cases of relationships of trust between people, state institutions, and those in positions of power within political systems, and their ability to act responsibly. Meanwhile, Saraf and Osella describe relationships of trust between people who were dependent on each other for economic reasons but whose responsibility to be trustworthy would grow over years and decades. To plan a commute, however, we were assessing others in the context of a built and living environment that included road conditions and traffic rules as well as the possible risk of dogs and snakes. There was no way to predict the behaviour of drivers—or animals—before encountering them. Nevertheless, the authors I cite all suggest that trust and mistrust are used to either secure and maintain systems and their powers, or question and dissolve them.

Before I conclude by discussing how I apply mistrust and mis*trusting to my own work, I have a final comment on the boundaries of mis*trusting. Whatever the inconsiderateness of mis*trusting, whatever the openness of mis*trust, and whatever the goal in terms of political systems, hierarchies, and dependencies, I caution against reading mis*trusting as leading to conspiracy theories. However, it is important to acknowledge that while often a positive force for social change it can also be manipulated and exploited. Political actors or interest groups can capitalise on mis*trust to promote their own agendas, which can spread misinformation and erode public trust (Di Piazza and Eccles 2002). The line between mis*trust and conspiracy theories is often blurred: both can arise from similar sources, including perceived power vacuums, lack of transparency in decision-making, and a general sense of disillusionment with authority. The action-oriented reason for this blurring is that in both cases the initial suspicion is based on observation and doubt, as well as power vacuums or the absence of legitimate power (Giddens 1996 (1991); Latour 2004). I return to the alliance to distinguish mistrust from conspiracy. As Adrian Quinn points out, conspiracy theorists do not primarily cultivate persuasive alliances but a strong desire to set themselves apart from a mainstream majority (Quinn 2002). This observation is also common in the development of the conspiracy theory that characterises the Covid-19 pandemic as a 'plandemic' (Buturoiu et al. 2021; Lovari 2020; Nazar and Pieters 2021; Pummerer et al. 2021; Tonković et al. 2021; Vériter, Bjola, and Koops 2020). Arguments, regardless

of their topic, are made to serve the purpose of a few rather than the many and based on the claim to a superior understanding of what is happening; a scheme that is also reproduced within the respective communities. The primary hallmark of conspiracy theorists is that they purport to serve society by exposing betrayal and deception; then combine the desire to stand out with the goal of propagating pseudo-scientific discourses that undermine the state and other hegemonic services and institutions that it is suspected will have irreversible effects (Güner 2023; Radu 2020; Sternisko et al. 2021).

While mis*trusting and conspiracy both seek to overcome situational powerlessness through subjective control—itself a guarantee of what its proponents (and they alone) might call undisturbed freedom—they remain distinct in their attitudes towards others and the decisiveness of their determination. This distinction is crucial to my work because I present mis*trusting as a constructive force for democratic engagement and social change and to equate it with conspiracy theories could undermining this positive potential by associating it with irrationality, closed-mindedness, and potentially harmful social consequences. Mis*trust does not seek to restore the established order or elevate a new group of defined proponents. Unlike conspiracy theories, mis*trust welcomes newcomers and is open-ended in its conclusions. This protects it from the irreversible attitude of linking events with subjective observations that only leave room for unsupported beliefs. Its open-endedness is thus a crucial aspect of its value for democracy and other forms of social organisation. If compromised, it would lose all productive power.

The goal of this second subchapter was to lay the theoretical foundations for mis*trusting as a critical intervention detached from trust, which required discussing the pro-social aspects of mistrust before continuing work on mis*trusting as an independent concept. With the help of Carey, Mühlfried and others, I was able to illustrate the multifaceted nature of mis*trusting in the context of systems oriented towards different kinds of orders, whether purely political or existing in the context of an environment in which humans and other beings navigate. In this sense, mis*trusting can be seen as a means of exercising power or, alternatively, as a process of concentrating and shifting power. I have also shown that mis*trusting is an action that is open to many, and unlike conspiracy it is productive even when used to obscure cognitive decision-making processes or provide only selected and occasional information. Those who mis*trust in the long term and repeatedly—and this is what is of conceptual importance here, so as not to dilute the term—preserve important cornerstones of our societies by revealing the very same decision-making processes, providing creative impulses and promoting individual autonomy: there must be trust

where there is mistrust. It is this complementarity that makes mis*trusting stand out as a concept.

*2.3Mis*trusting: Going beyond Theories of Trust and Mistrust*

My investigation of trust and mistrust does not conclude with the introductory discussion of their background and the need to rethink dominant understandings, which grounded mis*trusting as a complementary productive practice embedded in social structures: the ethnographic chapters that follow will extend existing theory to the particularities of mis*trusting whenever a situation I encountered during my participant observation suggests the need to do so. However, I will now turn to literature that is more distantly related to trust and mistrust, to show the discrepancies between the ideal and reality of mis*trusting and to develop an understanding that corresponds to the lived experience of my interlocutors. The theoretical extensions that I will address in subsequent chapters deal with hospitality, crises of mobility, decolonial post-socialism and competing responsibilities. These elements, which are most relevant to the theory of trust, are presented in the order in which they appear in the chapters, alongside their connections to the theory of mis*trusting.

The theoretical framework on hospitality and mistrust, particularly the work of Carey (2018) and Mühlfried (2018a, 2018b, 2019), illuminates the complex interplay of mis*trusting, starting from the suspicion inherent in the service area's transitory environment. It provides a lens through which to analyse the ethnographic observations presented in Chapter 4, revealing how the negotiation of norms, rules, and standards shapes the experience of hospitality and mobility for both customers and staff. While Kant and later Derrida discussed hospitality within a world-universalist project (Jaques Derrida 1998; Jacques Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000; Kant 2016 [1795]), my focus on transport and travel has a narrower scope in which intentional stopovers serve to "refresh and rejuvenate the traveller." (Candea and Da Col 2012; Molz and Gibson 2007a, 14–15). However, a restriction of the gift of movement may hinder progress towards a theory of mis*trusting. Considering not only the functional but also the emotional dimensions of welcome and unwanted guests and hosts has proved to be a valuable addition here (Shryock 2012, 2019). Perhaps surprisingly, the links between mistrust and hospitality are well-discussed. Both Mühlfried and Carey emphasise that hospitality is linked with mutual trust and mistrust. Both authors ask when and how hospitality is not just an offer, but an etiquette to be respected according to higher-level norms and knowledge of dominant structures, obligations, and limits of hospitality (Carey 2018; Mühlfried 2019).

Accepting the links between hospitality and trust and mis*trust and translating mis*trusting into an action that expresses hospitality opens several possibilities. First,

mis*trusting could be read as an indicator foregrounding moral and social norms that we prefer to follow (Edirisingha, Aitken, and Ferguson 2022; Price 1996). Second, it allows for the identification of numerical and other means of standardisation that are meant to draw the parting line that gains validity in a particular occasion of mis*trusting (Day, Lury, and Wakeford 2014; Lampland 2010; F. Osella 2022; F. Osella and C. Osella 2001; Strathern 2000). Finally, I frequently discuss how hospitality works and its norms and rules to better understand the price of acceptance for any kind of deviation (Mühlfried 2019, 51–54; 56-57) that I encountered at the service area. This adds context while also exploring the freedoms needed to take advantage of stopping to refuel, recharge and remobilise.

The second body of literature I engage with is that of crises of mobilities, moments when drivers stop, stand still, wait, or pause. While much of this debate has taken place under the rubric of immobility, I prefer 'crises of mobilities' (Faist 2013) because it highlights the social dimensions of standing still, experiencing the waiting and, if possible, responding to it (Faas 2016; Jones et al. 2013; Oliver-Smith 2013, 2016). Also, the focus on the social aspects of standstills resonates with my analysis of mis*trust by highlighting the importance of interpersonal dynamics and individual perceptions in shaping responses to disruptions. By examining mis*trust within the context of these crises of mobilities, I contribute to this body of literature by demonstrating the 'flickering' nature of mis*trust and its role in shaping social interactions and alliances during standstills. This analysis will clarify the nuanced ways individuals navigate uncertainty, negotiate power relations, and adapt to unexpected interruptions in their mobility projects.

It was also quite obvious that declaring a paradigmatic turn towards mobility at first would also soon generate a new view on crises of mobilities (Faist 2013). From the beginning, has its main argument been that there is no mobility without immobility, whether this means a temporary mooring or a standstill (Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006). This dichotomy is steeped in semantic and emotional dependencies resembling those surrounding trust and mistrust. The interest in knowledge also seemed similar at first, so scholars of mobility and immobility focused on the approach of understanding all kinds of standstill, stillness and immobility, but more as a tangible state than as an actual physical, ideal or emotional process within a society characterised by movement (Bell 2012; Conradson and D. McKay 2007; Ghannam 2011; Henshaw 2006). Tim Cresswell was the first to call for expanding the boundaries of mobilities and their crises beyond the idea that it is preferable to flow or be mobile and including moments "when the movement of ideas gets stuck, is made to stand still, or is forced to wait for receptive audiences" (2012, 651). In response, the various crises of mobilities have increasingly

been explored as moments of temporary material and ideational (dis)assemblages (Bissell and G. Fuller 2013; Vannini 2011a, 2011b).

In addition to temporary (dis)assemblages of ideas and materials, two particularly intriguing ways of investigating the crisis of mobilities have been developing along the boundaries of stillness as a counterforce to mobility. The first claims a particularly nuanced understanding of the meanings of immobility, while the second is concerned with the exchange between mobilities and their crises thereof. Both are consistent with ideas about how trust and mistrust dissolve and reconsolidate. Regarding the nuanced understanding of the meanings of immobilities, which are really crises of mobilities, Agata Stanisz argues that waiting, although often misunderstood as a stasis in which nothing happens, is actually a (dis)agreement between those who wait or pause and the events and actions they anticipate (Stanisz 2015). Most waiting, Stanisz argues, follows a particular logic of "mobility regimes" such as timetables, tachographs and others (Stanisz 2015). Similar ideas have also been developed also by scholars outside the realm of mobility studies. In Ghassan Hage's anthology *Waiting*, (2009b), not only Hage himself (2009a, 2009c), but also Gillian S. Tan (2009) and Peter D. Dwyer (2009) take a similar stance. All three note that the actual physical interruption is complemented by the experience of standing still in relation to reference groups.

Authors taking the second route approach the fragility of mobility through rhythm, or rather arrhythmia. Like waiting, rhythms are defined by an orienting assessment of one's own mobility and immobility in relation to goals and schedules (Edensor 2010; Edensor and Holloway 2008; Lefebvre 2007; Schubert 2009), but also to the movements of others. For example, professional drivers travelling through Vidin and Bulgaria face various situations that may create asynchrony with drivers choosing other routes. These include police roadblocks, road closures, etc. A double focus on dependencies in immobilities and arrhythmia allows for the recording, description and analysis of dynamics in the alliances where mis*trusting is applied to overcome different moments of crisis (Algan et al. 2017; Breslin et al. 2022; Brown and Marí Sáez 2021; Saraf 2020; Yellinek 2021). In such situations, the search for a shared understanding of rules, norms and standards would either end or confirm existing alliances.

The third body of literature discusses critical accounts of post-socialism as an infrastructural reality (Carey 2018; Mühlfried 2022; Schiocchet 2018; Sitkin and Bijlsma-Frankema 2018). Again, I aim to use it not only to better understand the context but also to explore the boundaries of mis*trusting and my interlocutors' emotional efforts respecting them. However, integrating post-socialism (and its proxies), is a challenging task, as several scholars have pointed out. Caroline Humphrey, one of the first researchers from a Western university permitted to conduct research in the former

USSR, argues that post-socialist generalisations—even and especially those based on grand narratives of reformation and upheaval—were fundamentally inaccurate and that the restrictions on access had led to a lack of knowledge about diversity and everyday cultural and social practices that conveyed the idea that socialism was experienced similarly in all regions at all times (Humphrey 2002, xx) The ability to study the fragments of a long-feared but now disintegrating system and its society added to the construction of hegemonic diminutives—the problem of post-socialism was surely not only theoretical and conceptual but also methodological (Cervinkova 2012; Cervinkova, Buchowski, and Uherek 2015; Chari and Verdery 2009; Ilieva 2010; Skalnik 2002).

Matters improved with the emergence of a shared rejection of grand narratives and with the integration of studies on fluid identities and literatures, regional localities, and subjectivities including senses and emotions into socialist and post-socialist studies. However, Milena Benovska-Sabkova and Monika Vrzgulová (2021) still argue that decolonisation is not completed. Why else, they ask, would the application of findings from post-socialist regions to other regions without a socialist past need justification? (Benovska-Sabkova and Vrzgulová 2021, 197) While I have tried not to focus on the particularities of different understandings of 'socialist' and 'high' modernisms as limited to technocentric development led by powerful dictators and technocrats (Mitchell 2009; Scott 1998) or as capitalist 'dialogical' (Taylor 1991) or 'green' (Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing 2011) modernisms, I can see how stigmatising assumptions, even among my interlocutors have produced 'clouded views' about socialism (Chelcea and Druta 2016) and liberal democracies.

At the same time, I came across reflexive and decolonial approaches avoiding absolute narratives of either system. While many of my interlocutors expressed disillusionment with both the socialist past and the post-socialist present, some individuals offered more nuanced perspectives. For instance, during one conversation at a birthday party, the service area's manager challenged the prevailing narrative of socialist inefficiency and capitalist progress and argued that despite the socialist system's limitations it had also fostered a sense of community and social responsibility that was often lacking in the current market-driven economy. To avoid any kind of stigmatisation, I highlight what is designated as post-socialism in contemporary contexts, emphasising people's trustful relations towards the assertiveness of competing systems and pointing out the difficulties people experience, not only in identifying the system relevant to a situation, but also when they start blaming capitalist and liberal policies instead of socialist ones for contemporary inequalities, poverty and other dysfunctions (Chelcea and Druta 2016).

One of the ways in which I was able to discuss assertiveness was by focusing on the terms my interlocutors used to discuss their legitimate desire to participate in a post-socialist and specifically capitalist model of society. I will thus selectively extend the discussion with terms such as 'privatisation' (Henig and Makovicky 2017; MacLeod 2002), 'appropriation' (Siobhan 2012; Tegtmeyer 2016), and 'stealing' or 'divestment' (Chavdarova 2001; Dalakoglou and Agelopoulos 2017; Nonchev 2006). I have also decided to avoid the term post-socialism in favour of a free translation of the phrase След демокрацията (дойде) (after democracy (came)). The phrase originated with my interlocutors and in context literally means 'after democracy (had come)'. In both the original and the translation, the phrase links what was before democracy—and democracy itself—with the hegemonic, neoliberal and capitalist promises. 'After democracy (had come)' represented a first step in coming to terms with post-socialism by helping avoid to the idea that the region was characterised by that single legacy while also enabling access to the illustrative power of narratives of socialist-modernist-inspired infrastructure projects and their imaginings and promises (Anand, Gupta, and Appel 2018; Dalakoglou and Penny Harvey 2012; Penny Harvey and Knox 2012; Schweitzer and Povoroznyuk 2020) and recurrent disappointments on the margins of socialist, post-socialist and other non-post-socialist liberal and capitalist realities (Khalvashi 2020; Ramakrishnan, O'Reilly, and Budds 2021; Star 2002) offer windows for analysing mis*trusting in political participation, as an escape from a "bunker of trust" or as a constitutive element in a society that is becoming increasingly familiar with their means (Mühlfried 2019, 71).

My fourth and final extension to theories of trust and mistrust concerns competing responsibilities to add subjective attributions to the measurable rules and norms inscribed in mis*trusting. Conducting research in an environment that is politically dominated by the collapse of socialism and accession to the European Union but 'condemned' to remain outside the Schengen Area, I differentiate between responsibility as 'social contracts', and responsibility as responsibilisation. 'Social contracts' highlights the dependencies, interrelationships and mutual recognition of citizens and decision-makers. The key question to be clarified here is who has the mandate to deal with something or to have control over someone (Robbins-Ruszkowski 2017; Trnka 2017; Trnka and Trundle 2014, 2017b). For Bulgaria, whose citizens had long lacked opportunities for political participation like free and fair elections, reorientating the relationship between the state and citizens was both a challenge and a source of inspiration (Burnyeat and Sheild Johansson 2022, 230; Kelty 2008).

In contrast to responsibility, which is regulated by 'social contracts' 'responsibilisation' (Foucault 1995) discusses responsibilities in the division of labour and in professional advancement and success, in the context of individual health emergencies and in the

face of an escalating, but above all self-inflicted, environmental crisis (Demian, Fumanti, and Lynteris 2023; Lemke 2001; Shore 2017; Trnka and Trundle 2014, 2017a). Unlike responsibility as a 'social contract', 'responsibilitisation' concerns individuals rather than relationships. Chris Shore identifies personal accountability as autonomy, the ability to act in a self-determined way, trustworthiness, loyalty, reliability, and finally, sensitivity to the needs of others, all key qualities for an individual to meeting the demands of responsibilisation (Shore 2017, 99–100). Neither responsibility, nor social contracts, nor responsibilisation are spared from criticism, however. Robbins-Ruszkowki argues that all analytical frameworks linked to responsibility are vulnerable to infiltration by the dominant political, economic and moral logics of neoliberalism. She therefore calls for a nuanced approach to the attribution of responsibility, regardless of whether 'responsibility' or 'responsibilisation' is used as an analytical concept (Robbins-Ruszkowski 2017, 194). Nikolas Rose and Filippa Lentzos go one step further. Using an everyday example of environmental pollution by large corporations, the two authors argue that criticising responsibilisation is tantamount to "a political and ethical shortcut." In rushing to our conclusions we tend to forget to engage the analysis and evaluation of "who is being held responsible by whom for what, in relation to what, in what ways, and with what consequences." (Rose and Lentzos 2017, 34) Rose and Lentzos but also Robbins-Ruszkowki call for a focus on coexisting responsibilities that link different institutions, with economic, social, political or other relationships and clarify the responsibilities they have with regards to the making of, for example, infrastructures.

One such process, in which divergent and potentially competing responsibilities reveal relationships of mis*trust, are the comparatively volatile acts of naming, name-changing, and branding (Dzenovska 2005; Matsunaga 2016; McAllister and West 2014). Naming, as the study of social and political structures through names has shown, often hesitates between not only memory but also moral and ideological systems or even meaninglessness. Responsible naming, instead honours people and ideas and the (dis)continuities linked to them, as well as contributing to remembrance (Augustins 2004; Basik 2020; Schweitzer, Povoroznyuk, and Schiesser 2017). By analysing of a naming process that developed along the poles of responsibilities and liabilities, I explore how mis*trusting depends on political beliefs rather than factual explanations. To ground this analysis empirically, I once again build on Mühlfried, arguing that an 'erosion of factuality' unfolds in the volatility of political responsibility (Mühlfried 2019, 73–79), and add the 'erosion of plausibility', which is intended to elevate mis*trusting from an individual practice to a shared intervention of responsible and meaningful critique.

Within a few weeks of my first trip to the service area, Radostin, Miki and Dani all had agreed that I needed a car. It was not only a matter of getting to the service area but also returning from it. Meanwhile, most of my interlocutors at the service area had also started to worry. One day, Javor, a co-worker at the service area, offered to check with some friends: maybe he could find someone who would be willing to lend me a car, "If you want, I'll ask a friend of mine. He has three cars, all roadworthy and registered. I'm sure he'll lend you one for about 100 leva per month. No vignette, no repairs." I did need a car, but was this a scam? A week later, Emi, one of the chefs at the kitchen pulled me aside. Someone had told her that Javor had offered to help me. Speaking partly in Italian, as we were the only ones who spoke this language, and not mentioning any names, she told me that under no circumstances should I accept the offer: "Той е лош *[sic]. Prima ti fa prendere la macchina e poi, quando la ritorni ti fará pagare un problema qui, un altro problemino lá, eccetera..."* (He's bad. He will lend you a car at first, but when you return it, he will make you pay for a small repair here and a problem there, and so on…). She added that I shouldn't worry, she would try to find me a car herself. I decided to trust Emi and told Javor that I would not take him up on his offer.

This chapter not only introduced the theoretical cornerstones of my theory, but the related concepts that together allow me to define mis*trusting in situations that deserve (shared) decisions. As during the drive with Dani, Miki and Radostin, I had to act based not on rules and norms, but only a sense of assumed responsibilities. I was aware of the contexts I had exposed to myself, but not yet able to fully grasp them and thus struggled to decipher relationships of dependency and power. With these early experiences in the field, it soon became clear that mis*trusting was not a condition but rather a set of actions, based on experience or knowledge but taking place in the present and looking to the future: a critical intervention that, in its names and paraphrases, seemed to get by without the concept of trust as a reference. The decision-making process during my first trip to the service area—and perhaps even more so the astonishment at my way of getting around—not only helped develop my concept of mis*trusting but also allowed a critical look at it as an ethnographic practice. But what does this mean for me? Should I have been open to fraud? My relationship with Javor, which had not been particularly close before the offer, faded. We continued to greet each other, but the joking around had stopped. Acting as an individual in the field, but also as a cultural and social anthropologist at home, blind spots of a theoretical, methodological and ethical-moral nature emerged. I will discuss these in the next chapter.

3. Methodological Considerations: Mis*trusting in Ethnographic Research

During my first afternoon at the service area, I received an unexpected phone call from Didi, the head of the accounts department. At first, I had trouble understanding, partly because I was still struggling with the Bulgarian language and especially without the help of non-verbal cues like facial expressions, but eventually I understood. Starting the next day, I could take Sunny Oil's company van from the main bus station in Vidin to the service area. I gratefully accepted this offer, which turned out not only to solve the problems with my commute but to expand my field site in unexpected ways, both geographic and social. Now, the service area effectively 'started' at the central bus station in Vidin, extending my reach beyond the immediate vicinity of the border crossing. I also got to know co-workers from the accounting department with whom I would otherwise have had little interaction. Thus, my field had not only expanded but also gained an additional space: the company van that picked up workers throughout the city.

Normally, the van was completely quiet, and the passengers passed the time by gazing out the windows. The composition of this group, the short trip and the early hour created a unique atmosphere. My own attitude there was very different from at the service area's shop or kitchen. Like the other passengers, I was quieter and more passive, and as the initial morning drowsiness wore off a sense of quiet anticipation remained. In the winter darkness, the day seemed far off. The journey took less than fifteen minutes and everyone stayed bundled up in their thick jackets. From time to time, we joked about how drowsy we still looked. Buried in the field, I began to absorb, listen, watch, smell, feel and record, write down and reflect on everything I was experiencing. At times, I found myself shifting between different subjectivities and perspectives, each offering a unique lens but also carrying its own inherent biases. This shifting not only influenced my lived experience but also how I analysed my data and crafted this ethnography.

As my research progressed, I realised that some people were more helpful than others in facilitating my access to and understanding on the field (Hamal 2020). Didi, and others ensured that my daily commute to the service area was both convenient and cost-free. This generosity not only solved a practical problem but also signalled a growing acceptance within the community. Inevitably, however, this favouritism inevitably influenced my perceptions, creating subtle biases that extended beyond the fieldwork itself.

An ethical framework and moral compass guided my research and shaped how I approached, understood and interpreted the complexities of the field. As a researcher, I found myself favouring mis*trusting over mistrusting and trusting, particularly when navigating rapidly changing social dynamics. After examining the dispositions and biases of other researchers who prefer mis*trust, I have divided this chapter into three subchapters. The first explores the multiple positions embedded in the pronouns 'we' and 'us', acknowledging my own shifting allegiances and distances within the field. Here, I draw extensively on Webb Keane's work on ethical life (2016) and argue for its relevance to everyday research practices, particularly the complexities of taking a stand within the research process. The second subchapter examines the reciprocal relationship between researcher and field site, questioning how my presence affected the environment and vice versa. I reflect on my emotional responses to certain statements and events, and how my presence may have shaped the expectations and behaviours of those I encountered. I conclude by reflecting on the challenges and opportunities of writing about mis*trusting, emphasising the importance of maintaining both critical distance and scientific rigour while grappling with the uncomfortable truths that may emerge from ethnographic engagement.

3.1 To the Service Area by Bus and Van: Approaching my Interlocutors at the Service Area

The Sunny Oil company van, an unexpected addition to my field site, fostered a sense of 'we' among its passengers, even when—or perhaps because—we were crowded together and sometimes even overcrowded. Then, we would squeeze together on the three middle seats or fold down the extra seats in the back. Despite this camaraderie, I often drifted into quiet observation, content to listen and watch the scene shift from the city centre to residential neighbourhoods to commercial strips and finally the open stretch of road leading to the bypass and service area. I did not begin to participate actively in conversations until much later than in other social contexts but eventually felt comfortable enough to comment and even initiate new topics. This hesitancy to engage fully in conversation, particularly in contrast to other settings, highlights the complexities of trust-building in transient spaces. While its precise reasons remain elusive, I can only speculate on the contributing factors.

As Ystanes and Broch-Due (2016) argue, pronouns can both shape social realities and foster 'othering'. My initial reticence on the van may reflect a cautious approach to navigating these dynamics, a subtle form of mis*trust in a new and unfamiliar social context. In this thesis, I strategically employ them to capture the relational agency at

play within the diverse modes of waiting, banality, and commotion observed at the service area and along the E-79. This approach reflects the fluidity of social dynamics that was evident even within the microcosm of the company van. However, certain groups, particularly those associated with regulatory authorities, remained outside this 'we', and were addressed formally by their titles or functions, highlighting the limitations of inclusion and the persistent power dynamics within the field. The 'we' that emerged on the van was just one of many potential affiliations within the service area's social landscape. It could signify a shared sense of distance from the locals or a camaraderie among riders as opposed to employees who arrived in their own vehicles or those already there.

While 'we' and 'they' sometimes delineated functional groups within the service area; occasionally the former included the entire service area staff as opposed to customers and suppliers. These affiliations were fluid and shaped by shared tasks and dependencies but nevertheless included relations of expertise, often entangled with mis*trusting. Webb Keane's 'Ethical Life' (Keane 2016) offers an alternative perspective, moving beyond the well-established critique of 'othering' that is often associated with the 'us' and 'them' dichotomy in anthropology. Keane, with a background in semiotics and extensive research on language in ethnography (Keane 1999, 2001, 2011), deploys linguistic forms linked to personal pronouns (inner dialogue, conversation, objectified language) and various affordances (psychological dispositions, conversational forms, historical objects) to elaborate his concept of 'ethical life' (Keane 2016; Wilenius 2016).

Upon arriving at the service area, we would thank the driver and greet the co-worker who politely opened the van's door. When I rejoined my co-workers in the shop or restaurant, this marked a shift in affiliation, as they seamlessly became the new 'we'. The previous 'we' of the van ride not only dissolved linguistically but also conceptually, with the other passengers becoming 'they' for the rest of the workday. To avoid the pitfalls of a relativism that avoids 'othering', Keane advocates continuous and rigorous self-examination of one's positions, evaluations, and perspectives within a dynamic field. My field's inherent fluidity enabled encounters with various actors and materials in ever-shifting yet recurring configurations, which extended my engagement with sensory experiences including with what I saw, heard, smelled, and felt later. Within the framework of an ethical life defined by interconnectedness, Keane emphasises how "productive tensions" tensions arising from the inherent contradictions and complexities of fieldwork, can be a source of ethical insight and critical reflection in ethnographic research (Keane 2016, 259–62)

In my research, these tensions manifested in various ways, shaping my interactions with co-workers and my understanding of the social dynamics at the service area. The fluidity of the field, with its shifting 'we' and 'they' dynamics, constantly challenged my sense of belonging and required careful navigation of my positionality. For instance, the commute to work created a temporary 'we' that dissolved upon arrival, highlighting the ephemeral nature of workplace alliances. This was further complicated by selective sharing of information and subtle exclusionary practices that were particularly directed towards Dessi—although we both arrived late—which underscored the complex interplay of social factors like rural background, gender, and perceived work ethic in shaping workplace hierarchies. Her exclusion from the core group prompted me to reflect on my own positionality within the field, how my presence might influence these dynamics, and the ethical implications of navigating these complex relationships. It also highlighted individuals' agency in choosing and shifting their affiliations, even within constrained environments. For example, my decision to hire a car was driven by practical considerations but also reflected my agency in shaping my research experience and navigating the social landscape of the field.

However, I believe Keane's discussion overlooks a crucial aspect: the agency individuals possess despite their affiliations and the potential compulsion to shift those affiliations and positions within the field. This question holds equal relevance for both researchers and their interlocutors. I have already mentioned one example where I actively shifted my position within the field that opened new avenues of inquiry and self-discovery. My return to the field in March 2020 coincided with a significant change: at that time, I hired a car, which afforded me greater mobility and independence. At that time, the only other employee at the service area besides the accounting staff who relied on public transportation was Dessi, a kitchen assistant from the village of Gomotartsi (Гомотарци). Like mine, her work schedule was dictated by the bus timetable and she could only work on weekdays. Although she took a public bus that dropped her off nearby and I relied on the company van, we formed a bond—a shared 'we' born from our distinctive circumstances. As we arrived two hours after the rest of the team, Dessi and I often felt like outsiders. Information from the night shift was shared selectively and we had to estimate the day's prevailing mood, so our sense of 'we' was fragile and not fully embraced by either of us or the rest of the staff. While we both arrived at the same time, my co-workers frequently derided Dessi's lateness to me and implied that she was unreliable, 'too weak', and better suited to a different line of work. She thus remained on the 'periphery' and excluded from the core 'we' at her own workplace.

The next step in my integration into the group based on the multiple mobilities leading to the service area was due to having access to my hired car around the clock. My

conversations with interlocutors at the service area and elsewhere confirmed that my seemingly unconventional decision to spend time at the service area for research purposes was legitimatised through the newfound access afforded by having a personal vehicle. However, even as I became increasingly integrated into the field, certain groups remained aloof, maintaining a distance that reinforced dichotomies inscribed in the 'we' and 'they'. For some, access was formally limited while among others there was a palpable yet unspoken apprehension, a phenomenon that is not uncommon in ethnographic fieldwork, particularly in Bulgarian contexts, as Anna Zadrożna (2016) notes. Beneath the surface friendliness flowed an undercurrent of mistrust and suspicion. My interlocutors frequently expressed concerns about the prevalent "mentality" (*mentalitet*) and perceived "lack of manners", described criminal or immoral activities, and warned me against interacting with specific individuals or groups (Zadrożna 2016, 217–18).

While Zadrożna's observations, particularly those about warnings against a criminal element thought to be present in the region, suggested potential illicit activities around the service area at night, the boundaries of my field and affiliations within it were more porous. At first, I could not observe the night shift due to the practical constraints of the bus schedule; later, I was explicitly excluded from it due to concerns for my safety. Through persistent engagement and informal visits 'as a guest' during these hours, however, I eventually was able to hear about the 'darker' side of the service area at night: prostitution, fights, and the ever-present risk of robbery. I was categorically denied access to the bathing facilities because such an environment was supposedly inappropriate for me. My protests were futile; this area remained inaccessible. Despite my protests, this area remained off-limits.

The Covid-19 pandemic further solidified this exclusion, even as the role of these facilities became more prominent due to disinfection and disease prevention. However, although I occasionally felt under scrutiny both from co-workers and the ever-present surveillance cameras, my experience differed from Zadrożna's metaphor of a protective yet confining prison (2016, 217–18). The distancing I experienced felt less like overt confinement and more like a subtle form of control that might have been due to my gender and perception as a Western European outsider. However, the fact that my actions never attracted more attention than my co-workers' suggests I achieved some degree of normalisation within the everyday routines at the service area. While I never faced direct threats or expulsion, subtle boundaries were established from the outset by the shift manager: the cleaning staff and night shift were separate realms that I was not to intrude on. This implicit boundary hindered my ability to forge deeper connections

within these groups and precluded the emergence of an all-encompassing 'we' within the service area.

The kitchen, however, offered a space of genuine belonging. My familiarity with culinary tools, my knife skills, and my contrarian attitude sparked lively discussions and a sense of camaraderie among the staff. In contrast, outside the kitchen and away from the service area, I adopted a more reserved approach. Nonetheless, the nuanced negotiations and constant analysis required to define group membership and comprehend the complexities of various positions had inherent limitations. My inability to personally illuminate all perspectives underscores the methodological impossibility of achieving a truly comprehensive understanding of the diverse social worlds that coexisted within the service area. Furthermore, deciphering group affiliations, my own sense of belonging, and the intricate dance of mis*trust have often necessitated retrospective reflection as these rarely became evident right away. Keane's notion of productive changeability within the field became fruitful only as these shifts in position and perspective yielded to a deeper, long-term understanding. Rather than accepting limited access, I actively sought ways to challenge the curated narratives and gain deeper insights. This approach that was based on my refusal to be satisfied with superficial explanations informed my data analysis, particularly when I felt I was being put off with overly simple answers.

Whether on the Sunny Oil company van or on any other mode of transport, I remained an active observer, engaged with my surroundings, and absorbing the sights and sounds around me. I tried my best never to shy away from interaction, and respond openly to my interlocutors, regardless of their tone or intent—friendly or hostile, sober or intoxicated, curious or suggestive. These encounters were dynamic: sometimes they challenged me and sometimes my own presence seemed to challenge those I encountered. The notion of conducting research from a position of detached objectivity proved unattainable. Instead, as Thomas H. Eriksen suggests, I found myself adapting to the demands of each situation and social context by embodying various roles: serious researcher, engaged debater, light-hearted clown, or playful joker (Eriksen 2010, 28). Back at my desk, I grappled with interpreting and negotiating the complexities of the field: the shifting affiliations, the multifaceted activities, the nuances of language and naming. While fieldwork and analysis are inherently intertwined, I will dedicate a separate subchapter to exploring these interpretive processes in greater depth.

3.2Positionality: Embodied Experience, Skill and Expertise

In recent decades, the methodological canon of cultural and social anthropology has undergone significant revision and expansion in response to the crisis of representation and calls for greater self-reflexivity. New approaches such as autobiographical and autoethnographic research (Butz and Besio 2009; Delamont 2009; Okely and Callaway 1992; Reed-Danahay 1997), as well as collaborative research (Luke Eric Lassiter 2005; Rappaport 2008), have emerged to address these concerns by challenging the power dynamics inherent in traditional fieldwork and mitigating the potential for unethical or exploitative and abusive practices in the field (Bourke 2014; Fassin 2006, 2008; Frankenberg 2005). This methodological shift underscores anthropology's need to critically examine its knowledge production processes, engage with questions of positionality and privilege, and dismantle entrenched biases. In this vein, I emphasise the embodied nature of ethnographic research, acknowledging how the researcher's physical, social, and cultural attributes inevitably influence interactions and shape the research process itself.

While my ethnographic practice does not strictly adhere to the conventions of autoethnography or collaborative research, it does draw inspiration from body-centred methodologies (Hastrup 1992; Okely 2020; Schindler and H. Schäfer 2021). For example, on one occasion the chef Emi instructed me to grate garlic and I readily undertook the task. Since this was a key ingredient in one of the service area's most popular dishes, I had to grate many heads, certainly at least twenty or thirty. Separating, peeling, and grating the cloves took over an hour and a half. Within twenty to thirty minutes, my hands began to swell and became warm and sticky with the pungent juice. With the repetitive motion and pressure, my right hand cramped up and I had to take a break. That night, my hands were throbbing, and in the following days small, painful cracks appeared on my skin. By Saturday, I was happy to temporarily escape the physical demands of the service area.

This seemingly mundane task underscores the profound role of embodied experience in ethnographic research. My physical discomfort and sensory engagement heightened my awareness of the subtle nuances of behaviour and interaction within the field. In addition, my co-workers' attentiveness to my pain—offering gloves, soothing cream, and a rest from further tasks—revealed an emerging sense of care and solidarity that I had not experienced before. Finally, Emi's meticulous preparation of my workstation could also be read as a subtle assertion of authority adding another layer of insight to her verbal instructions. Her actions suggested an assumption about my potential unfamiliarity with the task and prioritised clarity over efficiency. This adaptation of her

behaviour and communication style highlighted how my perceived skills influenced the dynamics within the kitchen.

After several weeks in Bulgaria and at the service area, I occupied a liminal space as a researcher, straddling the familiar and the unfamiliar. While I possessed certain proficiencies, like knife skills, my unfamiliarity with other tasks, like grating garlic, exposed my vulnerability. My behaviour on the company van and adaptations to different contexts and company further underscored this duality. And even though most of my informants continued asking about my actual work, most of them also nurtured rather specific ideas about what a university anthropologist would be doing. Some thought I was an expert in history and archaeology and assumed I was interested in folklore. Others explained that they were familiar with anthropologists because the cradle of the Balkans was to be found in the Bulgarian script and language. My ability to keep up during Bulgarian *horo* dances and speak and read the Bulgarian language often elicited surprise but also seemed to confirm their expectations of an ethnographer's interests. These assumptions also led some co-workers to eagerly share recipes and food preparation techniques they represented as traditional, often highlighting how the service area's practices aligned with or deviated from these traditions. While most co-workers accepted my interest in contemporary social phenomena, this acceptance often led to conversations centred around the region's minorities, immigration and emigration patterns, the perceived incompetence of political leaders, and, most pervasively, the spectre of corruption.

Conversely, I was genuinely interested in my interlocutors' concerns. One striking observation was their limited knowledge of their own region, coupled with an initial reluctance to ask direct questions. This tendency became apparent during a weekend trip I took in the spring. Just before my departure on Friday afternoon, Rumi, a co-worker from the bar and restaurant, inquired about my weekend plans. Would I be planting tomatoes and other vegetables? Had I met any other villagers yet? Were there houses available for rent or sale? Upon my return, as I shared my weekend experiences, I realised that Rumi's interest lay not in the literal answers but in the underlying implications. My responses had revealed whether my host possessed gardening expertise (it was, in fact, too early to plant tomatoes), the presence of Sinti and Roma communities in the village, and the nature of local governance. They also appeared to challenge some of Rumi's preconceived notions about the village and particularly what she perceived as its level of structure and organisation. However, we found common ground in our shared experience of the aggressive watchdogs near the entrance to the village. This seemingly minor detail, which resonated with her expectations of rural life as inherently risky, underscored the persistence of certain stereotypes even amidst shifting perceptions.

However, reporting from the village was not the only role I was gradually assigned. I became a kind of news correspondent, reporting first from the Italian- and then German-language media as the pandemic became firmly established first in Italy and then throughout Europe. My co-workers, and eventually even the service area manager, increasingly relied on me as an informant, seeking the latest news from the crisis-stricken region to help prevent the spread of Covid-19 at the service area. Beyond my role as an information source, I was also frequently drawn into discussions about perceived inequalities between Eastern and Western Europe. Despite sharing my co-workers' concerns about these disparities, I often found myself defending Western perspectives, particularly concerning their own experiences working abroad. Many, including Radostin, had spent years in Central and Western Europe and were familiar with the lifestyles and attitudes of younger generations there. In these discussions, I was often expected to defend the prevailing images of Western prosperity, rooted in modernist capitalist ideals. On several occasions, I was asked to assess and interpret statistics such as the per capita income in Vidin province—3,640 euro in 2020, half the national average (Petrov 2020). I was relieved to discover that Austria, the country to which I had been assigned (ironically, considering that I am an Italian citizen from South Tyrol), had no such minimum income requirement. How could I explain and justify the respective income disparities to individuals facing them daily? These encounters underscored the importance of recognising my own privileged position within the field. And yet, with each passing day, I gradually paid my "dues" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2017, 139), became increasingly integrated into the fabric of the service area, and assumed a role akin to a regular employee. I could finally move around freely, take notes and photos, and ask delicate—and not-so-delicate—questions with the expectation that they would be answered.

Reflecting on the garlic-peeling incident years later, I interpret its significance in multiple ways. First, it highlights the initial distance between me, as the researcher, and the field, while also demonstrating the mutual efforts to bridge this gap and establish rapport. Second, it reveals how my preconceived notions about the research, shaped by my ideals and academic background, clashed with the lived realities of my interlocutors, necessitating adaptation and flexibility. In this process of adaptation, the anecdote also underscores the welcoming gestures extended to me upon arrival and attempts to integrate me into various social groups. I openly discussed my limitations with co-workers, and they responded with a combination of instruction and proactive measures to prevent similar situations in the future: when the garlic irritated my hands, someone offered me gloves. Furthermore, the anecdote highlights the intimate connection between human bodies and the material world, a connection that is central to

anthropological understandings of place and region. Our physical forms are not isolated entities: rather, they exist in a dynamic relationship with the environment, constantly interacting and exchanging with it.

In this context, garlic, which was associated with the health benefits attributed to a specific dish, becomes a symbol of this interconnectedness. Its preparation and consumption affect not only the physical body but also resonate within the social and cultural spheres, influencing interactions and perceptions. Ultimately, this chapter has demonstrated the profound impact of embodied experiences on ethnographic research. The physical and emotional challenges I encountered, such as the garlic grating incident, not only provided insights into the daily realities of my co-workers but also shaped my own positionality within the field. Navigating the social dynamics of the service area, with its shifting affiliations and subtle boundaries, required a constant process of reflexivity and adaptation. By acknowledging my own vulnerabilities and preconceived notions, I was able to forge deeper connections and gain a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of life at the service area. These reflections on embodied experience, skill, and expertise will continue to inform the subsequent analysis of mis*trusting and distrust in Vidin, highlighting the importance of recognising the researcher's positionality and the embodied nature of fieldwork in understanding the dynamics of trust and power.

3.3Navigating Relationships: From Data Collection to Writing

At the beginning of my research, I was faced with a lot of scepticism but soon realised that some people were more confident with me than others. Sometimes, Kremi would stand up next to me and watch me take my field notes. I would sit at the table in the kitchen lounge or bent over the counter. When she was telling me something she thought was exciting and noticed I was jotting down some notes on my phone, she would stop talking and ask me to get my notebook, sit down and write properly: “Вземи бележника ти! Седни си и пиши!” (Grab your notebook! Sit down and write!) Kremi understood that I did not take out my notebook in every situation. Her insistence that I write properly highlighted the various expectations my interlocutors had regarding my research practices. Radostin was also familiar with some of my data collection methods and data preservation steps. He would sometimes watch me for hours as I read, underlined, cut, and pasted. Sometimes, he watched as I transcribed interviews and developed my jottings into more substantial notes. I never really hid these activities, and he never really dared to interrupt them, but when he was speaking on the phone with his daughter about me, he would usually mention that I was a smart person who read and wrote a lot. He would do this loudly and firmly and I was never quite sure

whether his comments were directed at her or me. One day, he brought me a cut bolt from the road: "Ето, виж. Това закрепва бариерите в земята." (Look here. This anchors the shock barriers to the ground). Without being asked, he had brought me something that he thought was important for my research, demonstrating his own knowledge of material things that an academic who read and wrote a lot might not notice.

While Kremi and Radostin readily supported my research methods and emphasised the active role of the interlocutors in my research, others were more sceptical (though not necessarily less important contributors to my research). For example, Natalia kept asking me to document everything with photographs so that could corroborate my memories also in the future. Once, I was talking to her ship-captain brother-in-law, Petko. While we were discussing my ideas and intentions before I started recording, she immediately asked: wasn't I planning to record the conversation. I calmly replied that I would record the interview if Petko agreed, but that I would ask for his permission only after I felt he had understood my ideas. Both siblings appreciated this explanation, and Petko said that of course I could start recording. I added that I would anonymise all the data and that would of course also try to keep my translations as close as possible to the original statements. Other interlocutors were suspicious because I was relying on participant observation and informal conversations rather than formal surveys and interviews.

At times, I worried about the materiality of my field notes—their physical form, size, content, and tone. What if I lost them or someone took them away? What if I included too much context or detail? What if I couldn't follow my thoughts and feelings once got back from the field? Today, some of the notes I developed from my jottings are puzzling or unclear. Some have become illegible; most need context and explanations that only my memory can provide. The mis*trusting inherent in the research process, permeates every stage, from the initial jottings to the final manuscript. The spatial and temporal distance between fieldwork and writing and the constant re-contextualisation of observations and experiences, all shape the narrative. The pronouns 'I' and 'they' frame this process, extending from raw notes to interpretation, culminating in a text ready for reception by readers I may or may not know.

As Larissa Schindler and Hilmar Schäfer argue in their account of the various forms of anthropological writing, the collection and writing of field notes, their elaboration and interpretation, and the elaboration of arguments based on them all require critical attention and suspicion from interlocutors in the field, from the anthropologist in the field and then at their desk, from the anthropologist's co-workers, and from their

extended readership (Schindler and H. Schäfer 2021). These reflections on mis*trust and the complexities of ethnographic representation influenced my evolving data collection practices. As I spent more time in the field, I developed routines for capturing my thoughts. Instead of relying solely on my notebook, I often jotted notes on my forearm or, more often, my mobile phone. This was because the bumpy roads made it impossible to jot down notes with a pen on the way to work in the morning. Sometimes, especially when walking, I would just speak into my phone (Burkholder and Thompson 2020).

In addition to being practical, the smartphone was the most natural solution, not only for me but also to the people I was talking to. Unlike my notebook, which I mostly took out in when I was not on the go—at the rest stop itself, sitting at a table in a restaurant, or even on a park bench or at a Sunday barbecue with friends and acquaintances—a smartphone never attracted attention (Gorman 2017; Laube 2021). On the other hand, when I started to write longer paragraphs in my notebook or make drawings one co-worker or another would often ask "Кво пишеш?" (What are you writing?). Moreover, once I had started taking notes on my smartphone in the morning, it did not seem to make much sense to change this routine or wait to find the time and place to write them down in an organised way.

I enjoyed making a few notes in the morning. I also soon realised that even the bus ride itself was different every day—there was always some little detail that I had not noticed before—and that my routine of taking notes in the morning was also reducing the pressure to look for occasions and situations that portrayed interlocutors in a particular way (Hammersley 2006) yet still allowing me to remain receptive to what I thought was noteworthy. I would transcribe for an hour or two later in the afternoon or evening, based on the notes I had taken throughout the day. Other occasions gave me an appreciation for my old-fashioned digital audio recorder. For instance, I was once driving from Sofia to Vidin and stopped just outside the city to look for it. I had noticed how much the construction of the road was affecting not only my own driving, but also other people's and felt the need to write down what I had experienced to hold on to this moment of collective adaptation. I was afraid to let go of it, even though it might not have turned out to be important. For the first time, I was a participant in the life of the road that most of my interlocutors described as connecting the service area, their families and themselves to the capital and its airport, with its work and study opportunities, and with seaside leisure trips.

In that situation, I had to switch from typing my notes into the mobile phone to using the recorder. This decision benefited my own and others' safety, as well as keeping me from being fined for unsafe driving. When I later reflected on the 'good service' of the

recorder in the field, I felt that the main argument for using it had been that it simultaneously maintained and dissolved the distinction between overly rigid self-imposed categories of field notes that shaped my interaction and my attitude towards them. Whenever the recorder was switched on, it seemed to invite me not only to engage in pure documentation but also to direct my attempts at explanation and reflection. In this way, the notebook, smartphone, and recorder formed a complementary set of tools, supplemented by a camera and a bag for collecting objects—mostly rubbish, debris, or splinters that I found by the road, but also the cut bolt that Radostin had brought to me. These not only facilitated data collection but also prompted ethical reflection on the treatment of found objects.

As a kind of organised record of impressions, I came to understand not only my jottings but also materials that I collected as "inscriptive." My own field notes were then enriched with some background information, making them "transcriptive" and in some cases then enhanced with preliminary interpretations, making them "descriptive" (Clifford 1990). Taken together and iteratively interwoven, all these different kinds of notes with varying levels of detail fed into the production of something akin to what has become known in cultural and social anthropology as "thick description" (Geertz 1973). While I was lucky enough to have been able to adopt an approach to data collection that was closely related to my presence in the field, it was only after returning to Vienna that I realised that I had inadvertently attempted to objectify my data through this classification—an impossible undertaking for any anthropologist given that there was no possible way to formulate descriptions of consistent quality and free of concepts classified as superior (Campbell and Luke E. Lassiter 2015; van der Geest 1990, 589)—and that a 'thick description' is an aspiration that is always limited by the process of turning fieldwork into data. While achieving true objectivity might be elusive, the pursuit of 'thick description' remained crucial and involved identifying and analysing recurring patterns and concepts within the data.

To return to my own methodological starting point, I had to consciously develop positions that would guide my analysis and determine how my interpretations would be understood and received. I began to recall memories based on small snippets of text, notes, recordings and other material and to make sense of what I had grasped. Slowly, I realised that when writing my thesis, I would also have to be as objective as possible, not only by reflecting on my interpretations and providing my readers with clear and comprehensive descriptions, but also by reflecting on my reasoning in my interactions with interlocutors and my research tools and explaining my thoughts and interpretations. There were limits to how close I could stay to what my interlocutors said and meant—in particular, what 'I' believed to understand and describe from the

inside differed from how my interlocutors would have experienced and read a situation. Everything was “based on the anthropologist’s theoretical presuppositions” (van der Geest 1990, 591). This became particularly clear when I encountered derogatory comments about people perceived as Sinti and Roma and disturbing justifications for discriminatory measures against them. I found these situations inappropriate, annoying and morally wrong. It did not help when my interlocutors then assured me that I had to understand that this was probably the only region left in Europe where it was ‘still okay’ to be racist. Most of my interlocutors self-identified with the characteristics described by Ivan Kalmar in *White but not Quite* (2022), which tended to undermine my credibility and competence for an appropriate reading and interpretation.

By including this kind of judgement in my dissertation and not just writing it as a private note, I risk doing them an injustice. However, such assessments allow deviations and irritations to be identified, situations to be abstracted, and the state of the field to be construed based what I consider a convincing approach to a solution: a snapshot of the ‘I’, and the ‘they’ in the field at a certain point in time. In the present text, I use different pronouns intentionally to indicate to what extent people identify with, share, or are affected by selected positions, statements, and actions. This makes it possible to thematise and reorganise personal states and judgements, however morally questionable. Writing this way means thinking and finding meaning not only on the basis of data but also embodied experience even though interrogation through interpretations from different perspectives always verges on narcissistic self-reflection by the ethnographer (Bourdieu 2003; Bourdieu and Wacquant 2017). The only way to avoid or minimise this reductivity is to link my personal conditions and experiences to the scenes and situations that I observed in the field and chose to present here, similarly to how Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing articulates her own attitude to birth control to explain her interlocutors’ in *Diamond Queen* (1993) or Michael Fisch explicates how he was intuitively surprised by the behaviour of persons committing suicide in his *Anthropology of the Machine* (2018). These anthropologists also convey their personal attitudes and moments of surprise in their work to facilitate subsequent reflections on the phenomena they observed in a manner detached from their moral concepts. How should I deal with overt racism and antiziganism? With machismo and sexism? With the fact that I knew the welfare state, while my interlocutors ‘only’ knew the socialist or post-socialist state, and perhaps even one that could be described as turbo-capitalist? How do I deal with the fact that I use the word ‘only’ in this question?

Whether the issue is stigmatisation or discrimination or a particular view of community and world events that my interlocutors or I have brought to the exchange, the thinking and acting on the ground, or the interpretation, it is still of great importance here to understand mis*trust not only as a theoretical concept that offers new perspectives on

social relations that are more complex than relations of trust but also a call to action that can remove possible blinkers and unmask what lies beneath misleading surface impressions. If I—and you, the reader—assume that what I have written is in principle a way of representing the shared world of Bulgarian workers at a service area and point out that racism and antiziganism, as well as sexism, were part of everyday life at the service area—do you then mis*trust the quality and content of other episodes reproduced in the context of this work? Do I mis*trust my interlocutors, or do I mis*trust my readers? Who is pursuing what agenda? The culmination of these considerations lies in how the author chooses to represent and preserve the social dynamics observed in the field (Clifford, Fortun, and Marcus 2011; Starn 2015). In addition to the fluidity of the positioning and perspectives depending on pronouns and the elaboration of a central concept brimming with agency, I would point out the deliberate use of different tenses and the abandonment of historical presence, which appeals to me personally. The changes in tenses depict the actual interplay of trust and mistrust in mis*trusting in my thinking by differentiating between my experiences in the field and my subsequent thoughts, which are by no means divorced from my interlocutors but continued to develop and reached their final form when and where my interlocutors could no longer participate. Thus, I use the present tense for things I did not think of until I was writing and various forms of the past for those I had thought of earlier. In doing so, I may be making the cardinal mistake of compromising my scientific claim to reproducibility—or, by making it fully explicit, reducing it to absurdity. Mis*trusting my remarks may be the only way to grasp this thesis. Did a particular moment or conversation, take place as detailed? There is no way to fathom my knowledge and conscience.

Anthropological research and writing, by involving human connection and the search for meaningful perspectives, can be a special, but also risky, endeavour. The anthropologist, regardless of background or location, strives to create content that resonates with readers because of its relatability, not its sensationalism. Ethnographic writing is not just a product of anthropologists' travels and unique experiences, and I therefore believe it does not end when they leave the field. The strong impressions made influence changes of relationship when near the field yet solidify with the distance that comes with the return to the office. Some things only occur to me in retrospect. How much did I absorb in the field? Did I take it with me when I left? In what follows, the 'I' and 'We' indicate how and whether I identified with who and what was contributed. At the same time, the 'I' and 'we' are not a full endorsement. I could and will easily disassociate myself from some of the statements in the next sentence—or at least question the validity of what has been said. For me, such a style of writing is a necessity

to maintain flexibility in my thinking and to point out things that have caused irritation and disagreement among interlocutors, my interlocutors and myself. It is here that the change in pronouns, while the composition of the group remains the same, is perceived as an inconsistency in writing and thinking, and at the same time is most powerful.

4. Mis*trusting the Persistence and Lack of Rules, Norms and Standards

Hundreds of guests flocked to the Sunny Oil service area every day, regardless of the weather or season. Most filled their tanks, paid, and continued their journeys. Some stopped to use the toilets, others to buy some groceries. Only a small percentage climbed the stairs to the restaurant, but those who did rarely left without at least eating a little soup. Every driver who stopped had at least one urgent need, but at the same time it seemed that most tried to satisfy additional needs while there. Still, no matter what they accomplished, most stops were considered lost time and not at all linked with the idea of pleasure. A functionalist understanding of hospitality that satisfied the needs of drivers and their travelling companions, and remobilised them (Molz and Gibson 2007a), sufficed to understand not only the kind but also the layout of the facilities and services offered. However, the immediate functionality linked to the need could then be read in the relative straightforwardness of the guests' paths through the service area as they found what they were looking for and proactively carried out their actions. This determination was reflected, for example, in the fact that few visitors who entered the building looked for, or expected, anything outside the shop.

One discussion about whether to enter the restaurant took place between a young couple with two children as they stood on the small lawn between the shop and the restrooms in front of the stairs to the restaurant. The family had parked their car a few metres away and had all just come from the toilets, probably their main reason for stopping. In the momentary vacuum that followed, the man and woman started to discuss where to get some food and drinks. From their body language, the woman looked more interested in picking up something in the shop and the man wanted to eat at the restaurant. Eventually, the man decided. Saying "Хайде, пусни ни!" (Come on, let's go), he took a step towards the stairs and, with the kids in front, started to go up. About an hour later, I saw them all come down the stairway again. Even though they hadn't planned on going to the restaurant, they had probably enjoyed their lunch of soup and fries, a mixed grill, or the миш-маш (*mish-mash*)[8] that was on the lunch offer for today. By the time they got back to their car, one kid had fallen asleep. As soon as everyone was seated, the driver started the engine and pulled out of the service area. This apparently simple

[8] Traditional Bulgarian миш-маш *(mish-mash),* a dish made from eggs scrambled with peppers, tomatoes, onions, and сирене (Bulgarian feta cheese). At the service area, my co-workers would add rice and other vegetables such as eggplant or zucchini to the dish. My co-workers explained to me that *mish-mash* was a well-known dish throughout 'the Balkans' that was prepared to use up leftover vegetables and grains. When it was offered as a daily special, customers assumed it would be cheap.

decision about whether to enter the restaurant encapsulates the complexities of trust and decision-making at the service area, where travellers had to constantly weigh their need for efficiency and control against the potential benefits of relinquishing control and trusting in the services offered. Motives and motivations for stopping at the service area or a particular facility there varied as much as the drivers themselves. All these actions were planned and coordinated just as often as they were tied to gut feelings and expectations. Did I want to have to worry about whether I could make it to the next filling station? Could we risk being stranded part way to the border? Would we lose or gain time going to the restroom here versus at some other place? Where would the restrooms be cleanest and most hygienic? As for providing drinks and food, it is significant that any guest who just wanted a snack or a drink could get that in the shop, and many did. Nobody had to climb the steps to the restaurant.

This chapter explores how standardisation influences relationships and the navigation of rules and norms at the service area. Drawing on theoretical perspectives on hospitality and mis*trusting, it analyses ethnographic observations of interactions between customers and staff, as well as the handling of materials and ideas, to understand how individuals negotiate the complexities of trust and security in this transitional space. In contrast to the rest of the service area, a bustling hub of transience that catered to travellers' diverse needs mainly according to a logic of quick remobilisation, at the restaurant the expectation of swift remobilisation was challenged. Customers relinquished control and entrusted their needs to the service staff. This act of surrendering control necessitated a degree of trust: a willingness to rely on the competence and goodwill of others in an environment often characterised by anonymity and fleeting encounters. My becoming involved at the service area triggered interactions with my interlocutors and co-workers. One such interaction took place between Rumi and three young men who wanted soup and drinks and finally questioned her authority and ethics.

I use these situations to explore how trust and mistrust impact what people may perceive as the good practice of hospitality in service areas. I start my exploration with traditional takes on hospitality in mobility (Candea and Da Col 2012; Molz and Gibson 2007a; Shryock 2012), and then draw on Carey (2018) and Mühlfried (2019) to relate it to mis*trusting and hospitality. The second part of the chapter starts with customers informing themselves about the menu and ends with the informalities that become possible through standards and norms that are part of the weighing and measuring in the service area's kitchen. Starting from proponents of material flows linked with changes in social and cultural relations and actions (Appadurai 1986; Banister et al. 2011; Edirisingha, Aitken, and Ferguson 2022; McFadden 2007; Price 1996; Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing 2011) I then build on Martha Lampland (2010) and Sophie

Day, Celia Lury and Nina Wakeford (2014) to question the links between trust and mistrust, and standards, norms and rules in the particular form of numbers. In the third and final part, I describe the case of another customer, who wanted to pay for his meal in euros rather than leva. Discussing the conversion process by referring to scholars such as Ofer H. Azar (2005, 2007) and Filippo and Caroline Osella (2022; 2001), who all thematise moralities of norms and transparency, I suggest that voids result from mis*trusting towards norms, rules, and standards. Within this ethnography's general theme of power regimes and marginalisation arising in the flickering between trust and mistrust, this chapter aims to understand the service area as an arena of limitations and transgression based on situated trust and mistrust.

The act of entering the service area—a disruption to the rhythm of travel and an encounter with the unknown—could trigger feelings of vulnerability and uncertainty, highlighting the precarious nature of mis*trusting in these liminal spaces. No wonder the family did not return more quickly. It was hard to turn back after opening the heavy glass door at the top of the stairs and walking into the restaurant. Just past the doorway, drivers and other new customers would stop and glance from the first set of tables to the right of the door, along the bar, past the fridges, and up the semi-open staircase up to the mezzanine at the far-left side of the room. At this point, the decision was no longer whether to get seated for lunch or dinner but where would be best. Here, 'best' meant being invisible to other diners while still in sight of the waiters. However, this choice was somewhat unnecessary: even though the hum of the beverage coolers and the TV sounds in the background offered the feeling of intimacy and moments of invisibility to most of the tables, my co-workers and I were trained to remain attentive to the costumers needs. In fact, we grew so accustomed to the sound of the door closing and the draft when it was open that we introduced a welcoming ritual to head off that momentary disorientation.

My co-workers would greet guests and ask if they were looking for something and how they could help. However, most would ask for the menu, about today's special, whether there was a seat, or if they could pay in euros instead of leva. This time was the same: Rumi asked what the person was looking for and he responded that he would like a soup and a beer. The questions in such dialogues were not looking for information to make final decisions but intended to assess the situation, including the places' attitudes towards hospitality and trustworthiness. This was especially the case for this restaurant that was not part of a familiar fast-food chain and where standardisation, rules, and conventions enabled drivers at the service area to interact in relationships of mis*trusting despite fluctuation. It seems important to me to recognise that there has already been intensive investment around standardisation, self-service, and automation,

especially in transport-oriented services. Most of the time, we did not get to know or have unique conversations with our guests: what was more common were recognised and repeated patterns that protected both sides from surprises. In the following subchapters, I will explore my own, my co-workers', and customers' approach towards regulated mis*trusting. Gradually consolidating the field, this chapter elaborates on how people, in their diversity of needs and expectations, work against the norms and standards of the service area to negotiate legitimate and reasonable mis*trust.

*4.1Not for Everybody: Mis*trusting Authorities in Hospitality.*

Hospitality has long been discussed as a condition to world citizenship[9]. However, in the context of restaurants and similar establishments, it refers to restoring and refreshing customers engaged in a project.[10] And when this project is mobility, being hospitable then also includes offering an opportunity to slow down, pause and take a break: that is, to settle down and rest for a limited amount of time (Molz and Gibson 2007a). Combining these two forms of hospitality—serving food and a break in mobility—entails providing goods and services to facilitate the rest and recovery of passing drivers coming from highly diverse countries under highly diverse circumstances and at any time. Service areas are thus places and services designed to allow their guests to resume their drive as soon as possible (Cuthill 2007; Warhurst et al. 2000). A mechanic with experience in long-distance TIR *(Transports Internationaux Routiers)* driving was always stationed near the petrol pumps to ensure that all vehicles were functioning properly and manage minor repairs to signals, headlights, windscreen wipers, and the like. Other services were offered mainly to satisfy the needs of larger scale mobility. These went far beyond simply restoring the capacity to drive and included laundry service, monitored parking, and not only filling meals, but commodities such as alcohol and even (unofficially) providing a venue for sex workers to offer their services.

There were also places for drivers to make phone calls home and where they sat together and watched Turkish soap operas, also known as "*dizi*". On summer mornings, they often prepared coffee outside on a camping stove. Thus, some places at the service areas

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[9] According to Kant, hospitality was the foundation of perpetual peace: every person should have the right not to be treated as an enemy unless hostilely occupying a place (Kant 2016 [1795]). Derrida objected to this, doubting that we all shared a reciprocal understanding of responsibility, duties, and opportunities necessary for such a universal understanding of hospitality. Making hospitality conditional, he argued, would limit it to an act of generosity, rather than an unconditional act. Absolute hospitality would require individuals to open their homes without expecting the potential guest to do the same or respond adequately to that act of hospitality (Jacques Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000, 25; Jaques Derrida 1998).

[10] This is literally the etymological meaning of the word "restaurant", as my English editor pointed out.

more secluded than others, and individual drivers who wanted more privacy could always retreat to the cab of their lorries. All commodities and services seemed to be offered according to a timesaving and reductionist drive-through logic in which friendliness and a deeper interest in people were of little importance, but the necessity, will, and final destination after completing the intended kind of break and resuming driving seemed socially complex and this was why so many different spaces and services had to be offered. In this context, a hospitality built on mistrust rather than trust could never be an isolated and one-dimensional collection of spaces and services dominated by standards and norms shared by travellers, workers, and the authorities. Instead, it would cast shadows “where people assume that others can be known and trusted”, while “others are largely unknowable” (Carey 2018, 10).

One Saturday morning, the clock above the kitchen door showed that a new day had just started. Only half an hour earlier, I had been in a car with Natalia, a fifty-year-old taxi driver, and two of her friends. We were returning from the Belogradchik (Белоградчик) Fortress, where we had attended a summer touring performance of Giuseppe Verdi’s Aïda by the Sofia Opera. Against the backdrop of the Belogradchik cliffs, we had enjoyed over two hours listening to the love story between the Ethiopian princess Aïda and the Egyptian commander Radames. After the end of the opera and a long but enjoyable drive home, I decided to stop at the service area. I was hungry and wanted to share my experience with whoever was working the late shift that night. I sat down at the regulars’ table and ordered a beef soup and some toast. Most of the real regulars, that is, the long-distance TIR drivers, were already asleep or on their way out, so Rumi took a break to sit down and chat with me. I told her about the opera; the set, the artists, and the people I had been with. I asked her if she had ever been there and if it many people in the region went to such events. She did not deny this, but said it depended on individual taste.

Once I had told her about my Friday evening, it was her turn. I asked about the night’s shift and if anything unusual had happened. Rumi denied this: “Не, нямаше много хора.” (No. There weren’t many people). She then added that it was fine even if there were a lot of people, as long as the customers behaved themselves. She also noted that this night had just begun and that problems were more likely to come up when the bars and clubs had closed, and people had nowhere else to go. I picked up my spoon and continued to slowly eat my beef soup. Once I had finished it and had a beer, I also had some sponge cake. I was not hungry anymore, but I had decided to spend another hour or two doing participant observation at the service area.

Workflows differed at night, as Rumi and others had explained to me before. Contact with co-workers in other sections of the service area became more intense. Interaction with customers changed too, becoming less formal and a bit more personal: they said it was good to know the people who frequented your area at night. Personal contact was cultivated in various ways: co-workers from all over the service area would wander from one part of it to another and chat for a while at each, even if they had no regular work there. It was only on-duty security guards who made their rounds in pairs. If someone seemed drunk, noisy or likely to become aggressive, the employees in the shop would call upstairs to warn their co-workers in the restaurant. The waiters, meanwhile, tried to start interactions with a short conversation that would quickly assess a customer's sobriety and demonstrate that they were paying attention. In these situations, it was no longer the customer and guest who needed security but the host who needed protection from the guest. Such situations of tension between guests and hosts (whether the latter were owners, managers, or just employees), could elicit a range of reactions from credulity to hostility.

While I was eating my cake, one such incident took place: three young men entered the restaurant and, like most other guests, looked around, briefly discussed where to sit, and finally chose a table. Once they had settled in, Rumi came over and greeted them. Handing them the menu, she asked right away if they were from the region and knew she was not allowed to serve them alcohol. Visibly annoyed, one of them put down his menu and asked, "Каква е тази дискриминация" (What is this discrimination?) This provocative question displayed the kind of tensions Candea and Da Col have outlined (2012): in calling out a 'bad' policy and blaming Rumi for discriminating, the customer appropriated a principle intended to reduce mis*trusting to insinuate misbehaviour. Although they were ethnic Bulgarians, the young men were invoking anti-discriminatory measures instituted to protect ethnic minorities in the region. Rumi remained calm but unshaken. Something told me it was not the first time she had been accused of this. Instead of responding to the young men's claim, she continued to explain. She told me afterwards that she was sorry, but there was nothing she could do about this rule. Moreover, she agreed with her boss that there had been too many incidents involving local young men and this necessitated the new rule against serving them alcohol. But of course, they were welcome to stay to eat and or drink non-alcoholic beverages. These limitations on serving alcohol impelled by concerns about noise and security thus contributed to an atmosphere of mis*trust between the servers and customers.

However, this episode not only concerns good and bad guests and hosts: it also indicates a moment of suspicion that also helps explain relations of mis*trusting that permeate such interactions. Although Rumi acknowledged on behalf of the service area's owner

that the restrictions on service were based on probabilities and judgements related to 'bad guests,' their implementation—which often relied on superficial or discriminatory characteristics—cast the service area itself in the role of a 'bad host.' By denying some people access to services that could aid rest and recovery, they failed to meet the needs of travellers, even though those needs were not explicitly articulated. Still, despite its problematic nature the new rule was clear and straightforward. This clarity, combined with the freedom to interpret and enforce it, empowered Rumi to deflect the young men's attempt to challenge the restrictions. Their argument that they weren't interested in alcohol and subsequent compliance in ordering only food and leaving peacefully demonstrates that this approach worked, at least in the short term. However, this apparently straightforward interaction raises deeper questions about the power dynamics and ethical implications of suspicion and mis*trust in hospitality contexts.

Underlying hospitality's high-level dynamic of demanding and conceding are moments of suspicion that are accompanied by political implications and conclusions about controlling access to resources and thus particular issues and place. Melanie Brand offers an intriguing example of the relationship between suspicion and power in mis*trusting in South Africa, where social workers and counsellors must make complex decisions when granting women access to facilities intended to protect them from domestic violence. Brand explains that there are nowhere near enough places for all the women who apply, so the social workers must not only listen carefully but with the utmost suspicion and mis*trust the women as they may enhance or even invent stories to increase their chances.

This situation shows the kind of a dilemma that can evolve in a context where one would think mis*trusting should be sidelined: the women are likely to be in danger, but they must share a maximum of detail for social workers to make an assessment that they have absolutely no guarantee will be positive. In doing so, the social workers pay attention to all kinds of details. "In a nutshell, a variety of factors play into the formation of counsellors' generalized mistrust towards clients.... As has been shown, indicators likely to raise counsellors' suspicion include inconsistent and incoherent narratives, a lack of documentation or evidence, low levels of institutional involvement, 'atypical' body language and reluctance to partake in counselling. Over-common narratives that sounded 'truer than true' aroused suspicion as well." (Brand 2018, 85)

What is remarkable about these statements is that the social workers and counsellors seemed to empathise with all the women, even those who had not been experiencing domestic violence, and surely all agreed that they had good reasons to seek admission to the facility. However, the moments of suspicion and default reaction of mis*trusting

were the only way to ensure hospitality for those who most clearly belonged to the target group: women exposed to domestic violence rather than homeless women in general. A similar argument applied to the three young men Rumi refused to serve alcohol. Because so many young men had been misbehaving at the service area on weekends, members of that group no longer enjoyed full access to the hospitality that they expected there at the end of their evening, including a final drink or two. (Of course, these consequences were much less drastic and harmful than those in the case Brand describes).

But how does the process of selection link more strategically with mis*trusting? Further pushing the hostility of host-guest relationships, Mühlfried argues based on an experience at a Georgian banquet that mistrust holds particular interest to the host, explaining that it was the only way for the host to deem a guest and stranger a person who never ceases to be an enemy. We should see what happened at the service area in this light. The hospitality that Rumi granted the three young men, despite her suspicion that materialised in a brief verbal confrontation, not only required a high level of investment but also remained fragile. Any of the three guests, once branded as potential aggressors, could have decided at any time to act contrary to expected conventions and no one would have stopped them. If they had started fighting, it would have been understandable not only to withdraw the hospitality that had been extended to them, but even to regard them no longer as guest but as enemies (Mühlfried 2019, 46). On a more general level, on nights when neither the desire for alcoholic beverages nor the history of violence, but an actual fight between drunk young men interferes with the function of the service area, a re-prioritisation of hospitalities became necessary. Then, Rumi and her co-workers would have to call the police, who would arrive with flashing lights and sirens and break up the fight. Thus, risky situations emerging from alcohol abuse could compromise business and the tranquillity of the night.

In mis*trusting, then, a person accepts another person with reservations or a mostly implicit mutual agreement about certain responsibilities, duties, and conventions. As Mühlfried notes, accepting a stranger always involves both the host and the guests fulfilling their respective roles and obligations. Hospitality entails the host providing food and shelter and the guest is likewise expected to behave appropriately. Inappropriate guest behaviour can include assuming the host's role or taking their possessions (Mühlfried 2019, 46–48). But even if some of these conventions, duties, and responsibilities changed in the commercial context of the service area, the underlying principles of hospitality remained relevant. The commercial context of the service area, in prioritising profit and efficiency, led to a modified form of hospitality where interactions were often transactional and impersonal. While service areas and other business establishments are generally not obligated to admit everyone, they must do so in certain government-mandated situations. On typical days, the service area's

approach to hospitality reflected a cautious balance of trust and mistrust. This was evident in its focus on gathering information about travellers, which allowed its management to maintain a degree of control and ensure the smooth flow of mobility. I observed this firsthand on an occasion when lorry drivers were required to be offered free parking due to exceptional circumstances (see Chapter 5). However, this balance is delicate. The incident with the three young men, who did not necessarily have the right to be served at all, regardless of their age or condition, exemplifies this. Similar restrictions, enforced by house rules, also applied to drinks. Throughout the evening, accusations and power dynamics underscored the pervasive mis*trust between individuals. This mis*trust manifested in attempts to control behaviour, negotiate personal space, and stereotype others.

However, for the purpose of understanding the place of suspicion and mis*trusting in relations at the service area, it is important to note that an analysis of changes in behaviour is not a final explanation but a means to become aware of the complexities of rules, standards and norms in infrastructures. One useful way to think about norms and standards in the context of mis*trusting has been provided by Paul N. Edwards, whose term "infrastructuration" adds social and political, and individual components to the technological components of infrastructure. For Edwards, standards, norms and rules ensure certainty for some and allow flexibility for others, while also restricting access in the case of demonstrations of power towards others (Edwards 2019). In such an enhanced understanding of infrastructure, the standards, norms and rules become the basis for all sort of interactions and competitions along the road and at the service area. Thus, in these situations it was not the employees and operators of the service station who were mistrusting their customers and other passers-by: it was the drivers and passengers who were required to consider, or decide based on intuition, whether they should interrupt their journey at the Sunny Oil service station to restore their fitness to drive.

In sum, hospitality at the service area and elsewhere is an interpersonal relationship that builds on—or, better, demands—mis*trusting "trust may frequently be described as a way of managing the freedom of others, but, as we have seen, it is also a way of controlling it. Mistrust then, as we shall see, contributed rather to a philosophy of rugged autonomy and moral equality that assumes other people to be both free and fundamentally uncontrollable" (Carey 2018, 10). As for the case at hand, the analysis of observations of coincidental yet naturally recurring limits on hospitality emphasises this complementary and constructive potential of mis*trusting. Recalling the coexistence and complementarity of trust and mistrust, the example of the three young men and Rumi reveals the autonomy and room for manoeuvre that may be granted to

people in implementing rules and regulations. However, if instead of Carey's positive assessment one follows the more pessimistic and sceptical Mühlfried, mis*trusting may just be endless hard work and failure a valuable outcome for social relations (Mühlfried 2019, 12). Mühlfried explains that mis*trust does not prevent work: it is work. For this very reason, however, it can never be absent. As the ethnographic vignette showed, this also applies to hospitality, which has a classically positive connotation, but with mis*trusting as its key driver it is condemned to cut across rules, norms, and standards that are in place to guide social interaction. Yet, the ethnographic observations presented in this chapter also demonstrate that mis*trusting is not the sole force governing hospitality. When norms and standards are broken or circumvented, extraordinary moments of trust can emerge that challenge the presumed dominance of mis*trust in relationships at the service area.

*4.2 Food on Menus: Numbers Fostering Mis*trust*

Few customers already knew what they wanted when they arrived at the restaurant, but even those who mentioned a specific dish at the entrance usually took a look at the menu. Printed in Bulgarian with English translations, this sixteen-page laminated booklet was often greasy and sometimes sticky. The imagery on the cover suggested a rustic traditional Bulgarian tavern, but the design inside was in a more modern style, with photos showing starters, salads, and main courses. However, the actual dishes never looked like these pictures. Soups, side dishes, desserts and drinks were presented only as unillustrated lists, and the drink list was of brand names divided into categories including beer, soft drinks, hot drinks and spirits and liquors. As I looked at the menu more closely, I realised it had not been printed specifically for this restaurant: I had seen similar ones, with the same images, descriptions, and format, in other restaurants along the road.

Paging through the menu, I wondered if it had been the kitchen here at Sunny Oil, or at another restaurant where I had seen the same menu, or even somewhere else entirely, that had provided the names, descriptions and photos of the dishes. Most likely, none of the kitchens I had eaten at had ever been asked about their preferences and a generic menu, perhaps based on market surveys conducted for the Bulgarian restaurant sector, was available from their wholesale suppliers or printers. Whatever its source, the menu was only a baseline and it was up to the individual restaurants to decide which dishes to actually offer. Most could be ordered at Sunny Oil's restaurant, but some were never available. These could be recognised because they were listed without a price, a system that was used for both food and drinks and must have been at least somewhat self-

explanatory as I never had to tell customers that their order was unavailable unless it was simply sold out on that particular day.

There were also some blank spots on the menu where things like obsolete prices had been taped over, and eventually, some ingredients were also erased. While standardised, the menu thus also bore marks of adaptation and negotiation. These blank spots, taped-over prices, and crossed-out items spoke of a tension between the imposed standards and the realities of daily operation that raised questions about who dictated the menu's content and who felt empowered to deviate from it. Was the standardised menu simply an attempt to impose routine on the transitional space of the service area, or did the modifications signify a shift in the dynamics of trust and mistrust? Could it be that the very act of altering the menu represented a reclamation of agency, a subtle pushback against the homogenising forces of standardisation?

These observations resonate with broader anthropological discussions on standardisation and norms. As Arjun Appadurai (1986) and others have noted in the context of globalised commodity exchange and cultural flows, standardisation is not a monolithic force but a dynamic process and constantly negotiated and contested. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, a whole range of anthropologists started to think about norms and standards based on his thoughts. Some of these anthropologists revisited the role of standardisation in shaping societies and rediscovered the concept as one that makes visible negotiations and interaction. Authors such as Howard Price (1996), Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2011), and Prabash Edirinsinghat, Robert Aitken and Shelagh Ferguson (2022), all working on global flows of materialities and supply, argue that the process of creating standard rules and procedures for negotiations happens in all kinds of social situations, including interactions between buyers and sellers, employers and employees, and even within families and larger organisations like governments, and reflects the various cultural norms and expectations of the people involved. However, because these rules need to be interpreted and applied in specific situations, they can lead to misunderstandings, mistrust, and even suspicion between the different parties.

The standardised menu vividly illustrates this dynamic as an infrastructural element of the service area that streamlines the dining experience and, as a product of market research rather than local culinary traditions, attempts to impose uniformity and predictability on that transitional space. The blank spots symbolise this negotiation as a gap between an idealised standardised system and the messy realities the people working and eating there must both negotiate. This tension highlights the inherent tension in standardisation processes by underscoring how standards are not simply

passively accepted but actively interpreted and contested as trust and mistrust are continually negotiated by the various actors in the system. Not only studies of flows of materialities but more technical analyses of logistics and transport infrastructure have extensively discussed how norms and standards drive people-centred behavioural change. One key perspective emphasises how individuals adapt their behaviour to conform to the standards and norms that govern transport systems (Banister et al. 2011). The standardised menu at Sunny Oil exemplified this dynamic by acting as an infrastructural element that streamlined customer expectations through a predetermined selection and order of dishes. For example, placing the local specialty *shkembeto*[11] prominently at the top of the menu reinforced this expectation of behavioural conformity.

Another perspective views behavioural change as a result of policy interventions, often necessitated by individuals' inability or unwillingness to modify their behaviours on their own (McFadden 2007). Once again, *shkembeto* is a good example: it remained untouched by the modifications and alterations seen elsewhere and was not associated with any blank spots or crossed-out items, suggesting a seamless integration into the standardised framework. There are several possible reasons for this: perhaps it was consistently in demand and the ingredients were thus always kept on hand; perhaps the restaurant recognised its cultural significance and kept it available to cater to local tastes and expectations. One might therefore jump to the conclusion that it highlights an interesting nuance within the dynamics of standardisation and adaptation. The invariable presence of *shkembeto* on the menu, despite all the other modifications to it, suggests that certain elements can transcend the tensions between standardisation and individual agency. This could be attributed to cultural significance or consistent demand, which highlights the importance of acknowledging local preferences and exceptions even within standardised systems.

Before concluding this subchapter, I want to delve deeper into the significance of *shkembeto* and its presentation on the menu. In fact, this soup—like many other items—was listed along with a serving size (300 grams) and a price. This practice of quantifying ingredients, which applied not only to *shkembeto* but also various other dishes and drinks (Anranter 2024a), reflected broader trends towards transparency and measurable standards in the food service industry in Bulgaria and elsewhere. The service area not only provided the weight of processed meat but also tomatoes and olives, cheese, and

[11] In the context in which I conducted my research, the term '*shkembe chorba*' (tripe soup) was used more frequently than '*shkembeto'* (literally, 'the tripe') to refer to tripe soup. As I do not wish to contribute to the nationalist discourses that have formed and continue to form around *shkembe chorba* (Anranter 2024a; Perianova 2019; Shkodrova 2019), I prefer to use the term '*shkembeto',* the nickname used for the soup at the service area.

side dishes. I had noticed this trend elsewhere, at first in burger places, and then grill rooms and steak houses. It seemed as if restaurants, whose central principle was hospitality, were trying to respond to growing consumer mistrust by using concrete measurements to establish credibility, manage expectations, and thus pre-empt concerns about portion size and value. What struck me here was the repetition of these weight indications for key ingredients and side dishes, not only on the menu but every printed document, from the order tickets printed at the register and in the kitchen to the final receipt. Everyone declared "*Shkembe 300g".* This created a totalising relationship through numbering, encompassing service personnel, guests, cooks, administrative staff, tax officers, and even wholesale distributors. As Sophie Day et al. argue, numbers do more than calibrate: they shape value and give it form: "measures not only provide a means of calibration; they also introduce a way of sizing or, rather, of shaping, of giving form, to measure as value." She continues that these very measures, even when they only provide "the value of one-dimensional or linear quantity … [produce] proportional equivalence". This is also exactly what was happening at the service counters, where the weight in grams revealed nothing about side dishes' quality, doneness, or richness (2014, 136–37). In addition, these quantified portions were not always rigidly enforced. Their interpretation often depended on the perceived importance of an activity and could even fluctuate based on individual moods or circumstances.

The focus on quantification extends beyond mere logistical concerns. It serves as a tool for managing expectations, fostering a sense of control, and establishing a semblance of stability in an environment characterised by transience and anonymity. While portion sizes are standardised, their interpretation remains flexible, acknowledging the subjective nature of value perception. This flexibility, however, creates a delicate balance between adaptability and potential for mis*trust. As Thomas Crump (2012), Marylin Strathern (2014), and Sophie Day with Celia Lury and Nina Wakeford (Day, Lury, and Wakeford 2014) suggest, numbers can shape social relations and create a sense of stability. At the service area, where transience and anonymity were prevalent, the quantification of food portions offered a sense of familiarity and control for both customers and staff. This served a dual purpose of offering familiarity and control while also enabling predictability and facilitating comparisons. It enabled the customers to make informed choices and potentially voice concerns if their expectations (and not necessarily just about quantity) were unmet (Lampland 2010).

This emphasis on quantification, exemplified by the precise measurements on the menu and throughout the ordering process, served as a microcosm of the complex interplay of trust and mistrust in this transitional space. It reflected a strategic attempt to manage

expectations, provided transparency, and helped navigate the challenges of offering hospitality within a standardised system. Guests were empowered to voice concerns if portions did not meet expectations, while staff mediated between kitchen and customer. Even the cooks relied on the quantifications to ensure consistency and protect themselves from potential complaints: line cooks who lacked the muscle memory to estimate weights accurately were advised to weigh ingredients repeatedly on the scales to protect themselves from possible complaints. In the rare event of a complaint, they were instructed to remain calm and not give in to their doubts and misjudgements. The bookkeepers were also involved in this system of quantification, being tasked with calculating the turnover of food and its financial implications before interacting with suppliers and management (Anranter 2024a).

In conclusion, the importance of quantification at the service area transcends mere logistical efficiency and involves a complex web of relationships, highlighting the delicate balance between standardisation and the human element in service encounters. While numbers can reveal power structures (Day, Lury, and Wakeford 2014; Hovland 2010; Siqueira, Leite, and Beerli 2017) my primary focus lies in identifying how they shape interactions and create opportunities for both trust and mistrust within this hospitality-oriented context. Considering the specific needs of the environment and the place, the petrol pumps and the service area (often perceived more as an extension supporting the transport infrastructure than a stand-alone destination like a Viennese steakhouse), the standardised menu with its emphasis on quantification served as a tool to navigate the complexities of providing hospitality and building trust within the unique context of a transitional space. It was a testament to the fact that human interactions and the negotiation of trust remain central even in highly standardised environments and represented an attempt to manage expectations, provide transparency, and address the potential for mistrust that can arise in such environments.

*4.3Irregular Conversion Rates: Mis*trusting on the Brink*

When reflecting on the photographs from my fieldwork, I was surprised by what had seemed a mundane detail. The real-time price display at the Sunny Oil service area towered over the highway and was visible from afar from all directions. I realised that it was far more than just a functional sign: it was a beacon, a silent promise, and sometimes, a subtle threat. The photograph revealed how the symbolic power of these displays shaped travellers' expectations and decisions long before they ever arrived at the station. In the world of branded chains and franchises, they served as an attraction and a selling point. The familiar logos of Shell, Autogrill, and McDonald's evoke a sense of predictability, a guarantee of certain standards. Drivers, even those just passing

by, instantly recognise their chances to buy a coffee, grab a quick bite, or stock up on snacks. For frequent travellers, the familiarity of branded chains and their associated loyalty programmes can heavily influence their choice of service area.

But at the Sunny Oil service area, the experience was different. The lack of recognisable branding and minimal dimly lit signage fostered an environment of uncertainty. Travellers accustomed to familiar, reassuring brands had to navigate the service area with a heightened sense of caution, their trust in the establishment's reliability and fairness hanging in the balance. Sunny Oil was not a franchise and the plain digital price display was not reassuring. It did certainly serve the basic function of enabling drivers to make snap judgements about fuel prices from a distance, but it also triggered a different kind of response for those unfamiliar with the brand, hinting at the unknown and prompting a heightened sense of caution and mistrust. I noticed this in myself as I felt compelled to double-check prices and approach such facilities with a touch more wariness than I would at a branded station. This contrast underscored the profound impact of norms and standards on our experiences of hospitality and mobility. In familiar settings, we rely on these unspoken rules to navigate our interactions and manage our expectations, but in the liminal space of the service area transience and anonymity reign and the absence of familiar cues can leave us feeling vulnerable and exposed. The tension between transparency and opacity, embodied in the stark price display against the backdrop of an unfamiliar brand, set the stage for a complex negotiation of trust.

It became clear that even seemingly mundane elements like price displays and menus play a crucial role in shaping our perceptions and interactions in these transitional spaces. These are not just tools for conveying information, but also powerful symbols that communicate messages about trust, reliability, and the social contract between hosts and guests. This delicate dance between trust and ambiguity extended beyond the visual cues of the service area and manifested even in the seemingly mundane act of payment. Price conversions from leva to euros offered a revealing glimpse into how the service area navigated the complexities of standardisation while also leaving room for individual discretion and potential manipulation and potentially exploiting subtle ambiguities, becoming a microcosm of the power dynamics and unspoken negotiations that characterised the service area and highlighting the delicate balance between adhering to standards and exercising discretion. The cashier, Eli, would first print the bill in leva and read out the amount to the customers. If they spoke neither Bulgarian nor English, she would simply point to the amount. She then typed the exact price into the desk calculator at the counter and divided the amount by 1.9. In one case, she

converted 22.00 leva into 11.578947 euros, the driver paid with a twenty euros banknote, and rounded up, asking for only 7.00 euro in change.

People who settled their bills in euros would almost always add a tip; indeed, sometimes they tipped surprisingly lavishly. This generosity could be attributed to several factors, including the association of the euro with affluence, awareness that extra costs might be associated with paying in a foreign currency, or simply a psychological effect associated with smaller numbers. Later I found out that strategic tipping is indeed contested and impulsive behaviour is more likely (Azar 2005, 2007; Saayman et al. 2022). In any case, Eli only had a change in leva, so she multiplied the 7.00 euros by 1.9, making 13.30 leva. After she had counted out thirteen, the driver silently motioned her to stop and she understood that he did not expect her to look for the coins. The transaction was complete, and the customer left.

In both conversions, Eli ignored the current exchange rates of 1.967 and 0.508, which had increased the price for the meals and drinks (not counting the 1.72 euro tip) by 1.24 leva, or about 5.5 percent. There is no way for me to judge the significance of this increase, but it does remain a matter of fact. Presumably because the difference in each transaction was small, nobody seemed interested in either the difference or the lack of transparency. Neither the accounting department nor the guests—maybe not even my co-workers—showed any more interest in doing the math. And so, while they claimed simply not to be losing money, they were actually earning extra income: tips on payments in euros were about 30 percent higher. This practice, while seemingly minor, reveals a strategic manipulation of the system that exploited the lack of transparency in the currency conversion process. However, the responsibility for the actual conversion fell entirely on the employees who collected the money and had to account for it at the end of the shift. There was no indication of the official exchange rates and no note of any kind on the bills; everything was paid for in cash. This was not particularly important in itself, but it surprised me to see it happening in a place where every gram of cabbage salad was weighed out.

Neither the conversion at an undisclosed rate nor the price increases pasted into the menu bothered the guests. The employees seemed to have been cautious enough, but this apparently prudent approach also carried a cost in terms of hospitality. By prioritising risk mitigation and control, it could also have inadvertently created distance and reinforced an atmosphere of mistrust. Mühlfried argues convincingly that making room for the acceptance of deviations from the norm is particularly cost intensive if no immediate price or value is set. This very same cost intensiveness, he argues, should be taken into account when balancing compliance and non-compliance with self-imposed transparency (Mühlfried 2019, 51–54; 56-57). But what interested me was that not all

standardisations were made visible in the same way. Rather, transparent ones, like the marked prices and weight specifications, could be read as a kind of basic agreement between the customers and kitchen as well as the management and ownership, while hidden standards, such as the poor exchange rate and the kitchen's private rule of serving oversized rather undersized portions, could be read differently.

The transparent standards allowed room for manoeuvre and the undisclosed ones contributed to ensuring certain criteria regarding quality within those very groups. The transparent ones were the costs of hospitality, while the hidden ones were implemented to limit those very costs as a kind of safety net. However different these approaches were, they both contributed to minimising the cost intensity, before, during, and after the occasion of hospitable interaction and for a wide variety of people all linked to questions of providing, preparing, serving, and administering food at the service area. This interplay of transparency and non-transparency, which in this case responded to the chance to locate and perceive margins of interpretation, changes the relations of mistrust at the borders of social structures. The mistrust itself is originally made tangible through transparent and non-transparent standardisations and through the conscious sharing and withholding of information. The fact that not every standard is—or even should be—transparent can be deduced from the fact that trustworthiness based on transparency and unconditional integrity, especially in business, is not necessarily interpreted positively. The concealment of price changes and setting exchange rates in one's favour need not be understood negatively any more than adding an extra slice of bread. This observation aligns with Osella's (2022) findings on the role of strategic ambiguity and flexibility in navigating complex social and economic relationships.

Based on participant observation of Indian export traders in Yiwu, China, Filippo Osella suggests that a "market player who is overly trusting is likely to be taken advantage of, if not cheated, by others". By being taken advantage of and cheated, "an excessively honest export agent might not be able to make the most of the market, and thereby become blocked from building the reputation for success which is necessary to attract customers with an eye to quick gains" (F. Osella 2022, 1223). Ambiguities and deviations from the standards that favour or disadvantage the customers or operators, if they do not prevent business in general and hospitality in particular, are thus central building blocks of reputation along the transport corridor. The fact that the boundaries between legal and the illegal or permitted and not permitted can be tested is not a criterion (F. Osella and C. Osella 2001; F. Osella 2022). There is thus a kind of partial transparency that manages to bypass control and verification—or make them obsolete. In this partial transparency, there are no enquiries: these are not needed because merely framing a condition as a concession (okay, you can pay in euros) suffices to enable an

appreciative relationship of mistrust. Thus, on a general level, one can definitely establish that valid framework conditions (which can be, but by no means must be, imposed or mediated by the state, stabilise deviations by both guests and hosts when they attempt to induce mistrust).

In this context, it is important to understand all the regulating and ideal concepts in such a way that the right person is mis*trusted, with room for manoeuvre in varying degrees of intensity. This resonates with Mühlfried's (2019) notion of "hospitable mistrusting" where the acceptance of a stranger is always contingent on a degree of reservation and the negotiation of boundaries. In the service area, this negotiation took place not only between individuals but also within the very fabric of the standardised system itself. Without making this confirmed mistrusting public, however, the guest may decide to return or stay away from there in the future. Hosts themselves, whether impersonal management or individual staff members, do not influence this. And it is precisely this powerlessness that enables the willingness to deviate from standards, at least in the case of this service station. This is the motivation for reducing costs to maintain operations (Mühlfried 2019, 51-54; 56-57), given the pressure of complexity that can be attributed to the service area.

This chapter on rules, norms, and standards as they prevail and are applied in the service area is intended to elaborate on the multifaceted nature of mis*trust as an activity and method that unfolds not in absolutes but within the gaps, empty spaces, and uncertainties inherent in standardised systems. For example, the late-night incident with the three young men highlighted how pre-emptive mistrust, based on generalised assumptions, can shape interactions and potentially lead to discriminatory practices. This exploration has challenged the notion that systematised service areas necessarily lead to a reduction in complexity and instead revealed how rules, norms, and standards provide not only a framework for interaction but also create opportunities for negotiation, adaptation, and even subversion. Deviations, gaps, and uncertainties ensure that the core business, in my case transport and road-based logistics, can continue to operate to everyone's satisfaction despite frictional losses.

We have also seen how the standardised menu, with its modifications and quantifications, acts as a microcosm of the broader dynamics of trust and mistrust at the service area. It reflects an attempt to manage expectations, ensure transparency, and navigate the challenges of offering hospitality in a standardised, transitional space. However, the value of these numbers extends beyond mere logistical efficiency. They shape social relations, influence perceptions of value, and empower both customers and staff to navigate potential mis*trust. The flexible interpretation of standards, exemplified by the discretionary currency conversions and generous portioning, further

underscores the dynamic nature of trust negotiations in this environment. Finally, the interplay of transparency and non-transparency, as observed in the pricing and the selective adherence to rules, norms, and standards, highlighted the strategic ambiguity that characterises many interactions at the service area. This ambiguity, while potentially fostering mistrust, also allows for a degree of flexibility and adaptability that can be crucial for navigating the complexities of providing hospitality in a transitional space. While Sunny Oil was a branded service area, its brand identity might project a different image from the ubiquitous chains. The modified menu card, with its visibly changed prices and crossed-out items, suggested a degree of flexibility and adaptation not typically associated with global brands. This emphasis on local customisation, coupled with the potential unfamiliarity of the Sunny Oil brand to some travellers, created a dynamic where customers had to actively engage with the unique offerings and practices of the establishment and highlights how brand identity and the negotiation of standards can shape our experiences of trust and hospitality in transitional spaces. While familiar brands might offer a sense of predictability and reassurance, the less standardised approach at Sunny Oil could foster a sense of curiosity and engagement, albeit with a potential undercurrent of uncertainty.

In conclusion, this chapter has illuminated the dynamic and multifaceted nature of mis*trusting, which is constantly negotiated within a framework of rules, norms, and standards. The service area, with its systems and transient population, provided a fertile ground for observing these dynamics and analysing the standardised menu, currency conversions, and interactions with customers has provided valuable insight into how these elements shape the experience of hospitality and mobility in this transitional space. The tensions between imposed rules and individual agency, the interplay of transparency and opacity, and the delicate balance between hospitality and control all contributed to the complex and often contradictory nature of trust and mistrust in this liminal space. Furthermore, the analysis has confirmed my initial theoretical propositions, demonstrating how mis*trusting can act as a catalyst for adaptation, negotiation, and even unexpected alliances and challenging its solely negative connotations.

As exemplified by the flexible interpretation of portion sizes and the discretionary currency conversions, trust and mistrust were intricately intertwined in the service area's operations. These subtle deviations from the expected norms highlight the power dynamics at play and the constant negotiation of boundaries between staff and customers. As Mühlfried (2018b, 11) suggests, mistrusting reveals the underlying constitutive commitments within social interactions. The service area, with its standardised systems, became a stage for these complex mis*trusting relationships to

unfold. Moments of deviation from the norm—a queue at the counter, a complaint about portion size, a negotiated exchange rate—exposed the ongoing negotiation of trust and the subtle power dynamics at play.

The question of who has the power and the impetus to set, exceed, or even subtly manipulate standards remains central to understanding the complexities of the service sector. In the case of the three young men and the flexible currency conversions, the authority to act seemed to lie with the local co-workers, showcasing a degree of autonomy within the standardised system. However, the impact of these actions on customer satisfaction and the broader dynamics of trust remains an open question, particularly given the transitory nature of the service area's clientele. More important than the actual relations of power, however, is acknowledging that the relationship between trust and mistrust and norms and standardisations, which can be interpreted as functional hospitality, revealed constellations of dependency. As we move forward, it is crucial to recognise the multifaceted nature of mis*trust and its role in shaping social interactions within standardised environments. By understanding these complexities, we can gain valuable insights into the human experience of navigating the ever-evolving landscapes of mobility and hospitality, where trust is not simply given but constantly negotiated and re-negotiated. The service area, with its unique blend of standardisation and flexibility, serves as a powerful reminder that even in seemingly predictable environments, the human element—with its capacity for agency, interpretation, and adaptation—remains central to the dynamics of trust and mistrust.

5. Flickering Mis*trust in Situations of Crisis

Rules, norms, and standards governed not only the microcosm of the service area but also the expansive infrastructure within which it existed. However, such regulations can be challenged or even transgressed at all scales. The distinction between these spheres lies not only in the forms of participation but, crucially, in the emergence in moments of uncertainty of ephemeral, often unexpected alliances whose strength was rooted in mutual commitment. Mis*trusting, then, operates within the interstices of these established structures and offers opportunities to navigate, negotiate, and even transcend them. Consider the ubiquitous act of oncoming drivers flashing their headlights, a seemingly simple gesture but laden with multiple meanings. Sometimes, it serves to warn of impending hazards such as a broken-down vehicle around a bend or debris on the road or to indicate a speed trap or other obstruction ahead. However, it can also signal the intent to manoeuvre, sometimes within the bounds of traffic regulations and others in direct violation of them. Such signals are part of an unspoken, informal code of road conduct that can supersede official regulations in real-time driving scenarios.

In such instances, headlight flashing transforms into a form of communication, a negotiation between drivers that transcends the formal rules of the road to create a fleeting alliance based on shared understanding and a mutual goal of maintaining fluidity and avoiding standstills and other crises of mobilities. Other common uses include signalling the willingness to yield or allow another driver to merge or overtake oneself—or, conversely, the intention to overtake another vehicle. In these moments, the focus shifts away from strict adherence to traffic regulations towards a negotiated understanding between drivers, even if this entails bending or breaking the rules. Finally, headlight flashing can also function as a form of social sanction against drivers conducting risky and reckless manoeuvres. It serves to signal disapproval of perceived violations of unwritten road etiquette, such as trying to overtake another vehicle in a dangerous way (Burns and Katovich 2003; Featherstone 2004). Building upon the previous chapter's examination of mis*trust within the context of norms and their transgressions, this one expands the focus beyond the traditional emphasis on immobility within mobility studies. It explores the dynamic nature of mis*trusting during disruptions, highlighting how individuals actively navigate crises, forge alliances, and adapt their perceptions of trust and mistrust even within the constraints of logistical systems.

The disruptions I observed at the service area were all inextricably tied to some form of control, but they varied in both duration and form. They not only included temporary

police checkpoints but also ongoing road closures, as well as the pervasive sense of surveillance that permeated the site. Each disruption targeted specific groups, sometimes with overlapping impacts, further highlighting the complex power dynamics at play (Stanisz 2015). Consider the temporary police checkpoints erected nationwide in response to the Covid-19 outbreak in Bansko. These checkpoints, implemented to contain the virus by restricting mobility, directly impacted countless individuals across Bulgaria: lorry drivers and travellers as well as, significantly, my co-workers, interlocutors, and myself. In contrast, a later snowstorm-induced road closure primarily impacted long-haul lorry drivers and locals experienced minimal disruption to their daily routines. Finally, the ever-present surveillance associated with the electronic toll system disproportionately affected foreign drivers who lacked the mandatory 'vignette' and often resulted in delays, fines, and a heightened sense of vulnerability. This vulnerability stemmed not only from the potential financial penalties but also from the feeling of being targeted and excluded from the seamless flow of mobility afforded to those with the proper documentation.

Mobility crises expose the fragility of the social contract. Through the lens of mobility disruptions, this chapter illuminates the complex interplay of mis*trust and the formation of temporary alliances, further elucidating the central research question of how people engage in mis*trusting. Given the inherent incomparability of mobility crises in terms of origin, experience, and scope (Kleist and Jansen 2016), it does not offer a direct comparison, but rather an in-depth analysis of the diverse dynamics arising from such events, including their perception and management within various social constellations. The analysis explores how the 'flickering' nature of mis*trust, characterised by its dynamic and situational nature, manifests in the formation and dissolution of alliances during mobility crises and examines how individuals navigate uncertainty and negotiate power relations by strategically shifting their trust and mistrust towards different actors and institutions.

The following subchapters will delve into specific instances of disruption—the implementation of Covid-19 checkpoints, a snowstorm-induced road closure, and the challenges of the electronic toll payment system—to unpack the diverse ways in which mis*trust shapes individual and collective responses. I will also refine the concept of mis*trusting as a kind of 'flickering' that challenges the boundaries between trust and mistrust and thus develop my understanding of mis*trusting as a subversive act of coping, adapting, and potentially even rebelling (Oliver-Smith 2013; 2016). Through analysing the dynamics of mobility crises, this chapter contributes to my broader argument by demonstrating how individuals navigate uncertainty and negotiate power relations within the transnational transport network.

5.1Managing Covid-19: Forming Alliances to Sustain

In the early days of the pandemic, surgical masks were scarce in the region. However, news of its devastating spread from Codogno, Italy in January 2020 had instilled widespread fear and acquiring even a few masks felt like a victory. The six I managed to obtain from a sympathetic service area manager became priced possessions. Radostin and I meticulously washed and reused them, despite their deteriorating condition and our makeshift repairs, but despite our careful handling they inevitably began to deteriorate: first the blue outer layer and then the white inner one frayed. When the straps tore, we improvised repairs, punching new holes and threading makeshift ties through the fabric. It was only weeks later, when the supply was replenished, that we were finally able to procure new ones, but Bulgaria had yet to record a confirmed case.

On March 13th, 2020, the landscape shifted dramatically. The Bulgarian Minister of Health, advised by Major General Mutaftchiyski's team of experts[12] issued Decree РД-01-124 (Ministry of Health of Bulgaria / Министерство на здравеопазването 2020). Many people had already acquired masks and at the service area we also had gloves and protective shields (Anranter 2022), but these new regulations extended far beyond individual precautions. The new mandatory testing and quarantines and travel restrictions drastically altered daily life, especially for those in transport and logistics. The service area was deemed essential and remained open, albeit with restrictions; this starkly contrasted with non-essential businesses, which were closed. Capacity limits were enforced everywhere, but its connection to critical transport infrastructure afforded it a privileged position and even the restaurant remained open, offering a limited takeaway menu to lorry drivers, the lifeblood of cross-border trade.

The imposition of these regulations triggered a realignment of roles and responsibilities within families, friendships, and communities. Checkpoints along access roads, rather than at individual homes, necessitated strategic decision-making about travel, balancing essential needs with the imperative to minimise infection risk. The suspension of bus service to Peshakovo (Пешаково), the village where I was based, further complicated matters, which underscored how disruptions in mobility infrastructure could amplify

[12] Wenzislaw Metodiew Mutaftchiyski (Венцислав Методиев Мутафчийски), Major General of the Bulgarian Armed Forces and Commander of the Medical Service Command, headed the Military Medical Academy in Sofia, was appointed as head of the "National Crisis Unit for Coronavirus Prevention and Control" on 20 February 2020. Mutaftschijski gained public prominence during the pandemic because of his outspoken style, which led to the creation of numerous satirical social media profiles commenting on global and Bulgarian politics, some of which remained active years later. See: Приятно ми е, Генерала! (@generala_official) Instagram photos and videos.

existing dependencies and compel individuals to renegotiate their social contracts. While most residents in the region adhered to the stay-at-home orders and only ventured out with permits and for essential purposes, the service area workers remained on the front lines, ensuring the continued flow of goods and services. However, my research was not deemed essential to the supply chain, allowing me time for long walks and exercising.

As during other pandemics (Adey et al. 2021; Brown and Marí Sáez 2021; A. W. Somparé and E. B. Somparé 2018), state bodies were charged with enforcing the newly imposed regulations. The police checkpoints that were particularly conspicuous at Vidin's entry and exit points became a stark symbol of these restrictions, limiting both the physical and conceptual mobility of vulnerable populations. As scholars like Peter Adey et al. (2021) and by Susan Martin and Jonas Bergmann (2021) have noted, in the context of Covid-19 such checkpoints not only enforced physical restrictions, creating new dependencies, but also served as a potent reminder of the fragility of social hierarchies and the state's power to control movement. The interplay between mobility and its disruption, often framed as unintentional crises of mobilities, resonates beyond the specific context of the Covid-19 pandemic. This crisis of mobility, which is distinct from concepts like 'mooring' (Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006; Urry 2003, 2013) and 'rootedness (along the way)' (Feld and Basso 1996; Saxinger 2021), has prompted scholars to explore various terms—such as 'immobility', 'stillness' (Bissell and G. Fuller 2013; Tim Cresswell 2012), 'standstill' (Stanisz 2015), and even the more encompassing 'stuckness' (Hage 2009c), 'insulation' and 'isolation' (Vannini 2011a), and 'fixity' (Merriman 2023)—to capture the multifaceted nature of interrupted movement and its social, emotional, and political ramifications. These disruptions often create 'productive tensions' (Keane 2016) within communities, forcing individuals to re-evaluate their relationships, question established norms, rules, and standards and forge new alliances based on shared experiences and shifting perceptions of mis*trust.

The enforced crises of mobilities, in stark contrast to the fluidity and freedom often associated with modern life, fostered the emergence of new social dynamics and strategies for navigating the restrictions. In response to such crises, individuals sought ways to circumvent the regulations, revealing the inherent tension between state control and individual agency. This tension between state-imposed restrictions and individuals' navigation of them underscores one of the core themes of this chapter, the dynamic interplay between individual agency and the constraints of larger systems and structures—a phenomenon which is often amplified during moments of crisis. How else could Dani and Miki have visited us twice since the Baba Marta holiday, which coincided that year with the lockdown announcement? They justified their mobility through the pretence of care—they were bringing Radostin medication and some

groceries—but their visits also served the social function of offering a temporary respite from isolation. Like others registered in the city who lacked essential worker status, they likely pushed the boundaries of the regulations by omitting to mention that they also spent half the afternoon socialising and sharing a barbecue with us. On their second visit, they even brought two blank declarations, the documents officially required for any movement between rural areas and the city. This symbolised the complex web of dependencies that emerged during the crisis, not only between authorities and citizens but also within families and even between Radostin and me.

Armed with the travel permits, we strategised a trip to procure non-essential supplies. Radostin, believing me to be less vulnerable to Covid than himself, insisted I venture into the city alone despite his concerns about what would happen if I encountered the police. In the face of this national health emergency, I felt I needed his advice when dealing with the authorities. I began filling out the travel declaration with my given name, surname, birthdate, home address, and other personal details and we sat at the table and reviewed it together. I was unsure how specific the reason had to be and worried about my unregistered status in Bulgaria. We then turned our attention to the shopping list. Donning his reading glasses, he scrutinised the form and told me, "'Пазаруване'. Пиши 'пазаруване'. Ако искаш, сложи и 'храна'. Нищо повече." ('Shopping'. Write 'shopping'. If you like, add 'groceries.' Nothing else). I questioned whether to specify the supermarket Kaufland as the destination, but Radostin advised against this and suggested I put only the city, Vidin. Though unconvinced, I acquiesced, hoping I would get the chance to clarify if it became necessary. Radostin's guidance on my unregistered status was less definitive. While foreigners were not yet required to register, he agreed that this might change if the lockdown continued. For now, he advised emphasising my frequent visits and my recent two-month stay. He offered to research this further and urged me to call him if the police needed to confirm my residence.

As I prepared for the journey, the power dynamics inherent in the situation became increasingly apparent. The pandemic and its associated restrictions had intensified the division of labour within our household. Despite, or perhaps because of, our differing perspectives of the trustworthiness of the authorities, Radostin and I were renegotiating our roles and responsibilities. This realignment reflected a broader societal pattern of adaptation and negotiation in the face of crisis, as individuals sought to maintain agency and security amidst uncertainty. The pandemic, and the measures enacted to combat it, had triggered a redistribution of roles and responsibilities, not only within interpersonal relationships but also across social networks, highlighting the interconnectedness of individual and collective experiences. After a ten-minute drive from Peshakovo towards

Vidin, I encountered the inevitable police checkpoint. Strategically positioned at the city's entrance, where the E-79 highway intersected with the rural road, it was an impenetrable barrier that ensured that no one entered without scrutiny. Police officers in many different uniforms were stationed both in the middle of the road and on the shoulder and one was even sitting on a picnic chair smoking a cigarette.

After the vehicle ahead of me was allowed through, another officer in the blue uniform of the National Police Service waved me over. I inched ahead and rolled down my window. Both the officer and I wore masks, his complemented by blue disposable gloves. He asked, “Декларация?” (Declaration?) and I promptly handed him the document. That was insufficient and he started asking me pointed questions: “Къде живеете? Кво правите в региона? Защо пътувате до Видин?” (Where do you live here? What are you doing in the region? Why are you travelling to Vidin?) I answered honestly and showed him my Italian passport, which prompted a more thorough scrutiny given the heightened concerns about Covid-19. He turned away, relaying my information to another officer via radio; then opened the boot of his patrol car and placed my declaration in a designated tray. When he returned my passport and signalled me to proceed, I asked for my travel declaration back, falsely claiming it was my only copy, and expressed concern about leaving the city without it. (I really wanted to keep a blank copy to photocopy outside the restricted zone at the service area). He consulted the other officer, but they had no blank copies available. However, he assured me that the officers at the exit checkpoint would allow me to leave the city without a declaration, although he sternly warned me that I should always carry a second declaration in the future.

After completing our errands, I headed back to Peshakovo. To minimise travel distance and get a chance to copy the second declaration, I used a different checkpoint, on the road towards Serbia. This was notably larger and more heavily staffed than the other one I had encountered earlier. Once again, vehicles were strategically positioned to funnel traffic to the checkpoint. Amidst the various national police units, a gendarme vehicle stood out in the background. A policewoman in a green uniform with her mask dangling below her chin stopped me. Before requesting my declaration, she asked where I was going. “To Peshakovo,” I replied, then realised she didn’t know that place. I explained that it was a small village near the town of General Marinovo (Генерал Мариново) and that I was living there. Satisfied, she then requested my travel permit. I began to explain my previous encounter at the other checkpoint, where I had been assured a permit wasn’t necessary for exiting the city. However, she cut me off curtly: “Не. Трябва ви декларация.” (No. You need a declaration). I asked for a blank form, but she refused and reiterated that it was my responsibility to have one readily available. She then asked the purpose of my trip to the city. I explained that I had been grocery

shopping and pointed to the branded bags on the back seat. The officer briefly peered into the car, then stepped back and waved me through with a dismissive gesture. This seemingly mundane interaction and discretionary control over individual mobility during the crisis was merely a case of power dynamics, I concluded (Martin and Bergmann 2021).

When I arrived at the service area, Ivailo and Rosi greeted me warmly, inquired about my well-being and offered any assistance we might need. I assured them that we were doing well, expressing my gratitude for their concern. They echoed my sentiments about the relative safety of the countryside yet also expressed their own anxieties despite the implemented safety measures. Meanwhile, Moni emerged from the shop, offering a casual greeting and lighting a cigarette. I took this opportunity to ask her to photocopy the travel declaration for me. “Десет стигат ли?” (Are ten enough?) she asked. I said they were and sheepishly admitting that I had only retained the blank copy by misleading the police. They laughed with me, but did not comment further. My candid confession had unintentionally made them complicit in this minor deception, underscoring how alliances can emerge even in seemingly trivial acts of defiance against authority. Finishing her cigarette, Moni retreated into the office with my declaration. Ivailo, meanwhile, shared that despite knowing the local police, he dutifully submitted travel declarations for every trip; however, these documents were unlikely to have any real consequences unless an outbreak occurred. Moni returned with ten copies of what she told me was the latest version of the declaration, although I couldn’t see any changes. As the first lorry pulled in, signalling the start of another busy day, I expressed my gratitude and bid them farewell, mentioning that Radostin was eagerly awaiting my return. Moni reassured me that the service area would remain open as long as overland traffic persisted and extended an open invitation for future visits and any necessary paperwork assistance.

While the Covid-19 pandemic’s impact on mobility may seem obvious in hindsight, it was marked by unusual interactions leading also to situational disruptions as it unfolded. The crisis created new spatial and social dynamics, fundamentally altering routines and processes associated with visiting service areas and highlighting the challenges of unexpected (im)mobilities (Bissell and G. Fuller 2013; Tim Cresswell 2012; Schewel 2020). This newfound spatial division manifested in checkpoints along major thoroughfares, redefining the locus of threat from movement itself to the act of stopping and entering. The perceived danger shifted from travellers in motion to those seeking entry into the city, who were forced to halt, interact with authorities, and justify their presence. This demarcation between urban and rural spaces, negotiated at the intersections of mobility and crises of mobilities, led to the replacement of familiar

routines with unfamiliar regulations. This shift highlighted the precariousness of mobility, revealing its potential for sudden standstills and interruptions, and underscoring the inherent volatility of movement itself. As explored in the previous chapter, mis*trusting becomes particularly salient when established rules and norms are disrupted or absent. In such situations, cooperation, alliances, and coalitions emerge as crucial strategies for navigating uncertainty. Among these, alliances best embody the delicate interplay of trust and mistrust, representing strategic partnerships where mutual dependence and shared goals coexist with the potential for conflicting interests or even betrayal.

The first alliance I observed during the pandemic involved Radostin, his family, and myself. The shared experience of the crisis and the collective effort to navigate its challenges fostered a sense of solidarity and deepened our informal exchanges, echoing observations made by Eric C. Jones et al. (2013) and Alber J. Faas (2016) on crisis-induced collaborations. The experience of the crisis also transformed the dynamics of mis*trusting. Collective needs and responsibilities now took precedence over individual concerns. For instance, my anticipation of potential travel restrictions and consequent decision to hire a car significantly altered my role within our collective by providing a solution to our shared mobility challenges and allowing us to navigate the restrictions and access essential services in the city. The car also became a justification for using the travel declarations, further solidifying its importance in our crisis response strategy. By hiring the car, I not only increased our collective independence but also reduced our risk of exposure to the virus, thereby alleviating the burden on Radostin's daughter and her husband, who were already juggling childcare responsibilities. Simultaneously, Radostin assumed a new role as my primary informant and confidant. We engaged in frequent discussions about the logistics of navigating the restrictions, my observations of evolving social practices, and the general atmosphere in the town, and at the shopping centre and service area. This observation aligns with research on crisis-induced collaborations (Faas 2016; Jones et al. 2013; Oliver-Smith 2013, 2016) highlighting how shared experiences can strengthen social bonds. However, my findings also underscore the fragility of such alliances, contingent upon specific circumstances and individual perceptions, as exemplified by the evolving dynamics between Radostin and me.

While sharing information played a crucial role in fostering alliances within the service area, a different dynamic unfolded in the interactions between citizens and the police tasked with enforcing the restrictions. The second alliance, already established but further solidified during the pandemic, existed within the service area itself, which functioned as more than just an information hub, a critical role during crises that also carried the potential for misinformation and unequal knowledge distribution (Fortun

2001; Oliver-Smith 2013, 2016; Tzaneva, Maeva, and Erolova 2022) further complicating trust dynamics. This alliance centred on the exchange of information, which proved crucial in navigating the uncertainties of the pandemic. When it came to information about the geographical spread of the virus or the efficacy of various protective measures, the service area emerged as a well-informed node within a broader network. The concentration of knowledge there allowed it to function as a valuable resource for travellers, police, and the employees' families alike. Unsurprisingly, access to and willingness to share this information became key criteria for inclusion within this alliance. Exclusive access to information became a powerful tool, enabling the blurring of established social categories—service staff, authorities, and lorry drivers and other travellers—while simultaneously constructing 'dangerous others,' a phenomenon observed in migration discourses (Gustafsson and Hardtmann 2023; Wodak 2015), and other contexts where perceived deviations from accepted norms lead to social exclusion (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 2016; Glassner 2009). During the early stages of the pandemic, travellers from Italy were perceived as the greatest threat. The suspension of the weekly bus service connecting Bulgarian workers to Italy's Veneto region, which normally made a stop at Sunny Oil, was met with relief. However, as the virus spread across Europe, mistrust shifted towards drivers returning from other countries, particularly the Netherlands, Germany, and Austria.

A third alliance, distinct from the previously observed social dynamics, emerged among the various police units enforcing the roadblocks. These controls were implemented by three organisational entities: the border police, the national police, and the gendarmerie. However, my subsequent desk research in Vienna revealed that these, despite their distinct uniforms and operational roles, all these reported to the same ministry and had been gradually integrated into the 'national police' since 1990. This organisational structure was not only news to me but also seemed either irrelevant or unfamiliar to most of my interlocutors. They rarely questioned or explained the presence of three distinct units but reproduced the perceived segmentation of these police forces in casual conversations. This unquestioning acceptance could reflect a deeply ingrained deference to authority, or perhaps a tacit understanding of the strategic advantages offered by this seemingly fragmented structure. At the same time, the placement of all three units under the same ministry could also be read as an unsuccessful attempt to dismantle preexisting power dynamics by retaining operational independence despite formally reporting to the same minister. Finally, as one colleague suggested during a Ph.D. course discussion, it might represent a deliberate tactic by the state to obfuscate its power and create confusion, thereby hindering any targeted resistance.

Regardless of the underlying reasons, this acceptance highlights a pragmatic approach to navigating the complexities of state power, particularly during a crisis where cooperation with authorities was essential. Previously, the border police had a particularly good reputation among most of my interlocutors and co-workers at the service area. Despite rumours of bribery that their recruiters could be bribed, several interlocutors praised their effectiveness in safeguarding the borders and combating organised crime. However, the crisis had eroded this trust. Just weeks after Dani and her husband described how they had used false pretences to bypass the restrictions, my co-workers at the service area started sharing similar stories. This shift in narrative signalled a breakdown of trust and a growing inclination towards active mis*trusting of authorities. The dissolution of the presumptive alliance between citizens and the state was fuelled not only by personal experiences but also by media reports.

A few weeks after I shared my own experience of circumventing the police checkpoints, news reports emerged about flagrant violations of quarantine regulations in Sinti and Roma neighbourhoods (Kay 2020; Wölfl 2021) and, more alarmingly, among Bulgarians returning from abroad (Sofia Globe Staff 2020). These reports further strained the already tenuous relationship between citizens and authorities. My interlocutors, emboldened by these reports and their own experiences, began not only to actively evade the restrictions but also to openly question the competence and legitimacy of the authorities, including the once-respected border guards. This escalating mis*trust fostered an environment challenging the official narrative and testing the boundaries of enforcement became increasingly commonplace. Even Radostin, who usually complied with the authorities, started to express doubts and defiance, influenced by discussions on Russian and Bulgarian media. Despite our shared living space and daily interactions, Radostin was constructing an internal world of shifting allegiances, grappling with whom to trust and whom to mis*trust. This internal conflict reached a climax when Radostin requested a ride into town to collect his pension. This occasion, his first venture into the city in weeks, forced him to confront the dissonance between his internal world of mis*trust and the external realities of the lockdown.

The evening before our planned trip, he expressed his frustration at being forced to travel into the city just to collect his pension. He then requested a detailed account of the police checkpoints and control measures in place within the city. I sat down with him to discuss the situation, drawing on my familiarity with the checkpoint procedures, having navigated them numerous times myself. After our discussion, we settled on a departure time and retired for the night. The next morning, I awoke to the sounds of Radostin's preparations in the bathroom. As was his custom before venturing into the city, he meticulously shaved, showered, and combed his hair. Completing his

preparations with a spritz of cologne, he called out my name, using the affectionate diminutive: “Михаелчо!” (*Michaeltscho!*) I knew this signalled an impending announcement rather than that he was about to make a request. Without opening the door to my room, he asked if I would like to have a cup of coffee with him. This was more of a wake-up call than a question. He had already boiled the water and within twenty minutes we were on our way to Vidin.

I was driving more slowly and carefully than usual to avoid aggravating Radostin’s back pain. Halfway to town, Radostin’s conversation took an unexpected turn. He began to express his mistrust of the police, a sentiment that especially surprised me given his deference to authority in earlier conversations. He acknowledged that I had been able to make it through the checkpoints successfully but then gave me three specific instructions for our impending encounter: slow down but only stop when instructed, keep the car doors locked and the window open just enough for communication, and display our documents without handing them over. His concern seemed rooted in a desire for control and fear that my unfamiliarity with the situation might jeopardise our journey. I agreed, recognising that this interaction exemplified how individual experiences and perceptions of trustworthiness shape alliances and strategies during disruptions. Radostin’s attempt to exert control highlighted the nuanced ways in which mis*trust operates within relationships, adding another layer of complexity to understanding responses to mobility restrictions.

As we neared the checkpoint, Radostin reiterated his instructions, his voice tense with apprehension. Amused by his anxiety, yet recognising our shared goal of minimising delays, I attempted to comply. However, I also wanted to test the boundaries, asserting a degree of agency by pushing forward until the officer’s hand motion unequivocally signalled us to stop. The officer approached, and I cracked the window just enough for conversation. I stated our destinations—the post office and pharmacy—while Radostin nodded in affirmation. To our surprise, the officer simply waved us through without requesting any further documentation or explanation. We proceeded with our errands, a sense of relief washing over us as we navigated the now-familiar streets of Vidin. By midday, our errands completed, we were ready to head back to Peshakovo. As we cleared the checkpoint and merged onto the ring road, Radostin’s voice broke the silence, laden with disapproval: “Защо си спрял? Не ти ли казах да караш, докато те поискат да спреш?” (Why did you stop? Didn’t I tell you to drive on until they want you to stop?) This outburst did not actually seem to be about stopping but about my perceived defiance of his instructions or misinterpretation of the officer’s signal. Perhaps, I pondered, Radostin was testing the strength of our alliance, and I had inadvertently failed. Even now, Radostin’s motivations are unclear to me. Was he

genuinely concerned about potential repercussions, or was he asserting his authority in a situation where he felt more knowledgeable? Or was it a manifestation of his underlying anxieties about the pandemic and the perceived capriciousness of the authorities, anxieties that I, as an outsider, couldn't fully grasp?

His criticism, especially after our uneventful passage, left me feeling surprisingly inadequate, despite my growing familiarity with the checkpoints. It seemed that in his eyes I had still not fully earned his trust to navigate the complexities of the system. Despite our shared goal of minimising interaction with the authorities, this incident exposed our divergent approaches to navigating the checkpoint. We each remained convinced that our strategy was superior, underscoring the complexities of negotiating trust and agency within a power imbalance—particularly during a crisis where individual actions can have broader implications for the collective. I later discovered that my perceived inability to fully grasp the nuances of our alliance during a crisis triggered Radostin's deeply ingrained concerns about corruption and the potential for exploitation. This incident underscored how our divergent perspectives stemmed not only from our distinct life experiences and understandings of trust but also from our differing positions within the social hierarchy. Fortunately, our disagreement was short-lived. This experience, however, served as a poignant reminder of the complexities surrounding power, agency, and the negotiation of trust during crises, particularly in contexts where individual actions can have broader implications.

The Covid-19 pandemic, as experienced within the microcosm of the service area, exemplifies how crises disrupt established routines and compel the formation of new alliances, each with its own unique set of conditions and understandings. It also demonstrates mis*trust, particularly in its 'flickering' form. These alliances emerged in response to the disruption of established norms and the creation of newly demarcated spaces, both physical and social. As illustrated by the preceding examples, individuals navigated the mobility crisis not merely through compliance but through a dynamic interplay of pre-existing blueprints, the forging of new alliances, and the recalibration of mis*trust. By strategically shifting their trust and mistrust, individuals and communities renegotiated power relations, contested dominant narratives, and carved out spaces for agency and resistance.

Recognising the diversity of individual and collective experiences, I have closely examined the various strategies employed to navigate the crisis, beginning with the national authorities' intervention into the daily lives of millions through sweeping decrees. Decision-making within these alliances was often undertaken under duress, leading to actions that, with the benefit of hindsight, might appear imperfectly calibrated or misdirected. This underscores the inherent challenges of navigating crises, where

individuals and institutions must act decisively despite incomplete information and rapidly evolving circumstances. Nevertheless, these findings highlight the crucial role of mis*trusting in enabling adaptation, cooperation, and even resistance to authority when necessary. My analysis suggests that these alliances prioritised shared needs and goals if such behaviours did not jeopardise the alliance's stability or effectiveness, even if it entailed overlooking behaviours that might be deemed morally or legally ambiguous. Forming alliances during crises, therefore, becomes a crucial strategy for navigating the complexities of trust and mistrust that allows individuals to strategically balance reliance on others with a healthy dose of scepticism. The reconfiguration of roles and responsibilities during crises underscores how mis*trusting operates not merely as a cognitive process but also as a catalyst for social adaptation and change, influencing both individual actions and collective strategies. This observation directly addresses how individuals engage in mis*trusting and its broader implications as a critical intervention for social dynamics: the deployment of various police units, seemingly interchangeable in their roles, served a strategic purpose, allowing the authorities to maintain operational flexibility and deflect targeted criticism in case of unpopular or poorly executed policies. The resulting confusion acted as a shield against focused mis*trust, hindering any attempts to hold specific individuals or units accountable (a point I will explore further in Chapter 6).

5.2 "Let's Hope They Will Bring Them Tea!": Closing the Road Because of a Blizzard[13]

A police officer waved down lorry drivers headed south, directing them to leave the road and park in the Sunny Oil lot: the last service area in Bulgaria for travellers headed north on the E-79 toward Romania and beyond, and the first for those entering the country with destinations in its south and in Greece, Turkey, or Iran. More and more lorries were diverted as time passed. Some drivers asked the officer what was going on, but none were permitted to proceed. Every single driver headed towards Sofia was ordered to leave the highway, stop, and wait until the authorities reopened it. As more and more lorries arrived, my co-workers tried to free up some extra space. For the drivers, the employee at the parking lot became a second authority figure whose decisions and instructions had to be followed.

[13] Parts of this chapter were published in 2024 in the article "Unplanned Stopover at a Service Area: Waiting for a Road to be Unblocked", in *Humanity Mobilities* (Anranter 2024b).

Nonetheless, they cooperated in rearranging the parking lot to accommodate as many sidelined drivers as possible. Spacing their lorries closer together than the lines marked on the pavement and turning the areas designated for manoeuvring and as drive-through lanes into temporary parking spaces made them accomplices: parking too close together and obstructing driveways were obvious violations of the standard road safety regulations, which also applied to the service area's grounds. After hours of directing the incoming lorry traffic, one of the workers responsible for the parking lot came into the restaurant to warm up and have a coffee. Exhausted and soaked from the snow, he complained that most of the drivers would have no way to get their lorries out if there was an emergency in the car park.

On the day of the road closure, not only the car park filled up quickly, but also the restaurant in the service area. Anticipating the rush, my co-workers had not only stocked the refrigerators but also topped off the olive oil and vinegar dispensers, the salt and pepper shakers, and the pickled garlic jars. Although I had experience taking orders, serving food, and processing payments from my participant observation, my only tasks that morning were clearing and wiping down the tables. The regular servers, who were certainly more efficient and less error-prone, would take care of the rest. When new customers arrived, they welcomed them warmly before offering them the menu. They would then politely take their orders without writing them down, go enter them on the computer, and finally communicate them to the kitchen staff. Once guests had finished their meals, they would normally ask if they wanted to order anything else or just pay their bill. However, things were different that day. First, the servers took notes without vocally relaying them to the kitchen staff (who could check the printed guest tickets). Second, they did not ask customers if they wanted to settle when they finished eating, as it seemed that most of the drivers wanted to stay. The interaction between the lorry drivers and the servers shifted. Apart from me, everyone seemed familiar with how to manage this onslaught, which grew in intensity through the day. All seemed to have previous experience of this kind of winter emergency.

The Covid-19 checkpoints and snowstorm-induced roadblock both constituted unplanned interruptions to mobility and logistics and were enforced by the same state authorities, but they differed significantly in their nature and implications. This difference highlights the diverse forms that crises can take and their varying impacts on mis*trusting and the formation of alliances. The restrictions due to the weather, unlike those because of the pandemic, had an unknown yet foreseeable end and thus produced a feeling of temporary disruption rather than an open-ended crisis. Stocking the refrigerators in advance, one more action my co-workers had undertaken that morning, was a prime example of how deviations from routines materialised in anticipation of the rush. This proactive measure reflected an attempt to maintain a semblance of normality

and hospitality amidst the crisis and underscored the service area's role as a haven of stability within the disrupted mobility landscape. The fully stocked fridges made for quicker service, which encouraged drivers to linger and spend more money while they waited to hear when the road would reopen.

Later, after the national news broadcast (which did not address the road's reopening), the dwindling stocks of alcoholic beverages revealed that some drivers had opted to reclaim control by taking this workday as one of their legally mandated rest days. Instead of their usual quick meal and half-hour break, drivers spent many hours in the restaurant, consuming multiple meals and drinks, socialising, and passing the time. Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's concept of 'rhythm *and* arrhythmia' (italics added), Tim Edensor and Julian Holloway's work on how routines and mobilities inform social practice and interventions as people rely on established practices to navigate their daily lives and how disruptions to these routines can challenge their sense of agency (Edensor 2010; Edensor and Holloway 2008) and Agata Stanisz's concept of 'regimes of logistics' (Stanisz 2015), to examines the power relations and structures that shape individuals' experiences within transportation networks. Faced with an unexpected stopover due to the road closure, the seemingly insignificant act of taking the time to clean up and even apply aftershave or cologne before entering the dining hall can be interpreted as an attempt to transform the enforced standstill into a moment of respite.

The unplanned interruption created a sense of arrhythmia, disrupting the flow of mobility and the drivers' established routines and forcing them to adapt and find new ways to cope (Lefebvre 2007; Edensor and Holloway 2008; Edensor 2010). The drivers in the restaurant would otherwise have had a regular workday of driving, so they were now looking for ways to overcome the interruption of their regular rhythm. Anticipating a lengthy stop, most tried to make a virtue of necessity, partly by engaging in other activities and partly by chatting and sharing a drink or two with other drivers or by attending to hygiene and taking a more extended rest. The overall experience of arrhythmia, however, was not merely a disruption of physical movement but also a disruption of social rhythms and expectations that highlighted the interconnectedness of mobility, sociality, and individual well-being. The proactive approach to coping with the disruption reflected a form of 'flickering' mis*trust, where drivers simultaneously acknowledged limitations while actively seeking ways to regain agency and maintain a sense of normalcy. Read this way, the drivers' actions, including the fluctuations in food and beverage consumption, indicate not only competing alliances but also attempts to mitigate the 'arrhythmia' (Edensor 2010; Edensor and Holloway 2008; Lefebvre 2007, 68–69) caused by an obvious interruption compared to co-workers stopped elsewhere

along the road, other drivers who had chosen different routes, and not least their own driving routine.

The experience of such immobility transcended the mere cessation of physical movement: it encompassed a disruption of social rhythms, expectations, and the intricate web of dependencies and power relations inherent in the 'regimes of logistics' (Stanisz 2015, 77). This regime illuminates the intricate web of control and surveillance that underpins the modern movement of goods, encompassing both physical tracking and the vast informational networks of supply chain management. It orchestrates a complex choreography of acceleration and deceleration, creating hierarchical spaces where transportation is not merely linear but involves strategic pauses and detours. She highlights the precariousness of agency within the regime: "[Drivers] never knew when the pause would happen or how long it would last." (Stanisz 2015, 78).

Non-places like factories and highways become vital nodes within this regime, serving as junctions where movement and stillness intersect. A constant tension exists within this regime between the imperative for flow and the necessity for control, leading to a perpetual negotiation of power. Crucially, Stanisz recognises that standstills and pauses are not anomalies but integral components of transit and logistics that allow for the regeneration of capital and optimisation of the flow of goods (Stanisz 2015, 82–83). This perspective challenges the traditional view of immobility as a disruption to be avoided, instead framing it as a necessary and even productive aspect of a logistical regime. This raises the questions of who precisely was affected by crises of mobilities and standstill, how this disruption manifested in their experiences, and how these experiences were intertwined with the dynamics of mis*trusting. The initial sense of control among the drivers, who had transformed the service station into a temporary office (Laurier 2004), gradually gave way to unease. A lack of information and a sense of mis*trust towards those unaffected by the closure – drivers of smaller vehicles, those on alternative routes, and the distant bureaucrats—disrupted their usual rhythm.

To pass the time, some drivers played card games while others joked or commiserated about the enforced standstill. Around noon, a waiter switched the television channel from the action movies that had been on all morning to the midday news from Bulgarian National Television. The network's familiar jingle filled the room, silencing conversations and drawing everyone's attention to the screen. As usual, the broadcast started with teasers for all the breaking stories. This included footage of crews clearing snow and responding to traffic accidents caused by the inclement weather and of children frolicking in the snow along the Black Sea coast. One person in the room said something; another shushed them. The presenter began to speak, providing updates on the current road closures and capacity problems facing the road clearance service; then

continued with a second report on road fatalities since the start of winter. Someone lit a cigarette. Finally, the report turned to conditions at the Petrohan Pass to the south, where a reporter, bundled in a thick coat, described the treacherous conditions and stranded vehicles. The pass, he announced, would remain closed indefinitely. In the drivers' lounge, anxieties and frustrations simmered. One driver complained sarcastically about the lack of information and belated response, echoing the shared frustration over the lack of information and the authorities' delayed response to the road closure: "Дано му донесат чай!" (Let's hope they bring him tea!). This time there were no calls for silence, only a murmur of laughter that rippled through the dining room.

After the news had ended, the familiar sound of cutlery against plates resumed. Some drivers headed back to their lorries, while others lingered, seeking solace in another drink, perhaps a stronger one. The news had served then to recalibrate their mis*trusting the local police and re-establish a sense of camaraderie with those still on the road. According to the news reports, most drivers, whether co-workers or competitors of those who were now stuck, even those two hundred kilometres to the south, would not be able to resume driving and would have to spend the night by the road. The shared experience of the snowstorm fostered a 'community of fate' among the drivers. Seeing others facing worse conditions prompted a recalibration of expectations and routines. The enforced standstill provided an unexpected moment of reflection, allowing drivers to reassess their own rhythms and anxieties in relation to their competitors (Edensor 2010; Edensor and Holloway 2008).

The news highlighted a crucial distinction: standstill is not immobility. As Stanisz suggests, stillness can be a form of anticipation (Stanisz 2015, 84), a productive pause within the constraints of the logistics system (Tim Cresswell 2012; Stanisz 2015). The drivers at the service area, though temporarily halted by the roadblock, retained their agency and thus mobility. They could move around, socialise, and importantly, gather information. This access to information, however unreliable, allowed them to adapt to the delay, recalibrate their mis*trust in the authorities, and maintain a sense of control. The snowstorm, by disrupting the rhythms of everyone along the route, underscored the interconnectedness of the logistics system and the vulnerability of those who operate within it. Service areas, in this context, become vital nodes, offering not only refuge but also a space for the negotiation of mis*trust and the re-evaluation of mobility strategies. The newscast, by highlighting the plight of those stranded on the roads, triggered a shift in perspective. The drivers, although focused on the goal of making their deliveries on time, recognised their relative advantage and felt a sense of relief at having been diverted to the relative safety and comfort of the service area. This incident highlighted a broader truth: for lorry drivers navigating an unpredictable logistics landscape, that

day's standstill had become a part of their mobile reality. On-time delivery remained the goal but achieving it required a flexible approach to mobility.

The episode of a standstill and enforced immobility reveals the role and nature of mis*trust and highlights how such disruptions can reshape social dynamics, particularly within the context of rules, norms, and standards that are not applicable to crises. The drivers' reliance on state television news during the snowstorm, despite their general scepticism towards the media, underscored their attempt to find a productive moment within the hegemonic system of the logistics regime (Stanisz 2015). Ironically, these drivers—who were often the first to be subjected to suspicion and scrutiny—now found themselves relying on the very authorities they typically mistrusted. Of course, there were criticisms that the roads could have been cleared in a different order and the crews better staffed and equipped and able to respond more quickly in such winter conditions. However, the immediate need for information superseded these grievances. The drivers, along with the service area staff, engaged in discussions about the limitations of state management, echoing broader critiques of crisis response (Carey 2018, 74–75). There was also general frustration at the fact that drivers had only just been informed and were not given a choice about where to stop. At the same time, everyone was eager for the official lunchtime news broadcast. This was surprising, as during my entire research not a single interlocutor expressed trust for the media rather than the opposite. Mistrusting the media is not unique to lorry drivers, as studies of both Bulgaria and other countries in the region confirm (Newman et al. 2023; RSF Reporters Without Borders 2024). The unexpected reliance on and shift towards official news during the road closure highlighted the complex and situational nature of mis*trust: faced with a shared crisis, it seemed that the desire for reliable information and collective reassurance temporarily overrode ingrained scepticism. Thus, the snowstorm created a unique situation where the drivers' mistrust, usually directed at authorities and institutions, shifted towards the individuals perceived as contributing to the relative disruption and away from the road closure itself.

Based on that shift, it was possible to change from trusting to mistrusting, which was particularly directed at drivers of smaller vehicles and those who had chosen alternative routes, who were perceived as having contributed to the hazardous conditions and subsequent road closure. This 'blame-shifting' reflected the lorry drivers' feelings of vulnerability and their struggle to maintain agency in a situation where their usual routines and sense of control were disrupted. This shift in mistrust, while seemingly innocuous in this instance, highlights the potential for mis*trusting to be instrumentalised and is deeply intertwined with risk and the 'flickering' nature of mis*trust as it exploits the fluidity and context-dependency of trust relationships. By manipulating perceptions of risk and responsibility, those in power can redirect mistrust

towards convenient targets, thereby maintaining their own authority and deflecting criticism. This manipulation underscores the vulnerability of individuals within systems of power and highlights the importance of critical awareness in navigating the complexities of mis*trust.

While both the Covid-19 pandemic and the snowstorm disrupted mobility, they differed significantly. The pandemic, as an invisible and unfamiliar threat, fuelled widespread mistrust and anxiety. The snowstorm, a familiar phenomenon, allowed for a more predictable response and fostered a sense of shared experience. Unlike the Covid-19 restrictions, the snowstorm-induced road closure presented a familiar challenge. This familiarity fostered a sense of shared experience, a 'community of fate,' and allowed for a more predictable response. However, the closure still disrupted the flow of goods, highlighting the fragility of the transportation network (Stanisz 2015). Faced with this logistical standstill, the drivers turned to state television, demonstrating a flickering trust in official sources despite their general scepticism. This reliance on state-sanctioned information reflected their desire to find certainty and predictability within a system they ordinarily mistrusted, a system that now held their mobility and livelihoods hostage. In both crises, access to reliable information was crucial.

During the pandemic, initial reliance on official media quickly gave way to individual actions and the reorganisation of information networks based on perceived trustworthiness. The lorry drivers sought information from sources outside Bulgaria, seeking alternative perspectives and a more comprehensive understanding of the pandemic. This active pursuit of information reflected a healthy scepticism towards official channels and a desire to challenge the national narrative. The contrast between the official news and information from Russian sources further fuelled mis*trusting towards the Bulgarian government. The snowstorm, however, presented a different scenario. Despite their usual scepticism, the drivers relied on state-funded television for information. This reliance on state television, despite their usual scepticism, can be attributed to the local nature of the crisis and the perceived expertise of the national weather service. Confronted with a system that limited their agency, the drivers had to navigate a delicate balance between self-reliance and reliance on official information. This reliance on official information, despite prevailing mistrust, highlights the situational nature of trust. When individual agency is limited, trust and mistrust in authoritative sources may become necessary coping mechanism, a way to regain a sense of predictability and control in the face of uncertainty.

The drivers' mistrust shifted towards those perceived as responsible for the standstill—those in smaller vehicles or who had taken alternative routes. This 'blame-shifting'

reflected a common tendency to seek scapegoats in times of crisis, highlighting the complex interplay between individual agency, systemic constraints, and the dynamics through mis*trust. Both the pandemic checkpoints and the snowstorm roadblock revealed a nuanced interplay of mis*trust and alliance formation. They also underscore the need to move beyond crisis-focused notions of immobility and towards a more nuanced understanding of standstills within the framework of logistics and transit. This perspective recognises that standstill does not equate to crises of mobility, and mobility does not preclude standstill. The temporary roadblock, while highlighting the theoretical distinction between standstill and immobility, also revealed a practical consequence: the formation of new alliances that emerged as the drivers sought to navigate the disruption and overcome the challenges posed by the breakdown of established norms and routines.

Both road closures demonstrated how crises can reshape power dynamics and alliances, highlighting the role of mis*trust in navigating mobility disruptions. By incorporating authorities into a collective effort to manage the disruption, the lines between those imposing restrictions and those impacted by them blurred. This shift fostered a unique dynamic of mis*trust, one based on shared vulnerability and a recognition of the limits of control. Echoing Stanisz' concept of 'logistical standstill,' (2015), which emphasises the fragility of supply chains and transportation networks, emphasising the interdependence of various actors and the potential for cascading effects. While both incidents involved standstills and mis*trust, the Covid-19 checkpoints primarily revealed the role of mis*trust in forming alliances and negotiating power relations, while the snowstorm incident highlighted the importance of individual agency and collective resilience when re-establishing a sense of normality within the disrupted logistics regime. These findings directly support this thesis by demonstrating how mis*trust shapes social interaction during mobility crises, and particularly in how individuals challenge marginalisation and regain agency. Shifting the focus from temporary road closures to the implications of permanent surveillance, the following subchapter will delve deeper into narratives of moralising self-responsibility, further exploring the role of mis*trust in shaping social dynamics.

5.3 From Standstill to Responsibility: Denying Support at the Toll Payment Machine

When circumstances force individuals to alter their reference groups, they must re-evaluate their social positioning and navigate the complexities of mis*trust. This process is particularly salient during the subjects this subchapter will explore,

disruptions to mobility projects such as stops to pay required tolls, and the challenges encountered at e-vignette terminals. This flickering nature of mis*trust, in which relationships are constantly renegotiated in response to changing circumstances, fits the observations made by Algan et al. (2017) in their study of the European trust crisis and Yellinek's (2021) assessment on the relationship of the lack of political trust to the stability of the political system. Both note that mistrust of politicians tends to fluctuate more than mistrust of institutions, highlighting the dynamic and context-dependent nature of not only trust relationships between people and institutions and but between people and other people or machines that they—correctly or misleadingly—associate with these institutions. Drivers often anticipate a hospitable host-guest relationship and thus a perfectly functional alliance at service areas. However, obstacles like the e-vignette terminal could abruptly disrupt this mutual expectation and force drivers and service staff to renegotiate their roles and expectations.

Acknowledging the influence of logistical structures on relationships at the service area, I go beyond this rather statically structure-inspired understanding of crises of mobilities by examining the interpersonal dynamics of trust and mistrust during disruptions. The required stop to pay tolls is a compelling example of how an interruption can force the renegotiation of relationships between drivers, service staff, and the state. Having explored the dynamics and purposes of mis*trust and alliances in previous chapters, in this chapter I delve deeper into the complexities of these phenomena during disruptions, focusing on the 'flickering' nature of mis*trust and its implications for social interactions at the service area.

I will start with an encounter between a driver and the service staff by the toll counter. This man in his forties was wearing a grey tracksuit covered by an unzipped navy-blue quilted jacket. He also carried an accessory, a small white badge. He strode into the shop, his movements brisk and purposeful and swept the room with his eyes, then focused on the cash register and said just one word: "Таксата" (the toll). From his tone, it was impossible to judge whether he was placing an order or asking a question. At the same time, he pulled forward a small shoulder bag, just big enough for his vehicle registration, wallet, reading glasses, and phone, and started rummaging through it. On the little finger of his right hand, I noted an artistically shaped men's ring with a dark stone. Vanya, that day's cashier at the shop, waited for the driver to lift his head and look at her before providing a short and bland but unequivocal answer. Pointing at the terminal next to the coffee bar, she said "На терминала" (at the terminal). The driver then asked her, "Buy here?" but she replied: "No. Only [at the] terminal."

This curt response that he should use the e-vignette terminal set the stage for a tense interaction that displayed the power dynamics necessitating mis*trusting. Most employees at the service area were between twenty-five and forty years old. They all had mobile phones and were familiar with touch screens, they had vignettes for their vehicles, and they all spoke several languages, which the machine also supported. Despite her familiarity with the system, Vanya's refusal to help him, which I found surprising, highlighted a strategic disengagement reflecting a complex interplay of factors beyond simple logistical challenges. This initial reluctance, which I will later explain as 'flickering', might have been rooted in the kind of sense of vulnerability described by H. Brown and A. Marí Sáez (Brown and Marí Sáez 2021). They argue that mis*trust hinges on acknowledging one's vulnerability and anticipating that others will not take advantage of it. In this case, both Vanya's hesitation and the driver's frustration likely stemmed from a fear of being blamed if he made mistakes during the e-vignette purchase. This fear highlights the inherent vulnerability involved in navigating bureaucratic systems and relying on others for assistance and thus underscores the risks associated with both trust and mistrust.

Vanya's refusal to help him could also, however, be interpreted as an active form of mis*trust. By actively denying support, she was not only protecting her professional boundaries but also expressing her scepticism towards the state's toll system and her unwillingness to participate in implementing it. This active mistrust, in which the staff actively resisted engaging with the state's tolling system, contrasts with the more passive approach I observed during the snowstorm incident, when drivers largely accepted the road closure and sought ways to adapt within the constraints imposed by the authorities. In that case, mistrust was more subtly expressed through grumbling and complaints rather than direct defiance. Furthermore, the staff's active mistrust also differs from the neutral stance observed in the context of the Covid-19 checkpoints, where individuals sought information and negotiated restrictions without necessarily challenging the legitimacy of the state's actions. This nuanced understanding of different modes of mistrust, allows for a more comprehensive analysis of how individuals engage with and respond to disruptions in their mobility projects.

Finally, the driver sighed, turned around, and tramped towards the terminal. When he got there, he once again started to rummage in his shoulder bag. Taking out his reading glasses, he put them on. Meanwhile, I saw Vanya shrug and turn back to counting and restocking the cigarettes. Meanwhile, the man started to work through the screen, page by page: "Language", "Vehicle class", "Starting date", "Duration". He had to provide information about the vehicle, driver, payment method, and billing address; then scroll through, read (or pretend to read), and accept the terms and conditions. Repeatedly, he turned to Vanya seeking support: "Do I need to check this box?" "What is today's date?"

“Do I need to give my phone number?” All Vanya did was signal that she would not help and that the solution to his questions was on the screen. “It is written there!” and “Read the text!” were the only answers she would give him except for the date. When the driver looked at me seeking further support, I found myself imitating Vanya. I hunched my shoulders, closed my lips tighter, and started nodding my head: I would not respond to his request. While I *could* have talked him through the screens and answered his questions, my co-workers had advised me not to.

Somewhat adrift, but mainly disappointed and frustrated by our unhelpfulness, the driver mumbled something inaudible in a tone that indicated he did not appreciate our disengaged attitude. Still, he did finally manage to purchase an e-vignette from the terminal. He then picked up a bottle of water and ordered a coffee and a cheese *banitza.* Vanya took his order, printed the receipt, and took his money while I warmed up his pastry and prepared his coffee and offered him condensed milk (which he took) and three kinds of sugar (which he refused). Drinking the coffee in a single gulp and taking the *banitza* with him, he turned towards the shop’s exit. It seemed like we had all been trying to restore the employee-customer relationship before he left. After he was gone, Vanya returned to counting and stocking on cigarettes and I continued wiping down the counter. We were ready for the next customer.

The terminal itself became a source of frustration and mis*trust for many drivers. On crossing the border, most foreign drivers were required to purchase an e-vignette for road tolls. However, the toll agency’s claim to “allow suitable ways of payment and control without hindering the movement of the vehicles” (BG Toll 2022) often fell short of reality for the drivers waiting in line. The payment process itself became another hurdle in their journey. Although acquiring an e-vignette typically took three to five minutes, this depended on the driver’s computer literacy and reflected their different technical capacity to navigate what seemed to be a simple bureaucratic requirement. Some drivers filled out the forms for the Bulgarian road agency quickly and adeptly: they knew what to do and had all the information ready. Others seemed generally familiar with the forms and the technical and administrative environment and once at the terminal there was a good chance they would soon be able to continue their travel. However, it took longer if they had to double-check their vehicle registration number, had left their credit cards in the cab of their lorry, or were notified at the end of the process that they had not filled out all the required fields. If one or more drivers were having trouble those behind them in line became impatient and started to complain—or to offer support. With those drivers who did not know their way around caught in a situation where they had become dependent on help, the interpersonal dynamics were obvious. Most of those who got stuck decided to again call on the staff members to

pressure from the other drivers and we continued to refuse to help them. And, while they could not understand why we would deny such support, both the seeking and denial of it highlighted the complex power dynamics at play and the potential for mis*trusting to shape social interactions and responses to crises.

Some drivers' attempts to purchase e-vignettes and continue their journeys were thwarted in stages. After they entered the required information on each screen, the payment page confronted them with a frustrating reality: the machine did not accept cash. For those with no credit card or a low bank balance, this unexpected obstacle brought their mobility project to a screeching halt, which not only disrupted the purchase itself but also shattered their expectations of a smooth and hospitable experience at the service area. Those who struggled with the process, gave up temporarily, or still worse abandoned the terminal with the form incomplete—which blocked access for others—often received no assistance from the employees. Left to grapple with the situation alone, these drivers expressed their frustration, complaining about the lack of support, the inconvenience to their mobility project, and the extended delay. However, the service staff had a different perspective: they viewed themselves as employees of the service provider, not as allies of or partners in the state's toll system. My co-workers emphasised that assisting drivers with the BG toll terminal was not their responsibility since it was the state's toll-collection agency that had chosen this technology and designed the user interface. The distinction reflected a broader trend of state transformation at its margins, where responsibilities were shifted and redefined (Finn and Monique Nuijten 2010; Poole and Das 2004). When I initially considered offering assistance, Vanya asked why I was so sure I would not be blamed for any mistakes. Despite the possibility of appealing false accusations and the general expectation of hospitality, she remained reluctant due to her desire to avoid such potential repercussions as being forced to pay customers' fines or otherwise be reprimanded. This stance reflected a clear refusal to align with either the state agency or the drivers, who were both perceived as potentially demanding and unforgiving.

This vignette challenges Stanisz's (2015) view of disruptions as solely logistical by highlighting the dynamic interplay of mis*trust among various stakeholders. This constant negotiation and re-evaluation of trust relationships, particularly evident in moments of disruption, is what I call 'flickering': the constant renegotiation of relationships of mis*trust in response to changing circumstances. Like a flickering flame, mis*trusting is inherently unstable, wavering and fluctuating in response to perceived risks, unexpected disruptions, and shifting alliances particularly in contexts where mobilities are interrupted and individuals forced to renegotiate their social positions and expectations. This flickering nature of mis*trust became visible in the subtle shifts and negotiations that occur during interactions at the service area. For

instance, a driver's initial mistrust of the staff due to its refusal to assist with the e-vignette purchase might dissipate if the staff member offered other helpful directions or a friendly gesture. Conversely, a staff member's initial trust in a driver might waver if the driver displayed impatience, frustration, or a disregard for the rules. These micro-interactions demonstrate the constant recalibration of mis*trust as individuals respond to each other's actions and perceived intentions

Stanisz focuses primarily on the structural and systemic aspects of logistical standstills, while this vignette highlights the crucial role of interpersonal dynamics and individual perceptions in shaping responses to these disruptions. The relationship between trust and responsibility at the service area did indeed prove dynamic. One significant shift occurred in mid-March 2020, when the e-vignette terminal was removed from the shop. There were other changes at the same time: Plexiglas barriers and hand sanitiser dispensers were installed, signs limited the number of customers allowed inside at the same time, and masks became mandatory for both customers and employees (Anranter 2022). The formal and legal basis for all these changes was the same Bulgarian state directive that had authorised the police checks on the entrance roads to Vidin (see Ch. 5.2). In response to this order, the management and employees implemented protective measures and, critically, moved the terminal outside. Moni explained that this decision was made primarily to comply with the restriction on the number of customers allowed in an enclosed space (Ministry of Health of Bulgaria / Министерство на здравеопазването 2020), but it had a significant impact on the dynamics of mis*trust and alliances at the service area. The service staff became more willing to provide information about the terminal's functionalities, and the drivers, in turn, became more self-sufficient in using it.

During the remaining months of my observations at the service area, I never again witnessed a driver requesting help with the e-vignette purchase or the staff refusing it. Although initially an anti-Covid measure, removing the terminal from the shop turned out to reduce the tensions that (lack of) assistance with the e-vignette had caused. This shift aligns with the argument of Breslin et al. (2022) that discourses on trust define who belongs to imagined communities. They suggest that "trustiness (including both trust and mistrust) is a demonstration of good citizenship", thus excluding the recognition of others based on performances (Breslin et al. 2022, 216). At the same time the Covid-19 checkpoints and e-vignette terminal elicited two very different disruptions in terms of mis*trust and alliance formation. At the checkpoints, the invisible and unpredictable nature of the virus fostered a generalised sense of mistrust and anxiety, leading to the formation of temporary alliances among drivers seeking information and support. In contrast, the terminal presented a more localised and concrete challenge,

leading to a more focused mis*trust directed towards the state and its toll system. This difference highlights how the nature of the disruption and the perceived level of risk shape the specific forms of mis*trust and the resulting social dynamics.

This episode demonstrates how even seemingly minor logistical changes can have profound effects on social dynamics, trust relationships, and the boundaries of imagined communities within the logistics regime. Relocating the terminal allowed the employees to redefine the boundaries of their imagined community and clarify their roles and responsibilities. Previously, their perceived responsibility for assisting with the terminal blurred the lines between their role as service providers and the state's role in managing mobility. This ambiguity created tension and mistrust: drivers felt entitled to support while employees felt burdened by an unwelcome task. By physically and symbolically distancing themselves from the terminal, the employees reasserted their primary identity as service providers within the confines of the service area, clarifying the boundaries of their responsibility and their relationship with the drivers. This reconfiguration fostered a sense of mutual understanding and reduced the friction caused by conflicting expectations. The shift in responsibility also illustrates the flickering nature of mis*trust in alliances, highlighting their responsiveness to changing circumstances. Anger and frustration were now directed at the machine, not the staff. Furthermore, the relocation relieved employees of the burden of performing a potentially risky task—assisting with the e-vignette purchase—which they perceived as outside their job description and potentially detrimental to their own sense of community with the drivers. The terminal was now clearly a 'BG Toll thing,' not a 'Sunny Oil thing.' Meanwhile, the service area staff maintained a minimal level of responsibility limited to overall cleanliness, security, and the necessary utilities such as electricity for the terminal's operation. This spatial change further underscores the dynamic interplay of trust, responsibility, and boundary work. It dissolved the unwanted association of the service area employees with the tolling system, dismantling an unwelcome alliance and restoring the original boundaries.

The staff's reluctance to assist with the e-vignette purchase was not simply a matter of customer service failure, but rather a reflection of the misinterpretation and confusion arising from the drivers' expectation of support. While the staff possessed the knowledge to navigate the toll system, they resisted assuming responsibility for this task. By refusing to assist with the e-vignette terminal, the service area employees were effectively drawing a boundary around their professional domain, asserting their expertise in providing services related to fuel, food, and rest, but not in navigating state-imposed technological systems. This boundary work served to protect their professional identity and avoid being drawn into a realm of responsibility they perceived as belonging to the state. Ultimately, this episode highlights a fundamental

misunderstanding between the drivers and the service staff. The drivers viewed the staff as potential allies in overcoming a mobility disruption, while the staff prioritised their role as service providers within the confines of their defined responsibilities. Thus, there was a mismatch between different behaviours and alliances in which the very same people (or at least groups) were perceived sometimes as unhelpful or even obstructive and sometimes as supportive and hospitable or worthy of hospitality.

The perceived nature of the control or road closure—whether unilateral or collective, necessary or arbitrary—influenced the dynamics of mis*trust and alliance formation. Individual and shared perceptions of danger were central to these processes. More precisely, crises of mobilities are not merely logistical hurdles but dynamic social processes that create voids filled by a flickering praxis of mis*trust and alliances within the same regime of logistics. The staff's refusal to help during the process of purchasing e-vignettes demonstrates how disruptions can trigger the renegotiation of such relationships, highlighting the interplay of power, risk perception, and individual agency and thus helping to explain the fluidity of mis*trusting and offering valuable insights into how individuals navigate the uncertainties of mobility and the critical role of social connections in overcoming disruptions. Moreover, the varying levels and types of danger inherent in each of the three situations presented in this chapter—the pandemic, the snowstorm, and using the e-vignette terminal—revealed the drivers', the service areas', and my interlocutors' perceptions of risk influencing their mis*trusting behaviours. In the first case, an invisible virus threatened to spread among travellers. In the second, the snowstorm threatened to cause accidents or strand them on the road without access to necessities. The third case threatened more subtle consequences: potential financial penalties and delays for non-payment of tolls. By understanding the fluidity of trust in such contexts, we gain valuable insights into how individuals navigate the uncertainties of mobility and the critical role of social connections in overcoming disruptions.

This chapter aimed to understand how mis*trust shapes alliances and hierarchies during mobility disruptions. Specifically, I sought to explore: (1) how alliances form and renegotiate boundaries, including or excluding individuals based on shared rhythms and perceptions of risk, (2) how alliances can emerge with actors who might typically be considered outsiders, such as authorities or service staff, and, (3) how these alliances, often temporary and 'flickering,' are repeatedly reconfigured in response to changing circumstances and perceptions of danger and responsibility. The chapter also highlighted the fragility and fluidity of social relations within the logistics regime. Mis*trust and alliances are not static but constantly shift in response to changing circumstances. The 'flickering' nature of mis*trust necessitates a continuous process of

negotiation and renegotiation in which individuals revise their positions and perceptions in relation to others. This dynamic interplay is crucial for understanding the creative power of mis*trust in shaping social interactions and responses to disruptions. While negotiation is often central to this process, there are also moments of non-negotiation, where alliances become rigid or dissolve altogether, depending on the perceived dangers and power dynamics at play. The capacity for negotiation arises when individuals recognise a shared objective or when they perceive themselves as part of a larger collective.

In conclusion, mobility disruptions serve as potent catalysts for revealing the underlying complexities of trust relationships and social hierarchies. They force individuals to re-evaluate their assumptions, forge new alliances, and navigate the delicate balance between reliance on others and self-preservation. Crucially, we have seen how mis*trusting operates not merely as a cognitive process but as a dynamic force shaping social interactions and responses to crises through strategic information sharing, challenging authority, or seeking solace in shared experiences, individuals and communities employ mis*trusting as a tool for adaptation, resilience, and even resistance. Mis*trusting thus emerges as a central mechanism in overcoming the voids left by crises of mobilities, allowing for the negotiation of power, the formation of communities of fate, and the re-establishment of rhythm and routine in the face of disruption. Mis*trusting is a flickering interplay, constantly renegotiated and recalibrated in response to shifting circumstances and evolving perceptions of risk and responsibility.

By understanding these complexities, we can better appreciate the resilience of human connection and the capacity for adaptation in the face of adversity. Moreover, this analysis of mis*trust within the specific context of mobility disruptions contributes to a broader understanding of how trust functions in dynamic social systems. It highlights the importance of considering the fluidity of trust relationships, the influence of power dynamics, and the role of individual agency in shaping responses to uncertainty and change. Comparing these three disruptions reveals a spectrum of mis*trusting responses, shaped by the nature of the crisis, the perceived level of danger, and the social dynamics at play. The Covid-19 pandemic, with its invisible and unpredictable threat, fostered a generalised sense of mistrust and anxiety, leading to the formation of temporary alliances among individuals seeking information and support. The snowstorm, a more familiar and localised disruption, facilitated a sense of shared vulnerability and encouraged cooperation among drivers, while also highlighting the fragility of the logistics system. The e-vignette terminal, on the other hand, exposed the tensions between individual agency and bureaucratic systems, prompting a more focused mistrust directed towards the state and its impersonal technologies.

6. Mis*trusting Infrastructure Built Before and 'After Democracy had Come'

The previous chapter demonstrated how rules, norms, and standards help structure the voids created by relationships and reacting to them requires the renegotiation of alliances, even in times of crisis. This one explores the role of such voids in situations where mis*trusting comes to an end. By analysing divergent normative concerns related to mistrust and distrust, I turn my attention from renegotiations of alliances to failures to renegotiate them when mis*trusting was no longer considered an option. Some conversations built on such voids addressed matters like closures of critical departments at the local hospital or schools in the region, which were perceived as breaching the social contract between the state and its citizens and fuelled feelings of abandonment and distrust. Other voids resulted from incomplete or withheld data, as a survey I conducted during the first Covid-19 lockdown suggested. Some interlocutors worried about the state of the city centre, even though renovations were currently underway. This apparent contradiction highlighted the disconnect between the visible signs of progress and lingering anxieties about the region's economic and social well-being. The most telling voids in the discussion—perhaps because they were linked to serious accusations—emerged during discussions about an abandoned thermal spa and around rumours of the diversion of much of the funding provided by Bulgarian and European taxpayers for improving the road from Sofia to Vidin that increased distrust of authorities and institutions.

Several examples from Bulgaria's recent history demonstrate that such doubts were and are warranted, which, as Mühlfried points out, makes mistrusting a "useful cultural technique where discourses of trust have taken on hegemonic characteristics" (Mühlfried 2019, 81). At the same time, there is a fine line between mis*trusting and distrusting and it is easier to cross it than to return. While I read Mühlfried's mistrust in this context as a linear trajectory from trusting to mistrusting to distrust with the moral ambition of creating the space for new initiatives before it is shrouded by the irrationalities of distrust, I observed a more complex dynamic among my interlocutors. I decided to interrogate the voids in my interlocutors' narratives aggressively: whenever the doubts they articulated became too general and lacked precise information too this as distrust that indicated an irreversible condition. Located at the end of the long-term linear and continuous disintegration, distrust resulted from repeated disappointment and cumulative disenchantment. However, in keeping with the agency present in mis*trusting, I also interpreted such distrust as a strategic turning away from people, groups of people and institutions—a persistent symptom of the ill-reflected 'transition' in the wider region indicated by the 'post' in 'post-socialism' (Chelcea and Druta 2016;

Müller 2019) that may be linked to the narratives of material and infrastructural failure creating a sense of disillusionment and detachment from the promises of progress and development (Lebow 2016; Murawski 2018; Ssorin-Chaikov 2016). In Bulgaria, my interlocutors used the prefix 'post-' to describe their own position as not yet having caught up with 'the West' but also to introduce a new temporal layer to the debate by juxtaposing 'socialism' with 'democracy.' According to them, many Bulgarians—above all, those who had either never left the country or who had returned to it—continued to act naïvely and in a self-centred manner, with little consideration for either society as a whole or as institutionalised in the state.

I open this chapter with a vignette of a trip to the hot springs near Vidin and two other derelict sites that had represented the region's economic prosperity. This is not only to emphasise the potential for agency in restricted situations but to explore the boundaries of agency within the context of post-socialism, a concept that began in anticipation of epochal change but now often feels disconnected from the realities of people's lives. To assess their doubts and relations with mis*trusting and distrust as a condition, I analyse the rhetoric of "Инвестиция" (investment), which refers to 'self-enrichment' as fraud and theft and then "Приватизация" (privatisation) as a deviation related to it. Both these terms are common in everyday language and reflect patterns that solidify a distrust stemming from a two-pronged civic apathy: people are not only uneducated but also afraid to voice their opinions (Trnka 2017, 85). Both conditions and terms were long associated with socialism but now seem equally applicable to the capitalism and democracy which once had promised to break the apathy grounded in socialist and post-socialist distrust. Consequently, I will use these terms to expose the much-vaunted 'new opportunities' alongside the ideational and moral chasms that have become prominent in the decades following the socialist breakdown (Ghodsee 2011; Giatzidis 2002; R. Vassilev 2003; 2020). These terms, as Natalia pointed out, are helpful in discussing the ongoing corruption and fraud, the pending court cases against parliamentarians and the former prime minister, and the abusive debate culture of recent election campaigns, all of which have both prolonged economic hardship for many and caused a social-democratic 'backsliding' and moral decline (Damiyanova 2023; Gherghina and Bankov 2023).

With this chapter's second ethnographic vignette, I investigate my interlocutors' strategies to overcome both trust and distrust. The construction of a new highway connecting Vidin to Sofia, a project fraught with delays and setbacks, became a focal point for discussions about trust, distrust, and possibilities for change in the region. Building on the previous chapter's exploration of distrust, this vignette examines how individuals navigate their scepticism and seek to reclaim agency in the face of

unfulfilled promises and lingering doubts. The analysis centres around the long delays and unfulfilled promises related to the highway project, as discussed at a barbecue where the guests critically examined various viewpoints they believed to be dominant. My analysis of these mechanisms is based on the framework of comparative hopes and expectations of infrastructure (Anand, Gupta, and Appel 2018; Dalakoglou and Penny Harvey 2012; Penny Harvey and Knox 2012; Schweitzer and Povoroznyuk 2020) and the concept of the "bunker of trust" (Mühlfried 2019, 71)—to which I propose adding that of the 'bunker of distrust'. With these, I analyse the defensive posture of those shielding themselves from disappointment through cynicism and pessimism. This bunker mentality can manifest in various ways ranging from outright dismissal of any positive developments to subtly expressing scepticism and doubt. Radostin's distrust, for example, was obvious not only in his verbal pronouncements but also his dismissive gestures and resigned tone of voice. He seemed to take a perverse pleasure in highlighting potential pitfalls and delays, as if the confirmation of his pessimistic predictions somehow validated his worldview. Finally, I try to extend Mühlfried's line of thought by linking the abandonment of both bunkers to overcoming "encrustations of power" (Mühlfried 2019, 81).

The third and final subchapter expands the analysis of mis*trusting by examining how residents of Vidin perceived their environment and engaged with broader social and political structures. Based on a Facebook survey I conducted during the pandemic, I analyse public discourse surrounding infrastructure development and decay. This data supplements my ethnographic observations, combining narratives and actions to understand how mis*trusting was expressed towards both post-socialist infrastructure and infrastructure developed after democracy (had come). Building on previous subchapters' themes of hope and disillusionment, this analysis explores their connection to power dynamics through the lens of '*Unherrschaft'* (unrulership) and '*Gegenherrschaft'* (counter-rule) (Mühlfried 2022). These concepts, which emphasise the role of societal narratives in knowledge production, help illuminate how mis*trusting can be used to challenge dominant narratives about progress and development, particularly in the context of decaying or incomplete infrastructure. Specifically, this chapter will demonstrate how mis*trusting manifests in different ways across generations and can serve as a catalyst for both individual and collective action.

6.1 On the Road with Natalia: Dreaming of a Lost Future

At just over fifty years of age, Natalia, one of my closest associates, had witnessed both the successes and failures of socialism in Bulgaria. Following its collapse, she had worked in Italy; then returned to Bulgaria where she worked as a taxi driver and then

train conductor. During our trip to various abandoned places, she suggested a visit to the thermal baths that had once a popular recreation area for Видинчани (*Vidinchani*; people from Vidin). “I will show you the richness of our region,” she said enthusiastically and I readily agreed.

I had never heard of these hot springs and was surprised by how remote they were. While the ferry terminal had been within the city limits and the airport was about ten kilometres away, the thermal baths were much further, beyond the industrial area and past the abandoned SO MAT logistics centre[14]. As we passed the latter, Natalia reflected on that industrial complex’s decay. Many people who had been laid off over a decade before had never found another job in the region, where the downfall of SO MAT had coincided with that of many other large industries. All her friends who had worked there, whether they had loaded and unloaded lorries or maintained and repaired vehicles for this formerly state-run transport company, were now unemployed. The former transhipment point for international goods had become free parking for long-distance lorry drivers, and the workforce had dwindled from hundreds to just two people per shift. The problem, Natalia explained, was the same as at the other companies in the region: a lack of investment and a focus on selling off their assets after the fall of socialism. She mentioned “Инвестиция” (investment) so many times that I scribbled the word on my forearm to research its use in connection with recent developments in Bulgaria. Back home, confirmed her account in labour market and population reports (Bencheva 2005; Staiykova et al. 2007; Kofti, Hann, and Parry 2022; R. Vassilev 2003) and ethnographic studies of local, regional, and national economic development (Ghodsee 2005, 2011).

The further we drove, the rougher the road became. There were no signs for the hot springs and Natalia began to wonder if we were lost, so we stopped to ask a local for directions. The old man seemed surprised at first but directed us to a barely visible dirt track with a warning to drive slowly and carefully as it had not been maintained since the baths closed. Natalia followed this advice, and we crept along the overgrown path at a walking pace. The radio was off, and we sat in silence, waiting for a thud or scrape to signal the end of our journey. Natalia could barely see the road through the tall grass

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[14] Founded in 1960, SO MAT (*Стопанско обединение—Международен автомобилен транспорт*—Business Association of International Automobile Transport) was a state-owned transnational company and the only international carrier of road freight in Bulgaria during socialism. According to Emilya Karaboeva, SO MAT focused on transshipment between Western Europe and the Middle East. To achieve this, SO MAT worked with capitalist countries under socialism. By 1973, SO MAT had a network of border offices, agencies, and terminals at Bulgarian border crossings and in major cities including Belgrade, Budapest, Munich, Milan, Paris, Moscow, Warsaw, Prague, Bucharest, Baghdad, Damascus, Tehran, Istanbul (Karaboeva 2014, 226).

and the dense vegetation brushed against the small yellow car's wing mirrors. Finally, we spotted the ruins of a small hut and a slightly better-preserved cottage, the sign we had arrived at the baths. Natalia stopped the car and lit a cigarette, taking a few long drags before getting out. We had reached our destination where—as I would soon learn—the disappointments of the past and present were intertwined. We then set off to explore the site.

First, we climbed an overgrown levee, which offered a panoramic view of the surrounding landscape. To the east, the Danube snaked through vast poplar forests. From north to west to south, seemingly endless fields of grain stretched towards the horizon, dotted with scattered settlements. In the distance, Vidin's skyline was barely visible but the Danube Bridge spanning the river to the north of the city stood out. Closer by but in the opposite direction, clouds of dust rose periodically from a factory. I asked Natalia what kind of factory it was and whether it had laid off any workers. This question seemed to surprise her. She scanned the horizon, muttering the names of various towns in the region as she reoriented herself. Once she had her bearings, she turned to me to confirm that the factory I had seen was still in operation: "Добиват гипс!" (They are mining gypsum!) Fair enough, I thought. But immediately after confirming that the only visible industry was still active, Natalia went on to quickly list the factories and companies that had closed. Fertilisers and agricultural machinery were once produced in the area, there was a large rubber and tyre factory, and two more factories made buttons and shirts. However, the more labour-intensive factories had ceased production. The only remaining production in Vidin was milk processing; everything else was gone. I was repeatedly confronted with this seemingly pervasive decay— by Natalia and others as well—but sought to remain sensitive to examples that did not feed the dominant narratives of decline, reluctant to adopt or reproduce a condemning or romanticising ideal of socialism, post-socialism, or 'zombie-socialism' (Benovska-Sabkova and Vrzgulová 2021; Chelcea and Druta 2016; Müller 2019). Almost as if seeking reassurance, I found myself asking about continuities and positive examples of 'completed' infrastructural, economic, or social development.

On that day, however, Natalia was disinclined to follow me in seeking positive examples. Instead, she expressed a profound alienation from the groups she blamed for the region's decline. As I tried to find signs of progress and continuity, she seemed determined to highlight the failures and injustices of the post-socialist transition. Her behaviour could be interpreted as mis*trusting directed towards the very narratives she was arguing against. While I tried to explain the decay and decline, Natalia continued to distance herself from what Nadezhda Sotirova discussed as the "non-country" (2018). I gained insight into her perspective when I examined the baths: "See that? This must have been the first of the three baths," I said, pointing to a channel which looked like it

had once carried the water to the next pool. "In principle, hot water rises to the surface, while cold water sinks to the depths." Natalia knelt beside me, and we examined its materiality and haptics. This seemed like the right moment for some seemingly banal questions. I asked why the oligarchs did not invest in expanding production at these apparently profitable companies, which they had acquired through insider deals at fire-sale prices, instead of selling their equipment to Western consortia and for a smaller profit. I also pointed out that they could have made even more money by selling a healthy enterprise rather than a decrepit one. These questions deliberately ignored the potential structural challenges and risks large industrial companies faced during the transition to a capitalist system since I wanted to hear Natalia's own explanation for these decisions to understand her perspective and the narratives she drew upon.

Natalia looked at me and paused. She then answered: "Самообогатяване. Знаеш ли тази дума? Образува се от 'сам' и 'богатство'." (Self-enrichment. Do you know this word? It's made up of 'alone' and 'wealth'). Then she began to explain what she saw as people's typical greed for quick wealth. The example she used to illustrate self-enrichment had nothing to do with the thermal baths or the Vidin region but resonated with her experience of the post-socialist transition. This was the divestment in Bulgaria's largest metalworking company, Kremikovtzi AD, by the prime minister at the time, Ivan Kostov, who transferred 71 percent of its shares to Daru Metals for a single symbolic US dollar. This was followed by several further multi-million dollar sales and finally the partial demolition of the site (Miskovic 2011).[15] The memory of this transaction recalled to me the work of the American anthropologist Kristen Ghodsee, who was later criticised with some justification for romanticising portrayal of the socialist past (Benovska-Sabkova and Vrzgulová 2021, 195–96). Still, she aptly describes the privatisation process in Bulgaria as "contested and chaotic," resulting in the transfer of national wealth to "well-connected foreigners and a new local class of oligarchs and criminals." She further points out that these oligarchs and criminals had "used the uncertainty created by the transition process to transform formerly state-owned assets into their own private property through deceit, graft, corruption, intimidation, and violence" and that "ordinary people inevitably felt that they had been robbed by the privatization process." (Ghodsee 2011, 184) Natalia echoed this

[15] While I was aware of the original Kremikovtzi AD deal and some of its effects on the once-prosperous but now-derelict Kremikovtzi District on the outskirts of Sofia, I had no idea of the experiences associated with the deal or its consequences. The process of the sale was incomprehensible to many and included numerous and repeated dismissals, and later reports also attested to dangerous long-term heavy-metals contamination of the soil and water in the vicinity of the former industrial plant have reinforced an irreversible distrust towards the state and the powerful (Schulin et al. 2007; Boteva, Peycheva, and Miloshev 2013; Petrova et al. 2019).

sentiment, stating that this was simply the way things were, and adding that the fate of enterprises in and around Vidin was no different from that of the Kremikovski group.

Distressed, Natalia stood in the third and last pool, looking through a hole in the wall that had once been a window. She then turned back to me and provided more examples of self-enrichment: smuggling cigarettes, treasure hunters selling Roman coins, antique dealers tricking people into selling antique handicrafts for far less than they were worth, and doctors demanding bribes for preferential treatment. All these practices were aimed at accumulating as much wealth as quickly as possible, whether on a small and a large scale. In Natalia's view, this pursuit of self-enrichment revealed a dehumanising attitude and an inherent untrustworthiness. She concluded, "Но това е нашият манталитет. Факт." (But this is our mentality. Period). This matter-of-fact statement conveyed a deep sense of disappointment and resignation. Although no direct link existed between the thermal baths and Kremikovtzi AD, both were material proxies for decay and degradation, despite their differences in scale and nature.

Such proxies had the advantage of expressing distrust of a particular site while retaining the possibility of discussing wider structural and potentially existential challenges. This indirect approach allows for a safer expression of dissent by avoiding direct accusations that could be perceived as threatening. As Maja Hojer Bruun et al. argue, when viewed as a condition rather than an action distrust can be understood as "a formal way of withholding trust in any one party in a situation of risk, uncertainty or mistrust, and can play a part in building social order and establishing collaboration—for instance in political systems of checks and balances" (2020, 13). Considering the role of distrust in hegemonic political settings, I argue that switching between proxies frees conversations from fear by avoiding speculative claims that could put individuals at risk. Natalia *knew* how to express offensively yet innocuously that those belonging to the elite were collectively guilty of theft and fraud in Bulgarian society. At the same time, she *positioned* those like herself—who had no significant wealth or possessions beyond their own homes—as morally upright and trustworthy.

The distinction highlighted a social divide, separating those who allegedly exploited the transition for personal gain from those who struggled to adapt to the new economic realities. Using pronouns, she *contrasted* the groups she could relate to—ordinary people like herself—with those whose actions were motivated solely by self-enrichment. By combining debunking codes, she *separated* those who genuinely struggled with the freedoms of democracy from those who exploited a temporary collective state of ignorance for their own benefit. Consciously or unconsciously, she *dismantled* the authority of the state by highlighting the disconnect between its actions and the interests of the people. For Natalia, those who had enriched themselves during

the years of upheaval did so neither on behalf of nor in the interest of the public. This critique resonates with Sotirova (2018), analysis of complaints as a communicative practice which assigns meaning to distanced people and historical processes. Understanding the complaint as an independent communicative practice linked to a specific imagination, our conversation unveiled the continuously ambiguous assignment of people within society.

I finally left the ruins of the bath and walked back towards the cottage and the car to look for Natalia, but she was nowhere to be found. A mild breeze blew persistently across the overgrown grass. The clouds had dissipated, and the sun was getting stronger. I called out for Natalia and heard her reply from behind the cottage. She gestured for me to come over: "Ела тук! Това трябва да е мястото, откъдето е излязла водата. Неотдавна това място е било запечатано с бетон." (Come here! This must be where the water came from. Not long ago, someone sealed this place with cement). I approached with large, careful steps and found her standing in front of two polyethylene pipes protruding from the ground, their ends sealed with cement. They appeared quite new as their black surfaces and the thin blue line identifying them as water lines still shone in the sun. The cement cap, too, retained its rough unweathered texture. I was confused. Why would you pour cement into a newly installed hose that you might want to reopen?

Checking the internet, we discovered that caps for standard diameter hoses were inexpensive, which left us even more puzzled. While I was checking whether such caps were available in Vidin, Natalia noticed numerous small splashes and smears of cement around the hoses: "Виш кво прави приватизацията?" (See what 'privatisation' leads to?) The immediacy of the act of sealing a water pipe with concrete had evoked a whole multitude of new connotations beyond the hope of investment and the self-enrichment of the wealthy. While I was preoccupied with how the pipes had been sealed with cement instead of properly capped, Natalia was focused on its sloppy application. For her, the poorly sealed tubes not physically blocked the flow of water but also symbolically blocked progress and collective well-being. She criticised this quick fix, insisted that local workers were perfectly capable of doing a proper job when employed by foreign contractors, and maintained that whoever had sealed the pipes was in a hurry that demonstrated their lack of care and commitment to anything beyond the bare minimum.

At the same time, however, the sealing firmly refuted the longstanding misconception of inactivity, which prompted Natalia to provide supplementary information as to why the deserted thermal bath was yet another sign of the corrupt elites she distrusted. She

remembered some attempts to sell off the thermal bath and knew that some Japanese businessmen had been recently collecting information about the site as well as the neighbouring village and surrounding area. This, she concluded, might have been the last time the pipes had been opened and resealed to demonstrate the quality of the water. The deal fell through, she continued, when a local government official demanded an additional 'private payment' or 'entrance fee'. With this, although not presenting any evidence, Natalia brought the issue of bribery to the table: a quick conclusion based on assuming the state of these polyethylene pipes was the result of privatisation!

While the term 'investment' suggests compliance with the rule of law and implies a legitimate investment in the future, 'privatisation' carries connotations of illegality and shady dealings. Perceived as less institutional and more personal, it emerged from the remnants of socialism as a new and creative way to maintain power and resources and could include dubious friendships and economies of favour (Henig and Makovicky 2017). More dramatic cases included corruption that dictated divestment, structural opaque valuations and nepotism (Chavdarova 2001; Nonchev 2006). However, some of my interlocutors also used 'privatisation' to mean stealing or people illegally taking what does not belong to them.

Towards the end of my research stay, at a Sunday barbecue, one of my interlocutors took out a pellet gun and some cartridges. After firing into the air several times, he locked it up in a drawer. With a wink in the eye, he commented that he wanted to prevent any of the corkers he was expecting the following Monday from 'privatising' it. This statement was accompanied by a quick gesture in which he rotated his right hand from the inside to the outside. However, this really had nothing to do with the workers but was about outsiders in general. Moreover, the possession of such weapons was legally regulated and it was a bad idea to leave one out in the open: anyone who knew about these restrictions could become a potential 'privatiser'. This anecdote illustrates the ambiguity of 'privatisation'. The action of 'privatising' the pistol was not attributed to a specific social class, unlike the 'privatisation' by corrupt elites that Natalia had denounced. This suggests that 'privatisation', while often associated with illegal or unethical behaviour, can also be used to describe more mundane acts of taking something that doesn't belong to you, regardless of social status. The ambiguity of 'privatisation' also highlights the blurring of boundaries between post-socialist and neoliberal practices.

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, there are similarities between the post-socialist and the neoliberal: terms like 'privatisation', 'appropriation', and 'stealing' all evoke a capitalist environment dominated by global liquidity and uncertainty (Bauman 2017). I recall 'privatisation' being used as a key concept in discussions of the classist

depopulation and urban renewal of inner cities in Scotland in the 1990s (MacLeod 2002), the decline and resurgence of Detroit in the 2000s (Siobhan 2012; Tegtmeyer 2016) and the austerity-driven response to the Greek budget crisis from 2010 (Dalakoglou and Agelopoulos 2017). In completely different contexts, confronted with the support systems of those most convinced of the change, all the examples mentioned conditioned individuals and their environments, regions, states, and associations of states in their search for new, precarious solutions. The determination and vehemence with which these solutions were implemented was often criticised for creating a particularly pronounced form of capitalism in former socialist and Soviet satellite states (Aligică and Evans 2009; Humphrey 2010; Štiks and Horvat 2012).

The use of similar terms and arguments in both post-socialist and non-post-socialist contexts, however, raises questions about the persistent emphasis on a post-socialist legacy. Is there a reason to emphasise a post-socialist legacy at a particular place and time in history when local terms suggest that the present is already subject to other influences? I read the term 'privatisation', as it is used in both post-socialist and non-post-socialist contexts, as challenging the simplistic separation and unidirectional relationship between the post-socialist and the non-post-socialist. Even if interpreted differently, the unlawful takeover—which is not necessarily but probably in some way morally condemnable—allows for an account in which decay and collapse are not attributed solely to socialism and post-socialism. Instead, its ambivalent nature illuminates the fundamental qualities that I attribute to distrust.

Building on these observations, it is important to consider how distrust manifested among my interlocutors. In this context, it is not simply a matter of the absence of trust but also extrapolating selected cases, with a limited or overly general scope that wouldn't affect immediate relationships, and mis*trust within those relationships. Several dimensions of distrust that I encountered in my reflections on Natalia's narratives are addressed in the literature on the absence of trust (Schiocchet 2018; Sitkin and Bijlsma-Frankema 2018), as well as in studies on the justification of resistance and absence through previous experiences of unreliability in interactions with individuals and institutions (Algan et al. 2017; Carey 2018; Vakhstayn 2016). The perceptibility of distrust as linked to experience is another dimension addressed in this analysis. Understanding not only suspicion but also the limits of distrust based on Natalia's narratives was possible because we were in the former thermal bath and how she was distressed by actions that she refused to understand perfectly demonstrates Carey's distinction between distrust and mistrust (Carey 2018, 8). The materiality of the thermal bath reminded Natalia of the collapse and renewed her memory of specific situations of

powerlessness within a structure of domination. However, this relative powerlessness was neither limited to socialism nor the current capitalist system but applied to both.

Another aspect of this analysis highlights the role of repetition in shaping distrust. Going to the baths was an act of repetition for Natalia. The way she talked about the site's decay and built on generalisations when discussing the lack of investment and continued theft from society strongly suggested that she had reflected repeatedly on the collapse of the local economy. This repetition, coupled with the accumulation of disappointments and disillusionment, solidified her distrust in the authorities and institutions responsible for the region's decline. I show how these narratives inform how she expresses distrust after repeated disappointment and disillusionment as both the absence of trust and a resource allowing a more conscious decision about when to assert distrust within mistrusting (Sitkin and Bijlsma-Frankema 2018, 50–57). Carey and others, moreover, dispute the notion of a clear distinction between mistrust and distrust. While the two terms are often used interchangeably, Carey suggests that there are subtle yet important differences between them. My discussions about 'investment' and 'privatisation' demonstrate the ambiguous nature of self-enrichment, which appears prevalent in the region of my research. When associated with an untrustworthy group or institution, self-enrichment becomes a significant source of distrust. However, when practised by members of one's own group, it can be dismissed as insignificant or even seen as an act of counterhegemony. For both scenarios, I rely on the concept of alliance formation examined in the previous chapter. Another aspect highlighted in this analysis is the role of repetition in shaping distrust.

The degree of awareness with which Natalia expressed her distrust was evident in her careful choice of words and use of proxies to avoid direct accusations. This allowed her to maintain a sense of agency and a possibility for change, stability, and recovery, even while engaging in active mistrusting, which begins with speaking out, as I will show in the next chapter. Ultimately, this analysis reveals that distrust in post-socialist Vidin is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, shaped by individual experiences, social narratives, and the material remnants of the past. It is not simply an absence of trust, but a dynamic and strategic response to uncertainty, disappointment, and perceived betrayal. This understanding of distrust lays the groundwork for exploring how individuals navigate and negotiate these challenges in their everyday lives, as we will see in the following subchapter.

6.2Discussion at Home: Miki Knows All About the 'Autobahn'.

Following the Covid lockdowns in first in Bulgaria and then Austria and a short break, I returned to Vidin in August 2021for a second, longer stay. At that time, a long-awaited and much-debated highway project held significant implications for the region. This ongoing project has offered jobs building new bridges and roads and promises improved connectivity with Sofia through faster and safer roads and a long-term boost to the local economy. However, there have been many delays and setbacks due to funding shortages, political controversies, and logistical challenges. This history of unfulfilled promises has contributed to scepticism and distrust among the many residents who have grown weary of empty assurances. However, when my interlocutors discussed the numerous delays and setbacks at a barbeque, it became clear that alongside this weariness they also wanted to engage with the complexities of infrastructure development and reclaim a sense of agency and hope.

As I wanted to expand my focus on the service area to include the motorway, when I returned to Bulgaria I hired a car at the Sofia airport. Based on my previous experiences, I expected the journey to Vidin to last about three hours, but it ended up taking over five. Long stretches of the road were under construction between Botevgrad (Ботевград) and Mesdra, as well as between Montana and Vidin. Temporary traffic lights redirected the flow of cars and lorries, especially around the entrances and exits from the construction sites, which could be recognised, along with the direction of the transported material, the by red and brown dust on the tarmac as one approached them. From time to time, I caught a glimpse of excavations for a new second lane in each direction. The soil was being compacted, drains laid and the roadbed graded. Suddenly a makeshift speed bump interrupted my path, and my brakes squealed as I slowed down. Big tip lorries full of excavated earth were crossing the road from right to left where there had once been no crossing. I pulled over and stopped the car. A few minutes later the same lorries returned, empty, and crossed the road again after the drivers had checked that they would not be obstructing approaching vehicles with the right of way. This was important, as some passing drivers did not slow down at all and were whizzing past just thirty centimetres from my door handle and some even used the under-construction lane to overtake heavier lorries. (I am not judging them: I had almost forgotten to slow down myself).

Every now and then, a smaller, older lorry would come along and dampen the ground to keep down the dust. In the distance, I spotted a few concrete piers for an overpass. There were also smaller construction areas visible at the northern edge of Dimovo, near the village of Sinagovtsi (Синаговци), and along the Vidin bypass. Parts of the road

had been upgraded to allow for the transport of construction materials. Road signs along the bypass in Vidin announced that construction work for the long-awaited motorway from Vidin to Sofia had finally commenced. Excited by this tangible evidence of progress, I eagerly anticipated discussing these developments with my interlocutors at the service area, as well as Natalia and Radostin. The plans for the motorway expansion project had been approved long before my drive and people had long yoked their hopes to it. For example, I recall that Dani had kept repeating how an improved road would significantly reduce the time it would take her to go see her daughter after she began her studies in Plovdiv (in central Bulgaria).

Others, especially those less able to travel, expected visiting friends and relatives to have shorter journeys. My co-worker Emi, who had family members who worked as lorry drivers, hoped that the promised motorway would lead to fewer road fatalities. Radostin and others hoped that improved connectivity would finally stop the Vidin's ongoing depopulation and perhaps help attract new businesses there—an expectation local officials shared (Staiykova et al. 2007) that illustrates the powerful allure of infrastructure development and its potential to inspire dreams of a better future. Particularly during the time just before my return to Bulgaria and Vidin, it seemed that national entities had begun to act, breaking ground and thus renewing their promise to my interlocutors[16]. Soon, this second-tier overland road would be upgraded to a first-tier overland highway.

A few days after driving to Vidin, I was supposed to meet Dani, her husband, and her family at a barbecue. There, I told her about the construction work I had seen on the way from Sofia to Vidin: there currently were long areas of traffic congestion near Mesdra and the lorries were also rolling near Bela (Бела) and Dimovo. I added that I was happy to see that something seemed to be going on at last and asked if anyone at the table knew more about when the works were supposed to be completed. Radostin dismissed my observation: "Ще минат години, преди да стигнат до Видин. И кой знае какво ще е качеството на магистралата тогава." (It will be years before they get to Vidin. And then, who knows what the quality of the motorway will be). I was familiar with his reasoning and unsurprised when Dani nodded in agreement: I had seen her and Miki do this with her father many times, even when I knew she disagreed. Without delving into the reasons, this affirmative nodding seemed to be a way of maintaining

[16] The motorway expansion project was approved by the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works and then delegated to the National Roads Agency in September 2014 (Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works of Bulgaria 2014). Certain construction phases were prioritised due to economic considerations and the first new sections, which opened only shortly before or during my research visit, were situated in the centre and east of the country (Kostadinov and Sherifova, October 11, 2019; Milusheva, October 18, 2022).

family harmony. I decided to challenge Radostin and began to name all the construction sites that I had come across, including some located between Vratsa and Vidin on the northernmost section of the E-79 in Bulgaria. Unexpectedly, Miki, who was the only professional driver at the table but usually rather reserved in my presence, took the floor: "Вярно е." (It's true). Although there was absolutely no need, he had decided to jump in, which diverted attention from me to himself and also meant contradicting not only his wife but his father-in-law. This intervention was not without risk, as by publicly challenging his father-in-law Miki might not only disrupt family harmony but damage his own reputation.

However, this action also demonstrated a willingness to engage with the complexities of the situation and assert his own agency in shaping the discussion. Perhaps Miki's extensive experience as a professional driver navigating the uncertainties and challenges of the road had instilled in him a sense of self-reliance and a willingness to take calculated risks. Regardless of his motivations, the intervention shifted the tone of the conversation, and he continued that someone at the highest level was probably pushing for the expansion to finally happen. To back up this statement, Miki explained that a friend of his with connections in the regional planning department, his tongue loosened by a 'funny cigarette', had recently hinted that work was likely to start soon in Vidin, too. Dani seemed to know about this friend—she again nodded in agreement, but this time with her husband—but he would not have been the first to leak the story. However, he certainly seemed to be known for his indiscretion, especially at social gatherings. Then, Miki surprised them with detailed information about the route, which would not differ much from the current one. Its main advantage, other than adding two more lanes along most of its length, would be the construction of tunnels or bridges at dangerous crossings and bypasses around some towns and villages. Everyone around the table agreed that it was a good thing that the road was finally being built. The only drawback, everyone agreed, was that a tunnel under the Petrochan Pass (Петрохански проход) would not be part of this road improvement. However, Miki himself seemed to have made his peace with that. He defended the government, arguing that a tunnel there would shave only twenty to thirty minutes off the journey to Sofia and the cost was simply not justified given the current state of the rest of the road infrastructure. Miki's detailed knowledge and confident demeanour solidified his position as an impromptu expert on the highway project, further challenging Radostin's authority and injecting a note of optimism into the conversation.

I found it surprising to see Miki taking such an explicit position but wondered less about his reasoning than the dynamics his statements would unleash. The reasons for my surprise lay in the project's long history of delays and setbacks, which followed the

pattern of many other infrastructure projects that had often enchanted the public with promises of progress, modernity, and a better future. Such promises, as renowned scholars such as Nikhil Anand, Akhil Gupta and Hannah Appel (2018) have convincingly argued, can generate excitement and hope, especially in regions experiencing economic hardship or marginalisation. Their accounts of hope and excitement have been further refined by Penny Harvey and Hannah Knox (2012) and by Dimitris Dalakoglou and Harvey (2012), who argue that roads are not only seen as modern but specifically promise speed, political integration and economic connectivity. At least for the case at hand, it was not necessarily the hopes and the fulfilment of promises that contributed to my interlocutors retreating into both 'bunkers of trust' (Mühlfried 2019) and bunkers of distrust. Much more important are situations in which promises remain unfulfilled while creating 'precarious ensembles', even if implemented according to plan (Anand, Gupta, and Appel 2018; Schweitzer and Povoroznyuk 2020, 140).

Guided by disillusionment, individuals retreat into a 'bunker of trust,' clinging to the hope that promises will eventually be fulfilled, or into a 'bunker of distrust,' dismissing any signs of progress and maintaining a cynical outlook. Like the 'bunker of trust', the 'bunker of distrust' tends to ignore grey areas and ambiguities, compromises, and the willingness to negotiate not least in connection with the recurrent disappointments with large-scale infrastructure projects. It is thus safe to assume that the cyclical nature of such promises, including repeated announcements, reconfirmations, and partial implementations, thus can further reinforce this bunker mentality. This cyclical pattern where initial hope gives way to scepticism and distrust as promises remain unfulfilled can be particularly pronounced in post-socialist contexts, where experiences of economic hardship and political instability have eroded public faith in institutions and grand narratives of progress. In the case of the Vidin highway, the initial promise in 2014 had generated considerable enthusiasm among all the guests at the barbeque as well as to others of my interlocutors, but the subsequent years of inaction fuelled scepticism. Each reconfirmation of the government's commitment to the project brought a renewed flicker of hope, only to be followed by further delays and frustrations that were most pronounced in Radostin's initial statement. The cyclical pattern that he had also experienced during other infrastructure projects had trapped him in a 'bunker of distrust' and it was difficult to leave this and embrace the possibility of progress.

At the same time, one could argue, I was fully confident that *this* project would soon be finished and thus myself trapped in a 'bunker of trust' and unable to accept that this highway project was also going to fail. The dissonance between Radostin and myself in our respective bunkers, at least at the time of the conversation and direct confrontation, prompted Miki to act as he did. Both Radostin's 'bunker of distrust' and my own more

optimistic yet similarly closed ‘bunker of trust’ were characterised by cherry-picking information and interpreting events to confirm our pre-existing beliefs. Radostin argued using examples of corruption and bad planning from highway construction elsewhere in Bulgaria; I referred to the ongoing construction work I had seen. For Radostin, I was making the mistake of comparing Bulgaria to Germany and Austria (a comparison he would also make himself, but at his own country’s expense) and I saw Radostin as unaware of how closely both officials and private and communal institutions and associations monitored the spending of EU money.

In this discussion, Miki positioned himself between Radostin’s position and mine. To do this, he needed to overcome both the sometimes obsessive accounting for differences with other countries and his own expectations (Kurtović 2020; Martínez and Laviolette 2020; Stoler 2008; Tanweer, Fiore-Gartland, and Aragon 2016) and also break through several encrustations of power that he was exposed to in this situation. That is, he had to challenge prevailing narratives of trust and distrust and assert a more nuanced perspective that ignored neither the pitfalls and failures nor the potential benefits of the projects and engaged critically with both extremes. To do so, he almost automatically began by positioning himself as an opinion leader concerning highway construction in the region. Of all those present, he had spent the most time driving not only abroad but also in Bulgaria. Thus, he knew the dangers of the road and the challenges of road transport better than anyone else at the table. From him, I learned which statements about the highway extension were appropriately formulated and contextualised in both the past and present; the others sought additional explanations or guidance during the argument. However, establishing himself as an expert on roads in the region demanded individual agency. He first had to distance himself from institutional distrust rooted in the divergence between the actual and the imagined state present at a site or in region and break through an encrustation of narrative power to assert his and his families right to a better future and to do this right there at the barbeque. At this point, the stakes resembled those I discussed earlier regarding ‘privatisation’ and the imagined opportunities it offered to join in exploiting the country. Miki’s act of leaving his bunker, even if it was enabled by the other people arguing from within two opposed bunkers, challenged ‘encrustations’ (Mühlfried 2019)—a term that I will discuss after also shedding at least some light also on the fact that Miki had to use a proxy to take his position.

Although Miki had decided to oppose his father-in-law, would never have done so if there had any risk of being proven wrong by the fragility and inadequacy of infrastructures and the inscriptions they contain. Miki used a specific tactic to protect himself not only when he contradicted Radostin’s comment on the road expansion but

also in disagreeing with Natalia's assessment of investments and privatisation in the region: hiding behind the statements of an intoxicated friend that went into just enough detail to call into question the relations of power within the group and prepare the grounds for an argument. This statement managed to stop the quickly accelerating spiral of distrust by introducing a third party who might have been disreputable but had good connections in the public administration. This was a reasonable decision given the dynamics at the party, but it was still surprising as the current discussion of the extension of the road network and its route had been going on for months online and in print newspapers (Granitska 2020, 2021; Hristova 2021; Makaveeva 2023) and other media (skyPoint 2021a, 2021b, 2021c).

Miki's willingness to share information about the project, despite risking his reputation by mentioning that his friend was using illegal drugs, demonstrated his refusal to be silenced by the 'encrustations of power.' His cautious optimism, tempered by an awareness of the potential pitfalls, represented a nuanced approach to mis*trusting that allowed for both critical engagement and a hopeful outlook. While the cyclical nature of infrastructure promises can influence individuals' trust and distrust, individual agency remains important for navigating these dynamics. Indeed, closer consideration of the barbecue conversation that Miki's statement was neither overly critical nor blindly enthusiastic. By engaging with the complexities of the highway project and questioning its implementation, while also acknowledging the groundbreaking and seeking to reclaim a sense of hope, Miki actively worked to break through the encrustations of power he faced within his family and especially from his father-in-law—and also against the encrustation of power due to the dominant narratives of failure and decay. By taking this nuanced stance, Miki demonstrated his willingness to navigate the uncertainties of the project but maintain a critical yet hopeful perspective. He thus prevented his exclusion from the group, albeit by maligning an acquaintance, and had helped to transform the lethargy inscribed in waiting and trust into a productive constellation. However, Radostin, like Natalia and others, remained firmly entrenched in his 'bunker of distrust' and stuck to making negative comments and viewing any signs of progress with suspicion and cynicism. It was this very contrast that finally led me to acknowledge and highlight the subjective nature of mis*trusting and its dependence on individual experiences, social positions, and personal dispositions, as well as retreating into bunkers of trust and distrust until the right moment came.

This vignette has highlighted the complex interplay between individual agency, social dynamics, and the promises and pitfalls of infrastructure development in the post-socialist context. As Anand, Gupta, and Appel (2018) argue, we must examine not only the initial promises but also the realities of implementation and the potential for these projects to reinforce existing power structures. By exploring the specific manifestations

of distrust and the attempts to overcome it in the context of specifically located infrastructure developments, this chapter contributes to the broader theoretical argument on how mis*trusting links with constellations of power and how it may be used to challenge dominant narratives, hierarchies, and reclaim agency.

It also connects my theoretical analysis to the ongoing legacies of the post-socialist transition and their impact on individual lives and communities. For Miki and some of my other interlocutors, it was the right moment to leave their personal bunkers of distrust and critically study the infrastructure plans and their implementation. This engagement with the complexities and uncertainties of the project demonstrates the dynamic nature of mis*trusting. Those who, like Miki, are willing to leave their 'bunker' can engage in a more nuanced form of mis*trusting, balancing scepticism with hope and critically evaluating the project without succumbing to cynicism or blind faith. To 'leave the bunker', then, was not at all a moment of joy but an attempt to question the prioritisation of certain sectors over others during tendering and construction, express concern over how much their daily lives would change with the highway's opening, and demand clarity on how current road construction restrictions had been applied. The realisation of infrastructure projects, while offering a potential pathway out of the 'bunker,' also necessitates a continuous navigation of trust and distrust, as individuals grapple with the ongoing uncertainties and complexities of the post-socialist transition.

*6.3After Democracy (Had Come): Mis*trusting As a Way of Life*

The desire for autonomy and self-reliance was a recurring theme among my interlocutors in Vidin that reflected a deep-seated mis*trust in the state's ability to provide for its citizens. This was particularly evident among those who had experience working abroad. At the service area, I met many who had spent years in Italy, Germany, or the UK in search of better economic opportunities. Most expressed their desire to return to those countries, or at least to limit their dependence on the Bulgarian state. "Here," one co-worker confided, "you can't rely on anyone but yourself." This sentiment echoed those of others who felt that the state had failed to deliver on its promises of progress and prosperity. Staying in Vidin was a privilege among adults of working age: it required the means to bridge a few years of low income but meant not having to leave behind 'Skype children' to be raised by their grandparents, supported by remittances, and only able to see and speak to their parents online, the reality for of the children growing up in Vidin (Petrov 2020). People stayed in Vidin for only two

reasons: to care for elders or because they prioritised sending their children to Bulgarian schools. Some, like Radostin, spoke of their children who had emigrated with the hope they would eventually return with the skills and resources to create a better life for themselves and their families. One of Radostin's daughters, for instance, had invested in property in Vidin, a tangible manifestation of her desire to establish a foothold outside of state structures. Such individual strategies for navigating uncertainty highlight how mis*trusting can motivate people to seek alternative paths to security and well-being, even in the face of systemic limitations.

Radostin recounted his daughter's preparations to return home. Dani's sister and brother-in-law had acquired first a smallholding in the countryside with a large garden and a chicken coop and then a city centre apartment in Kaleto (Калето), the most prestigious district in Vidin. They had also imported two second-hand but fully featured luxury cars with leather upholstery. These, Radostin explained, were exceptional investments because they could easily be resold. Finally, he added that they always brought small amounts of money they had saved when they came back for their Christmas and summer holidays. By having prepared for their eventual return and planned for retirement while living abroad, many of my co-workers at the service area, like other interlocutors such as Radostin's family, believed that they could at least create the illusion of escaping the Bulgarian state for a limited period, even though their working conditions continued to deteriorate. The desire for self-reliance, I argue, extended beyond simply securing a livelihood. It represented a form of mis*trusting performance, a critique of the state's perceived inability to provide a reliable framework for a good life. Many sought to escape the perceived constraints of the Bulgarian system, even if only temporarily. They did this by cultivating skills and connections that allowed them to operate outside of formal structures by engaging in informal work and subsistence activities.

This was not necessarily a rejection of the state, but rather a pragmatic response to its perceived inadequacies. As Mühlfried (2022, 47) notes, their actions did not create a space entirely free from rule, but rather a critique of rule—a '*Herrschaftsmisstrauen'*—enacted through their mis*trusting performance. They navigated the boundaries of the system, seeking alternative avenues to achieve a sense of security and well-being. This resonates with the concept of '*Unherrschaft'*, where individuals actively negotiate their relationship with authority and seek agency in the face of perceived limitations.

This mis*trusting performance, however, was not simply a passive acceptance of limitations. It was also a way of actively engaging with and challenging the state's authority. While Mühlfried (2022, 62–63), observed that in the Georgian highlands reliance on the state was only a last resort, I encountered a more proactive form of

mis*trusting in Vidin. My interlocutors, while acknowledging the state’s role in providing social support, expressed frustration with its perceived inadequacies. They demanded transfer payments and services but simultaneously sought to limit their dependence on a system they perceived as unreliable. This proactive mis*trusting raises a crucial question: how does active engagement with the state manifest in the context of neoliberal individualism? Does it lead to collective action and demands for change or to a paralysis with individuals retreating into self-reliance and accepting the status quo? The answer lies in the complex interplay between individual strategies and collective narratives.

Mis*trusting performance was not without its internal tensions. Narratives of unruliness that emerged from the lived experiences of my interlocutors highlighted the complexities of navigating post-socialist realities. For instance, during our visit to the thermal baths, Natalia articulated a stark division between ordinary citizens and the elite. She described a system in which the state, or rather the elite acting on its behalf, had dispossessed the population of its former assets to the benefit of only a select few. This narrative evoked 1990s imagery of the “Wild East” (Kürti 1996, 11) and its unbridled capitalism and perceived lawlessness. Natalia’s frustration stemmed not only from the economic disparities but also from delays in the privatisation of certain properties, which she believed had hindered the development of the region. Her mis*trusting performance was thus intertwined with a sense of injustice and a critique of the state’s failure to manage resources effectively and equitably. Miki’s perspective further illuminates the complexities of mis*trusting in Vidin. His use of the term ‘privatisation’ to describe the act of theft, exemplified in the anecdote about the pellet gun, revealed a nuanced understanding of power relations.

While Humphrey (2002, 162) argues that theft can be a form of individual resistance against capitalism, Miki’s interpretation went beyond this. He highlighted how ‘privatisation’ had become a catch-all term for various forms of resource extraction and exploitation, blurring the lines between legitimate and illegitimate actions. This blurring, however, is not simply a matter of moral ambiguity. It reflects the ways in which different systems of order—socialist, post-socialist, and capitalist—intersect and are negotiated in everyday life. Miki’s mis*trusting performance lay in his ability to recognise and articulate these complexities, challenging the dominant narratives about progress and economic development. Radostin’s response to the road construction project presents another facet of mis*trusting performance. His denial of any visible progress reflects a deep-seated scepticism towards the state’s ability to effect meaningful change. This scepticism, however, is not simply passive resignation but a strategic ‘bunker of distrust,’ a defence mechanism against repeated disappointments.

Radostin, like many others I encountered in Vidin, particularly among the older generation, expressed a profound sense of disillusionment. These people had witnessed the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the subsequent economic and social upheaval, which left them with a lingering distrust of authority and a pessimistic outlook on the future. This distrust manifested in their reluctance to acknowledge any positive developments, which would have invalidated their lived experiences and undermined their sense of agency. Radostin's mis*trusting performance, therefore, lay in his active resistance to the dominant narratives of progress to safeguard his own interpretation of reality.

This scepticism towards the state's ability to act effectively is central to understanding mis*trusting in Vidin. Mühlfried's (2022, 49–50) term *Unherrschaft* does not imply the absence of rule—but rather its presence in an antagonistic way. My interlocutors, while critical of the state, did not entirely reject its legitimacy. Instead, they expressed deep frustration with its perceived inability to fulfil its promises and address their needs: when I directly asked what they thought of transport infrastructure development since 1991, every single interlocutor had at least one example ready from which I was supposed to easily understand how dishonest, poorly managed, and ill-financed it had been. Their frustration was obvious: despite acknowledging some progress, they offered examples of mismanagement, corruption, and inefficiency. Even the involvement of European institutions and anti-corruption agencies did not alleviate their scepticism. This persistent mis*trusting, and their intentions to neutralise rule and the attractions of rule (Mühlfried 2022, 25) can be seen as a form of "unruliness," a challenge to the state's legitimacy that pushes the boundaries of acceptable critique.

Despite this prevailing scepticism, however, the narrative of unruliness in Vidin is not static. The emergence of new political actors and movements, such as Slavi Trifonov's party Има Такъв Народ (There is Such a People), has created opportunities for challenging the status quo and reimagining the state's role. Natalia's involvement in this party and some of my interlocutors' attendance at demonstrations against the GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria) government demonstrate a willingness to engage with the political process and demand change. Even Radostin, despite his scepticism, acknowledged the opposition parties' positive impact on the region. At the same time, however, he was grateful to European institutions for forcing the parties in power to shift attention away from the capital and their own strongholds to more neglected regions in the country. A couple of years later, Bulgaria would hold its seventh election in three years, but these examples still suggest that mis*trusting can be a catalyst for political action, prompting individuals to move beyond disillusionment and actively participate in shaping their future.

These individual narratives of mis*trusting performance raise the broader question of how we can understand mis*trusting in relation to the legacies of socialism and the ongoing transition to a capitalist liberal system? It is crucial to move beyond simplistic moral judgements and focus on how mis*trusting functions as a tool for navigating the complexities of post-socialist realities. The point is to analyse individual observations, statements and attitudes and attribute them to distrust or mistrusting: this is not about good and evil or morality and immorality. Nor is it about the virtuous fulfilment of a citizen's duty, an issue which studies of citizenship have been examining extensively since at least the 2000s (see Isin 2002; Ong 2006; Isin und Nielsen 2021). As my interlocutors expressed in various settings—at service areas, in their gardens, during casual conversations—the Bulgarian state was often perceived as serving the interests of the affluent, a perception rooted in the experiences of privatisation and economic inequality that followed the collapse of socialism. This shared understanding highlights the collective dimension of mis*trusting, shaping a common narrative of disillusionment and critique.

When queried about the causes of the present situation, the responses were strikingly uniform. According to my interviewees, the Bulgarian state had morphed into a convenient tool of the affluent class, an observation that they each made independently: a situation, they asserted, dating back to the demise of socialism. To my co-workers, it appeared that neither Bulgaria, nor the region, nor the city, had a firm grasp on the current state of matters in Vidin. Many felt ignored by the political establishment, their voices unheard in the national discourse. Natalia captured this sentiment when she described the political divide: "We [in the north] represent the BCP (Bulgarian Communist Party), while they [the government] align with GERB." This divide, together with Radostin's reliance on Russian news sources, signalled a sense of alienation from the dominant political narrative. Furthermore, comparisons with Romania, on which Bulgarians had once looked down, now fuelled a sense of frustration and resentment. Dani and Radostin recalled that they had once regularly crossed the Danube to shop at the weekly market in Calafat as many things had been cheaper there; now "the Romanians come and buy here in Vidin." This reversal of positions underscored the perceived gap between promises and reality, contributing to the collective sense of disillusionment and mis*trust since the fall of socialism.

The mis*trusting persisted in the perceptions of the region's future. Despite recent investments in infrastructure, including a new harbour, the bridge, and renovations in the city centre, many remained sceptical of the promised logistics- and tourism-centred development. This scepticism was evident in an unscientific Facebook survey I conducted during the first Covid-19 lockdown from March 20 to April 10 in 2020. The

majority of seventy-one participants recruited from local groups focused on infrastructure and development perceived the situation as unchanged or getting worse. This disconnect between official narratives of progress and the lived experiences of residents highlights the challenge of rebuilding trust in a context marked by unfulfilled expectations and a history of disillusionment. The survey, however, also revealed nuances in these perceptions.

Women and individuals aged twenty-one to fifty with international work mobility experience expressed more positive views of Bulgaria's development within the EU and the region's infrastructure improvements. This suggests that exposure to different contexts and opportunities can shape perspectives on progress and the potential for positive change. These findings resonate with Polya Ilieva's (2010) research on Bulgaria's EU integration, which highlights Bulgarian's complex and often ambivalent attitudes towards the EU. While appreciating the benefits of integration, such as increased mobility and access to information, many also express concerns about the EU's bureaucratic nature as a "complex machine (for) administration" and its potential for imposing "ready-made" models that might not suit local needs (Ilieva 2010, 23–24). This ambivalence reflects the ongoing negotiation between local identities and global forces, a key aspect of the post-socialist experience.

Generational differences also play a role in shaping mis*trusting. The survey revealed a stark contrast between those over fifty and the younger generation. Older residents, many of whom felt left behind by economic changes and their children's emigration, expressed a profound scepticism towards the EU and infrastructure development. They seemed to perceive these developments as benefiting only the elite, which echoes Ilieva's (2010, 22–23) observation that the 'path to Europe' is often viewed with pessimism by those who feel excluded from its promises. In contrast, younger participants, while they did have some concerns, engaged more constructively with the idea of change and improvement and suggested ways to improve the existing system, reflecting a more active and engaged form of mis*trusting. This generational divide highlights the diverse ways in which mis*trusting can manifest, shaping both critiques of the present and visions for the future. Rather than rejecting any kind of change (not progress!), they commented on the change and elaborated on how the current system could be improved according to their ideas. They formed a civil society of resistance, waiting, but equipped with concrete proposals and united in their distrust of the political elite.

The projects expressed by my interlocutors in terms of mis*trusting domination or subservience differed in two ways. First, it seemed that people over the age of fifty were particularly inclined to categorically reject contemporary developments in the region.

Second, Natalia's and Radostin's past experiences led them to interpret even the most recent developments in an exclusively negative way, an observation that other researchers have linked to idyllic ruminations of bygone days or nostalgia (Bonfiglioli 2011; Creighton 2001). Mühlfried, on the other hand, presents an initially seemingly startling yet convincing proposition: that even apparently negative expressions of mis*trusting, such as vehement dissociation from the state, can catalyse political action and change: vehement dissociation may sometimes lead to openly political and even democratic or revolutionary mis*trusting. Such mis*trusting aims to jog the memories of the ruling elites and address longstanding grievances for good (Mühlfried 2019, 28).

Dissociation from the state in the heat of the moment should therefore not be seen as endangering it but as an intrinsic anchor that offers it potential. In this sense, he challenges the notion that mis*trusting inevitably leads to "paralysis and lethargic despair." (Pelkmans 2018, 176) and suggests that instead it can be a powerful force for social and political engagement by prompting individuals to challenge the status quo and demand a more responsive and accountable state. Miki's case exemplifies this active and engaged form of mis*trusting. His critical perspective on 'privatisation' and his willingness to hold various social groups accountable demonstrate a proactive engagement with the system. As Pelkmans (2018, 173) suggests, it is through questioning and doubting that people gain new insights and challenge established norms. Miki's mis*trusting, therefore, was not simply a rejection of the status quo, but a creative force that seeks to improve the existing system. This, when Miki applied the concept of privatisation to his environment and contradicted his father-in-law by using a proxy who was familiar with administrative rules that now followed a liberal capitalist logic, it was only because of his proactive disposition to mis*trusting various sections of society. In short, Miki refused to accept the narrative of the disillusioned citizen retreating into the various bunkers of trust and distrust and instead chose to actively engage with the complexities of post-socialist transition—a decision and action that aligns with Mühlfried's (2022, pp. 22-23) concept of *Gegenherrschaft* that belongs to a liberalism in which individuals seek to challenge and reshape the dominant narratives and power structures.

This chapter has explored the multifaceted nature of mis*trusting in Vidin, demonstrating how it manifests in relation to both socialist and post-socialist infrastructure, as well as infrastructure that was assembled and maintained after democracy (had come). Through ethnographic vignettes and the analysis of individual narratives, I have shown how mis*trusting functions as a lens through which people interpret their experiences, negotiate power relations, and engage with processes of change. The case of the thermal baths highlighted the role of distrust in shaping

perceptions of the elite and the state, while the discussion of the road construction project revealed the complexities of navigating uncertainty and disillusionment. By examining these diverse manifestations of mis*trusting, I have sought to illuminate the ways in which people in Vidin actively engage with their post-socialist realities, challenging dominant narratives and seeking agency in a context marked by unfulfilled promises and ongoing challenges. The analysis of infrastructure in Vidin reveals the enduring legacy of socialism, not only in its material form but also in the discourses and expectations surrounding development and progress. However, as Tuvikene et al (2020, 579) argue, the socialist imaginary persists, even if contested, and shapes how people interpret and engage with contemporary infrastructure development. This chapter has sought to demonstrate how mis*trusting functions as a tool for navigating this complex terrain by linking past experiences to present realities and shaping expectations for the future. By analysing the continuities and ruptures between different forms of domination, and the ways in which infrastructure materialises and reflects those power relations, this analysis has highlighted the enduring influence of the socialist past on the present.

Central to this analysis is the understanding of mis*trusting as a dynamic process: as a verb rather than a static state. It is an active engagement with power relations, a constant negotiation between doubt and belief, critique and acceptance. This dynamic nature is evident in the interplay between mis*trusting and distrust. This avoidance, however, should not be mistaken for apathy or disengagement. Rather, it reflects a strategic withdrawal, a way of navigating a social landscape perceived as fraught with risk and uncertainty. Distrust, in this context, becomes a form of self-preservation, a way of protecting oneself from further disappointment and disillusionment. My interlocutors, despite their frustrations and scepticism, did not disengage entirely. This cautious engagement, however, does not preclude action. Emigration, too, can be seen as a form of agency, a way of seeking opportunities and control in a context where they feel limited. These diverse responses demonstrate the complex ways in which mis*trusting and distrust shape individual and collective actions in the face of social and political change. The complexities of mis*trusting in Vidin are further highlighted by the ways in which people engage with the state and its representatives. My interlocutors, while cautious and often critical, did not completely disengage from the state but sought to navigate the system, seeking opportunities for agency and influence within the constraints of their perceived reality. Even my own presence as a researcher became a factor in the dynamics of mis*trusting. This initial hesitation, however, gradually transformed into a more open and collaborative exchange, which demonstrates mis*trusting's potential to foster new connections and generate shared understanding. This process underscores the importance of recognising the researcher's role in shaping

the research encounter and the potential for mis*trusting to be a catalyst for dialogue and collaboration.

7. Mis*trusting the North: Dissolving Responsibilities within Europe

Despite suffering from severe back pain, Radostin insisted on joining me for a walk across the new bridge over the Danube. Like many interlocutors, he found it odd that I wanted to walk rather than drive across this structure designed primarily for vehicles and asked what I expected to find. We parked our car at the base of the access ramp to the four-lane bridge, and as soon as we started walking the bridge's function as a conduit for heavy goods transport became apparent. Lorries queued in their designated lane, waiting for the traffic lights to change. This block clearance system had been implemented to regulate the flow of goods across the border and was designed to prevent congestion, but it often resulted in long wait times, especially during peak travel seasons when authorities prioritised passenger vehicles over commercial traffic. Ironically, Radostin and I were the only ones moving freely that day, even though we were defying the bridge's intended purpose for motorised transport. I found this experience bizarre.

The lorries parked in the first lane were occasionally overtaken by minibuses and cars, which seemed to confirm the bridge's promise of increased mobility. During a gap in the car traffic, I asked a lorry driver near the front of the queue how long he had been waiting. "Two hours"; he answered. Although Radostin was already waiting at the bridgehead, I continued the conversation. The driver stated that he was confident he would be able to cross in about twenty minutes. On the other side, he continued, there would be an additional thirty-minute wait at the border checkpoint. When I checked my watch, it was about noon: the time the driver had wanted to reach Romania. I found this ambitious—it was also not my own very first time travelling this route. Although this was neither an external EU nor Schengen border, I knew from personal experience that the border guards at the checkpoint would be thorough in their searches and questioning. According to one border official who preferred to remain anonymous, the crossing between Vidin and Calafat was the second most important in Bulgaria. The heightened scrutiny there served multiple purposes: it provided valuable information to European partners, allowing them to optimise their controls on certain routes, it allowed lorry drivers to strategically plan their driving days by taking potential delays and interruptions into account, and it provided my co-workers at the service area with a constant source of news and gossip about traffic jams, excessively thorough searches, and the success of the border police in combating organised crime. Regardless of these varying perspectives, the driver I spoke with remained stuck in traffic with hundreds of others.

Radostin’s perspective on the bridge reflects a broader tension between aspirations for European integration and the realities of Bulgaria’s position within the EU. Without waiting for my report, he remarked that it had not significantly improved the situation of long-distance lorry drivers. While families and those travelling in cars might experience some benefits since they were not affected by the block clearance system and no longer needed to conform to the ferry schedule, lorry drivers still faced long wait times and bureaucratic hurdles. Radostin then reflected on the changing status of lorry drivers: “Шофирането с камион беше голямо нещо. Пътували сте по света и сте донесли стоки от чужбина.” (Lorry driving was a big thing. You travelled the world and brought back goods from abroad), he said, referring to the role of international lorry drivers in providing access to both permitted and restricted goods during the socialist era.

Today, he continued, things were different. The pay was worse, conditions were more strictly controlled and waiting times and absences had increased. There was a continuous threat of reprisals ranging from strict enforcement of rules about time records to police intervention and border controls. To my surprise, he proposed a solution: the Bulgarian government should more forcefully advocate for the country’s integration into the Schengen Area.[17] I was surprised, as I had rarely heard Radostin make such clear demands. His call for stronger government action reflected a desire for Bulgaria to be fully integrated into the European Union, not only as a provider of cheap labour but also as a beneficiary of its protections and opportunities. This desire for inclusion also speaks to the unfulfilled promise of participating in the ‘elite circle’ of free movement within the EU, a promise to Bulgarians that has been repeatedly deferred and denied. For the duration of our walk, the empty southbound lanes and congested northbound ramp emphasised Bulgaria’s need to join Schengen as soon as possible, a promise to allow the free movement of people and goods that had been made long ago but which had come closer to in recent years than ever before. Radostin’s reflections on the bridge and its implications for Bulgaria’s relationship with the EU suggested that he had carefully considered the expectations and responsibilities associated with this project and especially the challenges in assigning responsibility for specific aspects of its design and implementation. As I show, this difficulty in pinpointing accountability often leads to an abstraction of responsibility in which mis*trusting becomes directed

[17] On January 1, 2025, Bulgaria and Romania became full members of the Schengen Area after a process of that lasted years. This dissertation was in its final stages of revision at the time of their accession, so this development is not discussed here. However, my central argument concerning the delayed realisation of a shared dream and the distribution of responsibilities remains valid.

towards entities like 'the bridge' itself, reflecting the presence of 'voids' where clear lines of responsibility are absent.

For more than thirty years, Bulgarians, and especially the inhabitants of the Vidin region, have been involved in many, often painful and disappointing, processes of transition: from socialism to democracy, from a state-controlled to a free-market economy, from limited to unlimited access to news and information, from restricted to almost unrestricted movement of people and goods. These transitions, while promising greater freedom and opportunity, have also been accompanied by economic hardship, social upheaval, and a loss of certainty. Many of the disappointments and frustrations were linked to the country's opening to the West and its integration into the European Union, along with its treaties, norms, and rules.

The Bulgarian anthropologist Polya Ilieva aptly captures this sentiment, arguing that integration has presented unexpected and persistent "challenges in adapting to the on-going creation of new cultural symbols and social spaces, transformation of institutions and educational curricula, and professional requirements and standards" (Ilieva 2010, 26). Alexander Kiossev, a professor of cultural theory at the Central Sofia University, has been broadly acknowledged for first using the phrase "painful self-colonising" to discuss the ongoing search for integration to an already existing, and well-defined association of states with their treaties, norms, and rules (Kiossev 2011). It was particularly frustrating when this "painful self-colonising" did not produce the desired results, such as the free movement of goods and inclusion in the Schengen Area. After the industrial exodus, the transport and logistics sector was the only attractive employer left and there was also a great deal of incomprehension and disappointment in the region. Despite Bulgaria and Romania's commitment to facilitating the free movement of people and goods, including the establishment of joint border controls, a lack of unanimity among EU member states had long prevented their full integration into the Schengen Area, contrary to the European Commission's recommendation (European Commission 2022). Six months after the disappointing rejection, the European Parliament issued its recommendation (European Parliament 2023). However, this renewed call for integration received little attention in the German, Austrian, and Italian media, reflecting a divergence in priorities and concerns.

In December 2023, a 'Schengen Air' (or 'Schengen Light') concession was granted to Bulgaria and Romania (European Commission 2023). Although they had applied to join the Schengen Area separately, the international community of European countries dealt with them jointly, or at least in lockstep, as it did with EU enlargement. This joint approach, while ostensibly demonstrating solidarity, also enabled detractors to mask the two country's specific concerns and remain vague about the expected improvements in

each. The first veto of the two states' accession, by the Austrian Minister of the Interior, led to diplomatic upheavals and even the withdrawal of the Romanian ambassador in Vienna (BrusselsReport.eu 2023; Griera 2023), so an alternative was sought in the procedure itself. The Austrian government, at least according to public statements, initially did not believe that Bulgaria and Romania would implement an efficient border protection mechanism with the support of the European Union's Joint Border Management Agency—an argument that did not remain unchallenged by analysts and commentators in Austria and abroad, as well as by the Austrian President Alexander van der Bellen. Almost unanimously, they pointed out that the dysfunctional border and migration regime should not be blamed on the applicant states and that a clear distinction should be made between international mechanisms and cooperation agreements and, more recent radicalised and undifferentiated domestic migration discourses (Frey 2022; Marinov 2023; Ulceluse 2022). However, all this criticism did not help. The full integration of both countries into the Schengen Area and abolition of border controls on land was postponed for another year, preserving the existing system of border controls and surveillance with its associated frustrations. In the meantime, the Bulgarian authorities—the traffic police, the border police, local authorities, or external agencies commissioned by the road administration—maintained control over the border and the roads within the country.

Throughout the multi-layered debate surrounding Schengen accession, various aspects of responsibility were discussed, including its acceptance, rejection, and the mis*trust associated with it. From Bulgarians point of view, the removal of borders was not only a further step on their 'European path' but above all signified admission to an elite club of freedom of travel and membership in a common culture that extended well beyond the right to travel, work, and reside throughout the EU (Ilieva 2010). This chapter focuses on presenting alternative viewpoints to the official narratives and addressing how individuals can position themselves in adaptable environments to cultivate well-founded trust or mistrust. Given the repeated demands for the full integration of both states into the European Union, as suggested by the traffic jams on the road and articulated in my conversations during my research, I address the question of how mis*trusting operates when attributing and denying, and claiming or rejecting responsibilities. This exploration will also challenge the notion of an 'erosion of plausibility,' and thus demonstrate how mis*trusting can instead lead to a more nuanced and situated understanding of responsibility, grounded in local experiences and social relations. Specifically, I examine how Bulgarian citizens, such as Radostin and Petko, expressed their mis*trust through their understandings of responsibility, and how these

understandings were shaped by their experiences of the post-socialist transition and the ongoing challenges of European integration.

I begin the chapter with the historical development of the Vidin-Calafat bridge, focusing on how evolving state-citizen relationships have shaped the understanding and enactment of responsibility in infrastructure projects. It explores the project's long trajectory under different political regimes, from early twentieth-century inter-state cooperation to its realisation in the post-socialist era. Drawing on anthropological insights starting from the work of Deema Kanneff (Kaneff 2002) on socialist paternalism, the analysis investigates how the transition to a post-socialist context has impacted accountability and responsibility for infrastructure development. Through an examination of archival documents, photographs, and interviews with residents, this chapter aims to understand how various actors—from local communities and national governments to international institutions and private companies—have conceptualised and enacted responsibility throughout the bridge's complex history. The analysis culminates in an exploration of 'responsibilisation' (Demian, Fumanti, and Lynteris 2023; Rose and Lentzos 2017; Shore 2017; Trnka and Trundle 2014, 2017a) examining how responsibility is assigned, negotiated, and contested in different contexts. This first subchapter of the chapter concludes by highlighting the complex interplay between formal regulations, critical and informal practices, and the role of mis*trusting in shaping how responsibility is understood and enacted in contemporary Bulgaria, where the state's role as mediator between individuals and the 'natural' has undergone significant transformations.

In the second subchapter, I discuss the attribution of actual responsibilities based on possible responsibilities and liabilities conveyed by the bridge's multiple names. Inspired by a somewhat antagonistic email exchange with the company that operated the bridge, I explain how various institutions, some of which are cooperatively involved in managing the bridge, use different names to potentially avoid not only responsibility but also liability claims. I refer to this part as an excursus because it requires a brief outline of the anthropology of names (Herzfeld 1982; Sutton 1997)—a subject area that remains marginal for me. However, this digression serves to illuminate the strategic use of naming in navigating responsibility and mis*trusting. The theoretical goal of the chapter is not to expand on the anthropology of names and naming in private and public contexts. Instead, the aim is to advance my thinking on the interplay between responsibility and liability (Robbins-Ruszkowski 2017; Trnka 2017) based on experimental assumptions and fundamentally speculative considerations.

In the concluding subchapter, I analyse a conversation with the ship captain Petko to demonstrate how the concept of mis*trusting is intricately linked to the negotiation of

responsibilities surrounding the bridge. Through his insights, I examine how the bridge's design and operation, and particularly the challenges posed by shifting sandbanks and a confusing lighting system, necessitate a constant reassessment of responsibilities and foster a climate of pervasive mis*trust among river users. Like the question of the bridge's correct name, there is no single contact person, unit, or institution that seems to have assumed full responsibility for these issues and could thus be mis*trusted. Building on the idea that mis*trusting mediates between the two unattainable poles of absolute trust and mistrust and depends on an interplay of standards and deviations from standards, I propose that the possibility to clearly attribute responsibility is a core condition for the exercise of critical and creative mis*trusting. Unlike the second subchapter of this chapter, I intend this one to fill the gap left in the interaction of two or more related actors using the premise of an uncompromisingly egalitarian and thus uncompromisingly trust-free environment (Bruun, Andersen, and Mannov 2020; Corsín Jiménez 2011; Ruh 2018). This exploration will also serve to pave the way towards a methodological reflection on the role of mis*trusting in anthropological research in the closing chapter, demonstrating how embracing mis*trusting of my own assumptions led to a deeper understanding of the complexities at play.

The chapter concludes by summarising my reflections and critically expanding on a question Mühlfried asked at a public reading in 2023: why have we have given up thinking of societies without a state in cultural and social anthropology? In response, I argue that mis*trusting, as a verbalised distancing from authorities using collectivising terms or categories instead of concrete places and infrastructures, contributes to narratives in fluid and competing systems of responsibility. Unlike the case of the crisis and emergency, in which the state intervenes and becomes visible, towards the end of my field research I realised that the bridge had not only lost its name—Radostin also had to ask which one I was talking about—but also the institutional unit to which responsibility for it was assigned, a particularly provocative idea for Bulgaria as a country attempting to join the EU. Ultimately, this opens the door to understanding mis*trusting as a critique that is fundamentally detached from the state but organised in a political, social, material, and cultural environment. This detachment, however, does not imply a rejection of responsibility, but rather a reconfiguration of it, in which individuals and communities actively engage in mis*trusting to navigate the complexities of a world increasingly shaped by global forces and neoliberal logics.

7.1 Acting Responsible: Building a New Bridge

In 1909, the idea of constructing a bridge over the Danube at Vidin was first proposed at the state level. In the course of a long-standing friendly correspondence with the parliamentarian Dimitar Mishev (Mishev 1905-1909), a Dr Bonchev[18], enquired on behalf of the Committee for the Cultural Advancement of the Vidin Region about the possibility of building a bridge between Vidin and Calafat. This was part of a larger series of questions that also concerned plans to drain wetlands in the region and protect the minorities on both sides of the Danube. The latter topic could be discussed productively in the context of the bridge and also at the international level, Bonchev explained (Bonchev 1909). However, this letter and the subsequent request did not come out of nowhere. Before he wrote the letter, the city council had held a meeting addressing the very topic, whose minutes state that the Romanian municipal authorities had invited their Bulgarian counterparts across the river to explore the possibility of constructing a bridge with the relevant state authorities. The purpose of this construction was to strengthen the relationship and trade between the two cities. However, the meeting only called for a referendum on the subject, without providing any guidance on seeking potential allies at the national level (Municipal City Administration Vidin 1909).

Later in 1909, the local newspaper discussed the "question of the bridge over the Danube" and a referendum that was to be held on that topic (N.A. 1909, 245). After the initial proposal to build a bridge between Vidin and Calafat, Vidin's city administration initiated a discussion and decision-making process. However, this initial enthusiasm seems to have waned, and the project stalled. There is no record of Dimitar Mishev responding or documentation of the public discussions or their results. It seems that the initiative lost momentum and a bridge between Vidin and Calafat was not publicly discussed again until 1952, when the Friendship Bridge between Giurgiu in Romania and Ruse in Bulgaria was inaugurated, some 300 kilometres downstream. However, this discussion also produced no tangible results. An official needs assessment was then completed by the authority responsible to the Minister for Road Transport in 1977; sixty-eight years after the first documented mention of the bridge (Stamenov 1977). The long delays unintentionally started to highlight the complexities and challenges of infrastructure development.

[18] Dr. Bonchev" seems to have been Berni Bonchev, a high school teacher, author, and physician who later served as mayor of Vidin (1934–1938). After studying abroad, he returned to Vidin in 1905 and became active in various organisations. While he did not achieve the construction of a bridge as mayor, he did implement various modernisation projects including draining the wetlands surrounding the city. One of his most significant initiatives was the resettlement of the local Roma community, who had lived for decades in malaria-infested areas (Pavlova, August 30, 2024; N.A., n.d.).

Finally, in 1993 the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria approved plans to construct of a bridge between Vidin and Calafat because the ferry service had, despite an expansion in 1987, apparently reached its capacity limit (Republic of Bulgaria Council of Ministers 1993a, 1993b, 1994). However, ferries continued to operate until the bridge's final inauguration in 2013. The lengthy intervals between the initial nomination, the reopening in the 1970s, and the approval in 1994 led me to conclude that implementing infrastructure projects such as bridges requires both the convergence of a wide range of institutional interests *and* personal commitment. Merely the desire to build was insufficient in this setting. Someone had to commit to the project, follow-up and ultimately take responsibility—a term often discussed under the guise of care and social contract (Trnka and Trundle 2014, 2017a). Looking at the early-twentieth-century communications about the construction of a bridge over the Danube, we see all four of these stages of responsibility, even though there was never a decision to build the bridge. First, the city administration of Vidin decided to pursue the project, at the invitation of its Romanian counterparts but nevertheless independently. Furthermore, the letter from Dr Bonchev to Dimitar Mishev, about whom little is known, expressed a deep sense of trust and loyalty.

Bonchev also demonstrated a sense of personal responsibility by asking questions and trying to relate his enquiry to his correspondent's interests. Regarding authorship, the enquiry from the Romanian authorities was mentioned in the city council's minutes and topic was debated in the local newspaper. However, the Bulgarian city administration must receive credit for initiating the correspondence, the referendum, and the start of the first serious discussion of the issue as it was responsible for taking these steps and accountable to the national authorities and the local population. Only once the discussion had ended and no further decisions and discussions were published did it become impossible to attribute any further responsibilities for the planning and construction of the bridge. At the time, no active decision was made by the state, local city administration, or Romanian authorities to approve or reject the construction of the bridge. The only decision that can be linked to responsibilities at this point was to leave the matter unresolved.

To understand the distribution of responsibilities in this context, it is important to consider the historical evolution of the relationship between citizens and the state in Bulgaria. In particular, the relationship between citizens and their political and administrative representatives and that between the representatives of the people and the various levels and states are relevant here, but at the same time they require historical context. After the correspondence had petered out, discussions on the construction of the bridge only resurfaced in the 1950s and later 1970s—the era of socialist paternalist

governance in Bulgaria. As Kaneff explains, the modern socialist state positioned itself as a mediator between individuals and nature. "Socialist paternalism was a two-way process: the state was concerned to look after the welfare of people—education, housing health—and citizens, for their part, were expected to contribute to the development of state socialism, through their work, family, community, and other state-approved social relations." (Kaneff 2002, 99) She emphasises that responsibility was a mutual relationship of dependency in socialism but had to be renegotiated and reorganised with the collapse of the socialist state and the beginning of decentralisation and privatisation since 1989 (Kaneff 2002, 101–2). This paternalistic approach influenced the way infrastructure projects like the Danube Bridge were conceived and implemented, with the state playing a central role in planning, funding, and overseeing construction.

Other anthropologists working with and from the former socialist states in Eastern Europe echo Kaneff's assessment in slightly different formulations. Jessica Robbins-Ruszkowski has a similar analysis regarding ageing within post-socialist societies: "The end of state socialism brought about different kinds of responsibilities between the state and its citizens, between generations, and between persons. The neoliberal desire for civil society in Eastern Europe mobilises local desires for citizens to create a certain form of responsibility to each other." (Robbins-Ruszkowski 2017, 209) In changing the relationship between the individual and the state, both address an increasing imbalance of responsibility with states accepting less and individuals taking on more. As in Chapter 2 of this thesis, I want to remind the reader of the demand for a more differentiated understanding of responsibility though responsibilisation and the need to avoid common pitfalls like allowing the dominant political, economic and moral logic of neoliberalism to infiltrate our analytical frameworks (Robbins-Ruszkowski 2017; Rose and Lentzos 2017). Responsibilities tied to contents, times and places by agreements and plans can be particularly helpful here. But before turning to these responsibilities bound to a culture of checks and balances with substantial influence at the societal level (Shore 2017, 116), I will consider how Bulgaria, the Bulgarian state and its public servants are themselves embedded in a regulatory system and obligations—and thus in relationships of responsibilities on behalf of their constitution.

No matter what infrastructure or infrastructure revitalisation measure was under discussion, my interlocutors were never quite sure who had been responsible for its realisation—or where it had originated. Most referred to Prime Minister Boyko Borissov, who later resigned but was still in office at the time of my first research visits. Todor Zhivkov, the Communist leader who despite his ruthless governance had initiated the process of de-Stalinisation and later been ousted in a palace coup, was also mentioned quite frequently when it came to adhering names to infrastructure. It was much rarer to hear the names of other politicians: no one mentioned Petar Mladenov,

who tried to preserve the power of the Communist Party in the state structures or Dimitar Iliev Popov, the first post-war Prime Minister of Bulgaria who was not a member of the Communist Party. In fact, I only heard one mention of the name of any of the numerous prime ministers, who usually only served for a few months, Ivan Kostov[19]. Most of these were also responsible for making—or not making—decisions with their cabinets: according to an initial conclusion in my field notes, a certain amount of power was required to be given responsibility. In the moment of 'disappointment', people did not mention Todor Zhivkov because everything had been better in his days but because they thought—partly since that time was past—that then they had known what they had to accept to live reasonably bearable lives. With the renegotiation of the relationship between citizens and their state and vice versa, it was precisely this reliability that was overturned.

In contrast to the approach of 'responsibilisation', which explores how individual actors act responsibly in neoliberal contexts, approaches rooted in the idea of the 'social contract' are concerned with recognising dependencies, interrelationships and recognition between actors (Trnka and Trundle 2014, 150). John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (1971) relates the idea of social contracts to responsibilities and attaches importance to precisely these relationships between citizens and decision-makers. In a society that had not previously enjoyed the ideals of political participation based on justice, including universal suffrage with free choice of parties, the reorientation of the relationship between state and citizens was a source of inspiration (Burnyeat and Sheild Johansson 2022, 230; Kelty 2008). A vehicle was created for cultural and social anthropology to address how thinking in contracts develops, confirms, and changes expectations of the state and specifically the way in which citizens conceptualise the political legitimacy of their government. However, it is also necessary to consider how Bulgaria's political system and its powers as well as the economic elite were in a phase of uncertainty because of the interdependence between global forces and the country's power structures. Here, the point is not to absolve those who seized the opportunity to enrich themselves lawfully but immorally, or even unlawfully, but to show how the concept of 'responsibilisation' does not stand up to the complexity of the experience of a transition from an autocracy to a hybrid liberal democracy via neoliberal ideology: it

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[19] Between 15 November 1990 and 11 May 2021, the end of Boyko Borrisov's third term of office, the Bulgarian Council of Ministers was headed by fourteen different people, some of them on an interim basis. In addition to Borrisov, Andrei Lukanov, Dimitar Popov, Filip Dimitrov, Lyuben Berov, Reneta Indzhova, Shan Videnov, Stefan Sofijanski, Ivan Kostov, Simeon Sakskoburggotski, Sergei Stanischev, Marin Rajkov, Plamen Oresharski, Georgi Blisnashki, among others, have been responsible for Bulgaria's fortunes since the collapse of socialism.

applies not only to people with access to power through positions and institutions, but also to ideologies and principles. When considering my interlocutors' inability to name the actors, it is necessary to remember that these actors acted in highly fluid contexts and were themselves often subject to dependencies they could not control.

The regional archives in Vidin contain all kinds of material about the construction of the bridge. I started with the photos. These were of mediocre quality, although with the necessary knowledge and equipment some could probably be recovered from the original negatives. However, their contents were more important to me than their condition. While filed with the records of the bridge and its construction, they primarily documented the construction of the new bypass road and railway link, as well as the details of selected construction phases. There were photos of planning, surveying, and safety work at the exits for the city, of work grading and widening existing road lanes, and new construction at junctions and of bridge structures. The photos had labels (originally in English and Spanish and translated into Bulgarian only when archived) like "Railway Overpass Bregovo", "Road Junction Bregovo", "Road Junction Kula", "Railway Overpass Kula", "Road Junction Vidin Overpass", "Construction Range of FCC in the Free Trade Zone", "Road Junction Novo Celo", "Transport Service Building Near the Bridge", or "Railway Overpass Vidin Koshova". Others documented the railway line and the two new stations in Vidin. The 'Goods Station Vidin' was built in the southwest of the city for bulk goods transport. A new area of the passenger station was constructed to handle international passengers and separated from the original station by a metal fence. These stations and other construction projects including the Vidin bypass road were all constructed as part of the larger bridge project.

The photographs, including their dates, revealed two aspects of the project. First, an extended period of preparatory work was necessary to create the appropriate structural environment for the construction of the bridge itself—an aspect repeatedly raised by my interlocutors and interpreted as part of an environment oriented towards economy and political participation. Second, the spatial and temporal division of the bridge's construction into different phases determined areas of responsibilities. Thus, in conversations with my interlocutors I was repeatedly struck that people seemed to find it difficult to assign responsibilities precisely and reliably when asked about the bridge-building process, it was only now that the size and complexity of the project in its implementation phases became manifest. Across the decade-long history of the bridge, from idea to decision to realisation, this formally clarified and informally occurring framework formed its own ecosystem. However, this was in turn embedded in further, larger environments, depending on the breadth of the viewer's perception. As Ingold describes elsewhere, my interlocutors also repeatedly employed cognitive patterns of varying scope (Ingold 2011 (2000), 178–181). Their ambition was to make the reality

of the environment their perception, to shape and animate the environment according to their own needs, and to negotiate with other organisms living on the site since the construction of the bridge. With the construction of the reinforced concrete bridge and railway line, and taking into account the navigability of the Danube and the reinforcement of the dykes, the decision-makers, financiers and engineers, ordinary workers on the construction site and administration, interpretated the new environment that would shape the future coexistence of human and other living organisms, including houses and grey infrastructure (Blier 1994), bacteria and viruses (Anranter 2022), and other non-human components and materials through their relationships (Ingold 2011 (2000), 187). My interlocutors were now about to pursue all these and other ideas, mostly guided by personal interests, and forgot about concrete attributions related to responsibility.

In the meantime, I discovered an official document on the history and financing of the bridge. I had come across this text by Sonya Machorska (2015) among the many photographs and a detailed structural analysis of the bridge's anchorages, piers, and stay cables. This text confirms the significant and measurable direct economic impact the bridge had on the local economy. Around sixty of the 274 million euros the two countries spent to build the bridge had been invested directly in the local and regional economy from the start of the bridge's construction. Additionally, more than 80 percent of the workers hired to build the bridge came from Bulgaria, a figure that contradicts the populist assumptions most of my interlocuters held that foreign enterprises had imported foreign workers. The cost was covered by private and state-organised development funds, in addition to tax revenues from the two countries, a common practice for such infrastructure projects in Europe. The European Union contributed structural funds, direct investments, and guarantees from the European Investment Bank (Machorska 19.06.2015, S. 2–3). The fact that the bridge had not been built by the EU again contradicted my interlocutors, whose facial expressions became increasingly puzzled as I shared more details with them. Despite this evidence, they seemed unable or unwilling to credit the Bulgarian state with such a large accomplishment. Why else were they irritated? Most did not know that the two countries had set aside unequal funds for the construction of this bridge, an imbalance that had been preceded by a dispute between them over its location, as each was eager to funnel traffic to its own roads to generate revenue from tolls and taxes on fuel sales, lodging, and food and drink.

On the other hand, everyone seemed to know about the debate on the ferry services from Lom (Лом) and Oryahovo (Оряхово). It was common knowledge that these connections would continue, and some were even able to state the fares. However, very few knew how vigorously the Bulgarian negotiators had debated the bridge's location.

Whatever my interlocutors attributed to whomever represented the state, they had taken responsibility. And regardless of whether they approved the project, they had interpreted this responsibility to include not only changing the environment of the Danube at the specified river crossing but also on their territory. However, since my interlocutors were unaware of most of these debates, they could not acknowledge those responsible for the decision and the institutions with which they were associated. But perhaps the long-term obligations they took on during the debates (like the fiscally sound management of the operation and maintenance of the bridge), the accountability they assumed towards various donors and creditors, and their dependence on Romania's cooperation in implementing border control systems were and remain reason enough not to trigger corresponding ascriptions in the first place—was this an opportunity to integrate responsibility and mis*trusting? In any case, I not only had to arrange the documents correctly but also ask how my interlocutors consistently attributed such a visible project to the wrong operator and named it incorrectly.

Despite the ambiguities regarding political representation and long-term prospects, the publicly available construction site and planning documents in any case allow for a much clearer assignment of responsibilities and accountabilities for each of the construction phases attributed to the project than those made by my interlocutors. With the overall project conceived by elites and eventually executed by architects, engineers, and workers from both within and outside Bulgaria, designated contact persons were responsible for its legal, technical, and structural aspects. These responsibilities were documented in the archives, leading me to worry that my argument now seriously risked falling victim to a flexible liberal responsibilisation narrative. While I had withstood the temptation to request more precise information during discussions with my interlocutors in the field, I began to adopt that kind of attitude as I wrote. Was it the responsibility of my interlocutors and like-minded people to ensure that the state or elected representatives handled their duties with conviction, care, and control? Christopher M. Kelty provocatively states that "representative government or democracy will work only if the people are ready for it, that is, responsible" (2008, 10). This highlights the concept of responsible societies for responsible governance, in which a society is only considered responsible if it fulfils its duty to control and shape itself.

7.2Dunav Most 2: A Bridge Re-Labelled Over and Over.

In late summer of 2019, when I had not even started my first long-term fieldwork in Bulgaria, I received an email from the company operating the Danube bridge between Vidin and Calafat. In addition to denying me permission for participant observation at the bridge itself, the email informed me that its official name was neither "New Europe

Bridge" nor "Danube Bridge II": all their documents referred to it as the "Combined Bridge between the towns of Vidin and Calafat". Furthermore, the company responsible for operating it was called "Danube Bridge Vidin-Calafat AD." This message, signed by the company's current executive director and sent from an email address containing both the name "Dunavmost2" and the phrase "Vidin-Calafat Bridge", did not answer my question about why the bridge had been given different names over the years. However, it did acknowledge several "free interpretations in the public domain" that "did not come from the official owners of the structure". One of these was "New Europe Bridge", which I had used in my first email. The European Commission, a formal partner and co-founder of several activities linked to the bridge over the river Danube, also used this term: on the very day it officially opened, June 14, 2013, it published a press release entitled "Commissioner Hahn hails opening of 'New Europe Bridge' as a potent symbol of European cooperation." (European Commission 2024). Why is this?

Anyone who has ever been involved in naming pets or even stuffed animals, toys and other objects; projects; and undertakings of a charitable, scientific, or economic nature—not to mention children—knows that this activity can hardly be detached from a certain sense of responsibility and involves considering a wide variety of connotations. In this case, the author of the final email explicitly claimed responsibility for only the company commissioned to operate and maintain the bridge, not for the bridge as a structure or symbol. Nonetheless, before I begin my reflections on changing and adapting names in contexts in which actors fear that responsibility is associated with accountability and reparation payments, a digression into the anthropology of naming is appropriate. Systematic examination of names and the naming of persons, as well as places and objects, was a relatively late development in cultural and social anthropology and focussed on personal names. Claude Lévi-Strauss argued in the mid-1960s, that names fulfil certain functions in the mediation of the social and the religious (Lévi-Strauss 1966).

Anthropological analyses of naming systems and names gained momentum in the 1980s and early 1990s. Michael Herzfeld's noteworthy work in the rural regions of Greece leads him to argue that names and naming systems are not the results of power relations but create a system of permeable social relations (Herzfeld 1982, 288). He concludes that the "systematic repetition of a name and its extension to an ever-widening circle of descendants rob it in time of any association with its 'original' persona" (Herzfeld 1982, 292) This aspect has been taken up and refined many times, including by the American anthropologist David E. Sutton, who is also researching the rural regions of Greece and draws attention to the dimensions of short and long-term continuities in naming in the context of the Greek debate on belonging to the 'family of European states' (Sutton

1997). In this context, he concludes, “naming practices are not merely about establishing continuity within families but can be seen as having wider implications for establishing continuities between the present and both a religious and a national past” (Sutton 1997, 423). Meanwhile, Richard D. Alford was unable to find any group recorded in the Human Relations Area Files that did not make use of any personal names (Alford 1988; Herbert 1990).

In the mid-1990s, after the anthropological debate on personal names seemed to have run out for the time being, the nomenclature of streets and roads, and objects attracted closer attention. Originally considered taxonomically and etymologically, the new field of critical placename studies, or ‘critical toponymies’, developed in the 1990s at the latest, partly in collaboration with or following developments in human geographies (Vuolteenaho and Berg 2009). Since then, social and political forces, colonial power relations and ideological positions have taken the centre of attention in the determination of names and also in the perception of existing names in rural and urban structures (Alderman and Inwood 2013; Tucker and Rose-Redwood 2015; Williamson 2023). During critical analyses of naming practices and the perception of names for streets, roads and places, the considerations previously made for naming people were also considered. More specifically, Maoz Azaryahu explains that “a critical approach applied to reading street names as a ‘text of memory’ should consider the possibility of ostensible incoherence, polysemy and heterogeneity, while acknowledging and seeking to explain the contradictions and inconsistencies that reflect the history of the ‘text’ itself” (Azaryahu 2011, 30). Since then, corresponding research has focussed on the functions of names for the construction of social and political structures and the importance of honouring people, groups of people and ideas in the context of outstanding achievements. They also addressed the danger of meaninglessness in the repetition of names intended for remembrance, as well as the significance of continuities and discontinuities in the construction and curation of narratives (Augustins 2004; Basik 2020; Schweitzer, Povoroznyuk, and Schiesser 2017).

After realising that not only the public but also the official contractors had repeatedly used new and different names, I had to adapt my search strategy. I started from scratch, combining Bridge and Danube with Bulgaria and Romania. In addition to the names, I already knew, I was able to find references to “Danube Bridge 2”, “the bridge over the Danube”, “the bridge”, “the Danube bridge between Vidin and Calafat”, “combined (road and rail) bridge”, “cross-border, road/rail bridge over the Danube river at Vidin-Calafat”, and “New Danube Bridge” in technical reports, protocols, and newspaper articles. Within a few days, I found a total of thirteen different terms and spellings that all referred to the same bridge—and my interlocutors were also repeatedly confused. If my questions were unclear or my interlocutors could not place them regionally, they

quickly asked whether I meant the bridge here in Vidin or the 1954 bridge between Ruse and Giurgiu. But if this confusion of terms occurred even during direct exchange and dialogue among my interlocutors, then how could large institutions that assign keywords and file numbers to all correspondence ensure the necessary continuity in the proceedings of bridge-making? And why did there not seem to be a clear hierarchy in a project of this magnitude (the European Commission had informed me in the meantime in an email that it would be up to the operating company to find a suitable name for the bridge), or an official, authoritative standard name?

Using a speculative approach, I shall elaborate on two hypothetical scenarios before continuing by elaborating the relationship between responsibilities and mis*trusting. First, I posit that naming responsibilities reflects the conflicting interests of different actors in the context of a competitive environment. Second, I suggest that the use of different names at different points in time indicates responsibilities. Concerning the first of these two propositions, it makes sense to focus on the preferred use of selected names. Confirming the importance of responsibility for the act of naming, it should be noted in advance that "the framework of competing responsibilities enables us to examine modes of responsibility that extend, challenge, or coexist with neoliberalism's emphasis on a particular kind of individual cultivation of the self" (Trnka and Trundle 2017b, 3). If we look more closely at the contradictions, the inscriptions of individual interests come to light. For the press release on the day of the bridge's opening, for example, the European Commission insisted on the pro-European and modernising dimension of the structure by using the title 'New Europe Bridge', which emphasises the connection between neighbouring European countries. The connotations associated with the name are as generic as they are specific and signal a particular ideology. What stands out, however, is that the name 'New Europe Bridge' also offers continuity and a proposal for a renewed alternative friendship within the framework of the European Union, just as the first "friendship bridge" was built to connect Romania and Bulgaria in the early days of socialism. The responsibility and scope lie in the construction of an overarching narrative with a view to Bulgaria's integration into the European Union.

This earlier bridge between Bulgaria and Romania is also relevant to the preferred nomenclature for the bridge on the part of the Bulgarian authorities. Indeed, they mainly referred to the bridge as the "second Danube bridge". Thus, they emphasised continuity, in contrast to the numerous breaks that both states had to overcome in the recent past. The term was probably dropped later because of bridges that were planned for other Romanian-Bulgarian city pairs along the Danube (Ganeva 2023). Most recently, however, the responsibility of the Bulgarian state, especially in the era immediately following the collapse of socialism in Bulgaria, has emphasised the ongoing progress

of infrastructure development. The occasional and somewhat unwieldy name ‘Combined Bridge’, which is also regularly used by national authorities follows a similar tradition, as the combination of two transport technologies once again also describes the Friendship Bridge between Ruse and Giurgiu: this, too, is famous for combining train and road traffic. Now, by constructing this second combined bridge they could match the achievements of the 1950s and, apparently, take responsibility and value the knowledge of engineers and construction workers after the end of socialism. Both institutions—the European Union, represented primarily by the Commission and the Bulgarian state, represented by its organs and committees—negotiated their neo-colonial claims in the naming of the bridge. The fact that the European Union’s name enjoys the greatest popularity on English and Bulgarian Wikipedia[20] and elsewhere has various causes. However, one reality is probably that Bulgaria as a state has reduced its control over economic, social and political institutions since 1989, and this especially applies to language and nomenclature (Kaneff 2002, 100–101).

The second issue is the possibility of using names to disguise individual situations, epochs, and thus also responsibilities and liabilities: all that remains is the opaque and the impenetrable. Name changes, as discussed in anthropology under the term “branding” for places and states (Dzenovska 2005), as well as in the context of (im)materialities and consumption (Matsunaga 2016; McAllister and West 2014) and, among other things, as ‘circuits of belief’ circulating between different parties (Cronin 2004), are not unusual. By changing the bridge’s name to a very technical description, the operating organisation was able to distance itself from the confirmed and unconfirmed allegations, rumours and criticism that had accumulated over the years. These included accusations regarding the project planning and awarding of the bridge, as well as inadequate workplace safety provisions and the handling of traffic congestion at the border. In the summer of 2020, when traffic jams and disruptions and the de-facto blockade of the bridge were observed, nobody complained about the alternative names that were being used.

Another good example is that of political mobilisation. Critics of the bridge as a structure and of the company maintaining the bridge might accuse it of following a neoliberal or even neocolonial project. The company’s changes to the name and its emphasis on technical matters limited its perceived role to operational concerns and thereby avoided any association with the broader political ambitions of the bridge project. The company’s aim and responsibility was thus, as shown in the email, to reject responsibility as a care and social contract towards the environment and thus avoid the

[20] The German Wikipedia uses the title “Donaubrücke 2.” Other languages, particularly Romance ones like Romanian—use various translations of “Bridge Vidin-Calafat”.

possibility of moral or penal liability (Trnka and Trundle 2014, 148–49). When lengthy phases of preparation had led to delays and when expectations of a project could neither be met in their form nor in their scope, name changes were one way to avoid responsibility, perhaps not legally, but socially. (This practice is especially importance in the next part of this chapter, especially in relation to mis*trusting). Meanwhile, I tried to pin the cause of my sudden suspicion on the emails and the company's relative responsiveness compared to my interlocutors: my suspicion was not caused by the name change, but by the distancing from it. When I realised that there was probably no need or interest to delve further into external perceptions of the bridge, I began to suspect (perhaps without grounds) the existence of hidden power complexes and hierarchies. Whether past incidents and proclaimed responsibilities played a role in the naming and external image was at best only something I could speculate about. The representatives of the company responsible for operating the bridge could have simply spoken to me: I would have asked questions, not bitten them.

*7.3A Bridge Like the Local Fair: Responsibility to Mis*trust*

I met Petko through Natalia. "How are you going to write something about the bridge if you don't talk to a captain about how they see it?" she asked. I agreed, gladly accepting her offer to introduce me to her brother-in-law. My first meeting with him was postponed several times. First Natalia forgot to ask whether he could find time to talk to me; then he had been working on the river, and finally he had to self-isolate after travelling abroad. Although retired, he continued to make occasional voyages for his former company, mostly to Kelheim in Bavaria and back. In a typical year, he made three or four trips of up to six weeks each. In this way, Petko, who had started out working as a deckhand on the ferry between Vidin and Calafat, was able to earn some good money to supplement his pension and continue to travel around the Danube region. Sitting on a park bench with a view of the bridge and the sun on his face, he was probably the most respectable-looking citizen among my interlocutors, someone who would be only moderately worried about his future compared to others in the region. His appearance, clothes, hairstyle, and well-cared for hands and teeth suggested that he could easily afford regular and comprehensive healthcare and personal care services. Throughout our conversation, Petko fiddled with a shiny new, mint-green Volkswagen key in his right hand. As they walked past, several people greeted him. This final part of the chapter explores the complexities of responsibility and mis*trusting in the context of infrastructure development, contributing to the dissertation's argument that

mis*trusting is a crucial tool for navigating uncertainty and critiquing power structures in a hybrid, liberally organised society.

Why does such a voyage take from four to six weeks and not always four or six weeks? Petko jumped right into the conversation: on his last trip, he had been stuck in Deggendorf in Bavaria for a week because the water level was too low. When I asked if this was a common thing, Petko confirmed that it was. However, every country has its own way of managing such conditions. In Germany, he said, they would simply delay some ships—first, those travelling upstream, then those travelling downstream. In Austria, there were enough tributaries and dams to regulate the water level. From Hungary and on, the journey became a little less predictable because of unstable sandbanks. However, there was a twenty-four-hour radio channel that provided information on their location and the water levels in the various sections of the river. Whenever a ship sailed downriver, it enjoyed the right of way due to its reduced manoeuvrability, as dictated by international navigation rules. But sometimes the regulations were more strictly or less strictly enforced. A captain needed to be prepared for anything, he continued. Only recently, there had almost been a serious accident by the bridge. At a time when the water level was low and sandbanks limited navigation to the channel between the first two pillars to the right of the island, a captain travelling upstream underestimated the speed of another vessel travelling downstream and the two ships nearly collided. However, Petko explained that the Spanish contractors could simply have built the bridge with a navigation channel that was wide enough for two ships.

In addition to the pier spacing, another thing about the bridge annoyed Petko: the flashing beacons and other lighting on the bridge at night and conditions of poor visibility. Again, Petko referred to international shipping law, which dictated that signal lights should be steady, not flashing. Above all, he was afraid of disgracing himself in front of his international colleagues, who he said must think they were travelling towards a fair instead of a bridge. The bridge was an embarrassment, but the local authorities didn't care. Petko claimed to have approached them on several occasions, but nothing had changed. All they could control was the lighting at the level of the river, not the illumination of the bridge above the road. He told me that they said the high pylons needed flashing lights to warn low-flying aeroplanes and helicopters. First, they placed the bridge piers in such a way that the captain needed a great deal of skill; then they made navigation even more difficult with the installation of numerous lights. If there was an accident or the ship ran aground on a sandbank and needed help, the captain was responsible for the ship, any damage to it, and any fines imposed by the authorities for blocking the channel. None of my interlocutors had addressed the complexities of responsibilities more explicitly than Petko.

Petko's attribution of responsibility to 'the bridge' itself highlights a crucial aspect of mis*trusting in complex systems picks up from the 'voids' I have been identifying throughout this dissertation and underscores the challenges of assigning responsibility in complex systems. By filling the void created by the lack of clearly defined responsibility he navigated not only his ship, but also situations where the decision-making processes were opaque, and the power structures diffuse. When individuals cannot identify specific actors or institutions to hold accountable, they may direct their mis*trust towards abstract entities or systems. In his example of a near-catastrophe, Petko refused to blame either the captains or the contractors, who had built the bridge as they were directed to do: it was the engineers who had taken care to relieve a bottleneck in land transport and protect it from airborne dangers, the authorities who had issued rules and then failed to enforce them, and the waterway coordinators who had failed to manage and monitor the various traffic flows. As someone who knew the local conditions, he also saw the responsibility as his own. With this self-confidence, he had also approached what he considered to be the relevant authorities to draw their attention to the fact that something was wrong with the signalling. In other words, the bridge, in its materiality, became a focal point for mis*trusting precisely because it represented a convergence of actors and forces that are difficult to disentangle.

I experienced the representation of responsibility, or mis*trusting by my interlocutors (especially in Chapter 5 on interruptions in travel, and Chapter 6 on the economic hopes associated with the new road), as volatile and embedded in a twofold political perception of the environment. Such a perception implies two things. First, mis*trusting is instrumentalised for the representation of actors' responsibilities, including individuals and materials representing institutions, computers, moral or ideological systems, a doctrine or military logic as a means of political confrontation. Similarly, Mühlfried points out that trust and mistrust are equally dependent on political convictions and less on fact-based explanations, and *ultima ratio* is used as a manipulative physical technique to enforce totalitarian systems of rule. Referring to people's growing faith in things they have seen and heard (rather than scientific knowledge), he speaks of an "erosion of factuality" (Mühlfried 2019, 73–79). A second dimension of the twofold political perception of the environment is characterised by the volatility of political responsibility, which goes hand in hand with mis*trusting in terms of the offering, granting, accepting, rejecting, and perceiving of responsibility, and which additionally leads from the "erosion of factuality", to an "erosion of plausibility".

To my surprise, not only Petko but all the interlocutors with whom I spoke about the construction of the bridge expressed quite robust opinions on the subject. At the same time, however, most could not fully and comprehensively assign the actual

responsibilities for the construction process they mis*trusted. This inevitably led to plausibility gaps: my interlocutors' knowledge of the bridge and its construction was not necessarily wrong, but it was to some extent unspecific and above all situational. Rather than a simple erosion of truth based on facts, what I observed was a shift in the grounds of plausibility. My interlocutors' situational and contextual understanding of responsibility highlights the dynamic nature of mis*trusting, which was constantly being negotiated and reinterpreted in relation to specific social and historical circumstances. Plausibility, then, is not lost; rather, it becomes rooted in situated experiences and local knowledge, challenging the idea of a singular, objective truth and supporting this dissertation's argument that mis*trusting is a complex and evolving process embedded in the fabric of everyday life. The findings of this chapter also reinforce the need for a 'mis*trusting anthropology,' as the conclusion of this dissertation will advocate, that recognises the dynamic and contextual nature of mis*trusting and its potential to unveil power structures, challenge assumptions, and foster a more critical and reflexive approach to social analysis.

When Petko had asked why the lighting on the bridge was so confusing, he had not received a satisfactory answer. At the same time, he was unable to repeat the answer in detail. He thought this didn't really matter and rhetorically asked what else he could have done. Then he answered his own question: he could have used other institutions, superior to the regional and national administrations, as monitoring bodies. In his criticism of the bridge, Petko often mentioned various supranational institutions with a regulatory character. These institutions, he explained, determined the content of examinations for ship's captains and regulated the use of navigational instruments such as echosounders, navigational radar and GPS. As in the case of the companies associated with the actual construction of the bridge by my interlocutors, Petko repeatedly named the relevant institutions; however, he did not ascribe any responsibility to the higher regulator bodies as opposed to the local and state administration, either for the bridge equipment or in his hypothetical scenario of two vessels colliding in the vicinity of the bridge. It seemed as if he was aware of the institutions but at the same time found them too distant and abstract to attribute a real control function to them. He also had no expectations of the companies in terms of overarching responsibilities, as he had not identified them as responsible in the specific case of navigational traffic control. He expected them to complete the construction and operate the bridge under the regulations and within the framework of a system institutionalised by the state authorities.

These expectations are confirmed in a study of harmful air pollution at a factory in Ostrava in the Czech Republic, in which Trnka concludes that "companies are cast outside of the sphere of moral life, not out of some perceived inherent lack of ethical

obligation but from a pragmatic recognition that labour will find little traction in invoking the moral responsibilities of management" (Trnka 2017, 95). Apart from that, more detailed information, as well as internal criticism of the implementation, remains—partly deliberately—hidden anyway.

Another abstraction occurred in the name of the bridge itself. While Petko and my other interlocutors could not identify the responsible authorities, the bridge, in its materialisation and manifestation, was attributed with personality and responsibility: "The bridge is too narrow for shipping." "The bridge looks like a fairground." "The bridge is embarrassing." For Petko, "the bridge" functioned as a proxy for everything to which it was not possible to assign responsibility whether this was because it had been planned poorly, implemented in a market economy, or managed and regulated according to globalised standards and norms. If neither an individual nor an institution could be mistrusted in the sense of neoliberal responsibilisation, the bridge as a conglomerate and structure seemed to be sufficiently materialised as an entity that could be mis*trusted. Indeed, full of expectation and in the manner of hybrid liberal responsibilisation, Petko had initially turned to the authority that had been commissioned locally with the issues of Danube navigation. His fear that captains who were not as familiar with the situation as himself were likely to fail to assess the situation and his knowledge that captains operating under time pressure were prepared to violate regulations despite the threat of heavy penalties for running aground on sandbanks and failing to yield the right of way to vessels travelling downstream had motivated him to approach the authorities. Instead of answers, however, all Petko got out of appealing to the national regulatory institutions was experiencing the asymmetry of a recently increasingly institutionalised responsibilisation (Shore 2017, 115). Thus, it seemed as if neither the companies nor the national authorities but the workers, and in this specific case the captains, who had to take responsibility and who had to answer for any accidents.

In my conversation with Petko, the personification of the bridge was a counterpoint to this that attempted to protect his profession, and perhaps even himself, from if not legal then at least moral and political accountability. By transferring responsibility to the bridge itself, Petko adopted a strategy of limiting the expectations placed on himself and others affected by the responsibility. However, because it was unable to respond to these expectations, it also made its contribution to the previously criticised 'erosion of plausibility'.

Neither Petko nor any of my other interlocutors was purely critical of the bridge. Many praised the cooperation between the institutions and companies involved in building the

bridge; many were proud that a project of supra-regional importance had been completed in the region in which they lived and worked. Everyone involved in its realisation, they argued, had finally managed to create a whole from individual sections and parts. Petko himself noted that most people in the town liked the bridge and the lights he had criticised; moreover, while traffic had increased, road congestion had decreased and the safety of river transportation improved, now that crossing the river by ferry was no longer necessary. Miki, Dani and Radostin also agreed that the bridge had brought good things in its design and implementation, although they disagreed about extending the motorway to Vidin. My co-workers said that their work at the service area was steady and good and that their wages had improved in recent years. Most of the connotations mentioned were functionalist, economic or even technical: in contrast to the situation discussed in the previous chapter, it seemed as if there was a positively connoted environment that came closer to the concept of trust and was free of trust, a logically and mathematically organised form of responsibilisation and trust that was free of the desire for trust per se.

The idea of interaction without responsibility and trust is not new. For example, Tim Ingold argues concerning the killing of animals by hunters and gatherers that this environment represents an economy of trust in which the relationship between humans and non-humans should not be read only in terms of hierarchical dependence but also egalitarian bargaining relationships (Corsín Jiménez 2011, 187). But are these ideas and visions also valid for interpersonal interactions in hybrid liberal economic systems disguised as seemingly egalitarian, democratically organised societies despite the demonstrably unequal distribution of resources?

Environments freed from hierarchies have not only been discussed by Ingold, and not only in the context of more-than-human relationships. Using the example of cryptography, Nicolai Ruh (2018) and Maja Hojer Bruun et al. (2020) emphasise that cryptographic platform economies, which are dominated by mathematics and logic and manifest themselves in the concept of 'trustless trust', address the insignificance of trust in closed systems—even if, or precisely because, public discourse on them is often permeated by libertarian ideas. They thus bring with them a previously unknown or forgotten (or only hypothetical) radical form of equality in the context of Western democracies. The semantic strength of these concepts derives from the fact that they prioritise trust above all else, giving meaning to the system to be described. At the same time, however, the very name of the concept is an oxymoron that almost immediately dissolves the hegemonic position of trust and in this way decouples trust as a subjective experience from environments, algorithms or, to return to the bridge, a complex convergence of events, actors, cash flows, and works that is seemingly resistant to external influence.

While the concept of 'trustless trust' may seem to promote equality by removing the need for interpersonal trust, it can also obscure responsibility and limit opportunities for critique, creating a 'void' where critical engagement and accountability reach their limits. By placing faith in supposedly objective systems or algorithms, individuals may become less likely to question the underlying power structures or biases embedded within those systems. This observation resonates with this dissertation's argument that mis*trusting is crucial to challenging dominant narratives and fostering a more critical and reflexive approach to social analysis, demanding transparency and accountability even within seemingly neutral systems. From the perspective of relations, my interlocutors' unexpectedly favourable assessments of the role of superordinate frameworks and conventions as a mathematically functional, trust-free environment of collaboration suggest a thought experiment. Assuming Petko had relied on mathematics, a superordinate system free of trust, or—to return to Ingold—a radically egalitarian environment, would he have felt the need to make demands of the national authority for the regulation and control of shipping? Would his complaints have challenged the logic of the system or the environment itself? What would have been the consequences?

From the perspective of order with clearly distributed responsibilities, undifferentiated mis*trusting towards 'the bridge' as a verbalisation of its material manifestation could only be global, superficial criticism. Not only Petko but also others among, who, along with their praise also always criticised the poor development of environments up- and downstream from the bridge that were now also involved in the stages of bridge development and its operation, changed their attribution of responsibilities out of embarrassment about not naming the actual addressees. As well as "the bridge", my co-workers at the service area blamed "the road" for recurring traffic jams, often fatal accidents and numerous travel disruptions. However, criticism rarely centred on "the bridge", whether or not in combination with the roads to Sofia and Timişoara, Romania but merely lent a face and an anchor to mis*trusting traffic regulations, health regulations and safety measures. Radostin once explained that, apart from the fact that the local economy could have benefited more from the construction work, it was not too much of a problem that so many people from abroad had come to Vidin to work (and thus also taken away part of the added value). It was just that the bridge was in the middle of nowhere. Who needed a bridge with no roads, he asked pointedly but without expecting a proper answer. Rather, his intent was to indirectly criticise the piecemeal traffic planning of the trans-European corridors, the priority given to through traffic over connecting the city and region to other regional centres, and the lack of resources for road development in Bulgaria.

The same was true in situations in which my interlocutors tried to hold 'the European Union', or the Bulgarian majority population, or the *'we'* who had the right to vote and thus determined the political majority, accountable through mis*trust. Only *'we'* could install the lights differently from everyone else, only 'we' could build a bridge without the necessary access roads. *'We'* that was "ние" (we) or "наш" (our). On the other hand, it was the "European Union" that should have ensured that the tenders had been organised in a way that only Bulgarian—not Spanish—companies would have won the contracts. Could one important part of the 'erosion of plausibility' be that individuals, in their mis*trust, make changes in attributions and manage their distrust and trust accordingly? From the perspective of a functional but trust-free relationship, there probably would not have been anyone to take responsibility or to whom a complaint could have been addressed demanding that they take responsibility. At the same time, however, there would have been a need for a comprehensive review of the functionality of the system or its environment in the event of a malfunction, such as the hypothetical collision of two ships actually taking place. Only the system itself could then be held responsible.

Now, how can the discussion of trustless trust and a levelling environment with mis*trusting as an active role in the complex be taken further? Several aspects come into play here. First, the use of 'the bridge' as part of a newly constructed environment indicates that my interlocutors considered its construction to be complete, even though they criticised the fact that it was not yet fully implemented or functional due to, for example, the lack of access roads or supposedly inappropriate beacons. Moreover, it seemed as if the bridge had been accepted into the status of an environment free of trust since the moment of its material manifestation at its inauguration. According to my interlocutors, at least from that point there had been few opportunities for additional attributions of responsibility in this environment. As a result, mis*trusting as an actively conceived moment could not address events of the past, only be fuelled by them. Put more simply, mis*trusting needs to know its events and, above all, its actors.

It also seemed to be of the utmost importance to define the boundaries of the space in which mis*trusting is possible at all. For the scenario instigated based on Petko's comments, the question arises of who is hiding behind the respective placeholder terms, 'the bridge', 'the road, 'the controlling body', and 'the EU'. Answering this question is significant because, by implication, only those who considered subsumed by the corresponding placeholders constitute a conceivable entity that could be mis*trusted based on reliable knowledge. Within the framework of a 'trustless environment', actors disappeared and no longer could be mis*trusted, as the mathematically and logically constructed environment, which was supposedly equalising, did not allow for mis*trusting persons or institutions that were not within reach. This brings me back to

both the ‘erosion of factuality’ and the ‘erosion of plausibility’. In such a relational relationship, subject to constant fluctuation, neither plausibility nor factuality is eroded by an active and therefore political mis*trusting. On the contrary, if the actors, including the power relations connecting the actors, are brought into connection with each other based on combined objective and subjective experience, both plausibility and factuality are reinforced.

Knowing which actors in which contexts are not addressable at a given time also means that mis*trusting starts where there is reliable information and relationships. I therefore question Mühlfried’s ‘erosion of factuality’ through mis*trusting as an active negotiation of positions and relationships, just as I question the ‘erosion of plausibility’ I proposed after a superficial examination at the beginning of this chapter. Embracing my own mis*trusting of this initial assumption underscoring the importance of reflexivity and self-critique within anthropological research has allowed me to move beyond a simplistic interpretation and grasp the dynamic and situated nature of mis*trusting in this context.

I opened this chapter with a discussion I had with Radostin during a walk over the bridge about Bulgaria had been denied entry into a full Schengen partnership for the time being. For him, there was a certain irony in the fact that it had been an Austrian EU Commissioner who inaugurated the bridge, only for another Austrian minister to delay its functionality once again. The lack of integration into the Schengen Area meant that for the time being the bridge could not be used to its full capacity for land traffic. As a result, its contribution to the freedom of mobility of families living and working in the region has remained modest, as have the businesses that increasingly queued up in front of the bridge not because of a genuinely better connection, but because of the traffic jams on alternative routes. Only with integration into Schengen will the infrastructure be usable in a way that might meet the expectations of lorry drivers and the local population affected by traffic jams, as well as border officials, engineers and the European Commission.

Later in the chapter, I turned to mis*trusting as articulated by my interlocutors, aiming to identify the supposedly responsible parties and to explore the limits of active mis*trusting in different constellations. The first clue that I came across was that my interlocutors were without exception surprised that discussions about constructing a bridge dated back to the early twentieth century. Without knowing the context, however, they couldn't determine who was to be held responsible for what, now that the bridge was finished and technically fully operational. I openly discussed the reasons why my interlocutors could not clearly distinguish between the steps of planning, realising, and

operating the bridge and other infrastructures. My conclusion is that numerous actors acted with clear names (and thus assumed responsibility); at the same time, however, these same actors were able to precisely assess how they could most effectively retreat behind ideas and fantasies. Any distinction was much more blurred than I had expected. A dispute with the operators of the bridge over the naming emphasised the importance of such practices and led me to consider the question of the assumption of responsibility with potential continuities in the filing of liability claims.

By the end of the chapter, I had learned to discard these assumptions. Only the use of a mental construct, helped me to understand that my interlocutors were not relying on didactic knowledge based on facts from the past but rather a situationally present experiential knowledge to define actors and positions of mis*trust. The change in constellations and hierarchies brought about by the awareness of one's localisation created the necessary environment for mis*trusting to no longer be applicable only to one's own environment and the question of assuming responsibility could be posed anew in such a way that trust as a category disappeared from the institutions themselves. The analysis presented in this chapter highlights the crucial role of mis*trusting in navigating the complexities and uncertainties of hybrid, liberally organised societies, where responsibility is often fragmented, power structures are diffuse, and individuals must constantly negotiate competing narratives and expectations. Given the right conditions, political mis*trust is active and thus neither erodes nor becomes plausible. A more situated and contextual understanding of plausibility is emerging, which changes how we mis*trust. This new understanding requires us to actively and strategically navigate trust in a hybrid, liberally organised society—also as researchers. For me, the core competence of self-positioning was initially incomprehensible. It also consisted of ignoring discussions that seemed relevant to me and later turned out to be peripheral, such as those concerning the name change and its implications.

8. Closing: Towards Critical Mis*trusting in Anthropology

My return to the service area in Vidin after a year's absence was marked by a sense of both familiarity and estrangement. "Колко искаш?" "How much do you want?" asked Ivaylo, highlighting the intuitively transactional and thus functionalist nature of our encounter before he recognised me at the filling station. I smiled and replied with a friendly but not-quite-serious formality "Здравейте!" (Hello!) Ivaylo put out his cigarette and took a few steps towards me. His face lit up and I could tell he had recognised me, not just by the way he raised his right hand in greeting, but also by the way he pulled up the corners of his mouth. As he walked towards me, he said loudly, so that Moni could hear his surprise: "Леле! Виш кой е тук. Как си? Кво правиш тук?" (Hey! Look who's here. How are you? What are you doing here?) My explanation, which mentioned another city and project that had brought me back to Bulgaria, failed to satisfy him, just as it would fail to satisfy all the others I met that day. The surprise and attention at my unannounced appearance were repeated several times that day. The same questions, over and over again; the same answers, over and over again.

At first, I could not get a conversation started. It was only when I had sat down at the restaurant with my closest former co-workers when I got to have a more serious discussion. For example, Ani first stated that there were no new developments; then argued that the quality of service had deteriorated and the workload increased since the owners had decided to fill only the most essential vacancies. Because I was too slow to reply, she continued with a bitter rhetorical question: "Why should people put effort and energy into a neglected region?" Thus, Ani referred to her former co-workers, with whom she had been forming an alliance, and also myself, who had once been accepted into the group and then left like everyone else. As the conversation continued, I learned that most of my former co-workers had at least temporarily returned to countries with higher wages. One had married, quit, and moved away; one had died. I was shocked. The last one left was convinced she couldn't receive the therapy she needed. Even without saying it explicitly, she pointed out that none of us was part of the alliance she was now forming with her other, new, co-workers. My year-long absence left me with no option but to acknowledge Ani's perceptions and accept her mis*trusting.

This dissertation has examined various situations I encountered at and near the service area. My goal was to free the concept of mis*trusting from simplistic interpretations, which often limit it to economic or political contexts. I argued that mis*trusting is far more pervasive and nuanced, permeating the everyday fabric of social life. It is not just a cognitive calculation of risk or binary assessment of reliability, but a fluid and

ambiguous process that is deeply embedded in social relations, cultural contexts, and situational and historical legacies. It is a tool for navigating the uncertainties of the everyday, for negotiating the complexities of power, and for challenging dominant narratives that seek to define and confine. To make this point, I have demonstrated the potential of a mis*trust for nuanced social analysis, especially when considering the social conditions that influence it, and have reaffirmed the abolition of an uncritical celebration of trust, as well as its importance as a form of social glue that enables the formation of associations for cooperation and defining solidarity and collective action against others. To illustrate how mis*trusting operates, I elaborate on 'momentary voids' that articulate interactions between my co-workers and long-distance drivers at service areas, but also with authorities and state agencies. Who was the right person or entity to support in a case of interrupted and delayed mobility? Who could provide reliable information about road conditions and construction, and to what extent were the drivers and all others involved in one way or another with the service area and its surroundings subjects to be trusted or mistrusted? Decisions to stay or move were sometimes limited and sometimes had to be made on the spur of the moment. But they were always informed by a complex interplay of past experiences and perceived reputations, but also contemporary and situational knowledge.

While crucial in navigating immediate uncertainties, the significance of mis*trusting extends far beyond these pragmatic considerations: it is deeply intertwined with questions of identity, belonging, and social justice. One good example is the mis*trusting directed at institutions that were at least superficially supposed to follow a post-socialist legacy that certainly informed debates about the unfinished highway to Vidin as well as about the management of the new bridge across the Danube. In both cases, my interlocutors tended to perceive the authorities themselves (rather than their employees) as incompetent, corrupt and irresponsive, perhaps a legacy of post socialism. While I have addressed such continuities, I continue to doubt them as I understood their concerns as much more reflecting specific crises of political legitimacy and responsibilities. In each of these situations, my interviewees demonstrated a sense of being unheard and neglected, and thus not only a scepticism about progress but also a desire for alternative social organisations that prioritise the local community.

This mis*trusting of authorities was further complicated by divergent ideas about responsibilities and the assumption of legal and discursive ownership discussed towards the end of the thesis, which was based on the making, labelling and maintenance of a newly built bridge over the Danube River. In this context, it seemed, mis*trusting became a form of resistance and persisted within different socio-economic and political systems and ideologies ranging from socialist collectivism to unrestricted neoliberal and responsibilisation of the individual. Just as mis*trusting the state fuelled protests

demanding for accountability, my interlocutors in Vidin highlighted its potential to catalyse collective action and social change.

Ultimately, I have shown that if understood as a critical intervention mis*trusting requires a deeper reflection on the dynamics of trust and mistrust within democratic systems. I have argued that commitment and courage are at the heart of this approach that calls for mis*trusting as a critical intervention, but also openness about one's positions, both to allow individuals to challenge dominant narratives and institutions and to create the opportunities for dialogue and social change that are so central to democracies. In this sense, mis*trusting—with the awareness that the outright disruption to dominant power relations requires engagement, and especially considering the systemic limitations of the framework—tells us something about the accessibility, distance and isolation of institutions and companies. It presupposes the capacity and knowledge to respond to criticism and accusation, allows for mutual recognition alongside interaction and debate, and challenges and ascribes power without necessarily leading to the collapse of dominant forms of rule.

These ethnographic insights—particularly the understanding of mis*trusting in the making and unmaking of social boundaries—lead me to propose a critical anthropology of mis*trusting that places it at the core of anthropological knowledge production. It is the discussion of such an anthropology and of mis*trusting as critical interventions in anthropology that I want to conclude my thesis with. A critical anthropology of mis*trusting, like my interpretation of Ivaylo initial 'failure' to recognise me as a former co-worker rather than an ordinary customer, requires acknowledging the inherent limitations of knowledge, the relativity of truth, and the potential for bias in both our own interpretations and those of our interlocutors. Thus, a critical anthropology of mis*trusting is simply a radically explicit reflexive anthropology.

Anthropologists are not immune to the biases and blind spots that shape human perception. Just as our scientific understanding is constrained by the limits of our current knowledge, our cultural interpretations are shaped by our specific social and historical contexts. A mis*trusting anthropology encourages us to question our assumptions, interpretations, and the information provided by interlocutors. The shift in Ivaylo's demeanour, from transactional to one of friendly recognition, highlighted the dynamic nature of mis*trusting and the potential for relationships to evolve over time. This underscored my need as an anthropologist to be attentive to the nuances of social interaction and to avoid premature judgements. It also once again highlighted the need to move beyond taking comfortable certainties for granted and to engage with the ambiguities and contradictions that permeate social life. A critical anthropology of

mis*trusting thus requires heightened reflexivity and constant awareness of our own positionality and its potential influence on our research. Following Keane, on whom I have drawn in developing my own personal methodological understanding of how to approach mis*trusting, it requires a more ethical stance in fieldwork, recognising the power dynamics at play in our own interactions and striving for accountability in our relationships with those we study. I fear that it is only by acknowledging our limitations and biases that we can strive for a more nuanced understanding of the social world.

An anthropology of mis*trusting, even if understood as an anthropology focused on critical interventions, is not without its challenges. Some might argue that a focus on mis*trusting fosters a cynical view of social interactions, neglecting the importance of trust for cooperation and social cohesion. And while the formation of unstable alliances that call for mis*trusting to foster both trust and mistrust would demonstrate how it defines fluid relations of what is seen as at least temporarily belonging inside or outside and thus catalyses collective action and social change, I agree with these concerns. However, mis*trusting as a critical intervention in anthropology can still empower individuals to question authority, challenge injustice and demand accountability and promote dialogue and understanding, and thus lead to more just relationships. If mis*trusting is understood as tactical, because it is used to subvert usually superseding or hegemonic value systems and ideologies and to create space for alternative ways of being and thinking within anthropologies, these concerns may ultimately be possible to overcome: a momentary glimpse of trust, mistrust or distrust as interdependent and formative conditions may succumb to a potentially nihilistic understanding of mis*trusting charged with cynicism. As a critical intervention in anthropology, mis*trusting instead entails a process of critical inquiry and reflection, guided by one's subjective understanding and knowledge and above all by a deep appreciation and understanding within the relationship. Like many other situations discussed, Ani's questioning of my return, exemplified how mis*trusting can expose power imbalances and inequalities. From an ethnographic point of view then, the key lies in recognising this dynamic interplay between mis*trusting and trust, acknowledging both as essential components of social life and requiring us to rethink traditional notions of objectivity and neutrality.

To fully exploit mis*trusting's critical potential as an intervention in anthropology, I have suggested focusing on the analysis of 'voids.' What exactly constitutes a void? Is it a gap in knowledge? An inconsistency in social structures? A moment of uncertainty or ambiguity? How do these voids shape individual and collective experiences? And how can we, as anthropologists, develop the methodological tools to identify and analyse them? Some voids are experienced individually, while others are perceived collectively. Some voids are of material and some conceptual. Finally, did the 'voids'

that I investigated throughout this dissertation have different characteristics reflecting the qualities of mis*trusting?

This requires examining the nature of these voids, the contexts in which they occur, and their impact on social dynamics. It is also what I have tried to convey in the vignettes throughout this dissertation, including the initial 'empty conversation' and the anecdote about my former co-worker's reluctance to engage in deeper discussions in this closing chapter. In every case the voids turned out to originate from relations including both the past and the present and both expectations and actual experiences (which often included abandonment and broken trust). Repeatedly, the void created by the socio-economic context of a 'neglected region' led to the exchange and interrelation of individual experiences and contributed to the formation of alliances. The voids created by uncertainties, which could mean everything or nothing to individuals and groups of people alike, were also likely to include approximations of explanations and speculation on the future—a habit that supports making the differentiation of mis*trusting a critical intervention in anthropology. For example, as a researcher I was not only exposed to exaggeration but perhaps also instrumentalised, which certainly affected my work. It is also impossible to ensure that my readers, who lack the advantage of having been in the field with my interlocutors and me, can follow my interpretations. This was a risk I could not ignore when my interlocutors asked how other people might interpret what I wrote about their arguments, decisions and interactions. It is because of this almost infinite number of potential inconsistencies that I invited my interlocutors to mis*trust me and to doubt my ability to grasp, process and communicate all their intentions to others. Mis*trusting as a critical intervention in anthropology must be two-sided, at least: it must not only emanate from researchers but also be directed at them.

Understanding mis*trusting's critical potential in anthropology, I also shed some light on mis*trusting shaping social conventions and individual beliefs as well as sense-making. I did not simply bring up the 'empty conversations' to characterise my return to the service area as instances of superficiality but to demonstrate how voids may lead to guarded interactions and a reluctance to share personal experiences. Although many of the voids I encountered in my research were not explicit, they transcended a simple rejection of debate and discussion and reflected a deeper sense of abandonment and the feeling that the region and its people had been forgotten in the midst of grand narratives of progress and development. Acknowledging these voids and the anxieties underlying them allowed me to move from the superficial interactions and repetitive questions about what I was doing there to my interlocutors' more complex experiences. It was through acknowledging voids—unspoken anxieties and unfulfilled expectations—that I was able to build genuine rapport and gain deeper insights into the social dynamics at

play. The proverbial 'building of trust' became a realty only through first accepting mis*trusting as a critical intervention. In that sense, a mis*trusting anthropology also demands that researchers be sensitive to the potential harm that mis*trusting can cause, particularly for marginalised and vulnerable groups.

To apply mis*trusting without causing any harm, it is thus important to recall once again its disadvantages and the necessity to apply it mindfully to prevent statements and actions that could exacerbate feelings of vulnerability or exclusion. It necessitates a commitment to fostering open dialogue and promoting understanding and a recognition that mis*trusting can be a catalyst for both conflict and transformation. How can we, as researchers, navigate the ethical complexities of studying mis*trust and ensure that our work does not inadvertently contribute to further harm or exacerbate existing inequalities? In attempting to read mis*trusting as a critical intervention to anthropology as a methodology that guides research practices, it is necessary not only to tacitly accept uncertainties, but also to address and reflect upon them using plausible markers. Mis*trusting as a methodological approach also would invite researchers to question their assumptions, interpretations, and the information provided by interlocutors and encourage a critical self-reflection that acknowledges the potential for bias and the limitations of the research process, including a mindful acknowledgement of the power dynamics at play within our own interactions and our attempts to be transparent about the limits of our knowledge. Furthermore, a mis*trusting methodology requires an acceptance of uncertainty and an acknowledgement of the multiplicity of realities with which we engage in anthropology. It necessitates the acceptance of a multiplicity of realities with which anthropologists shall engage to identify respective 'truth' and 'misinformation.' Certainly, my understanding was repeatedly challenged and expanded by my interlocutors in the field.

How are we supposed to become aware of what we know and better understand the limits of our knowledge and understanding? How can we ensure that our research does not simply reinforce existing power structures or perpetuate harmful stereotypes? By embracing mis*trusting as a methodological principle, we can push the boundaries of anthropological inquiry and contribute to a more nuanced and critical understanding of the human condition. Such an understanding requires a shift towards a more engaged and collaborative approach to research. It means recognising that our interlocutors are agents who shape and interpret their own realities. More than once, my interlocutors corrected news articles that I had read or expanded them with additional information, even though they had not themselves read the original articles. More than once, I found myself in situations where I disagreed with my interlocutor's stance on a particular topic. To be able to continue to follow their arguments, I started to ask 'what if' questions, accepting their points of view and their ideas about how things might be

playing out. Mis*trusting here paves the way for what has more recently been elaborated as a speculative anthropology (Bryant and Knight 2019; Knight 2022; Salazar et al. 2020; Wolf-Meyer 2019)[21]. At the core of any approach calling for mis*trusting as a critical intervention in anthropology is a commitment to challenging dominant narratives and institutions. Mis*trusting can empower individuals to question authority, demand accountability, and create opportunities for dialogue and social change. This is particularly crucial in contexts marked by inequality and injustice, where it can serve as a catalyst for collective action and transformation. It can also be used to reinforce existing power structures or to sow division and conflict. All of this requires a careful analysis of the specific contexts in which mis*trusting emerges and the ways in which it is deployed by different actors. We must ask who is mis*trusting whom, and for what purposes. How does mis*trusting intersect with other forms of social power and inequality? My positionality as an anthropologist perceived as Austrian and as affiliated with more affluent contexts likely played a role in the initial mis*trust I encountered. This underscores how mis*trust can be intertwined with existing social hierarchies and perceptions of privilege, requiring anthropologists to be particularly attentive to power dynamics.

This thesis has demonstrated that mis*trusting is a dynamic and multifaceted process integral to navigating uncertainty, negotiating power, and driving social change. It defined mis*trusting as a lens through which we can understand the complexities of human experience and work towards more just and equitable societies. By examining mis*trusting in the context of a Bulgarian service area and infrastructure development, this research offered a nuanced understanding of how it operates in post-socialist societies and in societies where democracy had come. The thesis highlighted the role of mis*trusting in shaping social relations, challenging authority, and fostering resilience in the face of uncertainty and furthermore emphasised the importance of open and

[21] Speculative anthropology combines anthropological methods with imaginative speculation to explore alternative possibilities for human existence. It challenges traditional approaches by asking 'what if?' and envisioning how things could be different. By drawing inspiration from science fiction, fantasy, and other forms of imaginative storytelling, speculative anthropology creates thought experiments to explore potential futures, alternative presents, or even counterfactual pasts. This allows anthropologists to challenge assumptions, critique the present, explore possibilities, and expand the scope of anthropology. Radical openness, by embracing uncertainty and challenging established knowledge, is essential for a speculative anthropology for speculative anthropology that requires the willingness to think beyond the confines of observed reality and consider a wider range of potential futures. Mis*trusting as a critical intervention further contributes by encouraging questioning assumptions, challenging authority, and demanding accountability. This combination creates a powerful framework for exploring alternative possibilities and contributing to a more critical and engaged understanding of the human condition.

visible mis*trusting for fostering dialogue, facilitating mutual recognition, and ultimately contributing to the renewal and strengthening of democratic processes. It also encouraged a re-thinking of anthropological research that acknowledges the potentially harmful downsides of mistrusting and distrust. All these themes, particularly those of the closing chapter, have helped me identify several areas for further exploration, including a deeper examination of the nature of mis*trusting relationships, a clearer distinction between open and covert forms of critique, and the development of a comprehensive framework for understanding the interplay of societal forces under conditions of mutual mis*trusting. By examining mis*trusting as a critical intervention in anthropology, I have advocated a methodological approach that not only encourages researchers to question their assumptions, interpretations, and the information provided by interlocutors but invites them to identify situations that are relevant in terms of alliances to unveil mis*trusting and its motivations and outcomes.

In a world grappling with uncertainty and division, critically engaging with mis*trusting that does not question the validity of anthropological research itself but rather foregrounds the complexities that shape our understanding is key. Mis*trusting as a critical intervention to anthropology calls on anthropologists to question their assumptions, acknowledge their biases, and actively engage with the complexities and contradictions of mis*trusting in their fieldwork and analysis. It encourages to question interpretations and results. It acknowledged the limitations of knowledge and the potential for bias. It demands a new ethical approach to fieldwork, recognising the power dynamics inherent in researcher-interlocutor relationships, potentially even undermining the authority of anthropological knowledge while strengthening the engagement in the field and with our interlocutors.

By consciously embracing mis*trusting rather than trusting or mistrusting as a core principle, I argue that anthropologists can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of human experience and explore the complex interplay that takes place between the creative power and learning about the norms, rules and standards for the unveiling of preferences in a society and about its hegemonic aspirations. Transferring an ontology inspired by mis*trusting to anthropology would recommend accepting situations where interpretations may not only be debatable but debatable for a reason and with an addressee that is more than an institution or system but less than a friend. A respective transfer may deepen our understanding of the relationships between people and institutions, and how mis*trusting can contribute to social transformation. Open mis*trusting, particularly in situations where interpretations are debatable, can highlight the role of individuals and their mis*trusting within various contexts.

Remember how Natalia and Miki both discussed the progress of the highway? Remember the discomfort created when I approached the police checkpoint, first on my own and then with Radostin? Remember my annoyance of being asked exactly the same question over and over when I returned to the service area a year after finishing my research? I am convinced that mutual mis*trusting is the most memorable critical intervention in every anthropological experience.

Epilogue

Throughout this research, my identity as a Western European man and a scholar without family responsibilities, remained constant. This position afforded certain privileges—access, mobility, a perceived neutrality—but also marked me as an outsider. This status, with its inherent power imbalances and uncertainties, became a lens through which I experienced and analysed the dynamics of mis*trusting throughout my research. My interlocutors frequently questioned my lifestyle and opinions, challenging me to understand the nuances of their inquiries and the subtle cues embedded within their narratives. This cultural fluency developed gradually, shaped by countless conversations and shared moments. Kremi exemplified this dynamic: despite our friendly rapport, she maintained a guarded stance, never venturing criticisms of her workplace or co-workers when I was present. Her playful yet pointed question—"Who knows? Maybe you're a spy"—delivered with laughter during a group break, revealed a deeper suspicion. I initially dismissed it as harmless banter, but in hindsight it became a glimpse into her complex worldview. Only later did I realise how my close relationship with another chef, her rival, had fuelled her suspicion. Perhaps in this context of precarious job security my presence was perceived as a potential threat, further fuelling her mis*trust, that ultimately revealed the deep-seated anxieties permeating post-socialist social relations. Despite my repeated explanations of my research intentions, in her eyes I remained an enigma and potential infiltrator.

This difference in perspectives stemmed from our contrasting life experiences. While I attributed my lifestyle choices and opinions to the relative comfort and security of my background—a life largely free from the pressing need to mis*trust—many of my interlocutors faced a starkly different reality. Things were different also for Kremi and others who were forced to leave behind their loved ones and travel and could not feel part of a European elite. The collapse of state socialism and the subsequent wave of deregulation had shattered the social safety nets they once relied upon, leaving them adrift in a sea of uncertainty. This collapse created a void of security, forcing them to rely on mis*trusting to navigate this new uncertainty they encapsulated in the term 'after democracy (had come)'.

Our discussions began to revolve around those who had remained in the region, grappling with these changes, not those who had emigrated in search of new opportunities. My freedom of choice contrasted with the limited agency of many interlocutors, who relied on mis*trusting as a protective mechanism and a means of asserting agency in the face of vulnerability. This underscored the paradoxical nature of choice: while seemingly empowering, its absence can necessitate mis*trusting as a tool for navigating precarious circumstances. I held firm beliefs in the power of

elections, the rule of law, and the principles of a constitutional state. My interlocutors, however, could not share this unwavering faith. They had witnessed firsthand how elections could be manipulated, how the legal system could fail to protect the vulnerable, and how power could be wielded to reinforce existing inequalities. This deep-seated mis*trust shaped their actions and decisions. It was a lens through which they viewed the world, a way to navigate an environment fraught with uncertainty and potential danger. Putting it this way, I think it is obvious how they mis*trusted for their protection; perhaps a critical intervention I had either never needed to develop or have since unlearned.

However, mis*trusting was not passive; it fuelled acts of resistance and agency. It became a form of empowerment, allowing individuals to challenge dominant narratives and demand a more just society. This is evident in the cases of Natalia and Veli, whose mis*trusting led to political action and ultimately contributed to shifts in the political landscape. Natalia, disillusioned with the political status quo, channelled her mistrust into action, joining a party and campaigning for change. It was the first time in her life that she had gotten involved in campaign events, and she eventually ran for the city council. Veli, driven by a similar sentiment, participated in protests in Montana and Sofia to voice his dissent. In retrospect, both acts of mis*trusting were successful. The protests contributed to the government's resignation, and Natalia's party secured several seats. Both acts, born out of mis*trusting, ultimately proved successful, contributing to a shift in the political landscape.

Yet both remained wary of fully investing in these temporary alliances of mis*trusting, highlighting the complex and ever-evolving nature of this phenomenon. My research has shown how mis*trusting, while often viewed negatively, can be a powerful tool for navigating uncertainty, critiquing power structures, and fostering agency. It is a complex and dynamic process, shaped by individual experiences and social contexts, that deserves further exploration in anthropological research. Mis*trusting, I argue, is not merely a negative emotion; it is a ubiquitous and productive force. It is a catalyst for critical thinking, challenging assumptions, and questioning the status quo. It can spark social movements, drive political engagement, and inspire collective action towards a more just and equitable society. It is also a subjective experience, shaped by individual histories and social contexts, constantly being reproduced and renegotiated in the face of new challenges. It is a tool for navigating unequal power structures, a source of agency for those who feel marginalised and unheard.

This dissertation has only scratched the surface of its complexities. Much more remains to be said about mis*trusting and its profound impact on social movements, political

engagement, and the ongoing struggle for a more just and equitable society. While this dissertation has illuminated the multifaceted nature of mis*trusting, its complexities continue to beckon further exploration, particularly its role in shaping social movements, political engagement, and the ongoing pursuit of justice and equality.

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Figure 1: The author in the kitchen doing a crossword puzzle. © Anranter, 2020.

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