

*Đura Stevanović*

## **Fifteen years of the International Scientific Conference – Vlasina Encounters (1995–2009)**

An International Scientific Conference, Vlasina Encounters has been held in south-eastern Serbia on the shore of Vlasina in Vlasotince and on Vlasina Lake for the past fifteen years (1995–2009). This conference is dedicated to rural problems and agriculture. It is organised by the Institute for Rural Studies, Serbian Rural and Agricultural Sociology Association, Balkans Rural and Agricultural Sociology Association and the Institute for Agro-economy of the Faculty of Agriculture in Belgrade.

The existence of this unique international gathering dedicated to the above-mentioned problems is a living testimony that not only traditionally each year in Serbia researchers from European countries get together, but also that a scientific conference can be held in Vlasina villages rather than at the seaside, in some famous spa or renowned hotel.

The Vlasina Encounters represent an expert scientific dialogue about important questions at their very birth place and with the people where they actually live. The Encounters deal with issues concerning the village and agriculture and all the problems that they encapsulate in the light of scientific-theoretical research and the quest for practical solutions.

The main topics of the Vlasina Encounters held so far were: The Balkan Village in Changes and the Regional Rural Development (1995), Agricultural Household, Renewal and Development of the Village (1996), Youth and the Village (1997), Intelligence and the Village (1998), Local Village Development (1999), The Future of Rural Areas (2000), The Village in European Countries (2001), Women and the Village (2002), Old People in the Village (2003), Science and the Village (2004), Rural Development and Environmental Protection (2005), Reviving and Development of Village Communities in Marginal Areas (2006), Traditional and Modern in the Life and Work of People in the Village

(2007), *The Village in Transition* (2008) and *Rural Scientific Research – the Contribution of Vlasina Encounters* (2009).

Sociologists, rural sociologists, demographers, geographers, ethnologists, historians, psychologists, agrarian economists, economists, political scientists, jurists, town planners, members of the clergy participate in the work of the Encounters, and by using a multidisciplinary approach, they ensure the theoretical and practical level of discussions, by proposing scientific studies and animating significant social actors, also putting in motion relevant social factors.

Many eminent scientists from European countries have participated in the work of the Encounters. They are from Portugal, France, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Germany, Poland, Italy, the Russian Federation, Ukraine, Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, FYR of Macedonia, Croatia, Republic of Serbia – Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Slovenia...

It was a great pleasure that such eminent agrarian sociologists and rural sociologists participated in the work of the Encounters: Theodore Shanin from Great Britain, Andreas Bodenstedt from Germany, Andrzej Kaleta, Pawel Starosta and Maria Wieruszewska from Poland, Svetlana Pisarenko from Ukraine, Vladimir Ivanovich Staroverov and Petr Panfilovich Velikiy from the Russian Federation, Bruno Benvenuti from Italy, Veska Kojuharova and Stanka Dobрева from Bulgaria, Agnes Nemenyi from Romania, Svetozar Livada, Ruža First-Dilić and Antun Petak from Croatia, Risto Kartalov, Petre Georgievski and Jorde Jakimovski from FYR of Macedonia... It goes without saying that we cannot mention them all on account of their vast number.

Numerous scientists from abroad came to the Vlasina Encounters during the most unfavourable circumstances for Serbia and even in 1999 during the NATO aggression. That year the conference was held under a large tent.

The Vlasina Encounters are unique in Europe. As far as we know there is not a single scientific conference anywhere in Europe with such an interdisciplinary structure, continuity and conceptual consistence that deals with rural issues.

Representatives of faculties, institutes and government institutions, regional and local communities, firms and other organisations have participated in the work of these Encounters. As far as we know, there isn't a single faculty or institute in Serbia, or a single scientist dealing with rural issues who has not taken part in the Vlasina Encounters.

All of these conferences have fulfilled their task. Within the topics under discussion, the extent of research in the mentioned areas has been analysed,

which problems of social and scientific interest should be further researched and which measures should be taken by the government and local communities with the goal of renewing and developing rural areas.

Within the Encounters work seminars for young researchers, other participants and scientists have been organised where the opening addresses were given by most eminent scientists. A specific tone to the Encounters work from its very beginning was given each year by the students with their research papers (from the Faculty of Agriculture in Belgrade, the Teachers College in Vranje, Faculties of Geography in Belgrade and Novi Sad and the University of the National and World Economy in Sophia, Bulgaria). Some of the papers often surprised the audience with their originality.

On the Encounters the following acknowledgements were given: for the life's work in the area of contributing rural scientific research, for the life's work in the practical contributing to agriculture and rural development, for the rural artistic creations, as well as the local communities that have contributed to rural renewal and village development and to the numerous village household owners who with their results have contributed to the reputation enhancement of the country folk in general.

The participants of the XV Vlasina Encounters held at the beginning of September 2009 awarded the acknowledgement for life's work to Professor Dr. Đura Stevanović, the founder, key individual and organiser of all the Encounters held so far.

The charter laureates for 2009 are Professor Dr. Andrzej Kaleta from Poland for contributing to the development of rural sociology in Europe and Professor Dr. Veska Kojuharova from Bulgaria for contributing to the development of rural sociology in Bulgaria and the Balkans.

The spirit of work at the Vlasina Encounters that implies several locations where the participants stay, their high number each year and the necessity of publicizing the proceedings of the conference require substantial financial resources. Apart from the aid of the Vlasina area local municipalities, numerous organisations and individuals, voluntary work by a great number of associates, we should specially point out a continuing assistance of the Serbian Ministry for Science and Technology, and sometimes (depending on who the Minister was) from the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Resources... In such way the government within its possibilities shows assistance to dealing with the above mentioned topics in the explained manner.

The work result of the Encounters is the foundation of the Balkans Rural and Agricultural Sociology Association the seat of which is in Belgrade. The

goal of this Association is to boost scientific and expert activities within the area of rural and sociological research based on accepted international experience, with respect to the possibilities of the countries – members of the Association. Cooperation and exchange of information and experience within the areas of research, conference organising, publicising research results that relate to Balkan rural space represent some of this Association's activities.

Bearing in mind the fact that Balkan countries are confronted with identical or similar problems, and that scientific and expert research regarding areas of rural sociology nowadays point out to many similarities and accordance, searching for new positive solutions in maintaining and enhancing the quality of life in villages and agriculture, the Association is formed with a goal of a more successful, rational and effective research and a change of rural sociology within practice, as well as solving rural problems in this area that by their nature surpass the countries' boundaries, but have an important interest for the people of our countries.

In 2004 the Vlasina Rural Sociological School was founded during the Encounters.

An international gathering of people who deal with village problems from most different aspects depending on their specialty and area of expertise was formed at the Vlasina Encounters. When each gathering was held the participants made new friendships and came back enriched with new scientific explorations and knowledge. Connections between them grew, joined research ventures were agreed, as well as comparative research from different countries.

The working part of the Encounters is held in plenary sessions, sections, round tables and open lectures. Presentations of significant books regarding the area of village research, thematic exhibits, cultural programmes, and the stay in at least one village that was characteristic to the topic in question are also organised.

A special characteristic of this gathering is its venue – Vlasina Encounters are held in Vlasotince, and the villages of the Vlasina area (Boljare, Dejan, Kruševica, Konopnica, Stajkovce, Tegošnica, Gložane, and Vlasina Stojkovićevo). The participation of the local village population and their help each year for the organisation of the Encounters are remarkable.

The conference participants are guests of village households, where apart from traditional Serbian peasant hospitality they get to know the joys and troubles of country life.