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Diversity and Inequality in Rural Europe – The Bulgarian Case

Kozhuharova, V., Koleva, G. (eds.), 2011. *Diversity and Inequality in Rural Europe – The Bulgarian Case*, Sofia: Bulgaria Rusticana.

This new book on rural problems in Bulgaria compiled by Galina Koleva and edited by Veska Kozhuharova continues the tradition of the publishing house Bulgaria Rusticana to present theoretical and empirical results from scientific research on rural communities offering an actual and controversial empirical and theoretical perspective. The aim of this book is to broaden the understanding of diversities and inequalities in contemporary villages. The book is divided into 3 parts – inequalities, diversities and chances for diversification and prosperity. It spans 355 pages. This collection reveals the advantages and challenges in rural areas as well as the grave inequalities between them and urban regions. The complex problem of diversification, difference and inequalities in rural communities has united the efforts of 37 scholars (33 articles) from different research institutes and universities in Bulgaria, as well as of colleagues from foreign countries – USA, Poland, Serbia and Macedonia. Various perspectives on the issue are examined opening the way for achieving answers regarding the essence of diversification and the possible sources of inequality in rural regions. There are a few chapters (V. Kozhuharova, M. Shishmanova, J. Jakimovski) that are comparative and theoretical in nature, while the others are predominantly empirical, discussing studies based on fieldwork. The empirical data presented here is very rich; it comes from quantitative, qualitative, sociological, ethnographic, economic and statistical research, representing single regions, national scale data and comparative international cases. The empirical content significantly enriches the authors' theses and reveals the high activity in studying the rural environment. It is important to mention that the various authors discuss different issues applying

their specific empirical data thereby contributing to the heterogeneity of the book. In the majority of papers the analysis is based on a single village or several villages, as a result of which some significant differences remain unobserved.

A central problem of discussion in the book is the relation between rural development and EU membership – consequences, attitudes, identities and the quality of governance of the agrarian sector in Bulgaria and in comparison with the other Balkan and European countries. The authors propose different perspectives with regard to the issues they discuss. On the one hand, they discuss the challenges faced by farmers who confront a situation characterised by increased competition, the necessity to introduce new production methods and technologies, maintain sustainable development as well as improve their competence and knowledge (A. Wrzochalska, M. Dudek). On the other, they state that subsidizing through direct area payments contributes to agricultural development acceleration (M. Atanasova), which is an important condition for the growth of the economy and particularly tourism. There are perspectives for development of alternative forms of tourism (rural, ecological, cultural-acquaintance type, religious, extreme, hunting, equestrian, etc.) as a chance for sustainable rural development (S. Videv, Y. Ikova). In some settlements there are viable tourism facilities with a potential to act as an alternative to the ubiquitous mountain tourism. In other papers slight optimism is revealed with regard to environmental policies. Although the proportion of those who contribute to the preservation of nature and safeguarding its resources is still rather small, the implementation of EU ecological policy, its integration in all other policies, the transition toward low carbon economy and domestic activity, is based on the dissemination of a new environmental culture, including environment-friendly behaviour (A. Mantarova).

An issue that continues to be discussed by scientists is the contradictory and frequently changing legislative environment, which in conjunction with the low competence and lack of motivation for efficiency on the part of the state administration creates a situation of insecurity and instability in rural areas. Given the total lack of guarantees that there will be consistency in the state policy with respect to the general parameters and conditions for the functioning of agricultural units, people feel obliged to undertake measures preserving their farms as profitable and competitive units. The changes in legislation bring small farms, especially sole-owner farms, to the brink of bankruptcy: they are faced with the choice of going grey in order to survive or declaring bankruptcy. The grey economy is an undying element in the economic life of rural dwellers. Although people are highly critical towards

the grey economy, these practices are an inseparable part of their daily lives (E. Chengelova). Public opinion reflects people's concerns that the overt presence of the grey sector in the life of the country will have a highly negative impact on impeccable employers who, in certain situations, are forced to accept the rules of the game as played by the grey ones. An even stronger apprehension is that under these conditions ordinary farmers must choose between joining the game or falling into the low income area and a low standard of living.

A similar thesis is defended concerning the transparency lacking in land ownership and cultivation reforms. A clash of different powerful group interests is visible in the process of legislative changes regarding land and its use. This confuses landowners and demotivates them from making long-term decisions (G. Koleva). The empirical information supports the thesis that the actual practices in land use are, in many cases, not legitimate: they bypass the law and regulations. This is due both to the lack of adequate policies for integrating human and material resources, and to the network's relationships; and all this facilitates illegitimate access to resources only for the very few close to the governing elites.

A significant problem revealed from empirical research is the understanding of many Bulgarians that the old member states have the most advantageous conditions in EU agricultural support followed by the group of newly acceded countries of the first wave; the group provided with the least advantageous conditions is that of the countries of the second wave of newly acceded countries. This is not considered accidental; evidently the EU institutions still apply different standards for agricultural producers from the different parts of Europe (C. Zlatkov). There is a discussion on the topic and an opinion is expressed that most probably the differences within the EU with regard to agriculture are caused by certain features of EU requirements. These rules are built upon and refer to specific conditions for agricultural production and business and do not take into account the specific conditions in the new member-states; there is a great difference in the conditions of agricultural production in Germany and the Netherlands compared with those in the Balkans, including Bulgaria. Excessive regulations are significant, sometimes going to extremes. An example of this were the requirements regarding the shape of cucumbers, which, understandably, were revoked a couple of years ago.

As a consequence Bulgaria (S. Stamenova) is one of the most disadvantaged countries as regards support for agricultural producers. In spite of the fact

that during the last years support of rural dwellers has slightly risen, it is still lower than the average Producer Support Estimate rate in the European Union which is around 30%. Due to this, the author concludes that there is a need not only for direct Government participation but also that there must be devoted attention to agriculture while formulating and conducting not only EU policy as a whole but also Bulgaria's own agrarian policies. One should also keep in mind that since 1989 the amount of agricultural land in use has fallen by about 15% and farmed arable land has fallen by about 46% according to the Ministry of Agriculture (Ministry of Agriculture 2006). This is a key issue with regard to the crisis in Bulgarian agriculture and leading to additional inequality between incomes, with the group of people with lowest incomes impacted the most. The considerable fall of average salaries of those hired in agriculture and the salaries in other industries shows increasing inequality between village and town incomes. Some of the issues concerning the income inequality and wellbeing of the rural population are expressed in the lack of a middle class and the presence of the greatest, by size, social group below the poverty threshold. As future improvements the participation of the state and the support of the EU are considered to help agriculture's production restructuring, sustainability and creation of equal opportunities for its development.

Referring to these concerns several articles address the diversity of post-socialist realities in Bulgarian as well as Macedonian, Japanese and Serbian villages (M. Keliyan, I. Aritonović, S. Šljukić, M. Peshevski). In the majority of them a conclusion is revealed that rural variation existed under socialism, but the socialist state's emphasis on equality for all led to interventions that constrained rural difference. In this regard, it is appreciated that during the post-socialist period there is an increase in the alternative: the state has now withdrawn, even though it still plays a crucial role through EU subsidies and in facilitating liberal reforms through legal provisions. On the one hand, the authors in this part distinguish a number of key variables determining possible rural prosperity: regional location, proximity to urban centres, values, kinship relations, gender as well as social and political connections with towns and cities, property arrangements that have emerged out of the varied restitution and privatization processes, tourism, ecological richness, communication facilities, individual initiative and leadership (A. Mantarova, D. Doncheva, Hristova, T. Davidkov, M. Atanasova, S. Videv, Y. Ikova). On the other, the researchers reveal in their analyses the most severe problems in the villages, such as health care (B. Ivkov, B. Nikolova), the aging population, lack of education resources (V. Milenkova, S. Jakimovska), migration (M. Chopeva),

poverty (V. Mitzov, K. Braykov) and crime (B. Gyurov, Y. Ahmed). It is worth revealing in detail some of the authors' theses and conclusions.

A major issue discussed in detail is that each year many Bulgarian village schools are being closed down because they do not meet European standards as to the number of children per class and per school. This is where the unequal start in education begins for thousands of children who daily travel a considerable distance to school.

While healthcare in Bulgaria is generally critical, for people living in villages access to healthcare services creates a great difficulty. Theoretically, the rural population has relatively easy access to the system of primary medical help. In almost every village there is a general practitioner who travels from the closely situated town, seeing patients on certain days of the week. Despite this, the access to specialized medical care in rural centres is demanding due to high transport costs. This is a serious problem, especially for those with chronic diseases, the handicapped and for the elderly. Another basic problem ensues from the large number of people living in villages without health insurance.

The imbalanced policy of development in rural areas (especially discriminated are those rural regions distant from the urban and industrial areas) leads to a massive depopulation of villages, dominance of males in the rural population, and sometimes a real social and demographic depression. The aging of the village population has negative consequences for rural sustainability. Frequent mention is made that there are no young people in the villages. Indeed, villages are aging and becoming, to some extent, homes for pensioners, not only in Bulgaria. The articles from Serbia reveal similar problems (J. Jakimovski). Rural pensioners receive the lowest pensions and buy only those essentials they cannot produce themselves. Urbanization has its costs for villages, and the price of electricity, water, telephone and Internet services, in some cases, reach higher levels than in the city (M. Keliyan).

Ethnic studies (Nedelcheva T, A. Nakova) reveal that the existing interethnic distances in Bulgarian villages are nowadays largely social distances, not purely ethnic ones, and that the ethnic differences are not really decisive in determining interrelations between ethnic groups at everyday level in rural areas.

According to the authors, it is unemployment that creates the most significant hardship in villages. Moreover, villages host many urban unemployed people who manage to survive in the rural area, partly by being near their relatives in their old family homes and partly by temporary or

sporadic agricultural occupations. The unemployment level in rural areas is almost twice as high as that in towns and cities according to the data of the National Statistics Institute. The decreasing labour potential of rural communities is a problem with serious implications that are not limited to the economic sphere. The exodus of people leads to a decrease in the number of clients using health, education and communication services and thus – to more inefficiency in maintaining these services and often to their discontinuation. According to the thesis presented in the book, the problems of unemployment and depopulation could be mitigated by the existence of a highly developed bridging social capital in the form of readiness for collective action and mutual trust, which could function as a foundation for better solidarity, development of the local natural and human resources, and thus – for new economic opportunities for the local population (D. Pikard).

The third cluster of articles deals with newly emerging values and notions of ‘the farmer’ (M. Meurs) and challenges for diversification and sustainable development of rural areas in the global age. Another chapter looks primarily at changing perceptions and challenges for rural diversification (V. Kozhuharova), supported by a local case study, whereas the following chapters provide empirical examples of changing notions and hierarchies in Bulgarian villages and cities which have undergone clear and tangible processes of Europeanisation and globalization (M. Stoyanova, N. Malamova). Farmers, as a social group, are characterized by a settled way of life and immobility, due to their belonging to a territory, their close links with the land and the local community – traits that define them as a static social group with strong local bonds and an identity that is apparently detached from the supranational and globalization processes. In addition, farmers as agents and beneficiaries of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) of the EU are linked to European institutions and dependent on them; they cultivate a strong sensitivity and imagine Europe as a supranational economic and political entity, and this fact also influences the formation and development of their identity. This complex nature of the farmers’ group makes the latter a challenging object of study, even more so when done in a comparative European social and cultural context. This is revealed by M. Draganova and R. Jeleva in their paper on diversity and identity. They deal with the dimension of diversity in the construction of farmers’ identity and with the development of its multiplicity through the perceptions, experiences and activities in their everyday life, as related to their biographical stories. It also focuses on how different types of farmers manifest their multiple identities. Based on the analyses of the authors, the

latter conclude that farmers are not just ‘sensitized’ by Europe, but are also able to support Europe when necessary. This is not only due to subsidies, which are the most important basis for the farmers’ survival, but also because farmers have developed ‘skills’ for benefiting from the European Union.

The conclusion is that during the two Bulgarian transitions in the course of the twentieth century the village and agricultural sector endured economic growth, diversification and transition from patriarchy to industrialization and the market economy as well as developed major social inequalities. Despite the unfavourable conditions the village continues to survive (V. Kozhuharova, S. Sljukic).

The aim of the book to deepen knowledge and awareness concerning rural diversities and inequalities is fulfilled. The rich variety of case studies demonstrates the exposure of villages to diverse economic paths, global influences, trans-regional connectivity, political and ideological discourse. The diversity and social, environmental and economic disparities challenge the established notion of a unified village, and reveal the effects of transition combined with the global influence and of EU membership. The variety of viewpoints in this book regarding the specificities of rural life, provide completeness of presentation of the “Bulgarian case” in rural Europe in terms of its diversity and inequality. The book is informative and recommended to both researchers and students as well as government institutions and all those interested in the issues of inequality, diversity and prosperity of contemporary villages. It is in English and this increases its accessibility to a wider and international audience of scholars, researchers, students and policy makers interested in Bulgaria and the wider regions of Eastern and Southeastern Europe.

