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**XXIX – The Congress of the European Society
for Rural Sociology (Rennes, France).
Crises and the future of rural areas**

The XXIX European Society for Rural Sociology Congress was held from 2nd to 7th July 2023 in Rennes, France. The direct organiser of this event was L'Institut Agro Rennes-Angers and its theme was *crises and the future of rural areas*.

The Congress organisers posed the following series of questions to the participants, around which core working groups were formed:

- a. Will the “new normal”, shattered by the COVID-19 pandemic, the great migration crisis and the emergence of large-scale armed conflicts in Europe (war in Ukraine), no longer be shared by rural areas? Is it possible to redefine this “normality”, and which processes, phenomena, structures, organisations, and institutions shall be applied, and if so, how?
- b. Do resilience, solidarity, well-being and sustainability as ideas that organise political, economic and social activities concerning rural areas still have any utilitarian value in the post-COVID, migration and war reality? Should they be redefined and if so, to what extent? Or do we need completely new ideas to successfully adapt the countryside and agriculture vis-a-vis the new European contemporariness?

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- c. What is the place of rural areas during crises? Is this a prospect of opportunity or rather, of progressive marginalisation? Paradoxically, could “difficult times” be an opportunity for a “relaunch” for the countryside and agriculture?
- d. How is this crisis shaping the future of farming families and farming communities in general? Does it change their position on the political and economic map of the world?
- e. Will rural areas, and in particular agriculture, be a real beneficiary of the bold green political strategies currently being implemented?
- f. Has the experience of the global crisis changed public perceptions of rural areas? If so, what new elements in the collective consciousness describe contemporary rurality, agriculture and food-related consumer practices?

A broader perspective on these challenges was provided by key-note speakers Joanne Coates (re-imagining the rural), Erika Nagy (changing geographies of rurality in Eastern Europe), Nathaly Joly and Hugh Campbell (how to teach students during crises) and Jakub Stachowski (international migration and rural communities).

To find answers to these challenging questions, 32 working groups were formed, comprising over 300 speakers.

Notably, the following theoretical and research strands have become particularly popular:

- a. The rural future under negotiation, where researchers posed a series of questions on the place and importance of rural areas in society, the economy and politics. One of the major themes present was the question of the most anticipatory trajectories of rural and agricultural development, rethinking progress or even rejecting growth.
- b. Rural civil society during crises. Here, in turn, most of the papers concerned the various adaptation procedures of NGOs in the face of the crisis and the Third Sector’s response to the aforementioned redefinition of the “new normal”. There were themes in many of the research reports showing a “relaunch” of many rural organisations concerning their rapid, flexible and sustained response to the crisis, in juxtaposition to inefficient state structures.
- c. Green transition, due to not only political demands (EU Green Deal) but also social pressure (environmental movements) and the

pressure of changing perceptions of the function and importance of rural areas.

- d. Food studies, broadly comprehended as the study of consumer practices related to not only food and cuisine but also a reflection on the importance of cuisine in the processes of social integration and reintegration, (from) the construction of rural identity, or finally its role in the social perception of contemporary rural areas of Europe.
- e. Rural policies of Exile, where the global migration crisis was discussed from the perspective of its relevance to the future of rural areas. Topics of presentations included new forms of enclosure, rural symbols in the reconstruction of modern policies linked to migration issues, constructions of membership in rural space in populism and the urban-rural divide.

Eastern European rural areas and agriculture formed the subject of nearly 60 papers (20%). These included speeches on:

- The economic situation and social changes of agriculture and fisheries in Eastern Europe in the face of the crisis: rural circular business models in Latvia and Lithuania (G. Mikelis), ICT and rural development in Baltic states (B. Pluschke) and Eastern Germany (T. Mettenberger), deagrarianisation and representation processes in Poland (A. Bilewicz), sustainable farming in Hungary (I. Kovacs, G. Nemesz), co-operation-based farm enterprises in Hungary (K. Kovacs), agri-tourism development in Poland (G. Foryś), effects of land concentration in Latvia (A. Zobena), mental health of farmers in Slovenia (D. Knezevic), local entrepreneurs and landscape-making in Hungary (M. Kiss), rural entrepreneurs in Croatia (N. Bokan), rural living labs in Hungary (B. Megyesi) and the precarity of Hungarian farmers (K. Nemeth),
- Cultural and social changes in the Eastern European countryside as effects of crises and adaptation to crisis situations: ethnic minorities in Eastern Europe and the role of ethnicity in rural renewal (L. Laschewski, E. Veress), changing identities of rural Hungary (M. Gyorgyovich), the future of rural youth in Eastern Europe (K. Szabo) and particularly in Croatia (B. Šimac), spatial inequalities in Czechia (J. Bernard), Ukraine (A. Kuzyshyn) and Serbia (B. Šimac), processes of social construction of rural spaces

in Hungary (B. Megyesi, B. Csurgó) and Poland (W. Knapik), international migration and rural society in Hungary (M. Gyorgyovich) and in Poland (R. Śpiewak), anti-urbanism in Czechia (P. Pospech), work-life balance among rural families in Croatia (M. Cernic Istenic), rural women's situation in Croatia (V. Ivanovic) and Poland (S. Urbańska), resilience and the quality of life in rural Croatia (V. Ivanovic), peripherality of rural in Croatia (A. Tankovic), social isolation in rural Latvia (D. Bite), cultural co-creation in rural Hungary (A. Czeglédi) and Croatia (E. Basic), rurality, farming and public goods delivery in Eastern Germany (L. Laschewski) and Latvia (A. Zobena), generation change in Hungarian agriculture (N. Swain) and small-scale fisheries in Croatia (D. Cepic),

- Towards an Eastern European Green Deal: alternative food networks in Poland (R. Śpiewak, W. Goszczyński, K. Stępnik), crises in management of natural resources in rural Latvia (R. Felcis) and water resources and social conflicts in rural Romania (D. Kiss),
- Methodological challenges in the study of the Eastern European countryside: contextualising vulnerability for understanding negative impacts on rural communities in the Czech Republic (L. Zagata), future challenges of interdisciplinary research on rural areas (I. Kovacs) and methodological challenges in local rural research (E. Piszczek),
- Rural NGOs and rural crises: the present and future of LEADER approach in Eastern Germany (P. Raue), Croatia (M. Roglic), Romania (T. Capota) and Hungary (G. Horzsa), rural NGOs in troubled times – the cases from Eastern Germany (A. Knabe, T. Kleiner, M. Alisch) and Poland (W. Knieć, A. Sitek).

Accordingly, the largest number of papers concerned rural areas and agriculture in Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, Romania, (eastern) Germany and the Baltic countries (mainly Latvia and Estonia), as well as selected Balkan countries (Croatia, Slovenia and Serbia). Researchers dealing with the Slovak, Bulgarian, Bosnian-Herzegovinian, Montenegrin, Macedonian, Kosovar, Albanian, as well as Russian situations were virtually absent (understandable in the current situation) the only exception being Ukrainian villages.