

Changes and Characteristics of Bulgarian Rural Areas

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1. Introduction

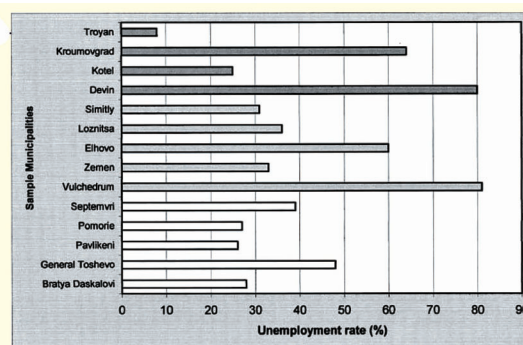
East European Countries have drastically changed due to the introduction of a market economy and in preparation for joining the EU. One of the most outstanding characteristics of these changes is the enlargement of regional disparity. Rural areas have been labeled as "losers"¹⁾. However, these rural areas are very diverse and their regional disparities have become even more pronounced²⁾. Above all, the contrast between rural areas near big cities and those far from them is prominent.

I would like to speak on the present situation, problems and prospects of Bulgarian rural areas. First of all, I am going to mention some characteristics of Bulgarian farms after privatization and rural problems. Then, I will speak about three different Bulgarian rural areas where we conducted field work in August of 2005.

2. Outline of Bulgarian Farms after Privatization and Rural Problems

In Bulgaria, privatization of agriculture started in 1991, and was almost completed by 2000. 5.7 million hectares of agricultural land were restituted to the former land owners.³⁾ Table 1 shows the number of holdings, agricultural area and average holdings size by holding types. Private farmers occupy 97.3 % of all holdings. They cultivate 30.2 % of all agricultural area. On the other hand, holdings by legal persons occupy 1.0 % of all holdings, and they cultivate 69.8 % of all agricultural

Figure 1. Unemployment in sample municipalities in Bulgaria (2003)



Source : The World Bank 2004. Bulgaria: Survey on rural development needs.

area. We discovered that after privatization a lot of private farmers started farming, however, their farm size was quite small: their average farm size is 1.3 ha.

Figure 1 shows the ratio of unemployment in 14 Bulgarian rural municipalities which was presented by the World Bank in 2002. Generally, the ratio of unemployment is quite high, and there is a great difference between municipalities. The average ratio of unemployment of the 14 municipalities was 39.0%. The average ratio of unemployment in the whole of Bulgaria in 2002 was 16.3%. We can easily find a higher ratio of unemployment in rural Bulgaria.

The World Bank reported on the major rural problems perceived by the rural population (Figure 2). The greatest problems are "Employment, source of income" 62.2 %, followed by "Bad conditions of the road network" 29.5 %, then, "High cost of health services" 25.5 %, "Marketing of agricultural products" 22.5 %, "Access to credit" 20.8 % and so on.

The following statement of the chief of Meshiza, municipality of Pernik, illustrates the present rural situation of Bulgaria clearly:

"Agriculture used to be the largest economic sector. It is a very small employer today. In the village (1,100 inhabitants), there is a co-operative that actually is in bad condition, and only 2 commercial farmers. People survive thanks to temporary employment and subsistence farming. There are possibilities to increase commercial agriculture but people fear to take such a big risk given the unstable market environment. If I had to describe the households in our village, I would say the largest group-more than half of the people and almost 100 % of the young under 30 years old- are unemployed. Others are people with unstable employment and retired (Statement of the chief of Meshiza, Pernik)."

3. Changes and Characteristics in Bulgarian Rural Areas

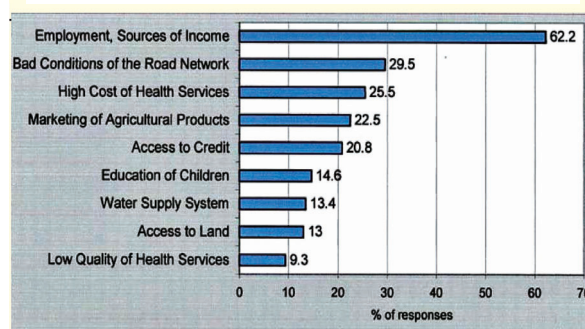
I would like to report three different Bulgarian villages, Lozen, Brestvitsa and Tran (Figure 3). Lozen has a population of 5,751 (2001) and is located 7 km southeast of Sofia (population: 1.13 Million, 2003)(Photo 1). Brestvitsa has a population of 3,939 (2001) and is 12 km southeast of Plovdiv (.population: 340 thousand, 2003). Tran has a population of 5,416 (2004) and is located in the western border region.

3-1. Lozen (Figure 4)

Lozen has experienced a rapid change in suburbanization. It has increased the functions of a satellite town. In the Socialist Era, Lozen belonged to an agricultural production cooperative. It had about 2,500 ha of agricultural area. It consisted of 300 workers. The number of workers in this agricultural cooperative occupied about 60 % of all workers in Lozen.

There were many commuters to Sofia. It took only 25 minutes from Lozen to Sofia by bus. It was easy for the inhabitants to commute there. Further, Lozen played an important

Figure 2. Major problems perceived by the rural population (2003)



Source: The World Bank 2004. Bulgaria: Survey on rural development needs.

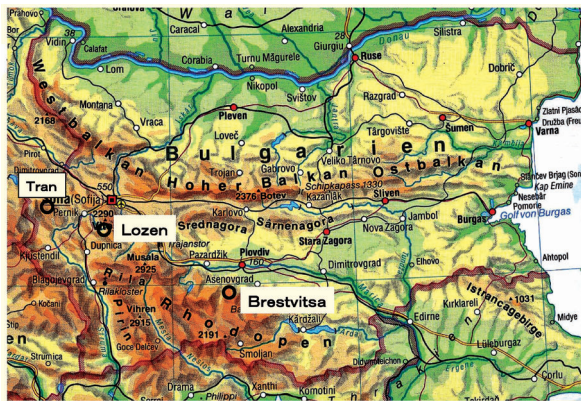


Figure 3. Study area



Photo 1. Sofia (8. 2005)

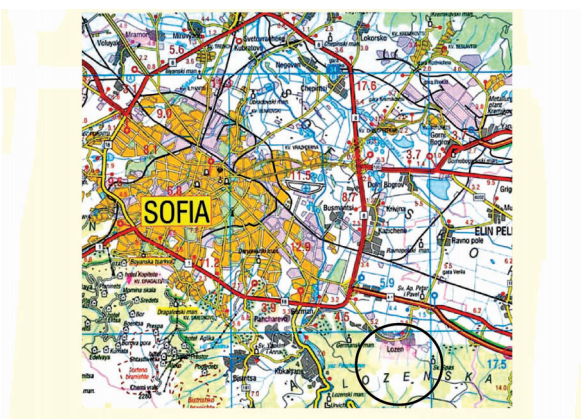


Figure 4. Lozen



Photo 2. A commuter bus in Lozen (8. 2005)



Photo 3. New residential houses in Lozen (8. 2005)



Photo 4. Fallow land in Lozen (8. 2005)

role as a location for second houses for the inhabitants of Sofia.

After 1991, a lot of private farmers were born; almost all of them are subsistence farmers. There are a few commercial farmers. There appeared various factories and offices such as meat processing, furniture production, car repair, retail and service shops, an animal hospital and storage facilities. Both residential houses and second houses have increased. Further, commuters to Sofia have also increased.

The population of Lozen has changed from 5,421 in 1992 to 5,751 in 2001. The population increased 6.1 % in these 9 years. Land use in Lozen has also been changed. While urban functions such as residential houses, factories, offices and second houses became prominent, agricultural functions weakened, which was demonstrated by an increase in fallow land. The

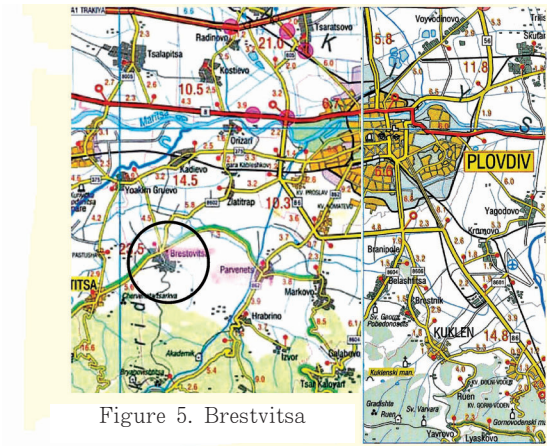


Figure 5. Brestvitsa



Photo 5. Brestvitsa and vineyard (8.2005)



Photo 6. Agricultural cooperative in Brestvitsa (8. 2005)



Photo 7. Winery in Brestvitsa (8. 2005)



Photo 8. Mayor of Brestvitsa (8. 2005)

unemployment rate of Municipality Pancharevo, in which Lozen is included, is 3.0 % in 2005 (Photo 2, 3, 4)

3-2. Brestvitsa (Figure 5)

Rural development of Brestvitsa is characterised by agricultural production and rural tourism. In the Socialist Era, the main industry of Brestvitsa was agriculture. There used to be an agricultural production cooperative. It had 1,600 ha of agricultural area and 850 workers. Its main products were grapes, vegetables, apples and cattle. They also had a state winery.

After 1991, it was reorganized into a new agricultural cooperative. The agricultural area decreased to 900 ha, and the number of workers also decreased to 150. They grow grapes, wheat and vegetables. They are also engaged in the cultivation

of other holdings by contract. The affairs of the cooperative are in poor shape. The state winery was privatized into a modern winery with the financial support of the EU (SAPARD). A lot of private farmers appeared, but almost all of them are subsistence farmers. A few of them are farmers with stable financial management. Brestvitsa is also trying to develop rural tourism connected with wine production. The unemployment rate of Brstvitsa is % in 2004 (Photo 5, 6, 7, 8)

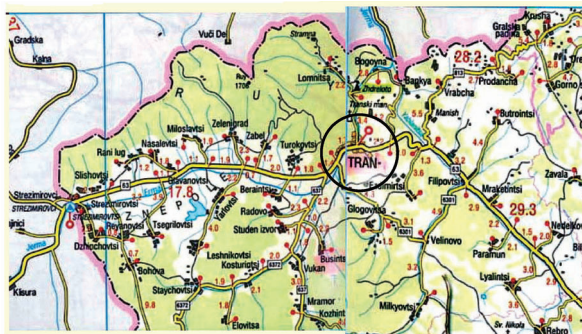


Figure 6. Tran

3-3. Tran (Figure 6)

Tran is a rural area where agriculture has greatly declined, and depopulation has been prominent. It is a mountainous area 700 meters above sea level.

In the Socialist Era, there used to be four agricultural production cooperatives, where they always kept 1,000 cattle and 20,000 sheep. They also grew hops and cereals such as barley and wheat. There were several state

factories such as machine-, plastic-, building materials production and so on. There were also some retail and service shops. In 1985, those who were engaged in agriculture occupied 2/3 of all workers in Tran.

After the privatization of 1991, the four agricultural production cooperatives were reorganized into new agricultural cooperatives. A lot of private farmers were born. However, it is difficult to find any holdings in good financial condition in either type of holding.

On the other hand, almost all the state factories such as machine production and plastic production disappeared. New factories such as lumber production and drain production opened their businesses; however, they have had difficulties in maintaining their business.

Therefore, employment opportunities for the inhabitants of Tran have largely decreased. The population of Tran has also decreased. It decreased from 7,922 in 1985 to 5,416 in 2004. It means that there is only 2/3 of the population of 1985. In Tran, population decrease and degeneration of community functioning is progressing simultaneously. Regarding land use, the area of fallow land has rapidly spread. The unemployment rate of municipality Tran is 19.0 % in 2005.

Tran has received financial support from the EU, the UN and the Bulgarian government. For example, in a joint project of the UN and Bulgarian government, roads, bridges, hotels and restaurants along the River Erma have been built and churches or museums also have been reconstructed so that the region can develop its tourism (Photo 9, 10, 11, 12, 13).

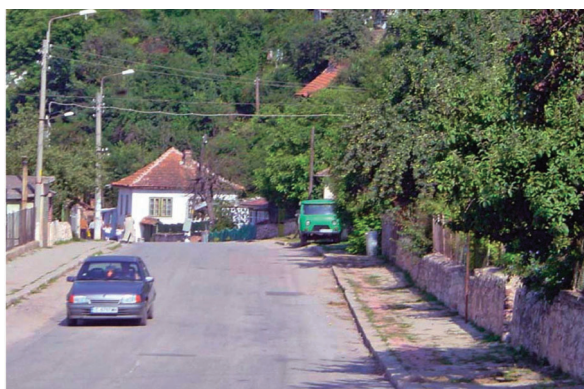


Photo 9. Landscape of Tran (8. 2005)



Photo 10 Landscape of Tran (8. 2005)

4. Conclusion

I have briefly explained the change in rural areas in Bulgaria using three examples.



Photo 11. Fallow land in Tran (8. 2005)



Photo 13. A new hotel under construction (8. 2005)

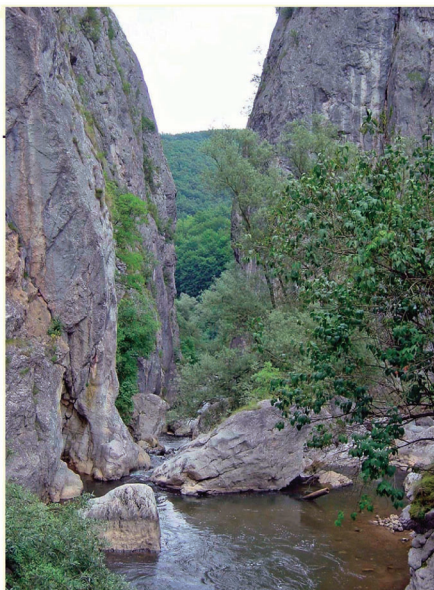


Photo 12. Erma R. and its surround (8. 2005)

Bulgarian rural areas have serious problems. To deal with them, it becomes very important to carry out the following measures.

1) Develop counter Measures for a huge number of private farmers with small farms. Most of them are subsistence farmers. They

can live neither by agriculture nor by other industries. Therefore, various employment opportunities other than agriculture should be created. One possibility is rural tourism.

2) Develop measures for agricultural holdings with stable financial management, for example, enlargement of farm size and rationalization of management.

We found a wide variety and diversity of rural areas and of rural problems. Therefore, it becomes quite important to carry out rural development programs specific to each area. Decentralization and institutional reformation to encourage the initiative of local governments will become more and more important.

Notes

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