
IMAGINED “RURAL IDYL” – NEW RESOURCE FOR ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN RURAL AREAS

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Abstract

The article aims to demonstrate how the Pan-European tendencies for the post-productive transition in rural areas and multifunctionality in agriculture are implemented in Bulgaria. The analysis examines the following issues: how the “rural” is used as a resource for entrepreneurship through the variety of conceptions and meanings, ascribed by different actors and what activities they undertake to transform these meanings into resources for entrepreneurship. The study shows that establishment of the image of the “rural idyll” creates a basis for development of activities such as exploiting in a new way and consuming the „rural“. It argues that such activities demonstrate possible ways for post-productive transition in rural areas in Bulgaria but the transition is still in progress.

Keywords: *post-productivism; multifunctionality in agriculture, imagining, exploiting and consuming the rural;*

For several decades rural areas in Bulgaria have faced a number of challenges such as recession, risk of depopulation, ageing, etc. Along with these processes, we observe an interest in the countryside as a place for „authentic life“, which is „better“ and „healthier“. In search for this better life, some people living in cities and/or abroad (im)migrate to rural areas looking to develop initiatives and businesses based on sustainable use of natural resources. These tendencies also coincide with a renewed interest in the values of the countryside which generated back-to-land movements (Brunori, Bartolini 2016: 195). In recent years, to the notion of rural has been added new meanings and now it is seen as a source of diverse resources and goods. The concept of post-productivism allows us to “look at rural areas in a “new way” by trying to explain and theorize changes and trends in contemporary agriculture, where the focus on agricultural production gradually shifted towards demands for amenities, ecosystem services and preservation of cultural landscapes“ (Almstedt 2013: 8).

With the declining importance of agriculture in economy (Galani-Moutafi 2013; Storey 2006) rural communities are looking for ways to deal with the situation. They try to adapt to “post-productive” transition through the ‘post-productive’ vision, associated with the exploitation of new economic opportunities, their rationalities and the strategies they implement” (Galani-Moutafi 2013: 103) and focus on “re-package the countryside in different ways”, regarding rural areas in “places of consumption rather than production” and promoting themselves through the „marketing“ of local uniqueness” (Storey 2006). Similar processes evolve in Bulgaria and various entrepreneurs start to see and use the resources provided by rural areas in a new way and their role and importance are reconsidered. They have become a source of food again, which is now with extra value – it is “clean”, “authentic”, “traditional”, “craft”, “local”, “fair”, “eco-friendly”. The countryside provides opportunity for „recapturing of the rural and the local” (Galani-Moutafi 2013:104) through rural tourism and ecotourism and the ongoing process of (re)traditionalization (Luleva 2020).

Some processes, part of post-productive transition in rural areas, are examined in my previous research¹ within the project “Transformations of Local Agricultural Practices under Conditions of Europeanisation and Globalisation”, as well as my colleagues’ work on the topic. Ivanka Petrova points out that local history, natural landmarks, memory, traditions, elevated to the status of “heritage”, are increasingly beginning to be instrumentalized. They are rediscovered, loaded with new meanings, enriched and have become important resources and part of the main capital of tourism, along with other areas in production, trade and services (Petrova 2018: 224). Petar Petrov notes similar tendencies – “growing global interest in experiencing and consuming “local”, “traditional” and “authentic” creates profitable production, where producers cleverly imbue their infrastructure, technologies and products with past [...], turning them into cultural heritage and identity-makers” (Petrov 2018: 14). Vihra Barova considers the production and consumption of dairy products and the emergence of festivals dedicated to particular foods as part of the general tendency of transition from farming to tourism (Barova 2018: 199 – 223; Barova 2018: 304 – 318).

The main aim of this article is to demonstrate how the Pan-European tendencies are implemented in Bulgaria and to analyze how the “rural” is used as a resource for entrepreneurship through the diverse attitudes, ideas and meanings given to it by various participants (local and newcomers) and what activities and practices they undertake to turn these meanings and ideas into resources for entrepreneurship.² I choose to analyze two tendencies of new functions of rural space that demonstrate in practice possible ways for post-productive transition in rural areas in Bulgaria.

¹ See Stancheva 2018a (in Bulgarian).

² The study is a result of the project “The Rural as a Resource for Entrepreneurship. New Perspectives in the European Context”, National Program “Young Scientists and Postdoctoral Candidates”, Ministry of Education and Science, 2021.

They signify the new attitude toward the countryside not only as a place for production, but as a place that adds extra value to agricultural products and as a place of heritage manufacturing for the consumption of tourism. The study poses the following main questions: how the “rural” is experienced; what are the roles of different social actors; how local heritage (natural and cultural) and agricultural products are interpreted as resources for entrepreneurship and presentation of the countryside? The analysis is based on fieldwork data collected over a long period (2013-2018), with additional materials from 2020–2021. 23 entrepreneurs engaged in agriculture and 13 owners of 10 guest houses are interviewed. It is important to be noted that respondents are part of networks which express certain views and “green values” (Pepper 1996) such as minimal impact on nature, sustainable use of natural resources, cooperation, sustainable local development. The producers interviewed are part of the For Clean Food³ movement and sell their products on farmers’ markets in three major cities – Sofia, Plovdiv and Varna. Other producers are part of the Bulgarian-Swiss project For the Balkan and the People network, and carry out their production in NATURA 2000 zones and also sell their products on a farmers’ market in the Bulgarian capital. Entrepreneurs involved in rural tourism are also part of networks that promote the above-mentioned values and ideas. These are guest houses with a Green Lodge certificate from the Bulgarian Association for Alternative Tourism⁴, others are part of the Bulgarian-Dutch project New Thracian Gold⁵ network, and of the Devetaki plateau⁶ association. The research is not focused on a specific settlement or region in Bulgaria, but follows the activities and initiatives of entrepreneurs in different areas. The names of the respondents are changed, and their words and thoughts are provided in italics.

Michael Woods thinks that reference to the “post-productivist transition” is useful in indicating a change in direction of government policy, but its wider application in rural studies and its transmutation into a concept has been controversial. First, because such concept was theoretically weak and poorly defined. Second, although the loose and general usage of the term suggested a significant transformation of agricultural practice away from productivist ideals, empirical studies presented limited evidence to support this assertion. Therefore rural geographers have started to search for alternative ways of conceptualizing change in the rural economy, with attention particularly focusing on the increasingly multi-functional nature of the contemporary countryside. The concept of ‘multifunctionality’ originates in attempts by rural geographers and rural sociologists to move beyond the apparent deadlock of the dichotomy of ‘productivist’ and ‘post-productivist’ agriculture (Woods 2011:

³ For more detailed information for the movement, see Stancheva 2018b.

⁴ There are nine Green Lodge certified guest houses in the country, see more details on <https://www.baabg.org/en/%D0%B7%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8-%D0%BA%D1%8A%D1%89%D0%B8/2/>

⁵ For more detailed information, see the official website of the project <https://newthraciangold.eu/>

⁶ NGO that is engaged in the revitalization, development and promotion the Devetaki Plateau area since 2008. For more details, see <https://www.devetakiplateau.org/sdruzhenie.html>.

79-80). According to Monica Gorman the reforms of the Common Agricultural Policy agreed by EU in 2003 have serious implications for farm families all over Europe and for strengthen the shift in European model of agricultural development towards sustainability and multifunctionality. A team of authors from the Agricultural University notes that the Bulgarian government does not apply the concept of multifunctional agriculture in the National Rural Development Plan, but uses terms such as “economic diversification”, “rural development” or “alternative activities”. This type of activities can be financed under the Rural Development Program - criterion 311 “Diversification into non-agricultural activities” (Dirimanova et al. 2014: 331). Gorman points out three type activities which describe multifunctionality using a classification of “broadening”, “deepening” and “regrounding”. Important for the present study are two of them – “broadening” and “deepening”. By “deepening”, farm households add extra value to their produce within the agrifood supply chain such as region-specific, organic and high quality products, on-farm processing or short producer-consumer chains. By “broadening”, there is emphasis on expanding the products of agriculture in response to new markets such as environmental goods and services, tourism and leisure products, energy, and diversity of non-food products and services (Gorman 2006: 27, 32–33). These types of activities are linked with Michael Wood’s approach of exploring the countryside through two aspects of engagement with the rural space and life - exploitation and consumption of the “rural”, influenced by the above-mentioned tendencies.

It is important to note that both in post-productivism and multifunctionality, environmental protection and recognition of nature as valuable in itself have an essential place. Therefore, the focus of the study is on entrepreneurs, part of networks which declare and promote sustainable use of natural resources and minimal negative impact on nature. Joe Vergunst talks about renewed values for rural environments, and more specifically of search for balance by recognizing that economic productivity (in whatever form) and nature conservation can exist together (Vergunst 2016: 292). Woods points out that frame of multifunctionality “accommodates many different pathways that farmers are following”. Such alternative models of agriculture “involve a very different representation of the rural, for example rural space is not considering just like acting solely as a site for accumulation through resource exploitation, but understood as a space constituted by interlocking social, cultural, environmental and economic elements in which the responsible exploitation of natural resources is a key mediating practice” (Woods 2011: 87).

Imagining the rural

The imagining of the rural plays an essential role in defining and undertaking specific activities related to the implementation of the ideas of exploitation and consumption of that rural. In his analysis, Woods defines rural as an elusive concept, a

term that does not describe a hard, fast and indisputable material object, but rather refers to a loose set of ideas and associations that have developed over time and which are debated and contested. According to him rural sociologist Marc Mormont “put it best in referring to the “rural” as a “category of thought”, a description that emphasizes that the “rural” is first imagined, then represented, then takes on material form as places, landscapes and ways of life are shaped to conform to the expectations that the idea of the “rural” embodied. Experiences of these “rural” places and lifestyles are fed back into the collective imagination, refining and modifying the idea and thus contributing to a dynamic process through which the “rural” is produced and reproduced” (Woods 2011: 16).

Woods points out that one of the most powerful and enduring ideas about the rural is that of the “rural idyll”. This imagines the rural to be a place of peace, tranquility and simple virtue, contrasted with the bustle and brashness of the city. Representations of the rural idyll were particularly popularized during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as Europe and North America became increasingly urbanized and industrialized. The rural idyll fed on discourses of anti-urbanism, agrarianism and nature that were used to differentiate between the urban present and a romanticized rural past, particularly by nostalgic urban residents. Thus Woods concludes that the “rural idyll” has commonly been an idea imposed on rural areas and communities from the outside (Woods 2011: 21-22). Currently in Bulgaria we observe similar perceptions of the rural, which are one of the reasons why migration to the countryside increase. Sociologist Tihomir Mitev notes that in the second decade of XXI century in Bulgaria there is a gradual equalization of the rates of internal migration from rural to urban and from urban to rural areas, and in recent years the latter is steadily ahead of the former reaching its peak in 2015, when the difference between the two doubled. He adds that the age of migrants, who move to rural areas is declining and the proportion of migrants in active age, with higher education and (entrepreneurial) ideas is increasing, which opens opportunities for development and transformation of the countryside (Mitev 2018: 171).

Current perceptions about the countryside fit into the idea of the “rural idyll”. In my respondents’ conceptions it is a place that provides quietness, tranquility, closeness to nature, coziness, warmth. The countryside also embodies certain notions of a lifestyle that is supposedly “authentic”, “good”, “healthier”, “in harmony with nature”, “sustainable”. The rural evokes warm feelings that take us back to the *brightest period of our lives* - childhood and the time spent in the *countryside with grandmother*⁷. Rural life is a dream come-true and it is equivalent to living in nature – *it was my childhood dream to live in the countryside, or in the mountains in general, somewhere in nature*⁸. It is also defined as a *return to the roots*⁹. What

⁷ L. D., female, 45, Sofia, interviewed in 2013, IEFEM-AEIM 990-III.

⁸ D. I., male, about 40 years old, Gornoslav village, Plovdiv region, interviewed in 2018, personal archive.

⁹ Ibid.

is more, the rural symbolizes dreaming for a past way of living. Indicative are the words of one of my respondents, who shares her belief that *if [her] grandmother was able to live this way, survive and create offspring, why can't [they], too?*¹⁰ According to other respondent rural areas and their inhabitants preserve specific traditional knowledge and practices, which are alive and can still be passed on to young people, such as being able to *make stone houses, nail horses, make herb products*¹¹. Today's increasing interest to the pre-industrial technologies is described by another respondent as *simple things from the time of our grandparents that provide a slightly healthier lifestyle. Something we are now beginning to aim for.*¹² The rural is also a space where you can “be yourself” and be free. One of the respondents, who is local told me, albeit with some hesitation, that he had decided to stay in the countryside precisely because of *freedom, freedom Sancho, maybe that's it*¹³. Such living gives people the opportunity to do what they enjoy the most and *to be their own boss*¹⁴. Other respondents, a middle-aged married couple who decided to move from the city to the countryside to develop rural tourism, believe that the quality of life in the countryside is different - *it is absolutely different – better*¹⁵.

Large part of the respondents decided to make a change in their lifestyle because of the belief that the production of clean food¹⁶ by themselves and its consumption lead to a healthier and better life. Some of them can be defined as “back-to-the-land” migrants who have chosen to adopt farming or horticultural practices as a significant lifestyle component and to promote a positive, pro-rural ideal (Wilbur 2013: 149). Migrants express romantic attitude towards the rural and the rural way of living, which at the same time is used by locals (with the encouragement and financial support of NGOs) and by themselves to create commodities and services that attract food consumers and tourists. The outside vision is crucial for perceiving the potential resources and goods that the rural areas provide. The owner of a guest house, who is not local, believes that things are connected and if the locals do not see the specific village as a tourist destination, *there is no way for the guest houses to profit*. Such *mindset* is missing and the locals *are so used to the climate, which is unique, with the energy charge it has, and with the view, which is also unique that she thinks none of these features impress them*¹⁷. Another owner of a guest house also said that representatives of a non-governmental organization appreciated

¹⁰ N.D., female, 36, Lipnitsa village, Botevgrad region, interviewed in 2015, IEFEM-AEIM 989-III.

¹¹ I. K., male, 33, Jelen village, Svoge, interviewed in 2014, IEFEM-AEIM 991-III.

¹² P. P., male, 59, Goren Krupets area, Belogradchik, interviewed in 2013, personal archive.

¹³ M. T., male, 40, Plevun village, Ivaylovgrad region, interviewed in 2013, IEFEM-AEIM 992-III.

¹⁴ R. P., female, 37, Sofia, interviewed in 2015, IEFEM-AEIM 991-III.

¹⁵ T. M., female, about 50 years old, Gorsko Slivovo village, Lovech region, interviewed in 2020, personal archive.

¹⁶ General definition about food, produced using environmentally friendly techniques without the use of artificial preparations and fertilizers.

¹⁷ L. K., female, about 50 years old, Dobarsko village, Razlog region, interviewed in 2018, personal archive.

a local product that the people of the village *did not acknowledge*. She shares more thoughts about this matter, believing that we are *truly foolish* because *we do not value what we have*¹⁸. Another owner of a hotel complex believes that *people outside have eyes to see things*¹⁹ that locals do not.

Exploiting the rural in a new way

Michael Woods points out that throughout history the primary function of rural space has consistently been understood as the supply of food and natural resources, including minerals, fuel and building materials. He notes that multifunctionality is not in this respect as radical as its proponents might imply. According to Woods multifunctional agricultural regimes are still centered on the exploitation of the land through farming, and are still located within a capitalist paradigm in requiring the commoditization of agricultural goods and benefits. Despite these characteristics the new regimes refer also to the multiple outcomes of agriculture, which include not only the production of food and other resources, but also social and environmental benefits (Woods 2011: 50; 80-81).

Global environmental ideas and new tendencies for exploiting the rural are brought to countryside by certain people who migrate from the city to these areas in search for good life. But it is important to note that complete concepts of sustainable development of rural areas and establishment of livelihoods that preserve the natural resources are introduced and implemented mostly by various NGOs and the specific projects, mentioned above. My analysis is based on observations and interviews with representatives of some of these organizations and producers, part of networks such as “For Clean Food” movement with its two formations – food cooperative and farmers’ markets in Sofia as well as farmers’ markets in Plovdiv and Varna – and “For the Balkan and the People” project and its farmers’ market in the Bulgarian capital. In this section I summarize concepts, implemented and popularized by NGOs and projects, and I explore how they are perceived and what tendencies unfold among two types of actors – locals and newcomers.

The rural areas are still a source of food but now it has extra value and is “packaged” in a new way - it is presented as “clean”, “authentic”, “local”, “natural”, “healthy”, “traditional”, “craft”, “homemade”, “certified organic“. All these definitions can be seen listed on a farm yogurt label: “Handmade products produced with much love from rare Bulgarian breeds of animals. Feel the authentic taste of a millennial tradition. Meet the herbs and the purity of Plana Mountain! Healthy natural products”.

This extra value put on the label shows that the products stand for the idea of so-

¹⁸ D. L., female, about 50 years old, Gorno Draglishte village, Razlog region, interviewed in 2018, personal archive.

¹⁹ B. M., male, 53, Smilyan village, Smolyan region, interviewed in 2013, IEFEM-AEIM 990-III.

cial and ecological sustainability. Sales are carried out within the frame of alternative food networks, which aim to “reconnect” (Kneafsey et al. 2008) producers with their market, consumers with product-process-place and finally people with nature (Kneafsey et al. 2008: 31-33). These are the so-called short food supply chains - food cooperatives, farmers’ markets, online platforms selling clean food, direct sales from the farm or online shopping. Producers are mostly small family farms that grow and produce food “with care” for nature and the consumers. Farmers receive fair payment for their work, evading the “speculative network of resellers”²⁰ by setting their own prices. In this way, Bulgarian production and small rural producers, who try to build a sustainable livelihood, are supported. The products are sold “directly from producers”²¹ and the reconnection with the product is carried out by personal communication between consumers and producers. New relations of trust are established – community of producers and consumers and yet another one of producers alone, with the latter emphasizing the desire for cooperation rather than competition. Producers guarantee the quality of their products not only with organic certification but also personally by standing up *with their face and conscience*²².

Farmers claim they use environmentally friendly practices as farming methods. For example, natural and free-range grazing animals; construction of special portable bottomless cages for birds, called chicken tractor which are moved to fresh pastures daily; the use of smaller chicken tractors in private gardens; lack of antibiotic treatment. They apply soil fertility care through composted organic manure, crop rotation, no pesticides, herbicides; fertilizers are being used for plant protection and cultivation, also innovative methods such as permaculture, allopathy, biodynamic agriculture, etc. are combined.

Food products are used to create local distinctiveness as part of a broader strategy for the promotion of the place (Storey 2006). Illustrative examples are the products which name includes the settlement they are produced in – Smilyan beans, Raduil beans, Samokov potatoes, Kurtovska kapiya²³, apple kurtovka, etc. Thus, the growing number of culinary festivals becomes part of the strategy for a place promotion. Elitsa Stoilova points out that culinary festivals are part of the experience economy as one of the ways not only to present but also to consume culture (Stoilova 2019: 246). She examines a specific festival, summarizing that it is a result of a local identity, but it is also a resource in itself. According to her, through it locals recognize common traditions by ascribing them uniqueness and define them as a tradition specific only to the region (Stoilova 2019: 253).

My many years of observations of producers coming to rural areas show that they possess awareness about global environmental ideas, and their words and prac-

²⁰ For more details, see <https://www.hrangoop.com/hrangoop/sofia/>.

²¹ Slogan at one of the capital’s farmers’ markets. In most cases, the food is sold through direct sales - personally by the producer on farmers’ markets and by the farm - on site or through online shopping. (това не знам дали се разбира какво имам предвид)

²² P. S., female, about 45 years old, Zdravets village, Varna region, interviewed in 2018, personal archive.

²³ Pepper variety from Kurtovo Konare village.

tices demonstrate the establishment of long-lasting interests in environmental care. Many of them decided to change their lifestyle believing that by producing clean food by themselves and consuming it, they lead healthier and better life. The initial motive for taking action to grow and produce food is health problems and awareness of the relationship between good health and clean food. A family couple producers says that *suffering*, due to a health problem, was their *engine*²⁴. Another family of producers also shares that such a problem made them pursue living outside the big city²⁵. Rada, a producer from Plovdiv, says that her husband suffered from an autoimmune disease caused by the consumption of polluted food. Her main motive for relocation is the wish to consume food that is minimally polluted and to produce it by herself²⁶. Others reveal different reasons. Mira, who practiced biodynamic agriculture, says that *chance*²⁷ brought her to the village where she lives now and to this occupation. Andrei shares that the idea for the farm was born gradually. He says that he has experience working on a friend's farm abroad: *I really liked the attitude towards work, food, the rural community, the time I spent in France was very good*. He also reveals that among the other motives for his relocation one was *the poor quality of the food on the market*²⁸. Other producers talk about their love toward animals: *there are many reasons to start this, but it's especially our love for the homeland, traditions, animals, preservation. Animals are always a factor. As from when I was little I grew up around many animals and Jana also, we love animals, they are part of nature and maybe that combination was a good reason for us to take this path*²⁹. My research shows that none of these producers were professionally engaged in agricultural activities before their relocation. Thus, health issues, production of clean food and changes in the way of thinking are among the main reasons for migration to rural areas.

In the stories of respondents the searching for a “good life” and self-realization are always present. The latter is mostly related to their agricultural occupations, which bring them gratification. Mira says that she experimented a lot - *and since the third year I had developed such a sensitivity to this nature that it is how it all started- I can no longer live without this [agricultural activities]. And even if you send me to New York, I will find a form, a way, something - to do it. I rediscovered myself ...*³⁰ Two of the respondents speak about rural life and firmly state that it is not so difficult. Nina thinks that people *should grow freely under the sky. And again, I'm telling you, it's much easier than it is in the city. It's physically tough, and even*

²⁴ N. D., female, 36 years old, Lipnitsa village, Botevgrad region, interviewed in 2015, IEFEM-AEIM 989-III.

²⁵ P. S., female, about 45 years old, Zdravets village, Varna region, interviewed in 2018, personal archive.

²⁶ R. R., female, about 35 years old, Gornoslav village, Plovdiv region, interviewed in 2018, personal archive.

²⁷ M. A., female, about 40 years old, Stroevo village, Plovdiv region, interviewed in 2018, personal archive.

²⁸ A. T., male, about 40 years old, Bryagovo village, Plovdiv region, interviewed in 2018, personal archive.

²⁹ M. R., male, about 45, Plana village, Sofia region, interviewed in 2014, IEFEM-AEIM 989-III.

³⁰ M. A., female, about 40 years old, Stroevo village, Plovdiv region, interviewed in 2018, personal archive.

*physically not that much, it's an impulse that supports you, holds you, you know. The need to work from morning till night and not be tired mentally and physically and then I go for just one hour in the city and just feel overwhelmed. I can't explain it. [People say:] it is very difficult in the countryside. No, no, it's not difficult for me, people. I come from the city and I am telling you that it is not difficult. I do not know why people think that it is difficult, that's impossible – there is no such thing*³¹. Mira shares similar thoughts: *Rural life is not difficult. If you want it, it's not tough. What is difficult about getting up when the sun rises and going to bed when the sun sets? What is more you work in the rhythm of nature. You go there [in the garden] until 9-10 a.m. you're done, you can rest in the afternoon, you can read a book, you will pick this corn, you will make that herb bouquet. You have such a variety of activities that you do not get bored... And at the end of the day, you can't even remember what you did. However, you feel this fullness and pleasure that "it's a super full day"...*³² In this case I can summarize that ideas, promoted by NGOs coincide with perceptions of newcomers producers, although expressed with different words.

This is not the case with local producers. My new fieldwork research was focused on farmers who grow and produce products in protected areas and territories, and in particular are part of the project “For the Balkans and the People” network. The main aims of the project express precisely the ideas for post-productivist transition – encouraging the development of local family businesses; preserving biodiversity in areas of high nature value (HNV), increasing consumers’ knowledge about the protection of these areas through direct sales of quality products produced on small family farms and supporting farmers in making additional income from products with extra value³³. The extra value of the products comes from the fact that they originate from protected areas and territories and are promoted as such through the various channels of the project and in the media. The main idea of the project is to show that nature and business can exist in harmony and for this purpose coordinators are looking for producers who develop activities in NATURA 2000 areas, nature and national parks. As a result of the project, according to official data, 26 sites for processing raw materials of animal origin have been registered³⁴; a farmers’ market has been set up where farmers can present and sell their products directly, which continues to exist after the end of the project; and two websites are created – “Food from the Balkans” and “Produced in the farm”, where consumers can see detailed information about every farmer and product. So far one can observe the simultaneous presence of all the prerequisites for successful exploitation of the

³¹ N. D., female, 36 years old, Lipnitsa village, Botevgrad region, interviewed in 2015, IEFEM-AEIM 989-III.

³² M. A., female, about 40 years old, Stroevo village, Plovdiv region, interviewed in 2018, personal archive.

³³ For more details, see official information <https://bioselena.com/>

³⁴ More official information about the results of the project could be found at (in Bulgarian only): <https://bioselena.com/en/projects/>

rural in a new way – direct sales, clean products with extra value, “economic productivity and nature conservation exist together” (Vergunst 2016: 292). But what are the farmers’ perceptions about these processes?

Entrepreneurs, most of whom are local, do not recognize nature as a factor in the quality of the product. One of the producers was not sure whether the location of his hives still fell within the NATURA 2000 zone, as it was indicated on the label of the product made years ago. He thought that NATURA did not affect the quality of his honey in any way. Another entrepreneur notes that pasture is generally important for the quality of milk and its products, but it is not primary. Grazing and nature were among his criteria for choosing a place to start his activities, but nature is perceived mainly as a background: *Well, I really liked the nature... First of all, [it is important that] there is pasture for the animals, the nature is beautiful, as I’m going there to live and to have good time, to feel the place*³⁵. Two beekeepers say that honey production in the mountains is less than in the plain. They say their hives are not in the Balkans, as stated on the project’s website, but in the foothill in Sredna Gora, where they get more honey and the production is more profitable. One of them thinks that among his clients on the farmers’ market in Sofia there are very few who appreciate that the product came from a protected area³⁶. For another farmer, what is most important for the quality of the milk is climate, and for him pastures in the protected and the unprotected areas are the same³⁷.

Two other beekeepers, who are not supported by the project, are not part of any networks and rely on their own efforts to sell their products, appreciate the rich diversity of nature in NATURA 2000 areas, but do not promote their products by it. Their hives were located in another settlements, and later they decided to move them to such areas. One of them, registered under the direct sales regulation, does not indicate on the label of his product that it originates from NATURA 2000 zone, but proves its quality by offering samples from each batch, which, according to him, speaks about the rich herbal content itself. He shares – *It is not a small advantage that the nature is rich, the difference is just huge*³⁸.

In general, conversations with producers show that they are not aware of the extra value that NATURA 2000 may give to their products and they do not emphasize on the fact, as project experts do. For producers it is very important that this project *opened their eyes*³⁹ about direct sales and farmers’ markets. The project helps them with funds and expertise to register under the regulation on direct sales in order to be able to make such sales. In this case I conclude that people and organizations external to the specific settlements again identify opportunities (especially in the protected nature) that can contribute to the development of small producers. My

³⁵ V. T., male, about 50 years old, Yagodovo village, Montana region, interviewed 2021, personal archive.

³⁶ N.C., male, about 60 years old, Kalofer, Plovdiv region, interviewed 2021, personal archive.

³⁷ A. I., male, about 50 years old, Berkovitsa, interviewed 2021 personal archive.

³⁸ C. D., male, about 30, Dragash voivoda village, Pleven region, interviewed 2021, personal archive.

³⁹ P. T., male, 31 years old, Melyane village, Montana region, interviewed 2021, personal archive.

previous studies on project “New Thracian Gold” and Slow Food Presidia producer’s networks also confirm these conclusions about local producers.

The main challenge for producers is achieving economic sustainability. Generally, these are small family farms, which according to the classification of Davidova and Thompson (2014) can be defined as semi-substance and commercial, where labor and management are provided by family members (Bosc et al. 2018: 44) and households can combine off-farm and on-farm activities and incomes (Brunori, Bartolini 2016: 195). The study shows that farmers who are engaged in crop farming achieve economic sustainability harder than livestock and bee farms which are more stable on the market. The former are semi-substance small farms, which in most cases grow food for their families, and sell the rest to farmers’ markets or in the form of “baskets”. Thus, they use activities as “broadening” and “deepening” as their livelihood strategy.

Consuming the rural

Michael Woods points out that usually the use of rural space for recreation and leisure is tied to the idea of consuming the rurality, or, at least, consuming the attributes associated with an imagined rural idyll. This can take many forms like landscapes, wildlife, rural culture, rural food and drinks. In each of these cases, attributes of rurality that are the object of consumption – scenery, nature, tranquility, heritage – are translated into commodities that can be bought and sold. Woods emphasizes that the consumption economy is now at least as important as the production economy in sustaining rural livelihoods. According to him tourism has been widely promoted as a development strategy for rural areas seeking to replace declining primary industries such as agriculture (Woods 2011: 92-94).

The imagined “rural idyll” corresponds to Salazar and Graburn’s understanding of imaginaries. They conceptualize imaginaries as socially transmitted representational assemblages that interact with people’s personal imaginings and that are used as meaning-making and world-shaping devices. The authors think that in their nature imaginaries remain intangible, so the only way to study them is by focusing on the multiple conduits through which they pass and become visible in the form of images and discourses. Their operating logic can be inferred from its visible manifestations and from what people say and do (Salazar&Graburn 2014: 1-2). “The tourist’s need for escape from the here and now, to a more authentic life “elsewhere,” in other places, other peoples’ lives, other forms of nature, and literally in other times” (Salazar&Graburn 2014: 9-10) is well used by guest house owners to build their own presentation. E. Wanda George et. al. define “nostalgia” and “escapism” as forces that engender a powerful attraction to rural experiences, especially for urban dwellers. According to them many seek the rural experience to reconnect with a past, perceived simpler life or their “roots”. Nostalgia is a strong motive for

tourists choosing destinations. The authors suggest that intensified travel to rural areas may be a form of “escapism” from globalization (Wanda George et. al. 2009: 7). Harvey Perkins thinks that nostalgia for a rural past is manifested in many ways, most commonly as anti-urbanism and an idealization of the small town or village in North America, particularly the US and as the rural idyll in the UK, with its emphasis on the countryside as a green and pleasant land which is safe, clean, healthy and enjoyable (Perkins 2006: 244)

Nezar Alsayyad also speaks about cultural imaginary and try to define various pathways of heritage manufacturing for the consumption of tourism. He combines the views of Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger about invented traditions and Benedict Anderson’s imagined communities to conclude that all heritage is socially manufactured, and that all traditions have the potential to be consumed (Alsayyad 2001: 3-8). As Harvey Perkins noticed commodification is an integral part of the re-resourcing of rural areas. By re-resourcing he means modification or abundance and replacement of established rural environments, productive processes and social arrangements with new built forms and new environments for production and consumption. The new forms of commodity have in some cases reproduced well-established rural spaces and in others produced new ones. The new rural spaces comprise new resource bases and changed landscapes, and new meanings, practices and imaginations of rural areas. Some of the products and production processes are closely linked to commodity forms which may best be discussed using the terms *attraction* and *experience* (Perkins 2006: 244-254).

Sonia Sredkova, who examines alternative tourism in Pirin region, Bulgaria, thinks that along with the opportunities that favor the development of tourism, there is another process of commodification of culture. She defines it as negative, because is related with the loss of the primary meaning that culture used to have for the community. Although she thinks that culture and its elements are not a constant. They are changing and respond adequately to changing conditions, so tourism is the impetus that drives the process. Sredkova points out that the development of rural tourism is an opportunity for younger people not to migrate but to stay in villages in order to manage family business, related to guest houses or other tourist’s activities (Sredkova 2017: 203-205). E. Wanda George et. al. also think that tourism becomes increasingly popular and appealing as a mechanism for stimulating rural growth in troubled times. They refer to other authors statements that “tourism is often viewed by communities losing their traditional economic base as their economic salvation” (Inskeep 1991) and that “many communities in economic crisis situations do turn, in desperation, to tourism as their “economic savior” (George 1995) (Wanda George et. al. 2009: 3,30).

The activities and the strategies of the guest houses which develop rural tourism, are formed on the basis of the imagined “rural idyll” characteristics and nostalgia for the past. In some of them, the hosts aim to create an atmosphere of home coziness trying to make tourists really feel like guests of the family. Owners of a guest house

say that their purpose is tourists to *feel like guests of close friends, of grandparents, to have a sense of family, home, to be taken care of with grandmother's dishes*. Their strategy is not to create shiny rooms, but for the interior to look natural – *we want it to be more rustic, more authentic*. They believe that this approach is successful because their place attracts *the right people* who always share that they were able to feel like *guests to grandparents*⁴⁰. Another guest house also provides closeness to the hosts and the feeling that tourists are guests of the family. The owners aim to make arrivals feel like they are in the countryside, by *providing quality food⁴¹ and service*. This should be combined with a visit to archeological and historical sites in the area, as *the luxuries of the hotels are missing*⁴². A third owner shares the same understanding – *when people come, for example, to the countryside, they do not come here to sleep, I think it is better to sleep in your home... you have come here to see, to understand something, to learn something*⁴³.

Another guest house present to their clients a kind of experience - [for the tourist] *to see, to touch the authentic, the real life of the village and when people come here, we offer a whole experience to the tourist, not just one sleep-over. Just when the guest comes, he is immersed in the village life and in our life and he becomes a part of our life*. During my stay, the electricity went out and our hostess Maria stressed that this was also part of rural life and sometimes it took longer and more patience to repair the damage. In the evening, the whole family gathered for dinner with their guests. And during the dinner preparation, the hostess mentioned that in the village you ate what the garden offered and that day there were eggplants. The food was an important part of the presentation - entirely homemade and with dairy products from the family farm. Providing such kind of tourist service – a guest house with a farm, according to the owners, is a successful strategy for closing the business circle. Maria emphasizes that this is a family business and everyone in the family is involved, which she says makes the stay of the tourists more pleasant – *they come to us as guests and leave as friends*. The hosts present the tourists with various crafts and show them specially prepared programs – “The route of bread”, “The route of milk, “The route of wave” – *we just try to preserve the traditions and teach more young people and children what it was like, so they can remember it*⁴⁴.

Another guest house owner *takes her guests back* in childhood through local customs, which aim is to remind tourists of *what it was in the past*. She relies on emotions, a performance such as involving tourists and dressing them in traditional costumes as part of her strategy. The family does not invest in the improvement of the rooms, because they share the concept *that the guest does not need you to just provide him the key and the bed, he wants something else, not just a bed. You will*

⁴⁰ T. M., female, about 50 years old, Gorsko Slivovo village, Lovech region, interviewed in 2020, personal archive.

⁴¹ By quality food, the host means rural home-grown production.

⁴² P. A., male, about 60 years old, Rabovo village, Stambolovo, interviewed in 2017, personal archive.

⁴³ B. M., male, 53, Smilyan village, Smolyan region, interviewed in 2013, IEFEM-AEIM 990-III.

⁴⁴ M. P. female, about 50, Sabotkovci village, Gabrovo region, interviewed in 2021, personal archive.

*not sleep the whole time. The idea is to have fun, to do something different*⁴⁵. According to another respondent from a neighboring village, demonstrating customs and crafts became *meaningless* because *the same things are shown everywhere*. She thinks that it is necessary to create a complete concept for a promotion of a place, and what distinguishes her village is climate and history, *as well as very powerful energy, and nowadays everyone needs such recharge*⁴⁶. Offering silence, tranquility and natural views is one of the ways to attract tourists. Some guest houses that advertise on the Internet include “delightful amazing nature”.

“Tasting the country” as Woods defines it is also an essential strategy in the complete presentation of the rural. It is achieved by providing cleanly grown and produced home-made food. Most hosts try to present local specialties with food they grew by themselves. All entrepreneurs admit that they buy the food, they cannot produce on their own from the local community and thus include other people in their enterprise. Others say their food is entirely local, from the area and from small producers. They think that *the home-made food is authentic, what is bought from the store is not*⁴⁷, *there is nothing better than the rural production, the rural production is the cleanest*⁴⁸... In one of the guest houses the hostess has kept her old stove “Miracle” and cooks on it, thus contributing to delicious dishes⁴⁹ and creating warmth and comfort for her guests.

It was noted above that some of the guest houses are certified as Green Lodge by the Bulgarian Association for Alternative Tourism. The description of the association’s website contains the criteria for obtaining such a certificate – “Hosts of these guesthouses and small hotels are local people who pay special attention to local nature and culture. They will be your guides to interesting sites and events in the region and will enrich your experience. Your stay at a Green Lodge will make you feel the charm of the traditional everyday life and guide you through the local cuisine. At a Green Lodge you can pay attention to hosts’ effort for sustainable performance”⁵⁰. Thus, food, natural and historical sites and local customs are identified as “markers of local “uniqueness” (Storey 2006).

The strategy of a certain complex of guest houses is to preserve what is typically Bulgarian by restoring the traditional architecture of the houses in which they provide accommodation - *both typically Bulgarian*⁵¹ *and with all conveniences. It’s*

⁴⁵ D. L., female, about 50 years old, Gorno Draglishte village, Razlog region, interviewed in 2018, personal archive.

⁴⁶ L. K., female, about 50 years old, Dobarsko village, Razlog region, interviewed in 2018, personal archive.

⁴⁷ T. M., female, about 50 years old, Gorsko Slivovo village, Lovech region, interviewed in 2020, personal archive.

⁴⁸ D. L., female, about 50 years old, Gorno Draglishte village, Razlog region, interviewed in 2018, personal archive.

⁴⁹ Many locals say that cooking on woods gives a specific taste to dishes and they always become tastier.

⁵⁰ For more details see <https://www.baatbg.org/bg>.

⁵¹ She means traditional, old.

traditional – you can see, feel the “Bulgarian”, – it’s both quiet and clean, but also you’re provided with all the things you are used to - not a toilet in the yard, and you get good heating. Their idea was implemented with great attention to every detail of the furniture, and their purpose is to go back to the past by restoring the exterior and the use of natural materials for the interior. One of their guest houses was built in 1853 and was restored in 2005 and, as the information on the web site claims, it is “the most prominent in the village”. Sylvia says that many of the new owners of other houses in the village have also decided to keep the specific architecture. The village has a typical Rhodope look with stone roofs and buildings. She also says that they want to make an association which aims to preserve the village as it was – *we, the new owners with villas, are much more enthusiasts than the locals, it has always been like that*⁵². Another owner, Diana, believes that demonstrating traditions is a kind of preservation and says that she does all this, not for profit, but *for the preservation*⁵³.

Each of the places combines several strategies, but does not implement the full range of them. The various guest houses have distinctive features with which they attract tourists. Some of them have managed to preserve the authentic look of the houses, but do not offer closeness to the family. In many cases, the presence of tavern or restaurant immediately implies professionalization of the service through employees, a more hotel-like principles and more distant from the idea of comfort, warmth and the feeling of real family visit. These strategies and presentations of guest house owners show that they have acquired very well heritage manufacturing for the consumption of tourism as well as the ability to return to the past. Not all guest houses succeed to achieve economic sustainability too. So, they also undertake different strategies to continue their enterprise and usually combine two or more activities for livelihood.

Conclusion

The study shows how “rural” is experienced through implementation of new functions of the rural space. Different participants in the process have begun to accept new attitudes toward the countryside not only as a place of production, but as a place, which can add extra value to agricultural products and as a place of heritage manufacturing for the consumption of tourism. Various new meanings are given to “rural” and are well used by different entrepreneurs for the achievement of their livelihood strategies. The two analyzed tendencies demonstrate possible ways for post-productive transition in rural areas in Bulgaria. The changes that have taken

⁵² S. T., female, about 50 years old, Kosovo village, Plovdiv region, interview taken in 2018, personal archive.

⁵³ D. L., female, about 50 years old, Gorno Draglishte village, Razlog region, interviewed in 2018, personal archive.

place in recent years in rural areas are due to the EU's common agricultural policy and its funding instruments too.

Another important factor in the development of such ideas and activities is the outside vision, the intervention of newcomers who have decided to change their lifestyle and settle in rural areas. They make a significant contribution to the establishment of the image of the “rural idyll”, which is the basis for the development of activities such as the exploiting and consuming of the “rural”. An important role in these processes have NGOs, which follow the same tendencies in rural development and try to show locals that economic productivity and nature conservation can exist together (Vergunst 2016). Markers of local “uniqueness” (Storey 2006) can not only be history and culture, but also nature and biodiversity. The experience economy (Stoilova 2019) and the instrumentalization of natural and cultural heritage (Petrova 2018) prove to be profitable strategies for attracting the right tourists. Although we have a commoditization of agricultural goods and benefits (Woods 2011), in new conceptual strategies it always takes care of nature and people.

All these processes are at the very start and at this stage such activities remain small in scope and are rare cases for a certain area or village. Even though we have whole strategies for development of specific regions, they also face difficulties. I can summarize that post-productive transition in rural areas in Bulgaria is still in progress and is not finished. In the future we will see what the long-term results of these activities and policies will be and whether they will lead to a more complete transformation of the perceptions of the village and its livelihoods.

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