

The Proximity of Spirit and the Spirit of Proximity

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In the second half of the 1990s I visited a small village in the Central Southern Rhodopes in Bulgaria. To get to the village was not easy because the road had last been repaired some ten years before. At the beginning of 2005, when I again revisited the place, the deplorable dilapidated state of the road around deep potholes and large stones demanded a skilled driver. The village consists of three hamlets, connected with roads hardly accessible by car. The contrast of the houses perched on the slopes of the mountains is striking: while several houses show symptomatic signs of devastation, others are well kept and a few buildings have recently been reconstructed with protruding satellite antennae on their roofs.

Upon my first arrival in the village, I soon talked to elderly men – pensioners – standing in the streets for a chat. They invited me to sit down for a while on a bench. In a short while they brought a 1.5 litre bottle, with a label indicating that the bottle had – once upon a socialist time – contained some shop-made liqueur. After some words the pensioners friendly invited me to test their *rakia*, the golden-yellowish content of the bottle. There was no way to reject the invitation without risking an offence and I gave in. We shared together one glass which was filled again after it had been emptied. When I tried the burning liquid, my hosts tried to guess from my facial expression whether I liked the *rakia* or not and they did not hesitate to ask. Obviously, they were very proud to have produced themselves the “about 50 to 60 *gradosa rakia*”, which means the brandy contains between 50 and 60 percent of alcohol. Soon our talk went entirely into the direction of home-made brandy and I learned that its production is a rather important aspect of life in the village. In the following years I repeatedly visited the place (last in autumn 2009) and got acquainted with the production of *rakia* and its significance for the villagers.

The people who produce *rakia* were either born in the village or, at least, have some relatives living there. They own houses and lawns in the area, inherited from their parents. A number of them moved to the city of Smoljan, the local administrative centre of the region, some decades ago. However, they have been keeping their relations to the village, where they go at weekends, especially in spring and autumn. After retirement they do spend more time in the village. In several respects they resemble those “young pensioners” that KONSTANTINOV (2001) describes: people who spent their life and career in cities during socialism and who returned after retirement in the post-socialist years to their native villages. Nevertheless, in the production of *rakia* are also locals involved who had never left the village, young people and also women.

The Rhodopian village

Nearly the entire population which lives permanently in the village is old or elderly people. Their children live in the regional city, in other larger Bulgarian towns and even abroad. From the former 300 inhabitants only few live permanently in the village nowadays. The school closed at the end of the 1990s because there were no more children. However, the village is not dying out. Those who have remained in the village are trying to make a living from agricultural production, thus some signs of investment are to be observed. Some houses have been rebuilt and reconstructed since the beginning of the 2000s. People from Sofia and Plovdiv have either inherited or bought houses and they use them as weekend holiday homes. Moreover, a basic infrastructure has always existed in the village centre where the mayor's office, a post office and an orthodox church can be found. A tiny shop provides basic foodstuff, newspapers and bread and a daily running bus connects the place with the city.

The inhabitants of the village are partly Bulgarians, partly Pomaks, but – so far – no Roma have lived there and signs of 'romanization' (as described for villages in *Stara Planina*) are absent. The elderly village inhabitants survive on tiny pensions and food production for subsistence¹. Some of the villagers manage to sell products in the city. On the surrounding lawns one can see sheep and goats and some have cows for the production of milk, butter, cheese and meat. On the mountain slopes others keep bee-hives. Hunting and fishing are also prominent activities of men in the village. KRESSEL (2010) has termed similar observations of economic activities in Bulgaria "milking the mountains". In the gardens mainly potatoes, pumpkins and beans are grown, but also tomatoes and cabbage, which are canned for the winter. On the lawns and in the gardens are also fruit trees, especially plum and apple trees. Due to the rough climate in this part of the Rhodopes, not all kinds of vegetables and fruits grow here in such abundance as it is known from the fields around Plovdiv and Pasardshik. Especially, the climate is too cold to grow grapes.

The main products sold to the city are milk, eggs, honey and beans (cf. additionally CELLARIUS 2000 for the economic importance of potatoes in the Rhodopes) and there was an occasion when a truck made its way up the bumpy roads to load hay, collected by hand on the mountain lawns. The hay was sold by a villager to farmers in Smoljan. The profit of a truck load of hay gathered in many days of hard work is estimated at about 200 *leva*². Although the main direction of transporting agricultural products is from the village to the city, also the other direction could be observed:

- 1 For a detailed analysis of a post-socialist village economy in Bulgaria see CELLARIUS (2000, 2003, 2004). CELLARIUS (2004) provides an excellent introduction in the economic activities in a Rhodopian village. The place of her research is about 60 km away from the village I refer to. Cellarius does mention the collection of wild fruits for the production of marmalade (2004: 139–140), but she does not mention the production of *rakia* as an important aspect of the social life.
- 2 In 1997 a currency board was established in Bulgaria. The anchor currency for the Bulgarian *lev* became the Deutsche Mark and later the Euro. The exchange rate is about 1.95 *leva* for 1.00 Euro.

grapes were brought from the plains around Plovdiv to this Rhodopian village – grapes for the production of *rakia*.

The co-operative

The village is situated in the Rodopes which were under Ottoman rule till 1913. In the 1920s a co-operative was set up in several of the villages in the vicinity. The co-operative was restructured several times in the following decades and in 2005 it is still operating. The co-operative owns several shops and storages in villages and in the city, and it employs its own personnel³. Until the mid 1970s one activity among many of the co-operative was the production of *rakia*. Till then it bought damsons (*slivi*) and yellow plums (*djanki*) from the local farmers. The production of *rakia* took place right in the centre of the village (behind the mayor's office), where the co-operative had a production unit: large wooden vats for the fermentation, holding 5.000 litres each, are under a roof, and the necessary distillery is in a shed (see the photo in CREED 1998: 114). In the socialist years the produced *rakia* was sold to *VINPROM*, the state-organized distribution and marketing unit for alcohol drinks in the socialist economy. Old people in the village remember that the *rakia* from the village could be found all over Bulgaria until the 1970s. Then, the co-operative stopped the production for *VINPROM* and the facility lay idle. Today the rotten vats cannot be used anymore, but it is different with the distillery.

Members of the co-operative (and many villagers are members of the co-operative) started using the facility to produce *rakia* for themselves. These activities became especially interesting after the changes of the 1990s in Bulgaria for several reasons: prices for consumer products started to rise drastically, including the prices of alcohol drinks. Due to decreasing living standards the return to home-made productions was a consequence. Moreover, in the early 1990s the Bulgarian media reported regularly about cases of poisoning by methyl alcohol. Casualties were caused because bottles of *rakia* bought in shops had been refilled with methyl alcohol. The risk of getting poisoned by such methyl alcohol can be avoided, if the product is home-made. Finally, for the pensioners the production of *rakia* can be understood as a social get-together which allows them to meet on several occasions and to share recollections of the old times.

The production

On three occasions I was present at the production process, which I will briefly describe together with the financial calculation of the producers⁴. The activities I elabo-

3 Compare additionally CARTER/KANEFF (1998), MEURS/SPREEUW (1997) for co-operatives in post-socialist Bulgaria.

4 See also the detailed description of brandy production in KRESSEL (2010: 111–113). CREED (1998: 96, 114, 189–190) also mention private viticulture and the distillation of brandy for a village in Northwest Bulgaria.

rate on are to be considered part of the informal economy in Bulgaria⁵. The products are, however, not for sale but it is rather for consumption within the household. Yet, the product *could* also be sold.

The cooperation in the production process is carried out in many ways. Groups between three and eight persons, mainly men but sometimes also women, come together. The group sometimes is constituted of pensioners only or of younger people aged 30 to 40. In one occasion it was a family together with several friends, in other occasions, neighbours and distant relatives formed the group of producers. Some of the groups' members are unemployed, while others hold formal employment.

The group works together both in purchasing raw produce, and in the production process. For the production of *rakia* several kinds of fruit can be used. Traditionally, in this village brandy was made from plums⁶. Some villagers still collect wild growing plums for this purpose. Since plums and damsons grow in abundance and no money has to be paid, the costs are low. However, the best *rakia* is considered to be made from grapes but grapes do not grow in this part of the Rhodopes. That is why nowadays people travel by car and a tiny trailer (*remarké*) to the markets in Plovdiv or Parzardshik (120 to 150 km away from the place) to buy grapes which they transport back to the village. In other cases it was reported that people bought grapes in Smoljan which professional traders had transported by trucks from the plains. If a person of the group owns a car and a *remarké* which can be used for transportation of the grapes, this is an important input to the shared production activities. After the fruit is collected or bought, the producers start with the fermentation, normally at places near the distillery. During the fermentation process sugar may be added to the mash. When the distillation process begins on a certain day (in the observed cases it was always a weekday), all members of the group engage in the common work. They gather at the distillery and an experienced expert from the co-operative joins them on the day. This person is in charge of the distillery, taking care of the smooth running of the process and of the production equipment. For using the distillery a small fee had to be paid to the co-operative. As a matter of fact, before the distilling process can start, the producers had to collect sufficient firewood and to bring it to the shed with the distillery.

After a certain time of burning the first brandy is dropping, then pouring in buckets which are later emptied into larger plastic barrels in the shed. A *spirtometer* is permanently used to check the percentage of alcohol of the brandy and it is mostly between 50 and 70 percent after the second distillation. Division of labour can be observed in many aspects: some members of the group look after the firewood and others are responsible for pouring the full buckets into the barrels; still others barbecue meat, and another group clean the copper caldron outside. During the distilling

5 See for informal activities CHAVDAROVA (2003), compare additionally THUEN (1998), KONSTANTINOV et al. (1998) and EGBERT (2006) for informal cross-border trade activities as another means of economic survival in Bulgaria.

6 Apart from plums and grapes *rakia* is also produced from apricots, figs or apples. During the fermentation some fruits may be added in order to get specific tastes, for instance apples and quinces are added to grapes. After the burning process local herbs may be added in order to get a more sophisticated taste.

process other villagers pass by. They exchange their experience of the *rakia* production or simply drop by the place for a chat and a mouthful of the new brandy. All test the *rakia* while it is still pouring into the buckets. Home-made salami and bacon are the appetizers. On one occasion the wife of a producer came at noon to the shed and served a soup for those working and also for the guests present.

One incentive for the production is certainly a financial one. The production output is per person between 50 and 140 litres. The following costs arise:⁷

- Petrol for driving to and back between the village and the markets in the plains near Plovdiv – only in case grapes are bought.
- The price for the grapes at Plovdiv (about 0.30 to 0.50 *leva* per kilogram).
- Sugar is sold for 1.20 *leva* but is not necessarily added during the fermentation process.
- For using the distillery 10 to 20 *leva* are paid to the co-operative.
- Firewood is normally for free, however, it had to be carried to the place.

The calculation of the producers is that 130 litre of grape brandy can be produced for 2.50 to 3.00 *leva* per litre (about 50 to 60 percent of alcohol). If the fruits do not have to be paid (i.e. they are collected or received for free from friends) production costs fell considerably to about 1.20 *leva* per litre. Compared with prices at shops which are between 5.0 and 7.0 *leva* (for 40 percent alcohol), 1.20 *leva* seems to be a reasonably low price.

It should be noted that the low price is also possible because the producers do not pay any taxes and they do not obtain a licence. Due to the remoteness of the place it is unlikely that such restrictions are imposed. However, in 2005 there was an ongoing discussion among people involved in these activities whether the EU accession of Bulgaria (in 2007) will impede their activities, i.e. implementing some form of regulation. After Bulgaria's EU accession a tax on home-made brandy was introduced. However, since it is not possible to control production, producers normally pay tax only for a fraction of their whole production.

Brandy and its production as an everyday topic

The production of brandy is an activity performed in small groups like among neighbours (*komšia*), families or friends; it is a form of co-operation within the sphere of household production. The production process itself demands co-operation but also offers many opportunities for the division of labour within the group. The production process and its output is an important topic of everyday conversation. On different occasions the men involved exchange information and recollect stories: how many litres they produced some years ago, which fruit they used and the prices of the fruit, the percentage of alcohol, stories about the transportation of the grapes or the buying of a trailer are told. Those who are engaged in the activities in this particular village are unanimous that the best *rakia* is produced in their village ("better" is defined by taste and the percentage of alcohol). When the brandy is offered on occasions, it is emphasized that it is a home-made production of that village. In one form

7 The prices given here are for the years 2003 and 2004.

or another, the making of *rakia* is not only a collective activity but also contributes to a common identity referring – in this case – to a specific village.

Indeed, in post-socialism people in the village do not tend to produce the cheapest *rakia* possible, i.e. that from plums which could be collected for free. On the contrary, they buy grapes which do not grow in the region and transport them to the village, thus considerably increasing the production costs.

It seems that the low costs of home-made *rakia* and the lack of paid jobs in the formal sector can only partially explain the engagement (and sometimes enthusiasm) in brandy production. To formulate the minimalist claim: the growing importance of such an activity in the daily life of the people is also related to the end of socialism which in Bulgaria went hand in hand with fundamental economic and social individual crisis⁸. People who had worked for the state for decades were often forced into retirement (see KRESSEL 2010). At the same time the high inflation destroyed individual financial savings (often accumulated in three decades) in the 1990s. With the disappearance of social security systems in the first post-socialist years, the long-time individual investment in social security (pensions) vanished. Furthermore, there was a rapidly increasing shortage of jobs in the formal sector of the economy.

The co-operative stopped the production of *rakia* in the mid 1970s and the reactivation of the distillery in the 1990s can be understood as a sign for such crises. People strengthened or revitalised their social ties to their native villages in the post-socialist period. However, they did not simply increase home-made production, but also – as in the described case – the production within social groups. This shows to a certain extent a return to the collective and a “socialist revival” (CREED 1998: xiii), however, this time not organized by the state in the form of a co-operative but privately organized. The production of alcohol may thus be understood as a group activity that gives a meaning other than economic. It is a return to production modes of common work not only known from socialism but in agricultural and rural production per se. Furthermore the production of *rakia* as a national drink in Bulgaria perpetuates a long running tradition as well as strengthens the local cultural identity.

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8 The difficult and precarious situation did not only increase home-made production of alcohol but also its abuse.

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