

338.48-6:379.845(497.2)

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WHAT IT TAKES TO BECOME A SELF-ENTERPRISING HOUSEHOLD IN THE RHODOPE MOUNTAIN, BULGARIA

Abstract: Part of the transformations in rural Bulgaria after the fall of socialism in 1989 can be described as the implementation of neoliberal policies, shaped by general trends such as shrinking welfare state, the introduction of markets in public and private spheres and the view that self-enterprising individuals are best equipped to live successful lives in such environment. The latter characteristic can be summarized as the crafting of neoliberal personhood. However, studies from postsocialist settings show that such personhood is always rooted in history and social relationships. This article takes this analysis further by training a spotlight on a form of domestication of Bulgaria's neoliberalization, whereby the household, the home and the family's energy became, to certain extent, market assets. It draws on ethnographic fieldwork conducted since 2009 in the southern part of the central Rhodope region. It traces the trajectory of a family who tried to establish a family hotel by extending their house, offering in priority their home-grown food to tourists and harnessing the energies of the household members to this end. Their attempt to receive money support from a programme of the European Union failed. As a result, they found themselves heavily indebted and obliged to work as migrants in the United Kingdom. This case study illustrates how the idea of the marketable self and home have met certain local conditions, thus giving birth to a locally cherished ideal of the commercial home and how difficult is to make this ideal come true.

Key words: household, commercial home, neoliberalization, Bulgaria, Rhodope, tourism

Introduction

The demise of the socialist economy in Bulgaria was immediately followed by the implementation of market capitalism. The latter rapidly espoused neoliberal characteristics, such as the retreat of the state from the provisioning of welfare, the creation of markets in spheres from which markets have historically been absent, and the politically supported production of deepening inequalities between social groups (Harvey 2005). As part of this process, governments in

postsocialist Europe eagerly promoted public policies and created more insidious institutional mechanisms aiming at inciting the people to turn themselves into self-enterprising individuals (Junghans 2001; Rose 1996). The Bulgarian political leaders adopted this global “logic of governing” (Ong 2007) by incorporating it into local dynamics. In particular, from the very beginning of the postsocialist era, the neoliberalization of society has been deeply intertwined with large-scale embezzlement of public resources by the political-economic elites (Ganev 2007). In these conditions, for the overwhelming part of the population, major incentives to cultivate self-reliant, self-controlling and self-enterprising individuals became the ever shrinking opportunities to make a living thanks to a job in the public and private sectors, coupled with the vanishing welfare support. These sweeping upheavals immediately made obsolete the people’s creative adaptations to the former economic and political regime (Creed 1998). Therefore, people from all social strata and milieus began to forge new forms of adaptation to the new conditions. But if neoliberal measures have by now been implemented everywhere throughout the postsocialist world and have contributed to shaping personhood, the latter process has everywhere been socially and historically embedded (Makovicky 2014). In contrast with textbook economy, people’s lived economy has remained a “human economy” (Hann and Hart; 2011; Hart, Laville and Cattani 2010), including in its neoliberal version.

There is growing ethnographic evidence about that. “If the neo-liberal project is about creating a personhood centrally defined by self-interest, it should look no further than a village in Romania”, wrote Radu Umbres (Umbres 2014: 142). In analysing the case of an individual entrepreneur in the construction business in a contemporary Romanian village, he argued that his activity was clearly motivated by self-interest. But this entrepreneur developed with every one of his clients a social relationship, practiced lower prices and accepted delayed payments as a guarantee of mutual trust. The pursuit of the builder’s entrepreneurial activity comprised practices which, at first glance, may have appeared as running against his self-interest. But ethnography reveals that forms of sociality that may look as counter-intuitive behaviour in a world driven by self-interest are in fact integral to this world. In reality, this entrepreneurial venture in the neoliberal conditions of a Romanian village can continue because it has integrated social relatedness at the heart of its operation (Umbres 2014).

This article addresses the same intimate intertwinement between neoliberal self-reliance and self-entrepreneurialism, and basic human relatedness. But it tackles it from a different angle. It analyses a case study where a household, the locus of relatedness, sentiment and a specific domestic economy, tried to transform their home, their domestic agricultural produce and their labour into market assets. This micro-ethnography provides the empirical basis for an understanding of one of the multiple forms of adaption of Bulgarian citizens to neoliberalization. The family tried to turn themselves and their home into an entrepreneurial venture in order to face the rampant disappearance of secure income in the region. It can be described as an attempt at “domesticating” Bulgarian neoliberalism. It meant a collective effort to harness the energies of the household members and reorganise their house and domestic life in order to come to terms with the new challenges in a particularly adverse economic environment.

Commercial homes are found in a large variety of places all over the world. There are bed and breakfasts, guest houses, family hotels, host families

and home stays, to cite only the most widespread types. They have a common characteristic: the hosts are most of the time present on the premises of the place where guests are accommodated and interaction between hosts and guests is the rule. Paid-for service, socializing between hosts and guests, and some form of sharing combine to shape the overall model of the commercial home (Lynch, McIntosh and Tucker 2009). At present, there are numerous instances of family hotels, guest houses and bed and breakfasts in my fieldwork area. In reality, in Bulgaria, rooms in private homes were put on the market of tourism during the socialist era, in particular in localities on the Black Sea coast. In her detailed ethnographic study of the coastal city of Varna and the surrounding resorts, Carla Bethmann described how two women, a mother in her late eighties and her daughter in her sixties, whom she met by 2006, had been regularly hosting tourists from Russia, the Czech Republic and Poland in their house starting from the 1980s onwards (Bethmann 2013: 261). In variance with the Black Sea coast and some ski resorts established as tourist destinations under socialism, the very southern part of the central Rhodope region where I conducted fieldwork emerged as a tourist destination only after 1989. The unique combination of picturesque landscapes, the search for new sources of income as a result of the vanishing employment opportunities in the region, open access to this area after decades of strict control, the availability of housing and the uninterrupted practice of domestic agriculture and animal husbandry became the main local assets. There are success stories of commercial houses, even though no one can afford to live from tourism alone (Tocheva 2015a). In contrast, here I bring the case study of a family whose struggle to transform their home in to a commercial home had a tragic outcome. In doing so, this family aimed at reaching a higher level of economic stability. This family shared in a locally popular idea according to which running a commercial home allows the local people to confidently face the challenges of economic uncertainty and the brutal loss of income. In other words, the marketization of the home and domestic relationships started to be viewed as a precondition to the reproduction of the home as a shelter and a space of unique togetherness. The case study presented below depicts first, the family's thrilling commitment with the new project and, later, the devastating aftermaths of this commitment.

How is the family's adaptive response to neoliberalization to be understood? I propose to use the concept of domestication. In their collective volume about neoliberalization in urban settings in postsocialist Slovakia and Poland, Stenning, Smith, Rochovska and Szwatek argued that "Neo-liberalism remakes the familial spaces of the household and of social reproduction as it remakes the economy" (Stenning, Smith, Rochovska and Szwatek 2010: 2). These authors draw inspiration from Gerald Creed's seminal work *Domesticating Revolution* that meticulously analysed a Bulgarian village life under series of state-socialist reforms and under the shaking transformations immediately after the collapse of the regime in 1989 (Creed 1998). Following Creed, and placing the household as one of the centres of their study, they called "domestication" their explorations of "the articulations between everyday economic practices, social reproduction and the construction of neo-liberal worlds" (Stenning, Smith, Rochovska and Szwatek 2010: 3). These authors used "domestication" in two senses: locally specific adoption of neoliberalism on the part of the elites and adaptation from below by individuals, households and communities.

In defining “domestication”, Gerald Creed argued that “through their mundane actions villagers domesticated the socialist revolution”. In fact, “domestication was not an event; it was an ongoing process” (Creed 1998: 3). The household was crucial to that process. Creed argued that the ordinary actions of villagers influenced the socialist system making it less unbearable and more acceptable. He further claimed that, generally, the villagers complied with the system, rather than resisted it. This attitude proved efficient in as much as it pushed the system to transform constantly as villagers themselves were adapting. To what extent the people among whom I did fieldwork influence the direction taken by the broader economic and political system is an open question.

The people whom I studied struggle to transform their domestic space, household relationships, domestic production and the labour provided by the household members into assets on the market of tourism. But offering their domestic space, relationships and production means also that the market is in a way integrated into the home. The local ideal and the practical enactment of this “domestication” of the tourist market within the economy of the household can be defined as a “niche”, a concept proposed by Richard Wilk (Wilk 1997: 225-230) in his detailed historical and ethnographic study of the Kekchi Maya in Belize. Richard Wilk argued that

“the household cannot be deduced from the world system, and we should reject moralistic or political agendas that seek to equate a social or economic stage with a household type. A better way to move from the specific case to more general insights is to use the concept of niche. A niche is not a place or a resource, nor is it a mode of production or a particular social formation. For a household a niche is a combination of different resources and techniques for production and consumption with which members survive and reproduce” (Wilk 1997: 225).

Similarly, the attempts at “domesticating” Bulgarian forms of neoliberalization have been expressed in ways and have taken forms which cannot be deduced from the encompassing frame. Not only specific local conditions have been absolutely instrumental to this process of domestication, but people’s creative adaptations must be considered as part of the bigger scheme.

Milen, whose adventurous family enterprise is described below, plunged headlong into a new venture whereby he and his family tried to combine several things: the unpaid labour of the household members, produce from domestic agriculture and home-raised livestock, housing, the participation in a programme of the European Union and a bank loan. All these had to be harnessed to develop a family business in rural tourism, with clients coming from Bulgaria and from abroad. This case study is interesting for several reasons. The described household trajectory embodies general trends in the studied region regarding encompassing economic transformations from before 1989 until the present period. It illustrates how household decisions were taken in order to adapt to new challenges. Adaptation to frequent transformations by using one’s skills and available resources has been a permanent feature of village life over the past three decades, as it was before (Creed 1998). The local people have constantly adapted to the changing value and meaning of land tenure and animal breeding, changing challenges related to the conditions of permanent and precarious employment and more or less favourable conditions for developing entrepreneurial activities. Importantly, villagers in the studied area have continuously drawn on their

domestic resources, using them alternatively and often simultaneously as a base of their house life (Gudeman and Rivera 1990) and as marketable things. The trajectory of the household analysed here is also an instance of how the life of local families intersects with the strategies of much larger economic and political actors, how it is shaped by them but also how the household members stubbornly pursue a distinctive ideal that links the domestic life with the market of tourism. The family described here went through moments of enthusiasm and joy, as well as deep sadness, and determination not to give up. Ethnographic detail about the states of mind and the steps undertaken by this single household illustrates how ordinary people try come to terms broader processes by mobilising their imaginations, taking decisions, toiling hard and using what they have at their disposal when struggling for a better life.

When Belan started receiving tourists

In summer 2007, Milen,¹ a man in his mid-forties, had just opened a small restaurant in the yard in front of his house, in the village of Belan.² A local woman who hosted me in her house during my first visit to Belan, and who later became a dear friend, brought me there to taste Milen's cuisine. Milen's main attraction was fresh trout. Milen would take a client to the small pond he had built in his garden and ask him to show the trout he wanted to eat. Milen would catch the fish, grill it and serve it a few minutes later. Although at that time villagers spoke of "Milen's restaurant", this was a family business to which every household member contributed in one way or another. This family also made available to their clients home-grown food, such as tomatoes and potatoes. The family was able to serve dinner to up to fifty persons per evening. Since the end of the 1990s, tourists, mainly Bulgarians but also foreigners, have started travelling in the area for recreation and hiking especially during the summer holidays.

The village of Belan, with approximately 350 registered inhabitants by 2010, is located amidst the picturesque Rhodope mountain, in the region of Smolyan, near the border with Greece.³ The socialist state made access to this border zone particularly complicated for the non-locals at the time when Greece belonged to the enemy capitalist world. For the local inhabitants, under communist rule, the government restricted their movements by creating a series of obstacles when they tried to move between the villages, but also when they tried to go to their fields, meadows and forest, when those were located near the border. The military strictly controlled all special authorisations and personal documents of the local people who wished to move from one place to another within the border zone, and when they tried to leave it.

1 This name and the other personal names cited in this paper are pseudonyms.

2 The name of the village is a pseudonym too.

3 Smolyan is the regional centre in the central Rhodope. The population of the town is estimated at around 30,000. The municipality of Smolyan, including the town and the surrounding villages (Belan is one of them), is estimated at 41,000 inhabitants.

The other reason for trying to keep these villages as isolated and difficult to access as possible was the fact that part of the population is composed of Sunni Muslims who have Bulgarian as their mother tongue. In Belan, at present, Muslims are by far a majority. Before and during state socialism, violent name-change campaigns were conducted several times. The state-socialist authorities in particular succeeded in institutionalizing intimidation and stigmatization, causing waves of emigration to Turkey and a still ongoing identity crisis for those nearly 130,000 Bulgarians of Muslim origin, distinct from the Turkish minority of the country, who continue to live in their home country (Clayer and Bougarel 2013: 19). For instance, in the first years after the communists took over the government, the population of an entirely Muslim village located literally on the border with Greece, located within walking distance from Belan, was displaced as part of a larger political scheme aiming to establish control over the border and over the population suspected of not identifying completely as Bulgarian. The displaced people were allowed to return to their native region a few years later. Some chose to settle in Belan, taking advantage of the fact that it is located slightly closer to Smolyan.

In addition to this dark side of the communist policies, a brighter side consisted of an improvement in the living conditions from the 1950s thanks to the arrival of electricity and running water even in remote villages scattered on the hills. Many villagers took the opportunity to renovate their old houses, especially in the 1960s, by introducing facilities that had by then become a standard of urban comfort elsewhere in the country, such as bathrooms and toilets on every floor, a better equipped kitchen and a larger number of bedrooms. A second wave of improvement of local housing started thanks to state support in the 1980s; the state allocated plots of land for free use in order to build private houses and provided monetary support to those new comers who settled in Belan and in some of the neighbouring localities of this border area (Tocheva, unpublished).

Milen's house had been thoroughly refurbished and extended in the 1960s. It had two floors, with a total of six rooms. When I arrived in Belan, Milen, his wife Elina, their son, their daughter and Milen's mother lived in the house. There was also a stable where sheep, a cow and in some years a calf were kept. In this region, domestic agriculture and animal herding continued in combination with, and often as a complement to, state-cooperative production, as they continued in the rest of socialist rural Bulgaria (Creed 1998; Tocheva 2015b). As it was the case before socialism, there were no significant differences in this respect depending on whether the villagers were of Christian Orthodox or Muslim origin; neither were there differences in the family structure (Brunnbauer 2002). The availability of housing and the still continuing domestic agricultural practice started to have a new significance with the implementation of market economy, as it is discussed below.

After 1989, major transformations regarding trans-border mobility occurred. The Cold-war constraints imposing border control disappeared. Newly democratic Bulgaria recognized equal rights and freedoms for every citizen, including the right to move freely, even though many countries applied visa regimes. From a geopolitical and ideological foe, neighbouring Greece turned into a privileged destination for Bulgarians searching for better paid jobs not only for the inhabitants of the Rhodope but for Bulgarians in general (Hatziprokopiou and Markova 2015). Another locally ground-breaking transformation was the arrival of tourists for the first time in the history of this border region. In spite

of virtually in existent tourist infrastructure in these places – and the area south from Smolyan is typical in this respect – tourists started to arrive, pushing further away from the Rhodope localities that the socialist state policies of tourism had enshrined as worth of interest, such as the ski resort Pamporovo and the village of Momchilovtsi (see also Bethmann 2013; Ghodsee 2005). In Belan, starting from the late 1990s, progressively, around ten officially registered guest houses opened (two officially registered as family hotels). In the neighbouring village (from where some of Belan’s inhabitants or their ancestors came), five such houses opened, two of which are compounds of fully equipped bungalows, providing also food and barbecue facilities. All of them are family-run businesses, with at least one of the family members having an accommodation on the premises of the house for tourists, or very close to it. Like all their neighbours in this formerly almost inaccessible area, the inhabitants of Belan began to draw pride and satisfaction from the place’s newly acquired status of tourist destination. Villagers would point to the fact that everybody is now welcome to admire the beauty of the region, taste local home-grown, tasty food, and enjoy Rhodope hospitality. Moreover, socialist-time employment structures vanished quickly after the collapse of the regime and new economic opportunities seemed less and less realistic, such as the opening of small and larger industrial plants, or the revival of large-scale agriculture. In these conditions, villagers started to creatively engage in catering for tourists by using the domestic resources available to them: their houses, the foodstuffs they produced and the unpaid labour of their household members. This new economic resource was not strong enough to prevent outmigration for work. The small wood-processing plant and the shirt-making factory, the major employers in Belan to this day, pay extremely low salaries. Since the moment when I began fieldwork in 2009, the population has visibly declined, even though pendular migration makes it difficult to estimate the real number of inhabitants. As I have witnessed, census workers were faced with the same problem when they asked some villagers to designate their permanent place of dwelling. Overall, the people were deeply conscious of being faced with lowing income that could easily break down the fragile equilibria of their lived economy.

This was the spirit of the time when Milen and his wife Elina decided to launch the family’s new venture. When I first met Milen in 2007, he had been unemployed for more than a decade. He had just registered as an “agricultural producer” as did many unemployed villagers by then. But this was an administrative arrangement and in itself this status did not secure any income. This official status opened the possibility for unemployed villagers with no income to pay contributions on their own which entitled them to public health care and to an old-age pension. In addition to that, thanks to his new status, Milen was granted small amounts of money by the Bulgarian Fund “Agriculture” for the agricultural land and the meadows that the family used to produce vegetables and make hay. At that time, Elina was a civil servant at the mayor’s office. She had a permanent full-time job but her income was clearly inadequate to provide for the family. Milen’s earnings from selling potatoes and vegetables, an activity discussed below, were an insufficient complement. This is why Milen initiated the tourist business. This was a family activity. During summer 2007, Elina, Milen and Milen’s two children participated in serving the food in the restaurant and helping in different ways. The elder son had just graduated as a cook from a professional school, while their younger daughter was about to start attending high school. They also offered a good part of their own domestic produce to feed

their tourists. Milen's mother readily cared for the animals. The household kept one calf per year to be slaughtered for meat and a cow for milk. They grew four tones of potatoes (one tone for sale and three tones to be consumed by tourists and by the family). By then, the local inhabitants had an expression for this type of household organisation set up by families developing a business in tourism: "working in a full circle." This expression meant accommodating and feeding tourists by using a maximum of unpaid household labour, domestic produce and one's own house or a housing belonging to the family. The two families who were said to be really working in a "closed circle" were also known for having exhausting work days and being obliged to accept internal inequalities, injustice and tensions. This was a local idealized model of household participation in the global market of tourism (Tocheva 2015a). This ideal looked particularly appealing to Milen from the very beginning.

Milen's entrepreneurial spirit

When I settled in Belan in summer 2009 with the intention to start ethnographic fieldwork there, this business was developing well. Milen had bought a second-hand van. In late autumn, he used to buy potatoes from the local producers and, adding his own potatoes, he would load the sacks in his van and drive down to two resorts on the Black Sea coast. People in the southern part of the central Rhodope produced potatoes in large quantity during the first decade after the fall of state socialism. Many of them engaged in barter with potatoes, exchanged for basic goods such as sunflower oil and detergent during the monetary crisis around 1997-1998 (see also Cellarius 2000). The production decreased steadily since approximately 2005, as cheap potatoes started to be imported from Poland and elsewhere. Although the local producers were strongly affected, the Rhodope potatoes retained part of their prestige and continued to sell as high-quality produce. Milen's potato business directly depended on the good reputation of the Rhodope potatoes. On the Black Sea coasts, Milen sold potatoes to owners of restaurants who were his long-term clients. Another villager did the same, but his clients were in a different part of the country. In the area surrounding Belan, Milen used his van to sell vegetables and fruits in the villages nearby. He had quite a few clients among the people living in remote villages where the small shops had closed down and all provisioning with food and other commodities happened thanks to the irregular arrivals of trucks and vans, such as Milen's.

In 2009, Milen's daily expeditions throughout the Rhodope villages and his longer trips to the Black Sea coast seemed to be very important for him. He considered himself as a good seller, although he had no professional training as a vendor. After his graduation in agronomy from socialist high education, Milen was given a job as an agronomist at Belan's state cooperative. He was still a young employee when the socialist regime collapsed. Rapidly, the new government organised the dismantlement of the state cooperatives in the entire country. In Belan, the dismantlement took place in 1991-1992. It took the form of a sale on auction of the machinery and other assets of the state cooperative. All former employees had to search for new opportunities to make a living. Soon after this

state-enforced demise, Milen and his wife Elina joined six other young villagers with whom they left to work as agricultural producers in the plain, where the soil is more fertile. They rented land and worked there during two years. Another member of that same group told me that the group earned altogether 25,000 BGN for the two-year hard toil, which was an impressively large sum at that time. When Milen and Elina returned to Belan, Elina got a job at the mayor's office. Milen bought a van and started transporting potatoes from the village, including those produced by his family, and sell them to restaurants in resorts on the Black Sea coast. He claimed that he used to sell annually between five and six tones out of the eight tones that his family produced. According to him, all in all, between around 1995 and 2010, he sold approximately between 100 and 120 tones of potatoes per year to his clients on the Black Sea coast.

Milen continued to buy from the villagers who had produced larger quantities of potatoes until approximately 2012. My hosts in Belan continued to sell to him several hundreds of kilos per year. They considered that Milen was fair with his fellow villagers, as he paid them a good price and would never try to cheat on them. My hosts, however, told me that, since the Rhodope potato is produced on small plots in mountain conditions, without pesticides or other chemicals, it is of high quality but it is also relatively expensive. Therefore, according to them, Milen could not make much money from selling only Rhodope potatoes. They told me that, on his way to the sea coast, he would buy cheaper potatoes of poor quality, would mix them with the high-quality Rhodope potatoes and would sell everything as if it were only Rhodope potatoes. On his way back, he would buy fruits and vegetables from the villages in the plain, especially varieties that do not grow in this mountain area and would sell them to the local people.

Indeed, Milen used to sell grapes, water melons, paprika, cabbage and other fruits and vegetables mostly to elderly people living in remote villages where the shops had closed down. In 2009, a friend and I accompanied Milen during several such trips. He enjoyed having company. He was happy to tell stories while driving his van. What seemed particularly important to him was to show that he had special commercial skills. While driving on the pot-holed mountain roads, amidst the bewildering beauty of the Rhodope, to villages with often no more than a hundred inhabitants, with houses scattered here and there, he proudly told how he used to smuggle when he was a still unmarried young man. In the late 1980s, he enrolled as a construction worker in a large construction site in the Soviet Union. Other villagers did the same by the same time, hoping to earn some extra money. During his trips back and forth, he used to buy jeans and sport shoes from Bulgaria and to bring them illegally to the Soviet Union. He sold his merchandise to Soviet people who had more limited access to such "Western" goods at that time. Such desirable goods were relatively more accessible in Bulgaria, even though not officially on sale but only available on the parallel market. After a few years in the Soviet Union, he returned to his native Belan, got a job as an agronomist and married Elina. He lost this job relatively soon. But for him, this did not seem to have been a traumatic experience. In contrast, most villagers who held jobs at the state cooperative told me that this event wreaked havoc at individual and collective levels.

When, in 2009, Milen recalled this moment, he emphasised that he had special personal predispositions to work in commerce. His parents used to work in the socialist system of commerce. His father was responsible for provisioning all the shops in the area of Belan. Milen was proud of his family's affiliation with

commerce, even though it would be misleading to generalize by saying that, under late socialism, fellow villagers held in great esteem activities like the one that his father had. Rather, in the socialist economy of shortage, people occupying positions allowing privileged access to scarce consumption goods were frequently accused of profiteering and provisioning above all their own families at the expense of the rest of the population (Kaneff 2002). In reality, Milen's fruits and vegetables business had little in common with the job of bringing commodities to the village stores in the frame of the state socialist system of provisioning with goods. (It should be noted, however, that in all the socialist economies of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, there were people known for their entrepreneurial skills, even though no one was registered as an "entrepreneur" (see Annist 2014).) However, Milen found that he had inherited good selling skills from his father. When approaching a village with his van full of fruits and vegetables, he would start joking: "Look now how I will get all the pennies of the grandmothers". Indeed, almost all his load got quickly sold. The total of the turnover he announced proudly to me and my friend at the end of the day was always at least three times higher than the total sum resulting from my personal calculations, based on my observations and mental record during the day.

Milen's exaggerations meant that he wanted us to believe that he was a good seller. But above all, he needed to persuade himself. Milen was strongly motivated to sell as much as possible; he desperately needed to make a benefit. His family was now faced with a tremendous challenge. Milen and Elina had taken what came out to be an adventurous decision which led them to unforeseen hardship. Milen embarked on a project supported by the SAPARD programme (Special Accession Programme for Agriculture and Rural Development) of the European Union. This came out to be a huge mistake.

Creating a family hotel

In 2006, Milen heard about SAPARD funds for rural development from the Smolyan-based office of the Bulgarian state Fund "Agriculture." In December 2006, he signed a contract in the frame of SAPARD. According to this contract, he had to build a family hotel as part of the EU-supported plan to develop rural tourism in the area and help the people develop entrepreneurial activities in tourism. He took a loan from a major Bulgarian bank – 200,000 BGN. At the end of the construction, the EU fund was supposed to give back to Milen fifty percent of the total sum of the loan, so that Milen could give this money back to the bank. The other fifty percent which Milen had to give back to the bank over the next few years had to come from the family's benefits from the family hotel. Milen and Elina were told that this mechanism was meant to support the development of an alternative to mass tourism and that it was also supposed to help the local people find a way out from the economic decline of the Rhodope. After the state-organized closure of the socialist-time small industrial plants and state cooperatives, and the serious haircuts in major employment sectors such as education and healthcare, Milen and Elina found that this good intention made perfect sense.

In May 2007, the construction of the family hotel began. The hotel has the capacity to accommodate twenty persons. It is built as an extension of the house. There is a door connecting the family house and the hotel. “This is practical, it makes it easier for us when we do the laundry for example”, said Milen. Milen and Elina wanted their guest house to be physically linked to the space in which the family lives, exactly like the immense majority of the other local people who accommodate tourists. Moreover, the name of the hotel is a combination of the first name of the son and the first name of the daughter of Elina and Milen. This choice brings evidence of the fact that the family related in a deeply emotional way to this building. For them, “family hotel” was not merely a label.

The building work was done by an external company hired by Milen. In this area, hiring an external company is by no means the usual way of building houses, extending them, or erecting new buildings for tourists. Local inhabitants tend to privilege the unpaid labour of kin and acquaintances. When this is not enough, they have recourse to hired labour provided by trustworthy and well-known small-scale local entrepreneurs. Milen departed from this model; he wanted the whole work to be done by one professional company, instead of navigating personal arrangements and possible interruptions in cases when workers or materials become unavailable in the construction process, as it usually happens when the work is done “between acquaintances.” In fact, the official contract he signed left him no choice. It obliged him to use a registered company providing declared labour. In the eyes of his fellow villagers, this choice revealed catastrophic, as I will discuss below. The construction of Milen’s hotel ended up on 31 May 2008. Immediately after, a local committee of representatives of the SAPARD programme and the Fund “Agriculture” was sent to check the result and give a final approval. The committee found a lack of conformity with the EU requirements. By then, Milen had already put a large board on the wall of the hotel, informing that the hotel was built with the support of the SAPARD programme. He was obliged to do so, he said, although the board was extremely expensive for him – 1,000 BGN. When the committee refused to give its authorisation to proceed to the payment, quite angry, Milen decided to take down the board.

Elina told me that, while putting together the application, the family spent significant amounts of money in order to get all the paperwork done, as public administrations in Bulgaria typically charge the citizens for various services. Elina said that their business plan, a key document of the application, was composed by an acquaintance who did really professional work. This person knew well the procedures. The help of this friend was a good alternative to hiring a consultancy company. Usually, Bulgarians who want to see their application for EU funding accepted turn to consultancy companies to prepare and submit the applications. Milen and Elina did not turn to a consultancy company; they relied on their acquaintance. Elina told me that, at the moment of the final evaluation in 2008, “we didn’t have a stable connection in the Fund anymore”, implying that this “connection” had helped them from inside to get the project accepted at the first stage of the evaluation. As they had not hired a consultancy company, they had no one to whom to turn for help now. “Asking for a second evaluation committee to be formed in order to re-evaluate the hotel meant that we had to do so much additional paperwork! This is extremely expensive. And at that moment, we have just paid the insurance for the hotel which means 1,500 BGN.”

The failed engagement with SAPARD meant that Milen and Elina took a loan of 200,000 BGN, spent all the money to pay the construction company and

found themselves heavily indebted by local standards. People from the village felt deep empathy for the family's dreadful situation. But it was also usual for them to express criticism. Milen hired an external company. He should not have done so, many commented. He was obliged to follow the EU requirements and had no choice if he wanted to enrol in the SAPARD programme. But this was an overly bold step, villagers commented. Another villager, whose family has developed one of the most successful tourist businesses in the area, told me that the family had tried to enrol earlier in different EU programme. But the complexity of the official procedure and the unofficial expectations of different local officials to receive bribes and favours dissuaded them (Tocheva 2015b: 148-150). They decided to rely on their kin and on trustworthy villagers with experience from construction, that is, to privilege personal connections, unpaid labour, reciprocal support, and to pay only trustworthy workers. Milen's disastrous experience with the SAPARD programme only confirmed local wisdom. The most widespread opinion was that Milen should have done like all the others who have extended their houses, built new facilities or have simply adapted their homes to receive tourists; he should have turned to local labour, to villagers who have professional experience from construction, and to small local entrepreneurs. The whole endeavour would have surely lasted much longer, due to possible temporary unavailability of workers and machines, but Milen could then rely on the workers for doing good job. Overall, it would have been by far cheaper and the work would have been of higher quality. After the company delivered the hotel, Milen turned several times to villagers who had experience from construction work, including the men of my host family, who helped fixing bathroom equipment and made all sorts of repairs.

In March 2010, when it became clear that there was no way out but to give the money back to the bank, Elina told me how she saw the situation: "The only way to get by for us is to receive guests, [to make sure that] they like the place, to sell a field or a meadow when the market for land will improve and, in this way, we will give the money back to the bank." But in the subsequent years, the benefits from the hotel and the restaurant revealed largely insufficient to reimburse the loan. In 2015, following a small surgical operation, Elina got seriously ill and passed away. Soon after, Milen and his elder son left to the United Kingdom as undeclared agricultural workers. They tend to come back rarely. The money they earn is sent to the Bulgarian bank. The bank took control of the plots of land (those a relatively small in this mountain area) belonging to the family which Milen had mortgaged. Several of these plots were sold on auction by the regional court in Smolyan. The last sale took place in November 2018 when six small plots were declared for sale by the court. The money went to the bank. Milen is determined to pay the money back. For him, keeping the family hotel is essential for retrieving a sense of home. For him, the hotel is part of his family's better future, even without his wife. I am unable to speculate about the extent to which his children share his view. His daughter, in spite of the sudden loss of her mother, succeeded in enrolling as a student in medicine. Her father and her mother's sisters with whom she lives now, strongly support her plan to become a medical doctor. The future will tell us how a return to Belan for Milen and his children may look like.

Milen followed some general trends in the area: he was trained and worked as an agronomist, a socialist-type profession in these villages, lost his job with the dismantlement of the state cooperative, in the early 1990s cultivated land with other local families, grew potatoes and sold his own and other villagers'

produce, started his family tourist business using domestic resources and the labour of the household members. Finally, Milen and his son left as wage agricultural workers to the United Kingdom, as have done at least a dozen of villagers since approximately 2012. But Milen ventured outside of the economic frames considered acceptable locally. He took a large loan from a bank, embarked on an EU project, hired an external company to build the hotel. All these actors are outside of his control; influencing upon their decisions is beyond his reach. His confidence in the system, that is, in his case, the combination of the bank, the private construction company, and the local representatives of the EU fund and the Bulgarian fund for agriculture, revealed excessive.

Conclusion

It would be misleading to argue that those people in Belan who have engaged in a small-scale tourism business by running guest houses and offering food produced on their own plots have actually endorsed the state-promoted ideology according to which individuals and families should be self-reliant. It would be equally wrong to argue that, in their eyes, the ever-shrinking state support to ordinary people is the best way to a sustainable economy model, whatever the Bulgarian government propaganda and the media which those in power have put under their control claim. The people in Belan do not think that they can challenge or resist the conditions imposed from the outside, such as ever shrinking state supports and policies inciting them to accept working even for the most miserable salaries. But what they creatively try to do is to come to terms with some aspects of neoliberalization, in their own way. Some of them, and Milen's family is part of this group, have made some aspects of neoliberalization integral to their definition of the most desirable form of domestic life. They have actively constructed an ideal of the household in which the household is the special locus where material life and a unique form of togetherness are deeply intertwined. They have tried to put on the market their home, their produce and the labour of the household.

This case study from the Bulgarian Rhodope shows how precisely an ethnography of ordinary village people, of their specific trajectories, aspirations, joys, pains and their restless struggle for better life, allows understanding household transformation in the twenty-first century. The life of this family and the future they desired are integrated in wider processes of neoliberalization and globalization. In fact, the inhabitants of rural Bulgaria have never really been cut from relations to urban centres and from the global world. At present, trans-local connections have been made integral to the life of virtually every village-based household (Duijzings 2014; Kaneff 2014). In the condition of rural embeddedness in the global world, Milen's story brings evidence of the fact that profitable globalization (providing food and accommodation to tourists) can rapidly transform into punishing globalization (undocumented migrant work abroad).

Milen's story is also about a tragedy that occurred due to a failed attempt to receive support from national and European instruments designed to precisely help the common people to start a new business. In a certain way, the official

institutions designed to help the people get by taught Milen and his family to become even more self-reliant. As Aet Annist wrote based on her comparative ethnography of the neoliberal turn in two villages in Southern Estonia, “In a diffused and decentralised manner the state that places responsibility on the individual creates conditions which are the opposite to empowering” (Annist 2014: 100). Annist’s analysis of the role of the state holds true for the EU in Milen’s case. Local desire for real self-reliance on the part of self-enterprising households became even stronger as a result of the unintended lesson taught by the Bulgarian fund and the EU programme. In the eyes of the local people, state and EU “supportive” instruments had to be even more decidedly kept at bay and prevented from interfering locally in order to protect the household economic “niche” of rural tourism⁴. Recently, a family accommodating tourists received EU subsidies. But these subsidies are used to grow vegetables in a small greenhouse, a very small-scale project involving virtually no risk for the family. Milen’s failed attempt to receive support from these organizations brought harm to not only the family’s business. It caused incommensurable suffering to its members and raised deep empathy among the villagers. Whatever Milen’s mistake was when he enrolled in the EU programme, for him and his family the consequences were harsh, to say the least. The court procedure left the way open for the bank to unleash its legal predatory practices. It is however no less true that for Milen, earning money from work abroad is also a way to retrieve control over their guest house. This is a business around which he still hopes to unite his family one day. In a certain way, neoliberal self-reliance on family and home as partly marketable goods now inextricably belong to Milen’s plans for a better future.

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4 In April 2019, journalistic investigation revealed a large scheme of embezzlement. Over more than a decade, state officials and other privileged persons have used EU funding made available through the Bulgarian Fund Agriculture officially in order to support the opening of guest houses to build private villas. See: https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/29884322.html?fbclid=IwARoOg_lrx96kXdqRs8PAcutzg-k5v_EXRl-8DB4yFBZvJQh5ZoDJWACStHk and https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/29912269.html?fbclid=IwAR34GfHbp-abVT-1me92Y-l2YTFdpwb9g7ZIUg-SuR_b1RTSm5mK279WyunY

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