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## **Turbulent Times in the European Countryside**

The change of the political system in Central and Eastern Europe affected not only politics but economic and social dimensions. It also affects the psychological frameworks that build up their normative system and attitudes. The authors of the book *East European Communities. The Struggle for Balance in Turbulent Times*<sup>1</sup> aimed to understand better the possible courses of change and its implications. They decided to focus on local rural communities as an example. The choice might be surprising as the existence of these forms of social life is more and more often called in question. Even theorists of social change often ignore this sphere, although it is the local community that suffers most from the change. It is on this level of the society that uncertainty of the future and the severe instability of the present is most clear. It is emphasized by a — rather dramatic — subtitle. The authors, mainly anthropologists and rural sociologists from the whole of Europe, aimed to balance the disproportion between the analysis made from the perspective of the state and those of the local reality, adding to the macrosocial perspective a balanced analysis of local problems. The texts in the book focus on the three mentioned dimensions of social change, concerning the two-way influence of state and international politics and local affairs.

One of the change dimensions focused on in the book is the economical one and privatization as one of its essential indications. David A. Kideckel in chapter *Two Incidents on the Plains in Southern Transylvania: Pitfalls of Privatization in a Rumanian Community* in a very interesting way sketches the differences in the manner privatization is seen by Western and Eastern European observers. The first ones tend to perceive privatization as a final aim of the change processes, and put little emphasis on the way this aim is achieved. They also often see privatization as an indispensable element of the free market, civic society, democracy, making it a univer-

sal right. They seem to perceive the difficulties caused by this process as the temporary relicts of unrealistic economic relations and socialism. They avoid the trials of discovering local and national varieties, stressing international similarities.

On the contrary, Eastern European observers see privatization as a process not its effect. This perspective helps to notice the social costs of transformation and difficulties, caused by the necessity of seeking compromise and of taking decisions which are often controversial. According to Kideckel's opinion, these researchers perceive the privatization process as meaningful, not just for state or household economy but also for the quality of social life and for the development of solid, energetic civic society at a local level.

All the authors of the book accepted the second perspective. Thanks to that the book gives a high quality picture of economic changes in Central Europe, considering local specifics. Readers have a chance of taking a closer look at the factors and indications of regional varieties.

The reader acquaints — hardly known — differences in the way Rumanian, Bulgarian, Polish, Hungarian agriculture was collectivized and their consequences for present development scenarios. The mentioned countries might form a continuum from the most to the least collectivized. Rumania would be one extreme, Hungary or Poland the other. The two latter are the subject of numerous discussions as far as the dimension of collectivization is concerned. Hungarian state agriculture was much more differentiated and the state farms took the form of big, regional enterprises managed by professional administrators and scientists. Even more distinctive is the existence — at first only half legal — of small holders branch and its success as a motive power of Kadar's market socialism. The common characteristics of the Polish and Hungarian systems (that makes finding an answer to the question of the range of collectivization difficult) is the fact of the existence of individual farms (there were as many as 3 million of them in Poland) and the survival of the main peasant attitude.

However, it is the scenarios of decollectivization that are the centre of authors interests. Gerald W. Creed (*An Old Song in a New Voice*) stands an interesting argument on the similarities between the processes of collectivization and decollectivization. He indicates that in both these processes farmers acted under pressure — first it concerned giving away the land, now it is the obligation of taking it back — implemented by state acts. Another common characteristic is the increasing politicization of the agriculture question. Local leaders and communities take similar roles. Creed contends that both these historical moments are characterized by attacking the countryside as such — at the time of 'constructing communism' on behalf of the working class, nowadays on behalf of 'urban intellectuals and the capitalist undertakings in the West European economy fashion'. It is

an extremely interesting argument, that allows one to read the book from a totally new perspective.

Collectivization form and scope did not stay without the impact on the present scenarios of rural areas development. Ildico Vasary claims (*Labyrinths of Freedom: An Agricultural Community in Post-Socialist Hungary*) that the political change in Hungary was not followed by social shock. Hungarian society slightly deviated from socialist ideology and practice thanks to market socialism politics, mentioned before. Hungarian villages had some of the characteristics typical for this popular — or even overused — term of enterprise. These elements were formed in the extended informal net of mutual help and of 'second economy' in defence strategies against economic facts. Among such characteristics mention should be made of the tendency for innovations (in spite of the aversion for fundamental change) with its roots in more predictable and traditional forms of social relationships and production. There are several development possibilities connected with the new regime, among these support for a restrained form of state farming; return or restoration of traditional farming (understood not just as a way of farming but also as an attitude and life style); support for the modern sector of agricultural enterprises.

Polish farmers, like the Hungarians, had experienced market economy before, but the transformation is very painful for them. It is one of the problems in the article *A Polish Village in the Process of Transformation Towards a Market Economy* by Andrzej Hałasiewicz, Andrzej Kaleta and Dennis Vnenchak. Polish farmers resented the decrease in demands of food products, inability to rival subsidized West European agricultural products, income decrease as a result, the necessity of taking high interest credits, the increasing number of unemployed and dramatic lowering of living conditions. The development possibilities are seen in a harmonic combining economic rationality, new technological possibilities with infrastructure development, incentive to look for additional income sources (including other economic branches) and with caring for cultural values and respect for the environment. The special role would be played by the local community involved in this strategy and understanding the philosophy behind it.

A similar aspect — stressing the role of local communities — also appears in Rumanian economic policy. The Rumanian governments, after spontaneous and uncontrolled decollectivization acts, decided to give back about 80% of state land to previous owners. One of the most difficult elements of the project occurred to be finding the legitimate owners, out of which only 18% were farmers qualified to make agricultural use of the land to be taken over. However, it was not the only difficulty the reforms met, among others there were the lack of capital, technology, agricultural infrastructure up to the right criteria of dividing plots (the average was to be about 3 ha). Strategies that were finally taken promoted different

kinds of agricultural enterprises for their big scale production possibilities. One of the promotion elements was low bank rates. Nevertheless, the most important thing in the context of other articles is that the Rumanian state accepted the legal identity of local communities, which can develop their own production systems.

Germany, likewise other countries, decided to sell or even close state enterprises. The law arranging reorganization of farms was laid down in 1992. According to this document former state agricultural enterprises might be replaced by co-operatives and partnerships or they might be liquidated with the profit going to those who put in the land or other goods into the enterprises and their workers. There were few willing to start individual farms, which can be explained — as Joachim Singleman (*Agricultural Transformation and Social Change in East German County*) does — by the age of German countryside inhabitants, economic insecurity, anxiety about loosing everything, lack of experience.

This rough review which is based on few examples of implemented or planned economic development strategies does not generally estimate their efficiency. There are at least two reasons for such a disinclination for evaluation. The first of them is a significant difference in the detail level of the analysis, the second — and more important — is that the authors seem to avoid providing the reader with information on the first consequences of taken strategies. All these examples seem to indicate that privatization is not a panacea to the economic problems of rural areas, though it is not a suggestion to abandon the process.

Other change dimensions are political, socio-cultural and psychological. Social change in rural areas caused a sense of instability of the present and uncertainty of the future, as consequences of economic processes, for instance the unemployment threat. These fears are also a result of a general attitude of Central European countryside inhabitants, that is the aversion to fundamental changes, in this case apart from the drastic economic situation change to necessity of reformulating the position towards ownership, farming, enterprise category, necessity of creating new aspirations. The socialist period caused a deep alteration in consciousness, such as deviation from the agrocentric value model, dissolution of traditional social bonds based on prestige and respect; elimination of traditional folk culture, weakening the life styles and values separate character. The threats mentioned above, arose in socialism manifested in social schizophrenia, a continuous sense of menace, in personal life too, expressed in testing friends and allies (Steven Samson, *All is Possible Nothing is Certain: The Horizons of Transition in a Rumanian Village*).

The need for a new identity, separate from 'socialist subconsciousness' (G.W. Creed), denying a whole hitherto existing reality — as politicians often stress — is mightily felt in rural areas. Continuously stressing this

necessity even deepens not only the sense of injustice and inequality but also the sense of lacking gratification and satisfaction, especially in the face of attacks on the countryside as such and its social seclusion.

It is an emerging challenge for local communities - erasing the anger against socialism and on the other hand against the new system, which is so demanding. It is also the communities' task to stimulate local inhabitants to economic and political activity. Local communities may also enable to decide their future and participate in local and national political life through negotiating a development course (necessity of conducting such negotiations is repeatedly stressed in the book, especially in the presence of multiple chances, with the complexity of a labyrinth). Active participation is indispensable, it only makes the local community members observe society through a prism of their personal experiences, needs, aversions, often utmostly different from those of decedents.

Some of the authors perceive (paradoxically maybe) a great and positive role of conflicts in fulfilling this task. Hirshman, quoted by Jacek Kurczewski (*Changing Conflicts and their Resolution in Polish Communities Today*) contends that a democratic society in the market economy is on a 'stable diet of conflicts'. It is an argument close to the authors of the book, who perceive conflicts as a stimulus for deepening local knowledge on identity, ethnical as well, for producing political consciousness and economic, political, professional and life activity.

Summarizing the above, the authors seem to be attached to the ideal of a civic society, the rural areas cultural and social revitalization paradigm. The change efforts undertaken are in nature a great experiment. They might lead, as David Kideckel argues, to inertia and frustration or to energizing local communities to a rapid change.

Reading the book leaves one with a sense of hunger for something. It is an interesting review of post-war history of countryside and agriculture in Central Europe. It also gives a full picture of change possibilities and scenarios undertaken in this part of Europe. However, even if a little premature, a thorough evaluation of the transformation course is missing.

Simultaneously the balance between the analysis of macrolevel influencing local reality and the opposite relation is a little unsettled, despite the editor's plans. We can face a very thorough review of the effect state and transformation in its macro dimension make on the course of economic and social change in rural areas. The role of local communities in forming society is still a matter of strategies and future plans. The exception here are ethnical minorities in Bulgaria, that actively influence government policy. Therefore, after reading what predominates is the sense that the authors did not manage to achieve the set goal. Nevertheless, the book is a very valuable document of 'great transformation'.