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Globalization: Attitude of Rural Communities in Central Europe (XVIIth Congress of the ESRS)

The XVIIth Congress of the European Society for Rural Sociology on "Local Responses to Global Integration Towards a New Era of Rural Restructuring" was held in Chania, Greece, 25—29 August, 1997. The organizers provided a platform for discussing a few clearly outlined problems and ensuing from the ascertainment of the fact that the globalization process does not proceed as one of universal homogenization and integration of societies but leads to new differentiations and disparities. The following subjects were tackled by the Congress:

- new forms of integration and marginalization of rural communities evoked by worldwide integration processes;
- new rural development strategies and interpretations of the notion of "rurality";
- new modes of integration applied within, and outside, the European Union;
- new forms of employment and changes in living conditions in the rural areas;
- the role of rural sociology in verifying the theory of rural development including the theory of modernization.

The participants' interests were reflected in the names of the 22 working groups, some of which were to hold their debates for three days and others, only one day. The most numerous groups and thus indirectly arousing the greatest interest were those dealing with: "Local responses to global integration experiences and lessons from Central and Eastern Europe" (22 reports contributed, coordinators — N. Swain and M. Lošťák); "The social consequences of the 'big' macro changes in rural spaces" (19 reports, coordinator — R. Almas); "The social construction of locality in the post-modern countryside" (18 reports, coordinators — O. Stanek and P. Starosta).

Considerable interest was also aroused by the groups on: "Global change and farming identity: the empowerment of farm women" (15); "Challenging

the future of a declining countryside in Southern Europe" (14); "Rural restructuring and demographic change" (13); "Continuity, revival and re-invention of rural traditions" (12); "The post-productivist countryside: alternatives within sustainable rural development" (12); "Tourism, agriculture and the countryside" (11); "Nature and environment: the political and economic manipulation of the countryside" (11).

However, what failed to attract the participants' attention were the earlier proposals concerning the formation of those groups that would handle the problems of local responses to changes in the natural environment, the interdependence of science and local convictions in the shaping of rural reality and, also, the question of the status of rural sociology in the curricula of agricultural studies.

In spite of the convenient location of the Congress, it was not attended by scholars from Turkey, the Ukraine or Croatia. Out of almost 200 participants there were few from Russia and the Baltic Republics (once constituent republics of the former U.S.S.R.), the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Austria, Rumania and the New Yugoslavia. As regards that part of Europe, the only country with a numerous representation was Hungary (13 persons). Apart from thirty participants from Greece, there was a considerable group from Britain (18 persons), Finland (13), Norway (13), Italy (11), and Holland (10). The small number of participants from Germany (5), and France (4) compared with that from the USA (8), Australia (6) and Canada (6) seemed to justify the presumption that the Congress of the European Society for Rural Sociology evoked more interest outside Europe than in some countries of the old continent.

What are — in the light of the debates of the Congress — the responses to the process of globalization on the part of the rural communities in Central and Eastern Europe? The three-day deliberations on the subject, of the most numerous working group should have provided, it would seem, a relatively accurate picture of the processes occurring in that part of Europe. Yet, what was lacking among the 19 reports delivered in the course of the proceedings of the group were dissertations comprising an analysis of the impact exerted by the globalization process on rural communities in Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, the situation prevailing in eight Central European countries was extensively discussed (Hungary, Bulgaria, Poland, Slovakia, Rumania, the Czech Republic, Slovenia and the territory of the former German Democratic Republic). It is difficult to separate the experience ensuing from the influences of the process of globalization on the rural community and agriculture in that part of Europe from that resulting from the change of the political and economic system effected in those countries after 1989. Yet, the experiences are mainly negative and relate to the disintegration of socio-economic structures functioning in the rural areas and agriculture until that time, growing social inequalities, unemployment and social pathology. Such

a negative assessment was more pronounced in the papers concerning the situation in Bulgaria, Rumania and Slovakia and, to a somewhat lesser degree, Hungary and the Czech Republic. However, these reports presented the effects produced on the rural community by both the change of the political and economic system and the process of globalization, rather than descriptions and analyses of the responses of those communities to the changes affecting them. If the transformation of the political and economic system in Central and Eastern European countries recognized as a result of the process of global integration, then the process appears in that part of Europe as one of marginalization or the rural population and its dependence on forces alien and unfavourable to it.

Very few people, while functioning in the community, make the most of opportunities provided to enterprising people by the new system. Most inhabitants of the rural areas are helpless in the new reality and radical deterioration of their position seems to them sufficient reason for justifying their hostility towards the transformation now under way and the current political elite. Reminiscences of the ineffective economy and poor quality of life under the previous system are obliterated when confronted with the current feeling of insecurity and the lack of prospects for improvement of that situation.

The results attained by the working groups were assessed by participants in the panel discussion recapitulating the debates of the Congress. The coordinators of a few major working groups and M. Goran Djurfeldt, President of the ESRS, took part in the panel. They pointed out to the selected global and local aspects of the process of globalization. Reidar Almas suggested that the democratization process, connected with globalization may occur gradually, like the emancipation that took place in European culture as regards peasants, then workers and, not all that long ago, women. The panel accepted the assertion that globalization may lead to the polarization of some communities and that a way of resisting the process of marginalization would be their endeavours to have a role in the decision-making bodies and influence, if only at the local level, on the decisions made. An equally unanimous stand was taken with regard to asserting the need of working out a new theory of describing and explaining the processes taking place in the post-productivist and post-modernist rural reality. A Greek representative pointed out examples of persistence and growth of socio-economic disproportions as a consequence of globalization processes, i.a. the control over local production being taken over by foreign, frequently international, corporations. Only one, rather controversial enunciation made by a panelist, pertained to the illusory nature of social problems caused in the rural community of globalization. Nevertheless, even that statement did not provoke any broader discussion. The four-day Congress, held in one of the southernmost spots in Europe, was exhausting enough for most of the participants.

The geographical situation of the seat of the Congress may account for the fact that the differences between the processes of economic growth in the Mediterranean as well as other West and North European countries were more accentuated than at some of the earlier ESRS congresses. These differences also concern cultural and intellectual traditions, difficult to modify and with considerable influence on the given country's ability to swiftly adjust its economic system to the requirement of global integration. That question was aptly discussed at the plenary session by Apostolos Papadopoulos, a representative of the younger generation of European sociologists. The basic difference between the two parts of Europe (with Central and Eastern Europe being, in many respects, closer to Southern Europe) may result in the model of economic development, proposed to the South and East European countries not only failing to bring about the expected results but even aggravating the current disparities. This model until recently effective in West and North European countries does not lead to a reduction of employment in agriculture nor to the development of state-of-the-art technology in Southern Europe. Moreover, the means allocated by the European Union for assistance to structural transformations in Southern Europe may prove insufficient to surmount the difficulties ensuing from that state of affairs. And this is a serious warning sign to the Central European countries since the Union is in a position to grant them far more modest means for the purpose than those allocated to Greece, Spain, Portugal and Southern Italy. A counterpart of the process of stabilization of employment in South European agriculture seems to be, in Central Europe (and especially Poland, Rumania and Bulgaria) an increase in, and persistence of, the high rate of hidden unemployment in agriculture.

The Congress was held in Chania, the largest town in Western Crete and the seat of the Institute for Mediterranean Agriculture. The organizers allowed time for viewing the wealth of Cretan and Greek cultural traditions, including the remains of the Minoan culture at Knossos. It was only there, the cradle of contemporary civilization, that the globalization process could be grasped in proper perspective. After the fall of Minoan culture its technical achievements (e.g. the water supply system) were forgotten for more than five centuries. Being aware of this fact we are inclined to manifest greater concern for the results of our present undertakings and anxiety about the rather vague vistas of what is to make our attainments due to the transformations currently under way.