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Integrating Roma for a better future for Bulgaria

Introduction

Bulgaria is a small country in the Balkan Peninsula, which has very beautiful and rich nature. We have a sea, field and mountains all combined in a land smaller than 120 000 km. We use our soil by growing crops like wheat, corn, rice, vegetables and a little cotton, but unfortunately we can't use all of it. Bulgaria has plenty of land but not enough money to utilize it. In different parts of Bulgaria there are different amounts of utilized land because of the big diversity in the ethnicities. Turks, Bulgarian and Roma are the three major ethnicities that still haven't learned to live together, still didn't get used to each other's presence, differences and cultural diversity. Because of that misunderstanding, agriculture in Bulgaria is not as developed, as it has potential to be.

My country is divided up into 2 parts of developing agriculture – Bulgarians (none Roma), who grow crops like wheat, corn in the north part of the country and rice and vegetables in the south; Roma people, who raise animals like horses, goats, chickens, rarely pigs and there is no particular part of Bulgaria where they raise live stock. This difference is based on culture, not religion.

There is a very big diversity between Roma people's customs and traditions and Bulgarian people's way of life. In the past, Roma people were nomads and moved to different places very often, so they used horses to go from place to place and raising these animals as to make a living stays in their culture up to now. While Bulgarians have been in the Balkans since 681 and that is why they've learned how to make a living by growing crops and having small farms. They had seeds of plants that were unfamiliar to Roma and they had the knowledge of how to take care of their crops, they also had the time to wait for them to ripe, unlike Roma, who had to move every autumn. "Since 1989, the livestock sector has suffered, on average, a stronger contraction than crop production (more than 50 % in livestock numbers). At the end of the eighties, livestock was highly concentrated in large state controlled co-operatives and in intensive state livestock complexes. The liquidation process of state controlled co-operatives and the fall of domestic demand marked the start of a decapitalization phenomenon. The consolidation of small-scale farms, which are now the main farm structures for livestock, has not compensated for the effects of the downward trend in livestock numbers. The decline in livestock has been persistent and there are no signs of recovery. Pig production is the most important livestock animal and it still has still a relative importance in complexes, which have not yet been privatized, however most of them will be privatized in the near future."(Agricultural)

"The share of trade with Western countries has been reinforced during the transition period but since 1993 a recovery of the agricultural exports to the FSU (Former Soviet Union) can be observed. OECD (Organization for Economic co-operation and development) countries import about 32% of the Bulgarian agricultural exports and the EU import about 23%. Trade with the EU has significantly developed. Agricultural exports to the EU increased from 6% of total exports in this sector in 1989 to 23% in 1997. Agricultural imports from the EU increased from 18% in 1989 to 21% in 1997, although they rose as high as 54% in 1992. Like other CEC (Central European Countries), Bulgaria signed an Association Agreement with the EU in late 1993 in order to benefit from trade with western markets. Bulgaria is a GATT (General Agreement on Tariff and Trade) and WTO contracting party since 1997. It has also become a CEFTA (Central European free trade agreement) member on 17 July 1998." (Agricultural)

Roma people don't have perfect relationships with the countries next to Bulgaria, because they don't have the same rights in the Bulgarian community, since they're not in their own country, and that is why Bulgarians have bigger markets – they sell their cucumbers and tomatoes to Turkey and Greece, Romania buys our wheat and corn. However, Bulgarian farmers don't usually raise animals, some raise cows and bulls, sheep and chickens, and that's why they don't trade with all their neighbors. That is where Roma people find their market – they sell their horses and other animals to Serbia and Romania. Often Roma people buy products from the Bulgarian markets – like fruits and vegetables for their households, but Bulgarians rarely do the same. They prefer trading livestock with their neighbors, thinking that their product is better quality. (Promoting) “Because of this, rural poor people of my ethnicity often indicate that one reason they cannot improve their living standards is that they face serious difficulties in accessing markets... The markets are of fundamental importance in the livelihood strategy of most rural households, rich and poor. There is no good connection between the north farmer's part of the country and the south and not-educated-in-agriculture part of Bulgaria, nor there is good relationship between Roma and Bulgarian markets.” (Promoting)

The last five years have been very tough for Bulgarian culture. Global warming changed the climate of my country a lot. (The effect) “It is currently impacting the nation's ecosystems, so people are confused what to grow if the results are not the same. They started importing products from other countries, and the export is a lot smaller percentage than it used to be.” Back in 2004 for example we imported 65% of fruit and vegetables and around 40% of meat, but in the present we import a lot more - 78% vegetables and fruit and 84% meat, which is twice as big. (Econews) “Some of the reasons for this process are inaccurate focusing the resources devoted to agriculture, underinvestment and not creating conditions to attract skilled workers in agricultural production.”

The Millennium Development Goal I am emphasizing on is goal number 3: Promote gender equality and empower women. Even though it's emphasizing on Gender equality, I would like to expand it, so it would include ethnic equality too. Gender equality is not such a big issue in both Roma and Bulgarian families. Women are treated well, but it's unusual for a Roma woman to have a job for example. I think that ethnic equality is the biggest problem in my country, so if we can manage to get over that, things would change very quickly. (Millennium)

People first of all can't afford to grow more crops, and second – not all of the population works on the same thing to develop agriculture. A poor urban family can barely earn enough money to feed their children, pay their bills and save some money. Life in smaller towns is cheaper, so if they want to move to another town they have to have a farm, or grow their own animals to make a living, because there are not many jobs in smaller towns. Since the prices for seeds are very expensive, they can't afford to buy it. Even if they do have the money to plant crops, or buy animals, when they get the market started customers want to buy their product for cheap, so workers in agriculture give up on growing their own crops (or animals for Roma people) and start buying from foreign markets just like most of the population, and that is how export gets very low.

The people that can still afford to have a farm, or animals, have very small ones – Roma people have maximum 12 horses in a family and maybe 6-10 chickens. Bulgarians have 3-10 hectares of corn and the same amount of wheat. There is plenty of land that has the potential to feed not only the entire Bulgarian nation, but to export a big amount of their products. Unfortunately, there are not enough educated – in - agriculture people who can manage to utilize the land, and if there are – they don't have the credit to start their farms.

Farmers use the crops or life stock they raise to feed themselves, so by not having expenses for food, they

save money so their kids can study in good schools and universities and can get a better education not only in agriculture so that they would continue working on the farm. There are schools in the small towns but they are just from 1-8 grade and they rarely emphasize on agriculture, so kids have to move to high schools and universities in the nearby cities, and that costs a lot of money for their parents. Unfortunately few big cities in my country have schools that emphasize on agriculture.

People from the big cities usually buy their food from supermarkets, which 80% of the products sold in those markets are foreign and 20% is what our farmers produce. Those 20% have a very high price and are rarely preferred by customers. People work in factories that produce clothes, shoes, canned foods like tomatoes and peas or sewing factories for the women. They don't get paid very well, because the owners of those factories are foreigners and they find good and cheap workers here. It would be very helpful to people if the owners of the places they work in were Bulgarian, because hopefully they would get paid better, and would have more dedication to their own country.

Ethnicity equality is a big problem ever since Bulgaria got its independence from the Turks in 1878. We have been trying to recover from the losses we had because of the Turkish rule and we are trying to make up for the progress that took centuries to reach for the other countries. We had to be on the same level of development just for a few decades, so we rushed into it and I think that we managed to reach the standards of other countries. We have the technology and the infrastructure, but by focusing only on that we forgot to develop better relationships with each other. To me it feels like we are two different countries living in one – each one has its traditions, language and rules but they don't try hard enough to unite and start thinking as one country.

We are all Bulgarians, all equal members of a nation that fought for so long to be what it is today, we all went through the tough times that my country had, and we celebrated victories that were the best for all of us, but we don't realize that and we struggle to prove the opposite. Bulgarians don't accept Roma as people with equal rights as theirs - they consider them invaders in their land, people who use the natural treasures of Bulgaria, without being welcome to do so. But that is not true, Roma people love Bulgaria and they are trying to fit in but integration is a two-side process. If only Bulgarian's can accept us as a part of their country, as a very important piece that builds up the image of Bulgaria, so many things would change. They would start hiring people with different ethnicity. There would be plenty of jobs for everyone, and workers would be more qualified, because Roma can do many good things, but don't have the chance to show how capable they are. Nobody has to starve or steal from others to survive. The crime rate would go lower and the country would be safer. We would work together to make our country a better place for all. The economy rate would grow very high, because there would be many more people having jobs.

“Most of the increased food production will be grown domestically and increasingly in more ‘marginal’ or ‘fragile’ lands. An estimated 90% of food products consumed in my country (Bulgaria) will be produced by its own farmers. Large and growing interior populations like Turks and Roma will continue to be fed mainly by local and national producers. Total export levels will increase sharply. Changes will depend not only on productivity and quality, but also on shifts in relative transport costs for international shipping and internal overland transport, and the distances between major population centers, ports and agricultural regions. Large and growing interior populations in my country will continue to be fed mainly by local and national producers. Globalization of agriculture will influence product mix and prices.” This should be done very carefully in order to protect the soil and to keep the balance in nature. (Biodiversity)

Everybody living in Bulgaria would be content if these changes happened. I think the government has to give some small loans to those who would like to buy land or animals and start their own farm, but don't have the credit to do so. That way there would be more food produced and bigger competition on the

markets and when there is competition, there are good deals for the customers.

It would also be very nice if there were more schools and universities that emphasized on agriculture, so that many students will be capable to start a farm after they graduate for example. I am sure that there are many people who would like to make a living by growing their own crops and selling food but they don't have the knowledge to do it. One way to make integration an easier process is to send Bulgarian and Roma students together to camps and seminars, so Bulgarian kids, who already know how to grow crops could teach the Roma kids the basics of growing crops, and the Roma would teach them how to raise animals. That would be very helpful for their parents, and for the entire country.

“Most of the smallholder farmers are struggling to live and to feed their families on less than US\$2 a day. Many have not been able to respond to increased demand because they lack access to assets and capital and they face higher transaction costs, which makes it difficult for them to adapt and respond quickly to market developments. For the million people who live and work on small farms in my country, life has become more precarious. But with the right investments, policies and development programs in place, smallholder farmers have a huge potential to increase food production, improving their lives and contributing to greater food security for all.” (Food prices)

“Smallholder farmers do not compete on equitable terms in local, regional or global markets. Often they lack access to markets because roads are poor or transportation is too expensive. And higher food prices do not always filter down to the farm-gate, where poor farmers often have to sell their products. Supporting smallholder farmers would not only enhance world food security, but would make a significant dent in poverty. Leaving them out of the equation will push many into greater poverty. When people cannot make a living on the land, they are often forced to leave it. This economic migration has implications for social tension, urban poverty and conflict.” (Food prices)

“Smallholder farmers can contribute to greater food supply for the world. But, first, they need secure access to land and water – as well as to rural financial services to pay for seed, tools and fertilizer. They also need roads and transportation to get their products to market, and technology to receive and share the latest market information on prices. And they need stronger organizations, so they can have greater bargaining power in the marketplace and can influence national, regional and global policies related to agriculture. Above all, smallholder farmers need a long-term commitment to agriculture from their own governments and the international community, backed up by greater investment.” (Food prices)

My country has very big potential to be strong and stable in its economy. “The main assumptions are that the government will keep the political commitment to pursue the implementation of the reform program as agreed with IMF and WB and simultaneously it will face the initial reforms needed for EU accession. Under this moderate growth and progress of privatization, foreign and domestic investors should initiate the recovery of the confidence in the Bulgarian economy. Nevertheless, the low purchasing power of a large part of the Bulgarian population constrains the possibilities of a more rapid recovery based on the progress of the internal demand. It will remain also a factor of potential instability, in the case of further deterioration of the standard of living for this part of the Bulgarian society. The need for stabilization of farming structures will, in the short term, prevent large shifts towards capital demanding activities or the development of long cycle productions such as permanent crops or cattle.” (Agricultural)

The government should emphasize on the relationships within the country and create a better environment for all who are Bulgarian citizens. There must be bigger control on media, who shows only the worst of the events happening in Roma community. The rights of Bulgarians and the Roma people should be the same, and the government should make sure that whoever breaks the law, no matter which ethnic group they belong to, should get the same punishments. It would be great if there were more schools where

Roma and Bulgarian kids study and grow together as friends. Teaching the young generation to love the people different from them is the best way to keep our country united and strong to walk its way to progress and better future for all.

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