

THE SERBIAN – BULGARIAN BORDER REGION: THE FORGOTTEN BACKYARD OF EUROPE

СРПСКО-БУГАРСКИ ПОГРАНИЧНИ РЕГИОН: ЗАБОРАВЉЕНО ДВОРИШТЕ ЕВРОПЕ

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ABSTRACT: *In this paper we investigate the current demographic and economic situation of the Bulgarian-Serbian border region. We pay a special attention to the permeability of the border, the role of the actors across the border, as well as to the economic situation, to the way how the people from this poorest region of the EU survive. We finally comment some of the possible economic opportunities for the future development of the zone.*

Keywords: *Border regions, Cross-border cooperation*

РЕЗИМЕ: *У раду је приказана тренутна демографска и економска ситуација у бугарско-српској граничној области. Посебна пажња је посвећена пропустљивости границе, улози актера прекограничних простора, као и економској ситуацији и начину на који опстају људи из овог најсиромашнијег региона у ЕУ. На крају су предложене неке од економских могућности за будући развој ове зоне.*

Кључне речи: *погранични регион, прекогранична сарадња*

INTRODUCTION

According to recent theories (Deas and Lord 2006), there exist three basic principles governing the national regional entities: the European market, whose existence is crucial for the existence of boundary fluxes, the promotion of competitiveness, which stimulates the movement of knowledge and experience, and the reduction of the interregion-

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al differences. The last principle leads to some equilibration, which is very important in the case of the border regions and the cross-border cooperation (van Houtum 2000).

At the moment, there exist more than 70 cross-border regions in Europe, which are involved in cross-border cooperation to more or less extend (Perkmann 2003, Zimmerbauer 2012). One of them is the border region between Bulgaria and Serbia, which is in the focus of the present investigation. This region is one of the less investigated European border regions. It represents a lot of peculiarities mainly due to historical origins. It is geo-politically important as a key between West and East and it is an interesting example of a border porosity within a two conceptually different policy systems although previously belonging to the socialist bloc.

An extensive discussion exists in the literature concerning the border studies and the meaning of the border (Houtum van 1999, 2002, 2002a, 2003, 2005, 2011). Borders can be perceived as a barriers and obstacles for people to travel, to collaborate, or to work, as an obstacle for merchandises to be carried from one country to another. At the same time they can be perceived as a starting contact point for cooperation, as a place where many people exercise their profession and live from it.

Our analysis will be based on the concept that the natural core for a cross-border region is a territorial unit, where authorities participate in a cross-border cooperation initiative (Perkmann 2003). We will analyze up to what extend such cooperation exists in the case of the Bulgarian-Serbian border and who are the main actors for it (Zimmerbauer 2012).

In the present investigation we will be interested on performing an analysis of the border taking into account the border's layer model (Giaoutzi at al. 1993, Schack 2000). Our aim is to make an overview of the different manifestations, corresponding to the different aspects of the border regions, and to answer to the question of how do borders become transformed by the interaction across them. In addition we will be also interested to understand the economic situation of the ordinary people, how they organize their living and what they do they do in order to survive.

We will discuss in details on different aspects of the border region as physical aspects, regarding social aspects, regarding the level of communication, legal aspects, regarding the jurisdiction, economic aspects, related to markets and business, political aspects, closely related to government and governance and cultural aspects, where traditions are closely related to regional identities, physical borders and the corresponding mobility and identity aspects, regarding the spatial consciousness.

The paper is organized in the following way: in the next Section 2 we explain briefly the materials used for this work as well as the methods for their analysis. In Sections 3 we carefully analyze the demographic and economic situation of the border region giving an emphasis on the real economic situation of the region, of the Western Outlands and on the survival strategies people are using by giving an image of the border region based on the layer's model and its associated aspects. In the next Section 4 we briefly discuss the existing potentials for a future economic development in the border region and the cross-border cooperation. Finally, in the last Section we present our conclusions.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present research is based on official data from different State Institutions and on information, collected during a three weeks field work of the author to the area in October of 2011. During the field work, extensive notes were taken and several large interviews were made. The visited regions, where the interviews have been taken, comprise the communities and places of Majdanpek, Rajac, Babin Zub resort, Dimitrovgrad, Bankia (Trun region), Komshtitsa, Belogradchik, Salash and Vidin.

The selection of people to be interviewed has been done according to the criteria of having representatives from many age groups, different educational levels and current professional situations.

The English transcripts of these interviews have been saved and deposited to the database of the Institute of Geography of the University of Bern, Switzerland.

The analysis of the interviews forms the core of the section 3c, describing the real economic situation of the border region. The rest of the quantitative analysis is based on the existing statistics from the Bulgarian and the Serbian Institutes of Statistics, as well as from other databases.

THE BULGARIAN-SERBIAN BORDER REGION: A BRIEF PHYSICAL, SOCIO-ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND IDENTITY'S DESCRIPTION

The border region on both sides of the border between Serbia and Bulgaria has a beautiful landscape, almost virgin nature and is situated in a very strategic place (Fig. 1).

Its mountainous character offers significant opportunities for the development of tourism in the region. (Penin 2000, IPA 2007).



Figure 1. Map of the Bulgarian-Serbian Border Region (IPA 2007).

However, all these factors are not enough for a strong economy to develop. The region is being deserted and the economic and social situation is getting worse (Mladenov 2009).

The reasons for the current economic situation, which is the most shocking aspect of the border's description, are related to some extent to physical factors as the mountainous character of the border area, which acts as a natural barrier for crossing and creating difficulty with transportation.

Other important reasons have their historical bases as the forced collectivization during 1949-1989 and the period of Iron Curtain.

However, the main reasons for this situation is the character of the structure of property during the last decades, the disintegration and the collapse of the Bulgarian economy.

In Yugoslavia, Tito allowed the citizens to travel abroad freely since 1968 (Open Society Archives 1972) and allowed small and medium sized private properties. The economy was oriented to the free market. People who decided to emigrate to Western Europe were free to do it. As a result, the remittances they sent helped for the improvement of the economy.

Nowadays most of the property in Serbia is distributed in the same way as during the Tito's era, with many big businesses owned by the state. Because of the private character of the small producers in agriculture, the villages near the border are not as deserted as in Bulgaria (Mladenov 1998, Koroutchev 2011).

On the contrary, in Bulgaria people were not allowed to travel abroad freely until December 1989. During the rule of Vulko Chervenkov (1950-1954), a forced collectivization was imposed, that later resulted into the first massive anti-Soviet armed uprising in Eastern Europe, the Gorjani Resistance Movement (1950-1952) (Gorcheva 2007).

During Todor Zhivkov's rule (1954-1989), the exact same planning and structure of the collective farms as in the Soviet Union was implemented, but the results were ineffective.

The closing of the mines after 1989 and the decay of the mining industry had strong economic impact in the past. Many small cities, where the people lived before from this activity have been partially depopulated. Due to bad governing practices and mismanagement of public money between 1990 and 1997, the Bulgarian economy and state collapsed and hyperinflation followed.

Despite the above mentioned differences of the economic situation and the historical reasons for them, a common characteristic of the Bulgarian and Serbian border regions is their low economic development compared to the remaining territories of both countries (IPA 2007).

A clear example represent the Western Outlands - regions being in the center of political and economic discussion between both countries (Koroutchev 2011). This dark period of the Bulgarian history is still reflected in the conscience of the people from the regions, the majority of them who are not willing to accept the term "Western Outlands". The time will cure the injuries, but it will take long. Only the interests of the future generations, from the border region of both countries, to build something in common, a bridge between the countries, would contribute to solve the problems their ancestors have started about 100 years ago.

Resuming, the permeability of the border is relatively low not only due to the mountainous character of the region, but as well to the existing border restrictions and the different administrative systems. This highlights mainly the economic, political, and legal layers within the border's layer model (Giaoutzi et al. 1993, Schack 2000). Additionally, a social, cultural and identity layer could also be distinguished. Thus, the border could be identified as a relatively hard and fundamentally multilayered with regarding all the above mentioned aspects. The main relevance could be attributed to the social, legal, economic, political and physical layer. However, the cultural and identity layers present their moderate relevance as well.

DEMOGRAPHIC COMPOSITION OF THE BORDER AREA

The population in the Bulgarian part of the border area represents 26.81% of the country's total population or 2.07 million people. 81% of it is concentrated in Sofia city. The average population density of the border area is approximately 1.5 times less than the national average density.

The population in the Serbian border area represents 16,53% of the country's total population or 1.24 million people, being approximately 1.3 times less than the national average density. The province of higher concentration is Nišava with 35% of the total population.

The border area is characterised by its ethnical diversity, although ethnic Bulgarians and Serbs form the core part of the population.

Most of the people on the Serbian side of the border are ethnic Serbs and in the "Western Outlands" ethnic Bulgarians. There is also a Vlah ethnic group (23.6 thousand people) mostly living in the area of Bor, Boljevac, Negotin and Zaječar, as well as some Macedonian and Montenegrin minorities, which are mainly concentrated in Knjaževac, Zaječar, Negotin, Pirot, Dimitrograd and Surdulica on the Serbian side of the border (Gigovic 2010).

There are more Bulgarians in the "Western Outlands" than it is officially claimed, because some of them are written on the census as Yugoslavians or as from some other ethnicity, due to some economic reasons (Koroutchev 2011).

Part of the population of the "Western Outlands" has a Bulgarian citizenship, which is a clear advantage concerning the travel and works permits within the EU and for traveling to Bulgaria. The knowledge of the Bulgarian language gives the opportunity to have strong social, economic and educational ties with Bulgaria.

The knowledge of Serbian and Bulgarian languages gives as well an advantage to many people who work in the trade, legally and illegally, between both countries (Koroutchev 2011).

On the Bulgarian side of the border, most of the people are ethnic Bulgarians, with some important gypsy populations, mainly in the city of Kyustendil, the village of Gorni Lom and the city of Vidin. The percentage of the gypsy population (4.7%) is more than 3 times greater than in the Serbian part (1.4%) (IPA 2007).

Table 1. Life births and deaths in the Bulgarian side (upper table) and the Serbian side (lower table), (2010).

Bulgarian CBR	Births	Deaths	Births-Deaths	Deaths/Births ratio
Vidin	829	2399	-1570	2.89
Montana	1278	3166	-1888	2.48
Sofia	2151	4165	-2014	1.94
Pernik	1097	2393	-1296	2.18
Kyustendil	1097	2508	-1411	2.28
<i>Sofia city</i>	14886	14856	30	0.998
<i>Bulgaria</i>	75513	110165	-34652	1.46
Serbian CBR	Births	Deaths	Births-Deaths	Deaths/Births ratio
Bor	890	2273	-1383	2.55
Zaječar	863	2514	-1651	2.91
Pirot	630	1586	-956	2.51
Jablanica	1878	3516	-1638	1.87
Pćinja	2091	2456	-365	1.17
<i>Belgrade</i>	18262	20566	-2304	1.13
<i>Serbia</i>	68304	103211	-34907	1.51

There are also some villages with Vlach population in the region around Novo Selo (Koroutchev 2011).

The Serbian, Macedonian and Turkish diversity on the Bulgarian side of the border has a limited representation. There are only few Serbians and Macedonians in the biggest cities such as Kyustendil, Dragoman and Belogradchik (Gigovic 2010).

The negative demographic growth rate and the population ageing rate are the dominant characteristics of the population in the Bulgarian and Serbian border areas. The only exception of this trend is the province of Pćinja in Serbia (Table1) (Serbian ethnical composition 2002).

The reasons for this phenomenon are the lack of any perspectives for the young population and the consequent emigration to other regions or countries.

Since 1992 a strong migration process started in the Bulgarian part of the border mainly due to high unemployment levels in the region. It forms part of the massive migration at country level and of the brain drain tendency (Bulgarian natural migration 2011). There were no more restrictions to go abroad, the local economy went quickly down, the unemployment rate raised suddenly due to the closure of many factories and enterprises. The people decided to emigrate to other regions or countries for finding their place in the world.

The statistics of the mechanical growth rate at country level for 2011, corresponding to the external migration of the active Bulgarian population between 20 and 60 years old shows a clear tendency of emigration (Fig. 2).

This general tendency is confirmed by the internal migration process from the Bulgarian part of the border region. The migration from the north-western part, which is

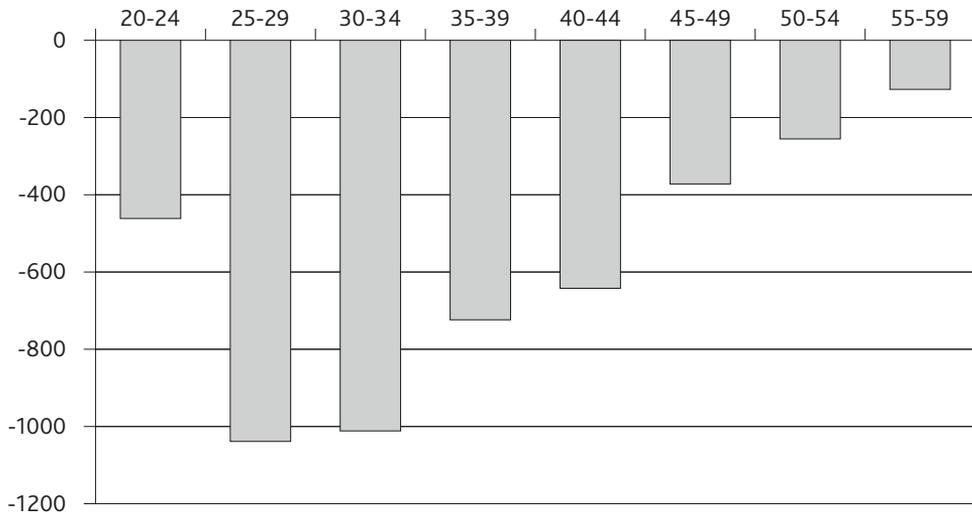


Figure 2. Mechanical growth rate of the active Bulgarian population, corresponding to 2011 (Bulgarian natural migration 2011).

he interesting for this study, corresponding to 2011, amounts to 12.200 people with the predominance of the migration flow towards the south-western part of the country. The reason for this specific internal migration is due to the fact that recent foreign investments have been initiated by the migration of many Greek small and medium enterprises to the south-western part of Bulgaria because of the severe economic crisis in Greece and the attractive low taxes (only 10%) in Bulgaria (Greece 2012).

The corresponding characteristics for the mechanic growth rate and the migration tendencies, corresponding to the Serbian part of the border region are similar, although one has to take into account the visa difficulties for the Serbian citizens.

As one can see, the migration independently of its character, internal or external, contributes to a further depopulation of the region, of a further collapse of the economy, to the aggravation of the aging demographic tendency and finally to the lack of any perspective for improvement in short range time scales.

Regarding the permeability of the border from this social and identity layers point of view, one could say that it is moderated due to some extend to the common ethnical basis and consciousness, although some more limited at communications level.

ECONOMY

Despite the existence of five border check points between Bulgaria and Serbia, the border is still regarded as a separating line because of the long period of isolation during the communism and the consequent socio-economic problems. Another reason for this isolation, already mention at the beginning, is purely geographical, mainly due to the mountainous and hilly character of the terrain and the underdeveloped transport infrastructure.

A common characteristic of the regions from both sides of the border is their low economic development, mainly represented by the trade and service sector, being clearly underdeveloped, compared to the rest of the territories. As a result, the cross-border cooperation is very limited, despite the existing regional development strategies and European economic programs in these regions.

The GDP is low compared to the rest of the European countries. In Serbia in 2009 it was 29.491 million euros (Serbian Institute for Statistics – GDP), meantime in Bulgaria it was 35.037 million euros (Bulgarian Institute for Statistics – GDP). A more stable recent tendency in the behavior is observed in the case of Bulgaria, mainly due to its adhesion to the EU and the corresponding European programs.

The industry on both sides of the border is mainly represented by the mining, being a leading sector in the past and still keeping its most important part in the regional industrial production. The most famous mining centers are Bor (Serbia) with the extraction of copper, Zaječar (Serbia) with the extraction of coal and quartz and Svođe and Pernik (Bulgaria), with the extraction of coal (IPA 2007).

In the Đerdap-Negotin area (Serbia), tourism is well developed because of the natural characteristics of the region. In the area of Negotin and especially around Rajac, wine production is the most important economical sector.

Further south, in the area around Zaječar and Knjaževac, the resort of Babin Zub and the agriculture are the main economical sectors outside the regional town, where services and, to some extent, industry are the most important economic sectors.

In the area of Dimitrovgrad, services and trade are the most important, due to the main border crossing of Gradina-Kalotina, while in Bosilegrad, the typical economy is mainly represented by agriculture and trade.

In the district of Vidin (Bulgaria), a tiny tourist industry as well as a service sector are the most important economic activities. Agriculture is mostly underdeveloped, characterized by fragmented land structure, lack of adequate machinery and investment and aging of the rural population. However, some big businesses from outside the region or from abroad are starting to invest into it. Hopefully, when the bridge between Vidin and Calafat (Romania) opens, the economic situation will improve by connecting Bulgaria with Central and Northern Europe in a quick way.

Further south, the small tourist investments around the summit of Kom are important for the local economy.

The border villages between Dragoman and the region of Kyustendil are mostly depopulated, with the remaining population practicing some subsistence farming.

Regarding the permeability of the border from the economic layer's, one could state that it is very limited and mainly based on some local trade and smuggling, which phenomena we explained in detail in the next section.

THE ECONOMY FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF THE CURRENT POPULATION

Eastern Serbia is one of the poorest regions in Serbia. North-western Bulgaria and especially the city and region of Vidin is the poorest region in Bulgaria and in the whole EU. Most of the people who inhabit the area live with difficulties (IPA 2007, Koroutchev 2011).

During the first years of the democracy in Bulgaria, most factories and agriculture were destroyed. Many factories were closed because of the low competitiveness of the products. Meantime there was a huge interest from part of the CEO's to buy the factories cheaply (during the privatization process) few years later. However, due to mismanagement and disputes, this did not happen most of the time and the factories remained closed (Koroutchev 2011).

In the interviews and field notes, taken during the field work, most of the people, especially on the Bulgarian side, expressed their pessimism on the democratic system of nowadays. They expressed their desire to return to a communist dictatorship (before 1989), mainly because during that period there was no unemployment, wages had a higher purchasing power and the public and social systems worked relatively well (Koroutchev 2011).

Nothing works here. There is nearly no production. There was a factory which produced rubber, where 1600 people worked. Now it was bought [privatized] and the few people who remain working there got their last pay in September last year. They did not receive a salary for a whole year. 100 meters away from here there is a business making clothes. The owner is a Greek. There is mobbing as much as you want there. If somebody gets ill, he or she is fired until he or she is able to work again and hired again then. They even don't pay the insurance for the period at which this person is ill. The salaries are 100-150 euros a month (male, 55 years old, Vidin, Bulgaria).

However, there is no way back. History has shown that the previous regime had no bases, it did not represent an economically stable system, it was far away from competitive productivity, it deprived people of political and economic freedom and it limited them within several inflexible directives and dogmas.

Fortunately, in Serbia democratic mismanagements did not happen in such a degree as in Bulgaria and people from the border region live relatively better compared to the people on the Bulgarian side, although the embargo, economic problems and hyperinflation during the Milosevic rule and NATO bombings have left a big toll on the local economy.

The economic situation depends on where are working. There are Copper, very little Gold, but the mining industry is working. Apart there is a jewelry factory that belongs to the State. I am electricity technician and for the moment I am satisfied from the situation (male, 50 years old, Serbia).

An important factor for the economies of both countries are the remittances sent from the emigrants living and working abroad, even from countries which now have financial problems like Greece or Spain. Remittances are a way to measure the ties between the emigrants and their families and their home country. It helps local development and it is an expression as well of the potential interests of the emigrants to develop something at home if they return in the future.

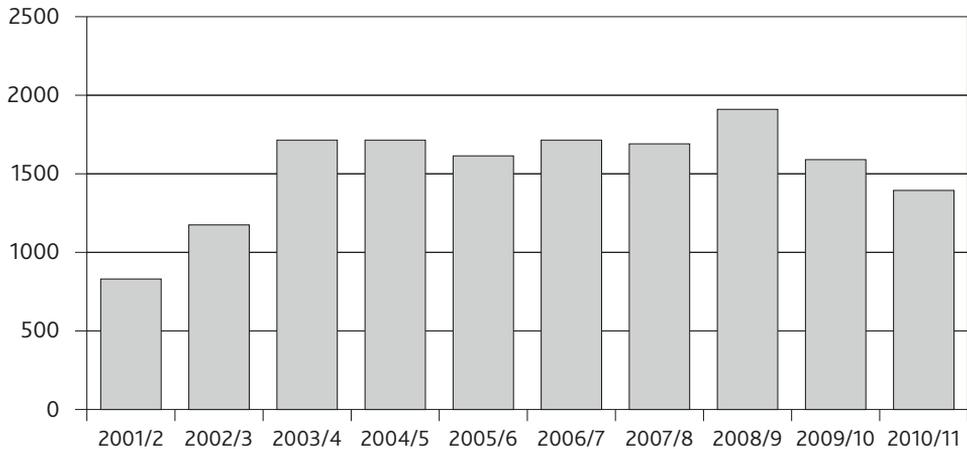


Figure 3a. Bulgarian inflow remittances in US\$ million (Remittances 2010).

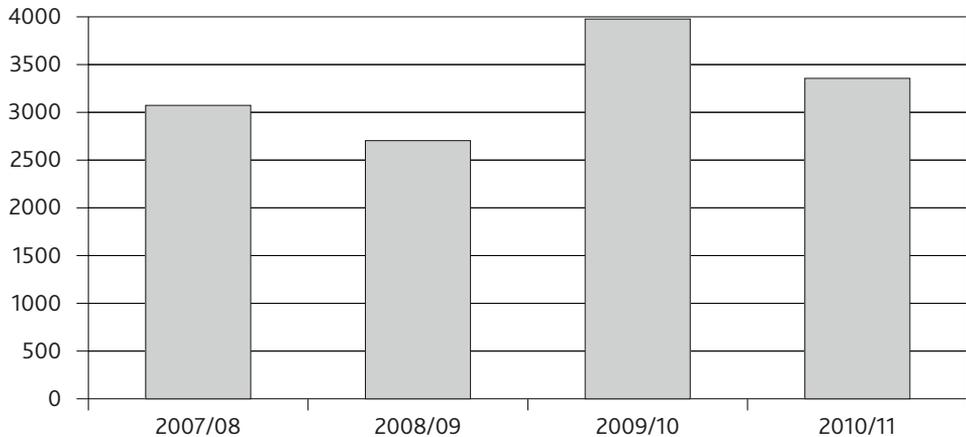


Figure 3b. Serbian inflow remittances in US\$ million (Remittances 2010).

In Bulgaria remittances in 2010 constituted a total of 3.3% of the GDP, while in Serbia in 2010 they constituted a total of 10.4% of the corresponding GDP.

The time evolution of the Bulgarian inflow remittances (Fig. 3a) shows a nearly constant behavior between 2004 and 2009 with the tendency to decline due to the financial crisis in the South-European countries, where the Bulgarian Diaspora is mostly concentrated.

The time evolution of the Serbian inflow remittances (Fig. 3b), known since 2007, show a similar behavior to the Bulgarian one with the tendency of decrease during the latest year due to the global financial crisis and the reduction of the amount of remittances the emigrants are sending to their families in Serbia.

The average salaries per month (before taxes and contributions) in the Bulgarian part, corresponding to September 2011, run from 476 euros in the case of the city of Sofia to 246 euros in the case of the province of Vidin (Bulgarian average salary 2011). The

corresponding average salaries in the Serbian part run from 655 euros for the case of the city of Belgrade to 397 euros in the case of the province of Jablanica (Serbian average salary 2011). Regarding the prices, it results that these salaries are not sufficient to reach the end of the month if there are no additional incomes as remittances received, renting a property or just work in a second or even a third place, which in these countries is allowed. Otherwise, the real economic situation of the people would be very bad.

Those, who can not access to the labor market, which is mainly developed in the biggest cities, have very small incomes. These are especially the people living in the poorest parts of the border region. Only few of them are able to afford a car, and due to the fact that the public transportation is highly inefficient, people have great difficulties to go and go back from their villages, where they usually practice subsistence farming.

However, the current situation of the labor market does not enhance the porosity of the border with respect to the migration between both parts of the border region. Bulgaria belongs to the EU and Serbia not. There are strict restrictions with respect to the labor regulation between the two countries that make the economic permeability very limited.

Today very few people go from Majdanpek (Serbia) go to Bulgaria, because of paperwork and documents. The Bulgarian go there only transit (male, 50 years old, Majdanpek Serbia).

The mobbing attitudes at the working place and delay of payment for several months or even a year are very common (Koroutchev 2011). Because of this, people at their working place are more worried about how to manage to reach the end of the month. This triggers very low productivity and a negative attitude towards the work. The very low income of the local population leads to low consumption, which is closely related to the very high unemployment in some places (Koroutchev 2011). Low consumption triggers loss of clients and markets and consequently higher unemployment.

Officially in April 2011, the unemployment in Serbia was 22.2%. The region of Eastern and Southern Serbia had the highest unemployment in the whole country with 24.8%. Unemployment affected mostly the people aged between 18-24 and 25-34. Nationwide the corresponding unemployment rate for these age groups for 2011 was 49.9% and 30.3%, respectively (Serbian unemployment rate 2011).

In Bulgaria in 2010 the average unemployment rate was 10.2%. It affected mostly the population within the same age interval as before, 15-24 and 25-34 with a nationwide rate of unemployment of 23.2% and 11.4%, respectively (Bulgarian unemployment rate 2011).

The similar unemployment situation in both sides does not enhance the permeability across the border and the young people from both sides are more willing to choose other surviving strategies instead of looking for a job in the neighboring country.

The unemployed and those who are seasonally employed (on the weekends and holidays) usually leave the towns and cities and relocate back to their villages or holiday homes, where they can do some subsistence farming which allows them to survive (Koroutchev 2011).

Another way the people try to face the situation is not paying their bills (usually those small salaries are just the amount of the monthly bills for gas, phone, electricity,

heating wood, school taxes, rent...), but then they risk their properties being confiscated. Most people, who have an opportunity, take out loans, especially those who are on a public-sector job with a middle and high salary (Koroutchev 2011). However this could lead to a risky situation if some perturbations in the market occurs, especially now with the severe financial crisis in the EU and the strong decrease of investments.

Even people who should be able to live well from their salaries are forced to do part-time farming in their free time (usually all the weekends) in order to save money from food to be able to reach the end of the month. This worsens their professional standards as they spend time and efforts instead of concentrating on their current work.

Because of this controversial economic situation, people from the border area who want more than subsistence have two choices: emigrate or smuggle.

Emigration is a difficult task and not for everyone. There is no universal design to draw a successful emigration profile. It strongly depends on many objective and subjective factors such as education level, professional expertise, personal characteristics, country potential and policy as well as many other parameters.

The general tendency seems to be that people from the Bulgarian side are more likely to emigrate than those from the Serbian side (Koroutchev 2011). Nowadays, most of the Serbs usually prefer to emigrate to North America, instead of Western Europe. The Bulgarians usually emigrate to countries of Western Europe, such as Spain and Italy, or Southern, such as Greece and Cyprus. However, due to the financial crisis, these countries have high unemployment rates, which make emigration much more difficult.

Emigration between the two countries is very limited and mainly due to the ethnic Bulgarians, living in the Western Outlands, who are interested to trade or studying Bulgaria. This makes the border relatively less porous, compared to other borders in the vicinity (for example the Bulgarian-Greek or Bulgarian-Turkish border)

According to the opinion of most of the population from the border area, an important part of the income of some of the population comes from smuggling (Koroutchev 2011).

The border could be considered in this sense as a place, well defined in location, giving the opportunity to smugglers and the customs officers to make a living in order to survive.

Historically, the biggest smuggling scenario took place when the UN imposed a petrol embargo against Yugoslavia, starting in 1992. During that time in Serbia a petrol smuggler earned more than 500 times more in one month than an university professor (Koroutchev 2011).

Nowadays, smuggling is mainly done with tobacco, as cigarettes in Serbia are about two times cheaper than in Bulgaria. The income from smuggling could be regarded as the biggest factor in avoiding a total collapse of the economy of the border region and a factor to increase up to some extend the permeability of the border, although in some illegal way and against the current jurisdiction in both country.

FUTURE ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES OF THE BORDER REGION. COOPERATION ACROSS THE BORDER

Despite the above mentioned severe economic problems the people are facing everyday, there are many resources with big potential for future economic development in the border area that could offer new opportunities and challenges.

Tourism is one of them. The most successful tourist developments are located in Babin Zub and Đerdap (in Serbia) and Belogradchik (in Bulgaria). The presence of important ski and mountain resorts in Eastern Serbia, hiking possibilities, almost virgin nature in whole border area, rocks, fortress and thermal springs in Northwestern Bulgaria, make together the region potentially very attractive for development of eco-tourism (Koroutchev 2011).

From the other side, the Bulgarian-Serbian meetings at the border are an important stimulus which helps to strengthen the ties between the people from both sides of the border. Since at least 1956, there have been annual meetings at the border at several different locations. Most of them are not being held since the arrival of democracy, but some are still active. These meetings help the development of the tourist potential of the border area, the exchange of traditions and ideas between people of all ages, the taking of decisions about problems of common interest for all citizens living in the border area, and the help young people to know and understand each other. The meetings stimulate as well to enhance the permeability of the border from the point of view of the social, cultural and identity layer, as it enhances the communication, the cultural homogeneity and conscience.

These tendencies are also expressed by the cross-border cooperation, expressed as well by the common cultural heritage, cultural institutes and centers, which are potential opportunities for cooperation and interaction in terms of language education and common projects (Stojkov et al. 2008).

Cross-border cooperation exists also under the European IPA Cross-border Program (IPA 2007) by helping to develop an efficient infrastructure and enabling social and economic development on both sides of the border. The existence of these economic bases for a cross-border cooperation open solid ways for enhancing the permeability of the border regarding the economic, legal and political aspects. Some of the future projects will be the construction of the Sofia-Niš motorway and the strengthening of the border security, against illegal migration, human trafficking, smuggling and customs violations.

CONCLUSIONS

The border region between Bulgaria and Serbia possesses important economic potential. It is located in a strategic positions and plays the role of a bridge between the Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans, that makes it suitable for the successful development of the economy and the cross-border cooperation.

Apart it has an almost vergine nature that makes it attractive for the development of the tourism in that part of Europe.

However, these potentials are not enough appreciated by the governments and the western economies, they are not developed and the region is identified as one of the poorest parts of Europe and the poorest one of the EU.

Despite the existence of five border crossing check points, the border is still regarded as a separating line due to the extent mountainous and hilly character of the terrain and the underdeveloped transport infrastructure. Important reasons for this situation play as well the long period of isolation during the communist regime, the consequent socio-economic problems, the way the democratic transition has been done, the recent war and embargo in Yugoslavia and the lack of serious interests of the western economic societies to invest into the region.

Most of the people of the border region survive with difficulties. People have to work at several places in order to have the necessary income to reach the end of the month. Those, who cannot do it, decide to migrate to other country region or to leave the country in searching their host country in the World. Some others decide not to pay their bills, but this is not a solution of the problems, as soon or late they are forced to do it. Otherwise their properties are confiscated. Other people decide to smuggle and to live because of the price difference of the goods from both side of the border. Smuggling is one of the very few real functioning economic sectors in the region, taking advantage of the presence of the border and the contact of two different economies.

The socio-economic situation of the border region has serious demographic problems, due to the ageing of the population. The majority of the young population emigrates and the villages become less and less attractive. If there is no serious and fast change, the region will become depopulated and people would not believe anymore in the opportunities and in the values that the democracy could offer, a situation which will compromise the viability of building strong democratic governance.

Tourism and eco-tourism are a good perspective for the future. The border region has an important natural potential for their development. Some intentions are made in this direction. However, investments are needed in order to develop them. From the other side people in the border and in a broader area are becoming poorer and poorer and this poses the question if really local tourist activity will give serious income if it is developed in depth.

The future cross-border cooperation, supported by national and European funds, as well as the active cooperation of young generations from both sides of the border, are building the basis of the missing infrastructure, the intercultural exchange and education, which are very necessary for the future economic and social development of the zone.

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