

The role of EU programmes in stimulating entrepreneurship in rural regions: A viewpoint from Bulgaria*

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Abstract

The paper aims to examine rural entrepreneurship and the way it is enhanced by the EAFRD programme. The specific focus is on the perceptions and entrepreneurial behaviour of beneficiaries of hospitality and rural tourism projects in Bulgaria. The findings imply that participants demonstrate various entrepreneurship initiatives and call for closer cooperation with the local institutions, in order to maximize the overall effects. Involvement of higher public authorities, or programmes (such as EAFRD) considerably enhances rural entrepreneurship by providing a chance for potential entrepreneurs to start-up their own venture, and by determining general goals, which will affect both people and local institutions.

Keywords: *EU programme, EAFRD, Bulgaria, rural entrepreneurship, rural tourism*

JEL Codes: L26, Q26, Q28, R58

Introduction and overview

Entrepreneurship as a phenomenon has attracted the interest of policymakers and public authorities for many years, because of its profound positive effect on employment and economic growth. Usually, the greatest efforts are directed to rural areas and peripheral regions, which by default face significant challenges in their development, compared to urban regions. The launch of different subsidizing programmes in those regions have similar aims (Berk /Akdemir, 2006), such as improving infrastructure, the alleviation of poverty, and the increase of incomes/living standards, all of which could be achieved by stimulating endogenous initiative of the local population (Barke/Newton, 1997), often addressed as rural entrepreneurship.

Rural entrepreneurship encompasses the typical features of entrepreneurship in recognizing and discovering opportunities (Koppl, 2007; Shane/Venkataraman, 2000), establishment of new enterprises (Low/MacMillan, 1988; Priestley, 2013) and enhancing the process of innovation and creation of original ideas (Gafni/Gluck, 2014; Baron, 2014). However, all of them take place within the specific context of rural areas (Stathopoulou/Psaltopoulos/Skuras, 2004). Apart from proper utilization of local resources, Korsgaard, Müller and Tanvig (2015) con-

* Received: 23.7.2018, accepted: 25.10.2018, 0 revisions.

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sider rural entrepreneurs as much more locally bound and involved with the indigenous culture, traditions, and customs. Thus, rural entrepreneurs contribute not only by fostering economic growth but also by revalorising the place and creating value for it (Korsgaard/Müller/Tanvig, 2015).

Rural entrepreneurship enhances regional development by stimulating internal potential rather than relying on external support. Still, it is the local population's attitude and propensity to entrepreneurship that also play a crucial part for local region development (Coduras/Saiz-Alvarez/Ruiz, 2016). Many governmental institutions, non-governmental organizations and local associations recognise the vital role of rural entrepreneurship for its potentially positive impact upon local welfare (European Network for Rural Development, 2012; Stark/Markley, 2008). A main focus of above organizations' projects is assisting locals in understanding the challenges and overcoming the obstacles in realizing the entrepreneurial ideas (European Network for Rural Development, 2011). Deliberate funding (e.g. The European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development – EAFRD), public-private partnership (Björstig/Sandström, 2017) and numerous subsidizing programmes endeavour to trigger the entrepreneurial spirit from outside and in this way to stimulate the local initiatives. However, there are rare studies on the general output, efficiency and appropriateness of those programmes (Pato/Figueiredo, 2015), especially related to the anticipated effects on the entrepreneurial behaviour of the local population. Furthermore, empirical literature on rural entrepreneurship has focused mainly on developed countries (Pato/Teixeira, 2014), which are also located in the northern and central part of the EU, and we call for attention to the newer members of the union, most of which have peripheral location, and experience long-term problems with the reviving and developing of their rural territories.

In this regard, the aim of the current study is to examine how the EAFRD programme had influenced the motivation for entrepreneurship in the rural regions of Bulgaria, with a specific focus on the beneficiaries of hospitality and rural tourism projects. Since it is beyond our research scope to measure the overall effect of the programme, we focus on participants' perceptions and attitudes towards the projected/expected benefits for the area, especially in the context of entrepreneurial activities and endogenous development (Barke/Newton, 1997).

Background and review

The origin of ideas and individual proactive behaviour appear fundamental for entrepreneurial activities. Researchers find it impossible to determine the exact motivation and drivers that urge people to become entrepreneurs (Coduras/Saiz-Alvarez/Ruiz, 2016), although some research have been implemented in this direction (Paunescu et al, 2018; Coduras et al., 2016). Besides the internal psychological and personal traits, the socio-economic background of the entrepreneurs

also matters. Education, specialised entrepreneurial skills, work status, personal income and country of origin might have their impact on the readiness to become entrepreneur, but do not guarantee it (Coduras et al., 2016). Paunescu et al (2018) report that people in Bulgaria and Romania have the lowest propensity for entrepreneurship, among a sample of 10 Eastern European countries. Moreover, Bulgarians are motivated to start themselves a new venture mostly with the prospect of second income, but not for self-fulfilment or to realize their own ideas, things cited by all the rest of the Central and Eastern European countries (Paunescu et al, 2018). Therefore, it is essential for the local community to start recognizing the necessity of entrepreneurship activities for the overall improvement of their region.

The success of regional development, especially of a remote area lies predominantly in the purview of the local population who may collaborate with each other and build strong networks with all involved stakeholders (Woolcock/Narayan, 2000). This is valid both for the private enterprises, and for the local authorities and professional organisations, that might have a stake in the regional development. It is part of the social environment, necessary to produce local entrepreneurs, also addressed as social capital (Stathopoulou/Psaltopoulos/Skuras, 2004). Risk aversion, passivity and over-reliance on the public sector (Kasabov, 2016) seem to be the main hindering factors for the economic failure of a region, whereas appropriate education, cooperation, transport and communication and access to credit (Alemu/Adesina, 2017) are among the drivers for local growth.

The other substantial driver of entrepreneurship are the external motivators – those might be governmental programmes, projects, regional initiatives, public-private enterprises, etc. (European Network for Rural Development, 2011). Usually such incentives devote considerable efforts to develop the social environment of particular regions and thus increase the public's welfare. Intentional policies are directed to enhance employment and stimulate entrepreneurship by providing initial financial support. They rely on the multiplicative effect of the programmes that would further improve the competitive position of the region and would alleviate poverty. However, the direct subsidies not always achieve the projected aims. Skuras, Dimara and Stathopoulou (2003) report that higher funding invokes a substitution of labour-by-capital effect, i.e. people prefer to avoid new employment, but to invest in a capital-intensive project, thus skipping additional risk and training. In a similar vein Bergstrom (2000) found a positive effect from subsidization only in the first year, or during the grant period, while afterwards results indicate to be mostly negative. Those controversial findings seriously question the default goal of governmental and other institutional initiatives to stimulate certain region's entrepreneurship culture by financial injections. Moreover, since the expected multiplier effects do not really happen (e.g. increased employment, increased competitiveness of the local economy, etc.), policy makers need more serious post-factum studies of the overall outcome

from funding programmes, in order to assess their appropriateness and projected success.

A good example in this context is the EU programme for revival and economic diversification of rural regions, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). For the period (2007–2013) EAFRD focused not only on the development of competitive and innovative agriculture but also emphasized the improvement of quality of life and diversification of economic activities in rural areas (European Commission. Agriculture and Rural Development, 2017 a). Our attention is specifically directed to the last objective, which was further elaborated under Axis 3. The measures covered the support of job creation outside of agriculture, generating non-agricultural activities and support of micro-business entrepreneurship. Thus, priority was given to emerging business niches like information technologies, innovative production, the use of renewable energy sources, and ultimately, rural tourism and related activities (EU-Lex, 2012). Through all eligible non-agricultural activities, EAFRD actually aimed to stimulate entrepreneurial initiatives in rural regions. Moreover, certain financial support was provided for the commencement of new enterprises and exploiting the existing opportunities in those areas. However, there are few, if any, ex-post studies to evaluate the output from that programme (Pato/Teixeira, 2014), and none of them deal with Bulgaria.

Empirical setting

Bulgaria's rural areas encompass 81% from the whole territory, and 42% of the Bulgarians live in such areas (National Strategy Plan for Rural Development of Bulgaria, 2008). Rural regions are usually located far from urban centres and typically have poor infrastructure, poverty, low economic activity and limited access to basic services – a description, which is valid not only for Bulgaria, but for other European countries as well (Holland/Burian/Dixey, 2003; Iorio/Corsale, 2010; Baležentis/Kriščiukaitienė/Baležentis/Garland, 2012). Often those regions are depopulated and suffer from low economic, social and political initiatives (Turlakova/Slavova/Ivanova/Genov, 2015). Consistent with the general policy of the EU, the Bulgarian government has elaborated the National Strategy Plan for Rural Development of Bulgaria for the same programme period (2007–2013), which has represented the local interpretation and application of the EAFRD objectives (National Strategy Plan for Rural Development of Bulgaria, 2008).

Methodology

The research population encompasses only those beneficiaries who decided to develop tourism or related activities in their rural regions, during the 2007–2013 programme period. Rural tourism has been often cited as a major agent of local

development (Iorio/Corsale, 2010), contributing to a number of benefits for the local community – economic growth, the provision of additional income, increases in social contacts, opportunities to re-evaluate local heritage and the elevation of the economic value of specific indigenous products (Roberts/Hall, 2001). In addition, rural tourism has low entry barriers and is inherently connected to the agricultural industry for the provision of food and organic products (Dimitrovski/Todorović/Valjarević, 2012), thus allowing people a comparatively easy convert to rural tourism businesses.

As a main source of our study, we took the official information from the Bulgarian State Fund Agriculture, which is the leading institution, dealing with the distribution of EU funds. There were 2 lists with beneficiaries, who had applied for subsidiaries on Measures 311 (Diversification of non-agricultural activities), 312 (Support for the creation and development of micro-enterprises) and 313 (Promotion of tourists' activities). The first list comprised of all projects (not only those, related with tourism) and the company-beneficiaries for all three measures (containing 4440 entries). The second list was focused only on the tourism projects, but without beneficiary names, only project titles and geographic location (containing 738 entries). Unfortunately, there has not been a full, structured list of all beneficiaries with their names, projects and contacts. Our official request for contact details of the beneficiaries towards the Bulgarian State Fund Agriculture, as well as to the Ministry of Agriculture, was rejected. Therefore, we matched the two lists and created a new one, in which we inserted the contact data (e-mails, addresses, telephones), which we were able to find on the internet, searching by the names of the projects, their beneficiaries and in the Bulgarian Commercial Register. Finally, from a total of 738 projects, dealing with tourism activities in rural regions, we identified 420, and found contact data for about 105 of them – those were the research units.

In the current study we considered qualitative methods as the most appropriate, as they allow us a deeper exploration of the issues and may reveal unexpected themes. Furthermore, the small research population (105 identified projects) does not allow quantitative analysis.

The research took place in the period July – August 2016. We used convenience sampling – we contacted the beneficiaries by e-mail or directly at least three times, and finally conducted 14 semi-structured interviews with those, who agreed to participate. All respondents were owners of their properties. The beneficiaries live mainly in the mountain regions of Rila, Pirin, the Rhodopes mountain, the Central Balkans and the Shumen region, which traditionally endure all typical features of rural regions. All participants were given details about the aims of the study and were informed about the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. Table 1 represents the main characteristics of the sample.

Table 1. Characteristics of the sample

<i>Code</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age (years)</i>
R1	Female	18–30
R2	Male	41–50
R3	Female	18–30
R4	Male	41–50
R5	Female	18–30
R6	Male	31–40
R7	Female	31–40
R8	Male	41–50
R9	Female	31–40
R10	Male	41–50
R11	Female	51–60
R12	Female	31–40
R13	Female	31–40
R14	Female	Over 60 years

The interview questions were grouped into several sections. The first group of questions covered the whole submission process of the applications for financial support and the relationship with the involved institutions, i.e. the Bulgarian State Fund Agriculture, local municipalities, the Ministry of Agriculture and other consultancy agencies. The main idea was to check participants' perceptions of the way the programme application was organized and implemented, and in this regard, of how their entrepreneurial motivation was encouraged. Several questions dealt with the specific aspects of the hospitality projects, in order to study participants' involvement in this new business. The last questions asked were about the perceived benefits from the EU programme and participants' attitude towards current and future EU initiatives.

After collection of the data, it was transcribed and coded according to the content and emerging patterns. The analysis of the interviews was focused more on the participants' entrepreneurial experience and their attitude towards it, rather than on the particular type of activities performed (tourism and hospitality services). Still, the tourism aspect was considered in the study as one of the most popular ways to start a new venture (Baležentis, et al, 2012; Contini/Scarpellini/Polidori, 2009; Iorio/Corsale, 2010), and participants' involvement in this business further demonstrate whether they have evolved as entrepreneurs.

Results and Discussion

The first part of the interviews dealt with the application process for the EAFRD, which includes constant interactions between the involved institutions

and the respondents. The success of a campaign often lies in the initially founded relationships among the participants. Therefore, we asked the respondents about their perceptions, connected with the application procedures and the consequent communication with the relevant institutions. The answers were quite diverse, and it was impossible to detect any repeating opinions. Half of the participants (7 out of 14) shared that access and amount of information seemed convenient to find and understand, whereas the preparation of the pack of documents for the submission appeared as more complex. The difficulties in the application procedures forced many of the participants to seek for external assistance. More than a half of the respondents (8 out of 14) note that they used the services of a consultant agency for the preparation of the application. This fact implies that those interviewed were determined in their intentions to start-up a project with EU programmes, and did not give up because of administrative barriers. As Turlakova and Slavova (2012) note, persistence is a typical feature of entrepreneurs, as well as their search to find solutions for the emerging problems (Turlakova/Slavova, 2012), and similar entrepreneurial approach was demonstrated by the participants from the very beginning of their ventures.

Additionally, very few of the beneficiaries (4 out of 14) mentioned having had adequate help from the institutions (the Bulgarian State Fund Agriculture, the Ministry of Agriculture and the local municipalities). On the contrary, one of the respondents (R11) intentionally stressed the fact, that in her opinion “*Local institutions are not competent and we are not satisfied with the provided information*” (R11). Local institutions have an essential role as facilitators of the entrepreneurial environment (Komppula, 2014) and the established positive relationship between the entrepreneurs and the administration provides a reliable ground for the former to evolve further. In this regard, institutions and entrepreneurs should connect to work closer for mutual success.

In terms of the motivation of participants, all participants expressed their initial expectations for increased revenues, improved standard of life and gaining additional skills and competences (R5, R14). The majority also appreciated the chance to enter the hospitality business, with the special remark of R12 that “*all [her] involvement in the EU programmes is connected with the development of tourism-related activities*”. Indeed, only two of the respondents (R1 and R3) do not offer any additional services at their properties. The rest of the beneficiaries provide various activities to entertain their guests and to generate additional income – fishing, hunting, ATV driving, hiking, participation in agricultural activities, SPA services, pool facilities and the practising of traditional crafts. It is essential to note, that in most of the cases the entrepreneurial motivation goes beyond the purely economic benefits, but rather aims at “*revival of indigenous culture and traditional crafts*” (R7, R9, R10), “*recognizable local tourist product*” (R7 and R14), “*build awareness of the area as a tourist destination*” (R5, R7, R14). Apparently, the European Commission addressed those initiatives, since

the new programme period for rural areas support (2014–2020) is intended to support predominantly the socio-economic development of rural areas via upgrading the already existing/created general environment for non-agricultural activities development. (European Commission. Agriculture and Rural Development, 2017 b; Turlakova/Slavova, 2014).

An interesting motivational factor was cited by R7, R8, R9, R10 and R14, who applied for the EAFRD in order to utilize already existing properties, located in rural areas. Almost the same people (R3, R7, R10, R13 and R14) also mentioned that the programmes appeared to them as a chance to practise their hobby (hospitality business). Some participants want to develop further their business and to get certified as green and eco-houses (R11). Another owner (R8) has returned back after emigrating to Greece, only to apply for the EU funds and start a venture in Bulgaria. In this regard, EU programmes may be considered also as a means to alleviate the trend towards emigration and to attract local people stay at their home regions.

Considering all motivating factors, cited above, we can identify various forms of entrepreneurial initiative and creativity, demonstrated by the participants. They do not only develop opportunities but also create new ones (Shane/Venkataraman, 2000). In this particular case, the beneficiaries did not rely entirely on the conventional subsidy to implement traditional hospitality business but invented additional original activities, which brought certain revenues to the venture, apart from the core hospitality services. It is important to note, that most of the participants had introduced practices, which would be successful in the long term. This fully embodies the idea of Korsgaard et al (2015) for a value-added extra entrepreneurial initiative that transforms the space into place. The best example comes from R14 – she enlarged her old-style house with a new wing, decorated in the same style. Besides, a small museum was established to present the local traditions and customs. The whole project, though, still provides full comfort for the guests. *“The EU programmes definitely stimulated the local economy and awareness of the destination, but still need to enhance the knowledge about the local culture and traditions”* (R14). She has complemented the primary purpose of the EU programmes by emphasizing on the importance of local authenticity, history and attractions.

In line with the initial objectives of the EAFRD for improving residents' life in rural regions there comes the upgrade and reconstruction of the infrastructure. The poor road conditions, electricity and water supply have been pointed out as a leading issue among the respondents in their overall evaluation of the business environment. R13 complained about *“...serious problems with electricity, water and garbage – there is not regular provision, which is responsibility of the municipality”*. The same problems were cited by R8 and R9. Individual entrepreneurial efforts obviously are not enough for the total revitalization of the

rural areas. R8 added that “*such problems discourage tourists from repeat visit and deteriorate the image of the guest house, and also of the destination*”. This is an example of the collaboration with the local institutions in the entrepreneurial motivation and initiatives. Establishment of good relations with the local administration does not guarantee success for the entrepreneur. There should be a cumulative endeavour from all local stakeholders, in order to ensure growth and prosperity. Likewise, Dimitrovski et al (2012) and Contini et al (2014) derived the same implications from the rural areas development in Serbia and Tuscany, respectively. The problems affect not only the technical infrastructure but also the marketing activities. R14 called attention to the participation of the local municipality in the promotion of the guest houses: “*The municipality does not care for the guest houses – there is not even information about them on the official municipality web site*”. Considering the fact that all participants are inexperienced in tourism and related activities, they tend to rely on the continuous support of the institutions once they have helped with the initial project funding. A similar situation was found in Lithuania, where the entrepreneurs asked for appropriate marketing activities on an institutional level (Balezentis et al, 2012).

Along with the traditionally expected benefits from the entrepreneurship like increased revenues and employment, the interviewees appreciated the opportunities for new social interactions, as well as learning new competences and skills in the process of development of the hospitality properties. Their responses entirely go in line with the socio-psychological flow of entrepreneurial studies and the view that entrepreneurs are social actors, and their behaviour should consider not only the economic output (Koppl, 2007).

The entrepreneurial enthusiasm of the participants can also be notified in the external evaluation of their business. The guest houses they developed perform excellently and some of them were rated above 9.5 according to the Booking.com ranking (R9 and R12). In addition, the property of R12 provides high comfort and luxury, which exceeds the regular level of a guest house category. The owner (R12) shared that she had extra audit control procedures of the project, just because of her lavish property. Since in Bulgaria there were cases of EU funding misuse (Capital, 2015), the controlling institutions started to re-audit any suspicious projects. Nevertheless, the notorious cases restrain the entrepreneurial initiatives, because they discredit both EU programmes and all their participants.

Concluding remarks

Rural entrepreneurship proves in general its positive impact both on a regional economic and social development, as well as on the personal initiative and entrepreneurial spirit. The examined case of beneficiaries from the EAFRD programme in Bulgaria only reconfirms the validity of this statement. Despite some external funding was provided to encourage the rural development, the main fo-

cus of entrepreneurial success lies within the established relationships between local stakeholders, i.e. both local entrepreneurs and institutions should cooperate and work together for mutual goals in order to maximize the overall effect. In addition, a major implication from the study emphasizes on the provision of proper conditions for the entrepreneurs – all respondents confirmed that an improved infrastructure, both technical and social, would further boost the entrepreneurial initiatives. The involvement of public authorities, or programmes (like EAFRD) considerably enhances rural entrepreneurship by providing a chance for potential entrepreneurs to start-up their own venture, and by determining general goals, which affect both people and local institutions. Apparently, an initial financial boost is an important factor for the potential entrepreneurs, to dare to start. The most important evidence from the study is that all participants firmly claimed that their entrepreneurial spirit has been enhanced by the EU projects and funding, and all of them (without any exception) would participate again in similar initiatives in the future. Finally, the received feedback from the beneficiaries would serve to the institutions to improve their future projects in terms of the application process, interim procedures and communication with the applicants.

The main limitation of the study is also its main direction for future research: a larger sample should be examined and additional study on the local authorities' role in the indigenous entrepreneurial activities should be conducted. The ultimate survival of the subsidized ventures appears as another track for further exploration – how they perform after the end of the funding, if the entrepreneurs enlarge their activities, etc.

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