

# **“THE GRAVEYARD IS THE BIGGEST NEIGHBOURHOOD”: EXPERIENCE OF AGEING AND SOCIAL SUPPORT IN THE DEPOPULATING VILLAGE OF BANIA, PANAGYURISHTE**

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*This paper deals with the experience of ageing, as well as the structure and perceptions on the social network of elderly in the depopulating village of Bania near Panagyurishte. Results show that the process of ageing is perceived rather negatively. The older villagers suffer from multiple problems such as poverty, impaired health combined with low health care quality, and loneliness. The presence of death and several negative stereotypes of older people have also significantly contributed to the negative experience of ageing. The positive features of ageing are the satisfaction of retirement, as well as the joy of caring for children and grandchildren.*

*The social network size of elderly in Bania is smaller than that of elderly elsewhere. This is especially so in winters, when those living only temporary in the village return to their city lives. The villagers have, though, a strong sense of community, they are well connected and mutually supportive. Adult children, together with spouses, are perceived as the most important source of social support. However, when adult children do not live close by, neighbours have partially overtaken the role of supporting the adult children's parents.*

**Key words:** experience, ageing, social support, social networks, Bania

## **INTRODUCTION**

Ageing in Central and Eastern Europe, in terms of both demographic and societal change, is seen as more difficult than it is in the older member states since it is closely interwoven with the difficult transition to market economy (Botev, 2012; Hoff, 2008; Korinek, 2009; Petrov, 2007; World Bank, 2007). On the one hand, the economic and social upheaval contributed to the so-called demographic crisis in the region, where low fertility and high emigration considerably reinforced the ageing of the population (Hoff, 2007). On the other hand, the collapse of institutions, which had ensured older adults' well-being in the past, led to decreased chances of experiencing the positives of ageing at present (Korinek, 2009).

Building upon the premise that the “experiences of ageing find expression in the set of positive and negative meanings that people attach and ascribe to the process” (Heikkinen, 2004, p. 573), this paper seeks to reveal what are the perceived positive and negative features of becoming older in the depopulating village of Bania near Panagyurishte. Secondly, while bearing in mind that the depopulation process often

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leads to a rupture of social networks (Ni Laoire, 2001), the study aims to examine the structure and perceptions on the social network of elderly in Bania. The research presented here represents one of the first such attempts to explore the ‘lived experiences’ of ageing in rural Bulgaria, and the chosen methodology is for the most part qualitative. The literature review presented below is, however, largely based on quantitative research results, which is a reflection of the excess of quantitative over qualitative ageing research. This excess was noticed as early as 1981, when Cherry Russell argued that researchers failed to “assign a due weight to the perceptions and experiences of elderly people themselves” (p.173). Twenty-six years later she continues to suggest that although the need for people’s views has been better acknowledged now, gerontology still treats older people as an object rather than a subject.

### *Ageing from a life-course and individual perspective*

Within the life-course discourse, ‘being old’ is seen as a stage of life. The individual ageing starts when one is born but begins to develop progressively in the sixties, when retirement as well as many other major physical, psychological and social changes occur (Uhlenberg, 1992). Results from the Eurobarometer survey of late 2011 reveal that 63,9 years is the age when the citizens of the 27 European member states consider themselves as being old (Eurostat, 2012).

According to Lazarus and Lazarus (2006) the features of the individual ageing and the changes that accompanied it can be negative and positive, though no strict distinction between both is really possible. Some of the positives of ageing are the satisfaction of retirement, especially when there is an alternative to work; the joy of caring for children and grandchildren; the potential for making desirable changes in oneself; and the acquired wisdom. On the other hand, some of the negatives of ageing include an increasing awareness of one’s death; the experience of death of family members and friends; an increasing impairment of health; and an increasing intergenerational gap due to social change (Lazarus and Lazarus, 2006).

In Bulgaria, empirical findings reveal a tendency towards a negative portraying of the process of becoming older. Research highlights various problems among elderly, such as poverty, low health care quality, loneliness, and social pessimism. These are separately discussed below.

#### *Poverty*

Within the European Union, Bulgaria, along with Latvia, Cyprus and Romania, has one of the highest poverty rates among elderly, as well as the highest proportion of people aged 65 years and over, who experience severe material deprivations (Botev, 2012; Eurostat, 2011). In rural Bulgaria about 40 percent of the pensioners reported that they cannot afford to pay their bills and buy prescribed medicines. Because of insufficient financial means and an irregular transport they have since a long time also desisted from going on vacation or simply to the city to visit their kin (Dobрева, 2005).

#### *Low health care quality*

Low income is not the only reason because of which the Bulgarian peasants often remain medically untreated. This problem is deeply rooted in