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THE FRAGILE COMMUNITIES IN BULGARIA – EXISTING CAPACITY AND PROSPECTS FOR DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: *This paper aims at identifying the existing capacity among the inhabitants of three fragile communities in Bulgaria and to highlight the prospects for their socio-economic development. The results of a conducted under an Erasmus+ funded project survey and organised semi-structured interviews with members of the three fragile communities selected to participate in the project in the country, namely: the town of Knezha, the town of Roman and the village of Dolna Beshovitsa, are presented, discussed and analysed. The results of the study clearly show that, despite the fact that their environment has been deteriorating and has reached a situation characterised as “fragile”, the community members still possess the potential to responsibly and autonomously employ a set of preselected skills for reversing the negative trend and to succeed in contributing for the betterment of their communities.*

Keywords: fragile communities; local development; capacity building.

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INTRODUCTION

Regions experiencing economic and demographic problems have long been a major focus of measures and policies aimed at achieving territorial cohesion at national and European level. Data from a number of studies and analyses show that rural (as well as neighbouring urban) areas face a common challenge: their capacity to create quality and sustainable employment lags behind that of highly urbanised areas. Overall, incomes in rural areas are low, while the few opportunities to find a job and start own business are available in a limited range of economic activities. Such differences between regions in some cases lead to the depopulation of rural areas as a result of intensive emigration flows¹.

In this context, the project entitled “Innovation and Entrepreneurship for Fragile Communities² in Europe” (INTERFACE) implemented with the financial support of the European Union Erasmus+ programme, aims to help fragile communities in Europe find innovative and entrepreneurial approaches to solving their problems³. The approach associated with addressing the problems of the so called “fragile communities” originated from Iceland, where it was applied top-down in various small settlements affected by the demographic crisis by the leading partner of the INTERFACE project, the Icelandic Institute for Regional Development⁴. The main goal of this approach is to stimulate and activate the available resources and to build capacity among institutions, citizens and businesses in the community by supporting the launch of initiatives aimed at supporting its socio-economic development.

Specific measures to achieve the goal of the INTERFACE project include the implementation of activities aimed at building capacity in pre-selected fragile communities within the scope of the project, located in the partner countries, related to conducting trainings for mentors and organizing pilot training seminars for members of such fragile communities. Such activities aim to assist the inhabitants of these communities in acquiring competencies useful for solving their practical

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Archive:Rural_development_statistics_by_urban-rural_typology&oldid=294503.

² For the purposes of this article, as “fragile” are defined communities in urban and rural areas that experience persistent difficulties of demographic, economic and social nature in their development. The term is used by analogy with the way in which disadvantaged people are characterised both in Bulgaria’s labour market and society. It should be borne in mind that in this article the term “fragile” will refer to the communities as a whole rather than to the individuals who make them up.

³ The project “Innovation and Entrepreneurship for Fragile Communities in Europe” (INTERFACE) was implemented in the period September 2017–August 2019 by a consortium formed by six organisations from five European countries: Bulgaria, Iceland, Ireland, Italy and Greece. On the Bulgarian side, the company Tora Consult EOOD participated in the project, in whose team the author of the present article occupied the position of project manager. Exhaustive information on the INTERFACE project is available on this initiative’s web page: <http://interface-project.eu/>.

⁴ The Icelandic Institute for Regional Development (IRDI) is an independent state agency within the Ministry of Transport and Local Government. The function of the IRDI is to promote the development of rural areas and their economic activity, with a special emphasis on creating equal employment opportunities and decent living conditions for all their inhabitants. More information on IRDI may be found at the web address of the agency: <https://www.byggdastofnun.is/en>.

problems, thus promoting the overall development of their settlements. The specific communities were selected to participate in the project study on the basis of a specially developed methodology, based on which the selection process included the identification of three fragile communities in each of the partner countries. Indicators such as total population growth, employment rate and educational level were used.

In support of the implementation of the above-mentioned measures, training materials were developed and a study was conducted to identify gaps in the skills and training needs of members of fragile communities and local authorities in areas related to the creation of sustainable new jobs and services for the development of these communities.

Thus, the task of this article is to present, discuss and analyse the results of the survey and the organised in-depth semi-structured interviews with members of the three fragile communities in Bulgaria, selected to participate in the project, namely: the town of Roman and the village of Dolna Beshovitsa (Municipality of Roman, Vratsa Province) and the town of Knezha (Knezha municipality, Pleven Province), in order to achieve the goal of the article related to the establishment of the existing capacity and prospects for development in these communities. The thesis we will seek to confirm in the course of this article is related to the understanding that despite the fact that their environment has deteriorated and reached a state that gives grounds to characterise it as fragile, members of the above communities still have the potential for responsible and autonomous use of skills such as innovation, creativity, analytical thinking, resourcefulness, leadership and resilience (hereinafter referred to as INTERFACE skills), the aim of all these being to break the negative trends and be able to contribute to the prosperity of communities where they live.

PARAMETERS OF THIS STUDY

The survey conducted within the INTERFACE project on the existing capacity and prospects for development in the communities selected to participate in the initiative was based on survey questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. With their help, the aim was to identify the existing “problems” in the communities and the future opportunities for their development, while at the same time examining the existing competencies for “problem solving” and the needs for capacity building therefor.

In addition, the questionnaires are structured in a way that allows for identifying the needs of communities as a whole (public needs) as well as those of individual community members (personal needs) of competences to address problem areas at community level and empowering fragile communities and their members to be proactive in seeking development opportunities. Thus, the analysis serves to establish the competencies needed by the representatives of the target group of the project study in order to be able to responsibly and autonomously use different skill groups such as “creativity and innovation”, “analytical thinking and resourcefulness”, “leadership and resilience”, which are crucial for improving the situation of local communities.