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The quest for countryside support schemes for mountain areas in Central and Eastern European Countries (CEECs)

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The quest for countryside support schemes for mountain areas in Central and Eastern European Countries (CEEC)

(paper to the 41st Congress of the European Regional Science Association, ERSA, Zagreb, Croatia, 29th August - 1st September 2001 "European Regional Development Issues in the New Millenium and Their Impact on Economic Policy")

conference theme: Regional disparities, problems and policies

thematic area: *Problems of mountainous, rural, peripheral and other lagging regions*

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Abstract

Regional divergence between different areas of CEECs has considerably risen over the integration period into Western Europe economy in last decade. The EU enlargement process thus has to pay specific attention to its regional implications and to effects on regions with lagging economic development and structural problems.

Particularly mountain areas have, in general, to overcome handicaps of geographical peripheral location and low competitiveness. As the agricultural sector is still of significant relevance in these areas the preparation for the adoption of the EU Common Agricultural Policy is of major concern.

The paper draws on a national research project, commissioned by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Water Resources, and investigates the support schemes for mountain areas being established in the CEECs, particularly those aiming at preserving diversified countryside and outstanding cultural landscapes, as a means to nurture overall regional development. It also focuses on the need for regional policies enlarging the scope of economic activities in the peripheral mountain areas. In this context experiences from EU countries on policies for mountainous and less-favoured areas (LFA) and examples of successful local approaches in EU mountain regions are used.

1. Introduction

EU enlargement to the East signifies a new dimension and challenge, as well as a historic opportunity for the European integration process. Even to a larger extent than with the Southern enlargement of the European Economic Community it is the objective to integrate various national economies at an economic level significantly below the average. The great extension of the territory of the candidate countries directly points to the spatial scope of the challenge as a central issue of political interest in the negotiating process.

Large parts of the candidate countries are characterised by sparsely populated areas and despite of the continuous industrialisation strategy over many decades still by the dominance of agriculture. The increased attention for rural development and the renewal of the agricultural structures which follows from this situation also calls for the central recognition of regional development. Especially in a period of structural adaptation and of economic growth (to catch up) the regional balance of economic development will be a core requirement in the process of EU-accession (Dax 2000). Else a separation of the remote rural areas from the economic growth in the centres could contribute to a further deepening of regional disparities in these countries, respectively all over Europe.

It will be essential to build on those EU policies which have proved an impact on mountain areas development in actual EU member states. The extension towards mountain and less-favoured areas in Central and Eastern Europe seems particularly important since these countries are characterised to a large degree by such land use type. Moreover, these areas are threatened by actual trends of regional divergence which even tend to increase. Appropriate strategies for the agricultural sector still will play a decisive role, particularly in the more marginalized areas of the CEECs – however, the strengthening of an integrated regional development in these areas will be crucial in the long run. The paper therefore is conceived to capture the discussion of the application of countryside support schemes which are constantly evolving due to the negotiation process and further development of internal strategies.

2. LFA policies in Western Europe

Productivity and farm income vary greatly across regions not just in CEECs but also within the European Union (EU). These longstanding interregional disparities led to the establishment of the Less Favoured Area (LFA) scheme in the 1970s (Dax and Hellegers 2000).

From the very beginning, LFA policy was conceived as a structural policy aimed at the prevention of land abandonment, to preserve the farming population in those areas and conserve the countryside. In this respect, the LFA scheme was one of the first measures to address environmentally beneficial farming systems, at least indirectly. For the broader public the main relevance of the scheme was that for the first time an explicitly regional approach in agricultural structural policy was brought into play.

Over a long period it was the only significant structural measure of agricultural policy, but recent policy reforms have moved away from commodity market supports, towards direct payments and have increasingly emphasised the environmental implications of policy measures.

The LFA scheme responds to the widely divergent regional situation of EU agriculture, with respect to both the socio-economic situation and natural characteristics. It should set the framework for agricultural holdings in the LFAs to benefit from direct payments and specific measures. The categories and the criteria for the demarcation of the LFAs have been defined in EEC Directive 75/268 (Art. 3 para 3-5), later in Regulation 950/97 (Art. 23-25), and recently integrated into Regulation 1257/1999 (Art. 13-21).

The diversity of LFAs in the EU is even more striking when analysing the agricultural income disparities between LFA areas and non-LFAs. The differences within Member States are much smaller than those between 'northern' and 'southern' countries. Concern for the environmental impact of agricultural methods and the threat of land abandonment particularly in the Southern European countries will have to be extended to CEECs and will necessitate an increased awareness of the problem at the European level.

The vivid debate on rural and regional development within the last decade has, to a large extent, also incorporated the beneficial role of agriculture in LFAs, and particularly mountain areas. Analysis has recently focused on the positive impact that 'rural amenities' might play for rural development, thus highlighting the importance of harnessing the benefits stemming from rural resources (OECD, 1994). For the preservation of High Nature Value (HNV) farming systems within LFAs it will be of central importance that regional development programmes adopt this viewpoint. This means that the development of farming methods, as shown by this example, cannot be left to agricultural policy alone, but must relate to regional development processes also.

In conceiving the environmental sensitivity of mountain areas and other LFAs not only as a handicap to agricultural production but also as a rural development asset it seems appropriate

to address rural amenities too. Targeting of support must not be limited to LFA payments and agri-environmental schemes, but be extended to the set of measures for agricultural and forestry and general rural development. A special recognition of the environmental sensitivity in mountain areas and other LFAs through the Structural Funds Regulation could also enhance initiatives at the local and regional level.

3. Initiatives to enhance mountain development

In the following section the case of mountain areas in Austria is presented to serve as a reference for policy experiences of EU countries. This area, however, has long been more than just an agricultural region. Rather it is a fully integrated living and working space, whose geographical specifics do not lead to separation in a structural economic sense. They express themselves much more in the limited space available for settlement and industry, the handicaps on agriculture and forestry, in an expensive infrastructure and a particularly sensitive landscape (OECD 1998). All of these elements are more or less relevant for mountain regions in CEECs.

After a record of about 30 years of experience with complementary strands of mountain policy in Austria it is broad political consensus that policies to safeguard environmental and cultural amenities, as well as rural development in the mountain area of Austria, can thus only be effective in the long term if complex demands are tackled not only by sector-oriented policies, but also by the embedding of spatially oriented sectoral policies in integrated regional development strategies. The two approaches corresponding to the demands of an integrated policy for rural areas and the mountain area, in particular, are:

- the Austrian mountain-farm aid, with the focus on the spatially-oriented sectoral programme “Mountain Farmers Special Programme” as one of the most important means for preserving and promoting rural amenities in Austria (since 1972)
- an integrated regional policy approach aimed at strengthening endogenous regional development (since the end of 1970s).

The maintenance of the living and working space in the mountain areas is inconceivable without farming. Productivity in the alpine area is almost 25 per cent less than in the non-alpine areas, the income from agriculture is almost 20 per cent lower. For mountain farms facing particular difficulties, income from agriculture and forestry is only 60 per cent of the income in the non-mountain farms. As it soon became clear that separate economic development of favoured and less-favoured areas could no longer be counteracted by

agricultural pricing policy, the government introduced its own Mountain Farmers Special Programme in the early 70s with a strong regional emphasis, in which there was already a role for production-neutral direct payments to mountain farms, which were subsequently successively extended. The objective of Austrian mountain farming policy is to guarantee the sustainable existence of the mountain farms which is necessary to the maintenance of the population and farming suited to regional requirements as well as the maintenance of the cultural and recreational landscape taking into account the widespread amenities of cultural landscapes in mountain areas.

Integrated regional policy approaches for strengthening endogenous regional development support the realisation of innovative, ecological and socially acceptable projects in the mountain areas, and help to extend development potential.

Despite the threats for regional development in mountain areas which are even greater for regions in the CEECs, and often are concentrated in specific areas, the amenities of the mountain areas still represent *a great potential* for their future development. These areas are attractive places to live, work and recreate, they deserve proper management and careful development

Populations in the Austrian mountains have a strong sense of both, *independence and interdependence*. Their life and work are characterised by a strong demand for integration and co-operation. The majority of farmers do not depend on farming activities alone. Most farm families are pluri-active, with other gainful activities both on-farm, as well as off-farm. Farming and forestry are closely combined. Handcrafting has always been a complement to farming activities. Rural tourism has a long tradition and reaches high quality standards.

Within the *local communities* social ties and controls are still very strong. They ensure mutual support and co-operation. They may, however, also prevent necessary innovations. The membership in numerous village associations is impressive. Many cultural events keep traditions alive. There can be no doubt that *caring for the mountain areas* is not only legitimate, but indispensable for the well-being of people, the performance of the Austrian economy, the preservation of Europe's natural and cultural heritage.

In *a globalising world (economy)*, uniqueness, specificity and distinctiveness are becoming important development assets. While many economic production functions and factors such as technology, information, finance and labour can either be quickly moved or found all around the globe, other development assets such as unique rural amenities, natural habitats, landscapes and local cultures, like those to be found in these mountain areas, are immobile

and can only be experienced on the spot. Thus, in a globalising economy which speeds up factor mobility and international exchange of goods and services, these immobile factors begin to gain importance again, at least in relative terms. The challenge is to identify these critical development potentials, to maintain and enhance them, to make them known, and to find ways of managing and marketing them properly without undermining their carrying capacity (von Meyer 1998, pp.103f.).

4. Mountain areas in CEEs

Agriculture in CEECs is confronted with processes of economic and political integration (CEFTA, EU) and further liberalisation of international agricultural markets (WTO) which will irreversibly affect the existing agricultural structures. As less-favoured areas and in some countries considerable large mountain areas constitute a considerable part of overall agricultural land use, they are likely to be most heavily affected by potential negative consequences of the mentioned processes. Due to natural difficulties and problems of the restructuration of agriculture, the income potential from agricultural production in these areas is substantially lower than in lowland areas.

Especially in the case of marginal areas with poorly diversified economies, it becomes clear that the importance of agricultural production, reaches beyond its direct production performance. Up- und Downstream sectors are tightly dependent from it and its spatial, environmental and social external functions, nowadays in the EU increasingly valued and subsumed under the term “multifunctionality”. Agriculture thus plays a decisive role in the integrated development of mountainous regions and is also a starting point for existing policies in these areas.

Diversity of mountains in Central and Eastern Europe countries

The features of mountainous regions in CEECs are, from the policy but also from other points of view, very different. Tomaž Cunder (2001) groups the candidate countries starting from the actual situation of the mountainous areas into 3 categories:

- ⇒ Slovenia and Poland with predominant private family farms and mostly well developed infrastructure in mountainous regions,
- ⇒ Czech Republic, Slovakia and partly Bulgaria with just a small number of private farms and consequently hardly any social problems in agricultural sector, good

infrastructure and important shares of nature protected areas (Czech Republic) in mountainous areas.

⇒ Romania and also Albania with small private farms, overpopulation, a significant lack of alternative job possibilities, high unemployment rates and badly developed infrastructure in mountainous regions.

Table 1: Main characteristics of mountainous regions in selected CEECs

	Bulgaria	Czech Rep.	Poland	Romania	Slovakia	Slovenia
Share of mountainous areas according to :						
▪ territory (%)	46,0	32,6	8,0	33,0	55,0	80,6
▪ population (%)	28,2	20,8	5,8	15,9	47,0	40,5
Population growth in last period	depopulation and ageing of population	depopulation and ageing of population	modest depopulation	stagnation, growth of population in some regions	depopulation and ageing of population	stagnation, depopulation in extremely marginal areas
Share of agricultural land in mountainous areas according to total agricultural land (%)	39,0	24,6	6,5	22,5	47,6	75,5
Criteria for determination of mountainous areas :	natural conditions	natural conditions	natural conditions	natural conditions	natural conditions	natural and social conditions
Economical policy towards mountain areas:						
▪ regional measures	+ (limited)	+ (limited)	-	+ (limited)	-	+
▪ agricultural measures	-	+	+	-	+	+
▪ environmental measures	-	+ (limited)	+ (limited)	-	+ (limited)	+ (limited)

Source: Cunder 2001

CEECs had to elaborate over short periods strategies to preserve a diverse countryside that has been shaped largely by traditional agricultural systems. In the framework of negotiations with regard to EU-accession the existing EU policies became particularly important. The concern for mountain areas had to be put on the two of most relevant policy instruments for those areas in the EU countries: Recalling the extreme situation of Austria, where 37% of overall agricultural support payments in mountain areas are agri-environmental and 21% LFA-payments (Hovorka 2001, p.131), elucidates the significance of the measures for mountain farming.

In addition some CEECs (Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia) have already provided support to farming in marginal areas and in particular mountain areas, especially to grassland based farming methods. Among the three Baltic countries only Lithuania has established a similar programme to date. Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia and also Romania have not yet developed (substantial) LFA type schemes. Cunder (2001) analysed the heterogeneous

situation of policies in the CEECs by a more detailed study of three of the most characteristic countries:

- Romania, which represents a country with the largest mountainous area of CEECs but with almost no agricultural mountain policy,
- Poland, a country with relatively well developed mountainous regions, as well as a starting structural policy towards mountain farming,
- Slovenia which has, in comparison with other candidate countries, a substantial tradition of LFA policy development.

Most of the presentations of mountain areas of these countries don't provide a picture from the viewpoint of integral development. As many areas have lived through a troubled decade the development of the mountain areas have not yet been set as a priority of national policy and cannot be compared easily. However, Price (2000, p. 9f.) addresses in his synthesis on studies of the mountain regions East and South of the Adriatic Sea a series of common points in nearly all countries:

- "The mountain areas are characterised by marked and widespread poverty. The mountain population subsists in a relative autarchy and does not participate in the economic and social life of the country.
- Mountain people have restricted access to State services such as hospitals, primary schools, or cultural activities.
- The mountain areas are characterised by their lack of infrastructure, such as roads, telecommunications or electricity. Systems that once functioned, such as irrigation, sewage and heating networks, have fallen to ruin.
- Unemployment, although partly hidden, is very high even if the statistics are lacking.
- State and private institutions - which do their best to improve living conditions - are often totally absent from the mountain areas.
- The mountain regions and their populations are not taken into consideration in the political, economic and social life of the State. Neither do they have effective representation.
- Frequently, mountain areas have become prone to emigration. However, some areas have had substantial population growth due to people coming from cities. This can be explained through the strong family and social structures that have remained intact in the mountains, as well as the fact that the economic situation in the cities is even worse."

It appears essential that the topic of „mountain regions“ development should be on the national agenda of each state and should take into account not only economic growth but also social, cultural and environmental aspects.

Table 2: **LFA measures in Central and Eastern Europe**

Country	Size of LFA measure (in ha); in % of agricultural land	Main Scheme Objectives
Czech Republic (CZ)	LFA: 1,000,000 ha ⁽⁴⁾ 23.4%	Maintain rural landscape and population
Hungary (HU)	LFA: 2,750,000 ha ⁽³⁾ 44.5%	Maintain rural landscape and population
Lithuania (LI)	LFA restructuring: 360,000 ha ⁽³⁾ 11.4%	Improve living standard of farm population and increase employment in rural areas
Poland (PL)	Tax relief on marginal soils ⁽³⁾ 34.6% plus mountain areas	Support for farms on marginal land to prevent rural de-population
Romania (RO)	2 small LFA type schemes ⁽³⁾ <1% of agricultural land	Sustainable regional development, support for farming in marginal areas
Slovakia (SK)	LFA: 20 MEuro ⁽¹⁾ 17.7% of agriculture budget	Maintain rural landscape and population, mainly targeted at mountain areas
Slovenia (SI)	LFA: 1,377,000 ha ⁽²⁾ 56.3%	Maintain rural landscape and population

(1) Data for 1996

(2) (2) Data for 1997

(3) (3) Data for 1998

(4) (4) Data for 1999

Source: Petersen 1999a

5. Pre-accession aid for agriculture and rural development: a support to mountain areas?

Preparation for membership of the EU requires many changes to industrial and public infrastructure, administrative institutions and procedures, as well as training and capacity building programmes. To support these often costly measures the EU has established PHARE, which has become a familiar source of funding. Two further funds (SAPARD and ISPA) were agreed at the European Council meeting in Berlin as part of the Agenda 2000 proposals.

In addition a Special Preparatory Programme (SPP) in the framework of PHARE has been established (in the years 1998 and 1999), which among other things financed capacity building, training and technical assistance for the preparation of a national Rural Development Plan in each applicant country. This plan served as basis for measures under the SAPARD programme.

Both new programmes, the Instrument for Structural Policies for Pre-Accession (ISPAA) and the Special Action for Pre-Accession measures for Agriculture and Rural Development (SAPARD) are of great concern for the territorial development policies of the applicant countries. ISPA is clearly oriented at the model of the Cohesion Fund and has its main priority in catching up the gap of economic development of the countries. With an annual budget of 1,040 mio. € for 2000-2006, ISPA will fund up to 85% of the cost of infrastructure projects in the area of the environment (with the focus on investments to bring legislation on drinking-water supply, treatment of waste water, solid-waste management and air pollution up to EU standards) and transport infrastructure, which is essential if the expanded Single Market is to function smoothly.

The SAPARD programme which disposes of smaller financial means acts through horizontal measures towards the adaptation of agricultural structures and policy as well as support for rural development. As in the rural development programmes of the EU-15 regional priorities and region specific application has been desired.

SAPARD and SPP are the most important funds for agriculture and rural development. The required national co-financing (25%) for both funds is likely to take up a large part of the current budgetary resources for these measures in most applicant countries. Thus, decisions on the structure of programmes under these funds will significantly influence the future direction of rural policies in CEE.

Table 3: Allocations for SAPARD and ISPA programmes
(indicative annual allocation)

CEECs	SAPARD		ISPA		
	Amount in million Euro	Share (%)	Amount in mio. Euro min.	Amount in mio. Euro max.n	Average share (%)
Bulgaria	52.124	10,02	83.2	124.8	10,00
Czech Republic	22.063	4,24	57.2	83.2	6,75
Estonia	12.137	2,33	20.8	36.4	2,75
Hungary	38.054	7,32	72.8	104.0	8,50
Lithuania	29.829	5,74	41.6	62.4	5,00
Latvia	21.848	4,20	36.4	57.2	4,50
Poland	168.683	32,44	312.0	384.8	33,50
Romania	150.636	28,97	208.0	270.4	23,00
Slovenia	6.337	1,22	10.4	20.8	1,00
Slovakia	18.289	3,52	36.4	57.2	4,50
Total	520.000	100,00	878.8	1201.2	100,00

Source : AgraFood EAST EUROPE no. 216, Sept. 2000, EC 2000, p.9

SAPARD provides applicant countries with the possibility of funding projects in the areas presented in table 4. Out of the wide range of measures four measures have been selected as priorities by all applicant countries. These are investment in agricultural holdings, processing and marketing, agricultural diversification and technical assistance. Two measures are taken up by 6-7 countries: rural infrastructure and environmental protection and maintenance of the countryside (i.e. pilot agri environment schemes). This last measure indicates the relevance of the SAPARD programme but also its position as complementary funding to national actions.

Other measures, such as support for producer groups, water resources management or forest measures have only been taken up by some countries with a specific interest therein. Direct payments for mountainous areas or measures similar to the LFA scheme are (together with horizontal agri environmental measures) not element of the SAPARD programme. Through the application of the SAPARD programme only other structural measures (investment supports, forestry, producer groups) or rural development measures could be used for the development of mountainous regions in CEECs. These measures are, however, not designed and directed specifically towards mountain areas, and thus it has to be concluded that there is a lack of respective mountain policies.

Also with regional initiatives there are no major comprehensive national policies for mountain areas to be seen in CEECs. Although a number of pilot actions address the need for a larger integration of local population and for models designed to the specificity of problems of these peripheral areas experiences are rather scattered and not led by a strategic approach. In particular, this situation reveals the multitude of interests expressed by actors involved in various fields and regions (e.g. EUROMONTANA 2000, Dax and Námerová 1999).

Table 4: **SAPARD support measures**

measures	Priority in SAPARD programmes
• investments in agricultural holdings	XXX (all countries)
• improving the processing and marketing of agricultural and fishery products	XXX (all countries)
• improving the structures for quality, veterinary and plant-health controls, for the quality of foodstuffs and for consumer protection	X
• agricultural production methods designed to protect the environment and maintain the countryside	XX (6-7 countries)
• development and diversification of economic activities, providing for multiple activities and alternative income,	XXX (all countries)
• setting up farm relief and farm management services,	
• setting up producer groups,	X
• renovation and development of villages and the protection and conservation of the rural heritage,	X
• land improvement and re-parcelling,	X
• establishment and updating of land registers,	
• improvement of vocational training,	X
• development and improvement of rural infrastructure,	XX (6-7 countries)
• agricultural water resources management,	
• forestry, including afforestation of agricultural areas, investments in forest holdings owned by private forest owners and processing and marketing of forestry products,	X
• technical assistance for the measures covered by this Regulation, including studies to assist with the preparation and monitoring of the programme, information and publicity campaigns.	XXX (all countries)

Source: European Commission 2000, Cunder 2001

6. Conclusions

There is no doubt that agriculture together with forestry development will have to play still a core role for the future of overall economic performance in mountainous regions of CEECs. It is important to redirect policy objectives in time towards development initiatives which aim at the long-term process of activating regional potentials (going deliberately beyond the traditional economic activities) and nurturing wider participation of local actors. Especially in this area of motivating people for regional work and enhancing regional development there are still significant deficits to be seen. Tendencies of an increase of the gap between central areas and periphery underline these difficulties in the less-favoured areas.

The EU programmes for support in the pre-accession aid also focus on facilitating adaptation of national legislation as well as administrative structures and procedures to the European Community acquis. This orientation is led by the conviction that the Single Market and the support system of CAP cannot function without harmonised standards and procedures. However, such a rigid process leaves little room for national priorities or local bottom-up initiatives (Petersen 1999b, 23f.).

There arises the danger that pre-fabricated models and concepts of rural development are transferred from the EU-15 towards these countries without adapting them appropriately or developing them with the local population. Also the pace of the negotiation process leaves very few time for national authorities to prepare their rural development plans. This signifies a further obstacle to raise participation of relevant institutions and local population. In particular, in many areas there is still a need to establish regional structures which have been neglected for long time.

Together with the discussion on the European Spatial Development Programme (Europäische Kommission 1999) the concern for a spatial perspective of the whole European continent has been put to the fore in the work of the Council of Europe. The resulting proposals had to include, in particular, the development of regions of the CEECs which are neighbour to the EU countries and have to cope with a tremendous gap in economic performance between regions. The following priorities (for CEECs) have been stressed in that consultation process (CEMAT 1999):

- mobilisation of population and support of regional initiatives
- development of Euro-corridors and a significant improvement of the regional transport network
- international co-operation and territorial co-ordination

- establishment of a network of ecological corridors
- preservation and use of cultural heritage
- access to new communication technologies

Many of these areas directly address or have significant impact on mountain areas. In a phase of economic growth and far-reaching social restructuring it is particularly important to keep regional balance as a core aim of CEECs national priorities. It will be a new challenge for the EU how far the EU policy regulations can impact on regional disparities through specific measures designed for regional (and social) cohesion (Europäische Kommission 2001).

With the approaching EU-accession of some of these countries it becomes clear that new problem categories and levels for regional development arise. In particular, the situation of peripheral, mountain areas requires our attention and cannot be addressed by standard policy approaches. Besides classical economic support and infrastructure improvement one has to cope with a series of other, more intangible factors of regional development. In addition to the specific relevance of education and research the situation and development of environmental performance as well as issues of quality of life in the regions will gain importance. Due to the peripheral location, in parts of the regions natural and cultural features of high quality valuation are preserved. It will be decisive to use these as starting point for local development and thus reveal their rural amenity character to broader user groups. With such an approach it might be feasible that motivation of local population can be improved and regional disparities be limited.

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