

CHAPTER

7



7

LOCAL FOOD MATTERS!

LILJANA TANEVSKA

It is a warm summer evening and Pece Cvetkovski shares with us his passion for unspoiled nature, his joy of coming home to his parent's village and his delicious home-cooked fare. He offers cheese, vegetables and sausages and smiles: *"Be careful, it's all illegal food!"* He explains that it is not allowed to sell most of these delicious products on the market.

"There are also other reasons why our traditional food disappears from our tables. Taste this: Cironki. It's dried fish from Prespa lake, a local speciality. Fishing in the lake is the exclusive right of only one company. Fishing without permission is illegal. In principle, everyone could make Cironki, but in fact only a few old people do it if they buy the fish from the company."

*"Be careful,
it's all illegal food!"*

Pece Cvetkovski



"Local farmers and sheep breeders producing this high-quality cheese in a traditional way continued to sell it directly to their customers, through what we call 'friendly channels.'"

Pece Cvetkovski

The Forum Synergies' team has gathered in the garden of Pece Cvetkovski ([Villa Dihovo](#)) in the Baba mountains close to Bitola, North Macedonia, which was then called Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM). We are here in July 2013 to talk about 'local food.'

Back in 2013, North Macedonia was in the process of losing its local food heritage because rural people did not know what to do to stop the ongoing closure of food processing facilities and local markets. "North Macedonian food hygiene regulations were applied as if EU law was already in force here," Pece tells us. "Local farmers and sheep

breeders producing this high-quality cheese in a traditional way continued to sell it directly to their customers, through what we call 'friendly channels.' But that alone was not economically viable. The big and often foreign food processing corporations put large quantities of low-quality cheese and meat into our supermarkets, often imported, and wrapped in many layers of plastic with shiny new labels. Many consumers get trapped by that, also because it is cheaper.

But for me that may be legal food, but it has no taste. The quality is worlds apart from the cheese of our small local producers."



OPPOSITE
1a. 1b. Villa Dihovo, where we enjoyed Pece's rural place and food

THIS PAGE
2. Cironki, dried fish
3a. 3b. Stands from the local market in Bitola



"In West Europe we also see a revival of local and regional markets with high quality food which also gives a chance to smaller producers."



EU ACCESSION: LEARNING THE RULES OF THE GAME

Forum Synergies usually prepares its workshops and gatherings in two steps. We have gathered here in the garden of Pece to find out whether we can do something so that the loss of local traditional food production and marketing gets public attention and can be reversed in this region of North Macedonia. We have heard from Slow Food colleagues that the risk of losing that valuable small farming and local food systems is high in the Western Balkans. We have seen thousands of small dairy and slaughterhouses disappear in Europe in recent decades.

The reason why many authorities in EU member states closed or did not support small food processing facilities was often that hygiene rules were not sufficiently applied or that larger enterprises were more competitive. But in West Europe we also see a revival of local and regional markets with high quality food which also gives a chance to smaller

producers. So our plan to organise a workshop in North Macedonia on local food was to understand how an EU hygiene regulation could have such an early effect on local food systems in a country just preparing for accession.

We wanted to learn about the rules of the game and our chances to have our place in that new community. And I, as a passionate promoter of local food and as rural development worker from a small apple growing farm in this region, wanted to know how many of these new very limiting regulations were the fault of the EU and which were just applied by the national government to get small producers out of the way.

TEAMING UP FOR SOLUTIONS

To organise and host the workshop in 2014, Forum Synergies teamed up with a strong group of partner organisations, including the Slow Food Convivium of Bitola, Terra Madre of the Balkans, the Environmentally Sustainable Socio-

LOCAL WORKSHOPS

Forum Synergies co-organises workshops and Lifeshops in rural places in partnership with local actors. We visit our co-hosts first, before we later facilitate the workshop, so that we have taken all needs and opportunities into consideration. In this way we build trust and common understanding about local expectations and our capacities to bring new ideas and knowledgeable participants to the place where the workshop takes place.



"I can no longer use local meat, butchered at home. So I have to buy frozen meat, slaughtered hundreds of kilometres away, sometimes even imported from abroad."

Hristo Kostovski

KRUŠEVO SAUSAGE - THE PASSION OF A LIFETIME

During field visits we meet producers of local cheese, honey, paprika and sausages. Michele Rumiz, Slow Food Officer for Balkans and Turkey describes his impressions of the excursion: all fifteen of us struggle to fit inside Hristo Kostovski's small butcher's shop, as he explains to us the secrets of cured pork production in Kruševo, one of the highest towns in the Balkans. The sausage of the same name, known all over North Macedonia, has been produced here for at least a century. With his large hands, Hristo shows us the less used cuts of pork and beef that go into the sausage, along with leeks, herbs and spices, including mint and

allspice. Hundreds of sausages at different stages of ageing hang from the walls around us. *"The passion of a lifetime is in this work,"* he says proudly. *"But since our country has started conforming to the European regulations, I can no longer use local meat, butchered at home. So I have to buy frozen meat, slaughtered hundreds of kilometres away, sometimes even imported from abroad. Only that will meet the HACCP requirements. But this meat is not good quality, and I have to choose between following tradition and risking expensive fines, or making Kruševo sausage that is from Kruševo only in name."*

Economic Development of Rural Areas in the Balkan region project (ESSEDRA), the Standing Working Group for Rural Development in South East Europe (SWG) and the PREPARE network.

The workshop programme included three main types of activities: First of all field visits which help us to get an idea of existing problems and possible solutions of the people dealing with local food; secondly a focus on the economic and legal framework in which transition can take place; and thirdly work on possible solutions through dialogue, cooperation and common actions of the stakeholders.

4. Nicolce Nikolovski and Liljana Tanevska launch Local Food Matters workshop
5. Nicolce explains local food dishes to Branka Tome, Oliver Emmes and Christian Jochum
6. Hristo Kostovski and Kruševo sausages



FOOD HYGIENE REGULATIONS

Hristo Kostovski is not alone in having to deal with overly strict legislation regarding hygiene and consumer safety in food production, particularly for processed products. The problem affects the whole region, with tens of thousands of producers relegated to the black market, simply ignored or, worse, facing obstruction from the relevant authorities. The Terra Madre Balkans network has been campaigning about this for years. Now, however, the disproportionate investments demanded of small-scale producers in order to legally remain on the market have also become a problem in other EU countries, from Spain to Lithuania, and for almost all EU candidates. This is deeply ironic, as big food scares of recent years, from the horsemeat scandal to the

blue mozzarellas, emerged from the industrial factory food system.

Silence fell in the meeting room when Christian Jochum, from the [Austrian Chamber of Agriculture](#), described how Austrian legislation applied the European regulations with an innovative, flexible approach, aimed at guaranteeing consumer health through simple but effective procedures for the country's 46,000-plus small-scale food producers. The EU hygiene regulation gives member states the power to interpret the rules for specific local processing and marketing conditions, taking into account the shelf life of products for local marketing. Burcu Gezeroglu, a young Turkish delegate, struggled to believe it: *"Our authorities don't support small-scale food producers, they act like police inspectors. They show up, find examples of non-compliance, issue fines, sometimes close the business, and then go back behind their desks."*



THE FAULT OF NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS, NOT THE EU

The problem, therefore, is not the rigidity of European regulations, but their application in member states and candidate countries. Even the European Commission by now recognises that the flexibility provisions in the so-called 'Hygiene Package' have not been adequately implemented on national level. This is why the over 60 participants, each representing European and national institutions or civil society organisations, jointly released a declaration asking the European Commission to remedy matters as soon as possible:

"The participants of the workshop invite the European Commission to actively promote and support an exchange of best practices between the competent authorities of the member states and accession countries (through cooperation programmes, training etc.). In addition, a food safety help desk / mediation body should be made available at EU and at national level, providing support and advice to national, regional or local administrations, targeting practicable solutions, especially for local food

chains. These intermediate bodies shall facilitate the communication between competent authorities and producers and should be open for interested civil society organisations."

OPPOSITE

7. Christian Jochum presents the Austrian experience

8. Participants exchange before writing the collective declaration "Local Food Matters!"

THIS PAGE

9. Group photo from the workshop
Local Food Matters 2014

"The EU hygiene regulation gives member states the power to interpret the rules, taking into account the specific local processing and marketing conditions and shelf life of products."

Michele Rumiz

COMMUNICATION ACROSS EUROPE MATTERS

The case of the Bitola workshop and its impact illustrates how important the exchange of experiences and good practices is for transition towards better law-making and governance.

Public and social media usually offer very limited information of this kind and tend to interpret EU affairs in a limited national context. For Forum Synergies it is important to put our local workshops and projects also into a more global context and offer links to educational material which offers such context. One of these projects is the global 2000 m² field which illustrates how much our own food choice matters for reaching sustainable farming and food consumption.

EVERY BITE HAS ITS PLACE - A GLOBAL 2000 M² - FIELD IN PANKOW

Humans cultivate 1,5 billion hectares of arable land globally. If we divided this equally between the global population of 7,5 billion, we would each receive a 2000 m² plot of land. This would have to satisfy all of our needs: cereals, fruit, vegetables, oil seeds, fruits, sugar, tobacco, coffee and tea, even the cotton in our jeans and the rubber for our tires, the fuel and power generated from fields and, of course, all the organic waste we produce.

If we are careful, 2000 m² is more than enough for one person. The Global Field is a representation of how much of this lot is currently used for these different purposes. It shows us how wasteful and unequal our current food system is. It maps out how much land is required for individual dishes, for spaghetti Bolognese for example. This can also be done on the app.

"Every bite we eat has its own place where it was growing," Benny Haertin, the initiator of the global field, explains its purpose.

"Close your eyes next time you eat and imagine these places, this makes the whole difference!"





10. Slow Food Macedonia national congress April 14th, 2018

ENJOYING SUCCESS - LEGALISED FOOD PRODUCTION

"Since the workshop in Bitola we have grown out of the defensive corner," says Nikolce Nikolovski of Slow Food Bitola, co-organiser of the 'Local Food Matters!' workshop, as he meets up with Hannes Lorenzen at the European Parliament in Brussels five years after the workshop we organised in Trnovo, Bitola. "Now we have established Slow Food North Macedonia, we have a much more professional approach to our work, especially for advocacy and lobbying for small-scale producers in the front of institutions for changing and bringing new regulations to improve and legalise their production."

"The North Macedonian Food and Veterinary Agency has taken the initiative to elaborate hygiene rules that are more flexible, and marketing rules for small-scale farmers and processing companies which give fair income to farmers," he adds. Nikolce attributes much of this change to the initial 2014 'Local Food Matters!' workshop.

"Before that, everyone was looking into scale, big business and export orientation. Now also the Ministry is more interested in the high value of local and diversified local food, which is an important asset for rural tourism, and the creation of local jobs in rural areas, which North Macedonia and the entire West Balkan region need so much. Our typical products which were about to disappear due to a misunderstanding of what consumers

want, are back in the shelves, at least in the smaller shops, and people are proud of them: honey, cheese, fish, meat, herbs etc."

The workshop produced important European knowledge-sharing and experience but also had more tangible outcomes including a draft food regulation, which the Food Agency published in the North Macedonian press some years later. "We would not have dreamed of it back then," Nikolce says. "The conclusions of the workshop had been shared with all relevant local authorities. Some members of the Ministry and respective agencies were also present at the workshop and saw first-hand how other countries, like Austria, had allowed for a more flexible interpretation of hygiene rules. They saw for themselves how it could be done."

PARTNERSHIP WITH GOVERNMENT AND ADMINISTRATION

"Suddenly we were invited to be partners of the administration," Nikolce reflects. Alongside the Ministry, Slow Food North Macedonia now organises public debates about local food and assists in the drafting of new food hygiene regulations. "What is more, our new national food regulation is not a transcript of existing EU law. The spirit is that the quality is in each place, not just on the anonymous market. That is how we have grown into the role of supporting the administration, explaining and implementing the new food rules to the local farmers and small enterprises," Nikolce adds excitedly. "To fulfil this role is not difficult, because farmers agree with the new rules and they feel included in the legislative process. We are involved in working on guidelines for small producers and businesses, which

strengthens our role as bridge-builder between the government and local people.

The workshop gave us North Macedonians and West Balkan people the feeling that we are part of Europe, that those who are already part of the EU face similar problems. Together we can solve those problems. The local farmer's scepticism towards Europe transformed into another European vision - and reality. Having this workshop here, with stakeholders and local people involved, was making us feel part of Europe that seemed so far away before. It gave us a strong connection and energy that we did not feel before." Nikolce feels hopeful for the future. He believes that EU

"Our new national food regulation is not a transcript of existing EU law. The spirit is that the quality is in each place, not just on the anonymous market."

Nikolce Nikolovski

programmes like LEADER and CLLD give concrete support for farmers to modernise their cultivation practices, including mechanisation and better marketing. He feels that he is part of a driving force for a new food policy, and believes that North Macedonia is better prepared for the EU accession process. Partnership thinking is key in this process, working alongside NGOs and decision-making bodies at all levels. In this also SWG and the [Balkan Rural Development Network](#) play an important role of bridging the rifts between civil society and governments. *"We are on the ground and SWG is in the regional and governmental level, that is complementary," Nikolce concludes.*



11. Bukovo red pepper, now a Slow Food Presidium, a tradition maintained by a small group of producers

12. Tikvesh wine region



PEOPLE!



Boban Ilic is Secretary General of SWG, the Standing Working Group for Regional Rural Development of South West Europe, based in Skopje. SWG co-organised the Bitola workshop. After the war in the Balkans Boban Ilic initiated this multinational working group on agricultural and rural development policy between the new national governments in the region, with a spirit to re-establish peace through cooperation. SWG strongly supports bottom-up rural development initiatives and networks such as the Balkan Rural Development Network BRDN, and it applies the LEADER principles to all its support projects. *"We have made much progress," says Boban. "We are a region with great diversity, of people, cultures, religions, biodiversity, tasty food, and beautiful landscapes. In principle we have all we need. But our economy and our governance is still not working that way. We lose our young and best educated people. The EU has promised long ago that we can join but it is keeping its doors closed. If Brussels does not get its act together soon Europe will see drastic consequences not only in this region."*

LOCAL FOOD MATTERS IN A NUTSHELL

The renaissance of local food diversity and quality strongly depends upon local stakeholders' own initiatives, and upon engaged cooperation between farmers, local food movements and competent food safety authorities. The workshop organised by Forum Synergies and its partners in 2014 in Bitola illustrates the impressive impact that constructive dialogue can achieve on national food hygiene rules and food quality legislation, even in a EU neighbour country like North Macedonia.

The loss of small farms and the closing of local food processing enterprises can be avoided if existing food safety legislation is adapted and intelligently interpreted, taking into account the specific local processing and marketing conditions and shelf life of products. EU legislation is not as

inflexible as some member states administrations or populist politicians may suggest. The EU hygiene regulation gives member states the flexibility to adapt certain rules to specific local conditions. Thus, newcomers to the EU may offer innovative solutions to finding a good balance between increased demand of consumers for local, fresh and high-quality products and improved rules to avoid food hygiene risks. The Bitola workshop has strengthened the spirit of the local food movement and has built trust between local stakeholders and food administration. It has contributed to a new self-confidence of stakeholders that they can shape their own economies and livelihoods through cooperation. And it has hopefully inspired people in the Western Balkans and the EU to work more closely together for a better and enlarged Europe.