

# The Eastern Rhodopes – Terra Incognita of Bulgaria

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## The Unknown Eastern Rhodopes

To say that the Eastern Rhodopes are a mountain which will remain in the heart of everyone who ever travelled through its deep folds, will not be an overexaggeration. This is a land of peculiarity, enigma and vibrant energy stemming from the long and often unspoken history of the mountain. The Eastern Rhodopes has long been a Terra Incognita on the Balkans, where one can discover something different and captivating as every turn unfolds before them. A large part of what makes this place so enchanting is its people.

The Eastern Rhodopes are a home to a fascinating, multicultural populace – Bulgarians, Turks, Pomaks and Roma all live side by side, in peaceful co-existence, unlike many regions of similar ethnic and religious diversity. The demographic make-up of the Eastern Rhodopes has a lot to do with the centuries-long Ottoman presence in the region which only got liberated and united with Bulgaria during the First Balkan War of 1912.

Until that time the region had been populated almost entirely by Turkish people, but especially after the events of the Second Balkan War of 1913, when Bulgaria lost East and West Thrace respectively to Turkey and Greece, thousands of Bulgarians from Aegean (West) Thrace fled from the ethnic oppressions in these territories and settled in certain areas of the Eastern Rhodopes, within the Bulgarian frontier. Later on in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the territory of the Eastern Rhodopes was gradually populated with more and more Bulgarian families from all over the country.

Another typical group of the local population in the Eastern Rhodopes is that of the Pomaks, or Bulgarian-Mohammedans, as they are alternatively called. There are many theories about their origins and ancestry, but the most popular one describes them as native Bulgarian-speaking people who lived in the mountain villages and who got massively coerced to convert to Islam by the Ottomans during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The Pomaks in Bulgaria, unlike those in the Greek Rhodopes, have never been admitted the status of an ethnic minority. However, their fate in the country has for a long time been one of social and economic marginalization, and their ethnic identity largely ambiguous and disputed, as they have often been treated as inferior both by Bulgarians (for their inferior religion), and by Turks (for not speaking Turkish) (Todorova, 1998). To date, the majority of the Pomak population in the Eastern Rhodopes live in compact or mixed-population villages and towns in the region and get by through agriculture, livestock breeding and small merchandise. Some of them, especially the ones migrating to the cities, sometimes choose to convert to Christianity.

The ethnic group of the Roma people have settled in the Eastern Rhodopes a long time ago when tobacco cultivation started developing in the region. The Roma would arrive in small groups, settle in the towns and live off producing and selling cultivation tools made from wrought iron (Mihaylova, 2000:171). Nowadays, the numbers of the Roma people in the Rhodopes are among the lowest as compared to the rest of the country. They live mainly in the towns and, due to their predominantly low level of education, are occupied in low-skilled jobs or often temporarily employed by their fellow-residents to help in construction or in the field.

Regardless of their origins, the lives and stories of the people in the Eastern Rhodopes have been shaped in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by processes that united and separated spouses, families, kins, neighbours, and even whole villages. And yet, to this day very little is known in tourist literature about those events from the socialist past of Bulgaria which left a large imprint on the contemporary look of the mountain. This is why we set off on a journey to learn and try to understand what life in

this place was and is like for the ordinary people, for those who were made by and are making the Eastern Rhodopes.

This story is mainly based on local people's reflections and memories of the not so distant past (spanning up to 40 years back), as well as written historic, sociographic and ethnographic texts.

## **The Beginning of the Changes**

Throughout the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Bulgaria was marked by totalitarian Communist Regime, which placed the country behind the Iron curtain, and had an especially strong impact on the Eastern Rhodopes. It is important, however, to mention that the Communist legacies in the region cannot be viewed as either good or bad, as the following chapters will show.

In the 1940's the BCP found the Eastern Rhodopes settlements in what they saw as a rather primitive state – few of the villages were supplied with electricity and running water, the only way to reach many of them was through narrow paths winding up and down the hills, and the majority of people sustained themselves humbly through growing tobacco and keeping livestock mainly as a way to meet personal needs (The Region of Kardzhali, 1982:94).

For the following period of about 40 years the region was not only at the frontier between Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey, but more importantly, between the member states of the Warsaw Treaty and NATO – the two superpowers making history throughout most of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Georgieva, 1998:13). The strategic role of the region thus required a deep and intense economic and social restructuring – tasks which the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP) would be trying to resolve for most of the years under the Regime.

Thus, in the period 1950-1990, the Eastern Rhodopes were subject to a long period of dynamic and ambiguous changes which marked its wavering transition from pre-industrial to industrial society, from tradition to modernity (Georgieva, 1998:14). The ultimate goal was to build a developed socialist society. Many of these changes were part of the BCP's politics of country-wide modernization through industrialization, urbanisation, land collectivisation, agriculture intensification, cultural enlightenment, etc. However, some of the modernization processes brought about changes that were endemic to this region and that shaped its current socio-economic and cultural make-up.

The following chapters will present an overview of the economic and social changes having been taking place in the Eastern Rhodopes over the years of the Communist Regime and the long transition to democracy and market economy.

## **Industrialization – the development mantra of the Socialist Regime**

Alongside the establishment and consolidation of the Communist Regime, one large priority of the Party was to boost the economic development of the country and intense country-wide industrialisation was the shortcut to it. No region in Bulgaria was spared from this plan, regardless of whether the local conditions permitted that, including the Eastern Rhodopes. Large industrial plants were built and in operation in almost every town in the region within a time-span of a few years,

recruiting thousands of people and exporting a significant part of the produce to the countries of the Eastern Block.

Due to the strategic borderline location of the Eastern Rhodopes, the USSR influence on the industrial development processes could be felt strongly as most of the plants and production processes were designed by Soviet experts and equipped with Soviet technology. Thus, industrialization in the region began with the establishment of the Soviet-Bulgarian mining enterprise GORUBSO in 1950. The agenda of the enterprise included exploring the ground and extracting the metal ore reserves of the Rhodopean mine pool, the reconstruction and modernization of the mines and flotation plants/refineries, as well as the technical exploitation of the ores. Another result of the Soviet-Bulgarian cooperation was the SOVBOLSTROY enterprise, part of the GORUBSO system, which was created to take care of the industrial, urban and dam-lake construction in the region. The industrial giant which underscored metallurgy as the leading sector in the region's economic development – the smelting plant – was built just east of the town of Kardzhali in 1955. Its produce comprised one-third of the national lead and zinc reserves. Again, the smeltery project was designed in Moscow, the production plant was equipped entirely with Soviet technology and the process was guided by Soviet principles which were transmitted through expert visits and forging connections with four Soviet metallurgy plants – “Electrozinc”, “Ukrazinc”, “Chimkent” and “Ordzhonikidze” (The Region of Kardzhali, 1982:95).

The following projects of industrialization of the region continued at an even more dynamic pace. They were a direct consequence of the April Summit of 1956, where the leader of the BCP, Todor Zhivkov, gained a full control of the Regime and undertook a very persistent and systematic socialist industrialization policy. This process inevitably led to the relocation of a large part of the production forces. In the case of the Eastern Rhodopes this could be seen in the high concentration of the industrial sector in and around the regional centre of Kardzhali with 90% of the industrial production units located there. An important prerequisite was the availability of local raw materials, such as lead, zinc and many non-metalliferous minerals in the area. Another important factor was the availability of work force. Since the main occupation in the rural parts of the region was tobacco cultivation, this freed a lot of men from the agricultural sector and made them seek employment in the industry. Thus, the leading industrial sector was mining and metallurgy, followed by the extraction of non-metalliferous minerals, the production of construction materials, the engineering industry, food production, as well as the textile and shoe-production sectors. The textile and shoe-production sector had many small workshops located in the small villages throughout the region to ensure there was employment for many men and women. 30% of their produce was exported to capitalist countries, and the rest to the USSR countries. The tobacco production in the region was concentrated in the state enterprise “Tobacco Industry” whose plants in Kardzhali exported the produce to the USSR, the GDR, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Italy, France, Austria, the FRG, the Netherlands, Yugoslavia, the USA, Egypt, Peru, Uruguay and Japan (The Region of Kardzhali, 1982:95-97).

The processes of socialist industrialization later spread into the region, as factories and workshops mushroomed in every small town and most of the larger villages. In 1965 Momchilgrad hosted a factory for combined production of aluminium cutlery, sports and tourism facilities, as well as an engineering plant producing agricultural machinery. 5 years later Krumovgrad became a node of the textile and shoe-production sector in the region, exporting 50% of the produced shoes and clothes

to the USSR. The industrial production in Ivaylovgrad was concentrated in a factory for padlock production, as well as a Soviet outsourced plant for the assembly and production of electric equipment (The Region of Kardzhali, 1982:97). The region of Madzharovo was another centre of the lead and zinc mining industry.

The industrialization process was an enormous undertaking of the BCP that developed and spread through the Eastern Rhodopes within a period of about 20 years (starting in the 1950's). All in all, in the early 1980's the industrial production in the region delivered 75% of the entire regional produce. Statistics shows that in 20 years' time the industrial plants and factories more than doubled their number, being 21 in 1959 and rising to 45 in the early 1980's. The result of that was a significant employment generation, two and a half times more industrial produce and tripled industrial funds compared to the early 1950's (The Region of Kardzhali, 1982:96).

The drawbacks of this process, however, were largely seen in the gradual changing of nature, including the stripping of forests, destroying habitats through open mining of non-metalliferous minerals, local soil and water poisoning through uncontrolled discharge of wastewater, etc. As for the social impacts, while it did provide the local population with secure employment, what socialist industrialization also did was to gradually wear off people's entrepreneurial thinking, which would later prove rather detrimental in the transition to free capitalist economy.

## **The Socialist Agrarian Reform**

The industrialization taking place in the Eastern Rhodopes was accompanied by processes of socialist restructuring of the agricultural sector, which compared to those in the rest of Bulgaria, commenced with a significant delay because of the mountainous terrain and the fragmented agricultural lots. However, up until 1957, almost all of the arable lands in the rest of the country were collectivized and it was only a matter of time for the process to cover the Eastern Rhodopes, as well. Thus, in 1958 the mass collectivization in the region was completed and the agricultural lands were joined and consolidated in 40 labour-cooperative farms (TKZS) (The Region of Kardzhali, 1982:98). The agricultural reform involved the forced disturbance of tenure, the expropriation of all livestock and agricultural machinery (which were used to create state-owned livestock farms and machinery stations), as well as the consolidation of the lands into collective farms. This way, in 1958 Bulgaria became the second country in the world, after the USSR, to completely nationalize its domestic agricultural sector in order to politically consolidate and develop communism as the dominant social system (Fol et al., 1981).

The role of the intensification factors in the Eastern Rhodopes was increased, as another measure in the Agrarian reform. A significant share of the cultivation processes was mechanized and irrigation and mineral fertilizers were delivered by the state. The previous owners of the lands were organized in labour units, each with a state recruited administrative staff, and responsible for the land cultivation within the cooperatives. Tobacco was the predominant monoculture cultivated in the Eastern Rhodopes, as the soil was hostile to many other crops. Tobacco seeds and machinery were all supplied by the state, while the villagers, mainly women, were forced to supply the labour against minimal wages. In the autumn and early winter, all tobacco produce was requisite by the state. As a result of the intensification processes in tobacco and vegetable cultivation, statistics shows that for a period of 20 years tobacco produce had increased by 50% and vegetable yield doubled its amount.

By the early 1980's 85% of the local population's income was earned by tobacco cultivation and the region of Kardzhali was claimed among the best tobacco producing regions in the country (The Region of Kardzhali, 1982:98).

Livestock breeding was also strongly promoted in order to meet export demand. 86 thousand acres of pasture complexes were established and the state delivered fodder to ensure high productivity (The Region of Kardzhali, 1982:98).

However, a shortage of agricultural labour was arising, as many people migrated from the villages to the towns due to the forced collectivization (Georgieva, 1998:15). In order to solve this issue, what the government labelled "the work force reserves" or the people who had migrated from the villages to work in the industry, were returned back to the villages to help in the labour-cooperatives after each new generation arrived in town. Another measure to supply labour, involved the organization of temporary brigades including students, soldiers and factory workers to help collect the yield during the harvesting seasons (Kostov & Lingard, 2002:88).

To further prompt the agricultural consolidation and to resolve the labour shortage, the year 1969 saw the establishment of the first Agrarian-Industrial Complex (APK) in Ivaylovgrad, which was forged by a direct order of Todor Zhivkov (The Region of Kardzhali, 1982:98). The APK's were inspired by the leader's fascination for the communist model of merging the industrial and the agrarian work force, who in Bulgaria remained almost completely disconnected in defiance to the communist theory of the unified society. However, the new consolidated complexes never reached the expected success and the required state quotas proved to be too high to deliver.

In the 1970's the agricultural growth in the region was supported by family farming on private plots that people rented from the complexes. These plots were deemed to be a great country reserve for agricultural output (The Region of Kardzhali, 1982:99). They were primarily used by the families for subsistence reasons, and the surplus output they could sell themselves. Eventually, the cultivation of private plots turned out to be a successful practice as it ensured a significant share of the farmers' income (Kostov & Lingard, 2002:87). However, the exodus of most of the Turks in the Eastern Rhodopes in the last few years of the regime rendered a steep drop in the agricultural output of the region.

Overall, the land collectivization reform during the communist regime completely severs private initiative and private agriculture. It puts an end to any attempts at voluntary private cooperation. The state was the authority which determined the management structure and composition, exercising its total influence on the sector. Moreover, agriculture in the Eastern Rhodopes, as well as all over the country, was mainly tapped to finance the development of the industry which had been turned into one of the Party's ideological mantras (Creed, 1995:845).

Local people's take on the Socialist Agrarian reform is that even though it started as a forced undertaking, with time the land collectivization started reaping relatively good results in terms of productivity and realization of the yield. In their words, work improved because of the availability of cultivation machines, and all agricultural output was guaranteed by the state. *"Although the offered prices were not too high, local farmers say, making a distinction between back then and now, at least every kilogram of tobacco, grapes, wheat, meat and milk was bought off. Now it is different, now there are years when part of your tobacco produce you simply need to store in your attic until the*

*following year, when both its quality, and the price offered for it, are many times lower.”* The reform also made sure to secure employment, income and food for everyone in the Eastern Rhodopes. And not least important, in connection to it, many villages had electricity, telephones and running water installed for the first time and, eventually, the land reform did help to improve rural life in the region, though taking as much as it gave to the local people.

## **Urbanization and Towards a Developed Socialist Society**

The fast industrialization and the socialist restructuring of agriculture precipitated the migration processes in the Eastern Rhodopes in the end of the 1950's. By the 1980's half of the region's population was already living in the towns (The Region of Kardzhali, 1982:99), looking for a better life and increased opportunities. Moreover, as a part of the politics for development of the border region, many specialists in different knowledge fields and highly-educated workers from the rest of the country immigrated and settled in the Eastern Rhodopes (Georgieva, 1998:14), stimulated by the attractive salaries and bonuses offered to them. The state would even offer to put them and their families up for free. This is why even today many of the people who live in the towns are descendants of people having arrived in the Eastern Rhodopes from all over Bulgaria.

The towns were undergoing a dynamic construction activity as new residential areas, schools, libraries, community centres, public canteens, kindergartens and hospitals were built to meet the demand and ensure proper living conditions for everyone decided to settle there. A curious fact was that the town of Kardzhali had a single general plan for socialist urban design and development spanning until the year 2000. The town-development and the organization of the public services were part of a general agenda aimed at improving the living environment and the working conditions of the work class. Special care was taken that all towns and most of the bigger villages provided green leisure areas. This is the time when many of the villages in the region were supplied with electricity (240 thousand people), drinking water (447 villages – 221 thousand people) and provided with drains. Many roads and bridges were built, and the dams on the river Arda were constructed to cater both for residential, as well as for agricultural and industrial needs. The development of transport followed that of the regional economy. Regular transport connections joined the towns and villages in the region and the dam of Kardzhali even hosted a 250-seated cruise ship with an on-board restaurant and bar to meet the leisure needs of the citizens and guests of the town. The telephone communications and TV in the region were also introduced (The Region of Kardzhali, 1982:99-100).

The development of the socialist industry and agriculture was paralleled with activities aimed at raising and spreading the socialist culture. Art, folklore, theatre, cinema and the public press had to be available to everyone. Community centres in every town and village were organizing local cultural activities to foster the population's spiritual growth.

The well-being of the individual was also among the alleged priorities of the party. The state made human welfare services, such as healthcare and education, accessible to everyone. Every town had a hospital and every village had a small medical centre ensuring that even the distant rural population can receive qualified medical care. Many of the doctors were “imported” from other regions of the country. Physical culture and leisure were promoted as effective ways of recovery and recuperation of the working force (The Region of Kardzhali, 1982:103).

The Communist ideology was deeply ingrained in the educational system, as well. As a new measure to ensure the development of the socialist regime, secondary education was made compulsory. To make education accessible to everyone in the Eastern Rhodopes, 430 schools and 410 kindergartens were established in the region. Around 5000 teachers were employed in the education sector, many of whom were specialists who immigrated from the rest of the country to help develop the border region. The schools and enterprises in the Eastern Rhodopes, as everywhere else in Bulgaria, were to be turned into institutions for ideological, political and labour education (The Region of Kardzhali, 1982:102).

As a whole, urbanization in the Eastern Rhodopes in the second half of the XX century was the ultimate instrument of the BCP to accomplish the social and cultural development of the region and to spread the ideology of building a modern socialist society. It is largely due to this process and its associated impacts that the rural areas in the Eastern Rhodopes were gradually depopulated and abandoned. This has also achieved some serious socio-psychological shifts in the way that many young people from the region nowadays perceive village life, farming and cattle breeding to be backward and primitive.

## **Bulgarian Nationalism and the Revival Process**

The principle of the ethnically homogeneous nation was one of the building blocks of the developed socialist society. In the higher authority levels there were two main measures discussed to help keep constructing the monolithic Bulgarian nation. One of them was the periodic opening of the border to Turkey and the emigration of groups of Turkish people to their “second homeland” thus managing to maintain the minority size within the “optimal” share of 8.6% of the total population. The first mass wave of Turkish emigrants (155 000) chose or were forced to leave the country in the period 1949-1951, followed by a second exodus of another 130 000 who left between 1968 and 1978 to join their families in Turkey. As the emigration waves were causing unexpected economic and foreign-policy effects, the BCP saw assimilation as an equally good way of reducing the Turkish minority numbers, halting any possible Turkish nationalistic incitements and gradually eradicating the Muslim religious affiliation. Thus were born the secret plans labelled under the socially appealing name “Revival process”, which had been brewing within the circles of the BCP since the 1950’s but only became reality in the 1970’s and 1980’s (Gruev&Kalyonski, 2008:117-119).

The Revival process in the years of the Communist regime in Bulgaria was a highly ambiguous and forceful assimilation campaign held against the two largest Muslim minorities in the country, namely the Pomaks and the Bulgarian Turks. Although in smaller numbers, the Muslims among the Roma people were also subject to this campaign, as the Party aimed to sever even the slightest chance of Turkization among this minority, as well. Thus, a large part of the population in the Eastern Rhodopes was affected by the assimilation one way or another and the region’s deserted villages, abandoned lands, separated kins, friends and neighbours still bear the long-lasting legacies of this act of distorted Communist modernization.

While the assimilation campaign was being designed behind closed doors in the government, the official policy towards the Turkish minority in the first half of the Communist Regime (1947 - 1971) was deemed relatively favourable in that the minority had a right to freely exercise their specific ethnic and religious customs and traditions, as well as to receive education in their mother tongue

along with the obligatory studying of the Bulgarian language. They were allowed to issue printed editions and to watch television in Turkish. Moreover, the Turkish minority was given a few specific privileges such as quotas for free admission to higher education institutions or high-powered work places (Gruev&Kalyonski, 2008: 108-111). However, this policy of positive discrimination and gradual integration was rather contradictory and inconsistent as the privileges were launched and withdrawn time after time. Thus, in the 1960's the Turkish schools and kindergartens in the mixed population regions, including the Eastern Rhodopes, were closed and merged with the Bulgarian, the Turkish language was taught only as an optional discipline, teachers were laid off, many imams were recruited in the Secret Police, traditional Muslim clothing was prohibited, circumcisions were only done by doctors in state hospitals, some mosques were closed down and a strong socialist atheistic propaganda was launched, claiming Islam as a reactionary and backward religion (Gruev&Kalyonski, 2008:113).

And yet, by the mid 1970's in the Eastern Rhodopes there were evident educational, social and economic signs of a gradual natural integration and modernization of the Turkish population (Gruev&Kalyonski, 2008:108-111; Zhivkova, 2008:27-30). The main factor which contributed to that was the urbanization process and the increased opportunities for men to travel the country looking for jobs in the construction and industry sectors. Leaving their villages, being away from the tradition and the established family hierarchy, men would face the modern socialist urban environment, and embrace new understandings which they would bring back home. Thus, women in the family were given a voice; they were allowed to drop the traditional headcloth, to get educated and to take up a job away from the familial household and the tobacco field. The absolute authority of the most elderly man in the household was substituted by care and respect, but not blind obedience. This was claimed by a few to have been the real modern revival within the Turkish population in the Eastern Rhodopes, rather than what was to turn into a forced attempt at top-down ethnic identity shift designed at the higher institutional levels (Zhivkova, 2008:42-50).

That was not enough for the BCP and the "homogenous socialist society" utopia. The Turks continued to be seen as "distant others" and "still not modern enough". They were still living in predominantly compact rural areas, mainly in the Eastern Rhodopes, their level of education was considered to be insufficient (Gruev&Kalyonski, 2008:120) and, according to the secretary of the regional committee of the BCP in Kardzhali, the Turks' strong attachment to the Muslim tradition and customs was still too strong, and was a breeding ground of Turkish nationalistic sentiments (2008:131). Thus, step by step, the party created a progressist ideological hybrid combining Bulgarian nationalism and communism which gave birth to the so called revival process whose central measure was changing people's traditional Turko-Arabic names into Slavic names.

That, however, constituted a gross violation of Muslim people's identity as the Qur'an prescribed that a person's name was a bearer of his or her destiny and luck. After their demise, Muslims were buried and called up by their names to Allah who would assess their deeds and then send them to the other world. However, if those people were given different names than those whispered to them at birth, their souls would be unrecognisable to either the Muslim or the Christian god and would thus be doomed to never find peace. That is also the reason why the assimilation process would be met with such fierce resistance and would be a particularly overwhelming act against the lives of the Muslim population (Gruev&Kalyonski, 2008:65-66).

In the 1970's began the first stages of the assimilation targeted at the Pomak population in the Western and Middle Rhodopes, supported by the argument of their "Bulgarian blood and ancestry". The names changing campaign was met with resistance but brutal force, threats and extortions crushed it. Below the surface, this campaign was also an experiment checking whether such mass measures would be applicable in the case of the Bulgarian Turks. Thus, in the 1970's the first Turks and their children were also subject to the assimilation under the pretext that they were in a mixed marriage with a Pomak man or woman. In the meantime, the rumours about the repressions of the Pomaks and a small group of Turks taking place in the Western and Middle Rhodopes created an atmosphere of fear among the population in the Eastern Rhodopes that they were next in the line (Gruev&Kalyonski, 2008:123,127).

In 1978 in the country was introduced a universal civil registry which required all passports to be renewed by the end of 1985 and that was a convenient moment to confiscate the Turkish population's old passports and hand out the new documents with their new Slavic names. At the beginning of the 1980's the pressure of the assimilation process was already gaining ground as every Turkish person who would change their address or their job (for example in the system of GORUBSO), buy a new house, or apply for a construction permit was required to change their name first. The nationalistic and atheistic propaganda reached a peak, as speaking in Turkish in all public places was completely forbidden, the construction of new mosques was banned, circumcision and other Muslim custom practices were fiercely persecuted (Gruev&Kalyonski, 2008:129) . The police and the secret informers among the local population were following for the strict observance of the socialist civil rituals and traditions. In addition, the regional authorities in Kardzhali were ordered to take the necessary steps for the gradual dispersing of the compact Turkish population and their resettlement up in the country in predominantly Bulgarian regions. At the same time, the Bulgarian population in the Eastern Rhodopes was stimulated to stay and other Bulgarian citizens were sent from the country to settle in the region (Gruev&Kalyonski, 2008:128-129).

Those steps were just the prelude to the actual mass names changing campaign in the Eastern Rhodopes of the winter in 1984-1985. Although this was a logical consequence of the gradual assimilation process taking place, the campaign still caught the local population unprepared. The state monopoly over what information to be disseminated had made sure that no information about the assimilation process would leak in the public space to avoid any possible disturbances or delays.

It is interesting to mention that a key instrument in the campaign was the Secret Police who managed to see all measures through by espionage, recruiting of key figures such as teachers and imams and applying different methods of repression and extortion (Gruev&Kalyonski, 2008:134). Thus, in connection with a couple of assaults in Varna and Plovdiv in 1984, in the eve of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the regime, the Secret Police claimed them to be a result of Turkish terroristic activity. These events were also the direct excuse of the increased police and army presence in the mixed population regions, including the region of Kardzhali and the rest of the Eastern Rhodopes, which was also necessary for the names changing campaign which followed in the winter of that same year. In order to ensure that resistance against the campaign in the Eastern Rhodopes is minimised, many Turkish intellectuals, students, imams and community leaders were seized and sent without a verdict to prison in Haskovo or to the concentration camps in Belene and Bobov Dol (Gruev&Kalyonski, 2008:134-139).

The campaign between December 1984 and February 1985 resulted in the forced changing of the names and passports of all Turkish and Bulgarian Muslim people in the Eastern Rhodopes and amounted to approximately 850 000 people all over the country. The planning and organization was impeccable, mobilizing all administrative offices, the police, the national army, the border patrols, all party members, activists and the national intelligence service in the region. All old passports were confiscated, including those of the deceased family members. Even their names were changed in the registries in order to ensure that their living sons and daughters had Slavic middle names. There were places of fierce resistance by the local population which necessitated the use of armour, such as the outrages in Momchilgrad and Ardino. Different sources claim that the number of people killed in the resistance in the Eastern Rhodopes was around 20. Some of them fell victim in the shootings, others were beaten to death by the police. Hundreds of people were sent to concentration camps or interned with their families in different regions of the country (Gruev&Kalyonski, 2008:139-141). By the end of February 1985 the names changing campaign was over.

In March 1985 Todor Zhivkov spoke at a BCP meeting and foretold that this was not the end of the revival process. He suggested that it was to be renewed again within 15 years in a last attempt at completely eradicating Islam from the country (Gruev&Kalyonski, 2008:143).

However, that was not the end of it all for the BCP, either. The series of events did not go unnoticed by the international society and serious messages of condemnation of the assimilation process were spread both within and beyond the Iron curtain. Turkey was a key player in mobilizing this outcry by seeking support both from the NATO members and the USSR. The international isolation of Bulgaria and the BCP gradually exacerbated, as the country could no longer count on Soviet support after Mikhail Gorbachev rose to power. Seeing that no dialogue could ever resolve the situation, Bulgaria and Turkey were virtually in a state of diplomatic war. It was not until February 1988 that the two countries signed a treaty in Belgrade in an attempt to renew their diplomatic relations. In a following speech in May 1989, Todor Zhivkov announced that Turkey had agreed to open their border to all those Bulgarian Turks who wished to emigrate (Gruev&Kalyonski, 2008:144-151). The proportions of the emigrant wave were, however, largely unexpected, as close to 360 000 people chose to leave the country in the summer of 1989 (2008:193).

The assimilation process of 1984-1985 was deemed a failure. Instead of achieving to open up the Turkish communities to Bulgaria and construct their Bulgarian identities, it had only consolidated their traditional ethnic identity and chased them away from their home lands. The Turkish exodus of 1989, termed the Big Excursion was also the beginning of the end of Todor Zhivkov and the communist regime in Bulgaria.

## **Times of Transition**

If you talk to local people in the Eastern Rhodopes you cannot help but notice that transition is a dirty word to them. Indeed, many transitions have marked the region's history and made the sound of this word painful in the people's collective memory. Only within 50 years a flurry of social, cultural and economic changes took place in the region that made the lives of ordinary people in the small towns and villages resemble a social experiment laboratory. Within those past 50 years they had to go through transitions from traditional, self-sufficient communities to socialism, developed socialist society, modernity, even communism (Georgieva, 1998:9), only to see this entire regime collapse in

1989 when everything had to start over, building a new social and economic system in the transition to democracy, liberalism and market economy.

The changes that took place after 1989 crucially impacted life in the Eastern Rhodopes, especially that in the rural areas. Almost immediately after the fall of the Regime, and over the following years, a significant part of the Bulgarian Turks returned to their homes. This once again changed the demographic structure of the region, but it did not reverse the processes of steep depopulation of the rural areas (Zhivkova, 2008:54), caused by what was to follow during the transition to market economy.

It all began in earnest after the election of the first non-socialist government in the early 1990's, when the de-collectivisation and the privatisation reforms came into force (Creed, 1995:846).

Land restitution in many rural areas in the Eastern Rhodopes has been a particularly difficult issue due to poor ownership registry practices in the past and, mainly, due to the mass Turkish exodus from the region with the Big Excursion of 1989. Many of those people or their heirs did not return, as a result of which the ownership of large chunks of abandoned lands is unclear to this day. After a certain period, these unclaimed lands are taken by the municipal authorities and rented out to people who wish to use them for agricultural purposes.

Many of the co-operative farm constructions which perched in every village were torn down and given away to the local people in the form of bricks and other construction material. Few of those buildings were actually bought off for private business purposes. The fate of many of the industrial plants was similar. Most of them were gradually closed down over the transition years, leaving thousands of people in the region unemployed. Today the skeletons of those plants and workshops can be seen in every industrial district at the edges of the towns – Kardzhali, Momchilgrad, Krumovgrad, Ivaylovgrad, Madzharovo.

Following those changes, a large share of the economically active part of the population, started leaving the region in the 1990's and still continue to exit today. Emigration in the transition period has thus mainly been done for economic reasons, as young people went looking for education, employment and better life either in the large Bulgarian cities or abroad – in Germany, Sweden, the USA, Spain, etc.

Overall, the disparities between life in the towns and in the villages of the region nowadays are significant in terms of income, jobs, healthcare, education, culture and entertainment opportunities. However, a large part of the urban population in the Eastern Rhodopes still remains strongly connected to the rural life (Georgieva, 1998:16), as during weekends and holidays they return to their home villages to aid their relatives or cultivate their own subsistence gardens. Some of the towns in the region such as Ardino, Krumovgrad and Momchilgrad, still have typical rural characteristics, since agricultural activity is extensively practiced in the outskirts of the towns. Another very common practice which maintains the ties between towns and villages is that often the local rural population would send foodstuffs from their home produce to their town relatives, such as milk, eggs, meat, vegetables, fruit, and jars with preserved food.

In the contemporary conditions of economic and social crisis, the life of those people who chose or had no other option but to stay in the small villages in the Eastern Rhodopes is not easy at all. The

men, who left their families at home and went to work in the construction industry in the country or abroad, returned as work decreased significantly. This meant that a large number of families lost their primary source of income. Today, many of the people are busy with multiple occupations at the same time, such as small merchandise, tobacco cultivation, taking care of livestock, working seasonal jobs in the agriculture or tourism abroad, or in the country, etc. However, due to an inconsistent government policy regarding tobacco subsidies and quotas, more and more people give up its cultivation and start looking for alternatives.

The constant decrease in the rural population in the Eastern Rhodopes also led to subsequent closing down of schools, kindergartens, pharmacies, medical and transport services in many villages. As a result of that, the population who remained there nowadays has to send their children to the closest schools in nearby towns or larger villages, and often travel or wait for hours to receive medical help and pharmaceutical services. Entertainment opportunities for the villagers do not abound, either, as most of the café salons, cinema halls and community centres were closed, as well.

There are still villages in the Eastern Rhodopes with no electricity or drinking water installation. Most of them are completely deserted. In very few of them there still have remained a few elderly people who get by growing their own food, taking care of cattle or sheep, hauling buckets of water from the village wells or nearby water fountains and waiting for their children or grandchildren to come visit.

The legacies of the Communist Regime and the contradictory, unsystematic measures taken by the democratic administration over the last 20 years can be most easily spotted in the Eastern Rhodopean landscape, which can hardly be represented through words, but must be seen in order to understand the impacts. Travel in the region and your eyes will come across deserted villages, lying in a dilapidated state, looking almost as if they are haunted by the ghost of the insult and deprivation which forced people to leave their homes and their life belongings overnight. Talking to local people, however, shows positive signs of optimism and faith that one day the Eastern Rhodopes, apart from being an extraordinarily beautiful and enigmatic mountain which remains in the heart of every person who ever lived there, will become a better place to live and young people will start returning to their homelands.

## **The Life-Worlds of People in the Eastern Rhodopes**

Visiting the villages and the small towns in the Eastern Rhodopes so one can see the standing legacies of the Regime and how people live their lives nowadays is the only way to immerse in the truly authentic multicultural atmosphere of the region.

Indeed, the wealth of the region is its people and their ethnic and religious diversity. Bulgarians, Turks and Roma have been living humbly in peace and tolerance in this mountain for a long time, unlike the images of ethnic tension which the media and politics have been trying to construct. Many traditions have intermingled with time and are now observed both by Christians and Muslims together. The Turkish principle of respecting and being on good terms with the neighbours ("*komshuluk*") is what welds people in the Eastern Rhodopes together. Many Turks even go so far as to say that when one looks for a place to live, they should "buy" good neighbours first and then think about the house itself.

In a token of *komshuluk*, in the late afternoons and evenings, after work on the field or in the farm is finished, one can see groups of people sitting together in the village café or in the neighbour's yard. A bottle of local wine or home-made rakia are the obligatory items on the table. Often women would sit together and chat about Turkish soap operas, their children and grandchildren, the weather or simply the talk of the town. The elderly would gather around the local café table and play cards to pass the time and to discuss politics and the topical issues of the day. Communism is still very present in ordinary people's conversations. Many times they keep making reference to the times of the Regime, especially when they disapprove of anything they find to be a result of the current democratic and market-oriented political system. One can sense there is a sense of nostalgia for the years before the change when people felt more secure in terms of employment, food and social services.

However, there is no better way to learn about life in the Eastern Rhodopes and how the past is still having an impact on the present of the region than hearing the stories told by locals. Our journey thus began from the municipality of Kardzhali and here is what we found.

### **The Municipality of Kardzhali**

Kardzhali is the largest town in the Eastern Rhodopes. It concentrates large groups of people of diverse ethnic, religious and social origins, making up its complex social fabric. According to municipal demographic data, currently 62% of the population is Turkish, 31% is Bulgarian, 3% are Roma and the remaining 4% have defined themselves as "other" (Municipality of Kardzhali, 2012).

Some of the local people call it a town of immigrants, because many of its citizens have settled here either from the rest of Bulgaria or from the local villages in the years before and during the Communist regime. It used to be called the modern Diyarbakir (a province and city in South Turkey where Bulgarian revolutionaries were sent to exile in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) of Bulgaria because many political prisoners and scholars were interned here at the beginning of the XX century. Later on, during the Regime, small groups of highly-educated workers – teachers, researchers, officers, doctors – arrived to look for realization in the developing region.

The rich diversity of people and groups in Kardzhali is often a topic of speculations in the media and high domestic politics about ethnic tensions brewing underneath the surface, but if one simply walks the streets of the town, they would come across the real day-to-day cross ethnic relations among the citizens. To mention just a few, Bulgarian and Turkish children playing together in the school yards, people haggling in the town market in both languages, the priest and the imam sitting together at a table, drinking coffee and the symbol of the town's tolerance – the Church bells, the Muslim prayer from the minaret and the Bulgarian patriotic songs ringing from the old municipal clock tower, sounding all together.

Here is what a local woman says about the diversity of her home town: *"We all have very different and distinct backgrounds – some of us have blue eyes, others have brown eyes, we are Bulgarians, Turks, you name it! What we have in common, though, is that we all have settled here in Kardzhali either to run away from something or to follow some dream! This is what made us so tolerant to diversity!"*.

The locals often relate their memories of the times before 1989 with mixed feelings. On the one hand, they acknowledge that what Communism did in terms of creating modern conditions to live,

building roads and residential areas, installing electricity and drinking water facilities both in town as well as in the surrounding villages and hamlets, securing employment, education and healthcare for every single person, is still an unprecedented achievement. Some of them even refer to the 1970's as *"the Golden years of the region's development"*. But they also speak with grim notes of the feeling of oppression of their civil liberties, reinforced by the land collectivization reform, the lack of freedom of speech and the highly limited access to the border region. The events connected with the Revival process of 1984-1985 bear an especially bitter meaning to the locals. They recall the fear and tension in the air, the curfew and the dense presence of the police in the streets and squares, who would make sure to disperse groups of people and would apprehend those who spoke in Turkish, or showed any kind of defiance. *"There was this case when an old man got caught speaking Turkish in a local café, and the policemen beat him because of that, without even knowing that this man was a Bulgarian. He knew the language and wanted to show respect and solidarity for his Turkish brothers. When the police learnt he was a Bulgarian, they beat him even more because of his stark disobedience."* is what an elderly man recollects of the assimilation process. All locals, however, underline that this never influenced the relations between friends and neighbours of different ethnic backgrounds.

Although a significant part of the municipal population left with the Big Excursion in 1989, today, many abandoned homes in and around the town have seen their owners come back from Turkey. Since the fall of the Regime, travel across the border is becoming more and more easy, which allows many of those who left their homeland over 20 years ago to return and live their retirement years in the place where they were born.

Although people recognize the freedom which they have been given since the rise of democracy, they admit that not everyone can get a sense of it, as the main issue preoccupying many local people nowadays is making ends meet. In the exact words of a local woman whose fate has connected her with many people from the villages and the cottages in the region: *"Life can be easier today for those who have the money to afford it. I am speaking, however, of those people who in the years after the collapse of socialism, because socialism had a very firm grip on this region, and the closure of the industrial plants in the region remained literally without the means to buy bread. This is especially the generation in a pre-retirement age, who were left with very few prospects in the market economy. It is even difficult for them to sustain themselves by growing their own food, because the soil in the region is not as fertile as it is in the valley. Eventually, those people are left with few options but to count on their children and relatives, working in the cities, to sustain them. They lead extremely humble lives... How do you figure developing some of the villages in the region then, when there are still many of them with no running water installed, with no paved roads leading to them, just a narrow hilly path, which completely separates the village in the winter. The few people still inhabiting those villages are only interested in ensuring they have enough wood and flour to make it through the winter."* And the woman goes on to mention about the strong spirit and sincere friendliness of the Eastern Rhodopean people, despite the hardships which life serves them nowadays: *"Can you imagine what a great pleasure the elderly men and women take in talking to passersby, who approach them and ask them about their life stories? Someone to take a real interest in you, to come and ask questions about you, about what you've been through, to make you feel heard and important! All your life you've been working in the tobacco field, unnoticed by anyone, and suddenly someone comes and wants to have a chat with you....!"*

Indeed, there is something inexplicable, but awe-inspiring in the stoic and profoundly complex nature of the people in this region. As they themselves explain this, *“In order to survive in the local conditions and to rise above all changes that took place over the ages, many of them not so good, one needs to either be made of steel, or have an absolutely philosophical outlook on life.”*

### **The Municipality of Krumovgrad**

The municipality of Krumovgrad nests in the valley of the river Krumovitsa. Currently the population of the town approximates 5000 people, and that of the surrounding villages is around 16 000. The ethnic structure is variegated, similar to that in the municipality of Kardzhali, with 58% Turks, 22% Bulgarian-mohammedans (Pomaks), 16% Bulgarians and 4% Roma (Municipality of Krumovgrad, 2012).

There is a paradox in the municipality figures, however, as the official number of the municipal population based on resident registrations amounts to over 46 000 people. The reason for that, as explained by the local people, is once again the depopulation process. Its impacts can be observed mostly in the villages perching on the hills, some of which have been utterly abandoned. Where did all those people go? Many of them emigrated to Turkey due to the assimilation process, others descended from the mountain villages into the town of Krumovgrad and elsewhere in the region, a third group of people went abroad to seek better realization.

Again locals say that the times of the Communist Regime were neither black, nor white. They mention the advantages of having secure jobs in the co-operative farms or the industry, access to education and healthcare even in the small villages, and having regular transport connections running in the municipality. In comparison to that, life in the region today has become more difficult, after the drastic withdrawal of the state from many social spheres, which caused shocking impacts, according to them. The closure of the industrial productions and co-operative cattle farms, the loss of agricultural markets and the inadequate social policy of the government led to the gradual and immense drop in the population numbers. Locals say that *“there are no real alternatives to tobacco cultivation and livestock breeding in this area, and you have to pray that there is rain during the year, otherwise the river dries up, the pastures wither and life becomes very, very difficult. And then the alternative option is that the family splits as either the man or the woman in the house goes to work abroad, leaving their children behind, in order to save up for their well-being”*.

The mentioning of the Revival process brings bitter notes in the stories of the locals. A young Turkish woman who became subject to it in her teen years recalls the following: *“I was young back then, and I remember hiding with my family day after day in the field, amongst the tall tobacco stems. One day they just caught me at school, took me to the passport office and gave me my new name.”* Another Turkish man, who emigrated to Turkey in 1989, but keeps returning every year, relates a similar story: *“Those were scary times, we were scared of the Party. I remember I was riding my motorbike when I was halted by the police, who forcefully took my passport and told me I had to go to the passport office if I wanted my documents back. My own brother even got beaten by the police, because he was refusing to have his name changed. The insult of the state remained in us and we decided to leave everything we had behind to go to a country where we had nothing waiting for us.”*

Nowadays, the memory of the Revival process remains, but locals hurry to say that the relations between Bulgarians and Turkish people have rarely been defined by their ethnic or religious origins. However, they do admit that they know of conflicts where imams have refused to bury Muslims, who

kept their Bulgarian names. Another impact of the Revival process and the following mass exodus of the Turks, which is especially peculiar to this municipality, is the unclear ownership of many lands and properties which continues to this day. This is a particularly impeding situation, when a local person tries to purchase a plot in order to start a new or extend an existing business (mainly in the farming sector, but more and more also in relation to rural tourism).

There is, however, one positive consequence local people find in the depopulation process, and that is the return and regeneration of nature. They say that the abandonment of large portions of land has contributed to the growth of the populations of certain animal species (including the wolf), which had been gradually chased from their habitats during the intensive cultivation and industrial production back in the Socialism. It is not a rare picture to come across an old stone house lying in ruins and vegetation making its way to the light within the walls of the construction. All this makes the conditions for breeding cattle in the wild excellent. And indeed, many herds of typical Eastern Rhodopean cattle breeds, such as the Rhodopi Shorthorn cows, can be seen free grazing in the area. Since recently, the pastures around the abandoned village of Sbor are also roamed by the Tarpan horses.

The municipality of Krumovgrad is a small but rich and diverse share of the Eastern Rhodopes, whose people harbor authentic stories of wisdom, tradition, sadness and joys. What many of the locals say is: *“Even if life is not so easy here, local people won’t shut you out and leave you stranded. They are kind and merciful. And one can definitely learn a good deal from them.”*

### **The Municipality of Ivaylovgrad**

The municipality of Ivaylovgrad is a relatively sparsely populated area with a total number of the current population approximating 6000 people (Ivaylovgrad, 2012). The majority of them are Bulgarian Christian Orthodox.

Travelling in this region one can notice how the forested Eastern Rhodopean landscape morphs into hilly vast open spaces, extending until distant horizons. Small deserted, or only inhabited by a few families, villages perch on the hills, reminding of the history of the Eastern Rhodopes and showcasing the legacies of the Communism and the transition period in Bulgaria. Indeed, this is the place to see attractive authentic villages and hamlets (mahali) largely depopulated, some of them with two-three people, or two-three families still living in them.

The Greek border lies in the immediate proximity of the municipality. Until 1989 this had also been one of the least well-known regions of Bulgaria. For over 40 years, the municipality of Ivaylovgrad was at the very frontier between the member states of the Warsaw Treaty and NATO. Therefore, it was a region of high security measures and strong military presence. Ordinary people were rarely allowed to access this area, and even if they were, this was only against a special border pass, issued in advance by the visitor’s municipality of residence. However, more often than not, the only visitors that were permitted were highly-educated or skilled workers, such as teachers, researchers, medical staff, military and police workers, who were stimulated to settle in the area together with their families, as a part of the politics for development of the border region. Most of them left back to their home places after the fall of the Regime.

Similar to the other municipalities of the Eastern Rhodopes, the industrial plants, workshops and frontier posts in Ivaylovgrad were closed down or privatised during the transition period, leading to a

surge in the unemployment rate of the border municipality. Today, Ivaylovgrad earns a spot in the wine map of Bulgaria with its two reputable wineries, and is mainly famous for its Thracian and Bulgarian Middle-age heritage sites.

Due to the openness of the land, agriculture in the region of Ivaylovgrad has got long traditions, especially in tobacco cultivation, growing wheat, sesame and grapes. For this reason, the expropriation of the agricultural lands and the cattle was particularly painful to the locals. Despite this act being forced on the people, 20 years later the elderly recall that the labour-cooperative system did prove to work efficiently, as the productivity grew immensely. Moreover, they say that despite the wages having been relatively low back then, every family still received enough to afford a normal life and even managed to save up a little. A man in Ivaylovgrad says: *“These days there is a sense of nostalgia for those years among the local people here, not because of the Communism, but because of the low prices of food, the free education and healthcare, the regular transport to every settlement in the area, the little café-restaurants, cinemas and community centres in every village. But back then even though we had money to buy things, the shops in the region had very little to offer. One had to wait for months on end to buy a cassette player or a TV-set, and years to buy a car. And it didn’t matter whether you were rich or of modest income, we would all wear similar clothes, we would all eat the same food which was sold in the shops, drive cars of the same brand and watch the same TV-sets. There was simply no other option. Nowadays, there is such a big variety of items, but many people here simply do not have the money to afford it.”*

As for the Revival process, another monumental event of the Communist history of the Eastern Rhodopes, local people say that the impact here was not as dramatic as compared to the municipalities of Kardzhali and Krumovgrad. An elderly man remembers, however, that there was a very dense presence of troops and border patrols in the area, especially during the times when waves of Turkish emigrants were expected to cross the area. Another person who grew up in one of the villages in the area recalls the tension in the mixed population villages due to the presence of covert informers among the local population who could notify the secret police if any of the Bulgarians showed any sign of solidarity with the Turkish, or if the Turkish people would show any defiance to the established norms. He continues to tell that during the period of the Big Excursion all Turkish families from the local villages would sell their livestock and their household belongings very cheaply, and then leave their homes overnight.

After the collapse of the Regime, the land restitution in the municipality was met with joy by the local people, but they would soon understand that they could earn very little from cultivating their own plots. This is why many of them rented out their lands and left to look for better opportunities in different towns in the country. The young people who chose to stay in the region of Ivaylovgrad, nowadays, often rent lands and establish a small agricultural business, work in the gneiss quarry in the area or get hired to work seasonal agricultural jobs in the nearby Greek fields. With a sad note a few local people say that many young people who now study and work in the bigger towns, refuse to come back to the village life and work in the farming sector, as they do not see prospects in it, and even *“find it an offensive and backward job.”* One person goes on to add: *“They want to call themselves modern citizens, to live in the big city and go to have a coffee at the mall. Well, our village doesn’t have a mall, and neither does the government do anything about stimulating those young people to come back and stay here.”*

And yet, despite the hardships which rural life in the region brings them at present, local people remain hopeful and optimistic about the future of the municipality due to its great potentials for sustainable development. As one of the local people chose to conclude: *“Everything will fall into its right place, it just needs time.”*

### **The Municipality of Madzharovo**

Madzharovo is a small municipality in the Eastern Rhodopes with a total population of about 600 people. The main source of subsistence and income in this area is livestock breeding and less and less often - agriculture. Even though tobacco cultivation has been a rather common practice in the near past, today, only a few families continue to grow tobacco, as the state policy in this sector has been detrimental, offering low prices which do not match the resources invested in the cultivation of this industrial crop and families in the municipality can hardly sustain themselves with this occupation in reality.

The town of Madzharovo is a typical product of the Communist Regime and its grand industrial projects. The ground underneath the town was rich in lead and zinc, which led to the construction of a large state mining enterprise that dealt with the extraction of ores and did so until about 15 years ago when, following the general trend of dealing with former state industrial production in the region, the mines around the town were sealed and all enterprise buildings were torn down. Local people explain that the mines were the heartbeat of the municipality, as they employed the majority of men and many women, some of them local, and others who arrived from within the country to work here in the 1960's and 1970's. Many residential blocks were built back then to meet the needs of the workers from the Agrarian-Industrial complex and the mining enterprise of Madzharovo. After the change of 1989 and the closure of the mines, these blocks were either left empty or still host a couple of families on the most, as the population numbers were decimated by the outward migration. Indeed, the municipal population numbers before 1989 amounted to 5-6 thousand people whereas today they have reached a figure ten times smaller.

Local rumour has it, that a significant number of men who once worked in the mines of Madzharovo passed away as a result of the poor measures of work security underground. Indeed, little would be done in the past to secure that the work force is maximally protected from the severe conditions in the mine labour, such as the high density of crystalline dust in the underground air. A very unfortunate outcome of that, according to many widowed women in the area, was that their husbands, who once had worked as miners, would come down with fatal silicosis or lung cancer. There is a disagreement on this matter, however, as other people claim that this had nothing to do with the mines.

The labour-cooperative farms in the municipality of Madzharovo of the times during the Regime were not among the most productive, local people recall. The main crops which were cultivated were wheat and corn. The local conditions, however, were not very conducive to the growth of these artificially introduced crops, as a result of which yield was rather low compared to other regions. The de-collectivisation during the 1990's was met with enthusiasm by the land owners, but similar to other places in the Eastern Rhodopes, rural life simply did not provide people with the desired standard of living. That, combined with the mines closure, set off the gradual depopulation process here.

Nowadays, the local people who stayed in the municipality live off occupations such as breeding livestock, growing small subsistence plots with vegetables. Large-scale land cultivation is considered by the locals to be impractical, as the terrain requires mechanical cultivation, and hiring such services is rather costly, as they are only available in distant towns.

The financial state of some of the elderly, who once worked in the labour-cooperative farm of Madzharovo is rather poor, as they receive pensions of about 80-100 Euros a month. They count on the support of their working relatives. The men who retired from the mines were said to be among the few people in the municipality, who could afford a somewhat normal life. In the winter period, hunting is the favourite hobby and topic for discussion of many men – young and old.

The Revival process was another reason which led to the depopulation of the municipality, as most of the Turkish population in the area found themselves forced to leave the country during the Big Excursion of 1989. However, a large part of them returned to their home villages after the fall of the regime and the relations between Bulgarians and Turkish people continue to be based on mutual respect, friendship and trust.

The development of tourism in the municipality is something which the local people welcome warmly. On the one hand, it is something which supports the small shops, guest houses and workshops in the area, and, on the other, locals like the encounter with visitors, who have come to learn about their region. This is why, the wealth of the municipality of Madzharovo is not only its pristine nature and diverse bird life, but also its people who always have a few stories and anecdotes up their sleeves, which would make anyone's stay an enriching experience.

## **Distinctive Regional Festivities and Memorial Dates**

Several traditional festivities have continued being practiced in the region of the Eastern Rhodopes, despite the hardships of everyday life these days.

One of them takes place on May 6<sup>th</sup> every year and is very peculiar with the fact that on this date Bulgarian Christians, Bulgarian Muslims, Turks and Roma celebrate together. While for Christians this is the day of St. George, for Muslims it is Hidirellez, the arrival of spring, and for the Roma it is the celebration of their people's salvation from the dragon that was sent to kill them.

Another peculiar custom which is observed every year in Ivaylovgrad is Kukeri. This quite attractive and flamboyant event takes place to mark the end of the winter and the most interesting feature of it are the impressive costumes worn by young lads from the neighbourhood. They dance around the town and jingle large copper bells with the sound of which they chase away the evil spirits and welcome good fortune and rich harvest throughout the year. The dancers are treated with sweets and wine by the hosts of each house they visit (Bulgarian Festivities (a), 2012).

Once per year, the municipalities of Ivaylovgrad and Madzharovo host two related and very unique for Bulgaria events. They both have to do with the heroic, yet rather tragic escape of over 20 thousand Bulgarians from West Thrace in 1913, when in an attempt to cross the border with Bulgaria at the village of Yatadzhik (today's Madzharovo), over 2000 of them, including hundreds of children, were killed by the Turkish army (Municipality of Madzharovo, 2012).

In order to keep alive the memory for those people who died on their way to freedom, the place of their death, near Madzharovo, has been turned into a memorial complex where the remains of the killed are left to rest. This complex hosts the commemorative events every year at the end of September or beginning of October. This is the time when the sons and daughters of the Bulgarians from Thrace arrive in the region from all over the country, and even from abroad, to pay respects and to celebrate their culture and historic memory (Bulgarian Festivities (c), 2012).

A similar event takes place at the memorial complex Ilieva Niva in the Municipality of Ivaylovgrad every year on the first Saturday of June. The Day of the Thracian Child is organized and held to commemorate the Bulgarian refugee children from Thrace who died in 1913, as well as to celebrate children as the future of the nation. Each summer this event welcomes thousands of guests, different festive performances by children ensembles from the country, as well as the celebration of the culture and traditions of the Bulgarians from Thrace (Bulgarian Festivities (b), 2012).

## Conclusion

The region of the Eastern Rhodopes has long been shaped by complex demographic, socio-economic and political processes. Not least important of them is the socialist legacy which plunged the region and its people into a long and difficult period of industrialization, urbanization, land collectivization, forced assimilation of the local Muslim population and a wavering transition from planned to market economy (Georgieva, 1998).

Maybe it is those lessons of history that tempered the people of the Eastern Rhodopes and made them strong, resilient and wise, patiently taking care of the daily chores in the field or the farm, but also being able to rise above the hardships of life. It is the people of the region that is its indisputable wealth. They are so profoundly diverse and yet they were never strangers to one another. Being among them is like going back in time and all the clocks stopping.

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