

Youth Forum 21st Century Association organized an international exchange of good practices in eco-agriculture in the region of Smolyan

In the period 23-25 September 2021 an international study visit for exchange of good practices in environmental management, eco-agriculture and youth entrepreneurship was held in Smolyan.

The visit was realized within the project B2.6D.11/ 01.07.2019 “Environmental management enhancement by Youth-run SMEs” (Project Acronym - EnvironmentYou), funded by the Cross-border Cooperation Program INTERREG V-A "Greece-Bulgaria 2014-2020", co-funded by the European Regional Development Fund and by the national funds of the countries participating in the programme.

More than 30 experts and young entrepreneurs in agriculture from Bulgaria and Greece took part in the international exchange - representatives of the partner organizations of the project: Hellenic National Youth Council, Agricultural University-Plovdiv, Regional Development Fund of



Central Macedonia, Youth Forum 21st Century Association, Euroregion Nestos Mesta, Regional Center for Vocational Education and Training to the Chamber of Commerce and Industry - Blagoevgrad and the Association for Regional Social and Economic Development.

On the first day of the visit, the participants visited the Rhodope mountain village of Momchilovtsi, where they were welcomed by the dedicated mayor of the village Siyka Surkova and one of the youngest farmers in the village - Andrey Andeev. The main livelihood in Momchilovtsi is potato production, high-mountain cattle breeding and rural tourism, which the inhabitants of Momchilovtsi are proud to be pioneers of in Bulgaria. Ms.Siika Surkova presented the challenges and opportunities for development of small mountain settlements in the region, with an emphasis on the development of organic farming, cattle breeding, production of Bulgarian yogurt and tourism. The participants had the opportunity to learn about the history of the Yogurt Festival, which is traditionally held every year in Momchilovtsi,



as well as to enjoy the authentic Bulgarian taste of the famous yogurt brand "Momchilovtsi".

The “Lord of the Mursal Tea” - Andrey Andreev, shared his experience in organic farming telling the story of the Farm for Cultivated Mursal Tea, which he created a few years ago, as well as his experience in the production of honey and rosehip jam. He presented the entire technological process of growing Mursal Tea as well as the innovative solutions he has introduced in response to the challenges of growing and picking the herb. The participants were extremely impressed by Andrey's inspiring story, which can be described as a good example for the new generation of farmers.



During the meeting, good practices in the development of cattle breeding and potato seed production in Momchilovtsi were presented, as well as the challenges faced by local farmers.

On September 24th the participants visited the Mlechen Dom (Milk House) complex in the village of Smilyan, where they were welcomed by the dairy manager Ms. Milkana Yordanova, who told about the history of the complex and the Rhodope Milk dairy which was built there and is modernly equipped according to European standards. It was established in 1993 with the main activity of milk processing and over the years it had become famous for the great variety of ecologically clean dairy products produced according to old Bulgarian, Italian, Swiss and Dutch recipes. In the beginning, traditional Bulgarian dairy products were produced and later, after training technologists in Switzerland, the production of Swiss and Dutch cheeses began. An exceptional advantage is that the dairy is located in an ecologically clean area and hygiene in the enterprise is at European level.





The raw material - the Rhodope milk - is important for the good quality of the cheeses obtained high in the mountains along the Gorna Arda river. According to Milkana, good cheese cannot be made from milk milked from silage-fed animals. The cows must have grazed on the lush Rhodope pastures and in winter they should be fed only with forage and hay. Milk is also important for yellow cheese - the varied composition of the grass grazed by the cows is important to make it yellow in colour, firm, with a rich

milky flavour. The pronounced spicy taste of the Rhodope Milk cheese is due to the specific Rhodope terroir.

During the conversation, the participants had the opportunity to get acquainted with the technology of dairy production and compliance with environmental standards, as well as to try the most popular selection of cheeses of "Rhodope Milk" - kaba gaida (gouda), geranium (gruyere), parnar (parmesan), teise (tilsit), emmental, pecorino, as well as the so-called "Male cheese – Rhodopes" (prototype of the "Kefalotiri" cheese) and the yellow cheese "Smilyan", made from sheep's milk according to original recipe.



The trip around Smilyan continued with a visit to the unique Ethnographic Collection "Smilyan Beans and Traditional Rhodope Slippers" created in 2005, which is located in the Community Centre "Assen Zlatarov-1927". All kinds of bean works can be found in the museum collection and at the same time visitors have the opportunity to learn about the tradition of making and embroidering Rhodope slippers, which are an

integral part of the Rhodope costume. The museum also gained fame with the largest panel made of 23 000 beans, which is 2.10 / 3.36 m in size and in the production of which thousands of locals and guests of the village of Smilyan have participated in the last 15 years. The panel is in the process of being registered in the Guinness Book of Records for the largest number of unique participants involved in its creation.

During the visit, the hosts Iliya Godev, secretary of the Community Centre, and Banko Kichukov from the Agricultural Cooperative in Smilyan told about the Rhodope traditions and customs, as well as about the technology of production of Smilyan beans. The agronomist Banko Kichukov is one of the many Rhodopeans growing Smilyan beans, starting with half a decare in 2005, currently sowing beans on 3 decares and planning to reach 10 decares in the next few years. According to the agronomist, at the moment the areas with Smilyan beans are about 400-500 decares, and the varieties are due to a national selection developed over the years.



After Smilyan, the participants visited the small Rhodope border village of Gudevitsa and the unique "Eco School in Nature", where they met and talked with the inspiring Teodor Vassilev, chairman of the 'Future Now 2006' Community Center, on sustainable development, environmental education of young people, youth entrepreneurship and the development of ecological business.



Teodor is a young leader, visionary and inspirer who has been awarded the Civil Prize for Bulgaria by the European Parliament and has implemented a number of national and international projects for non-formal education in nature.

"Choose one of your dreams and follow it with a smile. The road will take you exactly where you will feel happy", this is what Teodor advises all young ambitious people.



Charged by the visit to the picturesque mountain village of Gudevitsa, the participants traveled to the Experimental Station for Cattle Breeding and Agriculture (ESCBA) in Smolyan, where they had the opportunity to discuss with experts on the topics: European legislation in the field of environment and sustainable agriculture; the challenges and opportunities for small and medium-sized enterprises run by young people; green economy, eco-innovation and green entrepreneurship. Valentina Vasilyonova, Deputy Chair of the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Agriculture at CITUB and the Chief Assistant Dr. Rositsa Shumkova from the ESCBA - Smolyan took part in the discussion. The host of the meeting - Dr. Shumkova, told about the scientific research, consulting and implementation activities carried out by ESCBA in the field of cattle breeding and crop production in the mountainous regions of the country, about the organized training courses for young farmers, the production of potato, chokeberry/aronia, black currant, strawberries, raspberries; polyfloral honey; fresh sour cow's milk, cow's butter and sheep's yoghurt; Karakachan sheep and Rhodope tsigai; elite breeding material and animals for fattening from the breeds Bulgarian Rhodope cattle.



On the last day of the study visit the participants were taken to the village of Gyovren, where they visited the unique Horse Farm of Dr. Osman Kutsev. The young and inspiring Dr. Kutsev told the story of his family farm, where he breeds mainly Karakachan horses, which have repeatedly won prizes of the National Horse Breeding Association.

