

Counterurbanites As Drivers of Innovation and Local Transformation A Case Study from Coastal Dobrudzha, Bulgaria

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The focal point of the text are the various economic and social entrepreneurship activities that have been developed in the last fifteen years by newcomers (people with and without ancestral connections to the village).

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Introduction

IN LATE August 2020, the two of us, with a group of friends, headed to the north Black Sea coast of Bulgaria, to pitch tent for a few days. We had chosen the vicinity of the village of Ezerets, located in a rural area on the very northeast edge of the country, past the big seaside resorts. We had visited the place for the first time nine years earlier. At that time, in 2011, the settlement was quiet and not so well-maintained, and the pine forest along the coastline, two kilometers from the village, was a peaceful and scarcely visited place. When entering the village in 2020, however, our

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attention was immediately caught by the dozens of vehicles with plates from other districts in Bulgaria and from Romania. The village square was filled with people of different ages. Unexpectedly, we found ourselves at a three-day event with an ecological, cultural and social focus, whose organizers were locals and newcomers from cities all over the country and abroad. Little did we know that the experience we had then, and our acquaintance with some of the people we met on this event, would be essential for our ethnographic research interests in the area in the years to come. It was during this event that we began to appreciate the significance of counterurbanization and its potential implications for the changing landscape of the village.

This article examines the intricate processes of economic, social, and cultural transformations of the village of Ezerets. The main drivers of these are a number of entrepreneurial initiatives by urban settlers (with and without family ties to the village). Furthermore, we are interested in how these changes impact the rural landscape and shape the use of existing local settings, assets, and resources. We aim to see whether and how these newcomers have not only contributed to the local economy, job opportunities, and infrastructure development, but also how their activities have influenced the social dynamics of the village.

First, we briefly discuss the key terms, theoretical concepts, and the methodological framing our study. Second, in order to contextualize the remoteness of Ezerets, we present the economic and demographic processes in the village during the last decades. These processes have set the direction of the socio-economic development of the settlement in recent years and also contextualize the role of the newly-developing counterurbanization processes in the region. The focal point of the text are the various economic and social entrepreneurship activities that have been developed in the last fifteen years by newcomers (people with and without ancestral connections to the village). They are the drivers of a number of sociocultural, economic, and landscape transformations of the settlement.

Theoretical Framework

Remote Rural Areas and the Concept of Remoteness

ETYMOLOGICALLY, THE word “remote” derives from Latin—it is rooted in *remotus*, the past participle of *removere* (“to remove”). A remote rural area is characterized as being distant from big urban (political and administrative) centers, and it “exhibits itself as a geographic inconvenience in accessing urban resources” (Chi and Marcouiller 2013, 22). In the European Union, remote rural areas are spatially defined for the needs of regional

policymaking: the region is considered remote if less than half of its population can reach a city of at least 50,000 inhabitants within 45 minutes (Dijkstra and Poelman 2008, 3). Additionally, such regions are characterized by low population density, a large share of elderly people, poor employment opportunities, poor infrastructure, and a lack of public and private services resulting in economic lagging (Bertolini, Montanari, and Peragine 2008, 7–9). These definitions are based on a formal geographical approach.

Without detaching remote from its geographical sense, from an anthropological point of view, the concept of remoteness is determined not only by topography but also by a topology that is expressed in a cultural vocabulary (Ardener 2012, 523). It is a relational category influenced by various socio-cultural processes—remoteness must be understood in relation to historical, political, and economic structural conditions and to how people perceive, (re) produce, and challenge their position within the frames of dynamic fields of power, being thus not static but “always being made, unmade and transformed” (Harms et al. 2014, 362–365). This proposition allows for the conceptualization of remote rural areas not simply as disconnected but as “shot through with uneven forms of connectivity” (Saxer and Andersson 2019, 143). They are tied in a specific way to regional, national, and international politics, economy, and culture. Thus, “remoteness and connectivity condition each other and result in shifting socio-spatial constellations” (ibid., 147). Remoteness should be examined in the context of embedded histories and, as Martin Saxer points out, it “is not only a relational condition, but in many places also a relatively recent one” (Saxer 2016, 110). Socio-political change or economic crisis, or even ecological disaster may reinforce the perception of a place being remote as a result of some disconnections which have arisen.

Counterurbanization and Rural Entrepreneurship

MANY RESEARCHERS view “true” counterurbanization as a movement to remote and peripheral areas, located beyond metropolitan influence, excluding the processes of suburbanization and peri-urbanization (Dean 1986, 151; Champion 1989, 32; Coombes, Dalla Longa, and Raybould 1989, 9), which “rather represent[s] restructuring within the urban system and its hierarchy of settlements” (Jones et al. 1984, 437).¹ Typically, newcomers to remote rural areas are described as anti-urbanites, and are driven by a rejection of the urban way of life. They endeavor “to escape crime, taxes, congestion, and pollution” (Mitchell 2004, 24). The anti-urbanites are driven by a lifestyle motivation, but their wish is to not only reside outside the

city, but also to work in a rural environment, making a completely new life for themselves. Elaborating on Mitchell's classification, Šimon (2014, 132–135) adds one more type—the rural entrepreneur. These counterurbanites see the environmental and social amenities associated with rural areas as an appropriate setting for business activities. Our previous study (Pileva and Markov 2023) indicates that even people who moved in search of a lifestyle change, in the course of time, influenced by various new conditions and factors in their rural life, changed their perceptions and priorities and eventually started their entrepreneurial projects.

In this respect, there are plenty of studies that provide evidence that rural in-migrants could play an important role in fostering the rural economy and local development, by establishing new businesses, and thus diversifying the rural economy, which is traditionally connected with agriculture (Stockdale 2006; Bosworth 2008; Bosworth 2010; Mitchell and Madden 2014). Kalantaridis and Bika (2006, 109) claim that “these new arrivals are relatively affluent individuals equipped with distinct attributes and networks of contacts.” Similarly, Bosworth and Atterton (2012, 267) look at the rural in-migrants as having “considerable potential to play a powerful transformative role in reshaping the nature and extent of the links and flows between rural areas and the regional, national, and global economies around them.” The indirect effects and benefits for the local community, deriving from the establishment and development of a business, such as the creation of social networks, the accumulation of social capital, etc., are also important for the analysis of the current text.

In contrast to commercial entrepreneurship, “social entrepreneurship refers to the identification, evaluation, and exploitation of opportunities that result in social value,” rather than personal economic profit (Certo and Miller 2008, 268). A social entrepreneur recognizes and addresses existing social needs and problems in a given community. By applying business practices and market-based skills to organize an enterprise or introduce a novel service, they aim at social change and at community capacity-building. Economic development is an adjunct rather than a primary focus (Steinerowski et al. 2008). It is worth noting that the two types of entrepreneurship are often intertwined.

For a better understanding of the entrepreneurship activities of newcomers in connection to rural development, in our analysis, we apply the so-called neoendogenous approach (Bosworth and Atterton 2012). It focuses on the interface between endogenous and exogenous factors. On the one hand, it recognizes that local embeddedness, connections to a region's culture, history, and environment, is crucial for the success of a given activity, especially in remote regions (Martynovich 2017, 743). Local embeddedness signifies the need for individuals' integration within the local environment, and emphasizes the importance of

establishing their business and social ventures upon existing local settings, assets and resources (endogenous factors). On the other hand, in-migrants bring with them valuable social capital and expertise. Due to their connections to wider social networks, infrastructures and markets, they have access to tangible and intangible extra-local resources and knowledge (exogenous factors) that are not otherwise present within the given rural community (Bosworth and Atterton 2012, 263).

Methodology

THE CURRENT text is a result of an ethnographic study of counterurbanization processes among Bulgarian and foreign citizens in Bulgaria. It has been conducted within the scope of the ongoing research project “The Neighbor from Sofia, the New Villager from Germany: Counterurbanization, Socio-Cultural Interactions and Local Transformations.” Although work on the project started in late 2022, we have previous observations on counterurban, economic, and socio-cultural processes in the village of Ezerets and the region, dating back to 2011. We have been visiting the settlement (a couple of times a year) since the summer of 2020. In 2023 alone, we visited the village four times—at the beginning of March, at the beginning of May, in late July, and at the end of August. We planned our visits so that we could attend certain events and observe specific processes. Our first two visits were meant to observe two village celebrations, organized by the local community center with the active participation of locals and counterurbanites. However, because of the focus of the current text, we do not pay specific attention to these two particular events. Our third visit took place at the height of the summer season, and the last one was at the end of it. This allowed us to observe various economic and recreational activities, as well as social engagements among permanent and seasonal residents, tourists, entrepreneurs, and authorities.

During our fieldwork, we conducted dozens of semi-structured interviews and informal conversations with locals and counterurbanites, village guests and administration representatives. With each group of interlocutors, we discussed specific sets of research problems. Some were carefully curated for the profile of the respective interlocutors, but most were recurring throughout all conversations. With elderly residents who were born, raised, and have been (mostly) residing in the village, we discussed local livelihood activities of the past and the ways in which the landscape of the settlement has been changing over the years. At the core of our conversations with newcomers were the motivations for counterurbanization, the reasons for choosing a village in a remote rural

area, business activities (ideas, conditions and setbacks), cultural initiatives, the interaction with locals and other newcomers, including other entrepreneurs, etc. The main topic of our conversations with the mayor of Ezerets were local economic and socio-cultural developments, including population change, the real estate market, tourism services, and landscape transformations. Talking to different actors allowed us to obtain information from various perspectives, as well as to cross-check data regarding local processes.

Ezerets: Economic Data

THE VILLAGE of Ezerets is located on the seaside part of the historical-geographic region of Southern Dobrudzha, about 2 km from the Black Sea coast (see map). Administratively, the settlement is one of the 15 villages within the Shabla Municipality (the municipal center is about 7 km away). It is within the limits of the district of Dobrich (the district center is 76 km away).² The village is also located about 87 km from the neighboring district city of Varna, the biggest settlement in Northeast Bulgaria.³ Ezerets stands 22 km from the border with Romania (the Durankulak—Vama Veche border crossing point). This proximity has had a significant impact on certain economic processes in the village and the region in general in recent years.



Shabla Municipality is a rural area; agriculture is traditionally the most developed industry, as around 85% of the municipality's land is arable (Plan za upravljenie 2003, 40).⁴ The proximity of the village to Lake Shabla-Ezerets (3 km) made fishing and crab-catching essential local livelihood practices between the 1950s and 1980s (ibid., 56). Since the beginning of the 1970s, after the construction of a government residence on the lake shore, and the access restrictions introduced, industrial fishing was made difficult, but the practice remained important in the region. In the 1990s, a significant decline in the lake's fish population was registered, due to no artificial restocking between 1985 and 2000. In the new millennium, this practice was revived by the responsible authorities, albeit sporadically (ibid., 37).⁵ Since 2004, the catching of crabs and fishing have been regulated by the Lake Shabla Protected Site Management Plan. The greatest obstacle for fishing activities is considered the swamping of the lake (ibid., 48–49). Today, amateur fishermen are rarely found in the village, and poaching is flourishing, according to locals and some representatives of the Varna Regional Environment and Water Inspection Agency.

Vegetable production has an especially important place within the local economy. In order to maintain the plantations (vegetables, orchards, and vines) near the lake, in the 1970s, a large-scale irrigation system was built. Grain, alfalfa and forage corn, as well as tobacco, were also grown. Since the beginning of the 1990s, vegetable production in the area in the immediate vicinity of the lake has gradually, but permanently, been replaced by non-irrigated crops (corn, wheat, and sunflower). In the second half of the 2010s, the cultivation of oil plants (lavender and canola) was common in the area (and the entire northeastern part of the country). As of today, the majority of the arable land of the village is held by large tenants. Only three small local farmers are registered (Letopisna kniga 2023, 4). A similar decline in smallholder farming is seen in the livestock sector as well. Until the end of the 1990s, most families raised sheep, pigs, and poultry. At the beginning of the 21st century, cows and goats (a couple of dozen), and sheep (a few hundreds) were raised on small farms in the village (Plan za upravljenie 2003, 36). In 2020, there were only two cattle farms, and two residents raised a dozen goats and sheep. Difficulties in agriculture caused by general risks, financing problems, unfair competition, workforce shortages, and the permanent consolidation of the sector, lead to the disappearance of small farmers. This process also affected the demographics of the region, which deepened its peripherality.

Over the last decade, tourism has become one of the leading industries in the economy of Shabla Municipality. Between 2016 and 2020, there was a significant and stable increase in tourist visits in the entire municipality. The number of registered overnight stays in 2019 was 24.7% higher than in 2016.

However, in the following two years, coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic, the gradual increase remained present. Thus, in 2020, the registered overnight stays were 33.6% more than in 2016, and in 2021—17.2% more than in 2020. The increase is registered even though, in 2020, probably due to the pandemic, there was a 36% drop in foreign tourists (Programa okolna sreda 2015, 24, 26).⁶ Following the growing interest, more accommodation places were established within the same period. In 2014, there were 100, in 2020—154, and at the beginning of 2023—193. As of the latter, according to the National Tourist Register, 67 are categorized as guesthouses, and 97 as offering guest rooms/apartments.⁷ However, the municipality remains unaffected by large-scale coastal resort constructions. Essentially, the presence of two protected areas along the coast in the Shabla Municipality—Lake Durankulak and Lake Shabla, as well as the military base on the Black Sea coast, south of Lake Shabla-Ezerets, are the greatest obstacles for big resort constructions in the area. As of 2023, only four hotels and guesthouses are registered in the municipality, and the biggest of them can house up to 78 people. This, in fact, prevents the commercialization of the area, maintaining its rural and closer-to-nature image, while at the same time making the area insufficiently competitive with the resorts south of Varna. Camping, however, is widespread (as of 2023, 17 campsites and bungalow sites have been registered⁸). In general, the area north of Shabla (Ezerets, Krapets, and Durankulak) is well-known among Bulgarians and Romanians for its wild camping⁹ possibilities.

Demographics

THE FORCED modernization and industrialization under the socialist regime (1944–1989) marked the beginning of the depopulation of rural areas in Bulgaria. Ezerets, being a small settlement, has been inevitably affected by these negative demographic processes. The urbanization of the country in the socialist period reached its peak between 1950 and 1985. For a few decades, the ratio between the rural and the urban population significantly changed: in 1946 it was 75.3% rural against 24.7% urban, and in 1985—35.2% rural against 64.8% urban (National Statistical Institute 2020, 58). In the 1990s (1993–2001), the tendency seemed to reverse—out of all internal movements in the country, 15.6% were village-city migrants, and city-village migrants were nearly twice as many—27.9% (Shishmanova 2014, 93). This coincided with the period of land restitution (see Kozhuharova-Zhivkova 1996, 19–21). Therefore, the counterurbanization was filled with hopes for a revival of agriculture

and agricultural areas in general. However, the process was not as stable as expected. Due to financial and production difficulties in agriculture, many of the in-migrants consequently went back to towns and cities, and those who stayed in villages were mostly retirees. In this respect, between 2002 and 2011, the share of urban-rural migrations considerably decreased (data from the National Statistical Institute).

Over the last decade, despite the continuing negative demographic processes in the country and the rural population decline in general, among urban populations (in active, pre-retirement and retirement age) there has been a growing interest in counterurbanization (see fig. 1).¹⁰ The peak was reached during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, when many moved to villages in search of more solitude and freedom from the various restrictions imposed in urban areas, in an attempt to deal with the crisis.¹¹ Then the city-village migrants were more than three times as many as those going in the opposite direction (95,510 against 30,108). In the following two years, the number of movements in both directions was relatively equal, with a slight predominance of those from villages to cities (data from National Statistical Institute).

According to the last five national censuses, since 1985, the population in Ezerets has been steadily declining, due to ageing and the outflow of people of active age to cities in the country and abroad. In 35 years, the population of the settlement has decreased by more than 1/3 (see fig. 2).

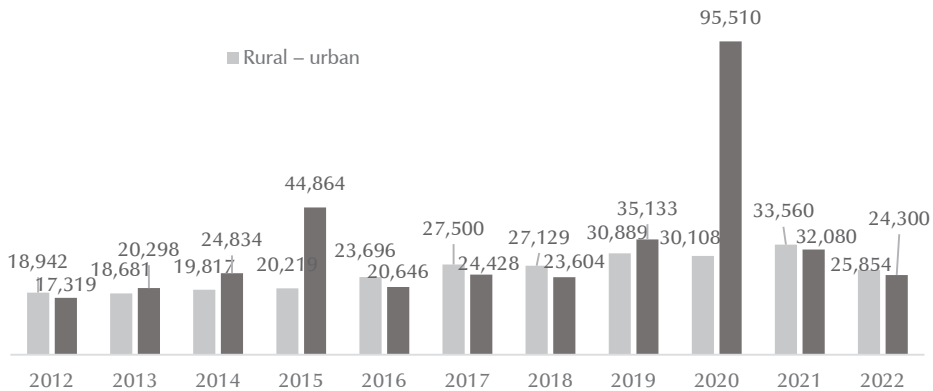


FIG. 1. INTERNAL RURAL-URBAN AND URBAN-RURAL MOVEMENTS IN BULGARIA
SOURCE: National Statistical Institute.

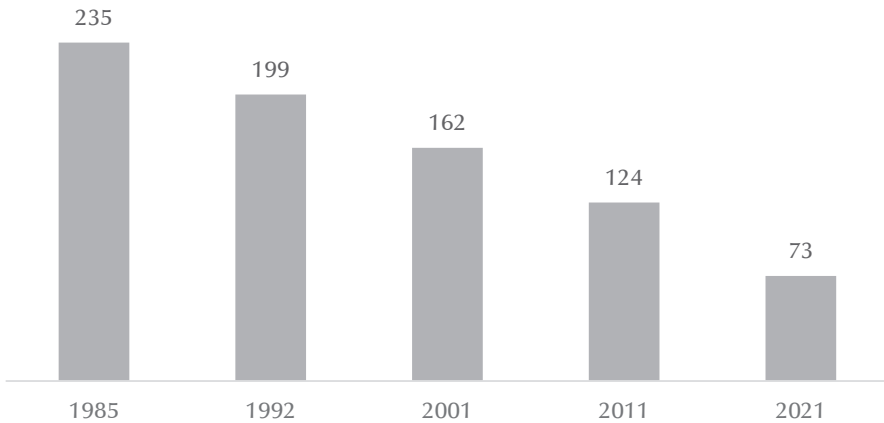


FIG. 2. POPULATION OF EZERETS ACCORDING TO THE NATIONAL CENSUSES DATA
SOURCE: National Statistical Institute.

From 145 people with current addresses in the village in 2011, the population decreased to 109 in 2019.¹² In the last three years, however, a steady process of mechanical population growth has been taking place (see fig. 3). The village's coastal location and the natural features and rural landscape are recognized as the biggest assets of Ezerets. As we have stated elsewhere,¹³ overcrowding and air and noise pollution are the core push factors from urban areas, as the notion of the village as a quieter, cleaner and greener “escape” from the urban “madness” is a pull factor to rural areas. Thus, as of 15 June 2023, residents in Ezerets with current address registration numbered 132. Of them, 52 have both permanent and current addresses and 75—only current.

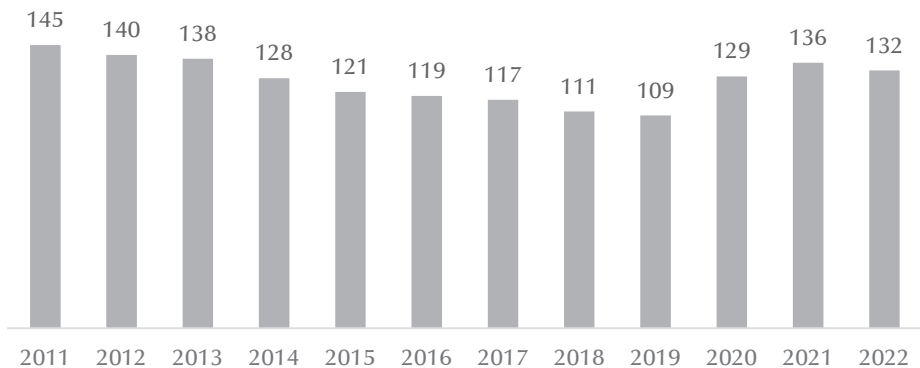


FIG. 3. POPULATION CHANGE IN EZERETS DURING THE PERIOD 2011–2022
SOURCE: Civil Registration and Administrative Services.

The newcomers are people from big towns and cities in the country (mostly Varna, Sofia, and Dobrich). Some inherited their houses, others buy properties as second or vacation homes or/and investment properties. There are also a few foreigners, who settled permanently in the village (from France and Belarus) or live there seasonally (from Slovakia and Poland). According to the mayor of Ezerets, in 2022, the village issued the most permits for construction and reconstruction in the entire municipality. The newcomers are considered peculiar drivers of change, bringing with them new social and financial capital and ideas, transforming the socio-cultural environment, economy, and the landscape of the village.

Economic and Social Enterprises

AS STATED previously, the so-called wild camping is among the most recognizable recreation activities in the region. Since the beginning of the 2010s, the beach near Ezerets has been gaining popularity among wild camping enthusiasts in the country. There is a small pine forest along the beach, which has been used as an unregulated peculiar bivouac. In the summer of 2011, when we visited the place for the first time, there were just a couple of tents pitched there. The vegetation among the pine trees was densely overgrown, offering privacy to the campers. In the last decade, however, the growing interest in wild camping in the municipality prompted the local authorities to establish some regulations. Therefore, in 2015, Shabla Municipality designated four places along the coast as areas for pitching tents and parking campers and caravans for a minimal municipal daily fee.¹⁴ Among those peculiar campsites was the pine forest near Ezerets. In the following years, the landscape changed. The low vegetation was regularly removed by the authorities, and a few general waste containers and mobile eco-toilets were placed. The new amenities were welcomed by campers, beachgoers and local residents, in the hope that the area would be kept clean and well-preserved.

The purposeful policy of the municipality in the previous years and the growing interest among the population in the country in more peaceful and non-urbanized places on the coastline have been gradually attracting more visitors to the northeastern part of the country, and the area of Ezerets is no exception. This especially during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, when physical distancing was basic social behavior.

In the summer of 2020, ironically opposed to the sought-after seclusion, the bivouac was crowded. There were tents, campers and caravans from all over Bulgaria and Romania, densely packed among the pine trees. Long-term camp-

ers fenced out “yard” spaces, often decorated with seashells and beach stones. Many had electric generators, mobile showers, and TVs. In the last few years, there have even been a couple of caravans present on site the entire year, “reserving” their preferred places.

In the last couple of years, there were many campers, especially in 2020, because of Corona. Romanians, Romanians, Romanians, Bulgarians—many. They pitch tents in the grove. Friday, Saturday, and Sunday it is full. There are also two bars... (Peter, mid-60s)

There had never been so many people in the bivouac as back then [the summer of 2020], it was unheard of. (Helen, early 40s)

In June 2019, the National Assembly started a procedure for regulating wild camping sites. As a result, the next year, Shabla Municipality stopped maintaining the bivouacs, waiting for the regulations. The discussions, however, caused a number of conflicts among various ministries, as well as dissatisfaction among various groups of the population. To this day, after four years, no consensus has been reached.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the enormous popularity the place gained among wild camping enthusiasts continues to attract dozens of holidaymakers, not only during the weekends, and not only from Bulgaria.

Even though the pandemic gave a new push to the tourism industry in the village, the peculiar foundations of the development of tourist services were laid in the previous decade. The various business initiatives have been gradually transforming the settlement. There is a hotel complex with a restaurant,¹⁶ a swimming pool and a small zoo with a variety of bird species called “The Wild Duck.” The name refers to the most popular bird species in Lake Ezerets. It was opened more than 15 years ago by Rado and his wife Kremena, both in their mid-40s. They were born in the village and have been residing in Varna most of their adult lives. However, they have never severed their connection with Ezerets. The couple has family who live in the settlement and Rado is an avid hunter and fisherman, pursuing his hobbies in the area. Having hereditary money, as well as finances from agriculture (being in the industry since the early 2000s), they established the complex on an inherited plot and a couple of neighboring ones, which they bought for this purpose.

We divide our time between here and Varna. In the summer, we are mostly here. We need to get the job done. My mother is here [in the complex] all the time, she works in the kitchen sometimes,

says Kremena.

The complex set an obvious landscape change in the village—it was built in the so-called Bulgarian Renaissance architectural style, resembling stone buildings with wooden posts, and verandas with wooden elements. The outdoor areas and numerous paths around the yard are paved with stones, and there are massive wooden tables and benches. This architectural style, although popular among restaurants offering “traditional” Balkan/Bulgarian cuisine, is not typical for Northeast Bulgaria and the seaside area in particular, but rather for the Balkan mountains. In the interior, there are hunting trophies and folk pieces (cloths and items of clothing, antique utensils, etc.). Because of the food and the overall atmosphere, over the years, the restaurant gained popularity all over the Dobrich and Varna districts, as well as among regular tourists in the vicinity, from the country and from Romania. “My mother praises the place; she loves visiting it whenever she comes to Bulgaria. I, on the other hand, am not a fan of the place,” claims Klaudia from Poland, whose extended family owns a few properties in the nearby village of Granichar, using them as vacation homes. The owners of the complex are one of the few in the tourism industry in the settlement that employ people from outside Ezerets, including people with disabilities. Over the years, however, their competition has been gradually growing.

In 2003, Zheni and her husband Emo, both in their early fifties, with no ancestral connection to Ezerets, decided to move to the village in search of lifestyle change. They used to work in nightclubs in Varna and were looking for a rural occupation away from the city noise and hectic way of life. “We used to visit friends in the village. My husband used to hunt for ducks here in the winter,” said Zheni. After the birth of their second son, the family settled down in the village, first living in a rented house. For about 10 years the couple worked in agriculture, growing peppers and employing field workers from the region. After experiencing financial difficulties, they decided to terminate their agricultural activities and, in 2016, they built three bungalows on the property they already owned. Their new business venture was motivated by the number of tourists in the region, and the village in particular, which was gradually increasing at the time. However, being a guesthouse keeper is not their main occupation. In summer 2015, Zheni and Emo became tenants of the village grocery shop with a pub. The couple have been running it alone, with the occasional help of their sons in the summer. Being in daily contact with local residents and tourists, the family became important figures in the social life of the settlement. Until recently, their small shop was the only one in Ezerets, “[In winter] I work half a day, or a couple of hours a day, so [people can buy] most of the necessary things,” says Zheni. The pub has been the favorite place for social gatherings, both for locals throughout the year, and for the new residents of the village in the summer.

Coming to the village for personal reasons rather than business aspirations is common for most of the entrepreneurs we met. Tanya (late 60s) first came to Ezerets in 1995 looking for cheap property in which to invest her savings: “I came here because it is wild [not urbanized],” she claims. So, she bought a single-story house with three rooms that was built in the 1950s–1960s with an adjacent small stone outbuilding from the end of the 19th century. In the following twenty years, Tanya’s family visited the place for a couple of weeks a year on their summer holidays without renovating anything on the property. With her husband and her own retirement approaching, and seeing the potential of the settlement, they started a three years-long renovation. From the beginning, they had in mind renting the place out to tourists. For that purpose, they built three ensuite rooms, embedding the remnants of the stone walls of the fallen adjacent outbuilding, and built a separate veranda for the visitors. After retiring, Tanya, who had been renting out short-term flats in Sofia since the mid–1990s, decided to develop the guesthouse in Ezerets for a couple of years and then leave it to her son. They opened for business in June 2021, when Tanya and her husband moved onto the property. The interior features a mixture of furniture they brought from the flats in Sofia, making the overall atmosphere homely. After her husband’s passing, Tanya hired a retired local lady to help her with cleaning. The property is surrounded by abandoned lots with no standing buildings. It is located near the end of 2nd St., where the dirt road leading to the beach begins.

2nd St. is only about 300 m long and has never been paved; $\frac{2}{3}$ of the properties on both sides of it are unoccupied. However, in 2021 Shabla Municipality¹⁷ allocated funds for its paving, because of its importance for the economic development of the village.¹⁸ Funds were also allocated for repaving 1st St. It starts from the entrance to the village, where the E87¹⁹ main road passes, and it ends at the opposite end of Ezerets.²⁰ The street passes by core social places in the village—the community center and the central square. The latter is actually a small park with a children’s playground, benches and a drinking fountain, and, near it, the renovated church. There is also the village hall, which houses the shop and pub run by Zheni and Emo. In recent years, a few other places along these two streets have become important for the local economic and cultural development, due to newcomers’ social and business activities.

After the tourism boom in the village in 2020, the owners of the hotel and restaurant complex, Rado and Kremena, decided to expand their business. Having previous experience in retail, the couple began the conversion of a single-floor building into a supermarket.²¹ The establishment opened in June 2022. This caused Zheni some concerns, since Rado and Kremena generally have bigger investment projects. However, at this point both shops have distinguished their positions in the industry. Although a detailed comparison of the shopper profile requires a separate study, from our own observations and conversations

with local residents, visitors, and workers at both establishments in the summers of 2022 and 2023, we found that campers and locals, including long-time seasonal visitors of the village, prefer the small shop, and tourists shop from both. We established two reasons for that—the supermarket is a bit pricier and the approach of the owners differs. While the former is ubiquitously important for all customers, the latter matters, especially for the locals. As stated above, Zheni's shop is the only place where local residents may acquire food products throughout the year, and deferred payment is an option for long-time customers. On the other hand, the supermarket's target group is not the locals anyway. Located at the entrance of the village, on the crossroad of E87 and 1st St., a bit away from the residential area of Ezerets,²² the owners aim not only at visitors to the village and beachgoers, but also at travelers from and to Romania, considering such customers as more solvent compared to the local ones. Another proof of this statement is the fact that the supermarket opens only in the summer season.

Similar to Zheni's shop, the supermarket also has an eatery under an awning. The concept is simple, like the pub—grilled meat, salads, basic seafood (mussels and fish), and beer. The eatery, however, also offers a few varieties of coffees, homemade ice cream and some iced drinks for children, all products considered not typical to the local market. The target of such products are obviously tourists and new settlers or seasonal residents in the village. The same also refers to the two new dining establishments in the village that opened in the last two summers. Both offer different varieties of seafood and pasta, grilled meat, fresh seasonal salads and appetizers, wine, beer, and cocktails. Both have only outdoor seating and an open kitchen concept. The newest opened in June 2023. It has a Mediterranean vibe with its blue-white decor. It is on a crossroads, right across the central square. The other one opened in June 2022. It is located on 2nd St. and is well-visible on the way to the beach. The establishment has fewer seats than the other one, but a big grass yard accessible to the visitors. It has a more casual and closer to nature “rural” vibe. The kitchen is in a trailer and the tables are placed right on the grass under a wooden roof. The place is advertised by the owners as kid-friendly. While there is no dedicated children's playground, toys are however available to visitors.

The owners of the restaurant on 1st St. are a middle-aged couple from Varna, who have another property in the village where they have rented two bungalows for years. The establishment is an investment they made because of the growing interest in the region and the settlement, particularly among holidaymakers from Bulgaria and Romania in recent years, as well as the new residents of the village since the pandemic. The owners of the restaurant on 2nd St. have a local background. Although the family have been living in Varna for years, they often visit relatives in Ezerets and spend the summers there. Influenced by the development of the area, they decided to invest in another inherited property on

a key location, which had been abandoned for 20 years. We find it interesting that, in both cases, the old houses on the properties, built in the first half of the 20th century, are not included in the business initiative. They are unrenovated and just loom behind the eating establishments, as if they are not part of the lot. This clearly speaks to the original investment idea of both families—location is what matters in the first place.

The restaurant on 2nd St. demonstrates a sort of implementation of an “old into new” notion by using old peasant chairs from the mid-20th century. The family’s decades-long personal ties in the village makes them more “popular” among locals. The restaurant was often referred to as “better” than the one on 1st St., whose owners are seen more as investors rather than dwellers in the settlement. Of greatest importance to the local embeddedness of the owners of the “rural” restaurant, however, is their business interaction with small food producers in the area. Tomatoes and cottage cheese come from such small farms, and the honey they use in some recipes and sell in jars comes from a female beekeeper from the village. They include these partnerships in their advertising strategy.

We observed similar cooperation between local entrepreneurs in other cases, too. The most distinctive items Zheni sells in her shop are souvenirs. At the beginning, she sold magnets in the shape of Bulgaria, because “it is the most popular thing people buy when travelling,” Zheni stated. However, in time, more people began looking for souvenirs featuring Ezerets—the village and the beach. “At the beginning, one of the families that supplied me with magnets was very skeptical that such an investment would pay off,” she added. Nevertheless, they agreed to try and the idea turned out to be profitable. Afterwards, new products followed—T-shirts, jugs, and water bottles. Photographs of the beach are used for the design. The main entrepreneurs she works with are a couple in their 40s from Sofia, who own an advertising agency based in the capital. About a decade ago, they bought a place in the center of the village and have lived in their caravan there for a few months of the year.

There also are a couple of craft jewelry and accessories ventures, as well as makers of decorative ornaments, who stand out among the traditional agriculture and tourism services. The artists reside in Sofia, they bought houses in the village in the second half of the 2010s and have spent their summers there along with their families. They often get inspiration from the coastal area and craft some of the items while in the village. A business venture, based solely in Ezerets, however, stands out—a garden center. Atanaska (early 50s), who originates from the village, previously worked on overseas cruise ships for more than a decade. Her sister also had a similar occupation for a few years. In 2014, they both retired from their jobs and returned to Varna, then their main place of residence. A year later, they decided to settle in Ezerets, investing their savings in a garden center on their inherited property.

Around the world we have seen this culture of going to a garden center. We don't have that here. . . . It is difficult, but I think we made the right choice, especially with the newcomers,

said Atanaska. The seasonal residents, not only in Ezerets but also in other villages in the region, are the main customers of the center. At the same time, the closeness to Romania turned out to be essential for the business. Over the years, long-term customers have been visiting them whenever they needed to buy plants and look for advice. The two sisters employ two locals.

These small entrepreneurs became an inseparable part of the socio-cultural life of the village. In the last five years, they (as well as other craftsmen from the region) have participated in various cultural events by having their own stalls or/and taking part in the organization process. Two events are worthy of attention—“Jazz by the Sea,” which began in July 2019, and the Green Days, which first took place in August 2020. We consider them both the most essential events in the settlement, shaping its image as a culturally developing place. At the basis of them both is obviously the social interaction among different actors, permanently and seasonally living in Ezerets. The main organizers of the events are counterurbanites, whose backstories and connections to the village differ.

Pavleta (early 50s) is a professional pianist. She was born and raised in the district center of Dobrich. In 2019, she opened a guesthouse in her summer home on 1st St. in Ezerets, a complex of buildings from the early 20th century, which she renovated and rebuilt. In the same year, being herself a musician and having a jazz singer as a daughter, she began producing a three-day musical event, called “Jazz by the Sea.” Each year since then, she has invited musicians from Bulgaria and abroad to perform for locals and holidaymakers in the region. She managed to attract Shabla Municipality as a partner and, since 2021, has secured a small professional stage with proper sound and lighting.

Helen (early 40s) was born and raised in a small town in the south of France. She came to Bulgaria in 2006 as a volunteer for the European Voluntary Service, where she worked with the Public Center for Environment and Sustainable Development in Varna. She came to Ezerets where she met her future husband, a local beekeeper, and stayed in the village. She is an ecologist and has keen interests in natural resource management. Living in a small village in a remote rural area, she became an activist for better waste management, recycling and less use of disposable plastic. In 2020, she was elected by locals as the secretary of the community center. The Green Days was the first large-scale initiative under her leadership. Helen organizes the event with the partnership of a few NGOs from Varna, and the Shabla area that she is a part of or affiliated with.²³ It aims at involving people of different age groups, professions, social status, and interest in actions towards environmental protection and the conscious management of

natural resources. During the three-day event, different activities take place—discussions, craft workshops employing plastic waste and old unused items, sports events, a food and craft bazaar, documentary film screenings, organized games for children, etc. Among the most important activities is the cleaning of the beach.

Both events also have an educational purpose. By taking the musicians out of the concert halls and jazz music out of the piano clubs, Pavleta hopes to offer the local audience a different kind of entertainment. Some of the visitors hear this type of music for the first time, which motivates the organizer even more. “Our goal is to make people love jazz, which is thought to be elitist, but really isn’t,” shares Pavleta. The Green Days, on the other hand, bring up environmental topics discussed within a local context, including the influence of the campers on the ecological balance in the region. Some of these topics are particularly new for the local elders, whose lifestyles include the use of single-use plastic bags, the burning of various waste materials in heating stoves in winter, and so on. Among the most significant educational activities within both events, however, are those involving children. The last day of the jazz fest is dedicated to a workshop for children, when they are taught by professional musicians and have the chance to play different musical instruments. In the environmental event, children are involved in various workshops on using plastic waste as craft materials and cleanup activities in the form of games, and attend discussions regarding waste and keeping the environment clean.

The atmosphere of both events is quite similar. They take place outdoors in central locations along 1st St. The event takes place on an sprawling meadow near the village’s main entrance, right next to the local playground and across from Pavleta’s guesthouse. The eco-event takes place in the central square, and the yard of the community center. The organizers of both events take advantage of the rural environment, and even enhance it by using haystacks as benches. The jazz fest invites the audience to use the area as a picnic site. Attendees place folding chairs and tables, bringing their own coolers, blankets, and food.

The concept of a jazz fest in a rural area, especially by the sea in the summer, has become well-known in the country in recent years. In this sense, the event in Ezerets is not an exception. What makes it stand out, however, is that it takes place in a small and little-known village, relatively far from the big resorts. Advertising the settlement as a vacation-worthy destination is among the goals of the organizers. Therefore, especially in the last couple of years, a few local entrepreneurs have shown interest in partnering in the event. Among the sponsors are the Wild Duck complex and the newly-established restaurant on 1st St. (neighboring the site of the event). By supporting the cultural event, the entrepreneurs advertise their ventures and make a profit from the visitors, especially if they come specifically for the event.

On the contrary, no local entrepreneurs are actively involved in the organization of the Green Days. The event was initially conceived as a non-profit initiative, which aims to create a civil society and to support the critical thinking of individual actors in a number of environmental and social processes in the area. In this respect, as a member of the community center board, Atanaska is actively involved in the organization, without using it to advertise her garden center. Representatives of the older local population also take part in the Green Days. Among the greatest supporters of the initiative are a couple of retired women, who are a part of the close social circle of Helen, on the one hand, approving her work as community center secretary, and on the other, being fond of her personality in general. Their help is sought after by Helen. Some facilitate the organization and others participate in the event mostly by preparing homemade foods and handcrafted items and offering them at the fair. Tanya, the owner of the guesthouse on 2nd St., for example, is among Helen's closest friends in the village. Her teenage grandchildren, who live in Sofia and spend the summer with her in Ezerets, are involved in the organization and participate in various activities within the event.

By 2023, the dynamics of a number of socio-economic processes in the village had changed. According to local residents, entrepreneurs and the media, the slowing of the remarkably steady upswing of recent years came after the spill in the Black Sea. In the early morning of 6 June 2023, an explosion destroyed the Nova Kakhovka dam in southern Ukraine, causing extensive flooding along the lower Dnieper River. Entire villages were flooded, including mines, industrial sites and agricultural land. As a result, large quantities of biogens and petroleum products, animal carcasses and household items ended up in the Black Sea.²⁴

Ever since the incident, the Ministry of Environment and Water of Bulgaria has been carrying out a weekly sampling of the seawater in different places along the coastline and in territorial waters, releasing the results in regular newsletters.²⁵ Although there is no data indicating pollution from the spill, media publications point out the fear of a deterioration in water quality as the reason for the cancellation of some of reservations north of Varna.²⁶ Meanwhile, at the end of July and the beginning of August, there were also continuous cold winds north of Kavarna which led to a drastic decrease in water temperature.²⁷ In Ezerets, local entrepreneurs and residents also confirmed a decreasing tourist interest during the last summer season. "I have not seen the village so empty since before 2020," said Helen. "The campsite is also not as crowded as in the last couple of years," said Tanya. Reservations at her place are also fewer than in the previous summers.

Conclusion

UNTIL RECENTLY, Ezerets was largely unknown outside the Shabla Municipality. Over the past decade, it has gradually gained popularity among wild camping enthusiasts in the country and in Romania. For the last couple of years, as some strive to spend time closer to nature, away from large resorts, it has been developing as a trendy place for escape from the urban hustle and bustle. This transformation has led to a reevaluation of the economic prospects of the settlement, particularly in the domains of rural and recreational tourism. This shift is essential, especially in the light of the obvious decline of agriculture as a family source of livelihood. Thus, in the last decade, Ezerets has naturally focused on various activities driven by the convergence of counterurbanization trends, entrepreneurial ventures, and the village's unique environmental features and peculiar cultural landscape.

We should note that the emerging new initiatives, although not entirely novel in nature, are innovative within the regional and local context. In some of the cases we examined, they are initiated by individuals who have previously lived in urban environments and permanently relocated to the village for various reasons. Other cases discussed in the text deviate from the typical profile(s) of counterurbanites, primarily due to the seasonal residence in the village and rural areas in general, which, however, do not make our interlocutors mere holiday-makers. During their time in the village, they tend to adopt a hybrid lifestyle, balancing aspects of rural and urban living, as well as work and leisure. Their seasonal counterurbanization proves to be more or less indispensable for the local economic development and sociocultural diversification of the environment, while being crucial to their own local embeddedness.

Some of the counterurbanites made this lifestyle transition years ago, when the village was relatively unknown, while others have been drawn to the area by its burgeoning popularity, striving to take advantage of the new emerging opportunities. Some have no prior connection to the village, while others have ancestral ties. Nevertheless, in all cases, there is a common aspiration to integrate into the local community and to become part of the village social and economic life with all its challenges, obstacles, but also opportunities and advantages. The entrepreneurs strive to leverage the available local assets and resources while bringing and using their skills and experiences acquired previously in urban settings. They also benefit from the social capital and relationships with individuals, institutions, and organizations, which they have built in both the urban and rural environment.

There are businesses that are clearly built up and run as family ventures, such as Zheni's bungalows and grocery shop—there are no employees other than family members in both. In other cases, however, people from Ezerets, Shabla and other villages in the municipality are being employed as staff. This refers

to both small businesses and bigger ventures. For the former to make a profit, the number of employees is the bare minimum. Tanya, for example, hired help (one person) only after she was widowed and was incapable of taking care of the property alone. As for the owners of the hotel complex with a restaurant, who also run the supermarket with the eatery, hiring staff is necessary not only in order to maintain the business, but also to be able to grow it. In such cases, hiring in the village and the region is most profitable.

Although Zheni and her husband do not employ locals, they partner up with some local entrepreneurs, seasonal residents, and sell their products. The partners are part of their social network, built while residing in Ezerets. Therefore, to them they are endogenous relationships. The goods are locally-inspired (souvenirs) and some even locally-produced (the lavender products), however, they are entirely intended for extralocal customers. As she explains, “locals won’t buy souvenirs depicting Ezerets.” Such partnerships distinguish the grocery shop from the supermarket.

In this respect, the social events are a good opportunity for collaboration between different entrepreneurs. Artists and craftsmen are partners to the events, showing their support, while selling their products to a certain number of new potential customers (tourists), as well as to already-established ones (counter-urbanites and regular visitors to the village/events). Considering that most of them use internet platforms for advertising and distribution, such small forums are a good way for small business expansion, receiving feedback face-to-face, or just for mingling with other artists and craftsmen.

Bearing in mind the growing popularity of Ezerets in recent years, the accommodation facilities in the village enjoy relatively high occupancy during the two months of the active summer season (July and August). In this sense, it would be difficult to establish a direct influence of the cultural events on the industry. According to the organizers, the Green Days are rather a bonus for those vacationing in the village, including at the camp site, while the jazz fest could be seen as a specific reason for some visitors to plan their stay accordingly.

Restaurants and shops certainly benefit from the events. For example, visitors to the Green Days buy water, drinks, snacks and tobacco throughout the entire day, since there are various events from late morning to late evening. The jazz fest audience also shop for the picnics they have on the concert meadow. Often, at the end of the day, the eventgoers dine in or order food-to-go from the eateries and the restaurants. Thus, such a profitable outcome motivates two of the establishments in the village to become one of the main sponsors of the jazz fest, as mentioned earlier.

The main organizers of both events, Pavleta and Helen, are small rural entrepreneurs themselves. So, this raises the question as to whether they (can) benefit financially from the fests. Pavleta houses as many of the artists for the fest as she

can in her guesthouse for free, and Helen and her husband do not sell much of their apiculture products in the food fairs during the eco event. At the same time, the organization of both events takes up months of their own time. Both women expend great social capital, for that matter—recruiting volunteers for the tasks before, during and after the events; finding sponsors, performers (for the jazz fest), lecturers for the discussions (the Green Days), and moderators for the workshops, etc. The resources they use are both exogenous—performers, lecturers and moderators very distinctly fall into that category—and endogenous—some of the volunteers, for example, are locals. However, the sponsors and partners to both events are exogenous and endogenous, and most of the volunteers are newcomers to Ezerets with years-long ties to the region, residing seasonally there, including some of the craftsmen. In this respect, both women do not directly benefit financially from the events they organize. While Helen and her husband do not count on such publicity for the distribution of their products in general, but on their own social network beyond the village and the region, Pavleta, as a guesthouse owner, can benefit from the advertisement of the settlement as a small rural cultural center. Such an image is definitely sought after by many of the fans of rural tourism, who spend their summer holidays in the village. □

Notes

1. Such movements are examined as a manifestation of urbanization; they represent the sprawl of a modern urban life and, in time, lead to an expansion of metropolitan built-up area. See more on this discussion in Pileva, Markov, and Periklieva 2023, 18–19.
2. As of 2022, the population of Dobrich was 89,182, <https://www.grao.bg/tna/tadr-2022.txt> (in Bulgarian), accessed 8.12.2023.
3. As of 2022 its population was 349,201 <https://www.grao.bg/tna/tadr-2022.txt> (in Bulgarian), accessed 8.12.2023.
4. Out of nearly 20,000 decares of Ezerets land, about 15,000 decares are cultivated, <http://bg.guide-bulgaria.com/NE/dobrich/shabla?t=sizes> (in Bulgarian), accessed 8.12.2023; https://www.landlord.bg/мaп/Дoбpич_Шaблa_Езepec (in Bulgarian), accessed 8.12.2023.
5. “400,000 fish were released in the Durankulak and Shabla Lakes.” *Trud*, 18 June 2018, <https://trud.bg/пyснaхa-400000-pибки-в-дypaнкyлaшкoтo-и-шaб> (in Bulgarian), accessed 8.12.2023.
6. See also “In the municipality of Shabla, an increase in overnight stays is anticipated for the tourist season of 2022,” *Dobrudzha Information Agency*, 6 April 2022, https://dobrudjabg.com/novina/v-obshtina-shabla-ochakvat-ryst-na-noshtuvkite-v-turisticheski-sezon-2022-video-/77515?fbclid=IwAR1qBwSERI-Rys3DIXIFVXHZ-KLBoxAZSA_KrwpFpXCRPzSwdryP0bk4j0xM (in Bulgarian), accessed 8.12.2023.

7. National Tourist Register, <https://ntr.tourism.government.bg/CategoryzationAll.nsf/mn.xsp> (in Bulgarian), accessed 8.12.2023.
8. Ibid.
9. Wild camping refers to setting up a temporary camp in a natural environment, often away from designated campsites or established facilities. It typically involves camping in remote, less-travelled areas such as forests, mountains, or along riversides or lakeshores, etc.
10. For more in-depth analyses of these processes and the motivations behind them, see Pileva, Markov, and Periklieva 2023, 11–15.
11. For more detailed analyses of the urban-rural movements in Bulgaria due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures imposed, see Pileva and Markov 2021, 543–560.
12. The Civil Registration and Administrative Services General Directorate provides current data on the country's population by current and permanent address in various administrative units in Bulgaria (district, municipality and settlement). Data for the current year is updated every three months, <https://www.grao.bg/tables.html>, accessed 8.12.2023.
13. For more in-depth analyses of push and pull factors for urban-rural migration within the Bulgarian context in the last decade, based on ethnographic research carried out in a couple districts in the country, including Dobrich District, see Pileva, Markov, and Periklieva 2023, 30–36.
14. The fee is 2 BGN (1 euro) per 10 m².
15. “The camping sites in Shabla Municipality have been designated,” *BNR—Varna*, 23 June 2017, <https://bnr.bg/varna/post/100845560/opredeliha-mestata-za-kampin-guvane-v-obshtina-shabla> (in Bulgarian), accessed 8.12.2023.
16. The restaurant offers Balkan cuisine and some seafood dishes. They claim to have 300 seats in the restaurant (indoors and outdoors).
17. Protocol no. 35 from a session of the Municipal Council—Shabla, 29 October 2021, <https://shabla.bg/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/РЕШЕНИЕ-277-ОТ-29.10.2021.pdf> (in Bulgarian), accessed 8.12.2023.
18. It starts at the crossroads right before the community center, on 1st St., and it ends where the dirt road leading to the beach begins.
19. Road E87 is part of the European road network. It starts in Odessa, Ukraine, passes through/by many Black Sea settlements in Bulgaria, and ends in Antalya, Turkey.
20. Cadastral map of Bulgaria, <https://kais.cadastre.bg/bg/Map>, accessed 8.12.2023.
21. The building is on a property the family owns (previously part of the local cooperative farm). On the lot, there is also a three-floor unfinished building (constructed in the late 2000s), which was meant to be a hotel. On the first floor, there was a roadside eatery that did not succeed and closed after a year.
22. It is important to note that many of the elderly residents, who dwell in the village all year long, live alone and do not drive.
23. Organizers are the community center, the NGO “Dobrogea” (established for that matter by a group of women from the Shabla region), and “Place Ezerets” (part of the “Place Bulgaria” citizen initiative for the development of public spaces and the

- urban environment, a project of the NGO “BG Be Active,” <https://www.facebook.com/myastoezerec>, accessed 8.12.2023).
24. “A disaster in photos: Nova Kakhovka dam breach in Ukraine,” *EU Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid*, 27 June 2023, https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/news-stories/stories/disaster-photos-nova-kakhovka-dam-breach-ukraine_en, accessed 8.12.2023; “Ukraine dam: What we know about the Nova Kakhovka incident,” *BBC News*, 8 June 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-65818705>, accessed 8.12.2023; <https://uncg.org.ua/en/the-consequences-of-the-russian-terrorist-attack-on-the-kakhovka-hydroelectric-power-station-hps-for-wildlife>, accessed 8.12.2023.
 25. “Sea Waters Monitoring Shows no Evidence of Approaching Potential Pollutants as a Result of the Incident in Ukraine,” Ministry of Environment and Water of Bulgaria, 26 June 2023, <https://www.moew.government.bg/en/sea-waters-monitoring-shows-no-evidence-of-approaching-potential-pollutants-as-a-result-of-the-incident-in-ukraine>, accessed 8.12.2023; “No evidence of pollution from Ukraine in Bulgarian Black Sea waters,” Ministry of Environment and Water of Bulgaria, 14 July 2023, “The consequences of the Russian terrorist attack on the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (HPP) for wildlife,” Ukrainian Nature Conservation Group, 7 June 2023, <https://www.moew.government.bg/en/no-evidence-of-pollution-from-ukraine-in-bulgarian-black-sea-waters>, accessed 8.12.2023.
 26. “Hoteliers Dive for Mussels in the Sea to Demonstrate that the Water is Clean,” *Telegraph*, 20 June 2023, <https://telegraph.bg/biznes/novini/hotelieri-se-gmurkat-zamidi-v-moreto-da-pokazhat-che-vodata-e-chista.-bylgari-i-chuzhdenci-anulirat-rezervaciite-si-snimki-380435> (in Bulgarian), accessed 8.12.2023; “Black Sea Hoteliers Sound the Alarm: Reservations are being Canceled en Masse,” *Maritsa*, 26 June 2023, <https://www.marica.bg/balgariq/obshtestvo/hotelieri-po-chernomorieto-biq-trevoga-masovo-se-otmenqt-rezervacii> (in Bulgarian), accessed 8.12.2023.
 27. “What is upwelling and why is the water in the Black Sea icy?,” *Darik Business Review*, 27 July 2023, <https://dbr.bg/6307> (in Bulgarian), accessed 8.12.2023.

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Abstract

Counterurbanites As Drivers of Innovation and Local Transformation: A Case Study from Coastal Dobrudzha, Bulgaria

The study focuses on the village of Ezerets, located in a remote rural area near the Bulgarian–Romanian border. Based on ethnological research, the study investigates the motivations, experiences, and contributions of counterurbanites, both Bulgarian and foreign citizens, who have chosen to settle in the village. It examines the innovative practices, ideas, and entrepreneurial initiatives brought by the newcomers and their contribution to the social, economic, and cultural transformation of the village. The study also explores the challenges and opportunities that arise from the interactions between counterurbanites and the local population, emphasizing the importance of inclusive practices and social integration. The findings highlight the significant role of counterurbanites in diversifying livelihood strategies and activities in search of local sustainability, including the establishment of ecological and rural tourism ventures, and the revitalization of cultural and social life in the village.

Keywords

counterurbanization, remote areas, rural revitalization, entrepreneurship, local embeddedness