

Juraj Podoba, Ph.D.

## “... THEY HAVE ALWAYS KNOWN TO KNOCK ON THE RIGHT DOOR ...” CONTINUITY, MODERNISATION AND TRANSFORMATION IN ONE SUB-TATRAS COMMUNITY

Process of modernisation characterised by industrialisation, centralisation, urbanisation, increasing role of education and specialisation and changing social and professional structures of the population, has marginalised the position of the rural areas (rural society) within the modern industrial state. In this respect, it has played a special role in the Central and East European countries of “real socialism”. In this part of Europe modernisation process was accompanied by “building up of the socialist village”. Now, in the transition period, the rural areas in every postcommunist country are facing the consequences of the communist social engineering, economic experiments and the communist idea “to wipe off the differences between town and village”.

Ernest Gellner defines communism as a political system of incredible success and incredible failure (Gellner, E., 1997). These two phenomena have played a different role in individual countries and regions, and have had a different impact on individual regional, social and professional groups, on individual generations or families. There is no doubt, that also the life of isolated populations is determined by the macrosocial level. But a more detailed view of the local level indicates that general determinants could have very different local impacts. Therefore we can prove the Gellner’s definition of the communist variant of the industrial society by very different local contents. The variety of local contents does not disapprove the general validity of his perspective. The comparative ethnographic material enables better understanding of its concrete expressions in the life of local communities and social groups.

Communism was only one of the modernisation alternatives of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which mainly after WW II. brought radical economic, social and cultural transformation — most significant, most quick and most resounding in the history of mankind. This process caused that the changes in the life of mankind are deep and irreversible, and are still continuing. In reality, the new society did not destroy everything from the previous era, but in a selective way it adapted the heritage of the past for its own benefit (Hobsbawm, E., 1977, 21, 22). Just on the regional and local level we can identify the consequences of both of these phenomena in the best way. Different expressions/impacts of the modernisation process on the microsocal level,

as well as different adapting strategies, gaining new social and professional competitions and roles, and on the other hand, different ability to accept the discontinuing changes, are creating the varying structure of regional, local and social differences. It could be formulated as a very differentiated relationship between modernisation and the extent of continuity and discontinuity in the transformation processes.

Different modernisation models have formed and changed in different ways the traditional conservatism of the Slovak countrymen. Traditional rural society was always conservative and hierarchic. During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was the basis of private property, political conservatism, religion and, not surprisingly also for traditional values, connected with peasantry. Today the Slovak rural society is conservative as well, but not in the same way. At present, it conserves predominantly the hierarchy of values connected with the communist period. If we want to understand the current social problems in the Slovak countryside, we must take into account these two aspects of the rural life.

The region situated under the West, High and Belá Tatra Mountains, which, in the times of Austro-Hungarian monarchy belonged to the two historical administrative provinces of Liptov and Spiš, during the 20<sup>th</sup> century is characterised by specific development. The most important specific phenomena of the Sub-Tatras region are the highest Slovak mountains, creating potential conditions for development based on tourism. The urban settlement in the historic district of Spiš, in the Middle Ages settled down by the privileged German (Saxon) population, has been a perspective basis for development of tourism since late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

At present, the highest East Central European mountains could form a base for potential development of urban and rural structures of settlement and a source of the next modernisation phase, arising from the communist modernisation model. In the 1990s the Sub-Tatras region shows the accumulation of contrasts and contradictions, which are unknown in the other parts of Slovakia. The neighbouring communities differ from each other by different degree of social and cultural decay and social pathology. On the other hand, in the Sub-Tatras region do exist not only the stagnating towns and villages. Many communities have been successful in profiting from developing possibilities of the sub-mountain region and from the early industrial and communist modernisation phases.

Modernisation process transforming the rural areas of Slovakia consists of two main phases: early pre-socialist and socialist. The first is characterised by a slow speed and continuity of changes and by a strong resistance of socio-cultural phenomena deeply rooted in the traditional agrarian society. In the region this phase was determined to a great extent by the development of railway (arterial railway Košice-Bohumín, Tatra cogged railway, Tatra electric railway), which promoted at the turn of the centuries the development of tourism. Individual communities started to differentiate gradually according to their abilities to profit from the next possibilities. And individual families in one community as well.

As well as in other parts of Slovakia, the communist phase connected with

industrialisation and collectivisation of agriculture had very discontinual character. In the Sub-Tatras region this discontinuity was emphasised by violent expatriation of the German Spiš inhabitants in the late 1940s. This predominantly urban population was replaced by people coming from different natural and social environment and cultural background.

The 1990s are influenced by very serious economic and social problems of the rural areas. The economic difficulties or even the decay of the agricultural cooperatives and collapse of some industrial plants has brought many significant social problems also to the Sub-Tatras region. The change of political and economic conditions has brought about the promise of new boom in tourism, based now on the private activity and property. But this optimistic promise is also in the Tatra mountains region present more at a hypothetical level. In the context of the local conditions the 20th century development created highly differentiated mosaic of urban and rural settlement.

This paper deals with the case study of a Sub-Tatras community which has special position in the whole Sub-Tatras region. Štrba is situated in the borderland of two historic administrative provinces (comitates), and of two current administrative districts, Poprad and Liptovský Mikuláš (before Liptovský Hrádok). The origin of the village is dated to the year 1280. The population of the villages situated along the boundary between two Upper Hungarian provinces of Liptov and Spiš has always been predominantly Slovak-speaking and Roman-Catholic. But Štrba was settled down by German-speaking colonists, who later gradually assimilated to Slovak-speaking population. During Reformation the inhabitants became protestants (Lutherans). As some other villages in Upper Liptov region, Štrba has preserved this confession until now. Protestants are dominating in the village, Roman-catholics form a minority. Inhabitants of Štrba were sub-mountain peasants and serfs under the jurisdiction of various Liptov noble families. Agriculture was hardly productive, money economy remained undeveloped until the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century, the standard of living was low. Men worked for money in forests mainly in winter as lumbermen. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century some innovations associated with the capitalist mode of production were introduced. Potato cultivation probably contributed to a population growth resulting in increasing hardships because of the limited land available. For Štrba was characteristic the egalitarian social structure. Situation started to change at the turn of the centuries, caused by the construction of railway, which enabled the development of tourism in the region.

**The case study of the Štrba community illustrates the ability of a sub-mountain rural settlement** to exploit in a relatively effective way the developing potential submitted by the individual modernisation models during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In rural areas this phenomenon has had only potential character. Therefore the case study shows an example of community coherence in combination with an encouragement of the own community leaders. It can also serve as an example, how they used their position and personal networks on the level of administrative district and the whole

Sub-Tatras region for the community developing strategies. In my opinion, for Štrba community is characteristic the phenomenon of the "progressive continuity of the local leadership". In spite of the dramatic modern history of Slovakia and Central Europe full of discontinual changes and breaks, Štrba community avoided the worst consequences of these dramatic historic events. This continuity of the local leadership existed both in the vertical and horizontal levels. Every new generation of the local leaders exploited the work and also networks of the older generation. On the other hand it did not remain on the rigid positions, but was successful in accommodating to the new situation, new changing conditions. All new mayors or agricultural cooperative chair (two most important political positions in the Slovak villages during second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) were brought up by their predecessors. The new cooperative chair was picked in the late 1980s by the cooperative grounder, who in the previous years was an officer in the state administration and in the same time the communist agitator during the collectivisation process of the 1950s. The current chair is the graduate of the Agricultural University, born in Štrba. Before he had worked in the agricultural cooperative of the neighbouring village Lucivná. The current and very active and successful mayor was the employee of the municipal administration also before he was elected to his post. He was the communist mayor of the 1980s, in the times of the local building boom. As a successful organiser of the village development he was again elected in two free democratic elections after 1989.

The cooperation between the community leaders on the horizontal level was very important in aiming the community needs and in mitigating the conflicts within the community, and in improving the relations between the community and the state after 1948. The relationship between two local priests, catholic and protestant (Lutheran), was always positive and good. In the confessionally heterogenous Slovak settlements such situation has not been usual. The cooperation between the community (the mayor) and the agricultural cooperative management was a very important factor in realisation of the local developing programmes. A good relationship between the representatives of both churches and the local representatives of the (communist) state was an obstacle for conflicts within the Štrba community. That sort of conflicts were quite usual during the "class clash in the village" of the 1950s. In the neighbouring catholic village Šuňava, the conflict between the community led by the local priest and the communist state power accelerated during the communist collectivisation of agriculture (see Skalnik, P. 1986). The police repressions against the Šuňava peasants were extraordinarily brutal. Inhabitants of the Štrba community learned very quickly from the consequences of the rebellion in the neighbouring village. The collectivisation was brought about without remarkable resistance. The strategy of the local élites, followed by the majority of the population, was oriented towards the opportunistic pragmatism. They followed the aims of the communist state power, but also they tried to exploit a maximal benefit from the state subsidy for the collective agriculture and from the sharing mechanisms typical for the communist way of operating the state and economy. In this strategy different local leaders, local

élite and whole village cooperated. For example, at the beginnings of the cooperative type of agriculture in the 1960s the local priests accepted common work also during Sundays. And very often they joined the volunteers working during the harvest, haymaking, potatoes picking, etc. On the other hand, the local communists were not keen on causing problems to either catholic or protestant churches. The former Communist party member and the first cooperative chair characterised in the interview the situation during the communist period: "... you know, we all here are Christians — communists ...". The official state and party policy and the ideological doctrine was followed without protests or resistance. But the realisation of it was in the hands of the local leaders. Therefore it has not been consequent and rigid.

The field work in Štrba discovered the local perspective of the problem, which is permanently present in the social science and in historic research: the relationship between personality/group élites and the collective/community in the historical development. The informants from Štrba explained their perspective on the successful local developing strategies in two ways: firstly by the activities and positions of the local élites: priests<sup>1</sup>, mayors, cooperative chairs and those local intellectuals, who had good and influential positions in the state (district) authorities and institutions, and secondly the creation of jobs in the local agricultural cooperative for the people with high qualifications, very often strangers (newcomers). Stabilisation of the specialists with high education in the village helped to increase the number of the local élites, educated people, who were able to participate in the developing activities for the community. On the other hand, the informants did not disapprove of the role of the local people, of the whole Štrba community. In their opinion, the local leaders would not be successful in their effort without the support of the Štrba citizens

Differences on the regional or local levels are caused by the scale of reasons. The field research in the Sub-Tatras region brought about the ethnographic material illustrating the tension between the readiness to accept the discontinuity pressures of the different modernisation models, and the evident traditionalism of the local community. Modernisation models submitted by the general civilisation progress, as well as models forced by the totalitarian communist regime. This case study is an example of the conflict between the urban and rural aspects of the modernisation process, which the Štrba community was able to exploit for the own purposes. Rural cultural phenomena rooted in the cultural and axiological model of the traditional agrarian society were used for the transmission of generally modern and specifically urban phenomena to the locality. Continual modernisation of the village intensified its attractivity for aboriginal people, newcomers and tourists. Štrba differs from the majority of the Sub-Tatras rural settlements by the absence of depopulating trends and the negative demographic structure. The reasons are local solidarity, economic prosperity, geographic attractivity and suitable location close to the railway and the

---

<sup>1</sup> Positive role of local priests was emphasised only by a part of informants. In my opinion it depends on their personal attitude to the church.

arterial traffic line, close to the district city Poprad and the industrial town Svit with two large and various small industrial plants, the social welfare realised directly in the locality. And also other qualities of the life in the community — from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there was permanent and never interrupted development, active local culture with relatively rich cultural life, traditional social control existing parallelly with the local cohesion. The majority of the Štrba community, led by the cooperating formal and informal local leaders has always known how to accept the modernisation models submitted by the concrete historic situation, and to profit from them. The community always shared an effective portion of the possible modernisation potential, after WW II the portion of the sharing mechanism characteristic for the communist economy, and to use it for the local development in an effective way. It was enabled by the locally specific combination of opportunism and loyalty towards the ruling political structures, Lutheran pragmatism and utilitarianism, community solidarity and coherence. The community coherence enabled the pragmatic elimination of problems and survival in the difficult periods during the war and the Slovak national uprising of 1944, and during the beginnings of the collectivisation in the 1960s. It also enabled in the similar way to profit from the state subsidy for the construction of the local infrastructure.

Flexibility of the local élites and the geographic location of the Štrba community today, as well as in the past, is the important condition for overcoming the difficulties of the transition period. Also for this community is characteristic the inertia of the communist modernisation model connected with the socialist welfare of the 1980s nostalgic feelings. The phenomena typical for the current post-communist Slovak countryside. It seems that the pragmatism and flexibility is expressed now also in the behaviour of the elected political representatives of the community. One part of the local population is step by step changing its economic behaviour and is starting to advantage the closeness of the High Tatra Mountains and especially the closeness of Štrbské Pleso<sup>2</sup>, for their private economic activities. On the other hand, tendencies dominated by the local solidarity, strict social control based on socio-cultural patterns from the communist period and conservative inertia are still forcing the major part of Štrba families to continue the outdated customs, outdated modernisation models based on obsolete ideological stereotypes. The institutional core of this strategy is still remaining in the local agricultural cooperative. This part of the local people shows a sort of perplexed and helpless behaviour without any particular ability to exploit the potential of the village in tourism and in regional economy. Activities of the political representatives, and especially those of the current mayor are still continuing the strategies realised by the community élites in the past. This sort of lobbying was described by one informant, a well-informed region inhabitant in the words: "... they

---

<sup>2</sup> Štrbské Pleso is a settlement built around the mountain lake up in the Tatra mountains, consisting of hotels, pensions, pubs, restaurants and hospitals, and with many areas for different sports, with ski slopes and ski running tracks.

have always been able to knock on the right doors ...” But the new dynamism of the social processes affected the networks of the personal support and the social capital<sup>3</sup>, accumulated during the last decades. Personal contacts created during “real socialism” still remain as their foundations, but the changing relations in the power structures, both on the regional and the state levels, are the current political reality. Also the mentality and the value hierarchy of Štrba citizens are slowly changing towards the values of the open society and free market economy, more urban cultural patterns and way of living. The interviewed representatives of the local élites hope, that the local people will again demonstrate their solidarity and enthusiasm from the 1960s, the 1970s and 1980s, which helped, to a great extent the community development. It also helped to create the special position of the Štrba community in the Sub-Tatras region. The great expectations of the inhabitants in the whole Sub-Tatras region are connected with the Winter Olympic Games.<sup>4</sup> In Štrba these expectations are underlined by their effort to acquire their former real estate in Štrbské Pleso. These great expectations might accelerate the beginning of the new modernisation phase, now out of the communist modernisation model, and based on the private economic initiative. There is a chance to overcome the difficulties of the transition period and to remain in the group of the most developed and welfare settlements of the Sub-Tatras region.

## Literature

Bourdieu, P., 1979: Entwurf einer Theorie der Praxis, Frankfurt am Main.

Gellner, E., 1997: Podmínky svobody, Praha.

Hobsbawm, E., 1998: Věk extrémů. Krátké 20. století 1914–1991, Praha.

Huba, M., Ira V., 1998: Stratégia trvalo udržateľného rozvoja pre región Tatry, Bratislava.

Skalník, P., 1986: Uneven development in European mountain communities, v Dialectical Anthropology, 10, Amsterdam.

Švorc, P., 1979: Štrba, Košice.

Švorc, P., 1988: Podtatranské premeny. 30 rokov Jednotného roľníckeho družstva v Štrbe, Košice.

---

<sup>3</sup> These two terms are used according to the definition of Pierre Bourdieu.

<sup>4</sup> Slovak government, supported by the local governments from the Sub-Tatras region try to organise the Winter Olympic Games in the near future in the territory of the Slovak Republic. (In the High, West and Low Tatra Mountains). The local people are hoping, that this event will improve “everything” in the region. Of course, the great expectations are not based on a realistic evaluation of the situation in the region.