

# PROJECT NEWBIE

## PART 2

What would help starters and successors?



MAKING THE BEST OF LIMITED RESOURCES

# BULGARIA

What challenges do successors and start-ups face? Lack of land and capital or the lack of knowledge or a network? This is what a group of European researchers and advisers want to investigate in the Newbie project. With the aim of finding solutions and recommendations for policy makers and future farmers. This time we are in Bulgaria, in the Sofia area, and are visiting four starters.

TEXT & PHOTO'S | MARCEL VIJN

**T**he bus meanders its way through the mountains. The road is sometimes extremely uneven, but the view is breathtaking. Green mountain slopes are interspersed with clear mountain lakes in which the cloudy skies are reflected. We are on our way to the first of four Bulgarian starters in agriculture.

**After about an hour and a half** on the bus we arrive at the dairy farm of *Zahari and Plamen*. Both are former athletes and Plamen has won many skiing medals. Even now they earn their money in the winter as ski instructors. After their sporting career, they worked abroad (hospitality) and founded this company in 2010, initially as a beef cattle farm. The

brothers started the business in order to earn their money in Bulgaria and to be able to live close to their friends and family. That they have first earned money abroad to invest in their new farm, we will see again later today.

**The company started** with 60 Hereford cattle, but that was not a commercial success because Bulgarians have little extra income to spend. There is no market for quality meat in Bulgaria. That is why they started with dairy cattle, 60 Holstein and 15 Simmental 5 years ago. They had to overcome many obstacles for this, they had to figure everything out for themselves. After all, neither of them have an agricultural background. They get most of their information from the



Didy

Stefan

Alexander

Zahari



"She leases 1.3 hectares from the municipality for 10 years. From this, last year she harvested 6,000 kg of strawberries, which she sold for 1.75 euros per kg."

internet. It's hard to find employees. People prefer to work in Western Europe, where they can earn more. That is why they are now building luxury houses for their employees.

The company has 350 hectares of land, half of which is leased and they produce 250,000 liters of milk per year. Unfortunately, the milk price is poor due to the Russian boycott. There is also more and more cheese on the market with added processed palm oil and that is pushing the real cheese out of the market. The lowest milk price was 28 cents per liter whilst they needed 39 cents. That is why they want to process milk themselves. A glimmer of hope is that the price of beef has doubled since it can be exported to Turkey. Additionally, the brothers have planted hazel trees and sell the hazelnuts to Ferrero (Nutella) in Italy.

**The next company** is neighbouring to that of the brothers and the owner, *Didy*, is eagerly waiting for us. She grows strawberries organically or, well, we will get to that in a moment. For Didy, agriculture is in the blood. In the communist era her mother drove a combine. Now Didy grows strawberries at a height of 1,000 meters. Because of the lower temperatures and because everything is open ground and they have not used tunnels, the strawberries are late. There is hardly any fruit to be seen in May.

She leases 1.3 hectares from the municipality for 10 years. From this, last year she harvested 6,000 kg of strawberries, which she sold for 1.75 euros per kg. She sells the strawberries to the villagers who like to buy the strawberries because they are not sprayed. Didy does spray chemical agents against weeds between the strawberry beds, but customers do not object to this. Logically, the company is not certified, but because Didy sells everything to people who know her, this is not an issue. Didy has no problem finding staff because she works with people from the Roma community. The Roma are disadvantaged in Bulgaria and few employers offer these people work.

**The organic raspberry company** owned by *Alexander* also began with money he had earned abroad. In this instance in construction in Greece. This company is certified and sells raspberries at a farmers market in Sofia. In Sofia people can pay more for organic produce. At the weekend, he sells his raspberries from a

roadside stall as people head towards the mountains. Alexander has wanted to be a farmer since childhood. He has taught himself cultivation. Alexander now grows raspberries on 4.5 hectares. He leases the land from the municipality and has undertaken a lot of work to make the land suitable for growing raspberries. He grows organically because he sees there is a market for this. He too is a ski instructor in the winter.

**The fourth and final company** is also a starter without an agricultural background. That is, *Stefan's* grandfather was a farmer, but in the communist period after the war all the land was confiscated by the government. After the communist period, Stefan was able to buy the land back and converted it into large polytunnels for baby leaf lettuce. He grows organically as much as possible but is not certified because there is no market for it, both because of the limited purchasing power and because consumers do not trust certificates due to the corruption in the country.

Stefan has worked in England for a number of years. He came back during the financial crisis. He did landscape gardening in England, but there is no market for it in Bulgaria and he has become a lettuce farmer because he saw in the supermarket how expensive those products were. He has taught himself everything using a bit of "trial and error". Stefan mixes and packages the lettuce himself for the supermarket and at the end of our visit we all get a bag of lettuce.

Stefan sells to all the supermarket chains in Bulgaria and to 120 greengrocers in Sofia. Supplying supermarkets is not always easy. For example Lidl gets its products cheaply from Italy. Stefan wants to export his products, but that has not yet succeeded. The price is the problem. For example, to export to Turkey is not an option because Turkish companies produce cheaper. He has 15 permanent employees and a number of seasonal workers. It is also difficult for him to find employees. He does not receive European subsidies and he does not want them either. According to Stefan, everyone who started with European money has already stopped.

**We board the bus again** with plenty of impressions to reflect on during the ride to Sofia. We have met four new agricultural entrepreneurs who are building a new business without support. There is no co-operation because they do not want to be associated with that term since communism and the tumultuous time afterwards. But they make the best of it with the limited resources that are available and for that they deserve a lot of respect. ■

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