

DANIEL LUTHER:

The Socio-Cultural Capital of Successful Villages (The Villages of the Year in Slovakia)

[Sociokultúrny kapitál úspešných obcí (Dediny roka na Slovensku)]

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Inspired by the successful ones: these words briefly reflect the key idea behind the extensive research project *The Socio-Cultural Capital of Successful Villages and Source of the Sustainable Development of the Slovak Countryside* (APVV-16-0115). The key results of this research are presented to the international audience in the book *The Socio-Cultural Capital of Successful Villages* (The Villages of the Year in Slovakia) [Sociokultúrny kapitál úspešných obcí (Dediny roka na Slovensku)] (2021b). The author of the book is Daniel Luther, a Slovak ethnologist.

The research was conducted between 2017 and 2021 in the framework of cooperation by three academic and university organisations: the Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, the Faculty of Arts of Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, and the Faculty of Arts of Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra. This thin book (81 pages) is freely distributed in electronic form, which suggests the ambitions to reach out to the international audience – not only experts but also the general public. The target group of the readers are mainly representatives of local governments at various levels: from mayors of small villages through regional political representatives to legislators. The final book chapter therefore contains specific recommendations that should lead to an improvement in the quality of life in the countryside.

The villages that applied for the Village of the Year competition were selected to take part in the field research. This competition is organised annually by the Ministry of Environment of the Slovak Republic. Even though the original selection was broader, the book is based on the analysis of data from eight locations (Luther, 2021b: 29). The author notes that it is not necessarily the most successful villages, since villages themselves have to apply for the competition, and not all relevant municipalities did so. The selection depends to some extent on the initiative of local self-governments.

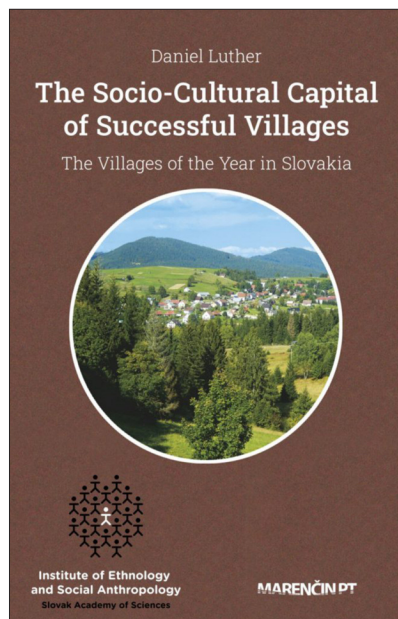
At the same time, the book notes an attempt to ensure a diversity of the municipalities to be able to explore various environments. The studied villages were at the end divided into two groups: suburban villages, and “typical” villages of a rural nature. Even though this division may appear somewhat simplified, it is based on the summary of the principal issues faced by the local communities. While the suburban municipalities cope with urbanisation processes, becoming “night-stays” for the inhabitants commuting to the nearby cities, the more distant ones face increased depopulation-related problems.

Even though the book follows up on the tradition of ethnological focus on the countryside, it rather has an interdisciplinary character, drawing on sources from other scientific disciplines that deal with the sustainability of the countryside, in particular, anthropology, sociology, and geography. The theoretical background is introduced in the introductory study. As the book title suggests, the text is inspired by Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of capital and observes local communities based on the various forms of sources that are available to them. Along with

economic capital, the social and cultural capital of municipalities is particularly accentuated. The book explores to what extent the social ties of the inhabitants strengthen the willingness to cooperate and participate in public life or in the development of the village. In relation to the quality of life in the countryside, the cultural capital can thus be defined very broadly: it can be identified not only with a rich social life, the possibility to build on their own intangible cultural heritage, strong local identity, but perhaps also with quality environment and the value of the surrounding landscape. It is the various forms of capital – economic, social, or cultural (or also environmental, see Wilson, 2010) – that forms the basis of the vitality of rural communities. Enough resources in one area may facilitate benefits in others. In this regard, the book deals with the concept of socio-cultural potential which can be influenced by a wide range of factors, including the past of a particular place. In the Slovak (as well as Czech) context, both the socialist heritage (for

instance, whether it was a so-called central village or whether it had a thriving local agricultural cooperative) and the question of how the municipality managed to cope with post-socialist transformation is significant. After the introductory theoretical study, the book contains partial chapters dealing with the fundamental topics that affect the quality of life at the given places, including the arrangement of public spaces, the promotion of own cultural wealth, relationships and cooperation with communities, the participation of the church in the life of the village, co-habitation with Roma inhabitants, or the importance of social life. Given the small size of the book and the ambition to reach out to the general public, the individual book chapters present detailed research data only marginally. Instead, they offer a summary of the most important findings. However, foreign readers could get a more complex idea of the key success factors of the given municipalities if more practical examples from the field research were illustrated – simply put, if the presented theses were accompanied by, for example, stories of specific people. It should be noted, though, that the research data has already been presented in detail in the monothematic issue of *Slovenský národopis / Slovak Ethnology* (3/2019), as well as several other expert texts dealing with the local context (see Bahna, 2019; Bitušíková, 2021; Darulová, Košťalová, Krišková, 2020; Jágerová, 2020). In addition, an extensive monograph in the Slovak language was simultaneously published (Luther, 2021a).

The book shows that what is crucial for the success of the municipality are strong social ties and existing cooperation between various stakeholders (municipal office, school, church, associations). Active communities can mobilise themselves in the event of danger and dispose of enough resources to promote their own cultural heritage. This can further enhance local identity across generations, thereby encouraging young people to continue living at the given place. The sensitive promotion of cultural (as well as natural) values also has potential in the field of tourism, which can bring additional resources to municipalities. What also matters is their size – small villages with the lack of initiative inhabitants face greater threats: depopulation and the ageing of the rural population thus represent a fundamental risk.



The book demonstrates that positive stories can be found in various Slovak regions. However, despite numerous concrete recommendations, the analysed success stories of particular municipalities are difficult to transfer into environments that do not dispose of various forms of capital. These recommendations can therefore be regarded as advice on how to promote the potential of the communities that do have it but have not yet found the way to use it.

One of the partial questions discussed in the book is the search for an ideal relationship with developers that invest in new construction projects in the suburban countryside. Particular attention is also paid to the villages inhabited by Roma – the chapter addressing this issue is more detailed compared to the other ones and offer practical examples. According to the advice presented in the book, the key to improving their position is an attempt to involve the members of (often segregated) Roma communities in the widest possible range of municipal activities.

However, to effectively solve this complicated issue, a more detailed study of long-term processes that can have a major influence on the identity and attitudes of rural people is needed. It should be mentioned, though, that, according to the introductory chapter, the research did not reflect in more depth on the historical context and representations of the past in the memories of the local population. What is explored is mainly the present (Luther, 2021b: 12). It is partly (understandably) caused also by the impossibility of conducting further research because of the COVID-19 pandemic that affected life all over the world during the last two project years.

This is also why there is a risk that the recommendations presented in the final book chapter will only have a limited impact not only when it comes to seeking a functional involvement of Roma communities in municipal life. The recommendations emphasise, in particular, the need for a functional institutionalised cooperation between self-governments and other stakeholders at the local and regional level. This, however, is not yet a prerequisite for the community to become inclusive and accept inhabitants that it considers different. The willingness to accept disadvantaged or different people in the life of a municipality (not only Roma, but also newcomers from cities or people of different religious beliefs) must be inherent also to the members of the local community. Strong social ties within a village may form a basis for social life, but may also create an imaginary barrier against the outside world and the diversity of attitudes and values that come from outside. Any social interactions can occur only between people who share common identity, values, as well as stereotypes. However, the recommendations offered in the book focus more on the issue of cooperation within a community (including the enhancement of local patriotism).

Community cohesion is undoubtedly important; however, isolation from the outside world can create a “dark” side of the life of seemingly well-working rural communities.¹ For the development of the community, not only good local social ties are important, but also the existence of various personal contacts of the local population with the close or wider

1 I ask questions related to the degree of openness of a community also in connection with the evaluation of the (positive) role of the church in community life. The involvement of the local parish community in the life of the village is addressed in a separate book chapter. The church is undoubtedly a strong actor in many Slovak municipalities, strengthening the internal cohesion of the community. However, does it create in the Slovak countryside an open platform for involving in community life even people with different church affiliation or people who do not claim to belong to any church?

surroundings. The ability to accept diversity requires the presence of “bridging” social ties – contacts with people across attitudes, competences, education, etc. In practice, for instance, this can include the maintenance of mutual contacts with relatives who left to study in the city and have stayed there (Flora, Flora, 2013: 128; see Putnam, 2000).

The book offers an example of research that explores the more successful ones; on the other hand, a team of Czech sociologists (see Bernard, Kostecký, Mikešová, Šafr, Trlifajová, Hurrle, 2019) have chosen an opposite strategy by focusing on the countryside in the periphery that faces numerous structural problems. I consider both of these approaches important, but transferability is difficult – it would be interesting to look for positive stories in places where there are not many.

The research presented in the book offers new inspiration for a sphere that should be under increased focus of ethnology not only in Slovakia, but also in the Czech Republic. The publication follows up on the sectoral tradition and accentuates the urgent need to understand the sustainability issues of the present-day countryside. This topic overlaps with the current nationwide debates on the division of society and the search for ways towards mutual understanding with people who feel left out or do not see positive examples of success around them. At the same time, mutual cooperation and trust is a prerequisite for the ability to cope with fundamental global challenges like (not only) climate change. It can therefore be appreciated that the recommendations in the book reflect on these problems of the modern world.

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