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“We are shepherds, but not sheep”: farmer protest and rural identity in Bulgaria

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ABSTRACT

Rural society in Bulgaria has seen considerable upheaval over the past century, moving from a position of political significance, rural actors were subsequently subordinated under the communist regime (1946–1989). The post-socialist period saw further turmoil as land restitution, privatisation, and depopulation reshaped rural communities, leading to increased marginalisation. Facing uncertain futures, rural producers have engaged in a range of actions to challenge and resist threats to their material interests and rural way of life. This article draws on a dataset of protest events in the media by rural producers over the 2000–2019 period to understand how and why they protested. In doing so, it considers how the claims presented can be seen to reflect efforts to protect rural communities in a time of change. The findings suggest that material interests serve as the key mobilising force, but that these rest on a sense of collective identity around the importance of rural society to support their claims.

KEYWORDS

Agriculture; farmer identity; media analysis; protest; rural sociology

Introduction

In June 2003 a group of around 150 people, consisting of farmers and local residents, gathered outside the town of Stroumyani, southwest Bulgaria. The assembled group burned bales of tobacco and blocked the E-79 road, displaying banners stating “Unpurchased Tobacco = Death by Starvation” and “Don’t Mock Our Work” (BTA, 2003). In December 2011, the National Association of Grain Producers gathered 170 tractors in front of St. Alexander Nevski Cathedral in Sofia before proceeding to the Council of Ministers. The protest was the culmination of nationwide actions over a planned cut to grain subsidies (BTA, 2011). These two events involved different rural actors with similarly varied concerns, although they both targeted the state in seeking resolution to their concerns. Together, they may be seen to represent wider patterns of rural discontent, as farmers and other rural residents mobilise to highlight the failings of the state. The active support of other residents, including local officials in Stroumyani (BTA, 2003), points to the relevance of the claims for the broader community and the sense of a shared identity and fate among participants. Rather than simply presenting claims

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around prices and regulation, these actions point to deeper concerns around the viability of rural industry and the communities that rely on it.

Rural communities occupy a marginal position in Bulgaria. Having played an important role in interwar politics (Crampton, 2007), they were suppressed during the communist period (Yancheva, 2012). Rural society was further impacted by changes in the post-socialist period, as freer internal movement in search of opportunities resulted in pressures towards rural depopulation challenging the viability of towns and villages (Duijzings, 2013; Yarkova & Mutafov, 2017). Reform of the centrally planned economy also saw the break up of large-scale state cooperatives and restitution of land, resulting in complex patterns of land fragmentation and concentration (Giordano, 2015; Medarov, 2013). The increasingly hollowed-out character of rural communities further increased their marginalisation, limiting mechanisms to express their interests. Examining the response of one rural community to a potentially polluting industrial development, Dorondel and Șerban (2019, p. 574) note that the, “local agrarian movement chose publicity as the means to protect this environment ... and then to scale up.” Protest can therefore be seen as a means of pressing claims in response to the threat faced by rural communities. Examining the issues mobilising action and the character of these actions can therefore shed light on the degree of rural discontent.

This article examines protest actions by rural producers over the 2000–2019 period. The aims of the article are to: (1) identify how and why farmer protests happen in Bulgaria, and (2) demonstrate the importance of identity in grounding and animating material claims. The media analysis contributes to understandings of the ways economically and geographically marginalised communities in post-socialist societies use contentious actions to protect their interests. The article is divided into four sections. The first section sets out the development of the rural environment in Bulgaria before introducing concepts that can support an understanding of protest as a form of active claim-making. The characteristics of the protest event analysis method used to identify and catalogue rural protest events is outlined in the second section. The third section draws out patterns of rural protest in Bulgaria over the 2000–2019 to identify the claims presented in these actions, including how they varied over time and between groups. Finally, the article reflects on how the pattern of protest events recorded relates to issues of identity and change in rural Bulgaria.

Literature review and theory

Developments in rural Bulgaria

The rural-urban divide has a long history in Bulgaria and one that was politically significant in the early twentieth century, making it important in understanding the contemporary forms of rural contestation. The formation of the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union (BANU) in 1899 represented a key step in the recognition of rural interests, as it emphasised the contribution of peasants (Daskalov, 2014). Central to BANU's view of society was the idea that “The peasant ... was not confined to the repetitive performing of one task, as was the factory worker, but had direct contact with and knowledge of the natural world” (Crampton, 2007, p. 185). Led by Aleksandăr Stamboliyski, BANU won the largest number of seats in parliamentary elections in 1919 and then a majority in

the 1920 elections (Crampton, 2007). In power, BANU pursued a form of peasantism that appeared flexible enough to accommodate varied interests but, in practice, “was unacceptable to traditional holders of political power” (Fischer-Galati, 1967, p. 104). This involved a number of reforms intended to support and bolster the position of the peasant, with a major element being the creation of a state land fund to ensure equal distribution of land (Crampton, 2007). This was in line with the belief that, “the land should belong to those who till it” with the formation of “cooperatives ... to compensate for the deficiencies of the small-scale agricultural units and to ensure agricultural progress” (Daskalov, 2014, pp. 298–299; Yancheva, 2012). A coup in 1923 removed the BANU government and the consolidation of the Bulgarian Communist Party in 1946 saw the removal of private land holdings through processes of collectivisation (Yancheva, 2012).

The end of the communist regime in Bulgaria in November 1989 led to considerable social, political, and economic change. These changes were particularly significant in the rural environment, involving the reversal of 43 years of collectivisation and state management. Coming to power in 1946, the communist regime had attempted to reform the agricultural sector, moving away from small-scale subsistence farming towards large-scale production and vertical integration (Medarov, 2013). These processes were focused on increasing efficiency and outputs but were also part of a strategy to maintain rural population levels by creating employment opportunities (Traikova, 2017). Following the initiation of the transition to democracy there were concerted efforts to unbuild the system that had been created. The Land Law of 1991 that dissolved, “the agricultural collectives, which were the basis of Bulgaria’s entire socialist agricultural sector, and subsequently re-establish the state of affairs of farmland that existed in 1946” was central to this effort (Giordano, 2015, p. 178).

The immediate impact of the reforms was the fragmentation of land holdings, as large cooperatives were broken up and returned to former owners or their descendants, who had little knowledge of farming practices or capital to work the land. The lack of transparency in the restitution process and the speed at which it was implemented created, “a bitter aftertaste of injustice and power abuse by the strong” (Traikova, 2017, p. 142). This was reflected in the rise of *arendatori*, agricultural entrepreneurs able to capitalise on the uncertainty of the early post-socialist period. Capturing the dynamics of this shift, Giordano (2010, p. 12, emphasis in original) argues:

the local *nomenklatura* realised that after a short while of widespread confusion they could appropriate the best machines and equipment ... they were [also] able to mobilise their past *network of relationships* in order to rent the best parcels of land from the new owners.

The result was a situation where certain individuals were able to build and consolidate large land holdings, reinforcing inequality and a sense of injustice. Medarov (2013, p. 177) argues that these developments were “often understood through the lenses of ‘corruption’, and ‘transition gone wrong’” but that such “accumulation by dispossession of control over land” was central to the post-socialist context.

Changes in patterns of land ownership and the break up of cooperatives saw a decline in employment opportunities resulting in outmigration from rural to urban centres (Duijzings, 2013). Yarkova and Mutafov (2017, p. 59) note that, “rural settlements during the last two decades ... [have seen] withering away the economic activity, dipole type of agriculture, [and] deterioration of quality of life,” leading to a self-

reinforcing pattern of depopulation in some villages. Duijzings (2013, p. 9) argues that as part of this process:

landowners preferred to put their property into the newly created cooperatives, which were run by people who had the necessary managerial skills and agricultural know-how and who often had control over equipment and machinery as well.

In spite of this Begg and Meurs (2001) argue that there remains a degree of continuity, as rural households were less tightly integrated under socialism, meaning certain traditions were able to be maintained. At the same time, the opening that followed 1989 also meant that rural aspirations and experiences were increasingly shaped by the involvement of new external actors and requirements (Bennike, Rasmussen, & Nielsen, 2020). Movement towards European Union (EU) membership from 1998 generated further stability, as the EU used its leverage to enable the country to work through the steps required to secure accession (Noutcheva & Bechev, 2008). Small (2005) notes that while the accession process opened opportunities for support, the informal nature of the rural sector hindered access to such support. Together, these features demonstrate the complex position rural producers find themselves in, connected to local communities while also being subject to forces beyond their control within and beyond the state.

Protest has played an important role alongside reforms in shaping the direction of Bulgarian politics at key moments before and after the elite-led removal of the communist regime in 1989. The first manifestation of this was the campaign that led to the resignation of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) government in 1997. These nationwide protests saw, “40 days of strikes, mass demonstrations, and round-the-clock student protests” and were centred on the failure of the government to introduce economic reforms and resolve issues of land restitution (Ganev, 1997, p. 125). More recently, protests in 2013–2014 saw the resignation of the Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) government and sustained pressure on its BSP successor. Considering the protest wave, Rone (2017, p. 159) notes that, “the framing of protesters’ identity was not static but dynamic ... in response to the opponents’ reactions.” This interpretation is supported by Krasteva (2016, p. 159) who argues, “the year of protests ... [marked] the transition from party politics to contestatory citizenship.” The result was the centrality of values in mobilising participants to present political demands (Krasteva, 2016). Another important point raised by Gueorguieva (2018, p. 59) is that, “participants in these ‘spontaneous’ mobilisations ... do not maintain links during latent periods when there is no mobilization. They are united by their negative reaction.” By contrast, actions by farmers were presented as non-political and focused much more on interests. Dinev (2020, p. 258) reinforces this interpretation, examining protest events from the period to argue that the, “lowest proportion of systematic contention is observed in the production and agricultural sector.” Rural protest participants have a greater ability to maintain links despite their marginal position due to their relatively small communities and lack of resources requiring cooperation (Dorondel & Șerban, 2019). Dinev (2020, p. 261) also notes that, “farmers ... demonstrate their grievances in the most disruptive way” of those engaging in protest. These differences reinforce the notion of rural protest as representing a distinct form of action.

Contentious politics and identity

Contentious politics features prominently among the range of potential mechanisms for groups to bring about or resist change and involves exercising agency by mobilising a sense of collective identity. Defining contentious politics, Tilly (2008, p. 5) argued that it:

involves interactions in which actors make claims bearing on someone else's interests, in which governments appear either as targets, initiators of claims, or third parties. Contentious politics thus bring together three familiar features of social life: contention, collective action, and politics.

The actions included under this banner vary considerably, with Tarrow (2011, p. 99) pointing to “three broad types of collective action – disruption, violence and contained behavior.” Central to such actions is a desire to present a claim concerning the rights or opportunities afforded to those taking part. Given the effort required to mobilise participants, Sewell (2001, p. 55) notes that it, “might also be defined as concerted social action that has the goal of overcoming deep rooted structural disadvantage.” The decision to engage in protest actions suggests that other, more established channels for seeking redress are closed, inaccessible, or ineffective. The confrontational character of protest actions means that participants draw boundaries that reinforce group solidarity and commitment (Halvorsen, 2015). As rural producers occupy a marginal position within society while also being able to call on a shared identity, it is apparent why a turn to contentious action may be seen as a viable option.

The physical environment features centrally in contentious politics, as actors aim to enrol settings that are meaningful to targets and observers to maximise their potential impact. Outlining the character of place, Cheng, Kruger, and Daniels (2003, p. 90) argue, “place is constructed – and continuously reconstructed – through social and political processes that assign meaning,” so actions that “seek to strategically manipulate, subvert and resignify places that symbolize priorities and imaginaries that they are contesting” (Leitner, Sheppard, & Sziarto, 2008, p. 161) can be impactful. In seeking to challenge place meanings, Endres and Senda-Cook (2011, p. 266) identify efforts involving: “(1) building on a pre-existing meaning of a place, (2) temporarily reconstructing the meaning of a place, and (3) repeated reconstructions that result in new place meanings.” Contentious actors move between these different approaches depending on the situation they are faced with and their available resources (Tilly, 2008). In a rural environment experiencing social and economic upheaval, place can serve as a point of stability, as rural dwellers seek to maintain practices and resist efforts to introduce change without consideration of their needs (Woods, 2003). Although rural producers are located within larger-scale networks, their local level actions can have an influence by contesting and attempting to shape the direction driven by actors at higher levels.

When considering the ability of protest events to challenge and reconstruct place meanings it is necessary to examine issues of space. Describing the relationship, Tuan (2001, p. 6) argues that, “if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause,” suggesting a mutually constitutive relationship. In an earlier examination of space, Tuan (1979, p. 389) noted, “the space that provides cues for our behaviour, varies with the individual and cultural group,” pointing to the relational nature of space meanings. This suggests that space can be seen as a conditioning feature, determining what actions are possible, as Sewell (2001, p. 55) reflects in the statement that, “spatial

agency ... [suggests] the ways that spatial constraints are turned to advantage in political and social structures.” Applying these insights to the rural space, they acknowledge potential limitations but also reinforce the idea that actions are able to use and work within these through the exercise of agency. In particular, the idea that space is shaped by social interactions points to the role of intangible features such as identity and tradition.

Faced with challenges to their way of life, rural communities have drawn on various sources to ensure their continued viability. Central is the ability to maintain a sense of shared identity. Outlining the characteristic of collective identity, Hunt and Benford (2004, p. 447) argue, “it is a cultural representation, a set of shared meanings that are produced and reproduced, negotiated and renegotiated, in the interactions of individuals embedded in their particular sociocultural contexts.” Klandermans (2004) further notes that collective identities are fluid, being called on and mobilised in response to threats to the interests of the group. Such interactions are more immediate in the rural space, due to the social proximity and relatively limited range of external influences. Addressing the notion of rural identity, Koleva (2013) points to the importance of agency exercised by rural residents in constructing their own identity, in contrast to that imposed from outside (see also Klandermans, Sabucedo, Rodriguez, & De Weerd, 2002). Rather than being passive recipients, rural dwellers manage change “through the continuous and everyday strategic and tactical manoeuvring that explores the limits of the possible” (Bennike et al., 2020, p. 41). Recognition of shared identity therefore becomes an important element in determining the likelihood of individuals resisting or advocating for change. The remainder of this article examines patterns of protest by rural producers, highlighting the extent of such events and how these feed into and reflect issues of identity in the rural space.

Methods

Acts of protest are temporary in nature, representing a collective outburst that generally lasts for a relatively limited period of time, determined by resources and restrictions, or a sense of having achieved the goal. Unless the researcher is present, an approach is required that is able to identify and characterise protest events after they have happened. This article draws on a catalogue of protest events in Bulgaria over the 2000–2019 period in the media. Recording detail on events in this way enables a protest event analysis (PEA) that can be used to reconstruct the pattern of past events, issues, and actors involved. Outlining the benefit of PEA, Koopmans and Rucht (2002, p. 231) argue that the method,

allows for quantification of many properties of protest, such as frequency, timing and duration, location, claims, size, forms, carriers, and targets, as well as immediate consequences and reactions (e.g. police intervention, damage, counterprotests).

The ability of such an analysis to capture this breadth of characteristics is dependent on the source material. This is potentially heightened when considering actions by groups that are physically remote from population centres, as is the case with rural protest events. In response to this challenge, Rootes (2003) notes that adopting a systematic approach to media sources can still enable the researcher to construct a reasonable

picture of past events. A further challenge involves defining what constitutes a protest event, the object of study. Drawing on Tilly (2005, p. 62), the analysis in this article focuses “on moments in which people gathered to make visible, public claims.” The representation of such events in the media varies considerably, depending on their newsworthiness, making it essential to embed a series of events in their contemporaneous and historic context to draw out their sociological relevance.

An important limitation of PEA is that it is not able to capture the richness of material that can be gathered from methods involving direct observation of or participation in the events being described. It also lacks the nuance that can be achieved in an interview study where the motivations and decisions of actors can be probed in depth. As noted, the temporally limited and in the case of rural actors, geographically dispersed, nature of protest makes it difficult to examine a range of protest events using such methods. The adoption of PEA enables the examination of a broader range of events in search of common patterns, which can then be further refined through closer case-study focused projects (Dorondel & Şerban, 2019). In addition, a close reading of news stories examining past protest events can draw out the voices of participants or their representatives, giving some sense of the richness of the claims being presented.

The data used to construct the event catalogue were drawn from a search of the electronic archive of the Bulgarian News Agency (BTA). Dinev (2022, p. 9) notes that the focus on the “international section of the Bulgarian Press Agency” results in a slightly lower number of events being captured. Nevertheless, the method still captures a range of events. The BTA was selected as it has been in operation since 1898 and is the national newswire for Bulgaria, giving it the responsibility to report events from around the country (BTA, n.d.). The BTA also carries brief summaries of the major newspapers, broadening the range of events covered and partially mitigating the potential limitations of relying on one source. Presentation of news events is shaped by reporting practices and editorial policies (Earl, Martin, McCarthy, & Soule, 2004), meaning that examining one source can provide a degree of internal consistency. The author gathered data from BTA using Factiva to identify events between 1 January 2000 and 31 December 2019. The search term “protest*” was used to return the highest possible number of events and minimising the chances of overlooking events (Strawn, 2010). The search returned 7538 stories, yielding 1264 unique events. These events were then examined to identify a subset of events with claims focused on rural production, leaving a final dataset of 140 unique events. The dataset is available at <https://doi.org/10.15124/10d9171d-4371-4a76-af15-a2cc484ad984>. The process of identifying and coding events involved two stages. First, the title and content of each story identified those that described a protest event was read. Second, each story identified was read and coded by the author, recording details on location, issue, actions (up to four per event), participants, and a brief description. The catalogue was then analysed to draw out patterns across the protest events, focusing on variation in setting, issue, and actions. The findings of this analysis are presented in the next section.

Findings

This section examines the range and character of protest events involving rural producers over the 2000–2019 period. Events reported in this section are derived from sampled

Bulgarian News Agency stories. Examining protest events in a systematic manner enables identification of targets, actions, distribution, and claims being presented (Tilly, 2008). The cross-sectional character of the data means that campaigns are more challenging to discern but this reflects the way in which such actions are recorded and presented to the public. Figure 1 shows the number of protest events involving rural producers and a categorisation of the claims being presented. This shows a shift from events focused on prices received for produce to claims addressing subsidies and regulation. Price-based claims addressed the state, such as when wheat farmers in July 2002 called for “protective prices” stressing, “this is not an anti-government protest. We have called for a sensible state policy on farming for 12 years.” Following Bulgaria’s accession to the EU in 2007 this shifted to demands for payment of subsidies, as in July and August 2008 when stockbreeders from Kurdjali province protested unpaid EU subsidies for pastures. The fall in the relatively small number of claims concerning unpaid goods and the growth in claims around regulation suggest further change in the agricultural sector, potentially towards a more stable sector and economic environment.

The majority of claims addressed financial issues revealed production is based on the certainty of sufficient economic reward. Within these claims, issues of identity also featured as a secondary theme by how claims concerning prices and subsidies were presented in terms of identity and lifestyle. This was captured in slogans such as “Don’t mock our work” and “We are shepherds, but not sheep” pointing to the sense that while rural producers may be marginal, they can’t be dismissed. As noted by Medarov (2013), the connection of people to the countryside means that there is a recognition of the role of rurality in society. These identity claims were also present on the wider scale in relation to subsidies, as claims addressing this issue had a secondary demand targeting (directly and indirectly) the EU calling for equal treatment with Western European producers. This was apparent when tobacco and vegetable farmers blocked the Romanian border crossing at Rousse by spilling produce on the road over “unfair treatment by the EU.” Economic claims were embedded in wider social considerations, with

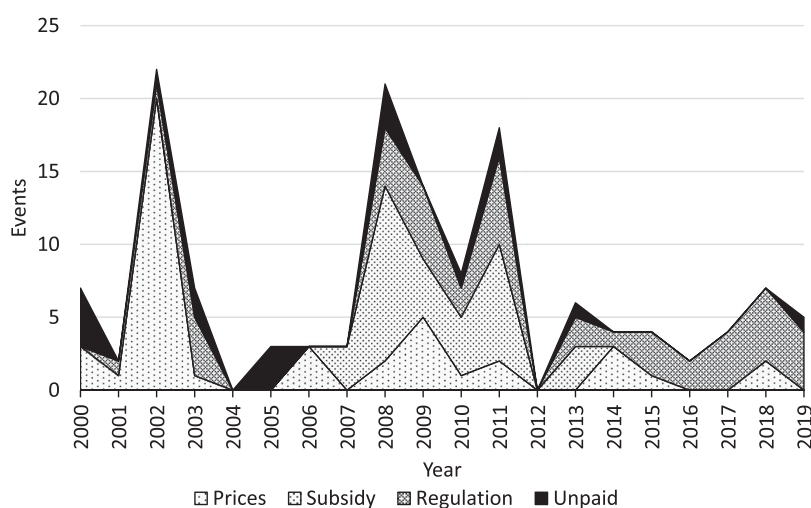


Figure 1. Protests by issue category.

producers in this case aiming to create a sense of common identity and treatment with their European counterparts.

The geography of the protest events also helped illuminate the nature of the actions undertaken by producers. Figure 2 maps the number of protest events by municipality (*obshtina*). The relatively low number (35) of events taking place in the capital Sofia, making up a quarter of the total events, contrasts with data on all protest events recorded over the 2010–2016 period where almost 60 percent of events took place in the capital (O'Brien, 2019). Events in Sofia tended to represent the culmination of actions that had built previously in the regions, as association bodies sought to influence the Ministry of Agriculture or the government. The remainder of events took place closer to the communities associated with production. Many events recorded took place on or alongside roads (49) and border crossings (13), enabling the protests to ensure visibility and potentially appeal to the local community while generating wider attention. Within these events, 48 involved actions to block roads, forcing a direct response from local authorities. An example of this tactic was seen in the campaign over potential cuts to subsidies by grain farmers in November and December, 2011, where farm machinery was driven on to and blocked roads in different parts of the country, including the Danube border crossing with Romania at Rousse eventually culminating in protests in Sofia demanding a meeting with the Prime Minister in December. Similarly, in February 2009, tobacco producers blocked the border crossing with Greece over losses caused by customs delays.

The settings for the remainder of the protest events were divided between urban (46), official building (26), and other (4). This distribution suggests the importance of presenting claims to an audience, both the target of the claim and the producers' wider

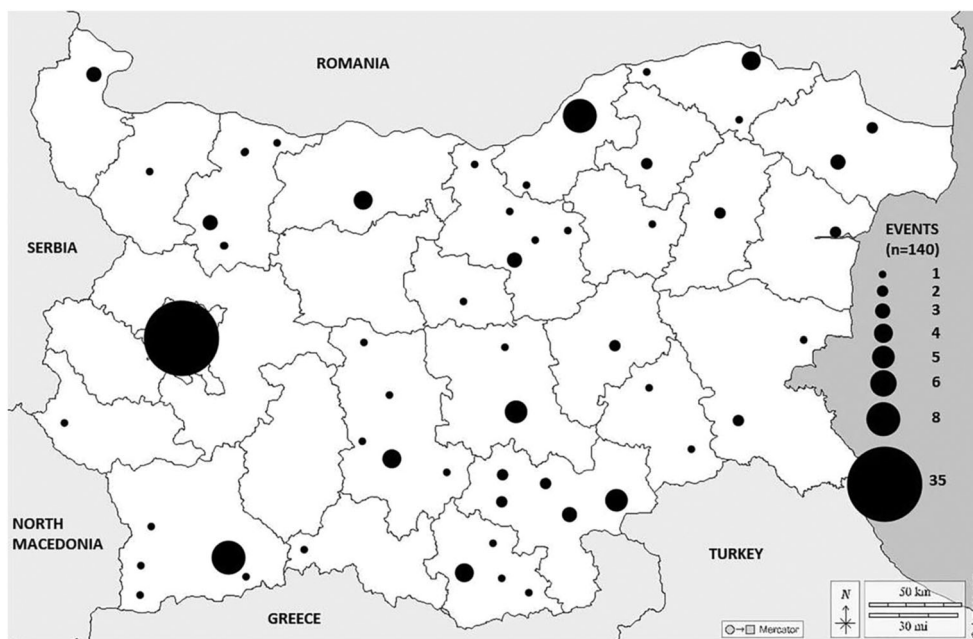


Figure 2. Protests by municipality. Base map source: d-maps.com. https://d-maps.com/carte.php?num_car=5666&lang=en.

community. None of the recorded events took place at the site of production (i.e. farm), reinforcing the need for visibility and presence. By targeting urban settings (city, town, village), the protesters were potentially more able to make their claims visible and ensure media coverage. These events often involved a range of distinct actions intended at presenting claims and demonstrating discontent. This is seen in an August 2002, event in Polski Trumbesh, which involved a rally of 300 participants organised by BANU calling for minimum milk prices followed by the pouring of milk in the town square. By contrast, the events that took place at official buildings were primarily concentrated in Sofia, focusing on the Ministry of Agriculture and the Council of Ministers. Actions at these locations were similar to those seen in other events, such as burning tobacco bales, spilling goats milk, and gathering farm vehicles.

Turning to the products that animated the protest events, it is possible to identify the occurrence of campaigns and consider how these related to changes in claims. [Figure 3](#) charts number of events involving members of the main producer groups. Producers of crops such as grain, roses, fruit (38) and tobacco (30) featured most commonly across the period. The focus of actions by these producers was primarily on prices and delayed payments, although tobacco producers were also active around the need to equalise subsidies from 2008. By contrast, the highest number of events involving livestock (25) and dairy (23) producers were concentrated in the period following Bulgaria's EU accession, focusing on subsidies and latterly on compensation for animal culls resulting from biosecurity efforts. Protest events involving miscellaneous producers such as truffle hunters and beekeepers (23) were also concerned with prices paid for produce before shifting to focus more on issues of biosecurity regulation and neonicotinoids later in the period. The key targets of all producer types were the Ministry of Agriculture (63) and other parts of government (49), with business (7) and the EU (3) featuring much less frequently. The focus on the state reflects the power these institutions have in shaping the economic viability and stability of such sectors and their communities, with the Ministry of Agriculture being the key regulator of the sector.

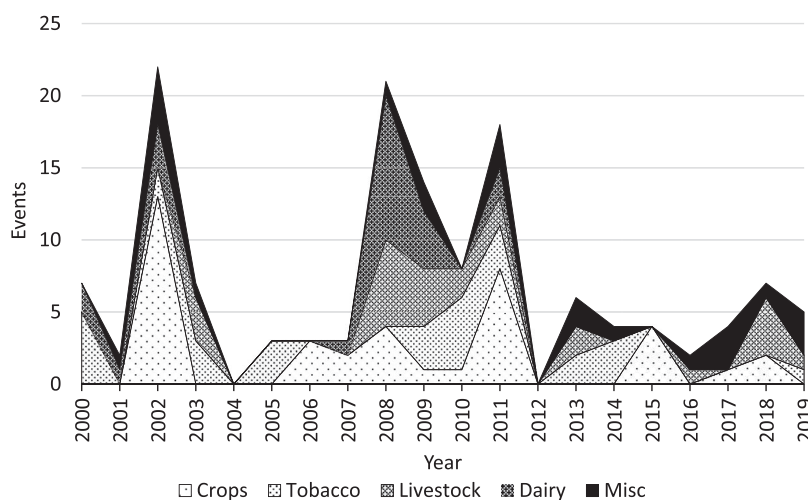


Figure 3. Protest by producer type.

Finally, the range of actions undertaken across the events under examination was explored. The dataset contained up to four distinct actions per event. For example, a gathering of 500 dairy farmers at Shipka Pass in Gabrovo carrying cowbells, flags, placards blocked the road by pouring milk, leading to clashes with police was recorded as “gather,” “obstruct,” “display,” and “perform.” To track change across the period, individual actions were aggregated into the categories of “Appeal,” “Demonstrational,” “Confrontational,” and “Violent.” Figure 4 presents this summary data, counting each event that has an action falling into the broader categories (to avoid overcounting). Demonstrational (gather, display, march, perform, costume, rally, meet, proceed) actions dominated. One explanatory reason may be that the aim of a protest event is to demonstrate what Tilly (2008) called WUNC – worthiness, unity, numbers, commitment. Events involving appeal (address, present) featured less frequently than confrontational (obstruct, chant, occupy, enter) actions. This represents the degree of effort required to mobilise a group for action, coupled with limited opportunities to present demands directly to the targets of claims in such geographically dispersed settings (Figure 2). Despite the high proportion of confrontational events, only one event saw violence (attack, damage), involving sheep breeders breaking the window of the Kardzhali office of the Regional Directorate of Agriculture and Forestry over unpaid subsidies in July 2008.

These data capture variations in the level of action undertaken by different producer groups. Financial considerations generated the most events, with Bulgaria’s accession to the EU leading to a change in the focus of this claim and the most prominent producer groups. The subsequent shift towards issues of regulation, concerning biosecurity controls (i.e. around African Swine Fever) and pesticides (neonicotinoids), was small, but may suggest a broader change. Geography featured (Figure 2) in the protest events captured, as most occurred closer to sites of production while also targeting strategically important sites such as roads and border crossings. Another feature of the data is the role of producer associations, such as the National Association of Tobacco Growers or the Bulgarian Union of Sheep and Goat Breeders, in mobilising participants, pointing

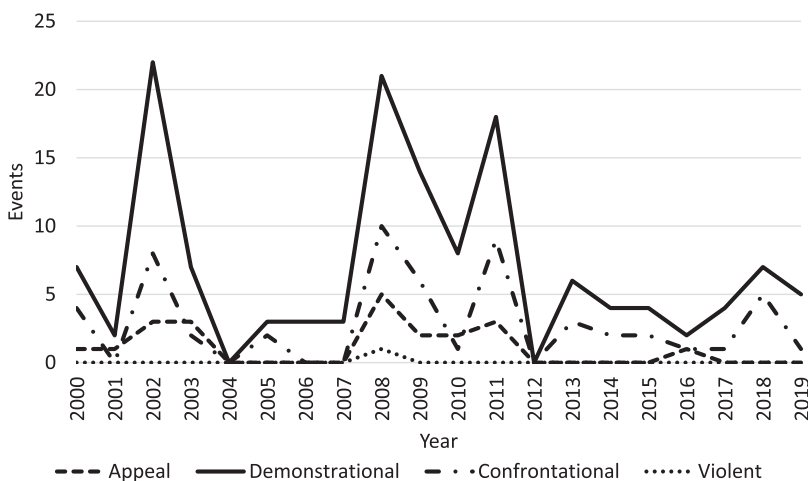


Figure 4. Frequency of action type.

to the role that the presentation of shared identity played in protest events. To draw out the relevance and deeper meaning of the event data, it is necessary to consider how the protest events examined can be interpreted through a consideration of rural identity and production.

Discussion and conclusions

This article adds to understandings of rural contention by examining in some detail the forms of protest undertaken by rural producers in Bulgaria. By examining such events sociologically, by conducting a systematic media analysis, the article has drawn out the repertoires and claims at stake. Central to the protest events captured was a sense that the state was not fulfilling its role as guarantor. This echoes Thompson's (1971, p. 79) classic formulation of a social contract:

grounded upon a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community, which, taken together, can be said to constitute the moral economy of the poor.

Rather than ensuring the viability of rural production, many claims pointed to an abdication by the state, leading producers to contentious actions as a last resort. This was clearly illustrated in two events in 2002 that questioned the viability of Bulgarian agriculture. In July 2002, the Independent Association of Milk Producers in Yambol circulated an obituary for Bulgarian agriculture (BTA, 2002a). This was followed in August by a protest near Krousheto where 200 farmers held a short rally that ended with people handing out packets of seeds of wheat as a requiem for Bulgarian agriculture (BTA, 2002b). The message being presented here and at other similar events was that the claims being presented went beyond immediately apparent issues to suggest that a way of life was under threat. The accelerating pace of rural depopulation and consolidation of land holdings can be seen as tangible representations of this challenge.

Embedded within the protest events recorded were themes related to identity. The data shows that issues of prices, subsidies, and regulation dominated as the explicit claims being presented. The material focus of these claims was embedded in wider considerations around protection of the rural way of life. The communist regime had attempted to weaken ties to tradition through processes of forced collectivisation but as has been seen in other cases, traditional practices can serve as a powerful mobilising force (O'Brien & Crețan, 2019). Identity was also a powerful tool in mobilising producers and presenting their claims as just, enabling them to identify an other against which to mobilise support. The State as the main target of protests occupied a complicated position, being presented as unrepresentative and uncaring at times and as weak and incapable at others. In doing so, protesters sought to craft narratives that would appeal to observers, where rural producers were seen as the backbone of the country, drawing on ideas of tradition and connection to the land (Koleva, 2013). Appeals to identity were also apparent in representation of producers in the face of external challenges. Faced with potential cuts to subsidies in 2014, grain producers threatened a "Greek strike" (BTA, 2013), presenting an image of reasonableness in comparison to their southern counterparts. At other times, producers made appeals that sought to construct an identity that was equal to rural producers in other parts of the EU.

Decisions to engage in direct action are conditioned by a broad range of social and contextual factors, which also determine what tactics are available. As Nejad (2016) has argued, the liminal nature of protest performances means they involve the recreation of rituals, emphasising the importance of particular sites and past events. Spatial constraints and opportunities played a central role in shaping the overall protest pattern in several ways. Rural producers by their nature tend to be more distant from population centres, requiring them to adopt actions that are able to capitalise on the opportunities available. As Figure 2 showed, most events took place away from Sofia and other major urban centres. Part of this may be linked to the desire to present claims close to the impacted communities, as a way of generating support. It may also highlight the relatively marginal nature of the population and the limited access to resources necessary to stage such actions. The large share of events taking place at roads and border crossings illustrates the way in which such actors can repurpose particular places. The act of obstructing (or threatening to obstruct) a road causes considerable upheaval, turning it into a space in which the claims being presented cannot be ignored.

The range of claims and actors involved in the protest events covered in this article was diverse. The more localised character of the actions points to the importance of place, while also demonstrating the ability of producers to act on a national scale, organising simultaneous actions in various settings by drawing on a shared sense of grievance to mobilise participants. This is increasingly important in the contemporary world, reflecting Argent's (2011, p. 188) argument that:

rural industries, land uses and communities are now firmly bound up within an expanding and overlapping mesh of networks governing their activities from a variety of scales, from the local through to the global.

This layering is apparent in the way in which producers presented claims to the government and EU over their treatment, particularly calling for equal treatment with producers in other European states or calling on the Bulgarian government to represent their interests at the European level. The growth of multi-layered relations presents a further challenge for rural producers, as such a move is likely to involve change in forms of production and further uncertainty and potential resistance, as regulations from the European level continue to be adopted. Roche and Argent (2015, p. 630) point to the difficulty in introducing change, arguing that "national policymakers, regional and local scale farm advisers and farmers themselves [can be] cognitively 'locked-in'," making it difficult to overcome established identities and patterns of behaviour. Operating in this multi-scalar environment presents further challenges to rural communities, while also reinforcing the importance of identity in ensuring claims remain grounded in the interests of these communities.

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