

Agriculture today is above all labor, qualification, entrepreneurship, resourcefulness, and half a pinch of luck

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Дата: 21.03.2018 Брой: 3/2018



Conversation of Emil Ivanov with Nedelcho Popov, Chair of the Agricultural Cooperative „Tundzha 94“ in the village of Panicherevo, Stara Zagora Region

Mr. Popov, you have been Chair of the agricultural cooperative „Tundzha 94“ in the village of Panicherevo for twenty years. This is an indication, a sign, that the cooperative members trust your managerial skills and abilities. What is the production profile of „Tundzha 94“?

The village of Panicherevo has 9,500 decares of arable land. The agricultural cooperative manages nearly 5,500 decares. The structure of our production is multifunctional. On 4,000 decares we grow traditional field crops; on the other 1,430 decares we have positioned our strategic line of activity – oil-bearing roses on 40 decares, lavender on 520 decares, vineyards on 650 decares and blue plums on 220 decares.

The strategic line of activity of „Tundzha 94“ requires predominantly manual labour. How have you addressed this key problem?

The answer is very short: we also rely on the Roma population.

This is an unconventional way to overcome the labour deficit in agricultural regions. Do you mean to say that you have achieved social integration of this population?

Panicherevo has its own model of interethnic coexistence, established before 1989. Remarkably, throughout all the years of the transition we have managed to preserve it to a large extent. Many Roma today are agricultural workers; they work diligently and correctly. Some of them got burned by migrant work across Europe and became convinced that Bulgaria is a good place for those who work! And here you can live more or less normally, without being afraid of ruthless exploitation, of „having your skin flayed“...

You mentioned that lavender is one of your priority lines of activity. It is a relatively easy agricultural crop from the point of view of plant protection and mechanisation. How is it in your case?

Our lavender is certified as an organically grown crop. We have a ten-year contract with the Bulgarian subsidiary of the French company „Bioland“ for the purchase of the entire harvest. We have achieved the maximum level of trust and security both on the part of our control institutions and on the part of our commercial partners. In this case I must make a very important addition. We harvest the crop by hand, not only because the quality is better preserved, but also because there are many stones in our fields and mechanised harvesting is extremely problematic.

And how are things in the vineyards?

The varietal structure is interesting from the point of view of high-quality wine production – along with Merlot and Pamid we grow Aligoté and Muscat Ottonel. Thank God, after many vicissitudes we managed to find reliable commercial partners – the wine cellars in Pomorie, Blagoevgrad and Ruse. They became convinced of the quality of our production and included us in the list of their valuable suppliers.

What are the horizon and prospects of agriculture under the „Tundzha 94“ brand?

Our investment strategy is perfectly clear. Gradual expansion, renewal and modernisation of the strategic production – roses, lavender, vineyards and fruit growing. However, there is legal uncertainty regarding the implementation of this profitable move. These agricultural crops are perennial and every undertaking in this direction carries a risk defined by the problem of land ownership. Many of the owners of this land, as soon as they see that we are investing capital resources in their real property, leave the cooperative and become real owners. In this respect the Bulgarian legal framework is imperfect; it has „loopholes“ through which our investment enthusiasm drains away.

Since we have raised the issue of increasing intensity, plant protection, fertilisation and breeding are tools for achieving production sustainability, for increasing and stabilising yields. How does „Tundzha 94“ implement this large-scale project?

„Tundzha 94“ is a client of the Sliven-based company „Viola“ JSC, a distributor of all leading companies for agrochemicals, fertilisers and seeds. And this is a great privilege for making an informed choice. This company, apart from being our exclusive supplier, provides us with highly authoritative agronomic expertise. The specialists of „Viola“ JSC know in detail every corner of our fields. They offer quick solutions and even quicker actions! Do you know how to maintain high fertility in vineyards and plum orchards aged 35–40 years? With the professional competence, involvement and support of „Viola“ JSC! Because efforts mean nothing without results. „Tundzha 94“ can take pride in the results of its work. But they have been achieved also thanks to the special format of our cooperation with „Viola“ JSC.

I will state, since you are giving me a platform, that our partnership with „Viola“ JSC is without alternative, it has withstood the test over the years, it has stood the test of time, under conditions of more than one or two extreme situations. Put another way: our partnership with „Viola“ JSC is good fortune, a tremendous opportunity. Business is a sequence of choices for which you must later bear responsibility. I, in my capacity as Chair of the agricultural cooperative „Tundzha 94“, bear full responsibility for our joint successful activity with „Viola“ JSC!

What is the most difficult professional choice of Nedelcho Popov?

There is no difficult choice, as long as you want to work. I am not ashamed to work together with Roma. In the field we are equal!

What would make you happiest?

To see more and more people in the fields. Bulgarian agriculture is not a lost cause, provided there is a far-sighted state policy.

Profile: Nedelcho Popov was born on 30.10.1955 in the village of Panicherevo. He is married and has two children. By education he is a veterinary technician.