

Potatoes – a model for endlessly long reproduction of defects

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There exists a very persistent mythologeme – that potato production is by definition in decline! The freefall mode, which has lasted nearly a quarter of a century, seems endless, expectations for any change are more than slim, and the trend shows consistently negative parameters. To this day, the cementing of old negative tendencies continues, and the problems are multiplying.

This is about a real failure of an entire sector, which, however you look at it, has its own relevant place and significance in agriculture and the food chain. The case takes on an even more sorrowful profile if one considers the fact that the terroir of our main "potato-growing" regions – Samokov, Smolyan, Pirdop, Pernik – in many respects surpasses not just one or two very successful Eastern and Western European destinations.

In Bulgaria, the areas occupied by potatoes in recent years have decreased to about 120,000 decares, with an average yield of 1300–1500 kg/decare. The unsatisfactory yield level, one of the lowest in Europe, is the result of a complex of conditions and reasons for non-compliance with the basic elements of cultivation technology for consumption and seed potatoes, a disrupted system of variety maintenance and seed production, the use of low-quality planting material, a high infectious background in the country, a low level of the material and technical base, a lack of harvesting machinery in mountainous regions, a lack of modern potato storage facilities, warehouses, etc. These reasons lead to the production of expensive, low-quality planting material, which provokes an increase in imports. The large annual imports, on one hand, cause the emergence of many new diseases and pests, and on the other – create opportunities for instability and dependence.

Who are the culprits for this shocking, apocalyptic picture? Of course, we are far from the thought and the competence to make a cross-section of the problem and point out in detail the guilt of the specific institutions, whose demonstrations of apathy, indifference, boredom, and inadequacy are at the root of this dramatic collapse. Some analysts on the topic claim that the lack of technological information among producers is one of the key reasons for the galloping disarray. Today in agriculture, much is said and written about every producer's right to an informed choice, regardless of their scale. In such a case, what are the mechanisms, engineering, and factors that should position a large-scale, objective, specific, and up-to-date information environment? These are the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, the Agricultural Academy, the National Agricultural Advisory Service, the Potato Producers Association, and the offices of multinational agrochemical and seed companies. Following the rules and logic, one could say that the state – in the person of the MAF – exhausted its enthusiasm and energy with settling the painful issue – increasing subsidies for vegetable producers, including potato producers, during the new programming period 2014–2020, within the EU. But this is far from enough! Not least because potato production in Bulgaria is concentrated mainly in mountainous and semi-mountainous regions, it is predominantly small-scale, with its specific characteristics, and needs a wide-ranging scheme of protections, regulatory mechanisms, and information sources. The said state (we mean the MAF) has no national concept for the development of the sub-sector in the short and medium term, let alone any idea for its information service. This task has been delegated to the lower level – the Agricultural Academy and the Agricultural Advisory Agency. But they, as is known, are in an indefinite period of reformation. And for the moment, they cannot engage in training and information services. The more observant will notice that the leadership of the Potato Producers Association has a conformist attitude. It tries very hard to inform its more primary members – mostly large farmers – on how to more easily and quickly obtain the benefits of EU funding. And perhaps that is why it doesn't have much time left for "side" activities... For multinational companies, potato production in Bulgaria is not a priority business, and they invest very modest resources in the information direction. For which, however, they cannot be blamed in any way.

One way or another, it is unthinkable for the Brownian motion of potato production to continue forever! If you want to be successful, if you want to win and move forward, you cannot go with the

flow. For the necessary transformation, modernization, and intensification to happen, the attitude towards information provision must first change. In this case, the Agricultural Academy is that institution which should be responsible for structuring a working information pool for all of agriculture, as well as for potato production. We are talking about policy, administrative capacity, scientific potential.

Taking into account the forecast for an expected increased interest in potato production in our country, driven by economic interest – the increase in subsidies, the journal "Plant Protection" invited leading scientific experts to inform readers on key issues of the crop's cultivation technology – varieties, plant protection, and fertilization.