

Visiting Partners from the Balkan Region

Author: Benjamin Hennchen
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In my first field trip for the TLFC project, I visited the beautiful regions of southern Serbia and Lake Ohrid in North Macedonia. As part of our case study, I planned to meet with two organizations working together with BioBalkan. BioBalkan represents an encouraging initiative that focuses on importing and selling fair priced and organic food from the Balkan regions. I personally appreciate their connections to these regions which are often not recognized enough for their vast organic agricultural potential and the role they can play for integrating quality, sustainability and fairness in the European food market.

I was genuinely eager to begin my journey, flying from Berlin to Belgrade, and then continuing by bus to the city of Niš, Serbia. On my bus ride, which is known to be the best way to travel through this country, I enjoyed watching the beautiful landscape, the many forests we passed, and the hilly terrain from my window seat.



Early the next morning, I met with an interpreter from Novi Sad, and together we visited the social enterprise, Radanska Ruža, located in the small town of Lebane. On site, we were greeted warmly and offered food and drinks showing the kind of exceptional hospitality I had also experienced on previous visits to the Balkan regions.

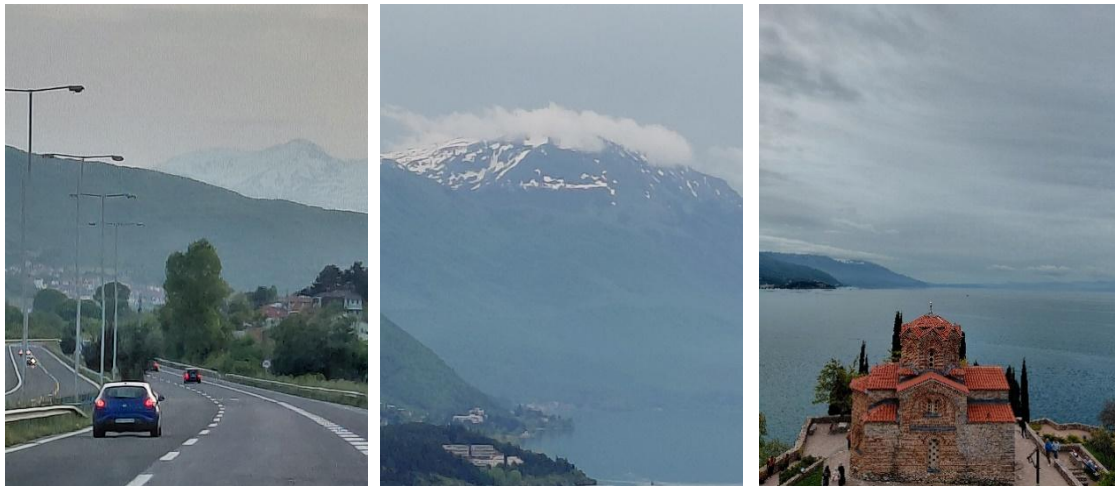
Radanska Ruža is quite a unique initiative in itself: One thing that stands out is that the entire production is carried out by women. The enterprise receives vegetables such as bell peppers and tomatoes but also various fruits from regional small-scale farmers, and produce traditional Balkan Ajvar, jams and other savory spreads. Using large pots and old-fashioned wooden stoves, I could observe how the women smoke and cook the ingredients slowly to enhance flavors and preserve the authentic taste of their products.

After talking to the managers, Ms. Pavlovic and Mr. Stozic, as well as to several of the women working at Radanska Ruža, I came to understand their commitment to provide an appreciative working atmosphere and to create economic impact for the benefit of the region and reinforce community cohesion in the surrounding villages. At this point I also need to express my gratitude for Mr. Schett and his fabulous translation, which instantly established a trusting connection and greatly helped me to understand the perspectives of our interview partners.



The next day, I was already on my way to Struga which is near the famous Lake Ohrid. The bus I took from Serbia had to cross the border, which added two extra hours due to the passport control. As a result, my planned arrival in Skopje, the capital city of North Macedonia, was significantly delayed.

I was lucky, however, that my contact person from Struga, Mr. Nelkoski, was also in Skopje at that time attending a conference and he offered to drive me the remaining 300 kilometers to the lake with his car. From his car's passenger seat, I saw why Macedonia is considered to be one of the most mountainous countries in Europe.



In Struga, the next morning, I could speak with Mr. Nelkoski about his company Nelkoski Organic Food. They specialized in processing, packaging, and selling organic hazelnuts for national and international markets, working together with a farming cooperative and using nuts sourced exclusively from Macedonia. His idea is to provide high quality hazelnuts produced under organic and ethical conditions as an alternative to the hazelnut supply currently dominated by Turkey.

During an interview with a farmer from the cooperative, I learned that hazelnut farming is exceptionally demanding, particularly during harvest season, yet profoundly rewarding when one sees the fruits of their labor. What I also learned during my visit to the NELKOSKI factory was that advanced machinery is essential for processing hazelnuts on a large scale. Automatic

sorting by size, peeling, roasting, distribution, and packaging are all steps that require technological assistance. On Saturday, we drove together to the 'Booster Week in Bitola,' an event designed to bring students from Switzerland and Macedonia together with entrepreneurs from small and medium-sized enterprises. In one of their presentations, the students showcased marketing strategies they had developed for NELKOSKI to expand into new markets with their hazelnut cream products, such as the hotel sector. I tried them, and yes, they taste excellent.



Even though not everything worked out for me as planned, people I met along my way have been very supportive, and experiencing that makes every journey worthwhile. This trip gave me a much better understanding of the initiatives and the people, how they work, what they stand for and the challenges that are ahead of them. I truly enjoyed my time there and would like to thank everyone (bigtime) who made this trip possible for me and the entire TLFC project!