

# TRADITIONAL FOOD PRODUCTS IN BULGARIA

Designation and Market Potential

BY MIROSLAVA DIMITROVA PH.D



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# Traditional Food Products in Bulgaria



## Designation and Market Potential

**By Miroslava Dimitrova, Ph.D**

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**Traditional Products in Bulgaria, Designation and Market Potential** is a textbook designed to provide a theoretical foundation and practical guidelines for understanding and implementing a system of protected GIs (Geographical Identifications) and TSGs (Traditional Specialties Guaranteed) for a number of Bulgarian foods and agricultural products. The book outlines some of the foods, products, and dishes bearing GI or TSG labels, and those which have the potential for acquiring this recognition based on their uniqueness, high quality, and specific features. This book can be used as an educational resource for students majoring in Food, Agriculture, Tourism, and Hospitality, and for anyone with an interest in the subject. It could also be used as a reference source in policy making and strategic planning.



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ex-ante screening of applications, GI-certified products are subject to inspection by an independent inspection body that checks for compliance of the GI-certified product with the product specifications. These ex post inspections are meant to ensure the products labeled as GIs, indeed possess the characteristics stated in the specifications.

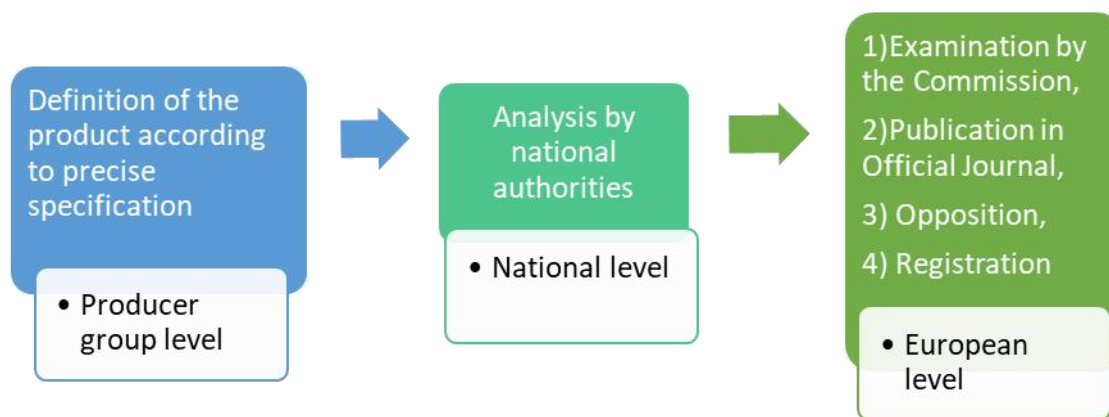
In addition, all producers within the GI area who comply with the product specifications are entitled to use the GI name to label their products. Both these conditions are meant to avoid obstacles to the functioning of the single market and the creation of monopolistic power from the side of the GI producers. Such obstacles would limit market efficiency and welfare.

The producer groups play a key role in the GI application phase. Additionally, they are in charge of promotion activities. They are also responsible for monitoring the use of the GI name and can take actions to ensure legal protection. Nevertheless, the GI regulation does not give producer organizations any power to control the supply of the GI product nor the ability to exclude any producers from GI certifying their product.

The role assigned by the regulation to producer groups is important for several reasons: It provides an institutional framework for joint actions favoring economies of scale and facilitating the entry of small farmers into the GI market while at the same time preventing producer associations from gaining market power by controlling the supply of GIs. Finally, GI regulation calls for the legal protection of GIs. This means that Member States must be proactive in protecting GIs and must initiate investigations in cases of presumed infringement and misuse.

In **Bulgaria**, the GI and TSG schemes are controlled by the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forestry (MAFF) which adopts the EU policy and legislation. The Ministry is also the body entitled to register and monitor the GIs at the national level. The application process is as follows: Group of producers submits a set of application documents. After the MAFF's approval is obtained, the application package is forwarded to the European Commission where the GI is enlisted in the EC journal of the identifications. The procedure usually lasts up to six months. There is a two months period of opposition and after that, the GI is officially registered.

Figure 1: Application procedure for PDO, PDI, and TSG



The Bulgarian legislation concerning GIs and TSGs adopts the respective legal documents issued by the EC. Some of the documents on the national level include:

- ✓ Ordinance № 6 of 5 May 2011 on the specific requirements for exercising official control over the use of protected geographical indications and foods of a traditionally specific nature
- ✓ Ordinance № 5 of 13 August 2019 on the preparation and submission of requests to the European Commission on agricultural products and foodstuffs with protected geographical indications and traditional specific character
- ✓ Ordinance № 4 of 28 May 2019 on the terms and conditions for the use of the optional quality term “mountain product” and for the control over its use. (promulgated SG, issue 45/2019)
- ✓ Law on the implementation of the Common Organization of Agricultural Markets of the EU
- ✓ EC guide for applicants for registration of PDOs and PGIs - preparation of the single document
- ✓ Green Paper on agricultural product quality: product standards, agricultural production requirements, and quality schemes

## 2. Country Profile: Bulgaria

### 2.1. *An overview of the physical and demographic aspects of the eligible area*

**Bulgaria** occupies the eastern portion of the Balkan Peninsula in South-eastern Europe. Situated on the crossroad between West and East and founded in the 7th century, Bulgaria is one of the oldest states on the European continent with a turbulent past and strategic

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## 2.2. *The production system*

### Agricultural production

#### **Agriculture**

Agriculture has always been a historically important sector of the Bulgarian economy. Just a few decades ago, a large share of the population was involved in some type of agricultural activity, farming, or husbandry. During the communist regime, the land was nationalized and consolidated into larger state-owned agro-industrial complexes which took advantage of integrated systems of automation, cultivation, and supply. In 1990 the government lifted restrictions on private farming, and almost all agricultural land was restored to private ownership while loans for the establishment of small farms and food-processing facilities were made available.

Bulgaria enjoys excellent natural conditions for developing the agriculture and forestry sector. Cultivated agricultural land occupies about 4.9 million hectares or 44% of the total territory of the country (IBG, 2019). The favorable climate for crop production and the availability of agricultural land has resulted in well-developed plant growing and animal breeding.

Unfortunately, with the progressive urbanization of the country, the Agriculture became less and less popular as a career choice and occupation of the young generation. Today, Agriculture accounts for less than one-tenth of the national gross domestic product and the forecasts predict an even further decrease in this share (Ivanov et al, 2019)

The main competitive advantages of the Bulgarian Agri sector are:

- ✓ Favorable natural conditions for the cultivation of a wide variety of crops, fruits, and vegetables
- ✓ The farming land is roughly 50% of the territory of the country
- ✓ Large diversity of soils, the majority of which are fertile, clean, and unpolluted
- ✓ Most of the production is organic (GMOs are banned)
- ✓ High health and environmental protection standards that guarantees the quality of the Bulgarian food products
- ✓ Availability of EU-funded programs in the sector as an incentive for growth of investment in the agricultural business
- ✓ Strong traditions in farming and husbandry

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### **3. Panoramic view of typical regional products: brands, certifications, traditional cooking recipes**

#### *3.1. Traditional products of the eligible area*

##### Agriproducts produced in North East and South East regions

The North East planning region embodies the biggest share of the arable land of the country. The most developed production here is of crops and cereal. Wheat, corn, and sunflower seeds are the main agri-cultures. In the western part (Targovishte and Svishtov regions) vineyards and orchards (mostly plums and apricots) are also cultivated.

The South East region, due to the warmer climate is famous for its vineyards, orchards, and vegetable gardens. Here grows one-third of all the grapes in the country. The main fruits are peaches, cherries, and apples, while the vegetables are mostly represented by onions, tomatoes, and cucumbers. This region encompasses several environmentally clean areas near the East Stara Planina and Strandja, which makes it particularly suitable for organic plant growing and bio-animal breeding.

Some of the typical products for the North East and South East regions are:

#### **Shablenska kapia (red sweet pepper)**

Shablenska kapia is a red sweet pepper, traditionally cultivated in the North East region. The pepper is usually big, fleshy, with a high sugar content and a distinctive aroma, which is mostly released when grilled or roasted. In addition, it is high in Vitamin C, fibers, and antioxidants.



#### **Silistrenska kompotna kaisia (apricot)**

This sour-sweet apricot is of medium size (50-55 g.), egg-shaped, and of a dark orange color with red blushes on the sides. The fruit is easily pitted and fleshy, which makes it particularly suitable for canning and compotes (from where the name is derived). The towns of Silistra

and Tutrakan are famous for their apricot orchards. In Tutrakan, the Apricot Festival is held annually



#### **Kazanlashka rosa (oil-bearing rose)**

The valley of Kazanlak occupies the western part of the South East Region. It is famous for its production of essential rose oils out of this beautiful rose flower (a part of the *Rosa Damascena* family). Bulgaria is one of the leading exporters of rose oil with more than 350 years of tradition in this sector. The rose oil is used in the perfumery, aroma therapy, cosmetics, and confectionery. It also has valuable medical qualities and is a natural antiseptic and stimulant. In May, the rose harvesting period attracts many tourists from the country and abroad. This is also the time when the Festival of the Rose is held

#### **Dimyat (wine vine)**

The North East region has favorable conditions for growing several varieties of vineyards, especially white wine vines such as Dimyat. This is an ancient, traditional vine robust to cold weather that bears fruits late in September with an excellent yield. It is used not only for white wine production but also as a brandy distillate.

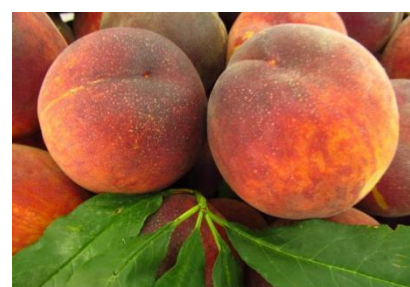


#### **Hinap (variety of dates)**

This unusual fruit tree used to be very popular in the past, but now it is almost extinct and can be found only in the South East territories of the country. It has high nutritional value and powerful medical properties. It is consumed raw, canned, or dried.

#### **Slivenska praskova (Peach from Sliven region)**

The Sliven region is one of the biggest fruit producers in Bulgaria. The peach orchards grow on over 25 000 ha of



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#### **4. Challenges and prospects of the traditional food sector of North East and South East regions in Bulgaria**

The food and agri- sector in Bulgaria have long-established traditions, a rich heritage, and bright prospects for the future. However, there are certain challenges that could potentially hinder its development, namely: The agricultural land becomes more concentrated in large farm owners and is dedicated to mass crop production, thus leading to a loss of diversification and limiting the small size, bioproduction. On the other hand, food production is also heavily industrialized with large companies prevailing in the sector, achieving economies of scale and strong price competitive advantage. Small farmers suffer additionally from limited access to markets and rigorous competition by cheap imported produces and food products. The food supply chain is usually long, thus permitting several intermediaries to deviate the profit from the original producer. Depopulation of the rural areas and migration of young people to the big cities is another negative trend that drains human resources out of the land. In general, there are gaps in market and production history for artisan food products, which occurred as a result of the 40 years of the communist regime. Small, family companies have not established long-term consumers thrust and traditions (as in some other countries) and have to compete in a very saturated food market with the big monopolistic companies which often discourages the free entrepreneurship spirit. Finally, along with the process of globalization and democratization of society, there is a negative trend of loss of culinary heritage, gastronomic identity, and taste. Fruits and vegetables are less evident at the family table, while prepackaged, frozen, sugar-rich, or highly processed food becomes more popular. The contemporary typical Bulgarian cuisine is steadily shifting towards adopting Western world convenience food models and abandoning the traditional healthy, but time-consuming techniques of cooking. There have been some initiatives to reverse this negative trend, such as the Slow Food movement and the “Let’s save the Bulgarian Taste” campaign. Those initiatives include the identification of potential GI candidates and support for producers and local communities in the application process.

The organic market in Bulgaria is relatively new and still small, yet rapidly growing. Over the past few years, there was a boom in the country’s organic products market. The number of specialized shops as well as the number of large retail chains included in organic food distribution increased. Most of Bulgarian organic food and products are destined for foreign markets. Bulgaria is a traditional producer of various types of certified organic honey

with excellent quality indicators being exported to the world market. Bulgarian organic fresh fruit and vegetables, milk and dairy products, jams, chutneys, dried fruits, and nuts have excellent taste qualities and are highly valued in the European and global markets.

The GI protection system is still in the initial stage of its development. The number of registered PDOs, PGIs, and TSGs is very small compared to other European countries. More efforts should be put in this direction, considering the potential benefits of the GI scheme for all stakeholders are numerous: The **producers** are benefiting from protection against misuse, imitation, and evocation as well as a price premium that can be obtained due to a stronger brand image. The **consumer** has a guarantee about the origin, the quality, and the authenticity of the product. Finally, **society** as a whole should encourage GIs adoption since GIs helps the local economy, environment, and community by creating income and jobs, promotes biodiversity by encouraging sustainable growth of local plants, animal, crops, etc., and enhances the savoir-fair and the old established traditions. Moreover, heritage preservation, especially in rural areas has a positive impact on tourism development (since local, GI products could be an incentive for travel to remote areas). In general, GIs leads to local development and prosperity.

**Fig. 4:** Economic, environmental, and social benefits of the GIs protection Scheme in Bulgaria

Economic benefits	Enivonmental benefits	Social benefits
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Fair food prices;</li> <li>•Income for local economies;</li> <li>•Higher life standard;</li> <li>•Synergies with relevant local business;</li> <li>•Diversification of rural tourism;</li> <li>•Effective and balanced use of EU funds</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Preservation of resources</li> <li>•Preservation of nature-friendly traditional agriculture;</li> <li>•Decrease of green gases and mitigation of climate change;</li> <li>•Preservation of soil fertility;</li> <li>•Preservation of wild species and habitats</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Employment and education at local level;</li> <li>•Decrease of depopulation and consolidation of local communities;</li> <li>•Diversification of local social services;</li> <li>•Strengthening the contacts between urban and rural population;</li> <li>•Access to fresh and healthy food</li> </ul>

Source: Dimitrova D. (2017)

For the future, in terms of food and agri-sustainability, several trends have to be embodied by society and supported by the government:

- ✓ Local plant and animal varieties have to be preserved by the communities and via specially designed governmental activities
- ✓ Partnerships with Research centers and institutes can stimulate the development and adoption of new, local varieties and breeds with a guaranteed genetic identity and improved qualities.
- ✓ Government and the European Union has to continue providing special measurements of support for local, small, organic, bio, and climate-smart agriculture
- ✓ Small-scale producers have to unify their effort and cooperate on common grounds in order to achieve sizable market and legislation impact. The need of forming so-called “groups of producers” is especially evident in GI application process.
- ✓ Identified local breeds and varieties should receive additional support, such as promotion on national and international levels, subsidies for the preservation of extinct breeds, training and education initiatives aimed at preserving the agri, food, and culinary-heritage, etc.
- ✓ A number of products, foods, and recipes have to undergo the transition from homemade to market-oriented production.
- ✓ Raising awareness among the local farmers and the society as a whole on the potential benefits derived from PDO/PGI and TSG identification and assistance with the application process.



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