

Surva Winter Carnivals: Challenging the Rural-Urban Divide in the Bulgarian and the European Civil Spheres

By Ana Velitchkova, University of Mississippi

The rural-urban divide is an enduring feature of modernity across the globe with multiple implications. Bulgarian Surva carnivals represent a social phenomenon that appears to challenge this divide. Based on participant observation, semi-structured interviews with carnival participants, and archival research, I find that Bulgarian Surva carnivals have acted as a type of civil repair, integrating rurality into the national and the European civil spheres during state socialism and after Bulgaria's democratic transition alike. In both socialist and capitalist visions of development, rurality is commonly disparaged as backward, a space to leave behind, literally and figuratively, in the country's path to progress. Surva carnivals periodically challenge this negative view of rurality, create rural-urban solidarity, and foster a sense of a unified domestic and European civil sphere inclusive of rurality. State socialism transformed Bulgaria from a predominantly rural society into an industrial one. While rurality was devalued in the national economic sphere, local officials in the town of Pernik elevated the rural new-year carnival Surva, popular in the surrounding region, to a national festival. Pernik's festival eventually became an international festival only growing in importance after state socialism's fall. Now, the international festival Surva touts itself as the "biggest" and most "authoritative" masquerade festival in Europe drawing in over 10,000 costumed participants and more spectators from around Bulgaria, Europe, and elsewhere. Surva disrupts Pernik's and its rural region's negative image in Bulgarian popular imagination. Pernik's region has been the butt of countless jokes representing lack of civility and development. Because of Surva, Pernik joined the Federation of European Carnival Cities and became a point of regional and national pride. UNESCO recognized the Surva tradition as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Surva became iconized as an exemplary specimen of rural folklore and as an integral part of Bulgarian national culture. As cultural institutions, Surva carnivals spotlight rural traditions and allow residents of underdeveloped rural communities to join the civil sphere nationally and internationally. In Bulgarian villages, Surva masquerade groups usher in the new year with ritual fires, bells, dances, processions, home visits, and exchanges of drinks, food, and good wishes. They collect gifts to redistribute to different causes. In late January, local Surva groups appear at Pernik's festival, which also hosts groups representing rural communities from around Europe and beyond. Throughout the year, Surva groups who do well in the Pernik festival competitions get invited to other carnival festivals across Europe. Through organizing and participating in various festivals, rural residents get in contact with people from distant social locations nationally and internationally. The donning of costumes and masks and the planning of playful festivities allow people to mingle together, share "traditions," and imagine themselves, at least occasionally, as part of an integrated national, European, and even global community. Surva provides rural residents, who often lack economic opportunities and respect, with sporadic occasions to get recognition as valued and contributing members of society. Surva gets support from local and national politicians of all political stripes acknowledging its integrative potential. Artists, scholars, and entrepreneurs flock to Pernik's festival and to villages to partake in Surva. Local, national, and international media report on Surva winter carnivals in largely positive terms.

Surva has become a tourist destination contributing to the struggling regional and national economy. Bulgarian Surva carnivals demonstrate how social cohesion can be maintained through periodic symbolic civil repair despite enduring social inequality.