

THE COOPERATIVE MODEL OF AGRIBUSINESS IN BULGARIA-ORIGINS AND CONTEMPORARY STATE

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Abstract

The contemporary Bulgarian cooperative business model emerged at the end of the 19th century in response to specific socio-economic conditions. It developed progressively with the realization of various businesses – agricultural, credit, or as provision of services to member-cooperators, etc. Throughout the years, the cooperative model underwent periods of significant growth, yet also of stagnation, which has justified the interest that both theory, and business practice have shown in it. Generally recognized is the contribution of a number of national and international researchers who in the past have analyzed the features of the cooperative model and defined it accordingly. From the analyzed literary and normative sources, we can deduce that the definitions and opinions on the cooperative nearly overlap. It is defined as a voluntary union of persons who mutually assist and cooperate with each other with equal responsibilities and rights. The member-cooperators delegate part of their functions to democratically elected leading representatives when they establish a cooperative enterprise. The main goal of the cooperative is to meet the needs of its members in its non-profit oriented activity. Considering the multi-aspect character of the studied topic, we outline the aim of this paper as making an analysis of the origin and development of the cooperative model and its applicability to the agricultural sector in Bulgaria. The chosen methodological approach is based on the statistical groupings of a big corpus of official data on cooperatives entered in the Bulgarian Commercial Register since 2005 to date. We have established certain indicators, reflecting the tendencies in the development of cooperatives by region of planning, economic sectors, annual revenue, etc. We used Microsoft Office and the licensed version of Statistics Grad Pack for Windows for data processing. Main inferences: In Bulgaria, the cooperative business model emerged first in villages to satisfy the needs of the local population. Later, these cooperatives appeared in larger towns. This process in Bulgaria is reverse to other European countries with more developed market economy. The agricultural orientation of the developing Bulgarian economy at the end of the 19th century explains the establishment of the first national cooperatives of the agricultural credit type in villages. In Bulgaria, the cooperative business model as a legal organizational form penetrated almost all branches of the national economy. The role of Sector A “Agriculture, forestry and fish farming” was dominant. To a great extent, this resulted both from the specifics of the Bulgarian economy, and the existing cooperative traditions.

Key words: cooperative, model, agribusiness, origin, state, development

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary cooperatives emerged in Bulgaria in response to particular local socio-economic conditions at the end of the 19th century. With time, they developed specific models based on various economic activities – agricultural, consumer, credit, miscellaneous, etc. Throughout the years of their development, they witnessed periods of significant growth and stagnation, which has justified the interest that both theory and business practice have shown in them. Generally recognized is the contribution of a number of national and international

researchers who in the past have analyzed the features of the cooperative and have defined it, such as Popov (1910), Dikov (1927), Pashev (1936), Donchev, Bonev, Valev (1941), Kanev (1943), Palazov (1946), Valkov (1945), Kanchev (2000), Kanchev and Doychinova (2006), Atanassova (2003), Yovkova (2007), Aleksandrov (2007), Boevski (1997, 2016, 2020), Kauffman (1907), Sombart (1919), Baranovski (1922), Draheim (1952), Boettcher (1980), Aschoff (1995), Münkner (1995), Wilson (2017) [24, 12, 23, 13, 16, 17, 18, 3, 30, 1, 6, 7, 8, 19, 26, 4, 14, 5, 2, 21, 29] and many others. The legislations of many European countries

(Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Spain, Portugal, etc.), where the cooperative had long traditions and has spread to different economic sectors, see it as a social model of doing business [15].

We can deduce from the analyzed literature and legislation sources that the definitions and opinions on the cooperative almost overlap. It is defined as a voluntary union of persons for mutual assistance and cooperation, who hold equal responsibilities and exercise the same rights. The member-cooperators delegate part of their functions to democratically elected leading representatives when they establish the cooperative enterprise. The main goal of the cooperative is to meet the needs of its members as a non-profit oriented organization. As a result, Shaarz and Casselman (1980) [25] call it “an economic system with social content”.

The European Economic and Social Committee in 2012, which was the International Year of Cooperatives, adds to the definition of the cooperative in the following way: “it manages the changes in an economically efficient and socially responsible way, contributes to the social and territorial adhesion and creates innovative business models in order to increase its competitiveness. It is generally agreed that cooperatives are part of the social economy”.

Departing from the multi-aspect character of the studied topic, we can outline the aim of the paper as making an analysis of the development of cooperatives and their applicability to the economic life of Bulgaria.

In order to reach the set goal, we have addressed the following **tasks**:

- Noting the key moments since the establishment of the first cooperatives in Bulgaria

- Examining the major features of the cooperatives in Bulgaria, revealed in the last two decades

- In view of the period of emerging cooperatives in the country we attempt to explain the manifested tendencies of their development at the beginning of the present century

The used methodological approach is based on the statistical grouping of a large corpus of

official data on cooperatives entered in the Bulgarian Commercial Register since 2005 to date. Selected indicators that reflect the trends in the development of the cooperatives by regions were established, such as planning, economic branches, annual income, etc. We used Microsoft Office and the licensed version of Statistics Grad Pack for Windows to process the data. Through a historical analysis, certain moments of the origins of the first Bulgarian cooperatives have been revealed.

Origin of the first cooperatives in Bulgaria

On 11 June 1890 two school headmasters – T. Yonchev and T. Vlaykov established the first agricultural credit cooperative in the village of Mirkovo, Pirdop district.

The second to emerge was the agricultural credit society “Zashtita” (protection) in the village of Lyubenova Mahala, Nova Zagora district.

Seven years later (1897) the agronomist N. Kardzhiev and N. Bachvarov (manager of a farm near Rousse), assisted by A. Gradev (teacher in the village of Schtraklevo) launched an active campaign among the peasants to establish cooperatives in our country.

Thus, in November, the first credit cooperative in the region appeared. Several days later another cooperative was founded in the village of Chervena Voda (Table 1).

A key role for the emerging of the first cooperatives in Bulgaria was played by the Bulgarian Agricultural Bank (BAB)[9].

A. Ivanov, manager of the credit department of the bank, implemented a policy for founding cooperatives in the country.

On this basis, “kernels” of employees were formed to popularize the cooperative ideas. On one side, due to obstacles, caused by the regulations of the first Commercial Law in Bulgaria, and on the other, due to the resistance of usurers, the process of cooperating proceeded slowly.

Several years after the emergence of the first cooperatives in the villages, such structures were established in some bigger towns in the country.

Table 1. First cooperatives in the Bulgarian villages

Year	Initiators	Type of cooperative	Reason for establishment
11 June 1890	T. Yonchev – inspector; T. Vlaykov – teacher	AGRICULTURAL CREDIT COOPERATION in the village of Mirkovo, Pirdop district	Model Statute, translated from German, compiled by Fassbender, student of Raiffeisen. Created as per the Commercial Law
1890		AGRICULTURAL CREDIT FUND "ZASHTITA" in the village of Lyubenova Mahala, Nova Zagora district	First registered as Economic Shareholding. Created as per the Commercial Law
1897	N. Kardzhiev – agronomist; N. Bachvarov – farm manager near Rousse; A. Gradev – teacher	COOPERATIVE ASSOCIATION in the village of Shtraklevo, Rousse district	Honorary chairperson is Gr. Nachovich – Minister of Commerce and Agriculture. Members of the Management Board contribute to 1/10 of the capital, according to art. 163 of the Commercial Law
1897	N. Kardzhiev – agronomist; N. Bachvarov – director; A. Gradev – teacher	COOPERATIVE in the village of Chervena Gora, Rousse district	Members of the Management Board contribute to 1/10 of the capital, according to art. 163 of the Commercial Law

Source: Own research on historical documents.

The first urban cooperative was established in 1899 in Plovdiv as a consumer type of enterprise (bakery). Afterwards, in May 1900 the consumer cooperative “Saglasie” (concord) was founded in Samokov, and in January 1901 – “Bratstvo” (brotherhood) in Kazanlak. In November 1902 the consumer cooperative “Bratstvo” was registered in Yambol (Table 2).

In the city of Sofia in 1903 P. Cholakov established the consumer cooperative “Bratski Trud” (brotherly labour). In the same year, a teacher’s savings and insurance cooperative was registered.

Later in November, under the leadership of A. Ivanov the first of its kind Sofia Popular Bank was founded.

Table 2. First cooperatives in Bulgarian towns

Year	Town	Type of cooperative	Activity
1899	Plovdiv	First urban consumer cooperative	Bakery
May 1900	Samokov	Consumer cooperative “Saglasie”	Commerce
January 1901	Kazanlak	Cooperative “Bratstvo”	Commerce, services
November 1902	Yambol	Consumer cooperative “Bratstvo”	Commerce
1903	Sofia	Consumer cooperative “Bratski trud”	Services
1903	Sofia	Teacher’s savings and insurance cooperative	Financial services
November 1903	Sofia	First Sofia Popular Bank	Financial services
1905	Sofia	Cooperative savings and insurance association	Financial and insurance services

Source: Own research on historical documents.

Two years later, the first Cooperative Savings Insurance Society was registered in Bulgaria (Table 2).

BAB analyzed the process of cooperating and published information on the period from 1899 to 1910 in which it noted the establishment and operation of 238 Bulgarian cooperatives diverse in their economic activity (Table 3).

Table 3. Number and membership in the first Bulgarian cooperatives per year

Year	Number of registered cooperative	Changes in the number of registered cooperative	Member cooperators	Changes in the number of member cooperators vs. 1899
1899	4		236	
1900	2	- 2	234	- 2
1901	2	- 2	140	- 126
1902	17	+ 13	683	+ 447
1903	77	+ 73	739	+ 503
1904	24	+ 20	1,447	+ 1,211
1905	91	+ 87	5,458	+ 5,222
1906	147	+ 143	11,224	+ 10,988
1907	238	+ 234	19,422	+ 19,186

Source: BAB, 1900-1910 [9].

Slowly, the process of cooperation in the country continued. After the participation of

A. Ivanov and H. Chakalov in the International Congress of Cooperatives in Budapest (1904) the managers of the established cooperatives decided that they should be regulated by a special cooperative law. Thus, in 1907 the first Cooperative Act was adopted (promulgated in State Gazette, issue 45/ 28.02.1907, amended in State Gazette, issue 48/ 01.01.1911) [11]. The act regulated the creation, structure and organization of cooperatives. Thus, a green light was given to the development of the cooperative action in the country.

In summary, the analyzed facts can lead to several main inferences:

-In Bulgaria, the cooperatives appeared first in villages to satisfy the needs of the local population. Later, cooperatives were established in larger towns. This process in our country was reverse, compared to other European states with more developed market economy.

-At the end of the 19th century the Bulgarian intelligentsia were avid supporters of the cooperative ideas, however the population needed time and systematic encouragement to become adherents of these ideas. The initiative for establishing the first Bulgarian cooperatives did not arise from the peasantry, but rather from progressively thinking Bulgarians (teachers, agronomists, bank employees, etc.). The Bulgarian intelligentsia foresaw the opportunities through cooperation to assist and support the poor rural population and to unite the urbanites. A considerable support was provided by BAB.

-The agricultural orientation of the development of the Bulgarian economy at the end of the 19th century explained the establishment of the first cooperatives in Bulgaria, such as the agrarian credit cooperatives in villages. Years later, at the beginning of the 20th century, the consumer cooperatives appeared, followed by the popular city banks, as well as some professional cooperatives/ associations.

-Despite the fact that after more than a century had passed, the process of emergence of the first cooperatives in Bulgaria left its mark on and to a certain extent continues to impact the

contemporary development of cooperatives in the country.

Aspects of the contemporary development of Bulgarian cooperatives

The definition, given in art. 1 of the first Cooperative Act (1907) in our country says: “A cooperative is any association formed by an indefinite number of members which is established in order to develop the economic interests of its associates and encourage the credit, agriculture, industry and trade through a cooperative action or mutuality.”

A similar phrasing of article 1 of the Cooperative Act in force (last) (adopted in December 1999 [18], amended and restated fourteen times up to now): “The cooperative is an association of physical persons with varying capital and number of members who through mutual assistance and cooperation realize commercial activity in order to satisfy their economic, social and cultural interests.”

These, and some other analogies may be found in both laws. Therefore, the claim that the cooperative’s past reflects its future is confirmed to a certain extent.

In the studied period between 2005 and 2023 in Bulgaria a total of 9,037 cooperatives were established. A considerable change in their amount with a clear trend for decline is observed (Figure 1).

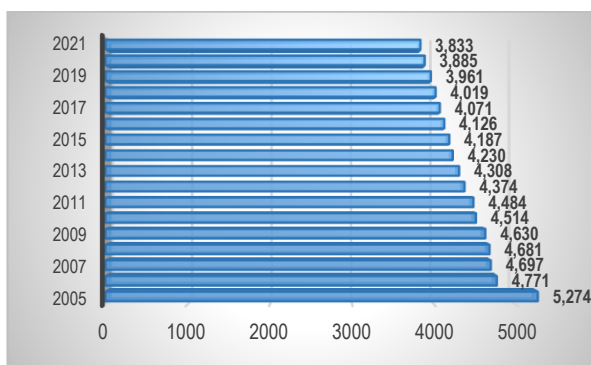


Fig. 1. Change in the number of registered cooperatives in Bulgaria by years.

Source: Ciela Norma and own calculations [10].

The highest number of active cooperatives was noted in 2005: 5,274, and the lowest in 2021: 3,833. The trend of decreasing the number of cooperatives both in the country as a whole, and per economic sectors is explained largely with the change in their status (Tables 4 and 5).

Table 4. Status of the cooperatives in Bulgaria: 2005-2023

Cooperative status as per the Commercial Register	Number	Relative share (%)
Acting/ active	2,818	31.2
Non-acting/ inactive	4,747	52.5
Eliminated	871	9.6
Termination of economic activity	443	4.9
In a liquidation procedure	104	1.2
Termination of the liquidation procedure	3	0.0
Continuation of the commercial activity	8	0.1
Restructuring of the cooperative, form: merging	30	0.3
Restructuring of the cooperation, form: separation	3	0.03
Undergoing insolvency procedure	8	0.1
Declared insolvent	1	0.01
Terminated insolvency procedure	1	0.01
TOTAL	9,037	100.0

Source: Source: Ciela Norma and own calculations [10].

Towards the beginning of June 2023 the cooperatives with a status of “active/acting” were as low as 2,818, and those with the status “inactive/ non-acting” were 4,747. The relative share of the former was 31.2% of the total number, and of the latter – 52.5%. The number of cooperatives “eliminated” from the Commercial Register is considerable – 871 (9.6%). Those who discontinued their economic activity were 443 (4.9%). 104 (1.2%) cooperatives are undergoing liquidation. Only 33 cooperatives have a status of “restructuring, in the form of merging and separation” (Table 4).

The change in the status of cooperatives in Bulgaria reflects on the annual income from their activity (Figure 2). We have found that the largest is the group of cooperatives with an annual income of 300 000 BGN, followed by those with 301 600 BGN. A declining trend in their number towards the end of the studied period compared to the beginning is noticeable. Simultaneously, the smallest are the groups of cooperatives with annual revenue of over 6 million and 3-6 million BGN. A reverse trend to a gradual increase in their number at the end of the period against the beginning is established. The latter can be somewhat explained by the status of 30 cooperatives which are “cooperative restructuring, with a form of merging”.

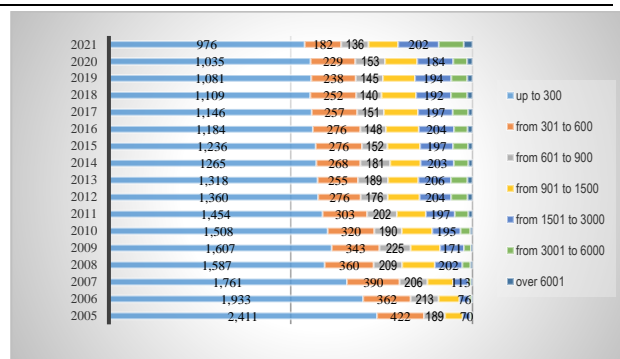


Fig. 2. Grouping of the cooperatives in Bulgaria by annual income in thousands of BGN: 2005-2021
 Source: Ciela Norma and own calculations [10].

With respect to the distribution of the cooperatives by regions for planning (Figure 3) we have found that most of them are in the South-central region – 1,609, or 17.8% of all, as most numerous are in Plovdiv and Haskovo regions. Next is the Southeast region – 1,578, or 17.5% of all, as the leader in this ranking is Stara Zagora region.

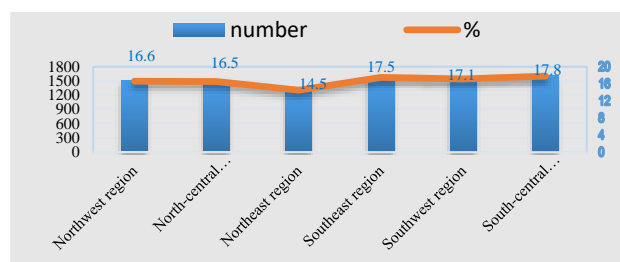


Fig. 3. Regional distribution of cooperatives in Bulgaria: 2005-2021
 Source: Ciela Norma and own calculations [10].

Third comes the Southwest region with 1,534 registered units, or 17.1% of all. The largest number of cooperatives exist in the city of Sofia. The number of cooperatives in the Northwest and the North-central region is almost the same, respectively 1,502 (16.6% of all), and 1,494 (16.5%). In it the largest number of cooperatives operate in Pleven region, followed by Rousse region. The smallest is the number of cooperatives in the Northeast region – 1,311, or 14.5% of all, as the highest number of active cooperatives in the region are situated in Varna region.

In the entire country during the observed period, the significantly lowest number of registered and acting cooperatives is found in two regions – Kardzhali and Smolen, respectively 98 and 129. We believe that the present regional distribution of the

cooperatives follows the pace of the economic development of the country regions. The fact that some are still influenced by the existing traditions of the cooperative movement dating back to the last century can be exemplified in the regions of Stara Zagora, Rousse, Sofia, etc.

The largest is the group of cooperatives with assets of up to 3.9 million BGN, and a trend to a small to negligible decline from 100% to 91.7% over the studied period. A significantly lower is the relative share of cooperatives which own from 3.9 million to 19.5 million BGN with a tendency to a gradual increase from 0 to 7.9% over the observed period. An insignificant is the relative share of the cooperatives which own assets of over 19.5 million BGN – below 0.5% of all (Figure 4). The results obtained for the owned assets show that the size of the realized activity of the cooperatives matches the capacity of micro and small enterprises.

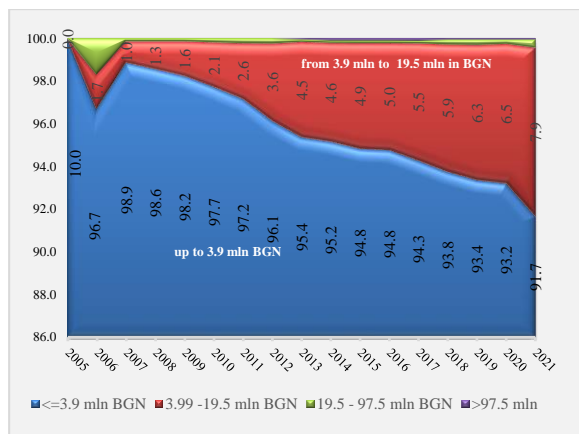


Fig. 4. Grouping of the cooperatives by value of the owned assets in %
 Source: Ciela Norma and own calculations [10].

The indicator “number of employees” confirms the supposition that cooperatives are predominantly micro and small enterprises. The group of cooperatives composed of up to 10 persons is the largest, however, a decreasing trend is also noticeable. Second is the group of 50-250 persons, i.e. those cooperatives whose size of economic activity matches the middle-sized enterprise. In Bulgaria, there are no cooperatives with more than 250 employees (Figure 5).

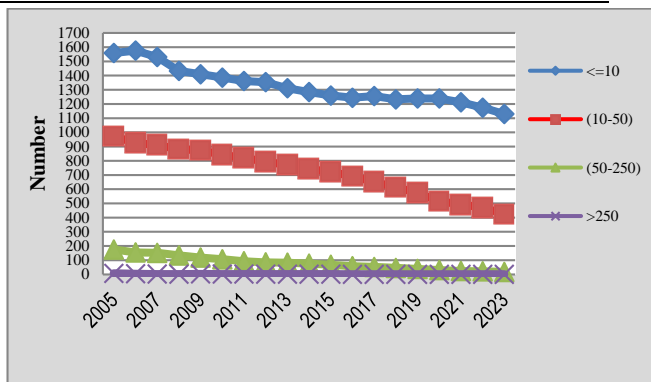


Fig. 5. Average number of employees in cooperatives: 2005-2023
 Source: Ciela Norma and own calculations [10].

Over the observed period, the cooperatives develop their activity in almost all economic sectors according to the Classification of Economic Activity-2008, except for sectors O “State administration”, and T “Activities of households as employers” (Fig. 6, Table 5).

The largest are the established and operating cooperatives -4,534 (agricultural, production) in Sector A “Agriculture, forestry and fish farming” – 50.2% of the total number. A smaller number – 1,443 cooperatives (mostly consumer) are found in Sector G “Commerce, car and motorcycle repair” which are 16% of all. Third in number -771- are the cooperatives (consumer, labour and production cooperatives, etc.) in Sector L “Real estate operations” – 8.5% of all (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6. Grouping of the cooperatives in the Classification of Economic Activity-2008 for 2005-2021
 Source: Ciela Norma and own calculations [10].

In Sector C “Processing industry” the registered cooperatives are 701 (labour and production cooperatives), or 7.8% of all.

We have found that the cooperatives in Sector K “Financial and insurance activities” (credit) constitute a share of 2.4% (213 units) of the total. They develop credit activity, as some may be described as referring to the existing popular banks in the country at the beginning of the 20th century.

The relative share of 2.5% (228) of cooperatives (labour and production cooperatives, consumer, etc.) that are registered and operate in Sector N “Administrative and support services” is noticeable. Their main role is to assist certain groups of the population – the disadvantaged and smaller producers (beekeepers, etc.).

A smaller relative share – 2.2%, or 197 cooperatives are registered and operate in Sector M “Professional activities and research”. This sector includes the regional cooperative unions, as well as youth, war invalids, construction design and other types of cooperatives.

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There are cooperatives in Sector F “Construction” – 175, or 1.9% of all; P

“Education” – 94, or 1% of all; Q “Human healthcare and social work” – 56, or 0.6%, R “Culture, sport and entertainment” – 27, or 0.3%.

Except for construction, in the other three economic sectors, the cooperatives are primarily professional associations, formed by intellectuals (physicians, teachers, musicians, athletes, etc.) who resemble those existing here more than a century ago.

Table 5. Grouping of cooperatives in Bulgaria according to the Classification of Economic Activities-2008 during 2005-2021

code	Economic sector	Total number	Relative share of the total number	Number of active	Relative share of the number of active
A	Agriculture, forestry and fish farming	4,534	50.2	1,074	38.1
B	Mining	9	0.1	2	0.1
C	Processing industry	701	7.8	201	7.1
D	Production and distribution of electricity, heat and gaseous fuels	7	0.1	2	0.1
E	Water supply; sewage and waste management and restoration	24	0.3	8	0.3
F	Construction	175	1.9	34	1.2
G	Commerce, car and motorcycle repair	1,443	16.0	473	16.8
H	Transport, storage and postal services	83	0.9	20	0.7
I	Hospitality and catering	70	0.8	17	0.6
J	Creation and distribution of information and creative products; telecommunications	57	0.6	17	0.6
K	Financial and insurance activities	213	2.4	79	2.8
L	Real estate operations	771	8.5	509	18.1
M	Professional activities and research	197	2.2	68	2.4
N	Administrative and support activities	228	2.5	45	1.6
P	Education	94	1.0	14	0.5
Q	Human healthcare and social work	56	0.6	16	0.6
R	Culture, sport and entertainment	27	0.3	6	0.2
S	Other activities	149	1.6	53	1.9
	Not indicated	199	2.2	180	6.4
	TOTAL	9,037	100.0	2,818	100.0

Source: Ciela Norma and own calculations [10].

As a preferred organizational form of association, the cooperative (consumer, production, delivery, etc.) is applied in the

following industries: H “Transport, storage and postal services” – 83, or 0.9%; I. “Hospitality and catering” – 70, or 0.8%; J “Creation and distribution of information and creative products; telecommunications” – 57, or 0.6%; B “Mining” – 9, or 0.1%, and S “Other activities” – 149, or 1.6%.

We have found that during the studied period in our country there is a group of cooperatives (199, or 2.2% of all) which have an undefined type of economic activity, and cannot be referred neither to sector S “Other activities”, or other sectors of the CEA-2008.

The above analysis has led to the several **main inferences**:

- In Bulgaria the cooperative as a legal organizational form is present in almost all economic branches of the national economy. Its role is dominant in two sectors: A “Agriculture, forestry and fish farming” and G “Commerce, car and motorcycle repair”. To a large extent this is the result of the specifics of the sectors, and the existing cooperative traditions.

- The number of active cooperatives in all economic sectors in the country gradually decreases. Most significant is the fourfold decrease in Sector A “Agriculture, forestry and fish farming”. Towards the middle of the current year, over a half of the cooperatives registered during the studied period have shifted their status to “inactive”.

- The activity of the Bulgarian cooperatives is low profit. The group with annual income of 300,000 BGN is significant in number against the others, however, a declining trend in their amount is observed at the end of the period versus 2005, and a slight increase of the number of high income cooperatives.

- Regionally, the highest number of active cooperatives is found in South-central region with a dominant location in Plovdiv and Haskovo regions active in almost all economic branches. The Southeast region takes a second place in the spread of cooperatives, as Stara Zagora region is a local leader.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite the contemporary challenges and issues of various nature, research on cooperatives in Bulgaria must continue to evolve in order to find answers to many questions related to their past and future development. As an organizational form of association, they have had and continue to play a key role in the production, processing, and trade of many products, as well as in the service industry. Finding solutions to the problematic aspects in their operation is important not only for the enrichment of theory, but also for helping local cooperative practice.

The combination of the historical aspects in this study on cooperatives since their origins to their current state, is a complex research approach. It, however, allows us to clarify the influence of the main factors (social, economic, political, etc.), that explain the presence of some and the absence of other characteristics and issues of contemporary Bulgarian cooperatives.

In view of the above, we allow ourselves to put a final touch to our paper with a quotation by Iliya Pavlov – one of the researchers of cooperative theory and the Bulgarian cooperative practice, formulated eight decades ago, which also sounds relevant to this day: *“The modern cooperation is conceived by the economic and social conditions of recent times; viewed as such, we can relate them to the history of the cooperative movement, and thus draw the most correct conclusions.”*

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