



Sociologie Românească

ISSN: 2668-1455 (print), ISSN: 1220-5389 (electronic)

***RURAL ROMANIA IN THE NEW CAPITALISM: 1990-
2020. PRO UNIVERSITARIA, BUCHAREST, 2022.***
IULIAN STĂNESCU & FLAVIUS MIHALACHE (EDITORS)

Sebastian FITZEK

Sociologie Românească, 2022, vol. 20, Issue 2, pp. 207-213

<https://doi.org/10.33788/sr.20.2.12>

Published by:
Expert Projects Publishing House



On behalf of:
Asociația Română de Sociologie

***RURAL ROMANIA IN THE
NEW CAPITALISM: 1990-2020.***
**PRO UNIVERSITARIA,
BUCHAREST, 2022.**
**IULIAN STĂNESCU & FLAVIUS
MIHALACHE (EDITORS)**

Sebastian FITZEK¹

Abstract

Authors and coordinators Stănescu Iulian and Mihalache Flavius capture a moving picture of the Romanian village, as it was inherited after the Romanian Revolution, transforming, and reinventing itself in an interesting story of an adventure between survival and authenticity of each land. The archetype of the Romanian peasant in the 21st century is the Odyssey of a lone wolf, alienated from the unitary vision of his mission of universality and at the same time motivated to live in the strangest challenges and in an endless European modernization. The coordination of such a volume is itself an adventure in the history of the most archaic place where Romanian-ness was born as a source of immortality and a return to the origins of a people tormented by the curse of finding own solutions to a global movement that has always caught it unprepared in its historical evolution. The authors who have subscribed to this volume are not just researchers, but voices that bring that mosaic of images to a complex picture, almost complete but never exhausted.

Keywords: rural area, village, peasants, rural society, rural development, modernization, income.

The book outlines a picture of the Romanian village on the edge of two different worlds: a past from which Romanian-ness was born and a future challenged by the new rules of globalization. The authors of this volume exercise their vocation as researchers, as photographers of the time, combining exact data, statistics, and

¹ Institute for Quality of Life Research, Romanian Academy, Faculty of Communication and Public Relations (FCRP), National University for Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA), Bucharest, ROMANIA. E-mail: sebastian_thomas2000@yahoo.com, sebastian.fitzek@comunicare.ro.

expert analysis with the ability to synthesise the depth of a living organism through opinions assembled in a single vision. With 22 scientific studies written by 24 researchers in multiple fields of social, political, and economic sciences, the collective volume has been gaining public interest from the very beginning, right from the first days of its publication. Gathering several authors on this volume, the transdisciplinary approaches become enriched; the references, the representations and those perceptions that are not to be missed in each chapter have the value drawn from the depths of a museum where the Romanian nation reveals its silent existence. The answer-seeker of 2022 delves into the problem of the Romanian village, during a millennium when nations and sophisticated satellites are fighting their egos in a battle with global ambitions and is still interested in the fate of the Romanian peasant, an anthem of the past hidden under the dust and emptiness of abandoned villages. What kind of developments have transformed the old village? How come the houses, the people, the local language, and folk music never fade and how come the lands still grow green?

Stănescu Iulian and Mihalache Flavius, along with the other authors, have put together an impressive book, bearing witness to a world that is completely different from the urban environment, a world that wants to reinvent itself and wants to align its modernisation to the Western village imagery. In the volume's introduction, Iulian Stănescu summarises the content of major issues concerning the development of Romanian countryside as it stands in the 21st century. The beginning of this millennium upon the old millennium, but not much has changed. After the 1990s, reforms seemed to be a long string of structural policies, and "the main conclusions highlight the fragmentation and inefficiency of the current agrarian structure, generating polarization and poverty, as well as the lack of evidence of owners and agricultural areas after more than three decades" (p. 14). The failure of the Romanian rural environment begins with the massive migration of the rural population after the 1990s, continuing with a type of reorganisation of agricultural land. Author Sergiu Țăra reveals, in his chapter "Romanian agrarian structure", why property was hastily managed or why the cadastre and land register were hit by laws that did not favour the Romanian peasant. Keeping cooperatives or abolishing them was almost absent from the public debate, and in the end, politicians abolished them on the grounds that they were no longer reliable in the new market economy. And yet the land restitution did not end even after 32 years, when rural life went into a deep demographic decline.

Flavius Mihalache portrays in his chapter "Defining the concept of rural environment" with great meticulousness the rural environment within the legal regulations in Romania, going through a vast literature, establishing a distinction between the agricultural and the rural environment. Depopulation of villages is a worrying conclusion drawn by several authors of the volume, together with the increase in heterogeneity "deriving from the territorial profile of natural and migratory movements, both external and internal (from town to village)" (p. 26). Supporting Flavius Mihalache's portrayal, the ageing population on country-level,

environmental problems, population-migration and finally, the financial, health and political crises are severe issues Romania has been experiencing.

The chapter “The main agri-food chains in Romania between 1990-2018” covers the core agri-food supply chains in Romania in the period 1990-2018. Authors Kruszlicika, Alboiu and Drigă, have perfectly reproduced the data and images of the difficulties we have faced in the last 30 years, offering solutions. “The policy in this sector must respond to market demands by reducing price fluctuations and the imbalance between supply and demand and encourage the consumption of fruit and vegetables, while ensuring the competitiveness of products” (p. 118). Such positive policies would stimulate local initiative through expansion of local markets and would reduce the number of intermediaries.

Against the backdrop of the funds that began to be provided following Romania’s accession to the European Union, Romanian farms seemed to enjoy a new hope and yet, in the chapter by authors Cecilia Alexandri and Lorena Florentina Chițea, we understand what the major discrepancies were between us and the West. “In 2016, Romania had about 3.4 million farms owning agricultural land, representing 33% of all farms in the EU. But most of them are subsistence and semi-subsistence farms, playing an important role in ensuring food security for peasant households, but a minor role in shaping the food supply that crosses supply chains, to processors and final consumers.” Only partially modernised, close to bankruptcy and lacking a solid market structure, most farms have developed little on the domestic market and almost not at all on the foreign market. A litre of milk bought for nothing from the farmer is then resold at 10 or even 20 times the price in supermarkets. These mismatches between supply and demand define an unregulated market in which state interventionism is not visible. “The problems that are now manifesting themselves, linked mainly to poverty and development gaps, have been caused to a large extent by the way direct subsidies are granted in proportion to the area owned by farms” (p. 140). There are, however, great efforts that Romania has made to modernise rapidly, and against this background, author Rusu explains in her chapter “Introducing EU Rural Development Policy in Romania – mission, priorities, territorial disparities”, in a novel way, through figures and graphs why in recent years our country has become one of the major beneficiaries of rural development funds. Qualitative research completed by the authors Dan Petre and Anca Popescu focuses on how Romanian farmers and agricultural manufacturers/growers belong to two worlds, missing the connecting elements. “There is a deep rift between large businesses (‘large agriculture’) and small and medium-sized businesses (‘small agriculture’). Large agriculture is now a fully functioning and highly profitable business area, dominated by international producers, using modern methods and technologies, and generally well connected to international trends. Small and medium-sized businesses, however, are predominantly at a level of survival or at best financial equilibrium.” Survival farming has become a way of life for many Romanian producers, discouraging start-ups and the confidence to develop successfully in this sector.

Simona Ilie approaches rural employment from perspectives of heritage and modernity, looking into its historical evolutions. Legacies of a post-communist world, with rules and customs deeply inscribed in the institutional and behavioural environment, did not surprise the Romanian peasant very much. However, through Ilie's chapter "Rural employment: between heritage and modernity", we understand what happened to young people. Most of them chose to leave, abandoning their lands and the continuity of their parents' guild. "On a different trend we find the young group (15-24 years) of female employment. For the latter, as for the economy, employment in agriculture has declined to levels below those at the start, in favour of non-agricultural fields" (p. 185). In another chapter "Income and living standards in rural households", the same author develops and explains with data, analysis and graphs the income policy in rural areas.

"Evolution of standard of living in rural Romania", a chapter written by Ana Nițu, gives us an in-depth analysis about income and other specific quality of life indicators. There are enough arguments by the author to understand why the gap between rural and urban areas has narrowed in recent times, and that there is a chance that it will disappear in the future. "Food consumption and the number of durable goods has reached similar values in rural and urban areas. Prospects for the coming years seem to be towards further narrowing, until these differences are eliminated, at least on some dimensions, and the standard of living in rural areas is brought to a level equal to that in urban areas" (p. 216). However, the variations remain an uncertainty in relation to the European average.

"Poverty and social exclusion" in the Romanian village remains a difficult point in terms of positive predictability, burdened also by a chronic demographic decline in certain regions of the country. In this chapter, Horia Mihai comes up with a complex analysis that should worry us. "The social categories most affected by the poverty of the 1990s were pensioners and agricultural workers" (p. 219). We find the same categories today in a world unchanged since then, and the risk of severe poverty and functional illiteracy remains roughly the same. Solutions exist, but the initiative remains only a prospect. "In order to reduce the poverty of the Romanian village, broad public policies are needed, which simultaneously aim to expand other economic areas besides agriculture and, at the same time, lead to the empowerment of as many people as possible whose options are limited in the current labour market context" (p. 225).

In the chapter "Living conditions: public utilities of local interest" Iulian Stănescu identifies the main positive trends in living conditions in rural Romania. "The major improvement in living conditions in rural Romania comes from the connection of homes and the population to water and sewerage, particularly to public networks." (p. 244). However, the heterogeneity between rural and urban areas has increased and will increase. "Broadly speaking, the policy and financing of water, sewerage and gas connections for rural households should take into account the increasing heterogeneity of rural communities in Romania" (p. 245).

Ionuț Marian Anghel depicts the socio-economic evolution of the Roma minority in rural areas. According to the author's reasoned opinion, the Roma "have remained more of a rural population" (p. 248) and the educational structure has slightly improved between the last two censuses. "The share of Roma who completed secondary education increased from 1.3% in 2002 to 3.2% in 2011, while the share of those who completed secondary education increased by more than 10 percentage points, from 22% in 2002 to 36% in 2011. The gap between rural Roma and other ethnic groups is considerable, with more than 90% of Roma having completed secondary school or less. The share of ethnic Romanians in the same situation is 70% and that of Hungarians 67%" (p. 250). However, spatial segregation is still high and access to public utilities remains an unresolved issue.

The second chapter written by Flavius Mihalache is "Education in rural areas", in which the impact of the endless series of reforms with minor positive effects is thoroughly investigated. The author talks about adjustments in the regulatory framework through figures and representative results in the educational structure in terms of school infrastructure, teacher turnover and quality of education. "The reform of the education system after 1990 brought, among other things, a reduction in the number of rural educational establishments and in the enrolment, figures offered by them, decision-making and financial decentralization, changes in the curricula, and some improvements in material resources, even though on this dimension many rural school establishments still show significant deficiencies" (p. 273).

Maria Livia Ștefănescu brings to light the subject of Romanians' accessibility to the desired forms of education in her chapter "Accessibility of Romanians in the period 1990-2010 to the desired forms of education". In her conclusions "a very significant part of the population is disappointed by the possibility of benefiting from the forms of education they want. The situation in rural areas is much worse. The constant change, from year to year, in the opinions of the individuals questioned about QAFI is also generated by the absence of a unified vision at government level, on the long term, for the promotion of certain types of educational policies". This sector of education remains a vulnerable point compared to Western European countries, perpetuating inequality in Romanian rural education. The author returns with a second chapter about the quality of health care perceived by the population, in which we learn that "a European classification ranks the individual health status of Romanians 15th out of 20 European countries".

"Health and healthcare coverage of the rural population" is another sensitive topic in rural Romania, but one that takes on an interesting shape in Cristina Tomescu's chapter. A complexity of the factors affects people's health status and evolution of health conditions: poverty, hygiene, hospital infrastructure, food quality, stress, as well as other indicators. Unfortunately, "life expectancy at birth in Romania is one of the lowest in Europe; along with Bulgaria and Latvia, Romania ranks last in this indicator, with life expectancy at birth in rural Romania

lower than in urban Romania. In 2018, the lowest life expectancy in Romania is for men in rural areas, a very low value in the European context” (p. 289).

Mihai Dumitru highlights in his chapter: “Social stratification in rural Romania” divisions, patterns, hierarchies, relationships, contained in social stratification in rural Romania. “Rural Romania entered the new capitalism with a historical legacy and with problems that, if not solved, will have a major influence on future generations” (p. 311). The Romanian economic elites remain alienated from the interests, but above all the obligations towards the population, perpetuating pauperisation, and the absence of the middle class.

“Deviance, criminality and social control in rural communities” reflects, in the opinion of authors Dan Banciu and Lucian Rotariu, a situation that has not changed in the last 30 years. “Although many important economic, political, and cultural transformations have taken place in Romanian society, paradoxically, during the transition period that Romania has gone through in almost 30 years, those “risk” factors that generate deviance, criminality and violence in society have not been diminished, counteracted, and prevented” (p. 312). An example confirming the rules is the unchanged situation of corruption in rural areas, in which local government representatives have been involved in a lack of transparency and subsidiarity at all levels.

“Processes of urbanization of the countryside and suburbanization of regional urban centres” is for author Cătălin Berescu a subject often politicized by the obsession with urbanization, ignoring the clear advantages of village life not only from an economic but also from a spiritual perspective. “Just as in the interwar period we looked to the village to find out essential things about the nation and communities, the hallmark of the Gustian school being visible even today in the world of academic research, we now focus on the city or the *lack of urbanity of the village* to describe, and especially to compare the way of life of Romanians with that of other nations” (p. 328). We have become familiar with a multitude of indicators that criticize rural life lacking modernization, but the Romanian urban environment alone cannot define the economic dimension and cannot define a nation without the rural dimension. The future of the Romanian village lies in a kind of generalized suburbia that “will generate an ‘American’ way of life, with problems adapted to the Romanian specificity, including a devastating impact on territorial development” (p. 339).

Laurențiu Tănase closes this volume with a study on contemporary society and the expression of religiosity in rural Romania – “Contemporary society and the expression of religiosity in rural Romania” – trying to understand its transformations from within the rural environment. “In rural Romania, social transformations are slower than in urban areas, but they are important enough to raise a number of important questions about the capacity of religion, especially the majority Orthodox religion, to harmonize with the modern changes that our contemporary society is experiencing” (p. 340). The process of secularisation is also closely related to the

act of ruralisation, and here there is a mutual influence that may differ greatly from the urban environment. Nevertheless, the Church remains an important place for religious assistance but also for socialisation.

The volume brings to light the most important themes of the Romanian village of yesterday and today, with the good and the bad, with evolutions and involutions seen from different legitimate points of view. As we read the book, two essential things stand out: on the one hand, the rural environment is not disappearing, but transforming, remaining an important component in defining the identity of the Romanian people, and on the other hand, the quality of life in the Romanian village has improved, despite the fact that many indicators show a notable gap between life in the city and life in the village where things are not good at all. Taken as a whole, each chapter highlights successful and failed policies over the last 30 years to modernise the countryside. The whole project stands out from other similar research in that the volume focuses on a complexity of themes, sufficient in terms of concerns and areas to provide a complete, up-to-date, and even futuristic picture of the rural environment, in such a way that the reader can also learn about some important predictions. The volume awaits any reader who wants to find out what has happened to the Romanian village, and especially who wants to rediscover it in the current light of post- modernisation and its dilemmatic change under the aegis of globalisation.