

Is money more important than status?

A case of Romanian peasants

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Abstract: Agriculture has lost its importance in many parts of the world, leaving peasants in a state of uncertainty regarding their social status and identity. This article uses both quantitative and qualitative data to present the changes experienced by Romanian peasants as a result of an entire series of processes which led to the loss of their place within society. Statistical data are used to illustrate the evolution of the most relevant agriculture-related indicators over the last three decades. Qualitative data are presented in order to explain how developments in agriculture were perceived by peasants. While the changes might be irreversible, the story of the 'old' class of peasants should constitute a starting point for redesigning national policies and avoiding the disintegration of an entire social class.

Keywords: livestock farming; social status; stock farmer; traditional agriculture

The social condition of the peasantry has declined throughout the world, especially in capitalist, urbanised, developed countries, and has been the subject of study in extensive literature articles. For some authors (Shanin 1972; Boltvinik 2016), the focus of debate has been on the 'awkward' persistence of the peasant class, which continues to exist in spite of century-old predictions regarding its disappearance and replacement with a new capitalist-style social class, or on the 'peasant essentialism', which has ensured the survival of peasantry even in 'mature capitalism' (Bernstein 2003). In other analyses, regarding peasants in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), the attention has been focused on the collectivisation process and how decades of land expropriation by the state led to the weakening of the peasant spirit and sense of community (Bauerkämper and Iordachi 2014). Other studies have dealt with the economic aspects of the 'peasantry issue', such as the rural-urban divide and poverty of the countryside or marginalisation of the rural space as a result of urbanisation, industrialisation or globalisation processes (Boltvinik 2016; Giannakis and Bruggeman 2020). Few works have tackled the 'bright side' of the peasants' story, offering examples

of how rural communities can be revived through state-implemented policies that can give a second chance to impoverished areas and small-scale family farming (Csoba 2020) or of how village inhabitants and 'preservationists' have managed to conserve the natural capital of rural space and reap the benefits, instead of the harm of gentrification (Brown-Saracino 2004).

Although all these studies are informative, they do not specifically deal with the subjective dimension of what happened with agriculture and peasantry in CEE countries over the last three decades, and especially after these countries joined the mainly urbanised EU. Not the least important, while there are numerous studies examining the risks in agriculture, defining the potential adversities related to the production, marketing, financing or legal provisions (Komarek et al. 2020), none of them deal with the conditions of peasants from a socio-psychological perspective. The sociological literature on risk has been dominated by the critical rationalist perspective of Beck's theory of 'risk society' or by the structural functionalist perspective of Douglas's 'sociocultural theory of risk'. While the former sees risk as a probability of harm caused by processes

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associated with modernity and industrialisation (Beck 1992), the latter views risk as culturally constructed and susceptible to culturally biased perceptions (Douglas and Wildavsky 1983). Although barely touching on the condition of peasants and agriculture, both theoretical perspectives primarily target the agency or the sources of the risks and refer to environmental risks of pollution or chemical overuse for increased production. As regards the identity and position of individuals within society, the risk society theory envisions an identity construction process grounded on 'reflexive modernization', beyond status and class, social identity being quite a matter of personal choice and risk taking in a society free from traditional restrictions (Beck 1992). The sociocultural theory includes the loss of prestige among the most important categories of risks, prestige, being one of the foundations of status (Roberts et al. 2019), but the theory is focused on the collective construction and perception of risk and on the 'sinners' who caused harm. None of these theories is suitable for the purpose of the paper, which aims to examine the risk of peasants' losing their social status and identity, with negative effects on their well-being and even survival, because the subjective perception of this risk cannot be fully comprehended when explored only in relation to the agency or with analytical risk assessments. A newer constructivist conceptualisation of risk, which is based on the idea that risks are socially constructed and deeply dependent on subjective perceptions and particular experiences of the actors involved, in terms of both the agency and intentionality (Battistelli and Galantino 2019), is better suited here.

A qualitative investigation on the social construction of the risk of status loss of peasants is essential to understand their current insecure social condition and, eventually, to exclusively remodel economically oriented agricultural policies that fail to see beyond numbers. As convincingly demonstrated (Boyce et al. 2010; Keshabyan and Day 2020), the overall well-being of individuals is not fundamentally linked to wealth or economic gains, but to their social status, usually the occupational one, which is the foundation of their social identity and source of self-esteem and reputation among their peers.

The focus of the research is on a part of the historical region of Bukovina, located in the north-eastern part of Romania, comprising the town of Câmpulung Moldovenesc and the neighbouring communes, in Suceava County. In this mountainous part of Bukovina, people have raised animals, mainly cattle, for centuries and have found their meaning of life in the attachment to the land and livestock, yet, in the last

decades, their way of living has lost so much in importance that they fear their material and cultural riches will disappear with them and will be lost forever, in an increasingly uprooted society.

Despite the geographically limited scope of the research, its findings are most certainly true for peasants from other new EU member states, which joined in 2004 and 2007, as the statistical data indicate a similar reality. In all of these countries, the importance of agriculture, as the percentage of value added to the gross domestic product (GDP) decreased approximately two to almost five times since the 1990s, while the population engaged in producing agricultural goods experienced a similar decline. At the same time, many of these countries remain predominantly rural, with a sizable amount of the population living in the countryside ranging from around 30% in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Hungary to 40% or more in Croatia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia (World Bank 2021), suggesting that a significant number of people have been left without their traditional occupation. Furthermore, ethnographic data collected from Bukovina apply to almost all the inhabitants of the mountainous areas in Romania and elsewhere, as private property, in general, and agricultural land, in particular, are of paramount importance for all peasants, regardless of the geographical region they inhabit.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

From a methodological point of view, the paper is based on two types of primary sources. The first one consists of qualitative ethnographic data gathered over a period of more than ten years, which includes many hours of personal discussions with the locals, an attentive survey of their behaviours, and participant observations of daily and seasonal activities. Assuming that the sole purpose of gaining academic knowledge is trivial compared to that of exposing the peasants' concerns, the research was devised to collect their stories and points of view regarding their social position or work and life satisfaction and use them to launch a debate about their future on socio-psychological, not economic grounds.

The research used a flexible purposive sample (Patton 2002), formed of individuals who had a great deal of experience in farming who were recruited through personal relationships and informal networks, as well as valuable information and suggestive stories. The study population, roughly belonging to three generations, was defined and selected by the main occupation. The first generation included individuals who are now in their

80s and 90s and who practiced agriculture, mainly livestock farming before the collectivisation process began in Romania and never gave up this activity. The second generation comprised their children, some of whom were pressured by the socialist industrialisation process to change their way of living and find jobs in the city, although they continued farming in their free time. They currently enjoy a state pension as former workers in the industrial sector but persevere in working in agriculture not necessarily for an income. The third generation included the children of the second generation who are presently working in other economic sectors or have emigrated.

According to the interpretive paradigm and ethnographic approach, observation of the participants was preferred as a method to both thoroughly document what peasants do, say, or feel and avoid the use of prejudgments about the study population (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011). Field notes, which reflected the emic perspective of the study population on the agents and consequences of any changes in agriculture, comprised a vast array of information, which was then coded on four main axes. Regarding the agency, their perceptions were coded as natural-manufactured and personal-external, referring to causes and responsibility for changes, while the intentionality dimension was divided into beneficial-harmful and economic-social, with referral to consequences. Frequently raised and repeated issues were coded according to the main correlates of status, respectively control over resources, prestige, and capital (Ellis et al. 2018).

Data interpretation was performed through a narrative analysis in an attempt to understand how peasants experienced changes in agriculture. The data analysis of the narrative focused on its content, identifying the types of problems raised and personal interpretations of those problems by the study population. The individual narratives were then compared and combined and source triangulation was used to provide a 'holistic' perspective (Bălan 2011).

The second set of data includes a series of official statistics provided by national and international organisations. Although official data are essential in understanding how Romanian agriculture changed in the last decades, 'cold' statistics cannot reveal the subjective meaning of all the events that transformed the traditional peasant, such as privatisation, liberalisation, European integration, or globalisation.

Since time immemorial, the inhabitants of the countryside all over Eastern Europe worked the land, for long periods as serfs, and depended on their crops

for subsistence, having almost no relations to the city market or money crops (Krader 1960). In Romania, although the land ownership of peasants is a relatively recent reality in their millenary existence, their reliance on working the land created a specific culture. This culture was extensively referred to in public space, political discourse, and literature to equate the essence of the Romanian 'spirit' with the simple, 'authentic' life of the peasantry, idealising the peasant, the village, and the rural life in general (Baghiu and Pojoga 2019).

It is this 'spirit' that the socialist regime was trying to destroy through the collectivisation of agriculture, a process that led to the reorganisation of 15 million ha of agricultural land into collective and state farms. Only about 9% of the total land fund remained relatively untouched by the collectivisation process, consisting of harsh terrain and dispersed rural settlements, unsuitable for mechanisation and the collective management of resources (Deletant 2019). Nevertheless, even in areas where the collectivisation was not workable, the state imposed a system of quotas and taxes, which was hardly bearable by the peasants and, by 1975, only 38% of the workforce was involved in agricultural activities, a substantial decrease from 72% in 1950 (Tsantis and Pepper 1979).

The community that is the subject of this study, further referred to as the Area (Figure 1), was not included in the collectivisation process, being surrounded by mountains and forests. The agricultural land of the Area primarily consists of natural pastures and meadows and the main activity of the peasants is livestock farming, even on the outskirts of Câmpulung Moldovenesc town. Locals remember that some attempts of establishing tillage associations existed in the Area, yet they were not profitable and were eventually dismantled. Nevertheless, the quota and tax system imposed upon the peasants by the socialist regime in the 1950s, based on the surface of the land or the amount of livestock they owned was so abhorred that many resorted to various tricks to resist the imposed systems. They did not sell their land or quit agriculture as in other parts of Romania (Kideckel 1983), but tried to reduce or hide their agricultural inventory or 'double cross the system'. For instance, a man in his late 70s remembers that his household used to raise a large number of mixed livestock, but the quota system made his family stop raising sheep and, complicit with the veterinarian, kill the new-born calves and declare them stillbirth so that they 'would not feed them for the state'.

Besides forcing them to hide their production and lie about their livestock, many second-generation individ-

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Figure 1. Map of Romania, including the Area

Source: Geoportal ANCPI (2022)

uals were also forced to find jobs in urban industries. Still, they continued the activities of their parents, doing factory work at nights and agriculture in their spare time or during the day. Instead of alienating them from traditional agricultural activities, these hardships made them stronger in their belief that doing agriculture was the 'authentic' way of living and their social status grounded in the ownership and working of the land was increased, not decreased by the socialist economy. Unlike in other parts of Romania where collectivisation managed to undermine the solidarity and structure of the family (Kideckel 1983), in the Area, the extended kin-based network continued to function as a unit of production. According to locals, what happened in the post-socialist period, especially the tumultuous and ill-advised liberalisation and transition to a market economy in the 1990s, as well as the economic and financial crisis in the late 2000s was what eroded this network of kin and friends, as well as their social position within society.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The evolution of the most relevant agriculture-related indicators is instructive in understanding the constant degradation of the peasants' conditions over the last three decades and the failure of the state to protect an important social class.

The consistent rural structure of the Romanian society and the importance of agriculture are revealed, among others, by the fact that agriculture contributed

a large share to the country's GDP even before 1990, in a period in which collectivisation, urbanisation, and industrialisation efforts led to the displacement of the large rural population. In 1990, the amount that agriculture was added to the GDP in Romania equalled 21.81% and declined to 18.16% in 1995, still remaining one of the highest values in Europe and certainly the highest among the current CEE EU members (Figure 2). In only three decades, following the global downward trend, the share agriculture provided to the GDP decreased five times, but remained the second-highest at EU-level, with 3.84% in 2020. Among the new EU member states added in 2004 and 2007, only Bulgaria underwent a similar decline, from 15.39% in 1991 to 3.51% in 2020 (World Bank 2021).

The contribution of agriculture to the GDP calls for an analysis of the share of the rural population in the total population and, from this point of view, statistical data in Figure 3 indicate that the pace of the urbanisation process in Romania has not been fast in the last three decades. During this period, the population residing in the countryside decreased by less than 2.5%, from 46.08% in 1992 to 43.67% in January 2021 (NIS 2021). The urbanisation rate was not only slow but was even reversed by the slight increase in the share of the rural population, which occurred during the period 2007–2016.

In Suceava County, which includes the Area, the rural population is almost 13% above the country level, at 56.11% in January 2021 (NIS 2021). Here, the demographic process has registered a peculiar devel-

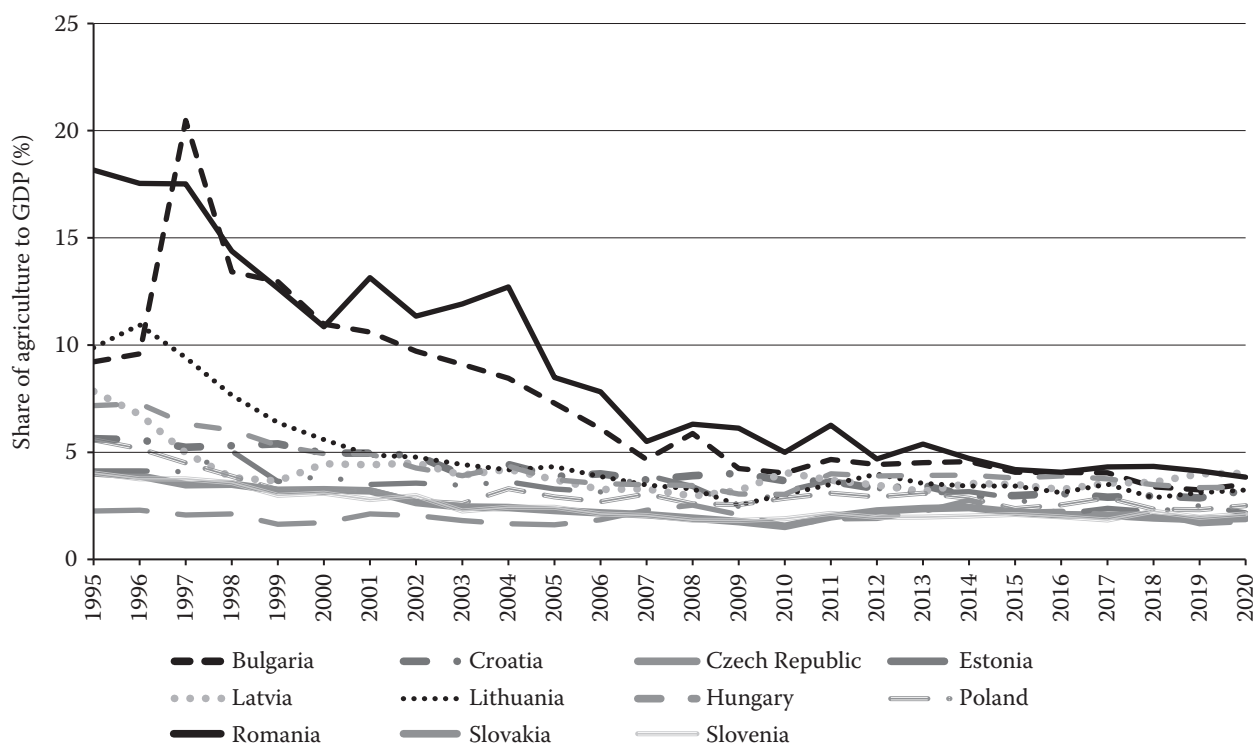


Figure 2. Value added of agriculture, forestry, and fishing to GDP in new EU Member States (% of GDP)

Source: Own processing based on DataBank datasets (World Bank 2021)

opment since the beginning of the 1990s. Suceava County was the most ruralised region of Romania even before 1989, in 1992, 63.48% of the population lived in the countryside. A significant change occurred in 2005, after Romania signed the Treaty of Accession to the EU, with a major drop in the total rural popula-

tion in only one year, from 63.59% in 2004 to 55.20% in 2005. In fact, the so-called 'urbanisation' of Suceava County was the result of administrative changes made by Romania to prepare its adhesion to the EU, which included the transformation of communes into towns and the incorporation of many communes and villages

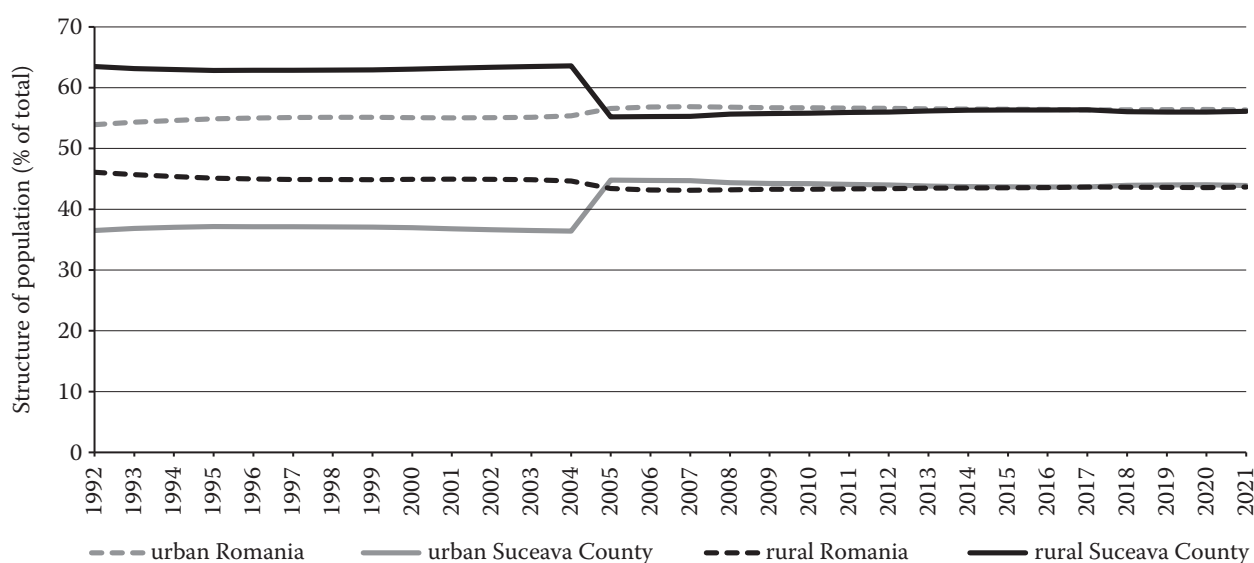


Figure 3. Urban and rural population by domicile in Romania and Suceava County (% of total)

Source: Own processing based on Tempo-Online datasets (NIS 2021)

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into municipalities and cities (NIS 2021). Although the former villagers became citizens officially, they continued to earn their subsistence by agriculture. Moreover, except for this large 'artificial' decrease, the rural population has continued to slightly increase since 2005.

Although not all the inhabitants of the countryside are peasants, the share of the population working in the agricultural sector in the total active population was and still is the highest among EU member countries. The evolution of the number of individuals employed in agriculture, defined by NIS as persons whose agricultural produce is used either for sale or exchange in kind or for his or her own consumption tells an interesting story by itself.

Despite socialist industrialisation efforts, the collapse of the former political regime found Romania in a relatively ruralised state, with almost 50% of the population residing in rural areas (NIS 2021) and being dependent on agriculture to a considerable extent, with approximately 30% of the country's workforce active in this field (World Bank 2021). In the first decade after the Romanian Revolution in 1989, the number of people employed in agriculture did not decrease, as was the case in all the other European states, even the former socialist ones. While, at the EU level, the top seven countries with the highest number of people employed in agriculture in 1991 remained on top, although in a slightly different order, in all the other countries,

except for Romania, the indicator has decreased significantly over the last three decades.

Unlike any other country in the EU, in Romania, the total population employed in agriculture grew almost constantly after 1991, reaching a peak of 45.21% in 2000. Since 2001, the number has decreased, but, in 2019, Romania remained on top, with 21.24% of the total employees being involved in agriculture, a rate almost double than that of Greece, which occupied second place in the same year, with 11.60% of the total employees being involved in agriculture (World Bank 2021). All the other new EU member states, which joined in 2004 and 2007, experienced more substantial declines, in 2019, their share of the population engaged in agriculture ranged from 2.66% in the Czech Republic to 9.15% in Poland (Figure 4).

For Suceava County, agriculture is even more important, the share of individuals employed in this sector is above the national level by almost 13%, although it has decreased considerably over the last three decades, from 45.43% in 1992 to only 33.86% in 2019 (NIS 2021). As in all other parts of Romania, in Suceava County, in the first decade after the 1989 Romanian Revolution, the number of people working in agriculture did not decrease, but it increased until reaching a peak of 57.68% in 2000, after which it started to fluctuate (NIS 2021).

The evolution of the number of employees in agriculture in Romania was coupled with, or even par-

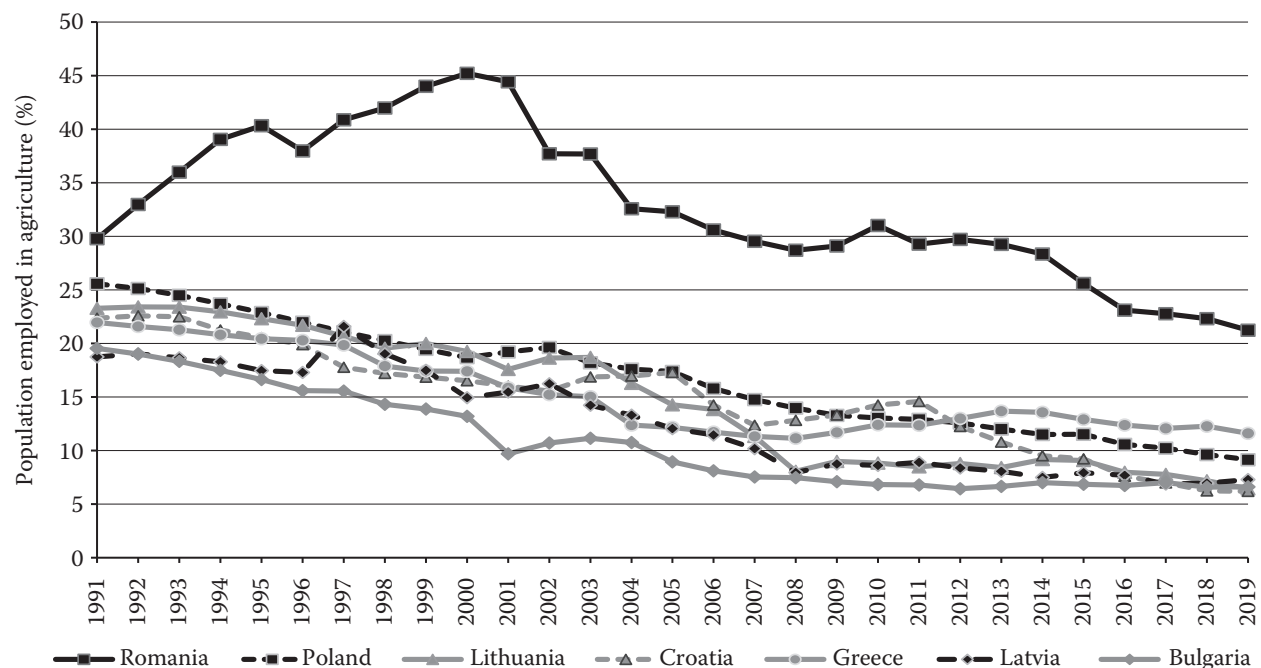


Figure 4. Population employed in agriculture in top-seven 'agriculturalist' EU countries (% of total employment)

Source: Own processing based on DataBank datasets (World Bank 2021)

tially determined by, the ample decline in the number of livestock (Figure 5). From 1991 to 2019, the livestock per 100 ha of land decreased by 62.37% for cattle, 66.38% for pigs, and 16.18% for sheep and goats (NIS 2021). In Suceava County, the density of the livestock per 100 ha was much higher than the country's level in the 1990s, as was the decrease since then. The number of cattle on 100 ha of land decreased by half, from 72.2 heads in 1990 to only 36.7 heads in 2019, while, nationally, it dropped from 38 heads to 14.3 heads during the same period (NIS 2021) and the biggest decreases compared to the previous year occurred in 2010, shortly after Romania adhered to EU regulations.

The decline in the number of livestock and the population employed in agriculture had a significant impact on the agricultural production and consumption patterns in Romania, which became an importer of food, including fresh cow milk and boneless cattle meat. Imports of whole fresh cow milk increased from 113 t in 1991 to 166 633 t in 2019, with the largest and constant increases occurring since 2007 onward. The quantity of fresh cow milk exports, which was 48 101 t in 2019, is almost four times lower than the quantity of the imports (FAO 2021). Similarly, once a net exporter of boneless beef and veal meat, with quantities almost five times larger than the im-

ports in 1992, Romania has since reversed the trend. (FAO 2021).

All these shrinkages in agricultural production and trade, as well as the overall agricultural activity, had various objective causes. A frequently used explanation refers to the fact that Romanian agriculture, as well as the agriculture of other CEE countries, was underfinanced and agricultural production was low and inefficient even before 1989 and the transition to a market economy did nothing except bring to light the result of decades of socialist mismanagement (OECD 2000). Other explanations invoke the failure of the democratic state institutions installed after 1989 to restructure the agricultural sector, which has led to the decrease in domestic agricultural production (Wolz et al. 2020), or the effect of land fragmentation as a result of the restitution process, which is not propitious for cash crops, but only for subsistence farming (Ovrei et al. 2021). Such explanations do not grasp the subjective factors which are not always related to the economic aspects such as profit, efficiency, and the cost-benefit ratio.

The rest of the paper presents the subjective experiences of Romanian peasants who, although concerned about economic issues, are more afraid of losing their status and social identity, which are indissolubly linked to their land. The description presented here is not

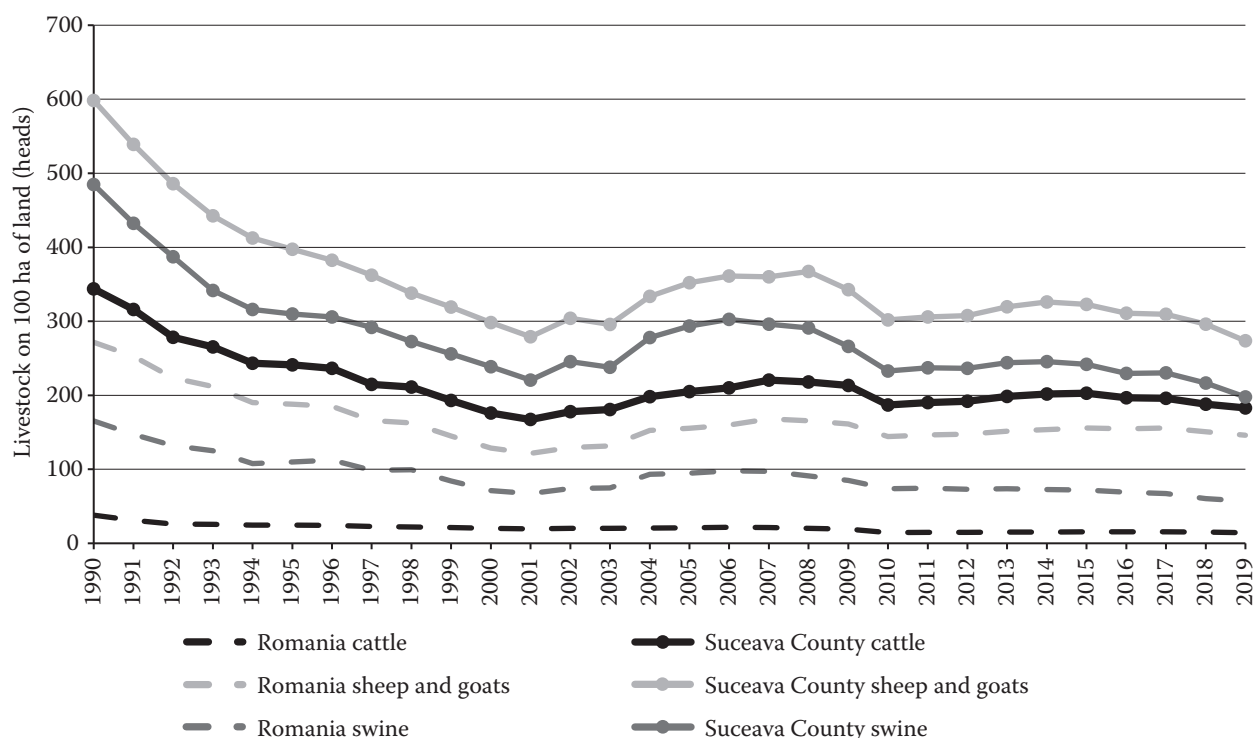


Figure 5. Livestock on 100 ha of land, by animal category in Romania and Suceava County (number of heads)

Source: Own processing based on Tempo-Online datasets (NIS 2021)

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about poverty, as are the majority of studies dealing with the 'peasant problem', but about subjective meanings attached to farming or the way Romanian peasants construct their reality.

Simply defined, social status is the position a person occupies within the hierarchy of a group or society, typically correlated with control over resources, prestige, and capital (Ellis et al. 2018). The most relevant status with which individuals identify themselves might vary from country to country and from epoch to epoch, yet it is commonly accepted that the occupational status is the primary element of a person's social identity (Faunce 1990) due to its achieved nature, as it indicates that the individual occupies a position within the group or society based on a variety of desirable traits and skills. Moreover, occupational status is the primary source of self-esteem and self-worth (Bourdieu 1984), which are not inherent characteristics of an individual, but status-derived elements.

Since the advent of agriculture, farming was associated with having a high status (Kanazawa 2015), as this hard occupation required control of the most important resource, certain abilities which conferred prestige, and a specific type of embodied capital (Borgerhoff Mulder et al. 2010), which was knowledge of how to work the land, take care of livestock and ensure the survival of the family.

In terms of control over resources, in Romania, as in other countries of Eastern Europe, people have a peculiar concept of property, which is an essential part of their personhood (Verdery 2004), and the ownership of agricultural land comes not only with rights but also with the obligation to work it out of respect for their ancestors and the inheritance their parents and grandparents suffered for.

After 1989, people in the Area had high hopes that they would be able to resume the activities of their ancestors without restrictions or quotas, and, in Suceava County, the number of people who left the countryside for the city in the 1990s was almost insignificant. This situation could be partly explained by the collapse of the oversized and inefficient socialist factories and the rampant unemployment and economic hardships that followed, which transformed the ownership of agricultural land into an 'occupational and social buffer' (OECD 2000). Yet, the second-generation peasants in the Area remember how eager they were to work together with their parents again, and they retired before reaching the standard retirement age and before the factories in which they were employed were closed, a tendency reflected in the increase in the share of people employed in agriculture

after 1990. The second wave of a slight increase occurred before the Romanian accession to the EU, as this step was predicted to bring considerable improvement in their situation (Kideckel 2009).

In spite of their high hopes, livestock peasants in the Area were constantly discredited with regards to their lifelong activity and the transformation of the agricultural land into a worthless resource for agriculture. In the three decades of transition and repeated reforms since 1990, the economic rationale or the 'incapacity and ill will of the state' made Romania a net importer of food products and live animals and the produce of their land, such as cow's milk or cattle meat, became useless, while the consumption needs were ensured through imports and a local market was not encouraged. In the words of one local in his 70s, 'amateurish and rapacious politicians, only interested in striking it rich fast, have sold almost everything valuable in the country, including their souls'. Such accounts are quite similar to the ones found by other authors (Swain 2013) not only in Romania, but in other CEE countries, such as Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, where, in the first years of post-socialist transition, 'impotent' or 'inexperienced' local authorities and opportunistic 'green barons' contributed to the collapse of a vital sector of the economy. Although referring to distinctive types of socialist agriculture and, in the case of Romania, a part of the country where the collectivisation process hardly resembles the characteristics of other regions of Romania, including the Area, Swain's analysis demonstrates how early traumatic experiences were overcome differently by these countries due to both their historical experiences, ranging from the highest degree of Soviet-style collectivisation in Romania to no collectivisation in Poland, as well as the agricultural policies regarding land restitution and collective farms dismantling implemented in the 1990s (Swain 2013).

Moreover, in an increasingly consumer society, only the land proper for building purposes remained valuable. Although the Area has a huge nationally and internationally recognised tourism potential, second generation locals do not want to sell or change the destination of their lands and are heartbroken thinking that this is exactly what their children and grandchildren might do after they will eventually die. Within an old and big family, whose heirs divided a very large plot of land inherited a century ago from their grand-grandmother and who continue to harvest hay and raise cattle, a member sold his property to an investor who started to build a motel. The transaction, although very profitable for the seller, was considered by other

members of the extended family a 'failure' to protect the inheritance and keep the land within the family.

For old peasants, their agricultural lands are those 'inalienable possessions' (Weiner 1992) that must be preserved and appreciated. As in other parts of the developed world, where people continue farming despite the hard work and low income (Wuthnow 2015), peasants equate owning land not only with their social status and identity, but also with freedom, and losing their freedom is the equivalent of losing themselves.

With reference to prestige, defined as social influence and, ultimately, control over desirable resources (Henrich and Gil-White 2001), in all human societies, the status granted the holder of a high social position, respect and dignity within a group or society, which are essential features acquired through hard work and display certain skills. Romanian peasants feel that, for years, their occupation has been discredited by both politicians and the media. Once, they were held in high respect and appreciation by their family, peers from the village and neighbours or friends from the town, because they possessed invaluable resources, such as the land and the produce resulting from it, as well as the skills for raising cattle and producing foodstuff wanted by everyone. Now, everyone can buy produce from the store, although of inferior quality. The few local dairy factories that still function in the Area collect fresh cow milk at a very low price, reminding the peasants of the times when socialist state institutions paid ridiculous sums for their products, making them feel that it is 'fairer' to give the milk away for free or even feed it to the pigs. As a 74-year-old man stated, it feels 'degrading to receive so little for a hard work' and it is like in the 1960s, when 'my father went to the collecting centre in town with a cart full of potatoes to pay his quotas and with the money he received he could only buy a big watermelon' for his eleven kids.

Unlike Romania, in other CEE countries, such as the Czech Republic and, to a lesser extent, Slovakia, Poland, Hungary, or Bulgaria, peasants were assisted by civil society, policymakers and even consumers in constructing a new social identity and adapting to the new economic conditions, for example, with organic farming (Zagata et al. 2019). Still, even in these cases, the change was the result of necessity rather than of 'reflexive modernisation', and even in the most successful country in this regard, the Czech Republic, it was only a minority of peasants that established a 'direct source' of their social identity in a new, yet old way of farming (Zagata 2009).

However, the old Romanian peasants in the Area continue to raise cattle, although on a smaller scale,

because they believe that maintaining traditions and their 'good name' is more important than gaining money. Not long ago, they used to harvest hay over the entire summer, on all their lands, including those located at high altitude on harsh terrain, not accessible for vehicles and hardly accessible by foot. The peasants constructed barns in the mountains to store the hay, which was transported to stables in the winter with the help of horse-drawn wagons. Now, few people still own horses and these plots have been abandoned in the last years because peasants lack the strength to climb and work in harsh conditions. One can easily see deserted or dilapidated barns in the mountains, although these usually belong to individuals who are now dead or to those who left the Area, as a 'good householder would never do that because the family and friends judge you'. For instance, a local in his late 70s climbed the mountain only to repair the roof of his barn, even though he had not used it in years. He did so because, otherwise, according to his strongly held belief, he would have lost his 'good name' and the associated prestige. Although it is hard, they continue to raise cattle and harvest hay almost exactly as their ancestors did. They are not doing it for money, as they are frugal and many of them have pensions, but because it is 'inconceivable' to proceed any other way, acting as if trying to maintain the 'metaphysical root' of work and maintaining an organic relationship between the land, hard work and worth, and to defy both the 'solid' and 'liquid' modernity, in which work became oppressive yet necessary for living an existence or 'entertaining and amusing', deprived of its former ennobling character (Bauman 2010). They have large houses, with at least one floor above the ground, yet it is not the house that brought them the appreciation of their peers, but the earliest harvest, the most perfectly cut meadow, the largest quantity and quality of hay, the healthiest and most productive cows. They stubbornly continue to believe that the amount of work and the size and quality of the hay that they produce should still be sources of gaining prestige in their community, although these concerns are nonsensical to their children and grandchildren, for whom prestige is currently associated with valued material possessions. Moreover, as explained in other papers (Morén-Alegret and Władyska 2020; Scoones 2020), some of the third-generation individuals might work even harder than their parents and in more difficult conditions, yet they are doing it abroad and no one sees what they do to earn their living, but only what they have managed to save abroad in order to spend on a summer vacation at home.

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Regarding capital, although peasants do not usually possess cultural capital in the form of elite culture elements as defined by Bourdieu (1984), they have wisdom and general knowledge and valuable expertise on how to properly cut and dry the hay, how to treat livestock diseases, or how to process farming products, but this knowledge does not interest anyone anymore. One's physical strength and ability to work in harsh conditions are highly valued in cattle raisers elsewhere (Kanazawa 2015), as is knowledge capital (Borgerhoff Mulder et al. 2010). Old peasants in the Area still struggle to maintain their physical and mental strength in order to ensure enough fodder for the winter, and they continue to work in high temperatures and with rudimentary tools. Some of them, even in their 90s, still use the scythe to cut the grass, although many have a petrol engine hay mower at least, which is nonetheless useless on slopes and land with difficult terrain. Once, their knowledge constituted elements of insurance against natural risks, such as food shortages that can be caused by climatic events or other natural catastrophes and made the difference between high- and low-status individuals, yet, nowadays, they are like masters without apprentices.

With regard to the constructivist conceptualisation of risk, in terms of the agency, Romanian peasants primarily associate the risk of status loss with the ill-conceived decisions of the political class, not with modernity, as, in the current society, they are offered no alternatives of defining their status-based identities because there is no substitute for their old lucrative activity. Once, the way of life of the peasants was threatened by mechanisation and industry and modernity allegedly provided 'multiple choices' for a continuous redefinition of the individual identity (Giddens 1991), yet now no industry has come into the neighbourhood. Once, peasants were expropriated in the name of collective development and individual empowerment, now they have the land, but it has become useless, all in the name of increased productivity and economic efficiency. Besides, one cannot reasonably expect results from sending the members of almost 6 million agricultural establishments in the CEE countries, of which there are more than 3.4 million in Romania (EC 2020), to reinvent themselves without state intervention, given that most of them are seniors owning small farms. As for the intentionality, while, at the macro level, the changes in agriculture might have been positively oriented, for instance, towards increased productivity and economic gains, at the micro level, the negative outcomes are more noticeable and, for peasants every-

where, they are reflected in the subjective fear of losing their occupation and, implicitly, their social status.

Confronted with all these transformations that threaten their social position, old peasants refuse to accept the reality and continue to convey morale and pride when talking in public, as usually high-status individuals do (Scheepers et al. 2009), yet behind the 'camera' they feel that their world is about to disappear. Such an anticipated development might be as disastrous to them, to their inheritance and to the entire country, as the Area is not only exquisite but also untouched by the harmful activities of present-day agriculture, such as the use of pesticides or other environmentally unfriendly substances and techniques.

CONCLUSION

The paper has offered some insight into the peasants' way of life in an area of Romania which has never been part of the collectivisation process and has continued livestock farming, although their life has been profoundly affected by a series of mismanaged processes that have taken place since the 1990s, such as the transition to a market economy, successive, but unsuccessful, economic reforms, preparations for European integration, economic and financial crises.

The degradation of the life of Romanian peasants does not necessarily refer to economic hardships, but to socio-psychological ones. The people in question are suffering because they lost elements of their social status, such as control of the resources, prestige, and embodied capital. Like other peasants throughout the world, they do not only need money, but dignity and a feeling of usefulness are paramount. It is their 'deep' conviction that agriculture, in general, and cattle raising, in particular, have lost their significance after decades of political neglect and public status discreditation, and that this is the reason that led to a paradoxical situation: while the land at home is left fallow, younger members of their families are going abroad to work as low-wage labourers in the agricultural or other sectors, in harsh conditions. It is also their conviction that regaining the importance of their status would bring their families back.

The main conclusions of the core narratives of the investigated peasants are that changes in agriculture are primarily manufactured by decision makers and that the main cause of their current condition is the inability of the state to capitalise on its resources and preserve the importance of peasants as quality food providers and keepers of traditions and local knowledge. The principal consequences of these changes are

harmful to them, and the biggest harm is not of an economic, but of a social nature; therefore, they want the reestablishment of hard work as a source of social status and identity. In significantly rural countries of the EU, such as Romania, the fate of peasants cannot be dismissed from the public agenda. Nor can it be efficiently tackled without taking the perceptions and particularities of those who survived decades of collectivisation into account, as they are about to completely lose their status and social identity, surrendering in the fight against the current global-scale phenomena. The narratives of the investigated peasants deserve consideration even if they might not be true and entirely representative for all the peasants everywhere because they are nevertheless proof of the state institutions' failure in correctly informing citizens about economic and political pressures and actions and policies impacting their life.

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