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## **The Rural Areas in Rumania after Systematization Experiment. What Is Its Alternative?**

Researchers on rural questions of East-central Europe, currently undergoing drastic changes, often encounter a different level and separate-ness of changes that are taking place in this region. One aspect of these changes, however, can be acknowledged as a common factor. The specificity of changes in rural environments in such countries as Rumania, Bulgaria, Albania, can be explained only in the context of the specific history of the various countries. For this reason, in the present article many references are made to the past.

The presentation of the origin of the attitudes of Rumanian rural inhabitants enables the understanding of facts which often surprise researchers possessing another perspective and experience, for example, rural sociologists from Western countries.

The forms of land ownership in the rural areas in Rumania depict the long process of more or less radical reforms and transformations. In the period between the two World Wars the Rumanian Parliament of the day passed (in 1921) a law on the enfranchisement of peasants. The area of big landed property was reduced then to 500 hectares and, in some regions, e.g. in Transylvania and Bessarabia, even to 100 hectares. The following stage of curbing private property in the country was the agrarian reforms proclaimed after the abdication of King Michael I, in November 1947. The division of land among peasants, hardly completed toward the end of 1948, did not allow them enjoy for long the status of its owners. For it was as early as June 1949 that the first state farms and kolkhozes were set up. Soon, acting by hook and crook the authorities declared that almost all land had been collectivized. Private property — of very reduced size — had been left but in the mountains regions. And it was also there that it has survived — in the form of a relict — until this day. Consequently, there is no problem in this regions of carrying out reprivatization. Another relict of private property in the rural areas — throughout the period of communist rule — the so-called homestead plots with an area amounting, at the most, to 250 square metres, and due to peasants. There is no doubt that certain specific traits of the mentality of the Rumanian peasants, and also the

agricultural traditions of their country had accounted for the fact that the system of collective economy proved particularly ineffective from economic point of view. And so it was the human factor and the organizational and ownership system that weighed heavily on the economic disaster of collective agriculture in Rumania, since the soil there is, for the most part, very fertile and the climatic conditions no less favorable.

Mircea Eliade, an outstanding expert in Rumanian folk culture and of the 'sacrum' and the 'profanum' elements in the mentality of Rumanian peasants, foresaw — as one of few scholars of the day — the survival of certain characteristic traits of that peasant nation. Considering from the perspective of an emigré, the situation of the Rumanian rural areas in the communist period, Mircea Eliade said in his diary, on March 5, 1948, that the Rumanian peasantry, with its 'nomadic spirit' would be able to adjust itself to the conditions of any socio-political system. However, due to the sphere of 'sacrum', or to put it more broadly, due to culture, to folklore, it would also manage to preserve its identity<sup>1</sup>. Those forecasts have proved correct after forty years, when the first steps were taken towards reprivatization in the rural areas, i.e. beginning with the revolution in December 1989.

The same scholar has ascertained, of the basis of his observation of the Rumanian rural communities, their traits specific and ensuing from them a certain provincialism, dilettantism and the tendency to improvisation. Those traits, the carriers of which are the Rumanian peasants — made it possible for them to pass, with relative ease, from one social system to another. Now following the trend of thought of that eminent cultural anthropologist, one may venture the statement that the said traits are useful today; nevertheless, the economic costs of the transformations are too high. 'Dilettantism and improvising' burden negatively the process of the reforms carried out in the Rumanian countryside today. The road leading from provincialism to the presently desirable 'European universalism' has proved by no means easy, yet it seems indispensable to the population of Rumania.

Another expert in the problems of the Rumanian rural areas and community, and namely, Steven L. Sampson, ranking among the generation of scholars much younger than Mircea Eliade but also remaining in the influence zone of anthropology, disclosed an astonishing quality of peasants in that country: their ability to survive in highly unfavourable conditions<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>M. Eliade, *Religion, Literature, Communism. An Emigré Diary*, London 1990, Puls, p. 63

<sup>2</sup>S. L. Sampson was carrying on field work in the rural areas in Rumania 1947–1981. His research findings have been published i.e. in the paper: *Rich Families and Poor Collectives: An Anthropological Approach to Rumania's Second Economy*; see: *Bidrag til Oststats forskning*, Upsala, vol. II(1), pp. 44–77; by the same author: *Bureaucracy and Corruption as Anthropological Problems: A Case Study from Rumania*, Folk, vol. 25,

In Rumania, both in the country and in town, there developed under the communist system, production and services within the framework of the so-called secondary economy (in specialist literature also called 'shadow economy'). And, as stated by Steven L. Sampson carrying on his field work in Rumania 'the houses and barns of villagers were relatively well-stocked' in comparison with those in the poor collective farms what was due precisely to the 'secondary economy' and the black market of agricultural products. To use the terminology of the above mentioned author, the secondary economy was not recognized as capitalistic with regard to the primary one. At present, in the new political system, the participants in that 'secondary economy' have been elevated to the rank of representatives of a new social stratum stimulating market economy in the rural areas as well as in the relations between the country and the town<sup>3</sup>.

In the period of communist dictatorship in Nicolae Ceaucescu's version, peasants had to develop a specific resourcefulness, to pursue an economic game with the state and with the 'primary' official economy. The direct contact in the rural areas of the former and the latter has resulted, however, as stated by Steven L. Sampson, in the spreading of corruption attitudes. It is also worth pointing out the great pertinence of his observations concerning the dense network of informal connections in the Rumanian rural market, the widely practised habit of offering gifts, informal payments and bribes in the purchase of hard-to-get goods.

The above individual attitudes and practices in the economic game should be rationalized now, in the conditions of liberal operation of the market. However, since the free market conditions have not been realized in the rural areas in Rumania as yet, peasants are trying to carry on the economic game with the new government and the agricultural economy launched by it, in the same way as they did it in the past, under the communist system. Consequently, a conflict arises between the economic objectives of individual producers (attainment of maximum profit) in the black market) and the economic goals of the government which is striving for an equilibrium of food supply for both the rural and the urban population, that of agricultural regions and the ones with a poor base of their own food supply, of the ethnically Rumanian regions and those with differentiated make-up of national minorities.

Under the dictatorship of Nicolae Ceausescu peasants spent most of their economic effort on construction of their houses. They were aware of durability of such an asset. Moreover, it is worth stressing that they managed to preserve — in rural buildings — the valuable historical and regional traits. It is due to this fact that the architectonic visage of the Rumanian

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1983, Copenhagen, pp. 63-97 and *Is Romania the Next to Poland?*, Critique, vol. 16, Glasgow 1983, pp. 139-145

<sup>3</sup> *Gospodarka nieformalna. Uwarunkowania lokalne i systemowe (Informal Economy, Local and Systematic Conditioning Factors)*, Editor: K. Z. Sowa, Rzeszów 1990

villages is much more attractive today than of the Polish ones with their predominantly urbanized architecture characterized by rectangular blocks of houses with flat roofs and devoid of any regional traits.

Should one follow the adopted sequence of crucial periods in the history of the socio-economic system of the Rumanian rural areas and community, two more of the important stages should be indicated after the already mentioned enfranchisement of the peasants by virtue of the decrees of 1921, the agrarian reform in 1947 and collectivization started in 1948. The first of them is the migration of the rural population from land to the cities, a process growing in intensity since the end of the sixties. It was not a trend due to natural gravitation of villagers to town but rather a result of the extensive system of industrial production, characteristic of the greater part of the socialist countries.

The observation of the negative impact exerted on agriculture by the rapid flow of labour from the country to town and the appearing shortage of food has made the Rumanian sociologists M. Matei and I. Matei point out the necessity of modernization of the rural areas and agriculture. The most essential factor of the desirable transformations was — in that period of the violent drift of the rural population to town — the consciousness of peasants, as stated by the said authors. The forces stimulating the rural community and agriculture should remain there while an adequate level of vocational education and knowledge of local conditions of farming are the prerequisite of attainment of higher productivity of labour in agriculture. The two mentioned sociologists were putting forward their suggestions concerning the rural community and agriculture, propagating the slogans of modernization, however without infringement of the existing ownership structure in the rural areas. On the contrary, according to them, the most able farmers were meant to modernize the big state farms<sup>4</sup>.

The other scientific circles, and not only those of specialists in rural sociology came forward — as far as that was possible in the conditions of dictatorship and totalitarian system — with proposals concerning preparation of the modes of interference, on the part of the state, into the processes of migration of the inhabitants of the rural areas to town. Stress was being laid not only on the quantitative decrease (as a result of the drift of the population from the country to town) but also on neglect of infrastructure, services, education and culture in the rural areas. The other negative phenomena mentioned were the unprecedented growth of 'feminization of the forces of production' in agriculture and the frightfully wasteful economy known i.e. as the paradox of 'good crops disaster', when non-harvested crops were being left in the fields of both kolkhozes and state farms and also the deficiency of processing<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>4</sup>M. Matei, I. Matei: *Sociologie si sistematizarea in procesele de dezvoltare*, Bucuresti 1977, p. 49.

<sup>5</sup>V. Miftode: *Elemente de sociologie rurala (Elements of Rural Sociology)*, Bucuresti

The author has referred here to the most essential determinants of the non-distant past of the Rumanian rural areas so as to enable better assessment of their present position and the dilemmas of their future development in the new economic and political context created by transformations due to the December revolution in 1989. However, what has weighed most heavily on the present condition of the rural areas in Rumania was the process of their so-called systematization launched for a long period of time. The origin and essence of that last reform ranking among a series of the state's abortive attempts at interference was described by Andrzej Korybut-Daszkiewicz who had studied the problem directly upon the turnover of 1989.

In 1987 the news reached the West that Ceaucescu had 'dug out' a plan (prepared fourteen years later) for complete demolition of more than fourteen thousand villages and their replacement by almost five hundred agro-industrial centres, constructed of prefabricated concrete slabs what was meant to be the symbol of modernity. Formally what was mentioned by him as a justification was the 'necessity of moulding a new man, according to the Marxist-Leninist pattern, due to elimination of disparities between the Rumanian people'<sup>6</sup>.

A formal authorization giving the Rumanian state bodies the right to activities in that area was stated by decree No 58 of 1974. What seems more important to us than determination of the moment at which activities were actually started of 'systematization of the rural areas' is the fact that the project of the said systematization enjoying the patronage of the president had been worked out in greater detail in the studies of scholars/experts in a few branches of science. Today the co-authors of the project would willingly pass the sponge over their none-too-distant activity.

The key-note of systematization — at the stage of both designing and implementation of the project — was the leveling of the conditions of life in the country and in the town. And it is worth stressing that the concept was being launched in conflict with the traditions of rural sociology represented still in the period between the two World Wars — by such eminent scholars as Dimitrie Gusti (to whom a book was devoted in Poland by Zbigniew Wierzbicki), Henri S. Stahl, Mircea Eliade and Traian Herseni.

Those who had contributed to the preparation of the feasible form of the plan for rural systematization are trying now to minimize the practical effects of the commenced action. True, some sociologists did indirectly point out the incorrectness of the adopted plan for levelling the conditions of the rural and urban community. An open contestation, at least by way of

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1989, p. 182; H. H. Stahl: *Organizarea administrativ-teritoriala. Commentari sociologice*, Bucuresti 1969.

<sup>6</sup>A. Korybut-Daszkiewicz: *Czarujący książę ludzkości. Potęga i upadek Nicolae Ceaucescu (Mankind's Prince Charming. The Power and Fall of Nicolae Ceaucescu)*, Łódź 1990, p. 31.

scientific publications was not possible, however. Somewhat earlier, when the possibilities still existed of writing more objectively about the plan for systematization of the rural areas, the already mentioned sociologists M. Matei and I. Matei were laying stress on the fact that the data concerning the villages to be eliminated should be analysed in greater detail because selection of that kind is a highly responsible task. They have also stated explicitly that 'that villages should not turn into small towns' and thus lose their local colour, 'the qualities of natural architecture'. The dominant function of the village should remain agricultural production with all its attendant facilities<sup>7</sup>.

At the time of discussion on the plan for rural systematization Vasile Miftode was still in a position to say in his book 'Elemente de sociologia rurala'<sup>8</sup> that the intended uprooting of peasants from their surroundings is liable to cause material losses, especially to kolkhoz economy, in the case of decrease in the number of rural population. Vasile Miftode suggested consideration of the opinion of such an expert on the subject as Traian Herseni who maintained that productivity in the rural areas was based on their inhabitants' rootedness therein, on the bonds with the place of residence and work. Destruction of those bonds is tantamount to a loss of possibility of supplying the state with food for the population. These forecasts have come true. Andrzej Korybut-Daszkiewicz says that systematization of the rural areas had disastrous consequences for the food market. According to the data of FAO, liquidation within the framework of systematization project of homestead plots resulted in a notable decrease of farm production and breeding<sup>9</sup>.

It is a matter of course that a community with typically peasant and even highland and pastoral background displayed a strong interest in the problems of the rural areas and peasantry<sup>10</sup>. Today, as a result of notable transformations in social structure, the influence of the peasant lobby is weaker. One should also bear in mind the fact that the rate of persons occupationally active in agriculture amounts to 28 per cent of the total. They generate 15 per cent of national income, the corresponding figures for industry being 38 per cent and 60 per cent respectively<sup>11</sup>.

One of the most mischievous principles of systematization was that of shifting houses situated far from the centre of the village, or on the slopes, for the sake of concentration of buildings. It was due to both reduction

<sup>7</sup>M. Matei, I. Matei: *Sociologie si...* op. cit. p. 39.

<sup>8</sup>V. Miftode: *Elemente de...* op.cit. p. 186.

<sup>9</sup>A. Korybut-Daszkiewicz *Czarujący księżę...*, op.cit. p. 89.

<sup>10</sup>*Gospodarowanie i sztuka ludowa w Karpatach. Z badań terenowych 1976-1980 (Husbandry and Folk Art in the Carpathians. Field Work 1976-1980)*, Acta Universitatis Vratislaviensis, Wrocław 1987, No 790.

<sup>11</sup>*Data for the Year 1990*, Institute for Quality of Life, Academy of Sciences, Bucharest.

and concentration of building that one expected to gain additional 300,000 hectares of arable land. The newly constructed dwelling houses were not to differ in any way as regarding the standard of their equipment from those in urban settlements. In Doctor Dorel Abraham's opinion (Institute for Building Designs, Bucharest), those projects can be recognized even as aptly drawn up if considered in terms of the criteria adopted in settlement construction. Implemented, however, in the countryside they failed to fulfil their social functions, have not approved of by the dwellers. Moreover, they were out of tune with the surrounding landscape<sup>12</sup>.

At present, there is no way to establish precisely what was the actual scope of the operations carried out within the framework of systematization of the rural areas. Nevertheless, it has been ascertained that 13 villages were demolished, four of them completely and the remaining nine in part, mainly in the vicinity of Bucharest for it was that district that implementation had been started in an extensive programme. In the villages concerned, bulldozers demolished the old peasant farmsteads and pushed down the wreckage into excavations and holes in the ground, levelling the terrain for future buildings. As peasants said those operations were like 'funerals' whereas the then authorities maintained that they symbolized burial of the old traditions burdening the countryside since the feudal period. By now one has succeeded in digging out many components of the demolished houses and using them in reconstruction of farmsteads in the destroyed villages.

A large number of villages were raised to the rank of town. Twenty eight towns were thus formed within the framework of systematization on an administrative route. According to the work by the already mentioned Andrzej Korybut-Daszkiwicz, the urban population in Rumania made 73 per cent of the total at the end of 1989, whereas in 1969 that index of 73 per cent applied to the country's rural population.

After the revolution of December 1989 the process of systematization was arrested completely. The new authorities have turned to the inhabitants of the villages where the old farmsteads were destroyed and replaced by the newly built blocks of flats with an appeal to express their opinion about the preferred form of their residence there. Seventy per cent of the respondents declared their wish to return to the old style, the remaining thirty per cent stating that they would prefer to live in the flats in the houses constructed under the programme for systematization.

Following those opinions the authorities decided to grant credits to the persons willing to reconstruct the old houses, at the same time allocating them also building plots with 1,000 m<sup>2</sup> in area. Now since the villages concerned are situated in the vicinity of Bucharest, projects have also been

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<sup>12</sup>T. Cernescu, M. Ginju, D. Turcu *Aspecte sociologice al locusri in qsatul romanese*, Viitorul Social 1987 nr 2.

prepared for utilization as recreation centres of the blocks of flats left by their inhabitants. Owing to the fact that a law was passed permitting possession of two houses (or flats, something which was impossible under the rule of Ceaucescu) there are to be found, in some villages formerly subjected to systematization, the first houses owned by persons residing in Bucharest.

The solutions mentioned above are but an outline of the alternatives to be applied in future with regard to the remnants of the era of socialism in the version of Nicolae Ceaucescu. Those dilemmas of rural development show explicitly that the mode of shaping the space is a telling projection of the condition of the state as a whole and also of the turn of mind of politicians, planners, lawyers and scientists.

Rumania has not joined as yet the vanguard of Central-European countries carrying out radical transformations. As regards the situation of the rural areas, much hope can be placed in the peasants opposition party and also in the attitude toward rural problems on the part of liberals and the democratic union of Hungarians in Rumania. If the said forces can be treated as a coalition, they make a strong lobby declaring itself for privatization of agriculture in the broad sense of the word. Yet the programme of the opposition parties concerning the rural areas and agriculture is slowly winning for itself new followers, considering the fact that in the elections in the fall of 1992 90 per cent of the population resident in the countryside supported the official National Safety Front.

In the light of that mood the opposition refers simply to the necessity of the second revolution since the first one, of December 1989, has been betrayed.

The analysis carried out by the author of the present paper have made him believe that the vehicle of those restorative economic transformations is the choice of the alternative of privatization and the operation of the free market in the rural economy in Rumania.