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What is Really beyond Communism? Romanian Rural Space between Traditionalism and Modernity

In this study I would like to point out the specificity of the Romanian countryside in the nineties, emphasizing the importance of the historical context of the coming into being of the modern village and the configuration of the peasantry as the main social category of the rural and the tardy trend of those times of "de-peasantization". In the second part of the study I will try to draw up some possible answers to some of the many questions raised as a result of the last-decade realities of the Romanian countryside.

In European rural society, the general trend of "de-peasantization" in the twentieth century led to the decrease of the importance the rural area has been playing in the country's social, economic and cultural life. The industrial modernization of the 19th century led to radical changes in the socio-economic structure of national societies and even the most traditional societies from Central and South-Eastern Europe have undergone such structural changes. A second great step in the modernization of the Romanian peasant state was taken in the second half of the 20th century, at the time of the communist regime by a forced transformation of the social and economic structures in Romania, this way the political leaders tried to induce modernization by a policy of forced industrialization and as a consequence, urbanization. The nineties showed that the process was not irreversible, the process of forced industrialization imposed in order to obtain a modern society stopped once the regime that gave the socio-political support to this political economy and the post-1989 governments could not continue this economic policy. The period of transition of the nineties led Romania's national economy to a comeback to earlier structures. Especially in agriculture this was a paradoxical consequence of land privatization, which was not followed by any other supportive measures in order to help the re-creation of a new social category of farmers. The non-existence of

technical equipment and of an agricultural credit system forced the new landowners to return to many previous techniques in agricultural activities. In many cases it seemed that this "re-peasantization" (taken in its qualitative approach) proved to be a counter-reaction to the "de-peasantization" from the socialist era. The concept of "re-peasantization" is used here to mean the comeback to social, economic structures from early modernity in the Romanian countryside, when the concept of "peasant" was used in its traditional sense to mean a rural inhabitant engaged in agricultural activities. We are the onlookers of a "re-peasantization" in the sense of a comeback of traditional economic and social structures of the first half of the 20th century. This process can be noticed in Romanian rural society, but it is not unique as there are countries in the Balkans (Albania and Bulgaria) which have been facing the same problems after 1989. These countries could not step on the same path of modernization with other Central European countries, bearing the heavy inheritance of both the socialist and the pre-socialist regimes of the 20th century. In the case of Romania we can state that there is a duplicity in the considerations made towards rural society, as is often said that the Romanian village must be the object of an inevitable, profound socio-economic transformation, but at the same time the village is considered to be the true source of tradition which by its modernization would deprive Romanian society of a basic element of its national heritage. If the first viewpoint especially characterizes adepts of the liberal (modernist) discourse, the last affirmation can be found mostly in the conservative-nationalist discourse. All of the post-1989 governments were adepts (at declarative level) of modernizing rural villages and transforming agriculture into a more efficient economic sector (even if they were not successful in elaborating a complete and consistent strategy in order to transform rural society).

Brief Historical Background:

The Evolution of Rural Space in Romania between 1848–1989

Romania, as the other Central and Eastern European countries, underwent a late process of industrialization and urbanization in the 19th century. In all of these countries these processes started with a delay of at least one century in comparison with Western Europe and North America. Although this was a general trend in the countries of this region, there were still significant differences in modernization for each country.

These differences can easily be detected in present-day Romania. The main important regions of the country are Transylvania, Crisana-Banat, Maramureş, Oltenia, Muntenia, Moldavia (these last three regions are also known as Wallachia before their emancipation from Turkish domination in 1877, and the "Old Kingdom" from 1877–1918), Bassarabia, Dobrogea and

Bukowina. Transylvania, Crişana-Banat and Maramureş are the Western regions of the country, which until 1918 were part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire as well as Bukowina, situated in the North-eastern part of the country.

The regions of North-Western Romania had a higher level of socio-economic development before 1918 than the regions in Wallachia. These differences can be tracked down best by an overview of the land reforms from the second half of the 19th century. The first remarkable land reforms were made in the Austro-Hungarian Empire as well as in Wallachia after the 1848 revolution, that moment being considered the threshold between feudalism and capitalism. The law legislated in 1848 was of great importance as it meant the abolition of serfdom in Transylvania, the Banat and Bukowina.

From that period of early modernity until the end of the twentieth century Romanian politicians tried to solve the problems of agriculture and of the peasantry by several agricultural laws.

The first of these was the 1864 law, with a sphere of influence in the Old Kingdom (Oltenia, Muntenia, and Moldavia). This measure was a necessary instrument of rationalization of the capitalist structures in agriculture. The failure of this rationalization can be interpreted as a consequence of the arbitrary appliance of legal measures.

In the Western regions (Transylvania, Partium, Banat and Bukowina) the first measure taken by legislation was the abolition of serfdom (1848), a *sine qua non* condition of the modern era. The pace of capitalist evolution led to major transformations in the social structure, a new social stratum evolved as a result of industrialization, the industrial proletariat. The majority of the members of this new stratum were former serfs.

In Transylvania at the end of the 19th century 85% of the population lived in the countryside, working almost exclusively in agriculture. In the period of dualism (1867–1914) with the help of new capitalist institutions (credit banks) and possibilities of transforming the previous structures in farming, these regions underwent an important transformation in socio-economic structures; this was of great importance for the rural area. In the Old Kingdom the law that led to the institutionalization of the agricultural credit system was not passed until 1937.

The first agrarian reform in the Old Kingdom in 1864 constituted a milestone in the evolution of rural society for the peasants and for these regions. The reform period, which started with the abolition of serfdom, was only the first step in the long way to the embedding of capitalist structures.

The period between 1849–1918 can be characterized as being a preliminary period of the embedding of real capitalist structures in the village. Especially in the Old Kingdom, the non-existence of such structures and

a very high level of poverty led to the Great Revolt of the Peasants in 1907, the last Jacquerie-type revolt in Europe.

Romania in 1920 had a very low level of urbanization. The percentage of the rural population in Romania at that time was around 80% (see Table 1 in the Appendix). In the first third of the 20th century Romania had the highest percentage of active population in agriculture alongside Yugoslavia and Bulgaria (see Appendix, Table 2).

After 1920, Romania enacted a new Land Law which constituted the means not only to the reformation of the land structure but also to the nationalist strategy of the new political power which aimed to increase its economic power by redistributing the possessions of the Hungarian and Saxon aristocracy. 1921 was the year of the first land reform in Romania, which was differently applied in particular regions, so a different judgement could be detected by the Government of the same realities.

This "differentiation" was not only due to regional particularities, but the more important explanation was that of consolidating the Romanian structures by subordinating the "non-Romanian" elements. A short overview of the consequences of the law: 86.1% of the expropriated landowners were Hungarian (the percentage of the Hungarian minority in Transylvania was around 54%). The Churches lost a great deal of their estates: the Roman Catholic Church lost 95% of its estate, the Calvinist Church lost 45%.

After the Second World War other laws were enacted in order to reorganize the land structure and the agricultural production forms. The law of 1945 was carried out in a period when people were hoping for the re-establishment of the same capitalist structures which existed before the war. The new land reform was looked at with high hopes as it foreshadowed a measure of social justice. The first article of the Law on land reform from 23 March 1945 said that "this is a national, economic and social necessity for Romania". The "revolutionary" reform initially wanted to make the peasants the only possible owners of land; the great landowners were expropriated. But this reform constituted a cover-up for the plans of the pro-Soviet parties. At the end of 1948, Romania's overall economic plan was presented. And, of course, this was the first step made by the new Government to destroy the private property system in Romania. The perspective of equal chances was the birdlime for social categories which had a subordinated role in socio-economic life.

The process of collectivization was carried out in two phases: the first which was not so radical (1949-1953) called on the rural population to join agricultural associations voluntarily. The first mild step introduced agricultural associations as the main form for farming. This was not a novelty so the population was not against it (there are many references in the contemporary bibliography of prosperous associations, mainly in the period be-

tween the two World Wars in Transylvania — the Law for organizing co-operations was passed in 1935).¹ The period between 1953 and 1962 covered the second step in the collectivization process. By exorcising the “richer” farmers they wanted to rule this social stratum out from the countryside. The official announcement of the total accomplishment of the collectivization process was made in April 1962.

We consider that period as the *Stalinist period (1949–65)* and the second phase as the period of *Forced transformation in Romanian agriculture and rural society (1966–1989)*.

After 1962 the state became the greatest proprietor of agricultural lands. 90.7% of all agricultural land was in the hands of the socialist state. 9.3% of the remaining land was the proportion of individual households from mountainous areas where collectivization was unsuccessful (mainly because of unfavourable agricultural conditions but there were cases where the socialist state gave up collectivization after fierce — sometimes armed — resistance in the fifties).

The period of the “revolutionary” transformation of society affected villages and their institutions. The aim of the communist leadership was to transform Romanian society into an industrialized and urbanized one. However, people soon realized that the new Government did not consider the well-being of the village as its top priority. The process of forced industrialization and urbanization was very expensive for the Romanian countryside. At declarative level the ultimate aim of the communist regime was to decrease the gap between the urban and the rural. But the village became an ‘appendix’ to the urban, becoming a kind of labour force and raw material supplier. In most cases, traditional village institutions (school, church) were given no major importance and the attempts of the communist government to undermine the role and influence of religion and the Church at the end of the sixties resulted in the total negation of its existence. So apart from the gap in infrastructure, employment possibilities, the damage to rural institutions were another impetus for the rural population to leave the village. By the end of the seventies the officials managed to ruin rural society by the progressive destruction of the economic, cultural and demographic potential of the village and the strong community bonds of the traditional countryside. The process of socialist transformation from the sixties which proved to shatter community forces and local economies led to the “interrupted embourgeoisement” of the peasantry, as I. Szelényi said in the eighties.²

With all the measures of urbanization and industrialization, the Romanian urban population overcame the rural population in 1985 (in 1985 50%

¹ Bözödi György: *Székely bánja* (The sorrow of the Szekler), p. 32.

² Szelényi, Iván: *Socialist entrepreneurs...*

of the population was urban).³ At the end of the communist era the process of the so-called modernization of rural society proved to be a process of slow annihilation of the traditional village and its values. In Romania the Stalinist transformation of agricultural and rural property relations was most successful. In 1989 the "socialist sector" in agriculture owned 90.7% of the total agricultural land in the country (which at that time was 14,758,980 hectares).

Romanian Countryside after 1989: Modernization or Back to Traditionalism?

1989 constituted a milestone in the socio-economic and political development of the country. Ten years of expectations made Romanian society sceptical about the positive results of reform. The first steps the Romanians expected the new government to take were related to the development of a legislative frame in order to re-establish a society based on private ownership, which meant the restoration of the former pre-collectivist land property system.

1991 constituted the moment of the legal codification of the claim to private property of the land in Romania. Unfortunately Law No. 18/1991 did not succeed in fully restoring the private property system in agriculture existing before collectivization, as the average size of an estate was 1.81 hectares (the whole surface which had to be redistributed was around 9,228,394 hectares to 5,104,449 former owners).⁴ The upper limit one could claim was ten hectares, the lowest being 0.5 hectare per recipient. By fixing the upper limit of land for former owners at 10 hectares of agricultural land and 1 ha of forest made Romanian agriculture fall into the trap of small-scale large-scale farming, yet in the opposite direction to 1962. In the legislative commission there were no farmer representatives or experts in the rural land property system. So this law led to the legalization of small and medium-sized property over the land.

There were two other impediments in the implementation of modern agricultural structures: technological backwardness and unsatisfactory financial resources. After 1992 very few people had the technical equipment and financial resources for competitive farming.

A defective legislative and economic framework made efficient farming impossible. The ageing of the rural population constitutes another problem, so the condition of human potential in the rural areas is bad. Pensioners receive a pension of only 300,000–450,000 leis (around \$10–12) a month,

³ Romanian Yearbook (2000), p. 16.

⁴ Fulea, Maria (1996): *Structura socio-economica a populatiei rurale in perioada de tranzitie la economia de piata* (Socio-economic structure of the rural population in the period of transition)..., p. 162.

which is not enough to pay the costs of farming. The 'non-existence of an agricultural credit system made villagers turn away from market-based farming. The law on agricultural associations carried out in 1991 (Law No. 36/1991) did not have a positive reaction as for many people this was associated with the former law of association from the fifties which ended with total collectivization. In cases where a local agricultural specialist was a reliable member of the community and wanted to establish a functional association, this was possible. Unfortunately, this was a minimal percentage. After 1996, when one of the governing parties claimed to be the representative of the peasantry (The National Christian Democrat Party of the Peasants) meant a fastening in the juridical process, which concerns agriculture, and of course, the countryside. The lease law was enacted in that period, as well as the law on price delivery, and the rectification of the 1991 Land Law (Law nr. 1/2000) which led to the re-installation of functional-sized farms, as the upper limit for arable land was fixed at 50 hectares and for forests at ten hectares. Another law which is very important in farming profitability refers to the free juridical circulation of land, thus the selling and buying of land can become a reality and the land market re-established. As the concentration of land is an important step in competitive farming, we consider this law as being one of the legislative measures which represent a very important preliminary condition of modern agriculture.

The results of these changes were mixed. Animal traction, rather than modern farming instruments, was used for working the "waist-belt" plots. Sadly the restoration of the land followed by the system of agricultural coupons were the only help provided by the state to individual farmers.

"Re-peasantization" as a Consequence of the Non-existent Agricultural Reform

I use this paradoxical concept of "re-peasantization" as the post-communist governments who were entitled to give a swing to the development of Romanian villages in order to help their evolution towards a multifunctional community and the creation of modern agricultural structures did not succeed in re-transforming socio-economic structures. In 1989 the overwhelming majority of Romanian villages lacking long-standing strategies showed the image of a socio-economic entity of the forties. As the majority of Romanian villages have a rustic unifunctional character, agriculture being the exclusive economic sector in most rural settlements, their erosion is almost inevitable. Multifunctional settlements would have a higher probability of survival. There are insufficient political and economic actors in rural society to support the multifunctioning of the village.

In spite of the formal privatization process of land property structures the Romanian village could not step on this path. Individual householders

cannot be called "farmers" as modern farming conditions do not exist and people working the land are more like peasants from previous centuries working without modern agricultural tools. As agriculture is the preponderant economic sphere in Romanian rural society (40.6% of the active population was registered as working in this sector in 1999 — see Table 3) the flourishing of rural society is impossible without the total restructurization of this vital sector.

Despite the impressive tourist potential, the lacking infrastructure prevents the organization of rural, agro- or ecological tourism as a viable alternative for the economic development of the countryside.

The inefficiency of market transition measures is combined with social problems. The malefic results of the communist era were the depopulation of villages, the dissolution of traditional social bonds and the distortion (by the collectivization of agriculture) of the responsibility towards production. Even though almost half of the Romanian population lives in rural areas (45.2% in 1999 covering more than 12,000 settlements),⁵ the government could not make any positive changes for the well-being of this important segment of society.

Possible Solutions for the Crisis of Romanian Rural Society

Taking into consideration the specificities of Romania's rural space we can still make a long-lasting project of development of our rural communities. This process would have the following objectives:

— the increase of agricultural production by adapting the structure of production to specific zonal conditions. In Romania, there are eight agro-regions defined according to the utilization of agricultural land (in most cases these agro-regions cover historical regions, so besides cultural identity each region has a special way of farming). For example, in Central Oltenia, 90% of the land is used as arable land, with a superior quality of soil;

— the development of non-agrarian activities and services in order to increase the income of rural communities. Another element of revitalization of rural communities could be the follow-up of potential resources of the countryside as a supplement to the local economy;

— the stabilization of rural youth in their local area by attractive measures for professional training in agricultural activities and preferential bank loans and utilities;

— the creation of a complex system of insurance for agricultural producers;

— the implementation of a social institution for the protection of children, handicapped and elderly people, or people with professional diseases

⁵ Romanian Yearbook (2000), p. 14.

on similar terms with other socio-professional groups. In the countryside most local governments instead of focusing on local investments, spend almost 50% of their annual budget on social assistance. A sad example is that of the former co-operative pensioners, who receive a monthly pension of 11.7 USD which is less than half of what an urban pensioner gets;

— the development of economic and social infrastructure. Rural society cannot function without a proper institutional system, which can be of help in initiating economic and social activities;

— the support of underprivileged rural zones, the most underprivileged being the mountainous zone which includes 687 communes, 3,300 villages and a population of 3.6 million people out of which about 2 million are agricultural producers.

— greater state involvement by a strategy of long-lasting development of Romanian rural communities. The experience of EU countries proves that the liberal “laissez-faire” policy is not relevant in this sector. So even if it is not a requirement for the state to again become the only owner of agricultural lands, the accomplishment of a real economic and juridical scheme for agricultural and rural development is one of the basic preconditions of the blind deadlock Romanian agriculture has come to.

Final Remarks

None of the governments have so far established a total scheme for a vital rural economy. The fear of becoming unpopular has led to taking halfway measures. The end of 2001 for Romania meant the first year which showed economic growth in the last ten years. Romania is a singular example among Central and Eastern European countries where the proportion of the population living in rural areas has not decreased after 1991 and agricultural structures do not show the existence of profitable market-based farming. The demand for a labour force in the urban area is much lower than before and this has forced rural commuters to return and try to make a living at home. Overall we can notice a partial “revival” of the afterwar economic structures. The above-mentioned economic measures applied with consistency could stop and slowly reverse this process.

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Appendix

Table 1

The evolution of the percentage of the rural population
in Romania in the 20th century

Year of the census	Total	Urban	Rural
29 December 1930*	100	21.4	78.6
25 January 1948*	100	23.4	76.6
21 February 1956*	100	31.3	68.7
15 March 1966*	100	38.2	61.8
5 January 1977*	100	43.6	56.4
1 July 1985	100	50.0	50.0
1 July 1989	100	53.2	46.8
7 January 1992*	100	54.3	45.7
1 July 1999	100	54.8	45.2

* Census.

Source: *Anuarul statistic 2000* (2001), Statistical Yearbook, ed. By. CNS (Commission for National Statistics), Bucharest, p. 16.

Table 2

**The distribution of the active population in sectors
in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (1910, 1930)**

Countries	Economic sector					
	primary		secondary		tertiary	
	1910	1930	1910	1930	1910	1930
Poland	77	66	9	17	14	17
Yugoslavia	82	78	11	11	7	11
Romania	80	77	8	9	12	14
Czechoslovakia	40	37	37	37	23	28
Hungary	58	53	20	24	22	23
Bulgaria	82	80	8	8	10	12

Source: Costea, St., Larionescu, M. & Tanasescu, Fl. (1996): *Agricultura romaneasca. O perspectiva istorico-sociologica* (Romanian agriculture. A historical-sociological perspective), Ed. Ararat, Bucuresti, p. 86.

Table 3

**Employment by main activity sectors
of the national economy in Romania (1994-1999)**

Economic sector	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
Primary	35.6	33.6	34.6	36.8	37.4	40.6
Secondary	34.4	33.6	34.3	32.0	30.7	28.4
Tertiary	30.0	32.8	31.1	31.2	31.9	31.0
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100