



The Romanian Village on the Verge of European Integration

Vasile SURD, Diana ALEXANDRU
„Babeş-Bolyai” University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania



From the administrative point of view in Romania there are 13.098 villages that are grouped in 2.846 communes. Of their 21.680.974 inhabitants, 10.245.894 (45,25%) live in the rural areas. About 90% of the Romanian territory is a part of and it is being economically and administratively managed by the rural areas (214.880 sq km).

A medium size commune is of 80 sq km, and that of a village is about 16 sq km. In Romania the average number of people inhabiting a village is of about 750, the differences between the values from one village to another being very high (there are villages inhabited by 1 up to 3 people, in comparison with other villages that have more than 10.000 inhabitants.) Approximately 6.700 villages are included in the category of the small size villages, having a population under 500 inhabitants (51,1%).

Romania is one of the few countries in Europe in which the number of the rural population increased after abolishing the communist regime (it grew from 45% in 1989 to 47, 25% in 2002) as a result of the re-migration of the urban population towards the rural areas due to the urban industrial collapse.

At the same time, Romania registered in the last 15 years a general demographic decrease of about 1,7 million people as a result of three competitive factors: the strong decline of births as a result of liberalization of abortions and general ageing of the population (nowadays in Romania there are about 6 million retired people - 27,8% of the total population); the emigration abroad; the relatively high death rate based on demographic ageing, associated to cancer, heart and lung diseases. The present day Romanian reality reveals that one of ten families is financially sustained by the money sent from the relatives working abroad (See “Our Money”, 2006).

The process of demographic ageing of the rural areas has begun even from the communist period when the dream of any young person in the countryside was that of migrating and working in the urban industry, of receiving an apartment in a block of flats, and having a car that would be produced in the country (Dacia automobile).

Today, in most of the villages, and especially in those situated nearby the urban centres, we may notice a process of demographic decrease. The urban poles of rank I in the national hierarchy: Iaşi, Cluj-Napoca, Timișoara, Craiova, Braşov and Galaţi cities are also affected by this process of demographic decrease, except for Constanţa City, situation explained by the severe reduction of the workplaces in the urban industry after 1989. An important decrease would also be found in other categories: in education where the number of pupils in most of the villages decreased of about 10 to 30 times, process that caused the desertion of some educational endowments in some of the villages and the concentration of the educational process in the communal centres. One of the parents emigrating abroad for work reasons, usually led to divorce in most of the cases, and it affected the health of the couple and the education of the children.

At the same time the cooperative and national land were disappearing, around six million landowners appeared overnight, each one of them benefiting of about 1,85 ha of agricultural field. Because the level of allotting this land is being rather high, therefore a landowner having 10-20 allotments of agricultural land makes it harder or even excludes the possibility of mechanization and modern *agro-techniques*.

The 800 ha agricultural field in a medium size village may be worked by about 20-30 farmers, if these hectares would be grouped together in 30-40 hectares/farm. The fusion of the agricultural land through selling and purchasing, according to the economic mechanisms of the market, is a very ticklish process and lacking even the slightest optimistic perspectives. The grouping of the agricultural field allotments, on the principle of volunteering and, the passing towards specialization of farm labour based on the work of experimented farmers, is a process blocked by that rural selfishness that has been present even from the antebellum period and, last but not least, by the fear of not losing the land. A large part of the agricultural field still remains not worked because the agricultural practices are lacking financial support. The other part that is systematically worked, in most of the cases, is almost always based on the physical work of the people and their animals. The Romanian rural agricultural household is by far autarchic and traditionalist. They mainly produce the basic cereals (corn and wheat), not giving enough attention to products like fruits and vegetables, which are the most wanted products on the market. Hence, the invasion of the internal market with such products which eventually are imported is verified.

In the present Romanian rural household people produce only for their own needs and using the cereal production to feed their animals; while as corn is being used for making a traditional dish called "mamaliga" (hominy). The fruits and vegetables are almost exclusively cultivated for their own consumption. In a household we may find around one or three pigs, domestic birds, cattle and one or two horses used for traction and agricultural works. The only product that is systematically being commercialized through rural collecting centres is the milk. The extremely low price of this product is rather discouraging the private producers, if we have in mind the fact that the average price for one litre of milk is purchased by 17,5 cents, whereas the sparkling water, Romania abundantly disposes of, is being sold in private shops and also in the big supermarkets for 52,5 cents/litre. The actual viable rural households are mainly run by people in their sixties/seventies, hence, their inadaptability to develop some large and modern exploitations of the land, or to produce goods. The sociologic study made in the pilot villages, when elaborating the Green Paper of the rural development in Romania, highlighted the fact that only 9% of the questioned farmers wish to modernize and develop the agricultural activities. The few modern planned farms (cattle, swine, and truck farming) are in a strong competition with the external market. Many of them can face this competition only if they develop other types of alternative activities (bread manufacture, crushing mills, processing the meat, tourism activities). The extensive agricultural activity is profitless. Large orchards surfaces, where apple trees and plum trees used to be cultivated, are almost entirely cut, and the ones given back to the former owners were cleared, as well.

This also happened to the vineyards. In the Southern part of Romania and in Dobrogea region the modern systems of irrigation have been destroyed, hence the decrease of production in this region, practically due to water deficiency. The industry of processing wool and sugar beet was basically decimated, fact that led to serious decrease in the number of ovine, respectively the increase of sugar imports from the traditional areas (Caribbean Sea area). The only species that registered a certain increase was that of horses, as a result of the lack of mechanic means for transportation and the extended use of animal brute force for working the land.

The process of giving the agricultural land into property determined numerous convulsions in the rural areas, remaining incomplete even now on the verge of accession to European Union. A real bureaucratic cobweb marked by the incompetence and indifference rules in most of the rural communal halls.

The lawsuits on the roll, for gaining or regaining of their properties, are numerous. In many villages, many of the old owners, who were sent away or are living in the cities didn't claim for their legal rights on the land they should have inherited from their parents or grandparents. Hence, the many reserves of agricultural field which is left at the well please of the rural commissions and of the communal halls to be reinstated into possession. Over night there appear new properties and new land owners, especially in the periurban areas or in the areas where the new highways were built. It is here that the most important land speculation is going on.

Most of the Romanian villages lack the intellectuals having a stable residence there where they are really needed. The medical and teaching staff are mostly outsiders (they come

here by commutation), and they do not even think of permanent settling due to the lack of living conditions and cultural isolation kind of services. Even the younger priests, yet having a family, leave their parishes the moment their children reach the school age, coming back to villages only on Sundays and for religious celebrations. The agriculturalist engineers were sacrificed on the altar of this new type of agriculture: small allotments and proprieties, the return to physical work of men and animals, giving up the valuable vegetable breeds, autarkical production. By making serious associated efforts, few of them have built some exemplary agricultural farms, but they are systematically being blocked by the lack of market demand for local agricultural products, as a result of market invasion with similar products imported from abroad. In some remote rural areas where milk gathering cisterns cannot reach, due to the shaky state of the roads, the milk exceeding the farmers use is to feed the pigs in their own households, while the price of this particular continue to grow on the market.

On the verge of European Integration the Romanian agriculture is significantly traditional and autarkic.

The social, cultural and religious life of the villages is poor and it comes to be only to symbolical participation at the important religious celebrations (Christmas, Easter, and New Year). The traditional clothing disappeared almost everywhere, and for the young people it is even shameful to wear the old clothes made by their parents or grandparents. In case of weddings it is the same; they play city music, the only purpose being that of gaining as much money as they can from the guests. Despite this, starting with the communist period the folklore was transferred to the city in order to be better preserved. In the big industrial units and university centres all kinds of important folk groups were formed often organizing shows in the villages and abroad, fact that revived the rural folklore. The traditional celebration of field works and animal breeding important dates almost completely disappeared. At this beginning of the third millennium a true spiritual dream it's all what's left of the traditional Romanian village.

The rural administration, set according to democratic norms and rules, is very often incompetent and inefficient, and in some places even corrupted. The rural communal halls hold in charge a much larger number of personnel than it's needed, instead of passing to a modernized system of computerized work. Very often the political factor prevails over the citizen's interest in decision making process.

The activities concerning the improvement of the equilibrium and hygiene state of the villages are inexistent because of the lack of initiative people in the rural communal administration have. Even in the villages where both the mechanic transport means and materials for modernizing the roads exist, such activities completely lack. Forcing the locals to contribute and work for the public welfare is translated into no electoral support for the future elections. For more than 15 years we have had to deal with a real vicious circle. Regarding the hygiene issue, the habits of individual hygiene are poor, the rural population and the autarkic household being at a low level of acceptability. Only 10% of the rural households have a bathroom and are integrated in the sewerage system, even though there are villages that dispose of an important local source of potable water.

Many of the local rural administrations wait for some European financial help so that they could do something in the benefit of their community, even though they have no initiative at all.

It is a real fact that over 13.098 of the Romanian villages need practicable roads, water networks and centralized sewerage systems. A new vicious circle is bound in accessing the European financial funds for the accomplishment of these basic needs. The rural administration needs new projects. Elaborating these projects by competition between pirate projectors costs a lot of money, money that the communal halls don't dispose of. In the absence of such projects money can't be asked for, form the EU even if the funds are available. In this case the county administration should hire its own group of specialized people to elaborate these projects, which should be the result of a thorough research of the villages in each county. Another choice would be a to elaborate these projects (communal roads, water networks) in partnership with the superior specialized technical educational institutions that dispose of the most appropriate means and competences in this field. This kind of intercessions must be discussed and facilitated by the Romanian Parliament. This usually rejects them because the private companies of projecting don't win the auction. And this happens maybe because some of them are managed by various members of the parliament. Besides this, an important amount of money given by the European Union for the purpose of rural development is being lost.

Setting up these projects could solve the problem of collecting and depositing the waste as well. In present times even the thinnest watercourses in the mountain areas as well as in the plain areas are being suffocated by organic and domestic waste, dead animals and plastic materials. The wild clearance of the forests in the last 15 years generated real ecological disasters (soil falls and landslides, floods, muddy drainages). Considering all these aspects that would stop these damages, a coherent judicial system hasn't been yet established. As the positive signals we can signal a real battle for secondary residences in the rural area and/or adjacent to the big cities spaces meant for recreational purposes of the exceedingly stressed city population. Moreover, more than 95% of the villages in Romania are connected to the electricity system. Unfortunately, no national politics of revitalization and rescuing the Romanian village does exist. As a consequence, almost half of the villages in Romania will disappear in a natural way. Re-populating these villages with native population is practically impossible under the present time conditions. Affluxes of emigrants of poor population countries will probably be able to replace the demographic deficit of the rural area in Romania.