

STRUCTURAL MODIFICATION OF THE RURAL SPACE IN ROMANIA

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ABSTRACT

Great structural changes have taken place in the Romanian countryside during the postwar years which have seen the rural population reduced from 15.87 millions in 1948 to 10.39 in 1992 (with a steep fall in the percentage strength from 76.6 to 45.6, since the urban population increased more than three times from 3.71 to 12.37 million). The paper examines these changes in the context of four phases of communist planning; followed by the transition to a market economy. The traumatic experiences of the past have left deep scars (especially the years 1965-1989 with its emphasis on rapid industrialisation and urbanisation) now the newly-reconstituted private farms have the opportunity to modernise while greater spending power should slowly reinvigorate both rural economy and society.

Romania is a medium-sized country 12th in Europe in area (237,500 square kilometers) and ninth in population (22.76 million at the 1992 census). 62.3 percent of territory consists of agricultural land while 27.7 percent is forested, leaving 3.8 percent for water surfaces and 6.2 percent for settlements and other uses (Vineze 1991). The agricultural area (14.79 million hectares or 0.65 hectares per inhabitant) is 39.7 percent ploughland (9.42 million hectares or 0.41 hectares per inhabitant); 13.9 pastures (3.31 million hectares); 6.2 hay meadows (1.47); 1.3 orchards (0.31) and 1.2 vineyards (0.29). In 1992 the rural population amounted to 10.39 million persons (45.6 percent), living in 13,123 villages distributed altitudinally between sea level and 1,400m (the highest being Petreasa in the Aries Valley, Apuseni Mountains) (Anderca & Chirculescu 1976).

The rural settlements are organised into 2,688 communes each comprising on average 4.9 villages. However while some communes have only one village several in Alba county have over 30 (Vidra 39, Bistra 35, Avram Iancu 33 and Sohodol 31) while Cornereva (Caras-Severin) has 40. Dispersed settlement in these areas seems to have arisen out of woodland clearance. The average population of Romanian villages was 791.6 persons in 1992 (3,865 for communes) but there are some very large dormitory villages near major urban centres such as Bucharest : Voluntari (27,000), Pantelimon (15,000) and Popesti-Leordeni (14,000) are complemented by three other communes with more than 10,000 people : Branesti, Bragadiru and Chitila. There are further examples elsewhere in the counties of Arad (Pecica and Santana), Braila (Borcea), Dolj (Dabuleni and Poiana Mare), Galati (Liesti, Matca and Pechea), Maramures (Poienile de sub Munte) and Neamt (Sabaoani) (Ianos 1990). However the situation is not static and great structural changes were experienced under communism (for there were 15.87 million rural inhabitants - 76.6 percent of the total - in 1948; more than the 14.28 million in 1930 when the rural share was 78.6 percent) (Pop 1988). Further changes have occurred during the transition since 1989. This paper identifies several distinct periods of change.

THE STAGE OF QUOTAS AND EARLY COLLECTIVISATION (1948-1956)

At the end of the Second World War Romania was still a quasi-rural state with the majority of population living in peasant village communities and working in agriculture. The age

structure was tilted towards the younger age groups with high rates of natural increase (and a low divorce rate) to accelerate family development after the losses of the war years. Villages were often isolated by bad roads and a lack of electricity and telephone communication. There was little out-migration and the rural economy was based on subsistence and traditional mixed farming making intensive use of manpower and animal traction; for in 1938 Romania had little more than four thousand tractors compared with 1.6 million horses and 0.6 million pairs of oxen.

There was no central coordination of crop specialisation and land use in general, but a quota system was imposed to ensure the delivery of agricultural products by the peasantry. This was necessary to help meet the payment of war reparations to the FSU but the demands were imposed in an arbitrary fashion and covered a wide range of commodities including cereals, potatoes, meat, milk, wool and eggs. The quotas were especially burdensome in the light of war damage and the prolonged drought between 1945 and 1947. The first collective farms were created in spring 1949 but, though the state was committed to the programme, the pace of change was gradual in the early years.

THE STAGE OF MASS COLLECTIVISATION (1957-1962)

Coercion through quotas gave way to a system of state purchase of agricultural produce at stimulative prices which contributed to a revival in agricultural production that was to be last until the 1970s (Puia 1979). However individual farms were threatened by the programme of mass collectivisation which began in Dobrogea (then Constanta region; now Constanta and Tulcea counties) in 1957. Throughout the country a propaganda campaign was backed up by the terror of deportation and imprisonment. There were many deaths among the peasantry before they were completely dispossessed of their land, animals and tools (apart from scattered communities in some isolated mountain districts) in April 1962. Mechanisation was made possible through the system of Machine & Tractor Stations and the number of horses declined to 1.31 million in 1958 and 0.69 in 1965 (when there were 81,356 tractors : one for every 121 hectares of arable land). The harsh treatment of the peasantry contrasted with the encouragement of the working class on which the regime depended for support.

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THE STAGE OF FORCED INDUSTRIALISATION (1965-1980)

Rapid industrialisation encouraged a growth of population in the urban centres. Particularly rapid growth occurred in towns which became county administrative centres under the administrative reforms of 1968 : a comparison of the 1966 census with estimates for 1980 shows four cases where population more than trebled : Ramnicu Valcea (from 23.9 to 78.1 thousands), Slatina (19.2 to 60.0), Slobozia (12.4 to 37.0) and Zalau (15.1 to 39.5); and another ten where population more than doubled : Alba Iulia (22.2 to 50.9), Bistrita (25.5 to 55.5), Botosani (35.2 to 78.6), Deva (27.0 to 70.3), Miercurea Ciuc (15.3 to 39.5), Ramnicu Valcea (32.7 to 113.4), Sfantu Gheorghe (20.8 to 55.2), Targoviste (29.8 to 75.5), Targu Jiu (30.8 to 72.7) and Vaslui (18.0 to 46.2). There were also two well-established centres where the population more than doubled : Bacau (73.5 to 149.0) and Pitesti (60.1 to 139.0). Moreover the absolute increases of more than 50,000 evident in these two cases were also experienced in Arad, Baia Mare, Braila, Cluj, Craiova, Oradea, Ploiesti and Sibiu; with more than 100,000 in Brasov, Constanta, Galati, Iasi and Timisoara and almost half a million in Bucharest alone which grew from 1.37 to 1.86 million.

Growth depended largely on migration away from the countryside which had been relatively light since 1948. In 1977 the census returns revealed that among the urban population 5.13 million people (roughly a third of the total population of the country) had been born in the countryside. The pressure of growth in the towns were evident in problems with the infrastructure of water supply and pollution control; also the provision of housing and sanitation, education, transport and other social services. There were growing social and behavioural problems. But there were also problems in the rural areas. Given the poor living conditions in the countryside people were keen to leave and the percentage strength of the rural population which stood at 61.8 percent at the 1966 census (compared with 76.6 percent in 1948) fell to 54.2 percent in 1980 (Figure 1). The urban areas gained 2.86 million people while the rural areas increased by only 0.23 million. A large part of the adult population departed, as well as the school leavers. It contributed to the feminisation - and the general ageing - of the rural population. Many of those who stayed in the villages commuted daily or seasonally to jobs in the towns. Households became smaller and the decline in population in many villages was very pronounced. The village of Calna in Vad commune (Cluj county) had a population of 702 in 1956, falling to 310 in 1977 and less than 200 in 1992; while the once large village of Feiurdeni in Chinteni commune (Cluj county), with poor road links, has seen its population decline from 1,823 in 1956 to 550 in 1992 (Matei & Mihailescu 1985). There was some discussion about an alternative development strategy that would involve a more gradual urbanisation and a diversion of resources to the countryside where mechanisation of agriculture might be accelerated and alternative employment provided. But the proposal was resisted.

There was nevertheless a significant increase in mechanisation in agriculture with a total of 146,592 tractors in 1980 (one machine for every 67 hectares of arable land). State and cooperative farms became larger, such was the emphasis was on "gigantism" in agriculture, as in industry. Huge complexes were built to rear livestock (cattle, sheep, pigs and poultry) but they required a good deal of transport to collect the fodder

while the organic waste could not distributed over the land (because of the high transport cost, combined with an absence of suitable equipment) and became a source of soil and water pollution. But in other ways too agriculture was poorly managed with politically-motivated direction from communist officials which prevented the qualified agriculturists from making an effective contribution. Statistics were often falsified to give the desired impression of progress. However there were major changes in land use because urban development resulted in the loss of much farm land, while the importance of industrial crops increased. Large water storages, related to hydro-electric stations, provided irrigation water but also resulted in the loss of land and the disappearance of some villages : examples can be found in the Bistrita and Somes valleys and also at the Iron Gates on the Danube where the old town of Orsova was flooded and the population was rehoused in Jupalnic village.

THE STAGE OF INTENSIVE FOREIGN LOAN REPAYMENT (1980-1989)

By 1980 the rate of growth was slowing down and the country was embarrassed by heavy foreign debts which has accumulated as a result of loans contracted during the 1970s in order to obtain industrial machinery. The burden of loan servicing fell on to agriculture which in 1985 was responsible for 77.2 percent of the total exports (although Romania was now considered an "industrial-agricultural" country). But the strain on agriculture was increased by the political priority attached to the repayment of the foreign loans, beginning in 1980. The drive to increase agricultural production was backed by further mechanisation with an increase in the number of tractors to 184,408 in 1985 (one machine for every 54 hectares of arable land) but this was followed a reduction to 151,745 in 1989 (one per 62 hectares of arable land) since virtually no new machinery was provided during this period. Meanwhile the optimum might be put at 500,000 tractors and accessory machine (having regard to the country's production potential). The state's requirements also resulted in a draconian programme of rural settlement consolidation which threatened half the country's villages with extinction (Bold et al. 1974). When the loans were repaid by spring 1989 the country was left exhausted : the rural people especially were poorer than they had been before the Second World War, although the state was alleged to have accumulated a positive trade balance of between two and three milliard dollars.

But the pressure was felt throughout the domestic economy with a limited food supply in keeping with notional requirements worked out by "scientific custom" (to say nothing of the energy shortages and the restrictions placed on essential imports). Meanwhile it should be remembered that the migration from the rural to the urban areas continued as rapidly as before with the towns gaining 2.14 million people (comparing the estimates for 1980 and 1989) while the rural areas suffered a net loss of 1.19 million. The urban growth was felt in Bucharest with an increase from 1.86 to 2.04 million, but there was an increase of more than 50,000 in Craiova and more than 40,000 in Bacau, Botosani, Brasov, Iasi, Oradea and Timisoara. The population of Baia Mare, Buzau, Cluj-Napoca, Constanta, Focsani, Ploiesti, Suceava and Targu Mures increased by more than 30,000; while growth exceeded 20,000 in Alba Iulia, Bistrita, Braila, Drobeta-Turnu Severin, Piatra Neamt, Ramnicu

Valcea, Satu Mare, Sibiu, Slatina, Targoviste, Targu Jiu, Tulcea and Zalau. The population of six provincial cities topped a quarter of a million : Brasov, Constanta, Cluj-Napoca, Galati, Iasi and Timisoara.

THE STAGE OF TRANSITION TO A MARKET ECONOMY (1989-)

Following the revolution of December 1989 the communist system was abandoned and land was slowly returned to its former owners. More than four fifths of the agricultural land is now private property and some of the woodland has also been redistributed. There remains a problem over mechanisation because while the old machine and tractor stations have been transformed into "Agromec", a company for agricultural mechanisation, much of the equipment is old because few new machines were acquired after 1985. Moreover many old attitudes prevail although generally the new farmers want to remove obstacles and build a new agriculture. Some 70,000 tractors are now owned by farmers but government has failed to use its energies to encourage mechanisation on individual farms : if programmes to supply 50,000 tractors a year had been adopted there would have been over 350,000 machines on the farms by the end of 1993.

Demographically the situation is very unsatisfactory with natural increase for the whole country (urban and rural areas combined) only 1.0 per thousand in 1991 (birth rate 11.9 and death rate 10.9). The trend was evident throughout the 1980s and is entirely due to the falling birth rate, which has to be seen in the context of a prohibition on abortions (first introduced in 1966) that was most insistently enforced during the 1980s. In 1980 the death rate was 10.4 (almost identical to 1991) but the birth rate was 18.0, giving a natural increase of 7.6 per thousand at that time (Prisacaru & Prisacaru 1993). However it is interesting to see strong regional variations with the ageing of the rural population much less evident in Moldavia (and some adjacent counties like Bistrita-Nasaud and Maramures) than in the south and west of the country where the negative rates were as high as -4.0 per thousand in Arad and Teleorman in 1991 (Surd & Mac 1988).

The same regional contrasts apply when the rural trends are considered (Figure 2). Compared with the national rate of natural increase of -1.0 per thousand in 1991 there were strong positive values in Iasi (7.3), Suceava (4.8), Bacau (4.4), Vaslui (4.0), Neamt (3.8) and Galati (3.7). The highest figures elsewhere were in Bistrita-Nasaud (3.3), Maramures (2.4), Constanta (1.9), Sibiu (1.3) and Satu Mare (0.7) : Sibiu is an interesting case because gypsy families have taken over the houses vacated by emigrating Germans and this has resulted in many births in the county. All other counties show negative rural rates of natural increase with the highest rates in Hunedoara (-9.3), Teleorman (-7.4), Caras-Severin (-7.0), Arad (-6.7), Giurgiu and Salaj (both -5.7), Dolj (-5.4), Cluj (-5.2). Even for the urban areas there were negative rates of natural increase in 1991 for Bucharest (-1.8 per thousand) and Arad (-1.6). However the national average was +2.8 per thousand and some counties which experienced high levels of urban expansion during the industrialisation drive still have many young families in the towns and natural increase in the urban areas is therefore very high in some cases : Salaj (10.1 per thousand), Botosani (9.2), Bistrita-Nasaud (7.9), Bacau, Gorj

and Valcea (all 6.7), Suceava (6.5), Maramures (6.2), Vaslui (6.1), Ialomita (5.9), Arges (5.7), Dambovita and Olt (both 5.4) and Neamt (5.2).

The ageing of the rural population is now very pronounced in the southern and western parts of the country with well over a fifth of the population aged over 60 (Figure 3) (Muntele 1994). The converse is a declining number of children attending school, which means that the expansion of rural education (involving new schools built in the 1950s and 1960s) has ceased as many schools are now closing. At Calna in Cluj county's Vad commune there was a primary school with eight classes and a total of ten teachers. But now the school is closed and the five or six children in the Class 1-VIII age bracket travel ten kilometers to school in another village (Surd 1994). Village communities are unbalanced with three major elements : the farming people who are elderly with a pronounced female majority; the worker-peasants - physically and morally exhausted through their "double life" working on their farms in the countryside while continuing to commute daily to work in the towns; and a small young generation which lacks the experience and the financial resources to cope effectively with modern agriculture. However there are some positive signs because the land is being worked better and the financial results are also more satisfactory. Farmers are receiving definitive titles to their land, new equipment is being obtained and new houses are being built. There is also the beginning of a return migration process (Turnock 1993).

CONCLUSION

Rural Romania bears the deep scars of some 40 years of communist planning, with the last 25 years especially traumatic on account of the emphasis on industrial development in the towns which left villages starved of capital and manpower. As a result of the revolution of 1989 this discrimination has ended and more stimulative market prices mean that the newly-reconstituted private farms have the possibility to modernise and develop. As greater spending power becomes evident in the villages a range of enterprises concerned with services and manufacturing should arise. It is very important that rural geographers should monitor all aspects of change in the countryside and observe the circumstances under which spatial variations arise.

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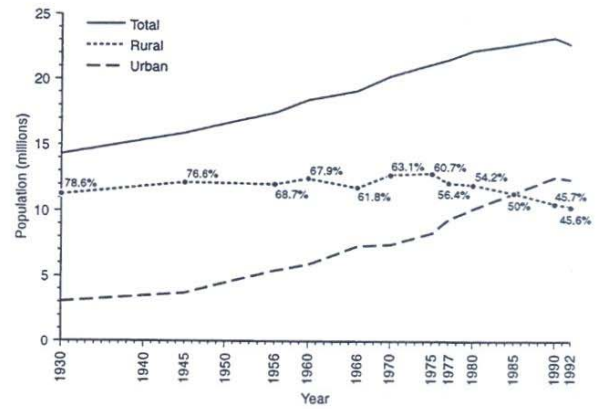


Figure 7.1 Population trends 1930-1992

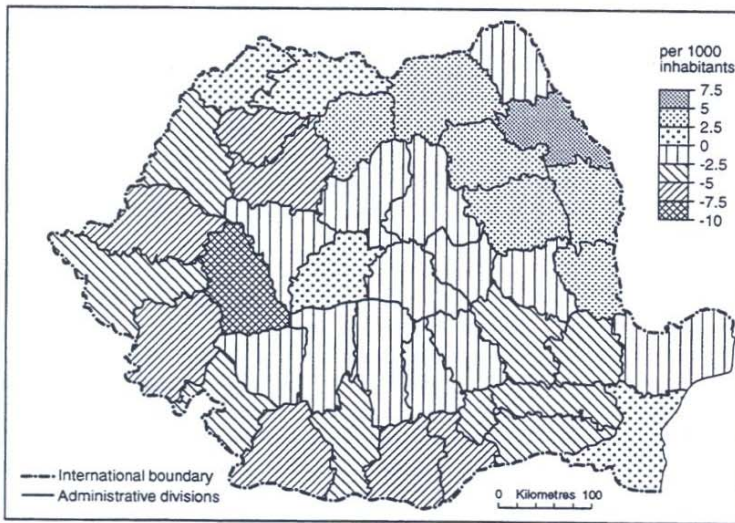


Figure 7.2 Rural population change per thousand in 1991, by counties

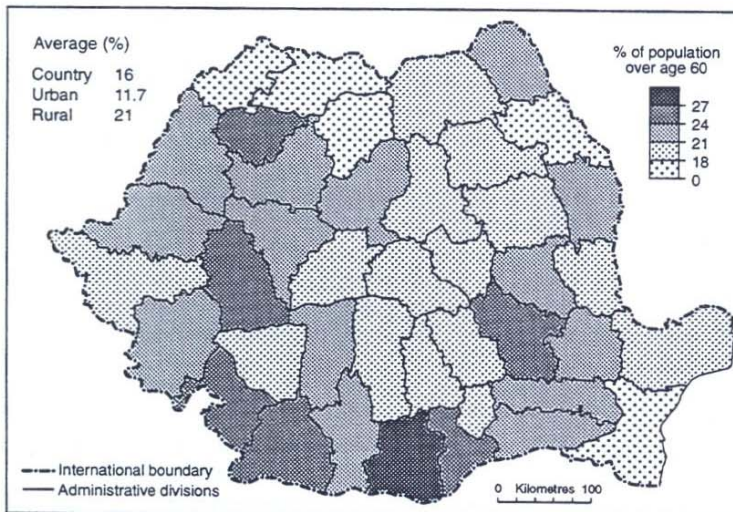


Figure 7.3 Percentage of total population aged over 60 in 1991, by counties