

By Design? Decollectivisation in post-socialist Romania and the rise of land grabbing (1991-2024)

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Abstract

The collapse of the communist bloc in Eastern Europe triggered significant economic restructuring and widespread disruptions across all levels of society. These shifts were part of a broader move toward neoliberal policies, often referred to as "shock therapy". Focusing on the rural context, one of the most significant changes brought about by the fall of the Communist Bloc was the process of decollectivization, which occurred in most former socialist countries. Decollectivization was a major agrarian reform in which land was redistributed, dismantling both agricultural cooperatives (CAP) and state farms. In Romania, this reform resulted in the emergence of a large number of peasant landowners. However, within just a few years, the number of agricultural holdings drastically declined, leading to the transfer of land from small and very small holdings to mega-farms—a phenomenon now understood as land grabbing. In this article, I conduct a historical analysis of the land reforms in post-socialist Romania, aiming to unravel their contradictory goals and their role in the advancement of land grabbing in Eastern Europe.

Keywords: post-socialism; land reforms; decollectivisation; land grabbing; land ownership.

Introduction

The phenomenon of land grabbing, generally understood as the control over land (or other natural resources) to the detriment of local communities, has emerged as a critical issue in global agrarian studies¹. Land grabbing is part of a complex shift in the contemporary food system that accompanies the process of financialisation and industrialisation of agriculture². One of the most widely cited definition, developed by Borras Jr. and Jennifer C. Franco, frames land grabbing as:

the capturing of control of relatively large amounts of land and other natural resources through a variety of mechanisms and forms, involving large-scale capital investment (foreign and domestic), in order to extract value through internationally-oriented commodity production³.

While extensive research has primarily focused on examining land grabbing in the Global South, Eastern Europe remains overlooked on this issue, with little research specifically targeting this geopolitical area⁴. Recent scholarship extends the concept to post-socialist and European contexts, arguing that capital-driven land concentration and the displacement of small-scale farmers follow a comparable structural logic⁵. Furthermore, while the literature discusses extensively the many drivers of land grabbing, little attention has been given to the legacies of collectivisation and decollectivisation and the effects it had on the rise of land grabbing in the region.

Situated historically at the crossroads of empires, Romania underwent significant transformations from a semi-feudal agrarian society to a period of modernisation during the interwar period. Subsequently, it grappled with the

¹ Saturnino M. Borras, Jennifer C. Franco, Sergio Gómez, Cristóbal Kay, and Max Spoor, "Land grabbing in Latin America and the Caribbean" in *The New enclosures: critical perspectives on corporate land deals*, Routledge, 2013, p. 227-254.

² Philip McMichael, "The land grab and corporate food regime restructuring" in *The new enclosures: Critical perspectives on corporate land deals*, Routledge, 2013, p. 63-83.

³ Saturnino M. Borras Jr, Cristóbal Kay, Sergio Gómez, and John Wilkinson, "Land grabbing and global capitalist accumulation: key features in Latin America", *Canadian Journal of Development Studies/Revue canadienne d'études du développement*, 33, 4 (2012), 402-416.

⁴ Saturnino Borras Jr, Jennifer Franco, and Jan Douwe van der Ploeg, "Land concentration, land grabbing and people's struggles in Europe", *Land concentration*, 2013, p. 6.

⁵ Jan Douwe Van Der Ploeg, Jennifer C. Franco, and Saturnino M. Borras Jr., "Land concentration and land grabbing in Europe: a preliminary analysis", *Canadian Journal of Development Studies/Revue canadienne d'études du développement*, 36, 2 (2015), p. 147-162.

rise of fascism, and later with the establishment of a communist regime and integration into the sphere of influence of the USSR. The Romanian Revolution of 1989 marked the end of the communist regime that had been in power since 1947, and put Romania onto a trajectory of transition toward a market-based economy and the establishment of a democratic system. Romania's accession to the European Union in 2007 further solidified its position on the global stage, making it the sixth-largest country in the EU by population⁶. The transition to a market-based economy, following the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, led to a tumultuous period of transition and decollectivization, marked by the dismantling of state-owned farms and the reconfiguration of land ownership patterns.

Romania is the country highlighted as one of the biggest targets for land grabbing in Europe, being included as a key case study in many of the research done on land grabbing in the EU⁷. It features in the own-initiative opinion issued by the EESC as a primary example of countries most affected by land grabbing, when arguing for the need to bring the issue of land grabbing on the European institution's agendas⁹.

The literature identifies various causes that lead to land grabbing in Romania. One of the primary causes identified is related to poverty and social exclusion¹⁰. Other causes are migration and an ageing population incapable of continuing farm labour¹¹. Not less important is the lack of state support for smallholders, and the prohibitory conditions for smallholders' access to European subsidiaries (CAP), which facilitates land concentration by subsidising according to the quantity of land, effectively prioritising large agribusinesses over small-scale farmers but also Western European states over post-socialist countries¹². Another

⁶ According to Eurostat, 2023

⁷ Hestia Delibas, Irina Velicu, Ioana Savin, Valer Simion Cosma, Ioan Sebastian Brumă, and Minodora Sălcudean, "Violence hidden in plain sight: pin-prick land grabbing in Romania", *The Journal of Peasant Studies* (2026), p. 1-21.

⁸ Irina-Adriana Chiurciu, Maria Prisacariu, Ion Certan, and Aurelia-Ioana Chereji, "Land-grabbing phenomena in the context of rural development", *Scientific Papers Series Management, Economic Engineering in Agriculture & Rural Development*, 23 (2023).

⁹ European Economic and Social Committee, "Land Grabbing – A Wake-Up Call for Europe and an Imminent Threat to Family Farming (Own-Initiative Opinion), NAT/632", EUR-Lex, 21 January 2015, Brussels, European Union.

¹⁰ Elena-Ana Popovici, Bianca Mitrică, and Irena Mocanu, "Land concentration and land grabbing: Implications for the socio-economic development of rural communities in south-eastern Romania", *Outlook on agriculture*, 47, 3 (2018), p. 204-213.

¹¹ Katelyn Baker-Smith and S. Attila, "What is land grabbing? A critical review of existing definitions", *Eco Ruralis*, acceso 10 (2016).

¹² Jan Douwe Van Der Ploeg, Jennifer C. Franco, and Saturnino M. Borras Jr., "Land concentration and land grabbing...", cit., p. 147-162.

reason Romania attracts land grabbers is the economic disparity within the EU, the low price of land, coupled with a very fertile soil¹³.

Still, what is less discussed in the literature is the role the post-socialist land reforms played in facilitating land grabbing in Romania. This article seeks to unravel the contradictory objectives of post-socialist land reforms and how this contributed to the emergence of land grabbing. In the following analysis, I will conduct a historical examination of the evolution of land regimes in Romania, with a primary focus on the impact of land reforms and their enduring effects on the current state of land ownership. By analysing a secondary sources, such as activist reports, EU addresses, official state reports, national laws, and policies, this study asks: how did Romania's decollectivisation process create the structural conditions that enabled the rise of large-scale land grabbing after 1989? Romania has become one of the EU's most significant cases of land grabbing, yet the literature tends to treat it as a market-driven phenomenon disconnected from the specific legacies of decollectivisation. By tracing land grabbing back to the property restitution and land reforms of the 1990s, this study reframes land grabbing as the structural outcome of decollectivisation policy choices, thereby linking post-socialist transition and global land grabbing, which are rarely brought into direct conversation.

Short genealogy of land issues in Romania (1864-1989)

The land issue is central to Romanian society's political imaginary, being at the core of many political reforms, significant struggles, and rich intellectual discourse¹⁴. Historically an agrarian country, situated at the periphery of many empires, this space has generated intricate political debates on the issue of development and subalternity¹⁵, anticipating contemporary discussions regarding uneven relations in the global capitalist system¹⁶. The condition of the

¹³ Ruxandra Mălina Petrescu-Mag, Dacina Crina Petrescu, and Ioan Valentin Petrescu-Mag, "Whereto land fragmentation—land grabbing in Romania? The place of negotiation in reaching win-win community-based solutions", *Land Use Policy*, 64 (2017), p. 174-185.

¹⁴ Manuela Boatca, "Peripheral solutions to peripheral development: the case of early 20th century Romania", *Journal of World-Systems Research* (2005), p. 3-26.

¹⁵ Daniel Chiroț, "Neoliberal and Social Democratic Theories of Development: The Zeletin-Voinea Debate Concerning Romania's Prospects in the 1920s and Its Contemporary Importance", *Social Change in Romania, 1940 (1860)*, p. 31-52.

¹⁶ Immanuel Wallerstein, "Semi-peripheral countries and the contemporary world crisis", *Theory and society*, 3, 4 (1976), p. 461-483.

peasantry was unsurprisingly a core issue in interwar Romanian society, where the agrarian question (Rom. *problema agrară*) occupied an increasingly central place in political debate, reflecting broader concerns over land distribution, rural poverty, and national development¹⁷. Land regimes in rural Romania have undergone complex transformations, marked by several land reforms, a soviet style collectivisation and a process of decollectivisation, bringing us to today's issues of land fragmentation and land grabbing¹⁸.

The first land reform in Romania took place in 1864, passed by the Kogalniceanu government and sanctioned by Cuza, and represented the first stepping stone in the modernisation of Romanian society, moving away from a feudal system through the abolition of serfdom and redistribution of land to peasants, no less than one-quarter of agricultural land being redistributed¹⁹. Although this land reform had the merit of fundamentally changing the property relations existing in the rural space, it had many drawbacks, mainly stemming from the allocation of insufficient and fragmented land, making viable exploitation of land difficult²⁰. The high taxation rates and the burden of paying compensation for the land received, resulted in ample social tensions, culminating with the Peasant Uprising of 1907²¹.

The second land reform took place in the aftermath of the First World War. In 1918, the establishment of "Greater Romania", through the incorporation of Transylvania, Banat, Bessarabia, and Maramureș, resulted in a territorial expansion of approximately 40 percent and the inclusion of diverse ethnic minorities from regions previously under Austro-Hungarian and Russian rule. The land redistributed to peasants came as a result of the expropriation of land holdings larger than 100 ha²², resulting in an interwar agricultural system in

¹⁷ Mirel Gheonea, and Cristian Constantin, "Chestiunea agrară în România. Considerații (1859-1907)/The Agrarian Question in Romania. Considerations (1859-1907)", *Hiperboreea*, 1, 1 (2014), p. 57-81.

¹⁸ Judith Bouniol, "Scramble for land in Romania: an iron fist in", *Land concentration*, 132 (2013). Ciutacu Constantin, Chivu Luminița, and Andrei Jean Vasile, "Land grabbing: A review of extent and possible consequences in Romania", *Land use policy*, 62 (2017) 143-150.

¹⁹ Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea, "Neoiovăgia: studiu economico-sociologic al problemei noastre agrare" (1910), p. 49.

²⁰ Sergiu Țăra, "Romanian agrarian structure after thirty years", *Jurnalul Practicilor Comunitare Pozitive*, 20, 4 (2020), p. 3-24.

²¹ P. Eidelberg, "The causes of the great Rumanian peasant revolt of 1907", *African Historical Review*, 7, 2 (1975), p. 17-28.

²² V. Axenciuc, "The Economic evolution of Romania. Statistic-historical researches, 1859-1947", *The Agriculture* (1996), p. 21.

which peasant ownership predominated²³: nearly 90% of agricultural holdings in the country were smaller than 10 hectares, with more than 70% of these under 5 hectares, together accounting for over half of the nation's farmland²⁴. The land reform of 1921 came in the context of the consolidation of the national state and was supposed to settle the growing tensions in the rural space. In 1921, 79% of the population was rural²⁵, a majority of which were working exclusively in agriculture.

The land reform, along with the male universal suffrage²⁶ resulted in the formation of a stronger peasant class, which became politically organised in the National Peasant Party²⁷, guided by an agrarianism ideology²⁸. Agrarianism, or agrarian populism, emerged from the specific contexts of inter-war conditions of the peasants in Eastern Europe. The state of semi-feudalism²⁹, the lagging behind Western economies and the threat of disruption of peasant societies through modernisation were all triggers for the mobilisation of peasant movements in Eastern Europe³⁰. Agrarianism was envisioned as a third way, opposing the modernist ideologies of both liberalism and socialism. At the core of this ideology lies the idea that peasants are the backbone of society, arguing that there is a deep connection between peasants and their land, transcending mere economic worth³¹. With an anti-capitalist and anti-liberal stance, it advocated for the preservation of a traditional structure of society, opposing industrialisation and the penetration of modernist ideas in rural spaces, which was viewed as leading to the exacerbation of individualism. Peasant parties were advocating for more land reforms and the consolidation of the peasantry, and many were organising around the concept of peasant democracies and promoting cooperative movements in agriculture³². Drawing parallels from

²³ Sergiu Țăra, "Underdevelopment in rural Romania: land ownership and agriculture from 1918 to 2018", *Calitatea vieții*, 29, 2 (2018), p. 201-222.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ V. Axenciuc, "The Economic evolution...", cit., p. 21.

²⁶ Romanian Constitution, published in the Official Gazette, no. 282/March 29, 1923.

²⁷ Tr. Partidul Național Țărănesc (PNȚ).

²⁸ Angela Harre, *Between Marxism and liberal democracy: Romanian agrarianism as an economic third way*, 2008, p. 57-73.

²⁹ Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea, "Neoioabăgia...", cit.

³⁰ Daniel Brett, "Indifferent but mobilized: Rural politics during the interwar period in Eastern and Western Europe", *Central Europe*, 16, 2 (2018), p. 65-80.

³¹ Dietmar Müller, and Angela Harre, "Agrarianism as Third Way: Between Fascism and Communism and between Capitalism and Collectivism", *Jahrbuch für Geschichte des ländlichen Raumes*, 7 (2010), p. 7-13.

³² Daniel Brett, "Indifferent but mobilized: Rural politics...", cit., p. 65-80.

agrarian ideologies of inter-war in Eastern Europe, we can see echoes in contemporary Latin American movements advocating for indigenous rights or peasant activism³³.

Within the broader rise of agrarianism in interwar Romania, rural political mobilization did not unfold exclusively along progressive or reformist lines. In fact, some segments of the rural masses were also allured by the discourse of the Iron Guard³⁴. The talking points about land as part of national identity, and saving the national land from the hands of foreigners, as well as the connections with the Orthodox Church and the promotion of traditional social structure that characterised the radical right in the 1930, mirror very well the discourse of the right-wing populists of today in rural areas³⁵.

The third land reform was implemented in 1945, in the aftermath of the Second World War. Often interpreted as a populist measure undertaken by the first communist-led government under Petru Groza, it must also be understood in relation to the political centrality of the peasantry in the interwar period. As a numerically dominant and electorally significant social group, the peasantry had long been a key political force, and land redistribution functioned as a means of securing its support during a moment of profound regime transition. Nevertheless, the reform involved the smallest redistribution of land among the three reforms and proved largely insufficient: 1,058,000 ha were redistributed to nearly 800,000 peasants³⁶. The allocation of small plots, typically limited to around five hectares, produced acute land fragmentation, whose consequences extended into the period of decollectivisation.³⁷ Still, the effects of the land reform of 1945 were short-lived: in 1947 the complete communist takeover came with a new plan for the complete restructure of agriculture.

The process of agricultural collectivisation began in 1947 and lasted until 1957-1962. It was an extensive project that completely restructured property relations in the countryside. Most land was transferred from private ownership

³³ Anna Hajdu, and Natalia Mamonova, "Prospects of agrarian populism and food sovereignty movement in post-socialist Romania", *Sociologia Ruralis*, 60, 4 (2020), p. 880-904. Saturnino M. Borras Jr. "Agrarian social movements: The absurdly difficult but not impossible agenda of defeating right-wing populism and exploring a socialist future", *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 20, 1 (2020), p. 3-36.

³⁴ D. Brett, "Taking the Long View? Polish and Romanian Agrarianism in comparison", *Jahrbuch für Geschichte des ländlichen Raumes*, 7 (2010), p. 183-203.

³⁵ James Frusetta, and Anca Glont, "Interwar fascism and the post-1989 radical right: Ideology, opportunism and historical legacy in Bulgaria and Romania", *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 42, 4 (2009), p. 551-571.

³⁶ V. Axenciuc, "The Economic evolution...", cit., p. 102.

³⁷ Sergiu Țâra, "Underdevelopment in rural Romania...", cit.

of peasants and large landowners into collective property through the creation of Agricultural Production Cooperatives (CAPs), as well as into state property through the establishment of state farms, which accounted for approximately 30% of total agricultural land³⁸. By the end of the collectivisation process, only 15% of agricultural land remained uncollectivised, mainly in mountainous areas, where systematic consolidation of property was infeasible³⁹. Land collectivisation was also accompanied by the nationalisation of machinery and tractors and the establishment of Machine and Tractor Stations⁴⁰.

The process of collectivization was undoubtedly a violent one and was faced in many instances with resistance from peasants and repression from the part of the authorities. In some cases land was surrendered willingly by the peasants, but this is certainly not the typical story⁴¹. The state adopted a vast range of methods to enforce collectivisation, from imposing high quotas of food to be given to the state, to intimidation and threats, to even imprisonment and seizing of assets. The collectivization of agriculture had far-reaching effects, profoundly altering the rural social fabric, destroying traditional peasant lifestyles, and fundamentally shifting people's relationship with the land, which in peasant society is intricately linked to their sense of identity⁴².

Collectivisation was guided by an ideological belief in the rational organisation of agriculture. Through centralised planning, the goal was to elevate the agricultural sector to the level of other industrial sectors⁴³. It was informed by a modernist vision in which land and agricultural production were treated as a factory, similar to the logic that later underpinned the Green Revolution in the Global South⁴⁴. Collectivization had the same function as the primitive accumulation of the 16th century, that is, the release of labour from subsistence agriculture to supplement the need for workers in the industrial sectors⁴⁵. However, the proletarianization of the peasants was partial, wage

³⁸ Wim Van Meurs, "Land reform in Romania—a never-ending story", *SEER-South-East Europe Review for Labour and Social Affairs*, 02 (1999), p. 109-122.

³⁹ Sergiu Țăra, "Underdevelopment in rural Romania...", cit., p. 11.

⁴⁰ Adina Dabu, and Paul D. Aligica, *Economic Dualism and Agrarian Policies: Land Reforms and Structural Economic Change in Romania, 1864-2000*, Springer Nature, 2020.

⁴¹ Gail Kligman, and Katherine Verdery, *Peasants under siege: the collectivization of Romanian agriculture, 1949-1962*, 2011, p. 1-520.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Adina Dabu, and Paul D. Aligica, *Economic Dualism and Agrarian...*, cit..

⁴⁴ Vandana Shiva, *The violence of the green revolution: third world agriculture, ecology and politics*, Zed Books, 1991.

⁴⁵ Alina-Sandra Cucu, "Socialist accumulation and its "Primitives" in Romania", *International Review of Social History*, 67, 2 (2022), p. 251-274.

labour being combined with subsistence agriculture, which allowed maintaining the low wage level and addressing food shortages⁴⁶.

The top-down policies adopted by the communist regime were meant to modernise agriculture, aiming to replicate the development of agriculture in the West, which involved implementing principles of intensive agriculture, land consolidation, and industrialization. Although the policy reduced land fragmentation by consolidating holdings, it failed to produce the anticipated gains in agricultural output. Production was low, mostly because people no longer had a direct interest in the land or in agricultural output, while decision-making was centralized and disconnected from local knowledge and needs. Moreover, many were engaging in everyday forms of resistance, like stealing the surplus⁴⁷.

Decollectivisation in Post-socialist Romania (1991-2000)

The collapse of the communist regime in 1989 prompted the beginning of the transition to a market-based economy, a transition that in the case of Romania took the form of ‘shock therapy’⁴⁸, abruptly disrupting Romanian society⁴⁹. In the agricultural sector, the transition period was marked by two major reforms⁵⁰: the privatisation of state farms (mirroring the broader privatisation of industry), and the implementation of decollectivisation⁵¹.

Decollectivisation was a state-led land reform⁵² that took place all over Eastern Europe after the fall of the Communist Bloc, more exactly in the countries that had undergone a process of collectivisation of land⁵³. Land

⁴⁶ Norbert Petrovici, “Neoliberal proletarianization along the urban-rural divide in postsocialist Romania”, *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai-Sociologia*, 58, 2 (2013), p. 23-54.

⁴⁷ Katherine Verdery, *The Vanishing Hectare: Property and Value in Postsocialist Transylvania*, Cornell University Press, 2003, p. 358.

⁴⁸ Anca Pusca, “Shock, therapy, and postcommunist transitions”, *Alternatives*, 32, 3 (2007), p. 341-360.

⁴⁹ Cornel Ban, *Dependență și Dezvoltare: Economia Politică a Capitalismului Românesc*, Tact, 2014.

⁵⁰ Paul Dragos Aligica, and Adina Dabu, “Land reform and agricultural reform policies in Romania’s transition to the market economy”, *Eastern European Economics*, 41, 5 (2003), p. 49-69.

⁵¹ Steven Sampson, “All is possible, nothing is certain: the horizons of transition in a Romanian village” in *East European Communities*, Routledge, 2019, p. 159-176.

⁵² Max Spoor, “Agrarian reform and transition: what can we learn from ‘the east’?”, *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 39, 1 (2012), p. 175-194.

⁵³ Jerzy Bański, “The consequences of changes of ownership for agricultural land use in Central European countries following the collapse of the Eastern Bloc”, *Land Use Policy*, 66 (2017), p. 120-130.

reform is defined as a state-centred programme redistributing land ownership⁵⁴. The former socialist countries had two main approaches to land reform after the regime change in 1989⁵⁵: one option was distribution of land parcels or distribution of land shares, a measure adopted by countries such as Hungary, Ukraine, Albania or Russian Federation. A second option was the restitution of land rights to previous owners or their descendants, with possible compensation when restitution was no longer possible, a measure implemented in Baltic countries or most ex-Yugoslavian countries. Romania opted for the second approach or which was an attempt of recreating the property system existing before collectivisation, land being restituted as much as possible to their former owners. As a result, five million people have benefited from this restoration⁵⁶ (1.8 ha/beneficiary). Yet, by 2020, Romania's agricultural sector has experienced a significant decline, with 60% fewer holdings compared to 2003⁵⁷.

The land reforms implemented after 1989 set the scene for the subsequent transformations of Romanian agriculture, resulting in the main features that are characterising it until today: land fragmentation, land consolidation and a dual system of agriculture⁵⁸. The purpose of the land reform was to reintroduce (although it never fully disappeared) private property in agriculture, in order to create an effervescent entrepreneurial class⁵⁹. The top-down measures, designed in great part under the guidance of the World Bank, lead to high land fragmentation and contrary to the expectations of World Bank advisors' low level of transactions and market engagement⁶⁰. Oftentimes these consequences were pinned on the peasants' resistance to change or traditional mentality, failing to acknowledge that the system put in place created a financial burden on smallholders, who were often times prohibited de facto from accessing

⁵⁴ Elisa Botella-Rodríguez, and Ángel Luis González-Esteban, "Twists and turns of land reform in Latin America: From predatory to intermediate states?", *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 21, 4 (2021), p. 834-853.

⁵⁵ Morten Hartvigsen, "Land reform and land fragmentation in Central and Eastern Europe", *Land use policy*, 36 (2014), p. 330-341.

⁵⁶ Dacina Crina Petrescu, Ruxandra Mălina Petrescu-Mag, and Vasile Surd, "Romania's agriculture: trends and challenges", *Advances in Agriculture & Botany*, 2, 2 (2010), p. 151-174.

⁵⁷ Ioan-Silviu Vîrva, "Structure and Performance Of Romanian Agriculture in the European Context: An Integrated Analysis Of Romania's Production, Areas and Trade", *Romanian Statistical Review*, 2 (2025).

⁵⁸ Petrescu-Mag, Ruxandra Mălina, Dacina Crina Petrescu, and Ioan Valentin Petrescu-Mag, "Whereto land fragmentation—land grabbing in Romania?... , cit., p. 174-185.

⁵⁹ A. Roger, "Romanian Peasants' into 'European farmers'? Using statistics to standardize agriculture", *Development and Change*, 45, 4 (2014), p. 732-752.

⁶⁰ Adina Dabu, and Paul D. Aligica, *Economic Dualism and Agrarian...*, cit..

subsidiaries, while at the same time were target to a ruthless campaign to fight tax evasion⁶¹.

Decollectivisation of agriculture in Romania was implemented through several laws, which tackled different aspects, gradually making the transition from a centralised organisation of agriculture to a market-led system. The first legislative measure was land Law 18/1991⁶², which legislated on the restitution of land. The law allowed for the restitution of land up to a maximum limit of 10 hectares per family, adhering to the land ownership structure established in 1948. The maximum individual ownership was capped at 100 hectares. Notably, land ownership was restricted to Romanian citizens, and unused land was subject to fines and potential loss of property rights if left idle for more than two years. Former workers of the cooperatives who did not contribute to land could also be receivers of land that remained unclaimed. Landowners had the option to farm individually or to form associations. In this context, fixed assets were primarily allocated to established associations, in the quest to promote collective farming and prevent land fragmentation. Land that was part of state farms was not returned, but the former owners received shares in the commercial agricultural companies⁶³.

Despite the purpose of restitution, the implementation faced challenges, as the redistribution of land titles was slow⁶⁴. Moreover, establishing legally recognized associations proved to be complex, particularly for ageing rural populations with limited education and understanding of legal frameworks. Additionally, the lack of fixed assets and livestock hindered farmers' ability to effectively cultivate the land they received, leading many to later abandon or sell their land. Months later, Law 36/1991⁶⁵ which regularised how agricultural companies and other forms of associations would function was adopted. The introduction of Land Leasing Law 16/1994⁶⁶, later amended by the new Law 65/1998, aimed to establish a framework for facilitating land transactions

⁶¹ Mihai Varga, "'Subsistence' Readings: world Bank and state approaches to commercialising agriculture in post-communist Eurasia", *The Journal of Development Studies*, 55, 6 (2019), p. 1253-1266.

⁶² Law on the Land Resources No. 18/1991. Published in Monitorul Oficial al României [Official Gazette of Romania], Part I, no. 37, February 20, 1991.

⁶³ Paul Dragos Aligica, and Adina Dabu, "Land reform and agricultural...", cit., p. 49-69.

⁶⁴ Katherine Verdery, *The Vanishing Hectare...*, cit..

⁶⁵ Law no. 36 of April 30, 1991 on agricultural societies and other forms of association in agriculture], Monitorul Oficial, Part I, No. 97, May 6, 1991.

⁶⁶ Law no. 16 of 1994 on Agricultural Tenancy Farming, Monitorul Oficial al României, Part I, no. 118 of 14 May 1994.

through land renting, perceived as a method to consolidate land (for more details see Table 1 below).

Law 54/1998⁶⁷ represented a significant shift in land legislation in Romania, characterised by a more liberal approach compared to previous legislations. The primary focus of this law was the facilitation of a land market within the country by regulating the legal circulation of land and introducing clear guidelines for land transactions. Moreover, the legislation expanded the permissible land ownership limit from 100 hectares to 200 hectares per individual. However, like previous laws, only Romanian citizens were eligible to own land under this legislation. Despite the anticipation that Law 54/1998 would catalyse the development of a robust land market in Romania, in the end it failed to do so. The law aimed to address land redistribution and fragmentation issues, with the hope that these measures would spur the growth of a dynamic land market. However, agricultural production remained predominantly subsistence-oriented, rather than market-driven and the envisioned development of a land market failed to materialise⁶⁸.

Shifting away from previous legislation that primarily addressed the dismantlement of Cooperative Agricultural Production (CAP), Law 1/2000⁶⁹ was a significant legislative measure that focused on the privatisation of state-owned land within State farms⁷⁰. By 2000, 70% of state farms were still operating, prompting the need for regulation in the privatisation process⁷¹. The law outlined two distinct methods for privatisation: share purchases and asset selling. However, despite its aims to foster agricultural development, the legislation overlooked the consequences of privatising communal resources such as irrigation systems, resulting in their destruction. This oversight had severe implications, with irrigated land decreasing from over 3 million hectares in 1989 to less than 100 thousand hectares by 2000, leading to significant production losses exceeding 40% due to severe droughts⁷².

⁶⁷ Law No. 54/1998 on the Legal Circulation of Land]. Published in Monitorul Oficial [Official Gazette], Part I, no. 202, June 2, 1998.

⁶⁸ Stefan Dorondel, *Disrupted landscapes: state, peasants and the politics of land in postsocialist Romania*, 2016, p. 1-252.

⁶⁹ Law No. 1 of January 11, 2000, for the reconstitution of the right of ownership of agricultural and forestry land, Monitorul Oficial al României [Official State Gazette of Romania], no. 138, March 1, 2000.

⁷⁰ Intreprinderi Agricole de Stat, or IAS

⁷¹ Adina Dabu, and Paul Dragos Aligica, "Land Reform and Agricultural Reform Policies in Romania's Transition to the Market Economy: Overview and Assessment", *HAL Post-Print hal-00480390* (2003), p. 41.

⁷² Ibid.

Table 1 – Land Reform in post-socialist Romania.

Law	Main Provisions	Goals
Land Law 18/1991	- Restitution up to 10 ha/family, max 100 ha/person (min 0.5 ha) - Only Romanian citizens could own land - Idle land fined / risk of loss after 2 years - Owners could farm individually or form associations - Fixed assets allocated only to associations; individual farmers received only credit value	- Restore private property (pre-1948 structure) - Encourage associations & prevent fragmentation
Law 54/1998	- More liberal legislation - Created framework for a land market - Two legal transactions: (1) buying/selling (2) land exchanges - Ownership cap raised to 200 ha - Still restricted to Romanian citizens	Stimulate land market & consolidation
Law 1/2000	- Targeted state-owned farms (IAS) still operating (~70%) - Privatisation through: (1) share purchases (2) asset sales	Complete decollectivisation by privatising state farms

Romanian Agriculture After EU Accession: Land Market Liberalisation and Land Concentration, 2007-2014

Romania formally began the process of EU admission in 1995 when it submitted its application for membership. However, negotiations for accession did not start until 2000, and Romania officially became a member of the European Union on January 1, 2007. The accession to the EU accession was conditional on adopting a free market economy, and agriculture was no exception. One element of Romanian land legislation that clashed with EU free market principles at the time was the restriction of land access to Romanian citizens only. The risk of land grabbing has long been perceived as a major threat, motivating several former socialist countries of Eastern Europe to implement anticipatory measures to mitigate its consequences⁷³. In the aftermath of EU accession, a number of Eastern European states established moratorium on

⁷³ Cord-Friedrich Von Hobe, and Oliver Musshoff, “On the effectiveness of restricted tendering as a form of policy intervention on agricultural land markets”, *Land Use Policy*, 103 (2021), p. 105343.

foreign ownership of agricultural land, with the stated objective of protecting local farmers from speculative large-scale acquisitions. Poland⁷⁴, Romania⁷⁵, and Hungary⁷⁶ among others maintained such restrictions for several years, arguing that without them, domestic farmers would be unable to compete with Western investors. The implementation of a moratorium on land sales, aimed to safeguard against disparities between Western and Eastern European economies, where low land costs in the East could attract high-income investors from the West⁷⁷.

In Romania, lawmakers were mindful of the threats posed by land grabbing, that is why measures to limit foreign purchase of land was a feature of the land reforms from the beginning, with amends to restrict or curb this trend being proposed even after the liberalisation of the market⁷⁸. In Romania, a moratorium was in force between 2007 and 2014, prohibiting the sale of agricultural land to foreign individuals or companies. This measure was intended to protect domestic land ownership by limiting acquisitions by foreign investors. Nevertheless, land purchases by foreigners occurred even before 2014 through legal loopholes, most commonly by establishing Romanian-registered companies that were subsequently used to acquire land or merged with foreign entities⁷⁹. Law no. 17/2014⁸⁰ marked the end of the moratorium, allowing any EU citizen or legal entity to purchase agricultural land. This legislative change effectively opened the Romanian land market to Western companies and investors, facilitating land acquisitions under the premise of free market principles.

Although it was expected that the end of the moratorium will inevitably result in an exponential growth of land grabbing, especially through foreign investment, as the end of the moratorium signified the end of any restrictions for purchasing land from investors from the EU, most land grabbing happened before the

⁷⁴ Agnieszka Stacherzak, Maria Heldak, Ladislav Hájek, and Katarzyna Przybyła, “State interventionism in agricultural land turnover in Poland”, *Sustainability*, 11, 6 (2019), p. 1534.

⁷⁵ Irina-Adriana Chiurciu, Maria Prisacariu, Ion Certan, and Aurelia-Ioana Chereji, “Land-grabbing phenomena in the...”, cit..

⁷⁶ Noémi Gonda, “Land grabbing and the making of an authoritarian populist regime in Hungary”, *Critical Agrarian Studies*, 46, 3 (2019), p. 606-625.

⁷⁷ Jan Douwe Van Der Ploeg, Jennifer C. Franco, and Saturnino M. Borras Jr., “Land concentration and land grabbing...”, cit., p. 147-162.

⁷⁸ Lucian Luca, “Romanian land market regulatory framework: the legislative corrections in 2014”, *Agricultural Economics and Rural Development*, 11, 2 (2014), p. 203-212.

⁷⁹ Anna Hajdu, and Oane Visser, “A Genealogy of the ‘Land Rush’. Waves of Farmland Acquisition and Diverse Investor Strategies in Romania” in *The Future of Food and Challenges for Agriculture in the 21st Century: Debates about who, how and with what social, economic and ecological implications we will feed the world* 96, 2017.

⁸⁰ Law No. 17/2014. Official Gazette of Romania, Part I, No. 224 of 27 March 2014.

moratorium expired⁸¹. Hajdu and Visser (2017) identify three distinct waves of land acquisition in Romania after 1989. The first wave (1994-2005) was marked by a gradual increase in land investment as the land restitution came to completion, driven by exceptionally low land prices resulting from high fragmentation. The second wave (2005-2010) corresponded to an intensified land rush, fuelled by the global turn towards farmland investment and speculative expectations surrounding rising land prices following EU accession. The third wave (2010-2016) saw a slowdown in land acquisitions as land prices increased and speculative incentives diminished, particularly after the end of the moratorium introduced pre-emptive conditions on land sales and improved transaction transparency.

The liberalisation of the land market raised concerns regarding land grabbing. Inflammatory rhetoric on the danger of foreigners taking up the land grew in the media and some estimates stipulate up to 10% of agricultural land is now in the hands of investors from outside the EU, with a further 20-30% controlled by investors from the EU⁸². The press information provides even more alarming figures, stating that around 40% of the land is controlled by foreign investors and 20-30% from the EU⁸³. Yet the only official statistics published by the Romanian authorities in 2016 estimates that foreign land control only encompasses 8% of land⁸⁴. This did not stop many politicians and activists from sounding the alarm on the danger of foreign penetration on the land market, often reinforcing nationalist sentiments and right-wing populism in rural areas, while simultaneously using these fears as a smokescreen to obscure land grabbing carried out by local elites⁸⁵.

The complexity of the phenomenon makes it that more difficult to account for the scale of land grabbing, especially considering that land grabbing is not only done by purchase of land, but also through land leasing⁸⁶, which is sometimes favored by big companies, who do not have to take on the financial burden of property tax, all while still being able to cash in subventions⁸⁷.

⁸¹ Anna Hajdu, and Oane Visser, "A Genealogy of the 'Land Rush'. Waves..., cit..

⁸² Ruxandra Mălina Petrescu-Mag, Dacinia Crina Petrescu, Hossein Azadi, and Ioan Valentin Petrescu-Mag, "Agricultural land use conflict management—Vulnerabilities, law restrictions and negotiation frames. A wake-up call", *Land Use Policy*, 76 (2018), p. 605.

⁸³ Vasile Burja, Attila Tamas-Szora, and Iulian Bogdan Dobra, "Land concentration, land grabbing and sustainable development of agriculture in Romania", *Sustainability*, 12, 5 (2020), p. 2137.

⁸⁴ Anna Hajdu, and Oane Visser, "A Genealogy of the 'Land Rush'. Waves..., cit..

⁸⁵ Suzanne Verhoog, and Mihnea S. Stoica, "'Land Grabbing' in Romania and Interlinkages with the Euroskeptical Populist Narrative" in *Communicating European union*, Accent, 2019, p. 18-40.

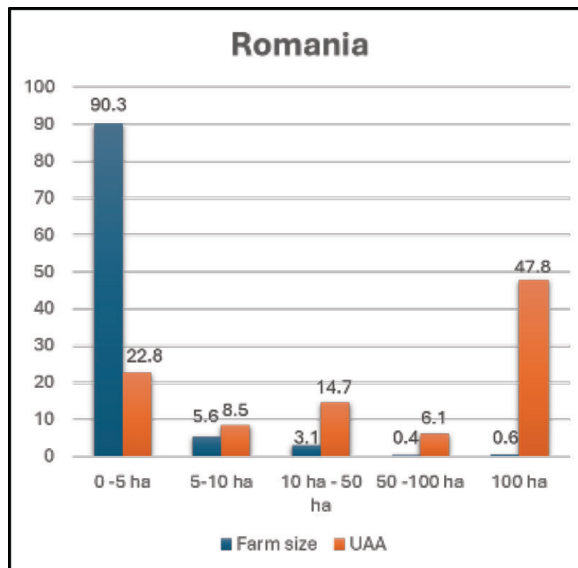
⁸⁶ Similar to what is happening in Ukraine, see Christina Plank, and Leonhard Plank, "The financialisation of farmland in Ukraine", *Journal für Entwicklungspolitik*, 30, 2 (2014), p. 46-68.

⁸⁷ Anna Hajdu, and Oane Visser, "A Genealogy of the 'Land Rush'. Waves..., cit..

An important insight from Varga, shows not only that big farms more often rent the land they exploit instead of owning it, but prefer this method, since this method cuts the tax burden on the land, besides the advantage that the rent is paid in kind⁸⁸. This aspect is important because although Romania's legislation had gatekept foreign entities from owning land, in an attempt to prevent land grabbing, it has de facto failed to do so.

Romanian agriculture is characterized by a big divide between very small farms and large-scale agribusinesses, a phenomenon common in Eastern Europe, which is known as the dual agricultural system. 90.3% of all farms are smaller than five hectares, while only 0.6 % are larger than fifty hectares. However, when examining the utilised agricultural area, smaller holdings below 5 hectares account for 22.8%, while larger holdings above 100 hectares utilise a significant portion, namely 47.8%, of the agricultural land. This indicates a concentration of agricultural land among fewer, larger holdings in Romania, despite the prevalence of smaller-scale agricultural operations. This disparity reflects a concentration of land among a limited number of large-scale operations despite the persistence of smallholders.

Figure 1 – Romania in terms of farm size and UAA (utilized agricultural area)⁸⁹.



⁸⁸ Mihai Varga, “‘Subsistence’ Readings: world Bank..., cit., p. 1253-1266.

⁸⁹ Produced by the authored based on Eurostat, data from 2020.

In Romania, land fragmentation is a direct consequence of the land reforms implemented after 1989. It is linked with low productivity and is considered an inefficient model for agriculture, leading to low mechanisation, low absorption of subsidiaries or abandonment of land⁹⁰. Still, there is some debate over this fact, as high fragmentation can result in optimised allocation of crops across plots in accordance to type of soil or climate conditions, which results in risk diversification and higher overall yields, and tends to preserve biodiversity⁹¹. Land fragmentation was not a direct intent of the land reforms, but an obvious byproduct of reinstatement of land ownership patterns presents in 1947⁹². Land fragmentation and land consolidation are both features of Romanian Agriculture and they are interconnected⁹³.

The Paradoxes of Post-Socialist Land Reforms in Romania

The restitution of land was guided by two contradictory principles. On one hand, the reform was aiming to restore land to its initial owners⁹⁴, undoing a perceived injustice of the communist regime. At the same time, another key aim of policymakers in the decollectivisation process was to transform the peasantry into commercially oriented farmers. Having opposing objectives, the process of land restitution failed on both sides, precisely because of the conflicting aims: it did not manage to create a strong and prosperous peasant class, and it failed to transform them into market-oriented entrepreneurial farmers⁹⁵.

The process of land restitution was meant as an act of restorative justice, an undoing of the harm that was inflicted on peasants during the process of collectivisation⁹⁶. The importance of having land for peasants was still a powerful idea that did not disappear from the shared imagination. While agrarian

⁹⁰ Morten Hartvigsen, "Land mobility in a Central and Eastern European land consolidation context", *Nordic Journal of Surveying and Real Estate Research*, 10, 1 (2014), p. 334.

⁹¹ Jeffery W. Bentley, "Economic and ecological approaches to land Fragmentation: In defense of a much-maligned phenomenon", *Annual review of anthropology*, 16 (1987), p. 31-67.

⁹² Terry Van Dijk, "Dealing with Central European land fragmentation", *Eburon*, Delft 872 (2003).

⁹³ Ruxandra Mălina Petrescu-Mag, Dacina Crina Petrescu, and Ioan Valentin Petrescu-Mag, "Whereto land fragmentation—land grabbing in Romania?...", cit., p. 174-185.

⁹⁴ A. H. Sarris, and D. Gavrilescu, "Restructuring of farms and agricultural systems in Romania" in JFM Swinnen, A. Buckwell and E. Mathijs (eds), *Agricultural Privatisation, Land Reform and Farm Restructuring in Central and Eastern Europe*, 1997, p. 189-228.

⁹⁵ Stefan Dorondel, *Disrupted landscapes...*, cit., p. 1-252.

⁹⁶ Wim Van Meurs, "Land reform in Romania—a never-ending story"..., cit., p. 109-122.

populism failed in crystallising into a revival of the inter-war Peasant Party, at least not to the extent of their former influence, as its historical electorate was weakened, its impact did not dissipate entirely after 1989.

The Land Law of 1991 can be read as an attempt to “turn back the clock” and reproduce not only the ownership system, but a social reality existing before 1947⁹⁷. Just as other historical land reforms were based on the idea that peasants need land, so did this reform prioritise the distribution of land to build up a peasant class⁹⁸. Paradoxically, this process sought to deliver justice by providing reparations for the state violence inflicted upon peasants, yet in doing so it revived historical injustices embedded in the previous landownership regime, reinstating kinship-based privileges as well as ethnic and status hierarchies⁹⁹. Furthermore, land restitution was intended to virtually erase the legacy of communism, yet it failed to account for the profound social and economic transformations that had occurred, which could not be undone through a simple reversion to pre-socialist ownership patterns.

The demographic situation of rural Romania at the end of the war was drastically changed at the end of the XX century. In 1947, a great proportion of the population was living in rural areas: the urban population in Romania was at 22,9%, while the rural population was at 77,1%¹⁰⁰. During postsocialism, the level of ruralisation of the population is still high for European standards, but considerably lowered compared to the inter-war period: in 1990 the urban population was at 54,3 %, while the rural population was at 45,7%. Interestingly enough, the rural – urban population stagnated during the post-communist period, such as in 2020, after 30 years of transition the proportions have not significantly changed: 56,4% urban and 43,6% rural population¹⁰¹. This demographic change is not surprising, considering the ample process of centralization of agriculture and massive industrialisation, but other factors such as the alphabetisation of the population also played a key role. What is certain is that at the end of the century, many of the former peasants who lost their land, and their families, were no longer in the rural areas, but underwent a forced process of depeasantization¹⁰², many of them becoming workers in

⁹⁷ Stefan Dorondel, *Disrupted landscapes...*, cit., p. 1-252.

⁹⁸ Andrew L. Cartwright, *The return of the peasant: Land reform in post-communist Romania*, Routledge, 2017.

⁹⁹ Katherine Verdery, *The Vanishing Hectare...*, cit..

¹⁰⁰ Tudorel Andrei, *Populația României, 1860-2020: Serii istorice de date*, Bucharest, 2020.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Cerasela Voiculescu, “Disappearing peasants?: On land, rent, and revenue in post-1989 Romania”, *Focaal*, 52 (2008), p. 77-91.

factories, emigrating to urban areas. Although they received their land back, they were no longer in a position to resume a peasant way of life.

More so, what could not be revived was the social structure of the traditional Romanian villages, the immaterial culture that was lost during collectivisation: traditional knowledge and farming practices and traditional customs of communal living and organising labour¹⁰³. This contributed to the gradual erosion of rural life, as local food production, biodiversity, and cultural knowledge steadily declined in the context of ongoing economic migration¹⁰⁴. The social fabric and social order built on the system of ownership were not as easy to restore as the physical parcels of land.

Furthermore, policymakers failed to account for the profound transformation in farming practices that occurred during five decades of collectivisation, as agriculture shifted from predominantly small scale subsistence farming with a limited number of entrepreneurial farmers to a centrally managed, industrialised system. The consolidation of land during the communist period resulted in the creation of an infrastructure appropriate for managing agriculture on a large scale. That means that machinery, buildings, irrigation were all built and maintained to facilitate an economy of scale. And while land could be relatively easily distributed back, this was not the case for complementary means of production that facilitated agricultural activities¹⁰⁵. Many peasants did not just lose lands, they also had these means of production taken away during collectivisation, which were not distributed back. Moreover, half a century had passed since their land was collectivised, making a return to traditional, low-mechanised agricultural production unfeasible.

Receiving back their lands was for many peasants a moment of profound joy and relief, yet that moment was shortly lived. Even though decollectivization successfully made peasants landowners, they lacked the resources needed to effectively manage their lands, primarily due to limited mechanisation and extensive land fragmentation. This situation often led to an inability to sustain their livelihoods solely through agriculture. As Verdery (2003) points out, “for these small owners, land lost value twice: once when it was seized from them by socialism and again when it was seized by the free market”¹⁰⁶.

¹⁰³ R. M. Petrescu-Mag, D. C. Petrescu, & H. Azadi, “From scythe to smartphone: Rural transformation in Romania evidenced by the perception of rural land and population”, *Land Use Policy*, 113 (2022), 105851.

¹⁰⁴ Ciutacu Constantin, Chivu Luminița, and Andrei Jean Vasile, “Land grabbing...”, cit., 143-150.

¹⁰⁵ Morten Hartvigsen, “Land reform and land fragmentation...”, cit., p. 330-341.

¹⁰⁶ Katherine Verdery, *The Vanishing Hectare...*, cit., p. 358.

A second goal that guided the policy makers during decollectivisation was kick starting the land market and transforming peasants into modern farmers¹⁰⁷. This goal appears to be at odds with the previous one. The first goal sought to recreate the social order that existed prior to collectivisation, prioritising the needs of peasants by restoring their way of life and reversing the process of depeasantisation imposed by the communist regime. The second goal, however was grounded in the assumption that peasants would eventually disappear, being regarded as a remnant of a bygone era. While land restitution reinstated peasants as landowners and reaffirmed their role as the backbone of agriculture, it simultaneously anticipated and implicitly planned for their eventual demise.

Conflicting objectives meant that land restitution failed on both counts, neither strengthening the peasantry nor transforming it into a market-oriented farming class. This failure stemmed from policymakers' mistaken assumptions about the outcomes of land reform and the privatisation of agriculture. It was expected that reintroduction of private property would automatically result in a dynamic land market and land transactions¹⁰⁸. Furthermore, food production was supposed to evolve following the pattern of Western Europe, where most food is grown for the market, on larger scale farms¹⁰⁹. So, even though extreme land fragmentation was the obvious consequence of the reforms, it was presumed that this is only an intermediary state that will be surpassed by land consolidation spawning from the regularisation of a private property regime. Yet, instead of making the leap to commercial agriculture and to adopt a market-oriented vision, Romanian peasants either slowly abandoned their lands and migrated to cities, or later on, engaged in transnational migration or they returned to subsistence practices¹¹⁰. Either way, the level of land transactions were very low in the first decade after land restitution¹¹¹.

Many of the official positions, which later on informed policies of the matter, blamed this situation on the so-called peasant mentality, informed by a traditionalistic view of subsistence, a mentality at odds with the demands of modernization and economic progress¹¹². Moreover, the failure to stimulate the

¹⁰⁷ A. Roger, "‘Romanian Peasants’ into ‘European farmers’?...", cit., p. 732-752.

¹⁰⁸ Adina Dabu, and Paul Dragos Aligica, "Land Reform and Agricultural...", cit.. Carolina Trivelli, "Land markets and land prices in the Central European Free Trade Agreement Countries", dostupno na <http://www.fao.org/sd/LTdirect/LTan0017.htm> (1997).

¹⁰⁹ Irina-Adriana Chiurciu, Maria Prisacariu, Ion Certan, and Aurelia-Ioana Chereji, "Land-grabbing phenomena in the...", cit..

¹¹⁰ Stefan Dorondel, *Disrupted landscapes...*, cit., p. 1-252.

¹¹¹ Adina Dabu, and Paul D. Aligica, *Economic Dualism and Agrarian ...*, cit., p. 40.

¹¹² Mihai Varga, "‘Subsistence’ Readings: world Bank...", cit., p. 1253-1266.

formation of producer associations and agricultural companies was blamed on past trauma induced by collectivisation. Supposedly, Romanian peasants were fearful of once again losing control of their lands and thus were acting in an irrational way against their own self interest¹¹³. This view of the peasantry as an anachronic category, not compatible with the concept of modernity, gives way to positions in which peasants need to be ‘saved’ from their ways of living. This resulted in a paternalistic approach of policy makers and economic advisors of the World Bank, who greatly contributed all throughout the process of land reforms and later on of accession to EU¹¹⁴.

Varga argues that the way subsistence agriculture is understood by the World Bank and governmental administrators is less in terms of farmers’ engagement in the market and more measured according to the farm size. Land fragmentation, which is the main concern for these policy makers, is often perceived only in relation to ownership, and other dimensions of land fragmentation are not really considered. Social fragmentation, which refers to the separation between those who work the land and those who own the land, and activity fragmentation, meaning the separation between land and complementary means to effectively exploit it, were not properly taken into account¹¹⁵. It is for this reason that many of the measures taken to halt land fragmentation in Eastern Europe and Romania, more specifically, failed, as land fragmentation was only considered at the level of ownership. Without addressing the other dimensions of land fragmentation, such as activity fragmentation, or the low level of mechanisation and infrastructure mismatch, the measures taken remain without real effect¹¹⁶.

Moreover, subsistence farming is more often complementary to other sources of income, such as pensions, paid labour, informal commercialisation, or income from abroad. Policy makers were guided by the idea that larger farm size is the only efficient way to organise agriculture and that small scale agriculture hinders agricultural development. The land reform and introduction of private property was presumably going to launch a land market that will eventually kick

¹¹³ J. V. Andrei, R. A. Ion, L. Chivu, R. E. Pop, and A. Marin, “Investigations On Farmers’ willingness To Associate And Join In Environmental Responsible Short Supply Chain In Romania”, *Applied Ecology & Environmental Research*, 17, 2 (2019).

¹¹⁴ Mihai Varga, “Resistant to change? Smallholder response to World Bank-sponsored “commercialisation” in Romania and Ukraine”, *Canadian Journal of Development Studies/Revue canadienne d’études du développement*, 40, 4 (2019), p. 528-545.

¹¹⁵ Rachel Sabates-Wheeler, “Farm strategy, self-selection and productivity: can small farming groups offer production benefits to farmers in post-socialist Romania?”, *World Development*, 30, 10 (2002), p. 1737-1753.

¹¹⁶ Terry Van Dijk, “Dealing with Central European...”, cit..

off the “players” unadapted to a market economy, transferring thus the land in the hands of more “entrepreneurial” larger actors¹¹⁷. The way that land reform was designed from the start was favouring commercial agricultural companies and disadvantaged individual farmers, who were given back lands but without having the actual means to exploit, all machinery or other complementary agricultural tools being given only to associations and not to individual peasants, who in turn became dependent on these actors¹¹⁸.

A lack of resources to effectively exploit their land is a more plausible explanation than the assumption that peasants failed to form producer associations because of their recent experience of collectivisation or that they resisted commercialisation due to presumed psychological traits. Furthermore, beyond lack of mechanisation, the literature also showcases the particular advantageous position that the nomenclatura, or the old regime administration had during the process of decollectivisation, having the technical knowledge that many of the landed peasants did not have anymore, after years of planned agriculture, and the insights into the process of land restitution¹¹⁹.

Instead of adopting measures that could actually support the newly established landowners, policy makers were more focused on transforming agriculture and delivering it to the market. For instance, 91% of farmers are ineligible to farming subventions due to their farm size¹²⁰. Measures for fighting tax evasion and increasing regularisation for commercialisation were prioritised over helping peasants, thus focusing on disciplining them into becoming good entrepreneurial farmers or indirectly forcing them to exit agriculture altogether¹²¹. They did not see the value that subsistence farming serves in reality for peasants, protecting them from an uncertain economic environment, but instead insisted on imposing a model of agriculture based on increased commercialization, without taking into considerations the actual conditions, and the ramifications of such policies¹²². The result was an impoverished peasant class and the dissolution of rural communities, leaving them vulnerable to land grabbing.

¹¹⁷ A. Roger, “‘Romanian Peasants’ into ‘European farmers’?..., cit., p. 732-752.

¹¹⁸ Adina Dabu, and Paul D. Aligica, *Economic Dualism and Agrarian...*, cit..

¹¹⁹ Katherine Verdery, “Fuzzy property: Rights, power, and identity in Transylvania’s decollectivization”, *Transforming post-communist political economies* (1997), p. 102-117.

¹²⁰ Adela Serban, and Alina Juravle, “The Romanian Rural Areas In The Context Of European Development Strategies (English version)”, *Revista Romana de Sociologie*, 3 (2012), p. 265-281.

¹²¹ Mihai Varga, “‘Subsistence’ Readings: world Bank..., cit., p. 1253-1266.

¹²² Diana Mincyte, “Subsistence and sustainability in post-industrial Europe: The politics of small-scale farming in Europeanising Lithuania”, *Sociologia Ruralis*, 51, 2 (2011), p. 101-118.

Conclusion

After the fall of the Communist regimes in 1989, the newly liberated states found themselves in a very strange position. The structures of power in which they were previously integrated disappeared as the authoritarian political regimes were brought down, leaving open new possibilities for rearranging their social, economic and political life. However, the scope of possibilities seemed constrained to only one option for development: mirroring the liberal economic models of Western countries.

The transition to capitalism was a great rupture with the communist past, yet both regimes build on modernist aspirations, and had the same goal: the resolution of the agrarian question through ample projects of industrialization of agriculture and the establishment of a rational, extractivist system that would throw away traditional rural livelihoods and would dissolve the peasantry. Although, in the post-socialist period, agriculture was privatised and land was reintroduced as private property, the belief in the efficiency of large-scale, industrial agriculture persists.

This article set out to answer how Romania's decollectivisation process created the structural conditions that enabled the rise of large-scale land grabbing after 1989. The argument put forward is that the current surge of land grabs in Eastern Europe, and more specifically Romania, must be put in relation to earlier state-led enclosures and the specific regional histories of post socialist land reforms. The failure of land restitution in Romania can be attributed to the clash between two opposing goals of the land reform: rectifying perceived injustices of the communist regime by returning land to its original owners, thereby revitalising the peasant class, and simultaneously pushing for the modernization and market-oriented transformation of agriculture. The paternalistic view of peasants as incompatible with modernity led policymakers and World Bank advisors to advocate for their "saving" through disciplinary measures. Policy makers prioritised market-driven agricultural transformation over supporting small landowners, inadvertently pushing peasants towards commercialization or exit from agriculture.

The focus on commercialization overlooked the essential needs of small-scale farmers, leading to rural impoverishment and heightened susceptibility to land grabbing. The overarching failure can be traced back to the neglect of peasant realities and the imposition of an ill-suited land reforms. Many of the consequences that resulted from these land reforms were not the direct intention of the policy makers, but a byproduct from the mismatch between the intention of those policies and the social realities in which they were implemented. While

policymakers rhetorically express concern for the realities of small farmers and the risks posed by land grabbing, in practice, little meaningful action has been taken to support them. Taken together, these dynamics show that land grabbing in Romania was not incidental, but a direct legacy of a restitution-based, fragmented, and under-supported decollectivisation that left small landowners structurally exposed once land markets liberalised.

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