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**RURAL SOCIETY,  
POWER,  
AND  
SOCIAL INTEGRATION**

*Festschrift  
for the seventieth birthday  
of Imre Kovách*

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# Quality of government, land and rural development

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WILLEM KORTHALS ALTES

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Land is an important asset in rural areas. Access to the land for the rural population has an impact on rural development. This contribution reviews, based on research and reports written in the context of the Horizon 2020 project RURALIZATION, the relationship between quality of government, access to land and rural development. In the next section, quality of government will be discussed, then a case study of the region of Teleorman in Romania (Korthals Altes 2021) will be presented, and outcomes will be discussed.

## Quality of Government

There is a vast literature indicating that the quality of government affects social and economic development. There is a clear link between good governance and the UN's sustainable development goals (Massey 2022). Bad governance falls "*...short of those elements such as accountability, transparency and opportunity to achieve the redress of grievance that lie at the heart of enlightenment notions of what it means to be well-governed*" (Massey 2022: p. 82).

The quality of government also relates to political equality, "*countries where political power is more evenly distributed tend on average to have higher levels of institutional quality*" (Ezcurra-Zuazu 2022: p. 290). There are not only differences in the quality of government between nations but there are regional differences – the "*peculiarities of the regional governments*" (Raya-Quero et al. 2023: p. 15) – that matter (Charron et al. 2015, Charron, Lapuente-Annoni 2019, Rodríguez-Pose-Muštra 2022). These impacts are relevant for developments in the rural areas themselves and the

<sup>1</sup> Part of this contribution has been published before in the "*Technical Report on Quantitative Analysis of Land Holdings and Land Market Trends*" (2021) written in the context of the RURALIZATION project. This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 817642. Thanks to Attila Szócs-Boruss for his comments on an earlier version of the case study.

ways in which rural areas can use their urban hinterlands through intermediate actors, as was found by Kovách and Kristóf (2009) in a comparative study.

*“The transformation of administrative structures and development policies is the key to explaining the emerging number and strengthening role of intermediate actors (...), as well as the shift in leadership and local power relations.”* (Kovách–Kristóf 2009: p. 51)

In less organized systems ‘quasi chaos’ conditions may result in ‘unclear’ regulations and a “*dominance of political and economic stakeholders*” (Kovách & Kristóf 2009: p. 56). This affects rural development and the social fabric of rural areas. “*Representatives of land users involved in traditional economic activities (such as agriculture) lose their position*” (Kovách–Kristóf 2009: p. 57). Csurgó et al. (2019) found the following: “*The methods of governance and involvement of actors significantly determines the success of interactions and synergies between rural and urban areas.*” (Csurgó et al. 2019: p. 91). Good governance plays a role in sustainable development. In rural areas, it relates to issues in land markets (Korthals Altes 2021) and government support for cohesion policy (Wishlade et al. 2019) and agricultural policy (Gonda 2019). Moreover, even in localized, bottom-up programmes such as LEADER and its Local Action Groups (LAG), quality of government plays a role, such as in a case in Hungary in which it was noted that “*The question of accountability is not central to the thinking of the LAG*” (Csurgó–Kovách 2013: p. 86). Instead, it followed an approach that was “*too general and bureaucratic*” (Csurgó–Kovách 2013: p. 86). This resulted in less optimal outcomes. Quality of government may also impact social society. For example in Hungary, the “*financial resources of rural civil associations were mainly from state and local government budgets and not from private society or economy*” (Kelemen et al. 2006: p. 60). Therefore, the quality of government may have an impact on the way civil associations function.

The Quality of Government Institute has executed regional surveys of quality of government in 2010 at regional levels, (Charron et al. 2014, 2015), 2017 (Charron, Lapuente–Annoni 2019, Charron, Lapuente–Rothstein 2019) and 2021 (Charron et al. 2022). These surveys aim to measure the quality of government based on matters such as “*control of corruption, rule of law, government effectiveness, voice and accountability*” (Charron et al. 2014: p. 71). In these surveys, people respond to 16 questions and statements such as “*The police force gives special advantages to certain people in my area. (Agree/disagree, 0–10)*” (Charron et al. 2014: p. 83) or “*All citizens are treated equally in the public healthcare system in my area. (Agree, rather agree, rather disagree, or disagree, 1–4)*” (Charron et al. 2014: p. 83).

The outcomes show large differences between regions in the European Union; in regions of Finland, Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands and Luxembourg higher scores can be found and in the South of Italy, Croatia, Greece, Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania, lower scores can be found (Charron et al. 2022).

An example of this relationship between quality of government, land and rural development will be illustrated using Teleorman, a region in Romania on the plains

along the Danube, where the issues of land accumulation by large companies with close relationships with government officials play a role.

### **Teleorman in its Romanian context**

Teleorman is a rural NUTS 3 region located in the Romanian NUTS 2 region of Sud Muntenia. Romania is characterized, like many other areas in Central and Eastern Europe (Korthals Altes 2022), by a dual land market of many small holders and a few large landholders, and an absence of the “*medium-sized European farm*” (Alexandri-Luca 2019: 12). The farmland holdings in Sud Muntenia are very unequal, with a GINI of 0.86 (Korthals Altes 2023). In the EU, only seven NUTS 2 regions, that is, Sud-Est (RO), Bucuresti – Ilfov (RO), Bratislavský kraj (SK), Dél-Dunántúl (HU), Severoiztochen (BG), Nyugat-Dunántúl (HU) and Pest (HU) (Korthals Altes 2023), have a more unequal division of landholdings than Sud Muntenia. Some other regions in Central and Eastern Europe also have a very polarized farmland holding structure (Györi-Kovács 2023, Korthals Altes 2022). Moreover, there is an issue in the rule of law in the Romanian land market resulting in unclarity of property rights and who is entitled to exercise them (Korthals Altes-de Wolff 2021).

In Romania, over 80% of the farms use over 50% of what they produce for their own needs. According to EUROSTAT, in 2013 there were 4.7 million “*Farms whose household consumes more than 50% of the final production*” in the EU, of which 3.2 million (67%) were located in Romania (EUROSTAT 2017). Romania has about 7.5 million households (EUROSTAT 2023); so, about 40% of Romanians are fed from their own farms. Most of the Romanian farms “*...are subsistence and semi-subsistence farms, having an important role in the food security of peasant households, but a minor role in the formation of food supply crossing the chains to processors and final consumers*” (Alexandri-Luca 2019: 5). However, as indicated above, a large share of the final consumers are peasant households. So, subsistence farming plays an important role in food supply for the population.

The production per hectare of Romanian small farms is, in addition, a lot larger than that of the bigger farms: on 12.1% of the land, farms under two hectares account for 25.1% of agricultural production (Miron-Lup 2013, Varga 2020). They use more labour-intensive ways of production, which pays off in higher productivity per hectare. Generally, these smaller farms have a mix of crops. However, a large part of the land is held by a few very large farms, which produce a few crops on a large scale (Alexandri-Luca 2019). The lack of diversity of crops on large farms has been growing (Alexandri-Luca 2019). Likewise, the share of land controlled by these large farms is also growing.

In Romania farms held by legal persons are 175 hectares on average, but in Teleorman these legal person-owned farms are over 250 hectares on average. Farms held by natural persons are only 1.3 to 2.2 hectares on average, depending on the region.

Overall, in Romania, land ownership held by natural persons has been decreasing and land owned by legal persons has been growing (Luca 2019: 5). In Teleorman, legal persons hold a larger share of the land than natural persons. The NUTS 2 region of Sud-Muntenia, in which Teleorman is located, has, on the other hand, a share of 87.2% of the farms that produce mainly products to be consumed by their own household (EUROSTAT 2022). So, there is a large gap between different types of farming, which is expressed in the high score on the GINI index (Korthals Altes 2023).

### **Large companies and the state**

In the study on land grabbing by Szócs-Boruss et al. (2015) *“The TOP 100 Recipients of agricultural subsidies in Romania”* (pp. 25–29), 8 out of the top 100 recipients are located in Teleorman. The largest in these regions (and top three in Romania) is Inter-Agro, who held 55,000 hectares of land in Teleorman in 2014 (Szócs-Boruss et al. 2015). According to its presentation on their old website, farming is just one of their lines of activities. Although InterAgro SA and InterAgro SRL (InterAgro 2020) have been in insolvency proceedings from 2nd February 2016 (InterAgro 2016b), it has been active in re-opening fertilizer plants (Banila 2020). Activities have included utilities, such as natural gas, in the town of Zimnicea in Teleorman and the operation of a ferry across the Danube (from Zimnicea to Svishtov). Zimnicea (about 15,000 inhabitants) seems to have been transformed into a company town in which all major economic activities are owned by one company. In Romanian news messages Zimnicea is characterized as “fief of lui” (the fief of) the president of InterAgro (Chiruta 2014, ECONOMICA.net 2020). Undercover reports indicate that day-workers are not properly paid by Inter-Agro (Chiruta 2014). Also notable is the fact that InterAgro has been grown based on “State sell-offs and the privatisation of key Romanian companies” (InterAgro 2016a). Such a growth supported by opportunities presented by the state fits with a low quality of government context in which residents perceive that there is no level playing field as the state provides more chances to some people than to others.

InterAgro has attracted the attention of the Romanian Anti-Corruption Directorate (Roque 2015). Senior officials have been prosecuted for corruption (Grădinaru 2019, Romgaz 2020), and the CEO has got a five year prison sentence for tax evasion, money laundering and buying influence (Berzuc 2021, Marica 2021).

In this context it seems to be challenging for new generations to achieve access to land in competition with such a “dominant force in the domestic market” (InterAgro 2016a), who also proudly present that they have been “harnessing and utilising the available European finance opportunities” (InterAgro 2016b). Although land grabbing is often labelled as something foreign, and something which can be stopped by banning foreigners from access to the land market (Petrescu-Petrescu-Mag 2018), many of the land grabbing organizations are domestic (Petrescu-Mag et al. 2017). In relation to this debate, and based on experience with the Romanian context, Baker-Smith and Szócs-Boruss (2016) have also developed a broader, multi-faceted, definition of land grabbing:

*“Land grabbing can be defined as being the control (whether through ownership, lease, concession, contracts, quotas, or general power) of larger than locally-typical amounts of land by any person or entity (public or private, foreign or domestic) via any means (‘legal’ or ‘illegal’) for purposes of speculation, extraction, resource control or commodification at the expense of peasant farmers, agroecology, land stewardship, food sovereignty and human rights.” (Baker-Smith–Szócs-Boruss 2016: 2)*

Having domestic ties provides relational capital that proves beneficial in areas of low quality of government. Local knowledge is also necessary to convince the “rural population (i.e., the elderly and the vulnerable)” (Petrescu-Mag et al. 2017: 180) to lease their land to the mass land holder, as the base underlying the mass holdings is a very fragmented structure of ownership. However, foreign investors may provide access to capital.

InterAgro is, as mentioned, not the only organization active in this region. Others can be found as well, including companies connected to the leader of the Social Democratic Party (PSD), and former president of the County Council of Teleorman (Dimulescu et al. 2013), who has been convicted and sentenced to jail for corruption related activities including the misuse of EU funds (Deletant 2018).

Specific to the Teleorman area is that the land was part of the Danube’s marshland until its drainage in the 1960s (Lup 2018). These former swamps were not returned to their former owners after 1989, but remained in the hands of the state which

*“...allowed for different political-mediated arrangements to be made (distribution of parcels to political clients and concessions accorded to the newly-emerged local “barons”) and determined the sort of agriculture that was implemented in the area.” (Troc 2012: 90–91)*

This fits with the developments of land held by large companies with a special relationship with state officials, as indicated above.

### Minorities

In contrast to these large landowners are the Roma population, as analysed by Troc (2012) in a case study in a few villages in Teleorman.

*“Even if they are strictly dependent to land and its cultivation, they represent also the only “proles”, being the sole group from these villages which does not possess land, and which, very likely, was all the time entirely dependent on the working needs in agriculture that were available in different historical moments.” (Troc 2012: 96)*

In interviews they recalled the socialist times in which they were employed for seasonal work.

*“If this form of engagement seemed to be profitable at the time, being employed on a daily-basis contract, they were excluded from some of the social benefits other agricultural workers get in the present, especially from the right to get a pension, or, also important, the right to get land during the re-privatization that took place in the first half of the ‘90’s.” (Troc 2012: 96)*



So, currently most of the Roma have access to the land around the house only.

The Adventists, a protestant minority in these villages, also *"have less land than the majority population"* (Troc 2012). Demographically they behave differently. They have a higher birth rate than the majority population and have been less involved in rural-urban migration. Before 1990, this related to their difficult situation.

*"Like all the other neo-protestant communities, the Adventists were under a constant state officials' harassment before 1990, which limited their mobility, and constrain most of the young and educated people to stay in the villages and, while they were not welcomed as employees in the state's institutions, to position themselves mostly towards crafts."* (Troc 2012: 97)

Troc expects that the relatively poor were attracted to this church as it practises a high rate of solidarity between members, and which explains their limited land-ownership.

The Orthodox majority of the villages are landowners who often have one and a half to three hectares of land divided between fields further away from the village, vineyards or orchards nearby and gardens. Most household also get small pensions or medical contributions based on previous work. These are aging communities in which the number of deaths is a multiple of the number of births (Troc 2012).

### Common Agricultural Policy and land holdings

In Romania CAP grants are 40% of farm income (Alexandri-Luca 2019). As CAP decoupled payments are area based, large farms owned by legal persons get a very large share of the CAP grants. That is, *"... 97% of farms receive only 40% of the total amount of direct payments, while the remaining 3% receive 60% of the amount"* (Alexandri-Luca 2019: 12). The decoupled payments have had some adverse effects on Romanian farming:

*"At the same time, it has amplified the 'land grabbing' phenomenon, under various modalities, both by the Romanian and the foreign land owners."* (Alexandri-Luca 2019: 15)

This issue of land grabbing has been studied based on case studies (compare Szócs-Boruss et al. 2015) and it relates to issues in the quality of governance.

*"The effect of Common Agricultural Policy implementation has been mainly materialized into the increase of farmer subsidies, which practically increased their value five times in the investigated period. Farm incomes steadily increased, yet the increase of the incomes is almost exclusively due to the increase of subsidies received by farmers, in a progressive amount from year to year. The share of subsidies in farm incomes increased from 10% in the year 2007 to 40% in 2016. In this context, we consider that many farms depend quite heavily on the direct payments received, due to the low productivity of agricultural activities."* (Alexandri-Luca 2019: 15)

So, there is a process of accumulating land in very large farms to harvest decoupled payments. This is not beneficial for the new generations in terms of access to land. Here land grabbing is sometimes equated with land in foreign ownership:

*“...the only rigorous but internal estimation, carried out by the Romanian authorities in the year 2016, shows that the agricultural land owned by foreign firms or Romanian firms with foreign shareholders totalled 958 thousand ha, i.e. about 8% of the agricultural area (or 12% of the arable area, taking into consideration that the largest part of land sold to foreigners is arable land).” (Luca 2019: 11–12)*

Land grabbing is of course not purely a foreign issue. Domestic parties also take up their share in this practice. After all, 3% of the farms control about 60% of the CAP grants and foreign-held farmland is only 12%. However, it must be noted that there are companies actively advertising that promote investment in Romanian land and who are also interviewed in publications targeting agricultural professionals indicating that you can acquire full ownership in Romania for the price of a one-year lease in the Netherlands (Engwerda 2017, van der Woude 2017). Reports of study trips to review ‘opportunities’ for investments in Romania (Boekhorst 2018, LTO Noord 2018) are, however, critical of the orientation of buying more land to grow instead of channelling investments into the improvement of current land. In the proceedings of this business trip, observations are shared that, for example, Romania has a dual land market of many very small farms and a few very large ones that predominantly lease their land. These farmers

*“...appear to be motivated to increase income on short-term with as low input as possible. Long-term soil improvements are less on the agenda, partly because a lot of the soil is not owned. The average Romanian would be tending to acquire extra land to increase income, instead of investments to increase the income of current hectares.” (Boekhorst 2018)*

It is probably best to read ‘average Romanian large landholder’ as it can be doubted whether the participants in this study trip have been meeting many smallholders, who are not so active in accumulating land.

The system of CAP decoupled payments clearly supports such an orientation to acquiring extra land. Investments in land improvements are not the main way to receive extra grants; investments in extra land does provide these. This seems to be a major disturbance in progress towards a more sustainable development of rural areas.

There is a “reverse tenancy configuration” (Amblard–Colin 2009) of many small landowners having large tenants that consolidate land holdings in “large-scale corporate farms” (Amblard–Colin 2009: 829). This development has been continued in the last decade (Alexandri–Luca 2019). In neo-classical economics:

*“The efficiency of land markets is measured through their ability to transfer land from less productive to most productive users. The transactions costs, which complicate or hinder these transfers, lead to efficiency decrease. Several studies have shown that the agricultural markets from the countries that had already passed through the transitional period were characterized by the existence of significant transaction costs, which represented a constraint for the farms that intended to increase their size, also in the case of Romanian farms. These constraints came from the costs related to the asymmetric information, co-ownership of land (as*

*result of the land restitution process), the precarious situation of the registration of properties, the high level of commissions and fees in connection to property transfers." (Luca 2019: 3)*

The transparency of the Romanian land market is limited. The statistics on operations in the land market are of limited use (Luca 2019). Various sources provide different data on land transaction prices; the general consensus is that the prices have been going up considerably since Romania became an EU Member state (Luca 2019).

## **Discussion and conclusion**

A low quality of government in a remote, non-mountainous region, creates conditions for the accumulation of land in the hands of a few large landholders. The low quality of government means that governments are weak, and that the population experiences the situation that not everyone has equal access to government services. This is critical for rural development. The fact that matters of local development are not addressed adequately, complicates access to land for new generations. Land and access to it is a crucial resource for new generations who aim to start a farm (Kováč et al. 2022). The non-mountainous character of the land means that economies of scale can much more easily play a role than in areas where natural conditions support small-scale farming. So, large inequalities in land holdings are typical in these regions, as is an ageing population.

Improvement of the quality of government may be a key action to be taken in these regions if the aim is to promote rural development and to ensure that new activities will flourish. The quality of government includes more than the rule of law in relation to property and transactions, and a well-functioning police force, it also includes equal access to important public services, such as public education and healthcare. It is an issue not only of whether the services and infrastructures are available (Győri-Kováč 2023), but also of whether they are equally accessible. It means in general that the elites in society (compare Szélényi et al. 1995) have a smaller role in relation to access to services.

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