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## Rural Romanian housing degradation – effect of land restitution and unemployment rates

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### Abstract

This paper aims to present the alarming situation of a constantly decaying rural built environment as well as its landscape. Even if rural settlement were and still are being abandoned in the entire world it is worrying that depopulation combined with aged communities represents one of the main reasons for this situation to occur in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Romania.

We have identified some of the elements that compose the foundation for this continuous decline and we are presenting with the aid of this study the major ones. It is obvious that education, from all points of view is the most important pawn, its absence leading to lack of overall vision, bad management of estates and possessions, unemployment, poverty and consequently decay. It is important to put a stop to this situation otherwise the gap between urban and rural settlements will continue to enlarge in terms of quality of life and the village will lose its cultural identity and value and will become a refuge for poor and unadapted individuals if not a ghost village.

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### 1. Introduction

In 2016's Romania there are more than 100 abandoned or ghost settlements, which still exist in the component of certain territorial administrative units. According to the web site 'localitati fantoma' there are several causes for

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this situation to occur, the one that concerns us being depopulation. Regardless of the reasons for rural abandonment, the consequence is desolated landscapes and obviously continuous degradation of the built rural heritage.

More than 25 years now since the fall of the Communist regime we can identify what stands behind the slow and deadly disease that finely grinds the constructed rural environment. It is not some sort of virus, pandemic, famine, bad geographical or climatic conditions. It is us, our poor decisions, our indifference and negligence that lead to the degradation of the rural landscape.

We have identified two major causes that led to this unfortunate situation and that regrettably have a long-term impact and are not easy to put to an end. From our point of view the first major element that actually triggered the second one was the restitution of land that followed the fall of the regime in December 1989. The poor administration of the individual agricultural property, together with the economic hardships that came with the transition period led to the next cause: the absence of education of any sort which constituted the basis for high rates of unemployment in the rural areas.

In other words the rural housing degradation is closely tied to the financial and especially moral degradation of their owners.

## 2. Materials and methods

The Communist government expropriated owners that had more 50ha and distributed it to landless farm workers. “In regions where collectivisation was not successful the average farm size was 2.3 ha. Post-communist land reform in 1991 restituted land up to a maximum limit of 50ha arable land per household.” (Davidova, et al. 2013).

The restitution of the land that had been previously confiscated by the Communists was a timed bomb. The farmers, freshly re-appropriated, after decades of dependence on the Party’s decisions, thought they found the goose that laid golden eggs. They thought that with their small plot of land, by exploiting it on their own, they would be able to support their entire family and consequently profit as well. They didn’t take into account the fact that the previous regime had a very clear purpose to transform the entire population, both urban and rural, into one addictive to the party through dispossession (of properties, cattle, tools, etc.), uprooting, disinformation, and so on. Even though the new farmers had only good intentions, they lacked the means to exploit the land or the money to invest in crops, animals and mechanization.

The retrocession of the confiscated lands was mostly done in small plots, sometimes the previous owners of larger agricultural lands have received distinctive smaller plots on different areas. All this led to “small productivity, inefficient use of production means, vulnerability of the producers, limited access to financial resources (Doris-Louise Popescu, 2014).

The mechanisation of farming activities that came with the technical progress didn’t bring benefices to small farms, not to mention semi-subsistence farms. The aging rural populations did not help either since, in Romania, “innovation in promising technologies and farm enlargements are hardly to be expected” (Salasan and Fritzsich, 2009).

According to the Statistical Yearbook of Romania in 2012, the agricultural surface of Romania is 61% of the total land fund and the rural population represents 45% of the total population.

Interesting to mention is that the Romanian small agricultural exploitations (under 5ha) and the so called semi-subsistence farms (SSFs) represent more than 90% of all holdings in Romania compared to half of the holdings for the entire European Union (Davidova et al., 2013) as shown in Table 1 and 2.

Naturally the semi-subsistence farms category, at European level, embodies a diverse group, survival per se not representing the main motivation. There can be identified three main types of motivations behind the existence of semi-subsistence farms:

- poor or unemployed farm holders trying to survive by the means provided by the farm;
- comfortable farm holders with other means of gaining their living;
- wealthy farm holders that could be called “hobby farmers”.

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