



## Navigating conflicting landscape aspirations: Application of a photo-based Q-method in Transylvania (Central Romania)



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 21 December 2013

Received in revised form 14 June 2014

Accepted 26 June 2014

#### Keywords:

Cultural landscape  
Landscape preference  
Modernization  
Multifunctional  
Q methodology  
Tradition

### ABSTRACT

In combination, the economic realities brought about by globalization, and the sustainability goals set by the European Union, translate into contradictory challenges for European cultural landscapes. With its high natural and cultural diversity, Transylvania (Central Romania) is facing the choice between development based on a “production for profit” logic, with the risks of a liberalized land market, versus a largely untested development pathway based on sustainability, landscape multifunctionality and conservation. In the context of these largely externally imposed and contradictory development pathways, clarifying the viewpoints and preferences of local people is important, and may help explain the outcomes of past policies, as well as inform future interventions. We undertook a photograph-based Q methodology study – interviewing 129 residents from 30 villages – to understand and explore the diverse range of landscape preferences held by locals in Southern Transylvania. We clarified these preferences by identifying groups of participants who shared similar viewpoints regarding local landscapes and their changing purpose. Our findings revealed five different “preference narratives” about Transylvanian landscapes, namely (1) landscapes for prosperity and economic growth; (2) landscapes for traditions and balanced lifestyles; (3) landscapes for human benefit; (4) landscapes for farming; and (5) landscapes for nature. Our systematic assessment of narratives showed areas of consensus and disagreement among participants. We relate the five preference narratives to current management approaches targeting rural landscapes. We conclude by suggesting policy approaches to tackle the diversity of opinions and interests found in this culturally and ecologically diverse landscape. Important policy priorities include fostering economic diversification and improving social capital.

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### Introduction

Cultural landscapes are geographic areas where humans and the environment have interacted through a variety of land-uses over long periods of time (Plieninger et al., 2006; Vos and Meekes, 1999), creating distinct ecological, socioeconomic and cultural patterns (Farina, 2000). Their worldwide importance has been recognized under the auspices of UNESCO through the World Heritage Convention (1972; Chief, 2006). Cultural landscapes are particularly relevant to Europe’s countryside (Plieninger et al., 2006;

Solymosi, 2011a; Vos and Meekes, 1999), and their conservation, esthetic and cultural values have been widely acknowledged (Palomo and Montes, 2011; Solymosi, 2011a). However, many valued elements of Europe’s cultural landscapes have come under threat. The sustainable management of cultural landscapes poses complex problems (Vos and Meekes, 1999), because it depends on specific types of human interventions, including extensive agricultural land-uses (Babai and Molnár, 2014), which are economically and culturally vulnerable in a rapidly changing, increasingly globalized world (Plieninger et al., 2006).

Southern Transylvania in Central Romania is one of Europe’s most notable examples of a cultural landscape (Akeroyd and Page, 2006). Historically, the region was shaped in terms of land-use and culture by Transylvanian Saxons, colonists from Western Europe who settled in Transylvania approximately 800 years ago (Akeroyd and Page, 2006). Aspects of everyday life, including social disputes within the “conservative but well-ordered” (Akeroyd and Page, 2006) Saxon settlements, were organized by powerful Saxon

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institutions such as “neighborhoods”, and relied on rigorous community rules and collective action (Dinu, 2012). Individually owned arable fields and communal forests and pastures were managed through traditional practices (Dorner, 1910; Sutcliffe et al., 2013), with individuals benefiting from participation in the commons (Akeroyd and Page, 2006; Dorner, 1910). A tight co-evolution between rural communities and local ecosystems resulted in a coupled social–ecological system (Babai and Molnár, 2014; Fischer et al., 2012) and a cultural identity embedded in the landscape (Hughes, 2008).

The natural and built Saxon heritage is still visible today (Akeroyd and Page, 2006; Dinu, 2012, pp. 44; Hughes, 2008, pp. 311), despite the various consequences of abrupt economic, political and social changes that took place in the region in the last century (Fischer et al., 2012). The number of Transylvanian Saxons declined progressively after World War II, following deportations to the Soviet Union, and controlled emigration to Germany (Dinu, 2012; Gündisch, 1998). Saxon depopulation left more room for the other ethnic groups already living in the region (i.e. Romanians, Hungarians, Roma), with additional immigrants arriving from other regions, and contributed to rapid growth of the Roma population (Dinu, 2012; Hughes, 2008). The new settlers’ connection to the region’s landscape was diluted by their own cultural identities and values (Hughes, 2008).

The last 70 years has seen rapid social, cultural and economic changes in Southern Transylvania. Starting with the agrarian reform (1945) and following land collectivization (1949–1962) imposed by Romania’s centrally planned economy, the individual and communal properties of many farmers in Romania (including Saxons), were absorbed into state or collective farms (Gündisch, 1998). Following the collapse of communism in 1989, the post-communism and transition periods were marked by social, institutional and political instability (Fraser and Stringer, 2009), and the opening of borders caused a final wave of Saxon emigration (Gündisch, 1998). Low levels of trust, and widespread corruption, have eroded social capital (Mikulcak et al., 2013; Newton, 2011; Slangen, 2004). Much of the population became unemployed as a result of the closure of state farms and factories. Tenure changes were brought about by widespread privatization (early 1990s) and restitution laws (of 1991, 2000, and 2005) (Kuemmerle et al., 2009; Nichiforel and Schanz, 2009). Initially envisioned as a “return to a just order”, the process of land restitution to pre-communist owners was intensely politicized (Verdery, 2003) and influenced by territorial administrative units (Verdery, 2002). This led to increasing domination of land holdings by a minority of individuals (Kuemmerle et al., 2009; Sutcliffe et al., 2013) and 2–3 ha holdings scattered in small parcels (Mikulcak et al., 2013; Verdery, 2003, pp. 133). Low profitability of subsistence farming, tenure insecurity, together with increased competition and land speculation, favored land abandonment and declining livestock numbers (Beaufoy et al., 2008; Huband, 2007; Kuemmerle et al., 2009). Finally, Romania’s accession to the European Union (EU) in 2007 led to further land-use and tenure changes, such as overgrazing by sheep (Akeroyd and Bădărău, 2012), encroachment on the commons (Sutcliffe et al., 2013), and changing migration patterns.

The novel institutional and legal changes introduced inherently with EU membership, have had positive and negative consequences for Transylvania. For example, Southern Transylvania now contains one of the largest sets of continental Natura 2000 sites in Europe, including both a Site of Community Importance – SCI (EC, 1992), and Special Protection Areas – SPA (EC, 2009).

Yet, while Natura 2000 designation provides financial and other resources for land management, the extent of such sites in Southern Transylvania has been regarded by regional officials as a barrier to economic development (Mikulcak et al., 2013). Similarly, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), most notably Pillar II, in theory

grants the region access to financial support for agriculture. However, the cumbersome nature of funding applications has meant limited efficacy in attaining European rural development objectives (EC, 2005) in the region (Mikulcak et al., 2013).

Today, the economic realities brought about by globalization and the sustainability goals set by the European Union (European Commission, 2010) create demanding and often contradictory challenges for the management of cultural landscapes. The international race for competitiveness and efficiency, and increasing connections to global agricultural markets have favored agricultural modernization and intensification, and made traditional subsistence agriculture increasingly unviable (Mikulcak et al., 2013; Öllerer, 2013). As of 2014, Romania liberalized its land sales, allowing greater foreign ownership, thereby risking “land grabbing” by foreign investors motivated by the region’s untapped potential for profitable intensification (Bouniol, 2013).

Despite a trend toward agricultural intensification there are indications of a shift (van der Ploeg et al., 2000) or at least a transition phase (Jongeneel et al., 2008) in agricultural policies, practices and paradigms. For example, environmental sustainability and societal relevance are enshrined as core objectives in Pillar II of the CAP (EC, 2005). During the 1990s, the historical, multifunctional nature of agriculture in Europe became increasingly recognized (e.g. the European Model of Agriculture, European Commission, 1998), and management objectives shifted back toward the provision of diversified rural goods and services (Haaland et al., 2011; Huband, 2007; Quétier et al., 2009; Wästfelt et al., 2012). Within academia, multifunctionality has been further revived as a means of operationalizing sustainable development (Helming et al., 2011). Empirical studies have reported the diverse expectations that people have of rural land-use, including food production and income, but also water regulation (Nainggolan et al., 2013) or outdoor recreation (Rogge et al., 2007). Similarly, growing awareness of the threats to cultural landscapes has driven policy makers to elaborate conservation policies which seek to preserve valuable social–ecological systems and their built and natural artifacts. International instruments (UNESCO World Heritage Convention) and European agreements (e.g. The European Landscape Convention, agri-environmental payments) now aim to include cultural heritage protection into the working ethics of land owners and farmers (de Groot et al., 2005; Rogge et al., 2007). At the same time, the Natura 2000 network requires farmers to protect ecologically valuable sites within farmland. These nascent approaches to managing agricultural landscapes challenge the “production for profit” logic to which newer member states such as Romania are only beginning to adapt. In addition, some critics argue that sustainability-oriented landscape initiatives largely serve the Western need to preserve cultural and natural heritage, but fail to maintain viable farming enterprises in the new (Eastern European) member states (Dahlström et al., 2013; Wästfelt et al., 2012).

Having experienced historical turbulence and facing contrasting development pathways, Southern Transylvania is under pressure to become simultaneously economically viable, ecologically multifunctional and socially sustainable. These multiple, potentially incommensurable, goals force Southern Transylvania’s inhabitants to reconsider how they perceive their landscapes. As a response, societal demands, preferences and expectations regarding local landscapes are expected to diverge. Various studies show how contested viewpoints can emerge about the purposes of landscapes, depending on personal motivations, needs and aspirations (Amblard and Colin, 2009; Greiner and Gregg, 2011; Solymosi, 2011a, 2011b).

Clarifying such contested viewpoints can make a difference in the current context of alternative, potentially contradictory development pathways. Despite progress in the study of

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