

RURAL DEVELOPMENT FROM POLICY TO POLITICS. NATIONAL STRATEGIC PLANS AND THEIR POTENTIAL IMPACT ON SOCIAL STRUCTURAL TRANSFORMATIONS. COMPARATIVE OVERVIEW. CASE STUDY ROMANIA BETWEEN THE EUROPEAN AND NATIONAL CONTEXT

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Abstract

The question of rural development is of utmost for countries such as Romania. In the current climate of tension generated by the post-pandemic recovery and geopolitical turmoil, rural development has been more important than ever. We are living in a time of great structural duress and the solutions are becoming more political as the effects of the policy are political ones. There is a transformation of the policy into politics as the Common Agricultural Policy and the Rural Development policy by any other name would still be politics. In this context, the flexibilization provided by the National Strategic Plan is more than welcome. The purpose of the paper is to analyse how the policy elements from CAP are turning into politics and are influencing the Member States politics. As the CAP post-2020 unfolded new tools such as the National Strategic Plan were added to the EC toolbox, but often their design was influenced by national specificities. The paper performs a desk review analysis of the existing sources and has a case study the way in which this process unfolded in Romania. What is of importance in all that time-consuming process is the fact that for the first time we witnessed a large-scale reflection process throughout the European Union member states. It was partially favoured by the COVID-19 pandemic which put everything on hold for a couple of months. That combined with the need to reform made everything more democratic and more advanced and reformist than the initial proposals.

Key words: National Strategic Plan, Common Agricultural Policy, change and reform, rural development

INTRODUCTION

Any discussion on the future of the Common Agricultural Policy post-2020 must be routed in the provisions of Article 39 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union on CAP's objectives: "to increase agricultural productivity [...]; to ensure a fair standard of living for the agricultural community; to stabilise markets; to assure the availability of supplies [...] ensure that supplies reach consumers at reasonable prices" [7]. Thus we are entering into an area where we are dealing more with politics than policy. For that purpose, a terminological clarification is needed as we are dealing with "policy" seen

as "the content or material dimension of politics. It covers the objectives and roles through which political solutions are to be found to specific problems" and "politics" seen as "the more or less conflict-ridden process in which both diverging and common interests and political views of varying provenance, initially in opposition, are over time consolidated and developed through negotiation to reach a concrete political goal" [1]. This matters because more often than never the ideas (like the above-mentioned objectives of the CAP) rather than self-interest determines policy-making [5]. Having in mind such clear objectives, with significant social importance is it becoming clearer now

that the CAP objectives are more than policy and are becoming politics.

The Policy agenda of agriculture has been steadily broadened with agricultural policy issues now interlinking with other policy domains (food safety, energy supplies, environmental protection, development aid, etc.). We are now dealing with the new politics of agriculture as a series of authors' state [9]. We are dealing with some political scientists called "agricultural exceptionalism" meaning the "idea that agriculture is a sector unlike any other economic sector, and, as such, warrants special government support", which still endures in the European Union [26].

This acceleration of the transition towards the realization that in the area of agriculture and rural development is not necessarily just policy but politics stem up rather early a couple of years ago only to be accelerated by the pandemics and the geopolitics. The CAP was developed based on the principles of the single market (unrestricted circulation of agricultural products within the EU), community preference (favouring the consumption of products originating in the European Union), and financial solidarity (common measures are financed from a common budget). Concerns about climate change and issues such as loss of biodiversity or water and soil quality show that agriculture has a role in the sustainable management of natural resources [19].

Thus in June 2018, the European Commission proposed the new Common Agricultural Policy 2023 – 2027, key to securing the future of agriculture and forestry, as well as achieving the objectives of the European Green Deal. This involved a series of key reforms with a strong socio-economic and political impact meant to have as a final result a CAP that is greener (with enhanced conditionality, etc.), fairer (redistribution of income support, social conditionality, supporting young farmers, improving the gender balance, etc.) and more competitive (crisis reserve, etc.) [13].

Climate change has a direct impact on ensuring the needs of agricultural production, as a result of the increase in average

temperature, soil degradation, or the process of desertification that has affected many areas of the world. The pressure exerted on agricultural systems and processes can have a negative. Often, all these cumulative effects generate growth prices, vulnerability, and insecurity in the agricultural sector. Adapting to the effects of climate change involves managing in an integrated way the challenges of the present by encouraging sustainable investments in new, better technologies implementation of eco-conditionality rules and guidelines, promotion of exchanges of good practices, etc. [27].

After the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU faced a health and economic crisis unprecedented in its history, with a series of economic, health and mobility, and freedom of travel measures being taken, which in turn had an impact on the rural development., as the Green Deal and other measures impacting agriculture were put on the agenda [20].

In that context, a new concept (re)emerged often associated with rural development, that of resilience. It was at the very beginning related closely to food security and was defined as "the ability of an individual, a household, a community, a country or a region to withstand, to adapt, and to quickly recover from stresses and shocks" [10].

The structural lessons learned from the early beginning made resilience the red line (compass) guiding all European actions being defined now in a broader way, not policy but politics: "Resilience is the ability not only to withstand and cope with challenges but also to undergo transitions in a sustainable, fair, and democratic manner". The spotlight is on rural development as it emphasised the need for a long-term vision of rural areas: "taking into account social and economic development, infrastructure needs, access to basic services, and territorial cohesion; this long-term vision should cut across several policy areas and require an integrated and coordinated approach at European, national, and regional level." [11].

Romania's accession to the EU meant a radical change in the way of making policy and it generated a renewed interest in the

importance of strategic planning, something that has been ignored all too much post the end of the communist period. As such in the area of agriculture there is a need for the political leaders to define and present their vision for the future and identify the national goals and objectives [3].

The purpose of the paper is to analyse how the policy elements from CAP are turning into politics and are influencing the Member States politics. As the CAP post-2020 unfolded new tools such as the National Strategic Plan were added to the EC toolbox, but often their design was influenced by national specificities.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research material is based on a desk research of the existing reports and studies. Due to the specificities of the research as well as the technical constraints this formula was adopted to have a better survey capacity of the area and its main challenges. A survey of the official documents of the European Commission on this topic has been done. Also the official documents of the Romanian administration in charge with drafting the National Strategic Plan have been taken into consideration. Of importance where also the articles and works showing the strategic role of the agriculture and its significance in the life of the society. At the end of the research we have tried to prove that the reform process of the CAP post-2020 lead to an increase strategic role of the agriculture at all the levels as the challenges ahead required this type of approach.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The answer to the above questions came under the form of the National Strategic Plan – each Member State would design its National strategic plan meant to combine funding for income support, rural development, and market measures, in a series of specific targeted interventions all of that. “[...] based on a strength, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis of their territory and agri-food sector” [12].

Romania, like other countries in the region such as Bulgaria, is facing similar challenges. Thus some of the lessons and conclusions learned from Bulgaria also apply back home as the recommendation can be translated back home: more focused policy, the importance of knowledge transfer, innovation, and cooperation, etc. [2]. All these findings came based upon previous analyses, pre-pandemic ones, showing the need for fundamental amendments as shown by the empirical data. Particular attention was given to Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) which are defined as purpose programmes that “focus on the funding purpose and the funding objective, with funding intended to be a vehicle for implementing and developing a diverse range of environmental and regional policy objectives” which to be more efficient need no depend on the willingness of those responsible for them [17].

This in turn is based upon other research that state that innovation is at the base of the European rural development policy. That implies a reach and innovative thinking and support better suited for politics and not policy. Social innovation is thus important and requires a whole-of-society approach [8].

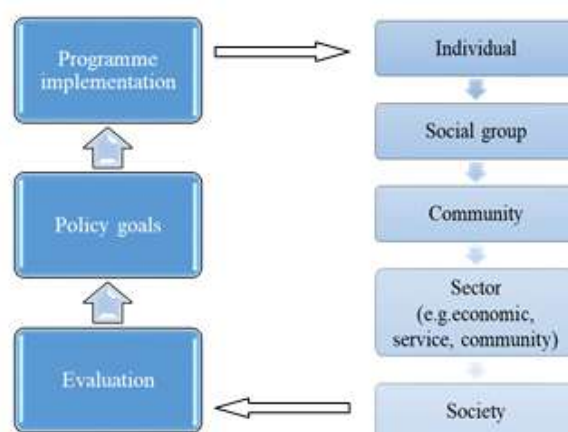


Fig. 1 The potential for innovation
Source: our design after [8].

As seen in Figure 1 the potential of innovation is first and foremost based on individual and then it goes higher in the food chain to social group and community toward the society as a whole. There is therefore a strong circular link as the society needs are evaluated, then policy

goals are established and the programme is implemented.

This challenge requires “a paradigm shift regarding the concept of shared management of rural development between the Commission and Member States” and the need to show “whether the post-2020 CAP is marked by a “renationalisation” of rural policy in Europe, or whether the key principles inspiring the reform signify a new step for EU integration” [16].

Romania has had a direct interest in the absorption of the funds that can be used for rural areas both from European and national financing sources, like the National Rural Development Program (NRDP). The national-based studies identified with a shadow of a doubt. The analysis done has shown that the allocations should be concept-based, around new economic concepts such as “innovative potential”, “smart village”, “multifunctionality”, “multisectoral approach”, “social return on investment”, and “territorial justice”, which can identify the real and specific problems of each rural region” [21].

In that context, based on the lessons learned, the focus of the post-2020 perspectives from a national point of view became even more

needed. From a Romanian perspective, the main request was to end the bureaucracy and simplify the policy to become more efficient. Also, there has been noticed a disbalance between the land consolidation and the welfare of the rural population – the more land consolidation or even land grabbing the poorer the population. Also capping direct payments is a solution that needs to be tailored to the local realities [15].

It is in line with the challenges that need to be addressed by CAP like economic, environmental, and territorial challenges. All these required “a reform of the priorities and programs of measures established by Romania, Poland and Hungary demonstrates the greater flexibility offered to the EU Member States by the New Approach of the CAP in establishing their hierarchies of rural development priorities and their financing” [6].

As the CAP 2023 – 2027 is being built around ten key objectives, they are going to be the basis upon which the Strategic Plans are going to be built, as they are supposed to mention a series of targeted interventions meant to address these EU-level objectives from a national perspective.

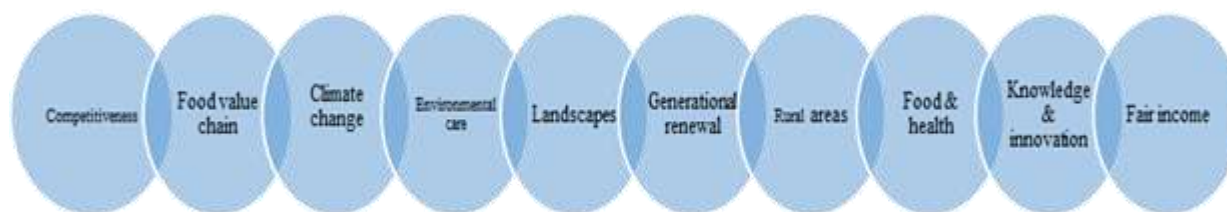


Fig. 2. The Ten Key Objectives.
Source: own representation after [14].

Ever since their inception, the process regarding the National CAP Strategic Plans has been surrounded by both cautious optimism and academic reservations, due to their complexity and the need to be simultaneously transparent and stakeholder inclusive. A series of analyses on both Old and New Member States have shown different levels of transparency from nationwide public debates (like in the case of France) to internal assessments (like was the case of Italy). Thus,

in these early stages, the policy recommendations were to set up and update official communication channels, publish and update roadmaps, more transparent and effective consultation meetings, set up clearer written working procedures, better and larger involvement of scientists, civil society, and NGOs while having in mind a clear red line, that nowhere in the EU or the world we cannot have full transparency of public decision-making [18].

A couple of years later after the start of the process, we have had this intermediary stage of the so-called Observation Letters issued by the European Commission on the intermediate versions of the CAP Strategic Plans, documents meant to highlight all the deficiencies of these intermediary versions. What they brought in as new ideas is the emphasis on the new context, meaning the conflict in Ukraine and its impact. Also, there was a focus on the need for a fairer and greener CAP [28].

The new security environment in Europe where food security became out of the blue dominant made CAP national strategic plans to switch focus from the EU Green Deal. For some scholars, the Plans only tend to favour short-term gains over environmental concerns in a staggering lack of foresight and the conclusion is a dark one: “most, if not all, Member States are unlikely to reach the Green Deal target of increasing to 10% the agricultural area under high diversity landscape features by 2030” [4].

As regards Romania we need to have in mind the specificities of the country even before the creation of CAP Strategic plans. Thus as early as 2020 one key national security objective is that of ensuring food security and environmental quality [24]. This change was reflected in the Governing Programme 2021 – 2024 where a key objective was the completion of the National Strategic Plan 2023 – 2027 with a series of three key objectives: promoting an intelligent, resilient, and diversified agricultural sector; strengthening market orientation and increasing competitiveness; improving the performance of farmers in the value chain [23].

Romania has started a complex consultation period since the second half of the year 2020. A series of intermediary versions were drafted with three versions of the SWOT Analysis being done. Each and every one were being made publicly available. The latest major public consultation was the one held in 2022. To fully understand the importance of these meetings a series of raw data is in order. Thus we first had the so-called Thematic Consultative Committee made up of 24

stakeholders who met on: 1 time in 2020, 1 time in 2021 and 2 times in 2022 as a whole. Yet the most important were the numerous thematic sub-groups (SG) each of them bringing together an important number of stakeholders that proved the extent of the interest of the relevant actors, as seen in Figure 3.

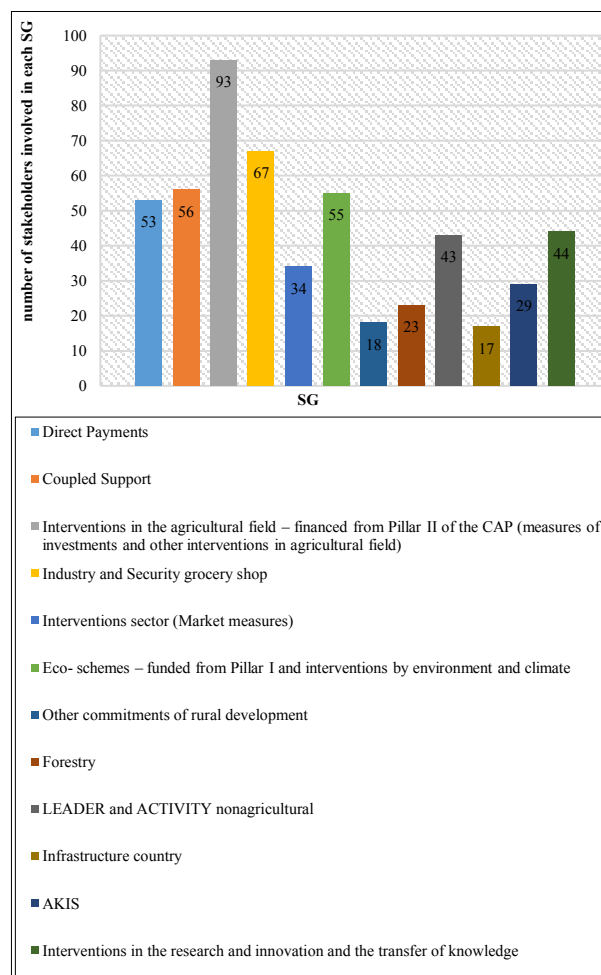


Fig. 3. Stakeholders involved in each subgroups (SG). Source: Own representation based upon the available data from [22].

The subgroups met from 2020 till August 2022 following the data available on the website of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development [22].

We have had a series of communications and replies between the European Commission and the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development based upon the first observation of the Romanian plan. Thus we have had a first version of the Plan on 28 February followed by a latter on 18 October 2022.

It was a long-discussed plan that received a lot of internal attention. It was at the end of the day an organic consultation program that brought together all the relevant stakeholders, as the dedicated website page proves it. It was an open process also due to the comments and observations made throughout the two years dedicated to the finalization of the CAP National Strategic Plans.

What also needs to be mentioned is that this process has been backed as early as 2017 when the Romanian Parliament analysed the Communication from the commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee

and the Committee of the Regions: the Future of Food and Farming COM/2017/0713 (mentioned also in relation with the CAP National Strategic Plan) where the Chamber of Deputies issued a series of ideas that received transversal political support. It stated that “a strong pillar of rural development will ensure a further modernization and the creation of new jobs, necessary for the vitality of these areas and considers that the capping of direct payments is not a viable solution because it would affect big and honest farms which highly contribute to the national economy” [25].



Fig. 4. The main actions to be pursued by Romania’s CAP National Strategic Plan as stated in the Governing Programme 2021 - 2024
 Source: [23].

CONCLUSIONS

What is of importance in all that time-consuming process is the fact that for the first time we witnessed a large-scale reflection process throughout the European Union member states. It was partially favoured by the COVID-19 pandemic which put everything on hold for a couple of months. That combined with the need to reform made everything more democratic and more advanced and reformist than the initial proposals.

Added to this the Ukraine conflict challenged the already settled conception of green transition and shift the focus on the idea of

food security. Things were now once more down to basics and to the need to secure necessities. Yet this approach also received a series of critics who perceived it as inadequate.

As for Romania, it shares a series of common problems with Bulgaria and other Central and Eastern European countries. It was at the end of the day a process of soul-searching in the area of agricultural processes. What should be noticed is that rural development is on the agenda of all the key Romanian institutions (Parliament, Presidency, and Government) and that the current CAP National Strategic Plan is a sum of all these aspects.

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