

## LAND-GRABBING PHENOMENA IN THE CONTEXT OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT

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### Abstract

*The paper presents the characteristics of the agricultural sector in Romania, through the lens of the land grabbing phenomena. It is one of the latest additions to an already full agenda of challenges that rural development must address. Land grabbing deprives the population of the ability to make decisions about the national land (what is cultivated, what agricultural practices are used, what is the purpose of the land), nullifying food sovereignty. Also, the possibility of young people to choose agriculture as a field of activity is restricted by the privatization of land, although they receive subsidies for establishing themselves as young farmers. The analysis carried out in the period 2015-2021 indicated that approximately 40% of Romanian agricultural land is owned by foreign owners, while 46% of the population lives in the countryside and 1.6 million people are employed in agriculture, forestry and fishing. The results showed that the largest areas are owned by Italy, Denmark, Germany, Sweden, Lebanon and the United Arab Emirates. The main fields of activity are the following: agriculture, forestry, conservation and renewable energy. At the same time, subsidies can represent significant income for large areas of land. For the studied period, an increase in the prices of arable land in Romania was found, although they are lower than in other European countries. The biggest increases in arable land prices were recorded in the West, South-East and South-West Oltenia Regions.*

**Key words:** agricultural land, land-grabbing, land price, Romania, rural development

### INTRODUCTION

Land-grabbing or land seizure is the phenomenon whereby large areas of land (of agricultural, forestry or other utility) together with the related resources (e.g. hydrographic bodies) are taken/controlled by various entities (individuals, corporations, governments etc.), to the detriment of the welfare of the local population and the environment.

The phenomenon of seizure has several forms: land-grabbing, forest-grabbing, resource-grabbing, water-grabbing. In this paper will be treated only the land-grabbing topic, with a special look on agricultural land, although land grabbing generally includes the grabbing of resources on that land surface (forests, water).

The phenomenon has not been precisely defined, nor are its limits and dimensions

clearly known. It is considered land-grabbing even if it happens inside a country and is practiced by the conational of the affected population. Land grabbing does not necessarily involve their purchase, but also their rental/lease at derisory prices for long periods (25-99 years) or concession by the governments of the countries concerned.

The main indicators of the land-grabbing phenomenon are the large areas of land owned by a single entity and the share of these areas in the total area of a certain population.

The problems raised by land-grabbing are the following: social inequity; environmental problems (deforestation; land degradation through intensive agriculture - monocultures, fertilizers and chemical pesticides, overexploitation of resources; reduction of biodiversity through large-scale monocultures; land transformation into a speculative object; privatization of public

goods, e.g.: water resources); damage to the rural environment (decrease of the standard of living; loss of jobs; the loss of the meaning of rural life; the displacement of local communities; the disappearance of traditional working practices, methods and cultural heritage of the respective areas; the violation of human rights; the loss of food sovereignty) [4, 18].

Factors favouring the extension of the phenomenon of land-grabbing are the following:

- a) Clear non-regulation of property rights/non-registration of land;
- b) The food crisis and population growth have led to greater demand on the food market;
- c) State control over the activities of companies outside their national territory is very low;
- d) The desire of the companies in various fields (pharmaceutical, cosmetic) to control all the production levels of the final product;
- e) Globalisation and the principle of free movement of capitals;
- f) Urbanisation.
- g) European policy pressures for the transition to green energy and biofuel production;
- h) Single payment scheme per hectare under the Common Agricultural Policy.

The Common Agricultural Policy subsidises each agricultural land with a fixed amount, irrespective of the use of the land, or with minimum conditions. This constitutes a motivation for the accumulation of land, deepening the phenomenon of land-grabbing. From the analysis of the distribution of direct payments at EU-27 level, in 2019, it is observed that 14,000 farms in the EU received 11% of the total payments, while 1.4 million small farms received only 1.2% of the payments [8].

The paper aims to present aspects related to the sale and accumulation of land in Romania, in order to conclude whether this phenomenon leads to the development of rural areas.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This article is based on a literature review and an analysis of existing reports and studies. Due to the specificity of the research, this

formula was adopted in order to have a better research capacity of the topic and its main challenges.

The following indicators were analysed to highlight the existing situation in Romania: the structure of active population by age group and area of residence, the labour force used in farms, the number of agricultural holdings, the structure of the ownership of land and agricultural holdings, the sales of agricultural land and the price of arable land.

The data were taken from statistical sites, such as the National Institute of Statistics and Eurostat, as well as from the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of Romania, the European Commission and from specialized documents, which were mentioned in the References.

The period in which the studies were carried out is 2015-2021.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In Europe, the phenomenon of land-grabbing is more widespread in the Eastern area (the former communist states).

The European agricultural model is that of family farming, with 96.3% of farms in the EU classified as family farms in 2016. Also, two-thirds of European farms work on areas under 5 ha [12]. Nine out of ten people working in agriculture at EU level (89.8%) represent the farmer or members of his family. An important role in agricultural land grabbing in the EU is played by a new category: banking entities, pension and insurance funds, which were not part of the agricultural world in the past. This is an important signal of the transformation of the soil into an ordinary commodity, an investment object and speculation, at the cost of affecting the rights of human communities regarding access to land.

In 2020, according to the National Institute of Statistics [14], the resident population in rural areas in Romania was of 8.9 million out of 19.2 million total (46%).

The active population of Romania was 8,972,820 people, of which 4,053,134 in rural areas (Table 1).

Table 1. Active population by age group and area of residence, 2020

Age groups	Environments of residence	Number of people
Total	Total	8,972,820
-	Urban	4,919,687
-	Rural	4,053,134
15-24 years	Total	607,199
-	Urban	197,934
-	Rural	409,266
25-34 years	Total	1,986,999
-	Urban	1,193,280
-	Rural	793,719
35-49 years	Total	3,735,468
-	Urban	2,173,832
-	Rural	1,561,636
50-64 years	Total	2,393,303
-	Urban	1,320,253
-	Rural	1,073,050
65 years and over	Total	249,851
-	Urban	34,388
-	Rural	215,464

Source: [14].

It can be seen from these data that in the segments aged 15-24 years, the active population is larger in rural areas, the situation being reversed from 25 years upwards, probably due to the lack of opportunities and jobs, which cause emigration to urban areas. Half of Romania's active population operates in rural areas.

At the level of 2020, the Romania's civilian population employed was of 8.4 million people, of which 1.6 million were employed in the agriculture, forestry and fisheries sector (Table 2).

Table 2. Labour employed on farms

Year 2016	Farm labor (AWU*)
Romania	1,640,120

\*1 AWU is a person working full-time (i.e. 2 people working part-time = 1 AWU).

Source: [9].

It is noted that Romania uses a large volume of human work on farms, although the utilised agricultural area of Romania is about 14.7 million ha. It is also useful to distinguish between unpaid (family) and salaried labour (typical of industrial farms in general, but not only). Wage labour generally reveals greater economic power on a farm. From the available data, it appears that Romania uses

mainly unpaid labour, and its share tends to remain constant [9].

These characteristics of the Romanian population make it vulnerable to the phenomenon of land-grabbing, as the land is the resource of existence of the rural environment, along with the activities related to agriculture and services performed by the agricultural population (e.g. education).

*Characteristics of the agricultural sector, from the perspective of the acquisition of lands:*

Romania has the largest number of farms in the EU representing one third of the total number, but accounting for only 3.4% of EU's production [13].

Table 3 shows that 87% of the Romanian farms are subsistent. At least 2,956,380 peasant families in Romania depend directly on the land for survival.

Table 3. Agricultural holdings in Romania

2016	Number of farms	Farms which consume more than 50% of their production internally
Romania	3,395,930	2,956,380

Source: [10].

A small percentage of entities (natural or legal persons), 1% in the case of Romania, own more than 50% of agricultural land. Small landowners who are the majority (74%) work only 13% of the agricultural area (Table 4).

Table 4. Structure of land ownership in Romania

Specification	Romania
Average area/holding (ha)	3.4
Major landowners and the percentage of agricultural land they own	<1% own 57%
Minor landowners and the percentage of agricultural land they own	74% own 13%

Source: [5].

According to data published at the level of 2016, agricultural holdings in Romania under 1 ha represent 53% of their total number, but exploit only 5.1% of the agricultural area used (UAA) at national level (Table 5).

Given that 84.6% of Romanian farms are not economically strong, they constitute a threat,

indicating the possibility of their disappearance in the coming years.

Table 5. Agricultural holdings in Romania

Agricultural holdings	Share in the total number of holdings	Utilized Agricultural Area (% of total UAA)
Less than 1 ha	53%	5.1
1-5 ha	38.6%	23.6
Exceeding 50 ha	0.5 %	51.1

Source: own design after [7].

### Land Sales Regulation

The liberalization of land sale to non-citizens took place in 2014, by Law 17/2014 (amended and supplemented by Law no. 175/2020) which provides that the extravilan land may be sold to natural or legal persons or from EU Member States or third states, after the prior exercise of the pre-emptive right for 1st and 7th pre-emptors.

The lands located less than 30 km from the state border or the Black Sea coast, as well as those located at distances of up to 2,400 m from the special objectives, can be sold only with the approval of the Ministry of National Defence. Also, the lands with archaeological potential can be alienated only with the approval of the Ministry of Culture.

If on the purchased land there are agricultural investments for fruit crops, vines, hops and exclusively private irrigation, the new owners have the obligation to preserve the agricultural destination of these investments. Moreover, the agricultural use of the land purchased may not be changed.

The alienation of the lands, as well as the alienation of the control package of the legal persons who own agricultural lands representing more than 25% of the company's assets at less than 8 years from the date of purchase, is sanctioned by the taxation of 80% of the amount representing the difference between the price for which the initial land was purchased and the price for which it was subsequently sold. This measure aims to discourage speculation on agricultural land [19].

Given that in Romania lease agreements are not established by law or government, upon the expiry of a lease agreement, the lessor

may give the land to another lessee, after a prior notice of the first lessee on the intention not to renew the agreement. This may discourage investment in land, the lessee being rather interested in investments that pay off in the short term.

At the level of 2021, the average price of one hectare in Romania was of 4,700 euro, but if we take into account the value of the most expensive traded land in 2021 (a land located in the extravilan of Iasi), the average price was 10,000 euro [22].

Under Law 17/2014, agricultural land was sold to foreign entities, as follows (Table 6):

Table 6. Agricultural land sales in Romania, for the period 2014-2018

Year	Number of hectares
2014	58,875.14
2015	172,353.79
2016	144,350
2017	153,927.46
2018	154,076.23

Source: own presentation after [20].

A study by the Transnational Institute, from 2015, estimated that about 5.3 million ha of agricultural land (40% of the approximately 13.3 million ha) are exploited by foreigners [23].

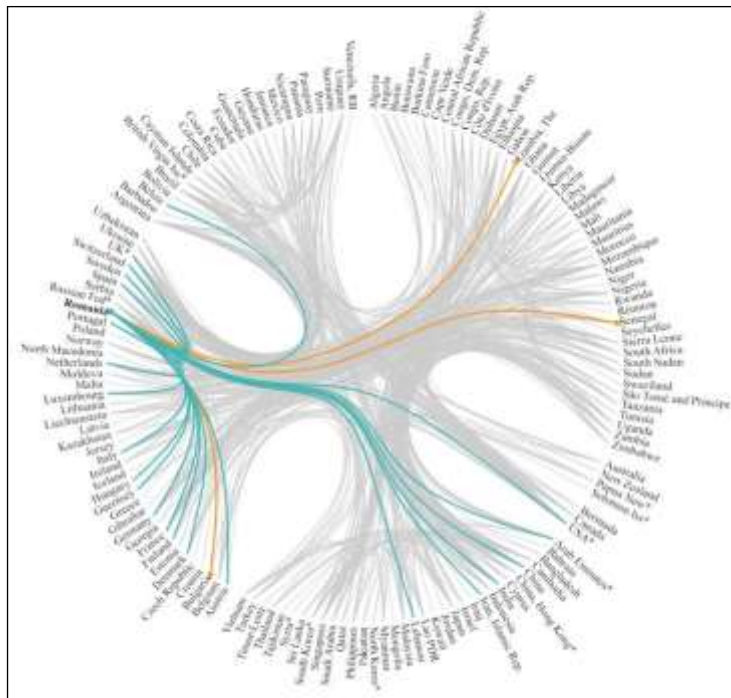
Data on global land-grabbing are provided by the Land Matrix Initiative, a partnership between the Centre for Development and Environment (CDE) of the University of Bern, Centre de Cooperation Internationale en Recherche Agronomique pour le Développement (CIRAD), the German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA), Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and the International Land Coalition (ILC) at global level, together with the Asian Farmers' Association for Sustainable Rural Development (AFA), the Centre for Environmental Initiatives Ecoaction, Fundación para el Desarrollo en Justicia y Paz (FUNDAPAZ) and the University of Pretoria at regional level. This formation has a site that monitors large land transactions (over 200 ha), from certain

countries considered to be highly vulnerable to land-grabbing, including Romania [15]. Figure 1, taken from the Land Matrix, shows the states that invested in land in Romania in 2018. The main fields of activity are the

following: agriculture, forestry, conservation and renewable energy. Thus, the largest areas are owned by Italy, Denmark, Austria and Lebanon.



Fig. 1. Map of transactions with agricultural lands concluded in Romania, at the level of 2018  
 Source: [17].



- Legend:  
 Countries that have invested in Romania (blue lines):  
 Austria: 2 deals; 28,054 ha  
 Belize: 1 deals; 12,500 ha  
 China: 2 deals; 8,372 ha  
 Denmark: 10 deals; 55,405 ha  
 Finland: 1 deals; 12,000 ha  
 France: 3 deals; 8,330 ha  
 Germany: 12 deals; 52,552 ha  
 Hungary: 1 deals; 5,772 ha  
 India: 1 deals; 2,500 ha  
 Iran: 1 deals; 2,600 ha  
 Italy: 8 deals; 48,446 ha  
 Lebanon: 9 deals; 66,320 ha  
 Luxembourg: 4 deals; 24,036 ha  
 Netherlands: 3 deals; 29,321 ha  
 Portugal: 3 deals; 16,300 ha  
 Spain: 1 deals; 5,717 ha  
 Sweden: 5 deals; 78,583 ha  
 Switzerland: 1 deals; 7,967 ha  
 United Arab Emirates: 1 deals; 55,639 ha  
 United Kingdom: 1 deals; 5,516 ha  
 Guernsey: 1 deals; 13,600 ha  
 United States of America: 3 deals; 38,327 ha  
 Countries in which Romania has invested (orange lines):  
 Bulgaria: 7 deals; 64,171.40 ha  
 Gambia: 1 deals; 30,000 ha  
 Senegal: 1 deals; 100,000 ha

Fig. 2. Map of Romania's land transactions, at the level of 2023  
 Source:[16].

Figure 2 shows the Romanian land transactions available at the beginning of

2023, available on the Land Matrix website. Compared to 2018, we can see the appearance

of new states that have traded land in Romania, the increase in the areas owned by some states, but also the fact that Romania owns land in 3 states.

The analysis of arable land prices in the 8 Development Regions of Romania for the period 2015-2021 (Table 7) indicates that

there was a strong upward trend. With the exception of the Bucharest - Ilfov Region, which is in close proximity to the metropolis, the biggest increases in arable land prices were recorded in the West, South-East and South-West Oltenia Regions. These increases exceeded the national average.

Table 7 Arable land prices in Macroregions and Regions of Romania, Euro/ha

Specification	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2021/2015 %
ROMANIA	2,039	1,958	2,085	4,914	5,339	7,163	7,601	372.78
MACROREGION ONE	2,046	1,932	2,129	4,516	5,681	6,648	6,470	316.23
North-West	2,046	1,906	2,022	4,181	4,921	6,261	6,206	303.32
Centre	2,026	1,870	2,256	5,051	6,895	7,267	6,893	340.23
MACROREGION TWO	1,988	1,913	2,017	4,802	4,859	7,337	7,539	379.23
North-East	2,083	2,033	1,961	3,849	4,036	6,621	6,773	325.16
South-East	1,999	1,863	2,028	5,484	5,448	7,849	8,086	404.50
MACROREGION THREE	2,042	2,040	2,229	4,782	5,887	6,369	7,835	383.69
South-Muntenia	2,048	2,059	2,227	4,688	5,833	8,245	7,730	377.44
Bucharest- Ilfov	1,783	1,999	1,958	7,378	7,394	11,615	10,707	600.50
MACROREGION FOUR	2,066	1,951	2,284	5,443	5,315	7,946	8,211	397.43
South-West Oltenia	2,007	1,966	2,227	5,730	5,591	7,856	7,957	396.46
West	2,101	2,036	2,216	5,102	4,986	8,053	8,513	405.19

Source: [11].

Although the prices of agricultural land in Romania increased between 2015-2021, they are much lower than those recorded in other EU countries, such as: Italy, Germany, Poland and Bulgaria. The same growth trend is expected to continue in the coming period [24].

Land accumulation in order to obtain EU subsidies is one of the reasons for the land-grabbing phenomenon. On large areas of land, subsidies can be a significant income. Thus, if we take into account the 2019 subsidy, the single area payment scheme was of 102,6082 euro/ha [2]. For the area of 5.3 million ha owned by foreign investors, according to the Transnational Institute, results an income of 543.8 million euro.

It should be noted that, in the Top 10 companies that received subsidies from APIA in 2019, 5 companies with foreign capital were ranked [3].

Supporters of land grabbing consider that it is useful in developing the economy, attracting foreign investment, creating jobs and opening national economies to the world market.

Romania's agricultural potential is suffering due to excessive fragmentation of properties, which makes it impossible to practice intensive agriculture. However, the merging of land, which will allow the application of innovative technologies in agriculture, must be done rationally [6].

Regarding the creation of jobs in intensive agriculture, which will be practiced on the large areas formed, at least at the level of Romania, it can only be a myth. Intensive agriculture, by definition, uses a small number of workers.

Romania already has a very high percentage of the population employed in agriculture, and the loss of land will only lead to a reduction of the population employed in agriculture, with very little chance of employment in another sector, the only remaining alternative being emigration, which is already on a very large scale in Romania.

Romania is the country with the highest rate of emigration from the EU, the diaspora of Romania being the fifth highest in the world, according to a report issued by the OECD in 2019 [21]. According to the same report, 1 out

of 4 Romanian emigrants plan to return home, and the land inherited from their parents is likely to become an objective for them to develop and invest their savings from abroad. The Government of Romania granted support to the young people who returned to the country, in the form of non-refundable funds that were allocated through Submeasure 6.1, of the 2014-2020 PNDR, Support for the installation of young farmers [1], which was opened in 2021, especially for young people from the diaspora.

## CONCLUSIONS

The phenomenon of land grabbing is presented as it follows: a small number of landowners control a large part of the agricultural area, disadvantaging small farmers and blocking the entry into the agricultural sector for those who want to exploit the land. The takeover of the land by the giant companies operating on thousands of hectares of land has the effect of making it impossible for other aspiring farmers to enter the sector, without holding an important capital.

In Romania, a significant part of the owners are foreigners, controlling about 40% of the Romanian agricultural land. The specificity of the Romanian population (almost half living in rural areas and with a very high share of occupation in the agricultural sector) makes it extremely vulnerable to the negative effects of land-grabbing.

Romania, like other formerly communist Eastern European states, was strongly affected by the rapid transition from communism to capitalism. Deprived of means of production and financing, excluded from granting subsidies, small farms do not have a real chance of catching up with large industrial farms, which exposes them in particular to the phenomenon of land-grabbing.

A possible solution to the scale of the land-grabbing phenomenon could be to restrict the maximum area that a single natural or legal person can have. Since the land is a public good belonging by right to the local communities, which are entitled to the preservation of their traditional way of life,

that restriction would not constitute a breach of the principle of the free movement of capital. The agricultural model must be one based on peasant family farms, not a model of private companies employing agricultural workers.

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