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## Prospects of Agrarian Populism and Food Sovereignty Movement in Post-Socialist Romania

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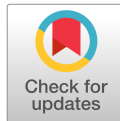
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# Prospects of Agrarian Populism and Food Sovereignty Movement in Post-Socialist Romania

Anna Hajdu\*  and Natalia Mamonova 

## Abstract

Progressive agrarian populism and food sovereignty have recently been discussed as having the potential to erode the right-wing populist agitation that is currently widespread in rural areas. However, these ideas are unpopular in post-socialist Eastern Europe. This paper studies the Romanian ‘new peasant’ movement ‘Eco Ruralis’ – a member organisation of La Vía Campesina. It argues that there is a critical mismatch between the progressive objectives of Eco Ruralis and the main worries of villagers in Romania. It also demonstrates the ways in which communist legacies influence societal attitudes towards capitalism and socialism, making the adoption of La Vía Campesina’s anti-capitalist and pro-socialist ideologies problematic. Finally, it shows that the concept of ‘food sovereignty’ can be misleading, as this concept is alien to the Romanian countryside. Instead, we reveal that other sustainable practices, such as seed sovereignty, are more culturally appropriate and may play an important role in eroding right-wing sentiments in the countryside.

## Keywords

agrarian populist movements, Eastern Europe, food sovereignty, La Vía Campesina, right-wing populism, social movements

## Introduction

**T**here is an on-going global revival of far-right, nationalist, conservative political movements, many of which have found support in the countryside. Indeed, rural and suburban voters have backed the recent entries of right-wing political parties into national parliaments (Scoones *et al.* 2018). Recent studies on right-wing populism in rural areas have tried to explain the growing rural support

for populism and to find progressive solutions to these dangerous trends (Strijker et al. 2015; Borrás 2018, 2019; Scoones *et al.* 2018; Mamonova and Franquesa 2020). These studies have concluded that rural communities have been the most affected by both the crisis of globalised capitalism and the crisis of representative democracies, making rural voters receptive to right-wing populist agitation and propaganda.

As a solution to this trend, Borrás (2018, 2019) has suggested fostering agrarian populism in the form of a food sovereignty movement. He has argued that agrarian populism 'holds the potential to radicalize the discourse, erode right-wing populist agitation, and advance a more promising progressive alternative' (Borrás 2018, p. 15). Agrarian (food sovereignty) movements have established a strong presence in the Global South. The international peasant movement La Vía Campesina has emerged as a major promoter of food sovereignty. However, the ideas of agrarian populism and food sovereignty have not found fertile ground in the Global North, particularly in post-socialist Eastern Europe (Higgins 2015).

This study aims to understand the constraints and prospects of agrarian populism (and food sovereignty) in Eastern Europe, considering the case of Eco Ruralis – the association of peasant men and women in Romania. Eco Ruralis unites various family farmers, organic producers, rural and urban gardeners, and agricultural activists. Together, they advocate and employ sustainable, peasant-like farming practices and lifestyles, which they contrast with the agriculture conducted by large farms and agribusiness. Eco Ruralis is one of the few Eastern European members of La Vía Campesina and can be characterised as a progressive agrarian populist movement.

Romania is currently experiencing a rise in populist, socially conservative, religiously dogmatic, and nationalist sentiments and politics' (Țăranu and Nicolescu 2017; Buzasu 2019; Dima 2019). Rural areas and small towns have become the bastions of this conservative turn, as was indicated by the results of the same-sex marriage vote in the recent 'Family Referendum' (Bursa 2018) and the electoral support for the conservative 'illiberal' agenda of the ruling Social Democratic Party (Paun 2019). Similar xenophobic and nationalist tendencies existed in Eastern Europe and Romania in the interwar period. Some scholars have raised concerns that the discourse of Romania's political parties and domestic media shows signs of a return to the fascist movements of the interwar period (Bucur 2004; Frusetta and Glont 2009).

This paper investigates how Eco Ruralis mobilises diverse rural groups and promotes a progressive agenda in the current challenging environment. In particular, it examines how Eco Ruralis articulates an agrarian populist discourse of 'Us' versus 'Them', engages in political and ideological debates, and deals with societal scepticism towards food sovereignty and other grand mobilising schemes. The paper analyses an agrarian populist movement in a conservative, post-socialist setting and explores how past legacies influence societal politics and perceptions related to agrarian populism.

Our research contributes to the literature on agrarian populism and food sovereignty in three ways. First, it reveals a critical mismatch between the progressive (but somewhat abstract) objectives of the agrarian populist movement Eco Ruralis and the main worries of rural residents. This mismatch results in a division between 'Us' (the 'new peasants' – members of the movement) and 'The rest' (the majority of rural

population). This mismatch then limits the potential for the agrarian populism of Eco Rurális to erode right-wing sentiments in the countryside. Second, this study demonstrates that the communist legacies influence societal attitudes towards capitalism and socialism. The influence of such legacies on public attitudes creates additional obstacles and ambiguity in introducing La Vía Campesina's anti-capitalist, pro-socialist discourse and ideology in post-socialist settings, such as that of Romania. Finally, this study shows that the concept of 'food sovereignty' can be misleading and should not be universally applied. Instead, the study reveals that other sustainable practices (such as seed sovereignty in Romania) may be more culturally appropriate and could regenerate a sense of belonging and restore local identity. Their potential to bring a renewed sense of belonging and identity means that these practices could be important elements in eroding the nationalist, xenophobic, exclusionary sentiments seen in the countryside.

The paper is structured as follows: The next section presents the study's methodology. After this, a section introduces the study's theoretical framework and provides background information. The empirical sections are organised around the main features of agrarian populism: 'Us' versus 'Them' discourse, political orientation, capitalist versus socialist ideology, and use of food sovereignty as a mobilising tool. The final section provides a discussion about the relevance of this study to other contexts.

### Studying agrarian populism in Romania

This research is the first study of a contemporary rural social movement in Romania. Rural mobilisation and grassroots activism have been largely overlooked in the literature and in debates on post-socialist rural politics (with some notable exceptions such as Mamonova and Visser 2014; Dorondel and Şerban 2018; Brett 2019). This case study of Eco Rurális is exploratory research. It was chosen in order to investigate the obstacles and opportunities that might be encountered by a progressive grassroots peasant association, which operates in a post-socialist environment. Although the leaders of Eco Rurális do not themselves call it an agrarian populist movement (populism has negative connotations in Romania), the association can be seen to share several features of agrarian populism. These include the way it draws a dichotomy between 'Us, people-of-the-land' and 'Them, elites', the way in which it presents the 'peasant way of life' as an alternative path of development, as well as the way in which it uses food sovereignty as a mobilising tool.

The analysis presented here is based on 23 interviews. The first author conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with six coordination committee representatives and five members of Eco Rurális in January–February and October–December 2019. Three committee members were interviewed twice. The interviews with the six coordination committee representatives focused on the organisational structure and membership of Eco Rurális, as well as the movement's values, ideology, and its goals and strategies. The five Eco Rurális members were asked about their motivation for joining the association as well as their awareness about, and support for, the movement's activities. In addition to the interviews, the first author conducted participant observation at three events: one conference, one consultation meeting, and

one general assembly held by Eco Ruralis.<sup>2</sup> She also attended two conferences where Eco Ruralis was a participant.<sup>3</sup> All interviews were recorded and conducted in person or online. Alongside this, document analysis was carried out to examine how Eco Ruralis represented itself and its agrarian populist discourse. The content of internal documents and online publications produced by Eco Ruralis was analysed thematically using the qualitative analysis software Atlas.ti 8.

Additionally, the second author organised structured interviews with eight rural residents of the Teleorman county (southern Romania) and Sibiu county (central Romania), and one Bucharest resident who has relatives in the countryside. At the time of these interviews, all respondents were not members of Eco Ruralis. The respondents were asked about their attitudes towards authoritarian governance, strong leadership, minority groups (Roma minority, Jewish minority, and the LGBTQ community), the European Union, and rural movements and organisations including Eco Ruralis. The interviews were conducted by external research collaborators,<sup>4</sup> and by the author herself in person or by email. The interview guide was developed to include a set of predetermined questions that were asked in the same order and within the same context to increase the reliability and credibility of research data. The external research collaborators were instructed about the objectives and methodology of the present study. The selection of respondents was done based on principles of representativeness to include various socio-economic groups of different age, gender and education. However, due to a small sample size and a selection bias (the author was unable to ensure absolute control of the sampling), these interviews are used here only to illustrate the tendencies in the countryside, not to reveal new trends and make any generalisations.

The second author also engaged in email correspondence with three<sup>5</sup> Romanian scholars specialised in rural and agricultural development in Romania. These interviews were designed as exploratory expert interviews, they contributed to the specification of the research focus and provided insightful information into the situation in rural Romania. The scholars were interviewed about their knowledge of Eco Ruralis; they were asked about how the movement deals with conservative groups in rural society, the political engagement of villagers, and the relevance of the food sovereignty concept. Due to the lack of published empirical studies on rural mobilisation in Romania, the exploratory expert interviews complemented the primary interview data and were useful in drawing the conclusions.

In addition to the primary research data, the present study utilises a vast variety of secondary data. The secondary data are derived from statistics (the Romanian National Institute of Statistics), public opinion polls (research conducted by the Center for Insights in Survey Research), as well as various academic and media publications.

### **Populism, agrarian movements and their key features**

Populism is one of political science's most contentious issues. While broadly used, it lacks a settled definition and a coherent theoretical framework (Woods 2014). Some scholars understand populism as an ideology. Other scholars view it as a form of

political mobilisation, or as a discursive frame (see the discussion on the slippery concept of populism by Mamonova and Franquesa 2020).

For the purpose of this paper, we adopt the definition of populism by Borrás (2018). Borrás has defined populism as ‘the deliberate political act of aggregating disparate and even competing and contradictory class and group interests and demands into a relatively homogenized voice, i.e., “us, the people”, against an “adversarial them” for tactical or strategic political purposes’ (Borrás 2018, p. 3). This definition allows us to engage with the two ideologically opposite variants of populism – right-wing populism and agrarian populism. These two types of populism target similar issues and adversaries, which makes the boundaries between them ‘constantly porous, blurring and malleable’ (Brass 1997, 2013; Borrás 2018, p. 26).

Recent studies have shown that right-wing populism and agrarian populism are both societal responses to the crisis of globalised neoliberal capitalism. This crisis is associated with economic impoverishment, social polarisation, commodification of nature, and the failure of national governments to put the interest of ‘ordinary’ people ahead of the priorities of wealthy elites (Harvey 2004; Borrás 2018, 2019; Scoones *et al.* 2018). Both types of populism, right-wing and agrarian, aim to give ‘power back to the people’ and reconfigure the existing order. Borrás (2018) outlined the principal difference between the two types of populism. For him, right-wing populism is a reactionary, conservative, nationalist movement that promotes and defends capitalism in the name of ‘the people’. Meanwhile, agrarian populism is a progressive, liberal, socially inclusive movement of various rural-oriented social groups and classes that advances a ‘peasant way’ as a sustainable alternative. Borrás (2018) argued that agrarian populism has the potential to subvert right-wing populism as it channels rural discontent into a more progressive form of politics.

Agrarian populism has its roots in ‘*narodnichestvo*’ – the 19<sup>th</sup> century ideological and political movement of Russian intelligentsia, who saw the peasant commune as a prototype of an ideal socialist society (Bernstein 2018). Members of the Russian narodnik movement in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century and the People’s Party in the USA – that emerged thirty years later – designated themselves as populists (Goodwyn 1976). Canovan (1981) identified as many as seven different types of populism in the world’s history: farmers’ radicalism, peasants’ movements, intellectual agrarian socialism, populist dictatorship, populist democracy, reactionary populism and politicians’ populism. The contemporary variant of agrarian populism is primarily associated with the activities of the international movement La Vía Campesina and other transnational agrarian movements that have gained popularity in the Global South (Borrás and Edelman 2016).

Agrarian populism is often incorrectly discussed as a unified and homogeneous movement, when it is actually plural and diverse (Bernstein 2014). In his study of class divisions in rural society, Byres (1979) distinguished between three types of agrarian populism: classical populism, neo-populism, and liberal populism. Later, he added a fourth type – neoclassical neo-populism (Byres 2004). These types of populist movement differ in class composition, attitudes towards private property and capitalism, and mobilisation techniques. Whilst Byres demonstrates the main varieties of agrarian populisms, none of the contemporary agrarian movements fit perfectly into any category in this typology (Borrás 2019). Hence, Bernstein (2018) calls for

concrete analysis of the particular movements, which have been labelled by academics as 'agrarian populists'.

Despite the variety of agrarian populisms, there are several features that are shared by the majority of the contemporary agrarian movements. These are: use of 'Us' versus 'Them' rhetoric; an anti-capitalist political orientation; advocacy of small (peasant) production as a sustainable future model; emphasis on diversity and collaboration of its members; and use of food sovereignty as a mobilising tool (Desmarais 2007, 2008; Wolford 2010; Borrás and Edelman 2016). Below we discuss features we consider crucial for our analysis.

### *Two antagonistic groups: 'Us' versus 'Them'*

Similar to populist movements, agrarian populism considers society to be separated into two antagonistic camps: 'Us, the people' versus 'Them, the elite' (Brass 2013). While right-wing populists adopt a nativist, homogenising approach when conceiving the 'Us' group, agrarian populists aggregate various socio-economic groups and classes into the 'people of the land' community. This community is open to everyone regardless of gender, generation, race, ethnicity, religion and nationality. The diverse members of this community are united by their effort to defend their way of life and subsistence from the threatening activities of 'Them'.

The 'Them' in agrarian populism includes transnational agri-food corporations, the industrial food system, supermarket chains, corrupted national governments, banks, landed classes, and other powerful groups that constitute the so-called 'one per cent' which controls most of the land and associated resources (Desmarais 2007, 2008; Scoones *et al.* 2018; Mamonova and Franquesa 2020).

However, in agrarian populism there is also a group of actors that fits into neither the 'Us' nor the 'Them' category. We refer to this group in this study as 'The rest'. 'The rest' consists of ordinary people who neither share progressive ideas of agrarian movements, nor are they aware of those. They often are more receptive to right-wing populist agitation and propaganda. For these people, the group 'Them' not only includes elites and the political establishment, but also ethnic and cultural minorities, as well as immigrants. They often blame 'Them' for taking prosperity, job opportunities, and public services from their collective 'Us' (Scoones *et al.* 2018; Mamonova 2019). According to Borrás (2019), agrarian populists have the potential to win over the supporters of right-wing populism by advocating structural social reforms and engaging in broader political initiatives.

### *Anti-capitalist (pro-socialist) political orientation*

In the ideological and political representation of their members, agrarian populist movements often follow the principles of the agrarian myth and peasant essentialism (see Brass 2013 on the return of the agrarian myth). Although not many of these movements' members are peasants, the idea of 'peasant-ness' – as antagonistic to capitalism – is commonly employed in their politico-ideological framework. The peasant essentialism largely influences the anti-capitalist (pro-socialist) agenda of many

contemporary agrarian movements (albeit with numerous variations and deviations as discussed by Borrás 2019).

While agrarian populism used to be an apolitical or third-way ideology, in the postmodern world it has become a political project (Brass 1997, 2013; Borrás 2019). Brass (1997, p. 27) has described how agrarian populism underwent two significant transformations. First, 'revolutionary agency passes from the proletariat to the peasantry'. Second, 'peasant-ness'-as-alienation metamorphoses into 'peasant-ness'-as-empowerment. Indeed, if previously peasants were portrayed as powerless victims of capitalism, the 'new' agrarian populism celebrates their persistence, sustainability and revolutionary character (Brass 2013). The contemporary agrarian movements aim to transform the existing capitalist order into a fairer (socialist-inspired) system by means of 'a political revolution and not just a reform programme' (Borrás 2019, p. 22).

### *Food sovereignty as the main 'glue'*

Contemporary agrarian populism is commonly associated with food sovereignty, which is itself a political project and campaign, an alternative, a social movement, and an analytical framework (Holt-Giménez *et al.* 2018). Food sovereignty is 'the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems' (Nyéléni 2007). Agrarian movements use the idea of food sovereignty to mobilise groups of food producers and consumers and create cross-national networks of solidarity and collective action. The groups mobilised cut across racial, gender, generational, ideological, and urban-rural divides.

Food sovereignty is not articulated as a universal principle, and thus, differs in meaning when compared between Europe and Latin America, combining differing food discourses (McMichael 2011; Thivet 2019). As a concept it is virtually absent in post-socialist Eastern Europe (de Master 2013; Visser *et al.* 2015). In Eastern Europe, the right of the people to culturally appropriate food, as well as their right to define their own food system, are both grounded in the longstanding tradition of food self-provisioning and regarded as a matter of fact. These rights therefore represent what Visser *et al.* (2015) have called 'quiet food sovereignty'. There are several factors that hinder the transformation of 'quiet food sovereignty' into an overt food sovereignty movement. First, rural dwellers perceive that their rights to food and to define their agri-food systems are part of the natural order of things. They therefore do not engage in political mobilisation around these rights. Second, smallholders do not perceive their farming as an alternative to industrial agriculture and do not regard themselves as powerful enough to enact changes. Third, communist legacies limit the propensity for collective actions related to the peasant way of life and farming. Finally, peasants were for many years manipulated for political gain. As a result, they have developed mistrust towards any 'grand' mobilising scheme (see De Master 2013; Visser *et al.* 2015; Mamonova 2018 on constraints of food sovereignty in post-socialist Poland, Russia and Ukraine, respectively).



## The previous failures of agrarian populism in Eastern Europe

Agrarian populism is not new to Eastern Europe. During the interwar period, agrarianism – a social and political movement that regarded rural society as superior to urban society – was popular in many Eastern European countries, including Romania. Its proponents advocated for development that was neither capitalist nor socialist, based on small land tenure and the large system of cooperatives (Neagoie 2008).

Eastern European agrarianism was primarily a peasant-oriented movement, in contrast to farmers' movements in Western Europe and the US (Karaömerlioğlu 2002; Eellend 2008). Small-scale peasant farmers – who used to be politically dormant – became the inspiration for many intellectuals who had been searching for a new vision of an ideal society. Then, the idealised notion of 'peasant-ness' became popular in avant-garde social and cultural circles and various peasant parties entered the government in many countries in Eastern Europe (Fairlie 2015). This period is known as the Green Rising (Bizzell 1926). The Green International became the name for the international cooperation between Eastern European peasant-oriented parties and groups (Eellend 2008; Daskalov 2014).

Prior to the First World War, the Romanian rural political scene was characterized by frequent peasant unrests, albeit with little revolutionary activity (Roberts 1969). These localised unrests were rooted in quasi-servile social and labour relations (neo-serfdom) and directed against the expansion of large landed estates, excessive fragmentation of smallholdings and decay of medium-sized properties (Roberts 1969). To deal with the growing rural discontent, the Romanian government launched a land redistribution reform that provided peasants with land and constitutional rights, contributing to the emergence of the peasantry as a social class (Mitrany 1951). This new class became the backbone of the agrarian populist parties and movements.

Agrarian populism in interwar Romania was a diverse movement with various ideological outlooks (Trencsényi 2014). Among the best-known peasant-oriented movements were: poporanism (an ideological and cultural movement that championed Romanian language and spirit, and aimed at liberating the peasantry through the organisation of cooperative farms); samanatorism (a political and literary movement focused on folklore traditions and national values); and taranism (a political movement aimed at promoting an alternative development path based on peasant principles).<sup>6</sup> These movements became the bases for peasant-oriented political parties. However, the parties were rather unsuccessful and failed to maintain political power.

Five main aspects can explain the failure of these peasant-oriented political parties during the interwar period. First, the peasant political mobilisation was rather weak and did not provide enough support for the parties' initiatives (Murgescu 2010). Second, the political leadership was characterised by demagoguery and suffered from a lack of both experience and networks (Mitrany 1951; Radu 2018). Third, these parties committed to non-violence and democratic principles and were therefore unable to counter their corrupt and violent opponents (Mitrany 1951). Fourth, the National Peasants' Party – which was the only peasant-orientated political party that succeeded in entering the Romanian Parliament – was unable to implement the promised

reforms in the context of economic depression and the emergence of a dictatorial regime aimed at counteracting the rising fascist movements (Mitrany 1951). Finally, the ideological inconsistency and ambiguity of agrarian movements led to their oscillation between the radical left and the radical right (Trencsényi 2014). As a result, far-right parties and then the communist dictatorship gained power in Romania. At the international level, the Green International also failed to become a powerful political force due to differences in the agrarian structures and national priorities of Eastern European countries (Trencsényi 2014).

During the communist period in Romania, agrarian populist ideas were subverted by the communist regime and many of the agrarian representatives were jailed (Mitrany 1951). The communist government aimed at transforming the peasantry into an agricultural proletariat (Gallagher 2005). Peasants' land and assets were confiscated in favour of large collective farms, where the rural population was employed. The collectivisation campaign was carried out through abusive schemes and met with significant rural resistance that was severely repressed (Deletant 1999). Later, in order to deal with rural discontent and food shortages, the communist government allowed rural dwellers to conduct small-scale subsistence farming on household plots. This farming was very productive and thrived outside of state control, but it was not associated with the peasant way of life and peasant farming.

### Land grabbing and the emergence of Eco Ruralis

After the collapse of Communism in 1989, land reform was initiated to transform formerly state-owned farmland into private ownership. The reform resulted in the highest level of land fragmentation in Europe (Hartvigsen 2014). Today, small-scale farms dominate the agricultural structure in Romania (INS 2010). The majority of rural residents conduct peasant-like farming on land plots averaging 3.1 hectares (Csáki and Kray 2005). They use manual labour (combined with some simple farm machinery) and grow primarily staple food crops. This semi-subsistence farming has become the poverty alleviation strategy for many rural households. It provides a safety net for food security (Hubbard and Thompson 2007) and a buffer for unemployment.

In 2007, Romania joined the European Union. EU membership resulted in increased foreign direct investment (Goschin 2014) and a number of positive effects on the economy such as lower unemployment and inflation rates, as well as income growth for poor households. However, according to Mau (2005), Taggart and Szczerbiak (2002, 2004), Toader and Radu (2018) European integration has not achieved economic benefits for all citizens. The prospect of EU accession has triggered rural outmigration (Horváth 2008; Roman and Voicu 2010) and land grabbing (EP Report 2015). In turn, regional disparities between rural and urban areas deepened (Goschin 2014). Besides that, there has been increased multinational interest in direct investments in the Romanian agricultural and mining sectors (Mihai *et al.* 2015; Hajdu and Visser 2017). Arable land investments have resulted in re-cultivation of abandoned land, improvements in farming technologies, and increased domestic agricultural output (Csáki and Jámboor 2013). They also resulted in the presence of a variety of farmland investors with speculative objectives (Hajdu and Visser 2017). The

investments in the mining sector are expected to boost tax revenues in the federal budget and contribute to local employment and business opportunities (Mihai *et al.* 2015). However, the investments are often described as ‘land grabbing’ or ‘resource grabbing’ because of their negative impact on local communities and the environment (see Vesalon and Crețan 2012, 2013, 2015; Mihai *et al.* 2015 on the impact of mining and fracking in the Romanian countryside).

Eco Ruralis emerged in 2009 in the context of the ‘Save Rosia Montana’ crisis. ‘Save Rosia Montana’ became Romania’s largest and longest environmental and social campaign. It was a campaign against the development of an open-pit mine initiated by a Canadian company for the mining of gold deposits (Ștefănescu *et al.* 2013; Vesalon and Crețan 2013; Mihai *et al.* 2015). Eco Ruralis was established by four peasants from Mures, Sibiu, Cluj and Alba counties in Romania together with two volunteers from the USA. In 2011, the association became a member of the La Vía Campesina movement. Eco Ruralis is legally registered as a non-governmental organisation (NGO), a part of civil society, and it currently has 12,000 members. Eco Ruralis calls itself a peasant organisation, however is made up of rural people from economically, culturally, and ideologically diverse backgrounds. Eco Ruralis closely mirrors La Vía Campesina in terms of the heterogeneity of its members, its horizontal organisational structure, and its democratic decision-making process.

According to our interviews with various members of Eco Ruralis, the propagation and free distribution of local seed varieties are the key practices that attract the majority of members to join the organisation. Upon registration to receive seeds, one automatically agrees to become a member of the organisation. Activities for the propagation and distribution of seeds are organised at local nested markets taking into account the low income of the rural population. The annual free distribution of local seeds, and the organisation of seed exchanges, have given thousands of people access to local seed varieties and have established Eco Ruralis’ reputation as a source of high-quality seeds. In the future, the association plans to set up five seed banks to preserve the genetic diversity of domestic seed varieties. Following peasant traditions, these seed gene banks will be located in small traditional houses (from interviews with Eco Ruralis committee member, 3 November 2019).

## Constraints of agrarian populism and food sovereignty

### *Us – they – the rest*

In a similar way to many other agrarian movements that adopt agrarian populist rhetoric, Eco Ruralis reproduces a discourse of ‘Us versus Them’. According to our analysis of speeches and texts of committee members of Eco Ruralis, the movement defines ‘Us’ as the group of so-called ‘new peasants’ – former urban dwellers and rural smallholders who are inspired by ecological and traditional food production. Eco Ruralis portrays this collective ‘Us’ as a group of liberal, progressive and pro-European citizens. They are described as aiming for the creation of a socially inclusive and fair society based on peasant principles. Meanwhile, the group ‘Them’ consists of large-scale agro-industrial projects, multinational corporations, supermarket chains,

and governments. This collective ‘Them’, forms the main adversary of Eco Ruralis (Eco Ruralis 2019a, 2019b). The Mission of the organisation underlines: ‘We will strengthen the capacity of the people to defend themselves collectively against the abusive / unfair actions taken by corporations and governments’ (Eco Ruralis 2019a). However, the identity building and mobilisation of Eco Ruralis’ members are also enacted through implicit contrast with another category or collective grouping, which we will call ‘The rest’.

For Eco Ruralis, this ‘The rest’ consists of smallholders who do not engage in agro(ecological) practices (they often use chemical inputs and are not interested in organic farming). Members of this group are described as being unconcerned about biodiversity and ecosystem problems. They are referred to as not supporting multiculturalism and cultural diversity in their villages (from our interviews with Eco Ruralis members and committee representatives). However, various studies indicated that ‘The rest’ group, which constitutes a majority, is a major supporter of conservative, anti-Roma, and anti-LGBTQ politics in Romania. Both elderly, as well as young, rural residents hold such political views. In the recent ‘Family Referendum’, for example, 65 per cent of students coming from rural areas (in contrast to 57 per cent coming from cities) voted in favour of restricting the definition of marriage to exclude same-sex unions, seeking to defend traditional family values (Fulga 2017; Youngs 2018).

To justify their position against same-sex marriages ‘The rest’ group uses the notion of ‘peasant-ness’ and ‘the peasantry’. Contrary to the progressive understanding of the peasantry presented by Eco Ruralis, ‘The rest’ portrays the peasantry in a conservative way. In one of our interviews, a rural dweller (man, 28 years old, non-member of Eco Ruralis) from Dârlos (Sibiu county) explained support for the ‘Family Referendum’ in his village by referring to the ‘divine nature’ of the peasantry:

‘Peasants are closer to divinity than those people in towns, and the priest still influences their way of thinking to some extent. [Therefore] the traditional definition of the family is an important religious topic here’. (interview conducted 25 October 2019).

In contrast with members of Eco Ruralis, ‘The rest’ do not see large corporations and land or resource grabbing as a major scourge of rural areas. In their interviews, they indicated that ‘infrastructure decline’, ‘lack of educational and health institutions’, and ‘depopulation’ were the major problems (these problems were named in six out of eight interviews with non-members of Eco Ruralis, conducted 5–25 October 2019 in Teleorman and Sibiu counties). Indeed, these issues have been found to be the main concerns of rural residents in Romania among issues of poverty, insufficient off-farm employment opportunities, low quality of drinking water, rising tensions between ethnic groups in studies by Hubbard *et al.* (2014); Mikulcak *et al.* (2012).

Some rural residents also blame the EU for problems in their areas. A rural woman (35 years old, non-member of Eco Ruralis) expressed her disappointment with the EU: ‘it is not what it was supposed to be, otherwise Brexit would not happen’ (interview conducted 20 October 2019, Sibiu county). Although Romania has generally remained immune to the anti-EU wave (Dijkstra *et al.* 2019), attitudes about the EU are divided and the strongest anti-EU sentiments are found in the Romanian countryside (Buzasu 2019). A 2018 survey conducted by the Center for Insights in Survey

Research found that 35 per cent of Romanians believed that the EU had brought economic benefits to the majority and 31 per cent thought that it had brought benefits to some whilst harming others (CISR 2018).

Another adversary of 'The rest' is the largest ethnic minority in Romania – the Roma minority. Many Roma communities have settled in rural areas and have become an object of hate for rural residents (Dinca 2014). Roma are commonly blamed for '... stealing, cheating, begging and [receiving] social support from the government, [which] encourages them to stay at home without looking for a job' (interview with a woman, 34 years old, non-member of Eco Ruralis, conducted 20 October 2019, Sibiu county). Indeed, there is a strong tendency towards negative social representations of Roma ethnics, which reinforces racist attitudes and prejudicial beliefs (Crețan and O'Brien 2019).

The anti-LGBTQ, anti-Roma, anti-EU sentiments of many rural Romanians go against the principles of Eco Ruralis and constitute a major challenge for the movement. The leadership acknowledges the existing discrepancies between the rural residents' mainstream sentiments and the ideology of Eco Ruralis. One interviewee mentioned:

'In one of our discussions around migration, the opinions were very divided. Some were against migration. [...] "We see how right-wing sentiments arise in our discussions, especially when we talk with male peasants" (interview conducted 26 February)'.

Within the organisation these discrepancies are solved through consensus. This also means that those who have controversial opinions that do not fit the organisation's positions are 'naturally excluded by the dynamic of the organisational process' (interview conducted 17 January 2019). Thus, the conservative and traditional way of thinking is not only an attribute of 'The rest'. Some of Eco Ruralis members share xenophobic and nationalist sentiments as a result of right-wing populist discourse generated by the media, national government and other authorities (interview with administrative member, conducted 18 October 2019).

Eco Ruralis describes itself as strictly against any type of exclusionary, nationalistic, and xenophobic rhetoric and practices. The movement demonstrates its openness to various people regardless of their race, gender, or sexual orientation. However, the movement does not undertake any proactive actions to combat the conservative and xenophobic ways of thinking that are present in the Romanian countryside. In an interview with one of the committee members, the person mentioned the following about dealing with the anti-Roma sentiments of rural residents: 'We have a few Roma members. [...] We haven't done any specific initiatives for this group. [...] We should do more' (interview conducted 3 November 2019).

Eco Ruralis focuses on those people who share their progressive values but it does not actively engage with 'The rest' group. In our exploratory expert interviews, Ștefan Voicu – an academic researcher specialising in property rights and agricultural development in Romania – argued that the movement's limited engagement with the conservative and traditionalist members of Romania's rural population is largely the result of its leftist agenda and its membership of La Vía Campesina. He stated that: 'they [Eco Ruralis] need to deploy a progressive discourse to be affiliated with ECVC,<sup>7</sup>

which does not resonate with the local population' (interview conducted 5 November 2019).

Besides ideological discrepancies, Eco Ruralis does not address the main concerns of the majority of rural dwellers (such as the decline of infrastructure and depopulation). This makes the movement uninteresting and unattractive to the majority of the rural population.

#### *Apolitical character of the movement*

As we discussed earlier, agrarian populism has become a political project in the post-modern world. However, political organisation is problematic in rural Romania. Rural dwellers appear to be politically apathetic and unwilling to participate in any kind of politics. While political alienation used to be commonly ascribed to older generations, recent studies have demonstrated that young people also feel a sense of estrangement from the prevailing political system (Robertson 2009; Pranzl 2017). In an interview, a rural resident (man, 28 years old, non-member of Eco Ruralis) from Dârlos, Sibiu County, said: 'Politics in my country is a big disappointment right now and it has been for 30 years' (interview conducted 22 October 2019).

Such disappointment with politics greatly influences the activities of social movements and NGOs in Romania. In our exploratory expert interviews, Dr. Ștefan Dorondel – a Romanian scholar specialising in environmental and economic issues in the post socialist-countryside – suggested that the apolitical character of Eco Ruralis is a conscious strategy:

'they want to be *perceived* as apolitical simply because the actual political class in Romania is quite unprofessional and badly perceived by the population. They would not serve their own cause if they would allow people to perceive them as affiliated with one or the other political parties. Not in the current situation anyway' (interview conducted 5 November 2019).

Eco Ruralis therefore faces a challenging task: it aims at strengthening rural civil society and representing its members politically, while staying out of politics. One of the Eco Ruralis committee members explained the movement's apolitical approach to political matters:

'You need to have the capacity to constantly apply political pressure and to sit at the table [with politicians] when they talk about you. [...] We wrote the whole chapter on agriculture for XX [political party] but we won't publicly say this because we are interested in consolidating civil society. [...] If everyone would jump into the same boat of forming a political party, the boat would sink' (interview conducted 17 January 2019).

However, there is no consensus regarding the apolitical approach taken by Eco Ruralis. Thus, at the meeting of the General Assembly, a new member of the movement stressed the importance of the group's members acting as politicians. She wanted to run as a mayoral candidate in her village and represent peasant interests through her membership in Eco Ruralis. However, political engagement contradicts the statute of Eco Ruralis, which defines it as an apolitical, non-governmental organisation. The following discussion illustrates the tension in the movement:

New Member: 'How many members of Eco Ruralis are now in the Romanian Parliament'?

Other members: 'None'.

New Member: [...] 'This is very bad. What could we do then? [...] How do you want to solve things if decisions are taken by them [politicians] not by us? [...] You are talking here about agricultural policies. Thus, 'policies' require 'politics'. [...] I don't trust politicians anymore. We have a convicted mayor in our village [...] I want to run as a candidate for the town hall. Otherwise, I won't have any decision-making power in my village. [...] Does this mean that I must leave Eco Ruralis'?

Coordinating committee member: 'Also in France, José Bové and other europarliamentaries left the Confederation Paysanne, a LVC member, like us. [...] They publicly said they don't have anything to do with the popular movement because they could discredit it. This is a deliberate action aimed at supporting the peasant organisation from the European Parliament'. (the discussion was noted at the Working Group on Land Access at the General Assembly, Sâncraiu, 5 October 2019).

The discussion quoted above alludes to the apolitical approach to political matters of La Vía Campesina, something that largely influences the politics of Eco Ruralis. This remains an unresolved issue for many rural movements and NGOs in Europe (Mamonova and Franquesa 2020).

### *Not against capitalism*

The post-socialist countryside is the arena for an ideological (and habitual) struggle between capitalism and the legacies of socialism. As Humphrey (2002, p. 12) noted: 'there is rather an unpredictable propensity to "turn back", or at least resolute refusal to abandon values and expectations associated with socialism'. Although many rural Romanians appreciate the changes brought by neoliberal capitalism and globalisation, many remain nostalgic about public services and social security that they experienced during the communist period (Murgescu 2012). A city dweller in Bucharest, who has relatives in the countryside, shared his insights about rural attitudes to communism and capitalism:

'They [rural dwellers] are still nostalgic about the communist times. [They witnessed] the destruction of the collective [farms] from the communist period, [which were] "privatized" by some of their former bosses who became rich entrepreneurs and exponents of capitalism' (interview conducted in Bucharest, 20 October 2019).

Eco Ruralis defines itself in opposition to communism and puts forward a progressive liberal agenda. The communist legacies prevent the movement from adopting the socialist ideology of La Vía Campesina. One of the coordinating members of Eco Ruralis said: 'Socialist terminology that is used by the LVC community scares us very much. We are more left wing but without ideological content, minus the socialist terminology' (interview committee member 17 January 2019). At the same time, Eco Ruralis follows La Vía Campesina's critique of capitalism, globalised agriculture, and free trade agreements. Thus, Eco Ruralis has to find its way between two 'evils'

– communism and capitalism. This is something, which is not easy, as one of the movement's leaders stated:

'This is a big discussion in Eco Ruralis [...] in our essence we are anti-establishment, more than anti-capitalist. [...] We recognise Capitalism's contribution to our contemporary condition. [...] We also recognise that Capitalism has done more harm to peasants than good and we recognise at the same time that Communism has done much more harm to peasants than good. [...] Still Capitalism offered more than Communism [...] but this area of Capitalism that is about corporate domination, about corporations and free trade agreements and markets and this globalism, this digital age, these are aspects that we look at critically as Eco Ruralis and indeed we have another vision' (interview committee member, 22 January 2019).

Recently Eco Ruralis launched *Acces La Pamant Agroecologic* (ALPA-Access to agroecological land) – an organisation that aims to collect donations to purchase farmland. This provoked internal debates because ALPA is based on capitalist principles, contradicting Eco Ruralis' ideology. The same contradiction is visible in the movement's attitude towards the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Despite *La Vía Campesina's* critique of the CAP, Eco Ruralis has supported the CAP, albeit whilst acknowledging its limitations. It advocates for the inclusion of peasant rights into the CAP. According to Eco Ruralis, the CAP can facilitate smallholders' access to land and associated resources and it therefore contributes to the creation of a sustainable agri-food system, which is based on peasant principles (from interview with a committee member, 17 January 2019). Thus, instead of criticising and rejecting the CAP, Eco Ruralis has tried to influence the CAP to make it represent the interests of farmers whose land parcels are smaller than 1 hectare (until recently, the CAP had a five-hectare payment threshold for agricultural subsidies).

#### *Food sovereignty and seeds sovereignty*

Food sovereignty is the mobilising framework of international agrarian movements, including *La Vía Campesina*. However, as we have discussed earlier, food sovereignty has many limitations in post-socialist settings. In Romania, societal recognition and mobilisation around food sovereignty rights is very weak and might even be described as virtually non-existent. In our exploratory expert interview with Ștefan Voicu, he stated that in Romania there is still 'some version of "quiet food sovereignty"'. However, 'it takes different forms depending on the region, as different types of agriculture are practiced in different parts of Romania' (interview conducted 5 November 2019).

Eco Ruralis is aware of food sovereignty's constraints in Romania. The movement supports activities carried out by its members, who aim at practicing, maintaining, and developing sustainable, small-scale farming and peasant lifestyles. However, some of the concepts, which have been promoted by the international food sovereignty movement, have led to controversy in Romania. For example, some members do not accept ideas about ecology or agroecology because these concepts are perceived as tools, which are used to fine-tune the industrial agribusiness system and are not



seen as offering peasant-based alternatives. At the same time they are perceived to be sophisticated and to hamper the interpersonal communication among rural people, as the terms need to be explained and put the organisation members into a didactic posture. A coordinating member explains:

'We recently had in Cluj the first workshop on political training and the concept (food sovereignty) has been intensively debated. The term can easily be distorted and misunderstood [...] Not all people accept the terms ecology or agroecology, even though we have been working with them for a long time now' (interview conducted 2–4 December 2019, via online written communication).

Instead, Eco Ruralis practices something similar to seed sovereignty. Seed sovereignty is understood as the reclaiming of 'seeds and biodiversity as commons and a public good'. It is taken to mean 'the farmer's rights to breed and exchange diverse Open Source Seeds which can be saved and which are not patented, genetically modified, owned or controlled by emerging seed giants' (Seed Sovereignty 2019). A coordinating committee member of Eco Ruralis emphasised that more than half of the movement's members regarded seeds as an important element of peasant identity. According to the committee member, this makes members want to preserve seeds and not be dependent on seeds distributed by agro-companies (interview conducted 26 February 2019).

However, this committee member also stated that there was confusion among members. He stated that the other half of Eco Ruralis members regarded the seeds as 'Romanian seeds' and saw them as a part of national identity, rather than as a part of peasant identity. Indeed, a new member of Eco Ruralis explained that local seeds gave him an identity, connecting him to a place. He said this sense of identity gained from the seeds was 'very similar to how Parmesan is associated [with] Italy or Emmental cheese [with] Switzerland'. (interview conducted 5 October 2019). This mix of understandings results in a mixing of a seed-based identity, a peasant identity, and a national identity. Eco Ruralis' coordinating committee is currently working on shaping the discourse on seed-related identity so that 'a peasant understanding [of it] does not transform into a nationalistic one':

'Considering that we are mostly a left-wing oriented movement, we do not allow that this view is hijacked by right-wing ideologies. Whenever we talk about seeds, we clarify our approach and specify that we do not refer to "Romanian seeds" but "Peasants" seeds' and we explain what Peasants' seeds mean' (interview conducted 26 February 2019).

The preservation and propagation of local seed varieties are important activities for Eco Ruralis members. However, 'The rest' does not always appreciate these activities. A member of Eco Ruralis described how she has been growing traditional seeds to continue the activity carried out by her grandmother, but that she is 'regarded as a strange person because of this'. She says that other people in her community (including her family members) 'do not see the value of working so hard to maintain the seeds and to grow the crops organically' (interview conducted 5 October 2019).

By bringing back a sense of belonging and restoring local identity that is under pressure through globalisation, multiculturalism and Europeanisation (Kymlicka (2013), seed sovereignty and related activities in Romania may offer a sustainable

alternative to the nationalist, xenophobic, exclusionary sentiments in the countryside. However, as we have argued, Eco Ruralis defines 'Us' in opposition to 'The rest'. This creates exclusion and disregard of 'The rest'. The exclusionary understanding of 'Us' undermines the ability of seed sovereignty to unite people. Eco Ruralis's current focus on 'the new peasants' divides rural society and could drive a larger gap between an 'Us' (who care more about seed varieties and are more mindful of agricultural practices) and 'The rest'.

## Discussion

Recent studies of rural populism claim that agrarian populism, in the form of food sovereignty movement, has the potential to erode right-wing sentiments and advance a more promising progressive alternative. However, food sovereignty is not a popular concept in Eastern Europe. This paper has studied the activities of the Romanian 'peasant' movement Eco Ruralis, which is a member of the international movement La Vía Campesina that is the main advocate for food sovereignty. In this study, we have examined how Eco Ruralis engages in political and ideological debates around food sovereignty and 'the peasant way of life', as well as how it mobilises post-socialist rural dwellers for collective actions.

We revealed a critical mismatch between the progressive (somewhat abstract) objectives of the agrarian populist movement and the main worries of rural residents. This mismatch generates a division between 'Us' (the 'new peasants' – members of the movement) and 'The rest' (smallholders who are non-members of the movement). The division then limits the potential for agrarian populism to erode right-wing sentiments in the countryside. Moreover, this study has demonstrated that communist legacies influence societal attitudes towards capitalism and socialism, making the adoption of the anti-capitalist pro-socialist ideology of La Vía Campesina problematic in Romania. Finally, this paper has shown that the concept of 'food sovereignty' can be misleading, as it is alien to the Romanian countryside. Instead, other sustainable practices, such as the preservation and propagation of local seed varieties, could be more culturally appropriate, and therefore, may have the potential to play an important role in eroding the nationalist, xenophobic, exclusionary sentiments which are seen in the countryside.

But how relevant is this study to other contexts and what can we learn from it? In this final section we will discuss some implications of this research as well as the generalisability of our findings.

The mismatch between the progressive ideas of Eco Ruralis and the local concerns of Romanian villagers found in this study is not unique. Scholars have identified similar tendencies in other places. In his study of transnational activism and the palm oil boom in Indonesia, for example, Pye (2010) showed that the global campaigns of rural social movements do not match the interests of local communities. Whereas the movements advocated for biodiversity conservation and climate justice, villagers were concerned about land rights and employment conditions in the context of the palm oil expansion. Similarly, Bilewicz (2020) has revealed that there is a critical misunderstanding between urban activists such as members of alternative food networks

and farmers in Poland. The Polish urban activists focus on food relocalisation, agroecology, and social justice, while the farmers are concerned about defending land ownership and traditions. These discrepancies result in hostility and distrust between urban activists and farmers.

Other scholars have also made similar findings about the constraints encountered by the food sovereignty movement in post-socialist contexts. Studies by Mamonova (2018), and Visser et al. (2015) for example, have argued that the post-socialist tradition of food self-provisioning hinders the emergence of an overt food sovereignty movement in Ukraine and Russia. Meanwhile, De Master (2013) has demonstrated that the spread of food sovereignty in Poland is limited by the cultural legacies of communism as well as the deep-rooted societal mistrust of social movements associated with 'grand' universal schemes. Her study argued that universal models for food sovereignty could accentuate existing splits between 'cosmopolitan' Western Europe and 'backward' Polish smallholders. This increase in existing divisions could then unintentionally strengthen the right-wing nationalistic sentiments of some Poles. Our research contributes to the studies of post-socialist food sovereignty with its discussion about rural attitudes towards communism and capitalism.

Various authors have identified the apolitical character of the rural population in post-socialist countries. In their study of rural mobilisation in Russia, Mamonova and Visser (2014) demonstrated that post-socialist rural residents tend to distrust any political action and to assume that hidden self-interest lies behind every form of collective action. This study has similarly found that societal estrangement from politics and from civil mobilisation defines the apolitical character of rural social movements.

In this study, we have also highlighted the uneasy relationship between the transnational movement La Vía Campesina, and its national member-organisation Eco Ruralis. In Romania, the approach and political stance of La Vía Campesina does not always fit with locally specific practices and discourses. This mismatch creates obstacles for the popularisation and practical application of La Vía Campesina's ideas in Romania. This finding echoes the arguments made by Ferguson and Gupta (2002). In their study, they argued that, when they are acting locally, global NGOs tend to impose their informal power. Therefore, the global approach to food sovereignty and the ideas of La Vía Campesina may need to be adjusted to local norms, traditions, and politics.

Finally, in this paper we follow the suggestion of Bloch who argued, 'misunderstanding of the present is the inevitable consequence of ignorance of the past' (Bloch 1954, p. 36). Although it is very difficult to draw parallels between the interwar period and the contemporary situation in Europe, some lessons might be learned from the past. It might be noted, for example, that in the inter-war period the failure of the Green International of peasant-oriented political parties was due to the fact that the individual countries' national projects were considered a priority and no overarching Eastern European organisation of agrarian parties was established. Today, La Vía Campesina faces a similar challenge. To create a coherent all-European food sovereignty movement, La Vía Campesina may need to engage with the specific national and local conditions in its member countries. At the same time, it may need to also embrace common interests and identify new connecting elements that go beyond domestic norms, traditions, and politics.

## Conflict of interest

The authors do not have any conflict of interest to declare.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The contemporary Romanian political discourse and politics are often termed as 'left-wing conservatism'.

<sup>2</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Nyéleni Europe Forum 26–30 October 2016 Cluj-Napoca, Romania; Food sovereignty consultation June 2016 Cluj-Napoca, Romania; General Assembly Eco Ruralis October 2019, Sâncraiu, Romania.

<sup>3</sup> Food Otherwise Conference 21–22 February 2014, Wageningen, The Netherlands; Access to land in Europe: Learning from the field Seminar 19–20 June 2017, Brussels, Belgium; Access to land conference 21<sup>st</sup> June 2017, Brussels, Belgium.

<sup>4</sup> The author is immensely grateful to her colleagues – Oana Moro and Dr. Marian Zaloaga for conducting the interview with rural dwellers.

<sup>5</sup> One of the interviewees would like to remain anonymous.

<sup>6</sup> For more information see the studies of Mitrany 1930, 1951; Korkut 2006; Șerban 2006; Harre 2008; Musat 2011; Daskalov 2014; Marin 2018; Radu 2018 on peasant movements and parties in Romania during the interwar period.

<sup>7</sup> The European Coordination of La Via Campesina.

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