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Conference Paper

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Provided in Cooperation with:

The Research Institute for Agriculture Economy and Rural Development (ICEADR), Bucharest

Suggested Citation: Lupu, Geanina-Valentina (2021) : National and European strategies and policies for the generation change in Romanian agriculture, In: Agrarian Economy and Rural Development - Realities and Perspectives for Romania. International Symposium. 12th Edition, The Research Institute for Agricultural Economy and Rural Development (ICEADR), Bucharest, pp. 236-242

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/263046>

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NATIONAL AND EUROPEAN STRATEGIES AND POLICIES FOR THE GENERATION CHANGE IN ROMANIAN AGRICULTURE

GEANINA-VALENTINA LUPU ¹

Abstract

The aging of the population is a real phenomenon and even more so highlighted in the agricultural field. The statistics highlight the fact that there are about 10% more elderly Romanian farmers than the European average. The causes of this fact lie in the aging population, the departure of young people abroad, difficulties in attracting young people to agricultural education. The need for technologicalization in agriculture also requires young entrepreneurs who are able to learn and apply such innovative technologies. The measures provided by European funds to attract young farmers are proving insufficient to ensure the renewal of generations in agriculture and to achieve sustainable development. Governments are trying to apply strategies and policies, some implemented according to the requirements of the European Union, which aim to attract the NEET category in the agricultural sector, coherent measures in the high school, vocational and dual education system to attract young people to vocational training with agriculture and entrepreneurship. The paper analyzes quantitatively and qualitatively statistical data on enrollment figures, accessing non-reimbursable funding provided by the National Rural Development Program to young farmers, various measures under the Common Agricultural Policy, other legislative initiatives. There is a better correlation of the educational offer for all levels with the real requirements of the agricultural field and the adoption of concrete measures to facilitate the transition from subsistence to efficient and attractive agriculture for young generations, allowing a renewal in this sector so important for the Romanian economy.

Keywords: farmer, young, agricultural education, financing, NRDP

JEL classification: I25, J58

INTRODUCTION

The preponderance of subsistence agriculture, a major differentiation between urban and rural in terms of life chances (quality of life, opportunities) and a massive concentration of poverty in rural areas, raises the issue of taking urgent measures to stop these trends. (Hatos, 2019)

The European Union raises the issue of attracting the younger generation to agriculture, mainly from the perspective of population aging. In Romania, the problem is marked by at least three difficulties: the aging of the population, the overwhelming migration of young people and the difficulty of attracting young people with professional training to the field of agriculture.

Romania is among the Member States with a relatively small share of young farmers, along with Italy, Belgium, Great Britain, etc., being considered among the countries where the problem of aging has an impact all the stronger as the number of agricultural holdings small sizes, which are the most numerous, are coordinated by older farmers. Depending on the age structure and the total agricultural land, it is pointed out that the aging problem is the most acute in countries such as Portugal, Italy and Romania. (Popovici & Călin, 2019)

This study refers to a series of information provided by the National Program for Rural Development (NRDP), Eurostat, studies conducted by the Consortium of organizations that include the World Vision Romania Foundation, Junior Achievement Romania, Civitas Foundation for Civil Society and the Romanian Centre of European Policies. Through the "Growing through Agricultural Education" Program, the consortium puts at the same table the agricultural education with the new technologies and the business environment, in order to support the performance of high school teachers and managers.

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MATERIALS AND METHODS

Taking into account the objectives of this study, our exploratory initiative was based on a mix of quantitative and qualitative research procedures in order to obtain relevant and valid information about the measures taken by the competent authorities to support young farmers, agricultural education and young people who are not yet included in employment, but do not follow any form of vocational training. The data are provided by Eurostat, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In Romania, a large part of the active population is involved in agriculture, which is indisputably correlated with the large number of agricultural holdings. Many of these households are subsistence, have low productivity, require a lot of physical work, but with few specialized skills. The agricultural sector highlights an acute labor crisis, an accentuated aging of farmers and a low rate of those who have received an education in this field. Although many people work in agriculture, the demand for initial and continuing training is quite small.

An opportunity in this regard is also the allocation of European funds accessible with the help of the National Program for Rural Development (PNDR). Sub-measure 6.1 Support for setting up young farmers gives them a chance to establish themselves as heads of an agricultural holding. Increasing the number of young farmers to join and participate in food chains, to become competitive, to establish themselves in rural areas is one of the real measures that contribute to the much needed generational renewal in agriculture (AFIR data).

Another measure concluded in 2019 was sub-measure 1.1. Support for vocational training and the acquisition of skills, which aimed at improving the specific technical and economic knowledge for the practice and management of agricultural and agri-food activities of farmers, as well as the general management of the farm. The two sub-measures mentioned are closely linked and are seen as a unitary whole, aiming for young farmers who benefit from support under sub-measure 6.1, farmers who work on small farms and who benefit from support under sub-measure 6.3, to implement agricultural techniques and technologies, including research results (AFIR data).

Table 1 exemplifies a number of sub-measures that have been implemented, as well as the absorption rate of these initiatives. As expected, the highest absorption of 92.80% had the professional training of young farmers, a measure concluded in 2019. It follows at a short distance the one on the installation of small farmers with a percentage of 90.80%, and the measure on the development of small farms registers by 12.39% less than the previous measure. Measure 6.1 is also allocated to support the installation of young farmers - NextGenerationEU (EUR), amounting to 100,000,000 which aims to continue the effort of generational renewal in the agricultural sector.

Table 1. The stage of implementation National Programs for Rural Development (NPRD), July 2021

Submeasure	NPRD financial allocation 2014-2020	Value of funding applications submitted	Value of ongoing and completed contracts	Value of completed financing contracts	Payments made	%
1.1 "Support for vocational training and skills acquisition"	5,910,092	37,704,742	6,664,023	6,589,605	5,485,009	92,80
6.1 "Support for the installation of young farmers"	466,724,186	622,600,000	433,990,000	396,570,000	423,786,798	90.80
6.1 "Support for the installation of young farmers"- ITI Delta Dunării	10,000,000	9,510,000	8,180,000	8,020,000	8,132,444	81,32
6.3 "Support for the development of small farms"	241,590,566	309,240,000	34,984,500	34,983,000	189,448,841	78,41

Submeasure	NPRD financial allocation 2014-2020	Value of funding applications submitted	Value of ongoing and completed contracts	Value of completed financing contracts	Payments made	%
6.3 "Support for the development of small farms" - ITI Delta Dunării	5,000,000	3,405,000	2,801,250	2,250,000	2,653,000	53,06

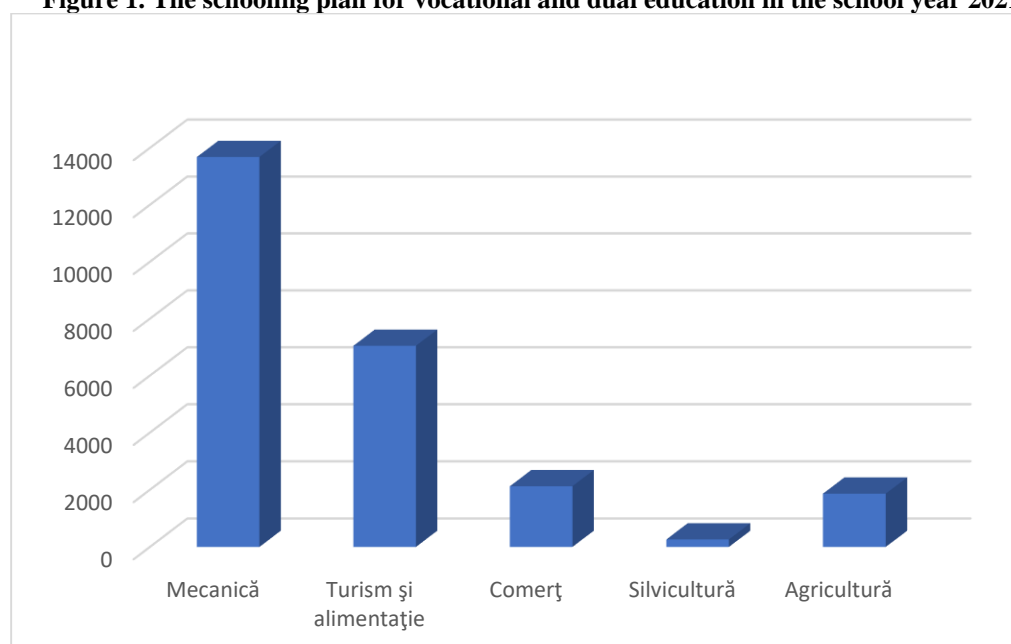
Source: The stage of implementation of National Programs for Rural Development 2014-2020, July 2021, <https://www.madr.ro/pndr-2014-2020/implementare-pndr-2014-2020/situatia-proiectelor-depuse-2014-2020.html?start=10>, Accessed on September 28, 2021

European funds for young farmers, among the few forms of support for them in Romania, are not enough to ensure the exchange of generations. Young people from rural areas in other European countries turn to agriculture earlier, from lower classes, mostly through forms of vocational and technical agricultural education in real business and farms (Toderiță et al., 2017).

Vocational and high school education with an agricultural profile have a low demand compared to the rest of the profiles. In general, agricultural-specific qualifications are aimed at eighth-grade graduates with a low level of knowledge, who often choose this profile due to their proximity to home, have low school performance and a fairly high dropout rate.

The initiative of the Ministry of Agriculture to finance high schools with an agricultural profile is welcome. These high schools are under double subordination to both the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Agriculture. But, this is not enough. There is a trend in terms of cutting the number of classes among agricultural and technological high schools in favor of the theoretical ones. This does not help the achievement of the strategic objective assumed by Romania within the Strategy of vocational education and training in the period 2016-2020 regarding the achievement of the level of 60% for vocational and technical education out of the total number of high school students. Figure 1 shows the number of places in the schooling plan for the school year 2021-2022 for different basic areas. The weight of the places occupied at the end of the admission stages for the year 2021-2022 is 82.6% for tourism and food, 79% for mechanics, 69.9% for trade, 57.4% for agriculture and 50.8% for civil engineering.

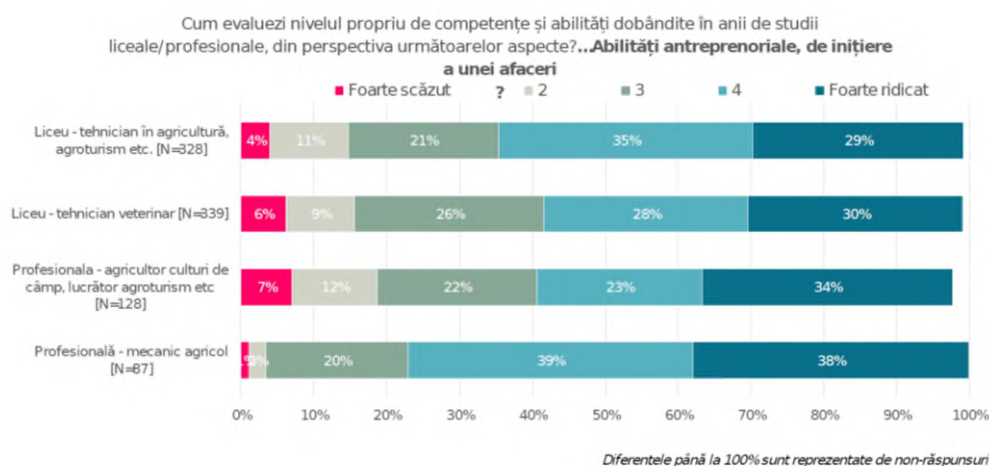
Figure 1. The schooling plan for vocational and dual education in the school year 2021 -2022



Source: data processed after <https://www.alegetidrumul.ro/>, accessed September 20, 2021

A number of bodies have been active in conducting research on agricultural education, the intention of young people to continue their studies in this sector, and in the development of entrepreneurship in agriculture. In this sense, it is necessary to take into account the report made by the Romanian Centre for European Policies within the program "We grow through Agricultural Education" which addresses the 57 high schools with agricultural profile in the country.¹

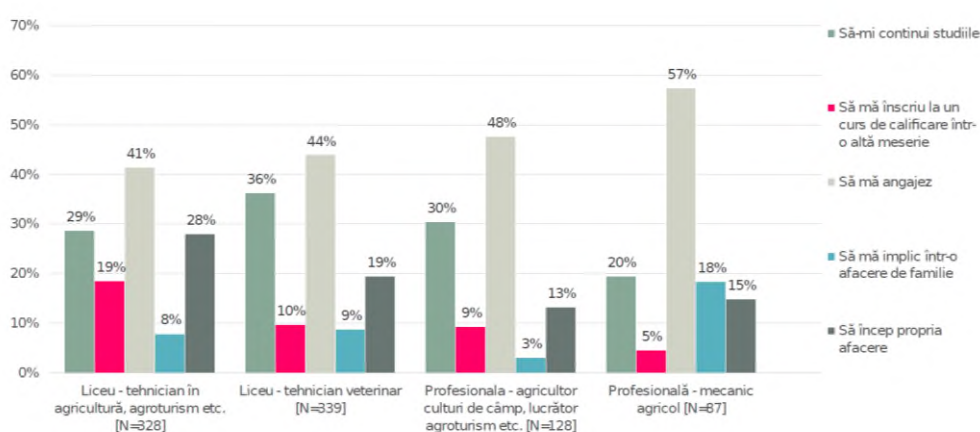
Figure 2. Self-assessment of entrepreneurial skills acquired according to the qualification obtained at the end of studies by students in high schools with an agricultural profile



Source: Romanian Centre for European Policies, Study on the motivations, experiences and intentions of students in the final years of high schools and vocational schools with a predominantly agricultural profile, 2021, p. 32

Regarding the self-assessment on entrepreneurial skills, there is an overestimation of them, partly due to participation in entrepreneurship education classes, and on the other hand to insufficient interaction with entrepreneurs in the agricultural field. The perceived usefulness of participating in entrepreneurship education activities is relatively high, and a number of students would have appreciated that these courses have taken place in recent years of study, so as to better understand what these classes entail and what would be their further practical usefulness (CRPE, 2021).

Figure 3. The future plans of the students from the high schools with agricultural profile depending on the qualification



Source: Romanian Centre for European Policies, Study on the motivations, experiences and intentions of students in the final years of high schools and vocational schools with a predominantly agricultural profile, 2021, p. 58

¹For more information <https://educatieagricola.ro/despre-program-consortiu/>, accessed September 27, 2021;

From figure 3 it can be seen that the students' future plans vary depending on the qualification where they are educated. The students from the veterinary technician specialization want to continue their studies, and the ones from the agricultural mechanic want to get hired.

A special situation have young people who are not employed or actively looking for employment, are not enrolled in a form of education or training, it is the so-called NEET category (Not in Education, Employment or Training). These people are mostly active young people, who find occasional work or low-paid jobs. This situation is also due to poor schooling, with insufficient or inappropriate qualifications, the economic, geographical or cultural causes contributing to the deepening of this precarious situation. As it can be seen in Table 2, young people in Romania are above the European average by about 3%. Overall, in the last 10 years there has been a decreasing trend of about 3-4%.

Table 2. Young people neither in employment nor in education and vocational training according to sex, age and professional status(% NEET), 15-19 years

An	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
UE 27	16,6	16,8	17,3	17,5	17	16,6	16	15,1	14,4	14	14
România	19,2	20	20,1	20,5	20	21,1	20,8	18,7	18	17,3	17,5

Source: Eurostat

Given that the vast majority (90.7%) of young people in the EU between the ages of 15 and 19 have continued to participate in some form of education and training (formal or non-formal), the following analysis focuses in particular on the population aged 20 to 34.

The current situation of young people is complicated because there are new models of transition from the educational to the lucrative area. Until a few years ago, young people integrated into the labor market only when they finished the last year of high school or college, and less often were employed. There is a lack of predictability now, because young people change jobs very often and look for the jobs that best suit their ideals and expectations.

Young people attending university courses are employed on a part-time or fixed-term basis, and some of the young employees undergo other training and qualification programs. In 2019, approximately 11.1% of young people aged 15 to 19 in the EU used this more flexible transition from education to employment, a share that rose to 18.7% among people aged 20 and 24, - 14.3% among those aged between 25 and 29 and 10.6% for those aged 30-34 [6]. As shown in Table 3, it can be seen that Romania is below the European average in the participation of young people in education and training, the difference being about 12%.

Table 3. Rate of participation of young people in education and training by sex, age and employment status (including NEET rates) 15-34 years

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
UE 27	39,2	39,6	40	41,5	41,6	41,6	41,7	42	42,3	42,6	41,7
România	30,8	31	30,6	31	30	27,8	29,4	29,8	29,9	30,2	30,2
UE NEET	60,8	60,4	60	58,5	58,4	58,3	58,2	57,9	57,6	57,4	56,6
România NEET	69,2	69	69,4	69	70	72,2	70,6	70,2	70,1	69,8	69,9

Source: Eurostat, https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=edat_lfse_18&lang=en, accessed 27 September 2021

This situation of young people who are not integrated on the labor market in any way, not even through a form of professional training, is closely related to the acute unemployment, but also to the rural environment from which they come and where they do not find work. It is important in this sense, the difference of mentality, economic and social development, of different employment opportunities between rural and urban areas.

CONCLUSIONS

In a few years, we already anticipate a crisis in the agricultural labor force due to declining birth rates, internal and external migration from rural to urban areas in search of employment opportunities and to ensure a better life.

Increased aging of farmers and subsistence agriculture has led state institutions to implement a series of measures to attract national and European funds to counter this. The fact that the percentages of more than 70% for the absorption of European funds for sub-measures 1.1 "Support for vocational training and skills acquisition", 6.1 "Support for the installation of young farmers", 6.3 "Support for the development of small farms" shows the efforts of governments to encourage the development of work in rural areas, but also the growing interest in these aspects of people from this environment.

The double subordination of high school education institutions to the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Agriculture proves to be auspicious, because there are investments of several million lei to improve the material base, professional training of these units.

Forms of vocational training in the agricultural sector at high school, vocational and dual level are beginning to gain ground over other qualifications, but this is also possible with the support of a number of private institutions, which through a series of well-thought-out initiatives have made a constructive advertisement for agricultural profiles. It is noted that 8th grade graduates are poorly informed about agricultural profiles, and their explanation could help increase the number of students who will continue their studies at high school, vocational or university level.

From national research, about 45% of high school graduates want to get hired. This category is followed by those who want to continue their studies (31%) and those who want to start their own business (21%). To the latter can be added those who plan to get involved in a family business (9%). About 1 in 8 students would like to enroll in qualification courses to learn another trade. Many students appreciate positively the study conditions offered by the agricultural high schools where they studied, the usefulness of the notions learned, the internships, the interaction with the business and entrepreneurial environment in agriculture (CRPE, 2021).

Many people in rural areas live in communities that fall into the category of the poorest. The generation shift in the agricultural sector is becoming more acute, with the need for well-trained farmers to take over their farms from their parents and truly ensure the sustainable development of agriculture. In these communities we find that people who fall into the NEET category is over 80%. The need to introduce accessible training courses for these categories is urgent. Attracting these young people to the agricultural sector through a series of financial and fiscal facilities, as well as a free qualification for an agricultural profile, would lead to a reduction of the labor crisis, and at the same time could ensure a reduction of the economic gap between the rural and urban environment as well as ensuring sustainable development in rural areas.

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