

## **Rural Systematization: A Radical Campaign of Rural Planning under Ceausescu Regime in Romania**

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### **Abstract**

*The main purpose of the present study was to assess the strategy of the radical campaign of rural planning in communist Romania between 1965 and 1989, as well as the implications of rural planning on agricultural efficiency and rural life. The results showed that the aim of this program was to introduce more land into the agricultural circuit and to liquidate the essential difference between the towns and the countryside. This study concluded that, although the strategy of systematization was conceived in the context of modernization of the country, it was implemented through coercive measures, planned to eliminate the peasants' independence and spirit, as well as to replace the traditional Romanian rural society with the socialist one of the new man.*

**Keywords:** Communist Romania, rural systematization, agriculture, traditional village, the new socialist man

### **Introduction**

In the second part of the communist era, between 1965 and 1989, the collectivization campaign was replaced with another radical campaign, systematization (*sistematizare*) of the Romanian villages. It was primarily a planning project thought to establish “an optimum combination of facilities” and “a rational use of natural resources” (Cartwright, 2001, p. 98). In Ceausescu’s words, quoted in Cartwright (2001, p. 89), this campaign had to take place in order to “liquidate the essential difference between the towns and the countryside.” The motivation was appreciable, but in having to destroy thousands of villages, the project was a radical one. In his speech addressed to the National Conference of the Presidents of People’s Councils on March 3, 1988, quoted in Deletant (1999, p. 148), Ceausescu clearly specified that “we must radically reduce the number of villages from about 13,000 at present to 5,000 to 6,000 at most” by the year 2000. This affirmation alarmed not only Romanians, especially the peasants who would lose their houses, but also the international media. They perceived Ceausescu’s intention as a destructive plan coming at a time when conservation and concern for environmental protection had been promoted to the top of the Western political agenda.

### **Background**

Although rural systematization had significant negative connotations during the *Golden Age* of Ceausescu, it was not a new phenomenon in Romania. The long-term modernization of Romanian settlements started in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but it was accelerated especially after WWII (Turnock, 1976, 1991c). Unfortunately, the geographical location of the country and historical events in Europe meant that Romania would consistently be in the situation of being a “war-ravaged buffer state between the major powers of Southeastern Europe” (Turnock [1970, p. 541], quoted in Sampson, 1982, p. 23). In this context, the efforts to modernize Romanian settlements were always considerable and, in some cases, really painful. In addition, while approximately three-quarters of Romania’s people lived in the rural areas even after WWII, policies were highly urban-oriented.

During the Habsburg occupation in the late eighteenth century, the villages from Banat and Oltenia, Southwestern Romania, were rebuilt “on accessible sites according to a regular plan,” following the same policy of “drawing out settlement to the main lines of communication” (Turnock, 1976, p. 89). Although the need for some coordination in the program encouraging the growth of rural settlements was emphasized by Ion Ionescu de la Brad in the second half of the nineteenth century, in general the responsibility was left to individual landowners. Turnock (1976) has noted that the first planning legislation in the twentieth century was passed in 1904, followed by another in 1925, which was strongly linked to the 1921 Agrarian Reform. The most important was the 1936 legislation, which “called for a thorough restructuring of rural settlement to reduce the isolation and backwardness of the villages” (p. 89). The required plans for each commune, which had to be prepared by each county prior to 1938, did not have the adequate cadastral maps, but they constituted a great beginning for rural modernization. However, the project was interrupted by the Second World War and postponed by the immediate need for the post-war recovery after 1945. Consequently, plans for rural areas, together with the agricultural sector, started to be reevaluated after 1950 (Moraru et al., 1966; Tufescu, 1974; Turnock, 1976; Ronnas, 1984; Turnock, 1991 a, b, c; Kideckel, 1993; Fischer-Galati, 1998; Cartwright, 2001).

### ***Communist Rural Planning***

Before Ceausescu, Romania was divided several times into different administrative units, specifically in 1950, 1952, 1956, 1960, and 1964 (Moraru et al., 1966). These administrative divisions finally created 16 economic-administrative regions, with 150 districts (*raioane*), containing 183 towns, 4,259 communes, and 15,129 villages (Moraru et al., 1966; Turnock, 1976, 1991b; Ronnas, 1984). The main problem in this territorial division was that the traditional settlement pattern with many small villages, some of them with rather scattered houses, was “an obstacle to modernization and to narrowing the social and economic gap between rural and urban life” Ronnas (1989, p. 543). According to Tufescu (1974), during the first half of the 1960s, there were approximately 5,000 small and very small villages, each with fewer than 500 inhabitants, representing around 35% of the total number of villages in the country. They were principally located in the Getic Plateau, the Barlad Hills, the Apuseni Mountains, and several other places, all having a very low level of economic development. Although some villages in the mountain areas were quite highly populated, they were very dispersed on the slopes, with large distances between houses and therefore did not exhibit appropriate conditions for “modernization.” As Turnock (1991c, p. 251) has suggested, rural settlement patterns have been reflective of “ethnic factors as well as past administrative measures,” as Moldova and Muntenia have enjoyed relatively low population density whereas Transylvania, the former Habsburg territory, has had a greater concentration of population.

After the Second World War the communist policies primarily focused on urban-industrial development. Nevertheless, in addition to the emergent urban-rural gap, differentiation between villages grew as a result of the different interests held by the administration officials for some particular places. Consequently, some villages experienced growth in the 1950s, but the majority were neglected. Equally important, a rural planning strategy clearly intensified in the 1960s as a consequence of the collectivization program, but clear principles were only developed in the 1970s (Turnock, 1991c). Specifically, during the collectivization process, the Romanian villages, especially the communal centers, had to develop certain specialized institutions capable of organizing farm activity, as well as assisting in consultation and future implementation. A significant number of rural industries still remained in the villages (e.g., timber, mining, textile, milling), but progress in rural industrialization was seriously eroded by urban industrialization and transportation development (Turnock, 1976).

Several crucial elements had to be taken into consideration in rural modernization, such as land forms, local architecture, natural resources, selection of the villages, as well as people’s attitude. The Carpathians and Danube Delta constituted special issues for rural systematization. Not only are the mountainous villages located at a high altitude but some of them have considerable variation in relief between the villages of the same commune. On the other hand, the Danube Delta is an extremely low and flat area and, in addition, the sandy banks (*grinduri*) are small and, with some exceptions, they are under serious flood risks. Therefore, while the viable villages from the plains and lower hills could, in general, be “modernized,” many small and isolated villages from elsewhere simply had to disappear. Equally, private houses typically exhibited traditional architecture, while the two-story apartment buildings, planned to be located in the central area of the villages, as well as the new farm buildings, research stations, schools, shopping centers, and other central agencies, used modern styles, in total disharmony with the local traditions.

Romanian architects and geographers were strongly against depersonalization of both towns and villages, calling for “architectural styles sympathetic to local tradition” and “a more careful balance” between the traditional and the modern architecture in order to avoid “a purely functional approach” (Turnock, 1976, p. 93). The most difficult problem, though, was the selection of the villages to be systematized. Theoretically, the problem was simply one of taking into account that it was known that almost three-quarters of the Romanian villages in 1966 had fewer than 1,000 inhabitants. Since many of them had limited economic potential, it was clear that those villages could not hope to have a wide range of services. Turnock (1976, p. 94) pointed out that it was suggested even in the 1960s that “as many as two-thirds of the country’s villages should disappear.” Nevertheless, opposition from villagers would play an important role in the process of village systematization.

The official call for rural systematization was expressed on November 11-12, 1965, at the Plenary of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party, followed then by that on October 5-6, 1967 (Tufescu, 1974). Ceausescu asked for efficiency in using the village land and water, avoiding excessive spreading out of the buildings what Turnock (1976, p. 94) has called “ribbon development”. Because the project at the national scale was more complicated than the government officials thought it would be, a multidisciplinary approach (geographical, ethnographic, and sociological) was needed to study alternative solutions for each locality. In this light, strong units of local administration and party organizations at the commune level were established to coordinate local planning and economic development (Tufescu, 1974; Turnock, 1974, 1976).

After the 1968 territorial-administrative reform, regional plans were adjusted to the new system of administration constituted by 40 counties (later 41) (*judete*), containing 2,706 communes (2,562 rural and 144 suburban communes) and 13,149 villages (Tufescu, 1974; Turnock, 1976, 1991b, 1991c; Ronnas, 1984, 1989). This new jurisdictional division was the rejection of the Soviet-inspired division, introduced after WWII, and a return to the traditional Romanian administrative pattern. The new division not only decreased the number of communes from 4,259 to 2,706, but also increased the communes’ administrative and economic power and enhanced local party control. Although it was not unusual to find a commune with only one big village, in general Romania’s communes had an average population of around 4,500 inhabitants, who lived in 4-5 separate villages (Turnock, 1991c; Cartwright, 2001). By 1970, each village was endowed with its proper system of public services (e.g., general and/or specialized stores, medical facilities, schools, cultural centers) and some 80% of villages had electricity. The local government (the Peoples’ Councils), the agricultural offices (Machine and Tractor Stations, Agricultural Production Cooperatives), the party’s organizations, banks, and other facilities were located only in the centers of the communes.

The 1968 administrative reform revised the previous decisions regarding rural settlements. There were three principal elements of rural systematization: (1) land use efficiency; (2) infrastructure improvement; and (3) the architectural façade of the villages (Ronnas, 1984). However, the special attention paid to the most developed communes in the hope they would become new towns was also important. Some surveys of local potential consequently identified some 300-400 communes which might be selected for eventual promotion to urban status (Turnock, 1991c). Overall, though, during the 1960s rural systematization made slow progress, it was the first deliberative attempt to change the rural landscape, emphasizing an increased interest in rural development.

The 1970s brought new attempts at rural systematization. The 1972 National Conference of the Romanian Communist Party, for example, adopted a comprehensive program of systematization (Turnock, 1976; Ronnas, 1984; Cartwright, 2001). The focus was put on the structure of rural localities, particularly on those small and very small villages without any opportunity for future development, as well as on problems of concentration of two-story buildings in the centers of the communes (*vatra*), industrialization, and the urbanization of a certain number of villages. Ideas outlined in 1972 were transposed into a more coherent program for the Eleventh Party Congress in November 1974, in addition to the 1974 Law on Systematization, approved on October 28<sup>1</sup> (Ronnas, 1984; Turnock, 1991b, 1991c). Discussing the 1974 rural modernization program, Turnock (1991c, p. 253) emphasized there were two important ideological factors at play: (1) “the priority for socialist agriculture” and (2) “the insistence on a built environment.” Giving priority to socialist agriculture meant automatically marginalizing the private sector, a goal to be achieved not only through efforts to restrict house lots to a maximum 250 m<sup>2</sup>, but also by moving all private plots of the collective farm members outside the built area.

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<sup>1</sup> Law No. 58 / 1974 (Ronnas, 1984, p. 277).

Moreover, increasing population density in the multi-story block-buildings has been seen as “a system of surveillance to minimize individualism with its potential for passive resistance to the regime” (ibid). Ronnas (1984, 1989) pointed out the complexity of the systematization process, which if enacted, would have taken 10-15 years to implement. The destruction of 5000-6000 small and less developed villages, including the relocation of the people to small apartments, presented more complex problems than the industrialization and urbanization of some 300-400 others that were more developed. Consequently, the systematization program’s implementation continued to be slow and far behind the original schedule. Specifically, by 1981 only one rural locality<sup>2</sup>, out of some 300-350 villages had been declared a town (Turnock, 1991c), while by mid-1989 only 28 new towns had been recorded (Ronnas, 1989).

Additional important reasons for this slowdown in rural systematization included the high expenses for repairing the catastrophic 1977 earthquake damages, as well as Ceausescu’s irrational decision to repay all the county’s foreign debts in a very short period of time (Turnock, 1991b, 1991c; Deletant, 1999). Furthermore, the completion of the Danube-Black Sea Canal in 1984, which signaled the start of major redevelopment in the center of Bucharest, slowed the rural program even more. In the mid-1980s, a major shift in priorities resulted in increasing investments in state agriculture (e.g., through further mechanization and irrigation) in order to maximize food supplies for export. Moreover, restricting courtyards and constructing apartment buildings of two or three stories would secure additional agricultural land for collectivized agriculture. The President’s repeated demands for more agricultural production had transformed agriculture into a key factor in the country’s export sector, aiming to the pay all foreign debts.

The slow pace of rural reform and the continued growth of the urban population, especially through rural-urban migration, led the authorities to resort to coercion. Ceausescu’s speech on March 3, 1988, put the systematization program at the top of the political agenda and stated that it was to be completed by the year 2000 (Ronnas, 1989). In addition to reducing villages from over 13,000 to a maximum of 5,000-6,000, the new targets also included a reduction in the number of communes, from 2,706 to a maximum 2,000. Furthermore, the speech called for a strict control of migration in 1989, forcing people who worked in the rural area to move to the commune or village where they worked (Ronnas, 1989; Turnock, 1991b; Cartwright, 2001).

In late November 1988, Ceausescu came back with another speech, emphasizing two aspects of the systematization program: the development of rural areas and rural depopulation. No reference was made to the many villages declared “non-viable” or to the precise date for finishing the megaproject (Ronnas, 1989, p. 548; Cartwright, 2001, p. 98). As it turned out, though, pressure for resettlement seemed to be moderated since the unviable villages would be allowed to die naturally instead of being immediately demolished. Overall, and with some exceptions, the plans failed, and only 24 communes had actually gained urban status by December 1989, when the communist regime collapsed (Turnock, 1991b). Finally, the 1989 revolution canceled the entire program, including those sections undergoing reformation.

### ***Implications of the Systematization Program***

There are several implications of these developments. First, systematization had resulted in a vast program of research. Many foreign and domestic scholars (geographers, historians, anthropologists, sociologists, ethnographers, and planners) have written about this program, including Parpala (1969), Turnock (1974, 1976, 1986, 1991a, b, c), Sampson (1982), Ronnas (1984, 1989), Kideckel (1993), Fischer-Galati (1998c), Deletant (1999), Cartwright (2001), and many others. Whereas many foreign researchers and a few Romanian ones opposed or criticized the intention of destroying Romanian villages, many domestic writers during the communist era praised, or were forced to praise, the project. Geographers (e.g., M. Posea, I. Bacanaru, A. Butureanu, V. Ioanid, C. Stan, D. Buga, C. Mihailescu, D. Defour and D. Dobrea, P. Poghirc, I. Bold, M. Apavaloaie, and others) included planning in their studies, emphasizing some implications of rural systematization on agricultural efficiency, industrialization, rural transportation, population density, services, flood risks, poor water supply, local employment, and so on. The topic was introduced even in the Romanian universities, as a geography course for graduate students, for example. I personally had to accept a compulsory course entitled *Settlements’ Systematization* in my graduate program in Romania, in the Department of Geography at the “Alexandru Ioan Cuza,” University of Iasi in the first half of the 1980s.

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<sup>2</sup> The mining center of Rovinari (Turnock, 1991c, p. 253).

Analyzing this aspect from the historical perspective, Fischer-Galati (1998c) argued that symbolic of Ceausescu's determination to shape the history of Romania was a concerted drive to destroy all edifices of the past which he considered incompatible with the victory of socialism, such as churches, monasteries, and/or historic buildings. Equally, in his view the villages had to be destroyed so that huge agricultural units capable of producing food supplies for an expanding industry, urban population, and export markets could be created. As for the motivation for such a project, Fischer-Galati (1998c) invoked both the economic and political aspects of rural reorganization, especially suggesting that the Hungarian peasants from Transylvania and Banat could readily contrast their economic standards of living with that of their relatively affluent conationals in neighboring Hungary and Yugoslavia. In this light, Galati (1998c, p. 474) has accurately described the dramatic future conceived by the communist regime for Romanian villagers, emphasizing that "the peasantry, disenchanting with collectivization, with confiscatory pricing of agricultural products delivered to the state and, above all, with communism per se, had to be removed from villages and relocated in prefabricated blockhouses surrounding the agro-alimentary centers."

On the other hand, Parpala (1969, p. 32), an advocate of the Romanian communist regime, saw rural systematization as a beneficial project, believing that it provided for "the establishment of a rational density of the inhabitants per village." In addition, in his view, "the systematization of villages will contribute not only to a judicious and efficient distribution of investment over the territory, but will also lead to the gradual recovering of certain areas of agricultural land" (ibid). Yet, in a complex geographical study regarding Romania, Tufescu (1974, p. 313) noted:

Rural systematization and modernization does not need to create an artificial village, of high comfort and disconnected from the people's soul, but on the contrary it has to preserve the value content of our culture millenary infused in the being itself of our nation.

*(Sistematizarea si modernizarea rurala nu trebuie sa creeze un sat artificial, de confort superior dar rupt de suflul poporului, ci dimpotriva sa pastreze continutul valoric al culturii noastre sadita milenar in fiinta insasi a poporului nostru.)*

Second, there was considerable domestic and international opposition to systematization. A remarkable instance of criticism came from an open letter sent to the President in August 1988. It was written by Doina Cornea, lecturer at the University of Cluj-Napoca, and signed by a certain number of people, mainly intellectuals from Transylvania. As has been specified by Turnock (1991c, p. 258), they told Ceausescu that he had "no right, without committing a grave abuse of power, to demolish thousands of villages without the consent of the people concerned and even without the consent of the entire nation." Both domestic and international opposition to systematization emphasized the risks of turning the Romanian peasant "from a producer to a consumer of food," changing at the same time their status "from owner-occupier to tenant" (p. 254).

Systematization attracted a great deal of bad international publicity. According to Deletant (1999, p. 153), Romania's President was put under the microscope by the Western media only "after Gorbachev's policies highlighted Ceausescu's old-fashioned Stalinism." The international criticism of the systematization program also had ethnic implications. In particular, Hungarians protested the government's "destroying their distinctive villages and traditions" (Cartwright, 2001, p. 100). In other words, systematization was perceived as "an attempt to uproot and forcefully assimilate the ethnic minorities" and/or "to eradicate century-old minority cultures in Transylvania" (Ronnas, 1989, p. 548). On the other hand, fewer complaints were recorded from Germans who emigrated from Banat to the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and whose houses were occupied by Romanians in the early 1980s. Turnock (1991b) correctly remarked that in late 1988 the Western media mistakenly emphasized that systematization was a particular threat to Romania's ethnic minorities. In reality, the program was a national one, generally affecting Romanians in the majority of cases. However, international criticism grew, resulting in a comprehensive campaign for rural protection through an "adoption" program (Turnock, 1991b, p. 103). The movement, entitled *Operation Villages Roumains*, attracted significant media attention (Deletant, 1999). Through this action, 430 Romanian villages were "adopted" by European communities from Belgium, France, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom by September 1989 (p. 153).

Absolutely remarkable was the Royal Family's intervention, respectively Prince Charles's speech delivered in April 1989, condemning the systematization program. As Deletant (1999, p. 154) emphasized, "the Prince instructed his Civic Trust to place rooms in its headquarters in Carlton Garden at the disposal of the campaign."

## Conclusion

Although the strategy of systematization was conceived in the context of modernization of the country, practically, the program consisted mainly of partial or total demolition of the villages and towns and their reconstruction following the communist principle regarding the “multilaterally developed socialist country” (Georgescu, 1991, p. 268). Moreover, it was implemented through coercive measures planned to eliminate the peasants’ independence and spirit, to enhance the power of the state, as well as to replace the traditional elements of the Romanian rural society with the socialist ones of the new man. The study found that systematization under Ceausescu could be considered even more than a planning process. Ignoring the rural traditions, as well as the urbanism’s ethics, the communist systematization represented a disaster for the Romanian architectural patrimony. Equally important, through this forced urbanization of the rural areas, it threatened to destroy a traditional way of life linked with the land and the identity of the village and its inhabitants.

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