

Past, present and future of common grazing land in Romania

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Abstract

In comparison to many Western European countries, in Romania the use of common pasture remains widespread, strongly linked to the predominance of subsistence and semi-subsistence farming in much of the country. Although its importance varies across the country, over half of all permanent pasture is under state or community ownership.

However, the role of the common pasture in the community is changing. The number of active users is decreasing, and those who have more animals are increasingly grazing their animals on long-term leased or private land, thus effectively no longer participating in the commons. This is encouraged by the current system of relatively low prices for agricultural produce and EU agricultural support payments, which for smallholders and larger farmers alike are now the main factor in the financial viability of farming in Romania.

One positive development against this trend has been the formation over recent years of grazing associations made up of member users, which may receive the payments for and administer the common pastures. These relatively new institutions could provide a sustainable solution to the problem of the disconnection of the community from the common land, however, multiple issues with lack of trust and insufficient regulation must first be overcome.

Using the case study of the Tarnava Mare region of Transylvania, the aim of this paper is to discuss whether the political and socio-economic situation is really eroding the concept of common grazing in Romania, and whether this presents a threat to not only the appropriate management of the grassland but also the livelihoods of smallholders.

Introduction

Common grazing in Romania, as in most of Europe, is a historical tradition. However, in contrast to much of Western Europe and despite great upheavals in land ownership during the past century, this form of land use still plays an important role in the country. Based on the amount of state or community owned agricultural land in the country (1.87 million ha in 2007: INS 2010), it can be assumed that around half of the 3.4 million ha of permanent pasture in Romania (MARD 2007) can be considered common land in the wider sense. Whilst its role naturally varies across the country, the vast majority of villages still retain at least one pasture which is used communally by the local inhabitants. The use of these communal pastures is strongly linked to the persistence of subsistence and semi-subsistence farming, which is the major type of farming in Romania both in terms of surface area and number of farmers involved (MADR 2007). Around 3.5 million families (90% of agricultural holdings) farm on less than 5 ha (INS 2010), for whom the possibility of keeping livestock

and thus survival as smallholders is contingent on their access to common pastures to supplement their own land. The common pastures therefore represent a major economic resource for small-scale farmers, but also as an ecological resource they comprise nationally a huge area of unimproved, semi-natural grassland, whose heterogeneous habitats support a large proportion of the country's plant and animal species (Sârbu et al. 2004, Page et al. 2011a).

Today, there are two main administrative models for common grazing in Romania.

In the mainly Hungarian-speaking regions of the country (roughly 3 out of 41 counties), almost ubiquitous is the *composesorat*. This community organisation owns pasture and forest land and is in charge of its administration, and may span several villages. Membership of the organisation is usually strongly restricted, often passed down through generations, however use of the commons is unrestricted for any member of the community.

In the majority of the country, however, the common pastures are publicly owned with administration carried out through the town hall. This rents out parcels, or makes the area available for common grazing and has traditionally applied a tax per animal for usage. The former is generally the case for sheep pastures, where individual shepherds rent land on which to graze and milk a mixture of their own and the villagers' sheep. The latter is generally the case for cow pastures.

The following will focus on the change in governance and cooperative use of cow pastures administered by town halls, as this form of common grazing is not only the closest to traditional use, but has also been the most affected by policy and community changes in recent years. It is based on information gathered during semi-structured interviews with seven cow owners using the communal pastures in the study region of Târnava Mare, an 85,000 ha area of lowland Southern Transylvania (Central Romania) with a high proportion of pastoralism linked with semi-subsistence farming.

Use of the common pastures is generally unrestricted both in terms of who, and of how many animals each owner could graze. This has previously been largely self-regulating, as the incentives for over-exploitation are low and the communes are not short of land. Users are almost exclusively subsistence or semi-subsistence farmers, usually owning 1-3 cows in addition to other livestock. Those with a larger number of cows rent or use private land for their animals - in some places this is an official rule, in others just the norm. In having more at stake with their cattle, these owners tend to remove themselves willingly from the commons system because it is no longer practical for them (they may have different milking times, or find it more convenient to keep their cattle out of the village, for example). Traditionally, the right of using the pasture has been coupled with financial contributions in terms of a tax per animal to the town hall and a fee to the cow herd, and a certain number of days work per year per animal grazed to maintain the pasture (scrub and weed clearance, repairing of water troughs etc.). This was overseen by a pastoral committee from the town hall.

Interaction with policy and recent developments in common land use in the study area

There have been two major impacts on common pasture use in the study area in recent years, both driven by Romania's accession to the EU in 2007. The first has been a decline in

the price of cow milk due to the increased interaction with foreign markets. This, in combination with a lack of interest in livestock keeping among younger generations, has led to a precipitous decline in the number of families keeping cows, and in most cases in the number of cows in the village.

The second impact on the way in which commons are used has been the advent of agricultural subsidy payments from the EU Common Agricultural Policy. Initially the town halls – the traditional owners and administrators of the common land – applied for the subsidy payments (i.e. Single Area Payments and Agri-Environment Scheme payments). In return they released the users from paying taxes and pasture maintenance responsibilities, which had in recent years rarely been properly enforced. However, although the users were freed from some financial costs, the support money was not effectively getting through to them. In response, the Ministry of Agriculture tightened regulations to prevent Town Halls from applying with the result that the renting of public land (by individuals or associations) increased. Many farmer or grazing associations were thus formed in order to take advantage of the subsidy payments, which they then use for the upkeep of the pasture or for community projects.

In addition, contracts for the rental of public land have in many cases become longer, due to the requirement of Agri-Environment Scheme agreements for the applicant to have the land rights for a period of at least 5 years. Whilst not removing land from the 'commons', this greater permanency of contract is further promoting the single user 'private' model of land use, which may have implications both for community access to the land but also for its ecological value. In terms of the latter, increased opportunity for an individual to make management decisions about the land increases the likelihood of change which may be damaging to wildlife (Wilson 1997).

The Grazing Association and its effect on commons governance

Although there have been similar structures in the past, Grazing Associations only started appearing on a large scale since 2007. Given little formal support as to how to organise and regulate themselves and facing a fundamental post-communist scepticism of cooperative structures in the local population, a multitude of variants on this theme exist with varying success. At best, the Grazing Association consists of the majority of farmers with 3 or more cattle, although this excludes many of the cow owners and the larger-scale cattle owners may not use the common pasture. At worst, the Grazing Association is a shell, only existing formally in order to be able to receive subsidy payments but with no willing participation of members. Where there are too few cow owners to form an association, in some cases an individual farmer rents land and lets village cows graze in an informal agreement.

Formal participation in decision-making concerning the pasture, such as how the subsidy money is spent or the maintenance carried out, is thus no longer possible for the majority of users. This inability to influence the running and the regulation of the commons is a major barrier to trust in and commitment to an institution (e.g. Ostrom 1990), and when the amounts concerned may be several hundred thousand Euros the potential for conflict is high.

Future prospects of common grazing

With the drop in interest from users and the greater convenience of the private land use model for land administration, most farmers predict the gradual death of the common pasture in the next decade, to be replaced by individual renting of parcels of public land. In turn, the current dysfunctionality of the Grazing Associations is contributing to the speed of the decline in commons users, as they are failing to distribute the agricultural support payments to the benefit of the community. These payments play an important role in the viability of farming at all levels in the current economic climate – without them, commons use relies solely on the historical hangover of tradition and poverty-induced dependence on home production of food. Thus, whilst any reduction in the number of cows is easily reversible, the loss of cow owners (and thereby the use of the commons) is not: once the knowledge and tradition of cow-keeping is lost in a family, it is unlikely to be regained. Grazing Associations may be able to contribute to the improvement of the lives of commons users and thus their continued existence, however, the self-organisation of these institutions does not currently seem to be sufficiently rapid or successful. For this reason, advisory services have an important role to play to help inexperienced associations manage these funds properly.

Conclusions

In the face of the Romanian urge to modernise agriculture and distance itself from subsistence farming, support for the role of common pasture in small-scale agriculture seems unlikely. Nevertheless, small-scale farming still plays an important role in the country – not just in terms of the large number of farmers, but also in its role in cultural identity, the linkage of the population to the land, and ecological benefits for wildlife and ecosystem services (Page et al. 2011). Should small farmers disappear, the land will not (yet) be lost from public ownership, but through renting of parcels to individuals its role as a community resource will change with the involvement of fewer people.

There is a great potential for institutions such as the Grazing Associations to replace the historical commons governance system and help small-scale farmers to survive in the current political and socio-economic climate, whilst maintaining large areas of ecologically valuable grassland in good condition. Nevertheless, faced with a climate of mistrust in cooperative organisations, a lack of experience or guidance in creating democratic institutions, and an uncertain future for small scale cattle farming, many have suffered in particular from a failure to involve and provide transparency for the users. Advisory and organisational support from central structures could, however, help to alleviate these problems.

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