

From Industrial Activities and Community Pride to No Man's Village Shrinking Villages in the Poiana Ruscă Mountains*

LELIA PAPP, ANA-MARIA POP, GHEORGHE HOGNOGI,
ALEXANDRA-CAMELIA POTRA, DĂNUȚ HUCIU

Introduction

EUROPE'S RURAL areas have undergone significant demographic, social, economic, environmental, and institutional transformations, mostly in recent decades. Nevertheless, while some areas have developed into highly livable and dynamic rural areas, others have experienced decline, resulting in increased territorial disparities both at European and at national, regional or sub-regional level (Atterton and Skerratt 2017; OECD 2016; Barca 2009; Gallent *et al.* 2008; European Commission 2007).

In terms of development, mountain rural areas are not an exception. Highly diverse in most characteristics, yet sharing some common features, mountain areas are paradoxical. Most of them are rich in natural and cultural resources, yet they face difficulties in diversifying their economic activities, providing services, facilities and access to infrastructure, and hence, difficulties in retaining human resources.

Natural constraints, including natural calamities, economically or politically induced depopulations, low birth rates, population ageing, population's pursuit of a less rural lifestyle, inability to attract new capital, lack of investments in facilities and infrastructure, low stakeholder involvement in addressing the challenges and opportunities faced by mountain communities are some of the triggering factors responsible for the increasing number of shrinking towns and villages in the European mountain areas, where thousands of settlements are reported to have been already abandoned or are on the verge of extinction.

Research indicates that most areas in the Pyrenees and the Alps, in countries such as France, eastern Spain, Slovenia, Switzerland, western Austria, parts of Germany or Italy, have recorded population growth and a high percentage of employment in industry and services (Glöersen *et al.* 2016; Nordregio *et al.* 2004). Simultaneously, parts of these massifs are experiencing stagnation or even demographic decline. Recent studies

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(Alpine Convention 2015, 13) indicate that wide areas of the Alps have experienced “a severe depopulation trend” in the 20th century. A similar trend has been reported for the North Plateau, the Iberic System and the Pyrenees in Spain (OECD 2009, 44). The Carpathians, the Balkans/South East European Mountains (Zhelezov 2011), much of the Fennoscandian mountains, the central Apennines of Italy and the mountain areas of the British Isles, Greece, Sardinia, Sicily have also recorded demographic decline (Glóersen *et al.* 2016; Nordregio *et al.* 2004).

In Romania, the Poiana Ruscă Mountains are the most affected by shrinkage processes. Located in the west of Romania, they are part of the Western Carpathians. Their geological composition is relatively simple (Pop 2006). However, the presence of various metallic and non-metallic mineral resources (iron ore, non-ferrous metals, marble, talc, dolomite, quartz sand, coal) as well as wood resources have been driving factors for the economic development of both the mountain area and the proximate surrounding area. Exploitation and processing of iron ore since the ancient period, with a climax between the 1970s and the 1980s, and the exploitation of high quality marble since the 19th century have not only led to a gradual increase in population, especially in the nearby urban centers, but also to a certain regional pride generated by the industrial heritage, vernacular architecture, or worldwide famous raw materials and industrial products. This is the case of the marble of Ruschița, used in the execution of various monuments, sculptural works, and the construction of buildings worldwide (Todor and Surd 2015), the villages of Ghelari and Teliuc, famous for their iron ore exploitation, or Govăjdia, with its early 19th century iron blast furnace.

Industrial decline and closures in the area after 1990, together with a general negative natural population change, a negative net migration rate, population aging and the lack of an integrated territorial approach to support economic diversification and locally based entrepreneurial activities resulted in an accelerated population decline. A previous research (Pop *et al.* 2017) indicates an increasing number of shrinking villages and five more deserted villages recorded in 2011 compared to the 1992 census, and the process is ongoing.

Triggering factors may differ from one mountain area to another, but no matter the cause, depopulation has serious medium and long-term consequences on this special type of areas, generally characterized by high economic, social, cultural, recreational, and environmental potential. Given the fact that “Europe’s mountains are of vital importance to the continent’s population in many ways” (Nordregio *et al.* 2004, 2), mountain areas have received increasing attention at European level.

The need for an integrated approach to addressing their particular development challenges has led to a shift in the way in which mountains are being considered. This meant a transition from “regarding the physical characteristics of mountainous terrain as detrimental” to placing much more attention “upon the ‘assets,’ ‘opportunities’ and ‘potential’ for enhancing socio-economic development trajectories in mountain regions” (Glóersen *et al.* 2016, 13; European Commission 2008; ESPON 2017).

Due to its territorial diversity, Romania is subject to high inter-regional and sub-regional disparities (Duarte and Pascariu 2017; Benedek 2015; Benedek and Kurkó 2012), “[...] with pronounced variations between regions, counties and between urban and rural areas which requires tailored and strategic interventions” (Ministry of European Funds 2014) for certain categories of territories such as urban areas, rural areas, mountain areas,

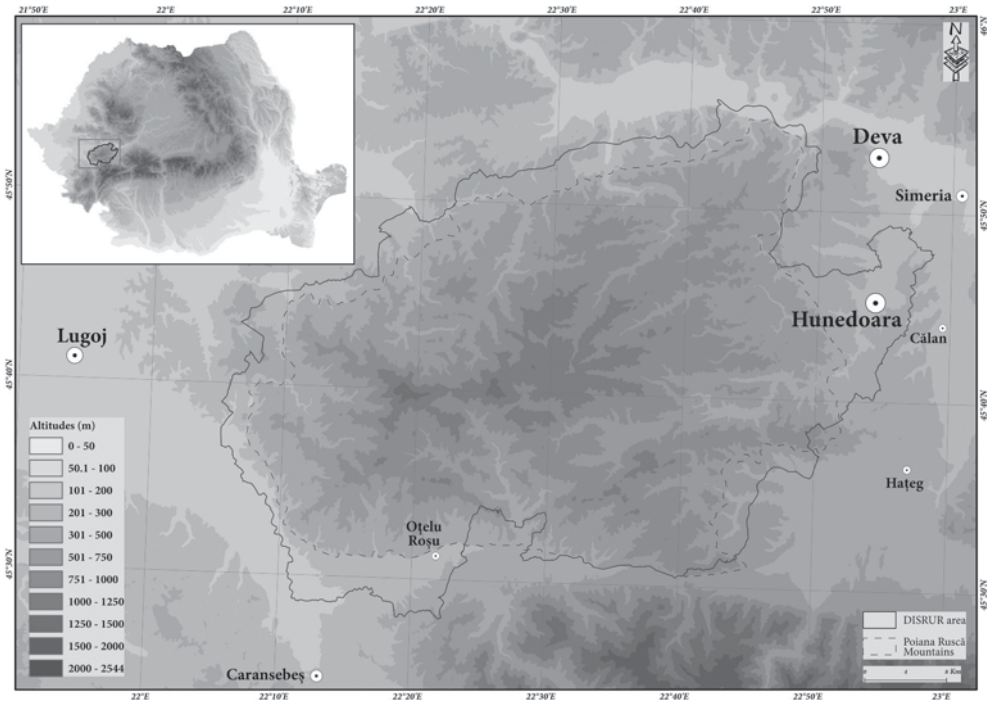


FIGURE 1. Location of the study area

coastal areas, cross-border areas, etc., as identified in the *Territorial Development Strategy of Romania* (Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration 2014). The *National Strategy for the Sustainable Development of the Mountain Area 2014-2020* (Government of Romania 2014) recognizes the need for specific measures in order to address the development opportunities and the specific challenges of this specific type of area, also included in the category of regions with specific geographical features. Out of its four overall objectives, one is specifically focused on increasing the attractiveness of the mountain areas and stabilizing the mountain population.

However, the current national measures meant to support the development of the mountain areas make no reference, except tangentially, to concrete solutions applied to communities in demographic decline. Meanwhile, nature is gradually reclaiming buildings, yards, gardens, agricultural land, and, eventually, entire villages.

Study Area

AT PRESENT, the study area, which covers an area of 2,109.3 km², overlaps the administrative territory of three counties (Caraș-Severin, Hunedoara, and Timiș) and 30 LAU 2 units, and includes 110 settlements. The study area broadly overlaps the Poiana Ruscă Mountains (Fig.1). The delineation of the area was made by

taking into account both the settlements located in the mountain area or with mountain-based economic activities and the ones located in the immediately adjacent area due to their strong industrial polarization of the human resources from the mountain villages. Therefore, out of the 110 settlements, 68 are located in the mountain area proper and 42 outside the mountain area, at the feet of the Poiana Ruscă Mountains.

Methods

THE CURRENT research is based on the demographic data recorded at the 2011 Housing and Population Census. In terms of demographic size, it was only settlements with less than 100 inhabitants that were selected for the research. The demographic threshold includes these settlements in the small and very small size category, where the premises of their disappearance as distinct territorial entities are obvious. Thus, out of the total of 110 settlements, 46 rural settlements with a downward population trend have been identified. Their evolution has been more or less conditioned by an industrial activity, be it the exploitation of a natural resource or the engagement of human resources in an industrial processing center.

Data Collection and Processing

IN ORDER to collect the data and information necessary for the research, we used the participant observation method during an eight-day research field trip to the Poiana Ruscă Mountains between 26 June and 3 July 2017. This qualitative sociological method was considered essential to gain in situ and in-depth insights into the phenomenon of depopulation and its socio-economic implications in this specific mountain area.

Participant observation was supplemented with other data collection methods and tools: direct observation, habitat observation sheets, semi-structured interview, analysis of documents and statistical data.

Direct observation of some elements (households, socio-economic facilities, road network, etc.) provided information on their features and conservation status. The landmarks identified during the research field trip were recorded into the field observation notes, photographed, and collected as GPS waypoints.

Habitat observation sheets were filled in to validate the presence or the absence of the considered indicators in each of the 32 settlements representative of the total of 46 rural settlements under study. The habitat observation sheets were structured on three components: households, road network, and local economy (Table 1) and indicators were selected to reflect both the physiognomy and the functionality of these components. They also included information on the conservation status of the anthropic elements and the degree of vegetation covering the built-up area.

A semi-structured interview was conducted with 76 local people from the same 32 representative settlements during the eight-day research field trip. The interviews provided information on the inhabitants' perception of their quality of life and, implicitly, of their village both in the Communist and in the present-day period, as well as information on their attitude towards the viability of the village they live in. In terms of gender, the interviewees are equally represented, with 38 women and 38 men. Most interviewees are over the age of 40, reflecting an aging trend of the local communities and an increasing demographic dependence, most of them being retired or active in the primary sector.

Statistical data provided by the National Institute of Statistics, as well as the data collected through habitat observation sheets, through direct observation, and interviews was processed and analyzed using Microsoft Excel 2016. Proportional and graduated symbol maps were then generated using ArcGIS 10.3 software to represent both the geographic location and the attribute value (number of inhabitants in each settlement in 2011, resource exploitation and resource processing centers).

The features of the depopulation phenomenon were highlighted by overlapping the collected data (statistical data, data collected through habitat observation sheets and through interviews). Data analysis and interpretation of overlapped data allowed for a classification of depopulated villages.

Results and Discussions

Depopulation in the Poiana Ruscă Mountains and Its Territorial Socio-economic Implications

THE MOST alarming demographic phenomenon in the Poiana Ruscă Mountains area is the depopulation of villages, associated with other demographic risk phenomena such as demographic aging, high demographic dependency ratio or population migration, especially youth migration. The downward demographic trend is preserved for most settlements in the analyzed area (103 out of 110 settlements), but the small settlements (with less than 100 inhabitants) are the most affected by the loss of population. The majority are located in Hunedoara County (Pop *et al.* 2017, 66).

The characteristics of depopulated villages, resulted from interpolating statistical information and information collected in the field, are given by the demographic size of settlements, existing resources, the state of maintenance of the built-up area, accessibility, or the functionality of settlements.

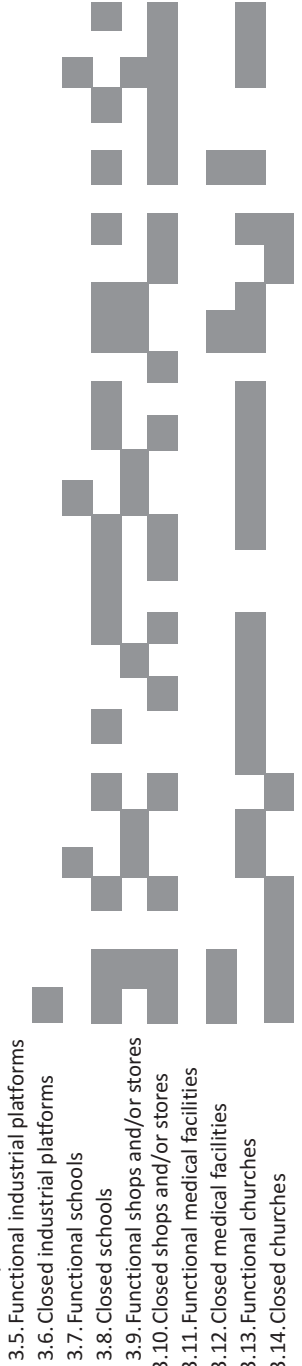
a) The small and very small settlements in the Poiana Ruscă Mountains follow a downward demographic trend. Of the 46 small and very small rural settlements, only two have recorded a continuous upward demographic trend in the last 20 years, between 1992 and 2011 (Căoi and Bretelin, located in Hunedoara County, in the proximity of the city of Deva), six have recorded a slight increase in the number of inhabitants between 2002 and 2011 (Alun, Dumbrăvița, Cutin, Merișoru de Munte, Groș, and Bujoru, all located in

3. LOCAL ECONOMY

Physiognomy

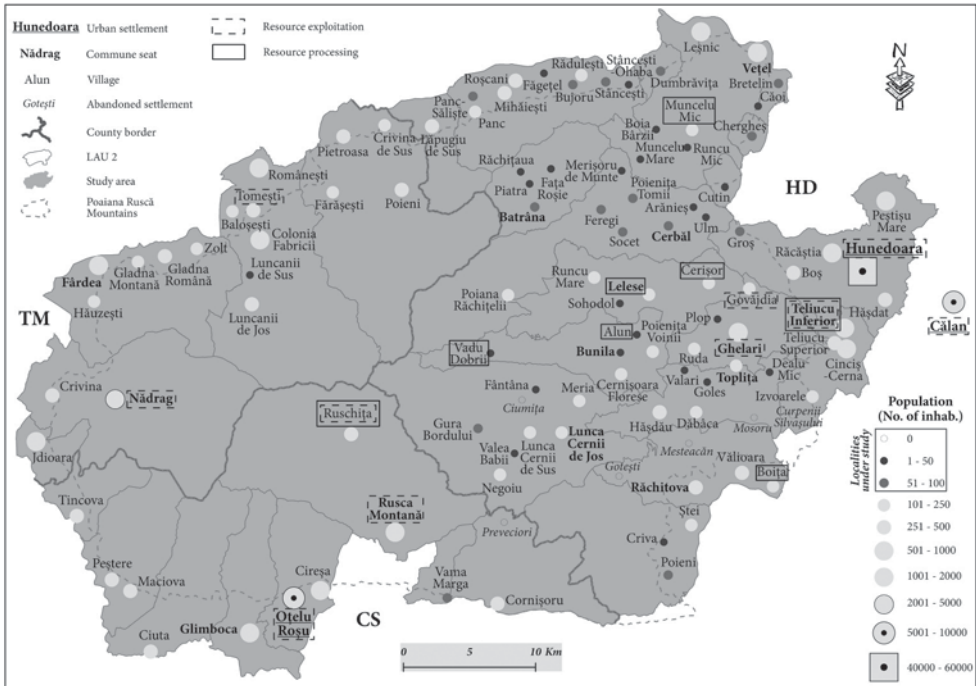


Functionality



NOTE: The habitat/settlement observation sheet contains information on the most important socio-economic issues of the built-up area, namely individual households, road network, and socio-economic facilities, both in terms of physiognomy and of functionality.
 SOURCE: Own calculations based on the habitat observation sheet filled in for 32 representative settlements.

FIGURE 2. HUMAN COMMUNITIES IN THE POIANA RUSCĂ MOUNTAINS IN 2011



SOURCE: 2011 Housing and Population Census

Hunedoara County), while the other 38 settlements have experienced a continuous downward demographic trend. However, it must be noted that the available statistical data refer to permanent residents; in fact, the number of inhabitants is significantly lower because many of them are actually seasonal residents. In addition, compared to 1992, when there was only one settlement with no inhabitants (Curpenii Silvașului in Hunedoara County), two decades later, in 2011, five more settlements were reported as having no inhabitants (Preveciori, Gotești, Mesteacăn, Mosoru, and Ciumița).

The analysis of semi-structured interviews has revealed the fact that the tendency of leaving the household, one of the main causes of depopulation, is not new. Ever since the Communist period (before 1989), younger families had been moving to cities, a fact validated by 12 of the interviewees. The main reasons why people changed their place of residence and moved to the city were a better job offer and a better education for their children. The most attractive places for the new residents were the industrial cities in the proximity of the mountain area, such as Deva, Hunedoara, Oțelu Roșu, where they bought houses or apartments, or even some commune administrative seats, with significant industrial resources.

In addition, out of the 47 interviewees with children, more than a half (26 persons) declared that their children’s permanent residence is in the city (Hunedoara,

Deva, Simeria, Timișoara): “The children come, of course. They come from time to time, just to see us. They have jobs... they won’t return here anymore. We bought them houses in the city, in Deva, in Hunedoara” (female, pensioner, Feregi). Others have preferred closer locations but conditioned by the existence of jobs, schools and medical facilities, usually commune administrative seats (Dobra, Tomești, Lelese, Vețel, Cerbăl). On the other hand, there are the inhabitants who have settled abroad, in countries such as Spain, Italy, Germany, England, or Cyprus. According to the interviewed parents or grandparents, many descendants living in other localities come regularly to their native village to visit their parents and give them a helping hand with household chores.

The majority population segment in depopulated and depopulating villages is the elderly, over 60 years old. Young people are very few and live here only periodically, predominantly at weekends or in the summer season. Two indicators considered in the habitat sheet, namely 2.3. Children in the street and 2.4. Empty roads, highlight the lack of youths on the village streets, except for the villages of Stâncești-Ohaba, Căoi, Poienița Tomii, Feregi, Dealu Mic, Ulm, and Cerbăl. The children identified during the field research were mostly on holiday, visiting their grandparents, which confirms once again the demographic deterioration of rural space.

Forty-one of the surveyed respondents confirm the presence of a much lower number of inhabitants in their locality of residence compared to statistically recorded data. The village of Țața (commune of Izvoarele) is the only settlement that statistically records no inhabitants, but in fact, it has one permanent resident and five seasonal residents, the house being a family inheritance (in the case of one resident) or a bought property (in the case of the other four residents).

The answers received during the field research frequently repeat the idea of ageing villages: “We are about 40 elderly people, women and men. Mostly women. Mostly widows” (male, former forester, Socet-I16, Table 2); “We are hardly 30. We are hardly 30 people as now there are families consisting of only one person” (female, pensioner, Dealu Mic-I11, Table 2); “We are only about six-seven old women and seven-eight old men in here” (female, pensioner, Luncanii de Sus-I37, Table 2); “We might be up to 40, but we are no longer that many as all the youths have gone down the mountain with their children. They are all in Deva, Hunedoara” (female, pensioner, Poienița Tomii-I24, Table 2); “Now there are only three [note: houses] instead of 17” [male, pensioner, Gura Bordului-I12, Table 2).

Other answers emphasize the seasonality of inhabitation, usually conditioned by the lack of local jobs and the possibility of education and training: “But there are more in the summer because they have on this side, Murari, as they call it, Crețu and Murari, they have houses. All of them are inhabited in the summer” (female, pensioner, Bunila – I2, Table 2).

The data collected through habitat sheets show a high percentage of settlements with deteriorated (29 settlements) and abandoned housing (26), their rightful owners being either elderly or deceased. Thirty-one inhabitants also certify the presence of

TABLE 2. Permanent residents in selected settlements in the Poiana Ruscă mountains

Settlement	Interviewees	Number of inhabitants, according to the source used:	
		Interviewed persons, 2017	2011 Census
Bunila	11/12	30/36	50
Alun	13	1	17
Arănieș	14	30	25
Cerbăl	15	50	87
Socet	16/17	40/33	55
Sohodol	18	20	25
Ulm	19	30	44
Dealul Mic	110/111	20/30	47
Gura Bordului	112	3	58
Țața	113/114	4/1	0
Valea Băbii	115	5	19
Vălari	116/117	20/23	34
Boia Bârzii	118/119	12/17	42
Bretelin	120	20	54
Căoi	121	15-16	21
Feregi	122	50	62
Muncelul Mare	123	24	37
Poienița Tomii	124/125	40/30	54
Bătrâna	126/127/128/129	70/61/100/30	86
Dumbrăvița	130/131	5/15	53
Făgețel	132	20	26
Stâncești-Ohaba	133	14	24
Răchițaua	134/135/136	3/4/4	10
Luncanii de Sus	137	7	31
Panc-Săliște	138	50	62
Criva	139	30	22
Poieni	140	100	95
Fața Roșie	141	7	22

SOURCE: 2011 Population and Housing Census and data collected from interviewees in 2017

some vacant/abandoned houses in the locality where they reside: “There might be houses, but they are empty!” (female, pensioner, Stâncești-Ohaba).

In 25 of the investigated villages, the information either from the habitat sheets or from the interviews indicates the owners’ willingness to sell their households or lands. Age, the conservation status of the households, the existing infrastructure and accessibility are determinants of the slow process of their occupation, despite the low selling price.

According to 17 interviewees, among the reasons that make some buyers buy land or households in this area is either the prospect of investment—“They left the land derelict. We, the family, I and my family bought it because we had nothing to do with the money, so to speak. We bought land, we bought houses...” (male, farmer, Cerbăl)—or the desire to have a holiday home. Other 16 interviewees consider that buyers are looking for a more secluded and quiet place: “It’s good in here. The air is clean, it’s not like in the cities with all those cars” (male, pensioner, Poieni).

In a few cases, people have inherited the household (4 interviewees) or have been looking for a more secluded space to start a livestock breeding business (3 interviewees).

b). Poiana Ruscă Mountains, a mountain area defined by the complexity of natural resources, has become an economically less exploited area. The ground and underground resources have seen intense exploitation and processing, with a maximum development in the Communist period. The sociological survey highlighted the use of the following local resources in the past: land (39 interviewees), pastures (32 interviewees), wood (8 interviewees), complex ores (4 interviewees), and ferrous ores (4 interviewees).

The inhabitants of the mountain villages have always been aware of the land's value as a major factor in ensuring their existence. This is why the capitalization of land and pastures has materialized in animal husbandry and plant cultivation, as 66 interviewees recall: "In the time of collectivization, all these lands were worked, now they are left derelict" (male, engineer, Panc-Săliște); "Well, there were more than 1,000 sheep here, 1,200-1,400 sheep here, in the village. No one had less than 20-30 sheep [...]. Now, nothing. Except for one who has about 60 sheep, that's it" (male, pensioner, Socet).

With the fall of Communism, the old mine galleries, quarries, or industrial platforms were privatized and closed, without any other functionality, left derelict or invaded by vegetation. In the case of the analyzed villages, the marble quarry in Alun is the most representative example in this respect. However, all neighboring rural and urban localities with industrial resources, which used to polarize the population of these villages, have known the same destiny. Thirty interviewees confirmed the intra- and the extra-regional polarization of inhabitants, either towards other industrial centers such as Hațeg, Oțelu Roșu, Marginea, Hunedoara, Mintia, Muncelu Mic, Dobra, Toplița, or Lelese, or from other regions of the country (from different counties of Transylvania such as Cluj, Bistrița, Sălaj, from Maramureș, Moldavia etc.)

c). The built-up area is increasingly invaded by vegetation and the conservation status of the anthropic elements is increasingly lower. Direct observation in the field confirms that there is no village in the investigated area that has not retained traces of the former owners' households, either deceased or settled elsewhere. The information collected through the habitat sheets shows that all 32 investigated villages have households that are maintained to a greater or lesser extent. In some cases they have been continuously maintained by their owners, in other cases households have been restored or rebuilt by their new owners.

With regard to household physiognomy, two categories have been identified: well-maintained households, including courtyards, roofs, fences, which are still predominantly found in the entire mountain area, and unmaintained households. In the latter category, the least maintained elements are fences, courtyards invaded by vegetation, rooftops, and dwellings themselves. Field evidence indicates that the latter category tends to exceed the former.

Even though many of the existing households have remained standing, only some of them are actually inhabited. Many of these can be classified as assets of the local vernacular heritage. Twenty-eight of the investigated villages have this kind of house-

holds. The maintenance of the physiognomic features of an authentic traditional house was based more on the degree of isolation and the owners' lower financial resources than on the existence of an education on the preservation of patrimonial properties.

Other buildings that had a socio-educational functionality are also in an advanced state of degradation. This is the case of the schools and medical facilities in Alun, Poienița Tomii, and Cerbăl, the store in Cerbăl, or even the churches in Bunila and Vălari.

d). The inhabitants of mountain settlements are dependent on the social and economic services offered by the settlements located on the very border or outside the mountain area. The access of the population to educational, medical, and commercial services is conditioned by several factors, such as the viability of roads, the number of inhabitants served, the existence of municipal services (water supply, electricity, gas), traveled distance. The analyzed area meets all the conditions of a less-favored area from this point of view, as these services are minimal in some settlements and, in terms of more complex services, they are dependent almost entirely on the offer of the nearby cities and towns.

Collected data indicate 17 villages where schools have been already closed. At present, there are only three rural settlements with functioning schools. Many of them are closed due to the decrease in the number of children or to the gradual merging of some educational levels, up to their disappearance.

Medical establishments, such as dispensaries, could be found in several settlements before 1989. They are now closed in Alun, Bunila, Poienița Tomii, and Gura Bordului, while the other rural settlements are completely devoid of any medical services and are dependent on the medical facilities offered by cities (Hunedoara, Deva, Cluj-Napoca, Timișoara), towns (Hațeg), or some larger commune administrative seats (Ghelari, Vețel, Dobra, Ilia, Densuș). These issues also arise from the statements of interviewees: "Here we have nothing... we have nothing here and I don't know if they are going to do something. I would be happy if they brought a doctor at least once a month so that one may be seen by a doctor. As I am hypertensive, I must go to Hunedoara to have my blood pressure measured" (female, pensioner, Bunila).

The use of mobile clinics (medical caravans) is seen as a solution to compensate for the lack of medical services: "We have just signed up, they came from the pension insurance and on Sunday... no, on Saturday when it was a feast day, as it was Midsummer's Day on Saturday, we received health cards to... to contribute. And they convinced us that a caravan with doctors and with ultrasound...and with... [Here, in the village?] Yes. Once a month" (female, pensioner, Cerbăl).

In addition, according to field observation and interviews, there is no pharmacy in the area.

Local people purchase the goods they need from the large stores located in urban areas or in the commune administrative seats. They either do a once-a-month shopping trip to these stores or it is their children who buy the goods for them from the city. For food or basic products they use local stores. The increasingly lower number of inhabitants has led to the closure of many of the existing stores. Eighteen villages are reported to face this situation: "We had one [note: a store] long ago, but now we don't have it anymore [...]. We do our shopping for almost the whole month (female, pensioner, Dealu Mic).

However, there are also several product delivery service providers that supply goods once or twice a week both for the small local stores and for the people who live in remote villages without any store: “We are glad that the van brings us bread twice a week, on Mondays and Thursdays. It brings us bread from Peștiș and the basic products we need, sugar, oil, so that we don’t have to go and buy them in the city. Transport costs me 60 lei to go and buy a liter of oil or a kilogram of sugar. It’s better to buy them here” (female, employee, Bunila).

As a result of a predominance of the Romanian Orthodox population, most Christian-Orthodox churches are functional, but there are also some exceptions conditioned by the lack of a stable number of residents or the lack of clergymen. It is the case of the villages of Țața, Alun, Bunila, Mesteacăn, Luncanii de Sus, Dealu Mic, and Vălari. Some of them are only open on the great annual religious feasts.

e). The municipal technical infrastructure requires modernization, maintenance, and connection work. As far as the municipal technical infrastructure is concerned, drinking water is mostly supplied by fountains or springs, usually a gravity-fed spring water system that services one or more households, while a small number of villages have centralized drinking water systems. Even fewer villages have sewerage, and this is mostly the case of the valley settlements (Vama Marga, Făgețel, Căoi, Bujoru). Gas supply is poorly represented, the population using either firewood or gas cylinders.

This is not the case with electricity, which was introduced in most of the villages even during the Communist period. Waste collection is another aspect indicating the quality of life in these depopulated mountain villages. Only fourteen villages have waste collection points.

f). The degree of spatial connectivity among settlements is conditioned by the predominantly poor condition of the road network. The major factor that has amplified the isolation of the mountain villages in the Poiana Ruscă Mountains area was the poor transport infrastructure. Few modernization works have been carried out in the last decades and they partially included county roads. Commune paved roads are even fewer. Generally, the farther a village is from a county road, the poorer its road.

The sociological survey identified 19 respondents satisfied with the state of the present road infrastructure, even though, in some cases, the increase in the quality of the road was only a transition from a dirt road to a gravel road. Six persons considered that road infrastructure is worse than before and three persons saw no change.

On the other hand, habitat sheets confirm the presence of a high number of dirt roads in the area. In addition, all villages with no inhabitants or with very few permanent residents have their dirt roads already covered by vegetation.

However, some residents and the new property owners do not look skeptically at the lack of road modernization works because they associate this with a high state of environmental tranquility: “The wilder the road, the more it is sought. It is better this way, for us at least” (male, employee, Mesteacăn), or “Well, we wouldn’t have found it [note: the house] if the access road had been good. Oh, they would have bought here long ago, but all of them turned around when they heard that the access road was

in bad condition... and in those years [our note: 2007] it was worse” (female, pensioner, Țața).

Interviews also show a certain difficulty experienced by the local administration in initiating interventions in the territory when they depend on an external, regional or national budget. Only a few modernization initiatives come from the local authorities and they are directly conditioned by access to local or European funds.

The availability of public transport in the area is low to none. Field observation and interviews indicate only one small village that is served by a microbus (Bretelin). Residents go to the city or the commune administrative seats only when necessary, either by their neighbors’ car, when available, or by taxi. Newcomers usually have their own cars and are not restricted in terms of mobility.

g). Functionality of settlements is directly proportional to the local communities’ labor power. The population living in the Poiana Ruscă Mountains is predominantly engaged in the primary sector, animal husbandry being their main economic activity for centuries. Very few interviewees (only 5) stated that the secondary or the tertiary sector currently offer jobs for the people in the area.

The majority of the inhabitants are pensioners and they keep a few animals (cattle, sheep, goats, pigs, rabbits, poultry) and even honeybees as a means to ensure their subsistence. However, newcomers see this kind of local specialization as an impediment to a potential economic diversification in the area: “Therefore, they [our note: the villagers] are not so... to think of something to make a tourist area. The area has potential because there are beautiful landscapes, but this is all they know: hayfield, sheep, cattle, horses, and that’s it” (female, pensioner, Bunila).

The young entrepreneurs established in the area have preferred to open a business in the field of animal husbandry (cattle or sheep), encouraged by APIA subsidies (Agency for Payments and Intervention in Agriculture). However, this entrepreneurial activity is still at its early stage: “There is one [our note: a farm] here as well. Well, they have a contract and they have about 300 sheep. But it’s not a real farm. It also has about 12 cows. However, it’s not a farm which can hire people, which can... because it’s difficult to sell the products” (male, pensioner, Muncelu Mare).

According to 43 interviewees, land and pastures are at present the only resources used by the local population. But they are not even used to their full potential because of the lack of local labor force, youth, entrepreneurial skills, managerial capabilities, and willingness to cooperate. Briefly, “There is more than enough land, but there are no people to work it anymore” (female, pensioner, Bătrâna).

h). The viability of the analyzed settlements is dependent on the small number of investments in the area. In the context of the numerous negative consequences generated by the depopulation of mountain villages, their continuity remains questionable. On-site documentation highlights the lack of local investments, the few existing ones being very punctual and focused on animal husbandry (14 respondents), the modernization of road sectors (12 respondents), and the introduction of water supply in some villages (2 respondents).

When asked what villagers lack at present, the interviewees' opinions are divided. Eight inhabitants consider that the lack of jobs, especially for the young people, is one of the greatest shortcomings of the area. However, they are not so optimistic about jobs being a panacea able to bring the youth back into the mountains. Other respondents consider that infrastructure is poor and requires improvement (4 respondents), and that the lack of some medical services (4 respondents) or even the lack of playing grounds for children would require mandatory investments (6 respondents).

Others (8 respondents) have become accustomed to the current situation and no longer want anything else: "We don't lack anything for now. There is a store if we need it [...]. The children bring us everything we need when they come. I want for nothing, really for nothing. Maybe health because we are old and we worked hard when we were young" (female, pensioner, Poienița Tomii).

Regarding the prospects for the evolution of the mountain villages, the opinions of the local communities involved are also divided.

On the one hand, 18 respondents believe that their village has some chances of survival: "We do hope that this village will resist because people come to their senses later in life. They would come back, ma'am, but they don't have where anymore" (male, pensioner, Gura Bordului); "Well, I don't know. We hope so... we have the water supply, we have electricity, we have other things... People do come back, they do things here. They have animals, sheep, cattle..." (male, employee, Sohodol).

Among the solutions perceived by the local communities themselves for the rescue of the mountain village, we mention the creation of jobs (3 respondents), increased involvement of the local authorities (7 respondents), the development of some entrepreneurial initiatives in tourism and agriculture (5 respondents), and the improvement of transport infrastructure (4 respondents).

Others believe that the viability of the village is temporally conditioned, overlapping with the current generation: "Maybe a generation, that is, the generation of my parents-in-laws who will continue to stay, and several other persons of their age. Otherwise, there are no more, the others have all passed away" (female, farmer, Vălari). If most of the youths have already gone, the elderly will surely stay because they think of themselves being too old to change their home: "[our note: The village will live] as long as we live. You know, where should we go now?" (male, employee, Țața). The viability of the village might also be conditioned by possible local policies and investments: "They will happen if... if something changes [...]. Maybe some larger farms will be set up because we have plenty of land, but at the moment... it's not all it should be. It's really not all it should be" (male, farmer, Cerbâl).

Even though the image of rural space remains in the mind of the local community, only two respondents believe that rural settlements will be upgraded and will have a much better physiognomy in the future, associating this improvement with the development of tourist areas.

The responses of 16 people demonstrate that the mental image of the mountain village, in the case of its continuity, will be much worse: "It will be worse because there are no people anymore. The people are all gone" (female, pensioner, Bunila); "This village will be like... if you have heard of Curpen [our note: she laughs]. There [our note:

in the hamlet of Curpenii Silvaşului] there is no one anymore... only bears, and wolves, and foxes” (female, pensioner, Dealu Mic).

Other inhabitants (5 respondents) are rather pessimistic about the future of their village and foresee no solution: “Nothing can be done for the commune any more. Ever since I first came here, 50 years ago, if I were to use percentages, I’d say that 80% has gone... the population that was here in 1969 and today’s population” (male, pensioner, Arănieş); “I don’t know what else could be done because nobody does anything here. What else should be done if the young people don’t return? What else can be done?” (female, pensioner, Socet).

On the other hand, 31 responses show a rather high skepticism regarding the continuity of the mountain settlements: “It’s on the verge of extinction” (male, farmer, Socet); “No, the commune of Cerbăl will no longer exist” (male, pensioner, Arănieş). Interviewees illustrate their opinion by mentioning population ageing and youth migration as main reasons: “I don’t know if ten of those who have their origins here would populate the village again... would return to their place of origin [...]. They come, they all come to the village fests, to the church, to funerals, to weddings. They all gather because they are relatives, so they gather together, but I don’t see them coming to populate the village unless two or three guest houses were established here, unless a tourist area were developed together with the village of Alun” (female, pensioner, Bunila); “In five years’ time... no more than 15 people will be living here. Rack and ruin. People have grown old and... we’re all dying, damn it! We are all sick!” (male, pensioner, Socet).

Under these circumstances, the degradation of houses and natural afforestation are seen as the next steps in the evolution of villages: “If the youth leaves, it’s all finished. This place goes to rack and ruin. Because, you see, if you let a house like this without any maintenance, in two or three years’ time you can see the effects, it’s gone. One thing at the beginning, a fence afterwards, one thing, another thing until it all goes down” (female, pensioner, Poienița Tomii); “It’s going to be a forest. There will be a forest here [...]. If there is no youth to resist...” (male, pensioner, Muncelu Mare). Moreover, several interviewees complain that, in many villages, inhabitants face a number of problems caused by the presence of wild boars and bears. These mammals are now descending more often to the mountain villages because of the lack of food and the nature-driven rewilding caused by the decrease in the number of inhabitants.

Typologies of Shrinking Villages in the Poiana Ruscă Mountains

CONSIDERING THE specific features of habitats, the types of activities currently carried out in the area, current investments, and management approaches to tackle the problems faced by the local communities, the shrinking villages in the Poiana Ruscă Mountains are in different stages of evolution. The way in which stakeholders responsible for the local development of the mountain settlements act determines the state of these localities.

The following categories of villages can be identified in the area:

1. *Completely depopulated villages, with no prospect of revival* (Mosoru, Curpenii Silvaşului, Ciumiţa, Preveciori, Goteşti). These villages have no inhabitants, households are derelict and there is no initiative to purchase land or households, accessibility is a major issue, both in terms of distance and the viability of roads. In this case, local authorities consider them a closed issue and take no initiative to support their repopulation.

2. *Completely depopulated villages, with revival prospects* (Mesteacăn, Țața). Even if they record no inhabitants and habitats are in a deteriorated condition, as indicated by the physiognomy of households, infrastructure, and socio-economic facilities, they benefit from a new, seasonal population input. The current inhabitants, descendants of the former local residents or new owners, have kept/purchased, maintained and upgraded the old dwellings together with the associated land for residential purposes, as holiday homes. Again, local authorities have taken no measures to encourage repopulation and change the evolution of villages. At present, the inhabitants are the only ones responsible for any improvement. Moreover, the tranquility of the residential location and the newcomers' interest in "wild" tourism do not require mandatory investments, not even in road infrastructure.

3. *Highly depopulated villages* (34 settlements, such as Răchițaua, Fața Roșie, Cerbăl, Poieni, etc.), characterized by a downward demographic trend, an ageing population, predominantly engaged in subsistence agricultural activities, and habitats generally prone to deterioration. Investments initiated by the local authorities have been minimal and limited to the modernization of some road sectors or the connection to centralized water supply. Local stakeholders are aware of the situation of these villages, but their initiatives do not substantially change the life of the population. Sporadically, new owners come and some households become functional again. However, all these interventions are not enough to support repopulation.

4. *Less depopulated villages* (Căoi, Bujoru, Vama Marga, Românești), where there are no concrete depopulation policies. There are indeed statistical data that confirm a possible revitalization, but stakeholders do not take concrete action in this regard. The physiognomy of households is gradually changing and so is the functionality of villages, which all borrow from the features of the peri-urban lifestyle. Road infrastructure is modernized and localities also benefit from the proximity of a major road.

The inclusion of the Poiana Ruscă Mountains in the less-favored mountain area (LFMA) category has produced several economic benefits, indicating the existence of a national policy for the revitalization of the mountain areas. However, territorially speaking this is not yet clearly articulated. At local level, there is no concrete measure to stop or at least mitigate population decline in these settlements.

Conclusions

THE DEPOPULATION of the Romanian mountain villages and, implicitly, of the Poiana Ruscă Mountains is a severe problem for the evolution of the rural environment. Given their lack of attractiveness caused by the lack of jobs, the isolation induced by the very low access to certain social and economic services, the poor con-

nectivity associated to private car dependency, most of these villages seem to be heading towards extinction. There are only few cases in which, through local initiatives, they are being repopulated or have received another functionality, mainly a tourism-related one. The lack of concrete policies and measures to stop or at least mitigate depopulation of villages is a first aspect that should be considered before any other initiative aimed at rural development.

With the increase in the isolation of villages undergoing depopulation, their dependence on the neighboring urban centers increases exponentially. Therefore, investments in transport infrastructure are absolutely necessary.

The analysis of the physiognomic and functional traits of the very small and small villages in the Poiana Ruscă Mountains, the status of current investments in the area, and the management approaches that tackle the problems faced by the local communities has led to the identification of several categories of villages that must be taken into consideration when looking for viable solutions to support the development of this mountain area. Each category, namely completely depopulated villages, with no prospect of revival, completely depopulated villages, with revival prospects, highly depopulated villages, and less depopulated villages, requires a comprehensive, solution-oriented approach.

The solutions for saving depopulated mountain villages or villages on the brink of extinction can be found by identifying the typology of the new residents, their functionality being designed according to types of activities carried out in the area (holiday villages, farm villages, etc.).



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Abstract

From Industrial Activities and Community Pride to No Man's Village—Shrinking Villages in the Poiana Ruscă Mountains

This paper aims to contribute to the understanding of shrinkage processes in the Poiana Ruscă Mountains, a former mining and industrial area. The research is focused on 46 villages, with less than 100 inhabitants, where the premises of their disappearance as distinct territorial entities are obvious. The analysis of selected demographic indicators, information on the physiognomic and functional transformation of villages collected through direct observation, habitat observation sheets, semi-structured interviews conducted with local people, and also GIS-based analysis and representation allow for a classification of villages according to their present status of conservation. The resulted typology provides the necessary basis for identifying the most appropriate solutions for their development. We conclude by reflecting upon the future development directions the identified village categories might take.

Keywords

depopulation, shrinking villages, mountain area, less-favored area, Poiana Ruscă Mountains