Urban vs. Rural During the Transition Period
In Central and Eastern Europe

Not a good time to be a peasant in Central and Easter Europe. Yet.

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Notes on the theme

What started as a protest against rising fuel taxes, moved quickly to more profound demands such as 'calls for lower costs of living for the working and middle classes and more economic parity between large cities and rural areas', Viola Stefanello, recently wrote in an article on Euronews.com[1], about the *Gilets Jaunes* movement in France. Furthermore, Cédric Szabo, director of the AMRF[2] is quoted in the same article: 'the rural world is normally not on the radar of political discussions. So, the Grand Débat can be another chance for the citizens to say what they really feel and want'. Szabo, refers to the recently inaugurated Grand Débat tour of Emmanuel Macron, that will bring the French president 'all over the country to meet mayors and citizens and listen to their questions and criticism.'[3]

So here we are, looking inside the current challenges faced by a solid democracy, which did not pass through Communism regimes, as the case in Central and Eastern Europe, nevertheless, vulnerable to double standards when policy makers are tackling urban vs. rural needs, at least as

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[1] Stefanello, Viola. *'What do French citizens want from their government?'*, Euronews (January 18, 2019), https://www.euronews.com/2019/01/18/what-do-french-citizens-want-from-their-government-use-our-interactive-map-to-find-out (accessed January 18, 2019).
[2] Association of French Rural Mayors
[3] Stefanello, Viola. *Idem*

perception if not looking also on statistical data[4]. It is not here the space to investigate the causes of such discrepancies, e.g. going back to the way the ancient Greek and then Roman cities were designed in the detriment of rural areas, nor one will relate to what Industrialization brought to this dynamic starting 18th and 19th centuries.

The assumptions at the base of this text are on one hand that urban - rural discrepancies are a global phenomenon, no matter the state of democracy and development of the territories considered. On other hand, one will build on the idea that the way further in dealing with the urban - rural relationship and dynamic is encompassing the needs within rural areas and other geographical peripheries equal to those of larger cities. Equal not in the strategies to be used, not in the solutions to be tried but in the consistency and dedication to tailoring initiatives on the specific and potential of the rural and smaller areas. Because smaller communities are not bigger cities not yet developed, as kids are not to be considered as grown-ups not yet grown. They have their own dynamic, peculiarities and needs. Same with the villages, same with smaller cities. And one will choose to build further on this narrative, if not because the rural population of the World counts to more than 45% of the total[5], at least because one cannot be considered without the other and because cities and villages are complementary forms of human manifestation as social groups and of human creativity and ingenuity, both being subject to criticism and *laude.*

Instead of projecting a future with solely mega cities and a nature and smaller communities preserved in memories, stories, videos, images, or protected areas, we might project a future that will not know how it looks like but that will be built by nurturing the right solid context for different forms of social interactions to co-exist and co-work. And not solely the urban and rural realities should be considered, but others that might occur when getting more people involved in the dynamic of the communities they are part of, not only the geographical ones but also the cultural, skills and expertise related ones, and of course the values and principles related ones. Or these are to be considered in relationship with the transitions to different stages of human development, seen through economic, social, political and cultural eyes.

Some challenges to consider

One such stage was in the Central and Easter European countries that were under the USSR (army, political, ideological, economical) influence after the Second World War until the early 90's. Namely, the transition to more democratic regimes with all that was more possible to implement thereafter, i.e. free economy, the re-emergence of the civil society, free media, freedom of movement, pluralistic politics, if to consider only few of the developments. And of course, with all the realities these societies had to confront like: lack of replacement elites, in

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[4] See for instance, Talandier, Magali ,Valérie Jousseaume and Bernard-Henri Nicot, *Two centuries of economic territorial dynamics: the case of France* (January 15, 2015), Regional Studies Association, https://rsa.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21681376.2015.1090887 (accessed January 20, 2019)
[5] See https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.RUR.TOTL.ZS (accessed January 20, 2019).

most of these countries - no lustration, no or minor exposure to practices of liberalism and pluralism in over 40 years of Communist regimes, resulting in almost no habits to ask for basic rights within large areas of the population, the disinterest for the public space as *Agora*, as civic catalyst, the lack of trust among people and in authorities, and the corollary few or no real wider public debates on the effects of the Communism on the psychology of the citizens and on the social interactions among them. Not to mention the *provincial*[6] stigma, used to refer to anyone outside capitals, say for instance Bucharest. Because everything was to be centralized, and being outside the chosen group, the *nomenklatura,* or those in favor to *nomenklatura*, and being outside the place where the chosen ones are taking decision for the rest, i.e. the capital, was almost like being second hand citizen.

One simple example will be considered here: in countries like Romania and is also the case in other countries from the region, in the '90s, it was common to use the word *peasant*[7] to refer to a person from *provincie*, from any other city but Bucharest. And it was used in a pejorative way, it meant: un-educated, ill mannered, a little savage, poor-dressed, a person that does not participate to the modern flow of ideas, trends. So, you did not want to be a *peasant*. And you could be one, no matter if you were from a village or a smaller city, since you were not from Bucharest. And the term evolved, now one could be a *peasant* if referred to as such by a person from a place bigger than the one you belonged to. Of course, one can trace the whole metamorphosis of once a pride for building the national identity during the 19th century, i.e. the rural heritage, into a stigma, by looking on the forced industrialization in these countries. Namely, the massive population (sometimes forced) movements from villages to newly created and existing cities, with no solid plans on integrating the peasants into these alien environments, with no interventions to equip the existing residents in the cities to welcome considerable numbers of persons that would affect the substance and dynamic of their communities. So here it is a chronic disinterest to both consider and therefore act for having a smaller social impact both in the villages and the host cities.

If one would move the perspective into a larger scale, here we are, in the middle of one of the major realities and challenges brought in by the *transition* in Central and Eastern Europe, i.e. the almost general disregard in the 90's of assisting rural and smaller communities to defend themselves against the *ghosts* and failures of the centrally planned economies enforced by the Communist regimes.

One should consider, for instance, the reality of closing dozens of factories and industrial plants both because of their lack of economic viability of due to fraud and corruption acts of the former

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[6] Coming from Latin *provincia*, 'in Roman antiquity, a territorial subdivision of the Roman Empire - specifically, the sphere of action and authority of a Roman magistrate who held the imperium, or executive power. The name was at first applied to territories both in Italy and wherever else a Roman official exercised authority in the name of the Roman state. Later the name implied Roman possessions outside Italy from which tribute was required',

https://www.britannica.com/topic/province-ancient-Roman-government (accessed January 20, 2019)**.**

[7] 'Țăran' in Romanian.

nomenklatura and secret services, which were controlling the means of economic, administrative and political power, after the fall of Communist regimes. This would lead to, among other effects, *ghost* cities, since they were depended on now dying mono-economies. And there was no back-up plan to rely on, the citizens having to deal with the new reality almost on their own.

The main consequence was that many citizens, now in their second or third generation of living into urban areas, were once again forced to move in large numbers in much bigger cities or abroad, or get into social assistance programs, putting additional pressure on the State, and leaving more room for disinformation and treating them as second-hand citizens[8]. Once again, the social fabric in these communities was affected, and the trust into the potential and sustainability of smaller places was eroding. Being periferic, from *provincie*, was now a stigma and not only on an elitist kind of narrative[9], but as a reality seen and felt in the quality of life of those citizens. Again, not a good time to be *peasant*.

And the bad news was yet to come, i.e. fewer taxes collected by the local authorities (since there were fewer inhabitants), resulted into fewer and worse services provided to the citizens, poor infrastructure, the lack of attractiveness of the smaller communities for investments and for living, lack of consistent support to update the existing social infrastructure for continuing to circulate ideas and knowledge among and inside these communities (either villages or small towns), and connecting them to larger cities, the brain drain but also closing down vocational schools that were securing the technical expertise needed into communities.

So countries in Central and Eastern Europe, and Romania it will be used again as example, ended having depopulated villages and towns, with less active work force, and more seniors and children as permanent residents, with lower self-esteem, not proud to be part of their communities, sensible to populist and nationalist narratives from the politicians, a captive electorate depended to State aids and assistance, less educated, with high levels of functional illiteracy, with less exposure and opportunities to engage in recurrent cultural, social and informational actions, apart from the main-stream, commercial media and the occasional, usually low-quality annual, town and village celebrations. And once joining EU, the phenomenon amplified, at least in terms of a massive movement of the population to better paid jobs in the EU countries. The rural and smaller communities' ecosystems were breaking once again, affecting not only these communities, the peripheries, but also the centers, the main cities.

And since the mainstream population movement for the last few hundreds of years is from peripheries towards the centers, having less educated, less involved, less skilled, less informed citizens in smaller communities, i.e. *the peasants,* consequently led to a bigger pressure on larger cities to absorb and integrate these people that are looking for a better quality of life. This is

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[8] And from here, it was a small step towards the *urban legend* with the social assisted citizens that are strangling the State, as the case in Romania, the reality being far from the one circulated into the public space. See for instance Meseșan, Diana, *'Războiul imaginar cu asistații sociali'* (in Romanian), Scena9, https://www.scena9.ro/article/razboiul-cu-asistatii-sociali-VMG (accessed January 20, 2019).

[9] As mentioned above.

favorable to segregation within the cities, not to mention the potential pressure on maintaining a higher standard in terms of cultural, social and civic life, that are prerequisites of a healthy society. Now everybody is seemingly losing.

Grasping resources for change

Nevertheless, no matter the challenges, the energies into societies are always bringing to surface solutions, communities being always surprisingly resilient and able to re-birth. And the solutions are not to be seen coming from one entity, or a single group of people that know *the way* and will act as saviors. More likely one should look to those (usually interconnected) individuals that are not necessarily content with the status quo. This is most of the time a minority that is ready to act, having the knowledge, the will, the drive and the right attitude. The flow usually follows the technology adoption life cycle or derivates and is self-perpetuating. Now, the challenge is not for this process to be secured, it seems almost like a natural law, but on how societies can nurture prompt defending mechanism to prevent populism, dictatorships and usually all the enemies of open societies[10].

Is not the capacity of societies to react to injustice to be questioned here, after reaching a threshold, is almost always happening, but the capacity of these societies to nurture healthy ecosystems that would shorten the distances in between the decisive reactions when injustice is spotted. If countries like Romania will for instance slide towards more dictatorial regimes in the upcoming years[11], is not the question *if* the society[12] will react, because eventually it will, but is the question of *when* it will react? And the sooner it will do it, the clearer it is the country got into more mature state of democracy. And this is not possible without creating the context for healthier societies, including a healthy educational, informational, cultural, social and economic exchange between rural and urban areas.

Therefore, any practices that are assisting citizens to get equipped with tools for participating to the lives of their communities and of their countries, on a long run, will lead to more people contributing to making democracy work. And this will lead to a different civic environment that we can not really grasp but we for sure can tell that will be more averse to dictatorships and authoritarian systems.

One example will be considered here. Take the case of the social infrastructure of a country, as mentioned above. This is usually a network of thousands of libraries, museums, schools, cultural houses, theatres, concert-halls, to mention just a few. By investing into enhancing the functionalities of these places, one can secure a flow of knowledge and non-formal education from centers (larger cities) to peripheries (villages, small towns). The social infrastructure can act

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[10] As described first by Henri Bergson and then by Karl Popper.
[11] But we can easily consider the political situation of Hungary and Poland.
[12] And we include into the *society*: the institutions, the civil society, the citizens, the private sector, the media and all the active forces into a territory.

as host and catalyst of the communities for those organizations and groups of professionals ready to scale-up their projects and mediate their expertise at local level. The result is win-win-win. Is winning for the local community which is exposed to quality information and education, is winning for the social infrastructure considered (e.g. library, school) because its educational and social offer is enhanced, is winning also for the organization that has the chance to scale up its methods, projects and initiatives in other areas[13]. Now, *the peasant* is likely to be exposed to pretty much the same quality informational content a city person is exposed to. And this starts to add on his/her sense or pride, of belonging and getting more involved in that community. And the community is no longer a static, geographical delimited entity, defined by those born within its boundaries, but has the chance to enhance its definition into the collection of assets and human capital that is participating to its dynamic.

Now *the peasant* made the transition from stigma to more pride. The president of the Republic comes to his/her community, during the Grand Débat tour. And he uses the existing infrastructure for the encounter, which might be the sport hall, big enough to host all those interested to come. Of course, the consistency, the recurrence and the good faith in implementing such initiatives, should give us the indicators of success. But the solutions are there, they just ask us to look closer, and to take the time to build. To build the normality of being inclusive and thinking our actions inter-disciplinary, inter-institutional and wired, including making more bridges in between urban and rural.

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[13] See for instance the EduCaB methodology designed and piloted in Romania and under implementation in various countries such as Romania, Nepal, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Tanzania, Senegal etc. EduCaB stands for Educational Capacity Building in Local Communities. More on http://www.educab.org/ (accessed January 20, 2019).