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# Violence hidden in plain sight: pin-prick land grabbing in Romania

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## ABSTRACT

The post-socialist transition in Romania has materialised in myriad factors that slowly eroded the capacity for social reproduction of rural populations. Using the concept of pin-prick land grabbing, this article draws attention to how, against the backdrop of loss of rural social fabric, unequal power dynamics among different stakeholders have led to small-scale land disputes and normalisation of extractive violence, which eventually facilitated large-scale land grabbing. By bringing to the surface these 'hidden in plain sight' forms of violence, the authors show the structural complexity of the phenomenon, putting forward the need for an environmental justice approach to land grabbing. .

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Land grabbing; post-socialism; environmental injustice; pin-prick land grabs; Eastern Europe

## 1. Introduction

Land grabbing indicates the means through which a global culture of monocultures, industrial animal husbandry and, more recently, agrofuels has been produced (Mazo and García 2020). While the phenomenon of land rush – as a global, large-scale extractivist process and a form of financialisation of agriculture – has been documented by numerous scholars globally (Borras et al. 2024; Chagnon et al. 2022; McMichael 2014; White et al. 2012), this article contributes to an under-studied dimension of land grabbing – that is, 'pin-prick', small-scale and cumulative, often done by stealth, swindle, fraud, or other abusive means in contexts of distress and poverty (Borras and Franco 2025; Wolford et al. 2025). Few studies have illustrated that land grabbing can happen through small-scale forms of land use change and less visible forms of abuse, which may also be read as intersectional injustices (Busscher, Parra, and Vanclay 2020; Martinez-Alier et al. 2016; Mincyte and Bartkiene 2019). Based on empirical evidence from Romania, we start from the observation that the post-socialist landscape is indeed experiencing a slow death of its agrarian communities by a 'thousand cuts' (Borras et al. 2024), as the last three decades of policy efforts are officially demonising subsistence agriculture (Velicu and OGREZeanu 2022).

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Post-socialist European countries attract land grabbers due to rapid land privatisation, fertile land and low prices (Burja, Tamas-Szora, and Dobra 2020; Constantin, Luminița, and Vasile 2017; Constantin, Luminița, and Vasile 2017; Popovici, Mitrică, and Mocanu 2018). Still, there are scarce qualitative studies related to the factors and socio-environmental implications of land grabbing, especially in this part of Europe. Therefore, our study answers this empirical research gap and conceptually expands ‘pin-pricking’ as a form of socio-environmental injustice: our case study in the Hârtibaciu Valley (Central Romania), specifically the concentration of land by Angus beef producers Karpaten Meat (KM), looks at the multiple layers of abuses constitutive of land grabs, and how these micro-scale dynamics facilitate macro-scale land grabbing.

In line with theories that analyse the invisible micro-level intersectional dynamics of oppression and uneven power relations (Zerilli 2006), we observed ‘insidious’ instances of abusive relations as normalised forms of extractive violence, often discussed as slow/structural/epistemic hidden in plain sight violence (Davies 2022; Nixon 2011) and associated with a vision of ‘environmentalism of the poor’ (Guha 2002; Martinez-Alier 2002). Land dispossession and primitive accumulation have always been integral to (post)conflictual and war-like situations (Peluso and Lund 2011; Vanhoute 2021). Land alienation is embedded within historical and structural social processes (Borras and Franco 2013; Edelman, Oya, and Borras 2013; Peluso and Lund 2011). Large-scale acquisitions of natural resources by transnational capital have never just happened as unproblematic free flow of capital but rather as painstaking negotiation among various actors, or as ordinary market transactions that ultimately accumulate into corporate control, or through the use of extra-economic coercion (Borras and Franco 2013), and generally against the backdrop of ‘pre-existing domestic inequality conditions’ (Fairbairn 2013). More so, the colonial discourse and practices prevalent in the capitalist system have led to a production of ‘idle’ spaces or ‘empty’ ruralities, which go hand in hand with a legitimisation of the grabber as a saviour (Li 2014; Tsing 2003; Wolford et al. 2025).

The concept of slow violence (Nixon 2011) helps shift the focus away from the ‘spectacular’ aspects of land grabbing, emphasising the trope of the ‘grab’ as the ongoing, less visible processes of dispossession and rural decline (Christian and Dowler 2019; Vorbrugg 2019). Suggesting that geographers should address the epistemic dimension of slow violence (Spivak 1988) by observing the ‘long duree of dispersed environmental harm’, Davies pushes Nixon’s concept to discuss the visible, everyday, tangible experience of, or exposure to, brutality and toxicity of local communities (Davies 2022). Our interviews show that in the neoliberal context of one of the harshest transitions to capitalism the world has experienced, everyday small tensions and disputes among villagers and other actors have normalised extractive violence in everyday abusive and competitive relations of uneven power, contributing to further marginalisation and disarticulation of rural social fabric, which eventually facilitated land grabbing and concentration (Velicu 2020). In line with Ribot and Peluso’s theory, which expands the understanding of access beyond a matter of property rights and towards ‘the ability to benefit from things’ (2003, 153), we show how pin-prick land grabbing can be discussed in terms of structural and relational enclosure of the capacity to maintain rural livelihoods on the land. This perspective complements the capabilities dimension of environmental justice, which points as well to the communities’ ability to function and flourish fully as a matter of environmental justice in its multi-dimensional sense, involving redistribution,

recognition and participation in decision making regarding livelihoods (Schlosberg and Carruthers 2010).

The article is structured as follows: it first introduces the concept of ‘pin-prick’ land grabbing. Next, it explores the academic debate on land grabbing in post-socialist Romania. The fieldwork results are then presented in three subsections: (a) the context in which land grabbing occurs in Hârtibaciu; (b) how overall rural loss during the transition has paved the way for land concentration; (c) the strategies used by elites to push vulnerable people to sell their land. Finally, it argues for an intersectional approach to pin-prick land grabbing and illustrates the injustice associated with this phenomenon.

## 2. Methodology and methods

This article is a result of an investigation that focused on land-grabbing conflict in the Hârtibaciu Valley (Central Romania) during 2024–2025 as part of a larger project examining four environmental conflicts in Romania and how these impact local communities (see Acknowledgement). We employed multiple data sources and methods to corroborate the findings. The fieldwork was organised in two stages: the first took place in March–April 2024, during which initial interviews were conducted, focusing on key villages affected by land grabbing, particularly Hosman. The second stage occurred between June and August 2024, allowing for additional interviews that expanded the area of investigation to include other affected villages, providing a more comprehensive understanding of local resistance dynamics and socio-economic transformations. The sampling method followed a snowball approach, starting with key activists in Hosman who facilitated access to other affected community members across the region. We collected a total of 41 semi-structured interviews. Given the region’s complex history of inter-ethnic cohabitation, conflict and social stratification (Oltean, Anghel, and Schuster 2017; Trașcă and Anghel 2019), we aimed for an inclusive sample that reflects its demographic and occupational diversity (see Table 1). By including diverse segments of the population, we aimed to capture a wide range of perspectives: retirees who have experienced the gradual decline of their communities, small business owners feeling pressure from corporate expansion, local administration representatives hoping for development opportunities, and activists witnessing and resisting land enclosure. Geographically, we focused on

**Table 1.** Demographic data.

| Category                  | Subcategory  | Count     |
|---------------------------|--|-----------|
| Gender Distribution       | Female   | 24        |
|                           | Male   | 17        |
| Ethnic Distribution       | Romanian   | 28        |
|                           | Saxon  | 5         |
|                           | Roma   | 6         |
|                           | German   | 2         |
| Occupations               | Retirees, entrepreneurs, farmers, shepherds, activists, workers, municipal workers | Various   |
| Geographical Distribution | Hosman   | 21        |
|                           | Nocrich  | 4         |
|                           | Altana   | 4         |
|                           | others (Movile, Tichindeal, Marpod Benești-Apoș, Cluj, Sibiu etc)                  | 12        |
| <b>Total</b>              |  | <b>41</b> |

Note: Authors’ biographies.

villages where Karpaten Meat has acquired land, prioritising areas with active peasant resistance movements. The research design was guided by a qualitative approach, emphasising in-depth interviews to explore personal narratives, perceived losses, inequalities and injustices, and the broader socio-economic transformations induced by land grabbing.

Interviews lasted between 40 min and two hours and were implemented in alignment with the project's ethical guidelines and the Lucian Blaga University's ethical protocol. All participants provided written (or verbal) consent for their participation in the interviews as well as permission for audio recording. Researchers took the time to discuss the values, concerns and preferences of participants so they could accept/refuse or withdraw at any time. The pivotal values of this study are fairness and the protection of the well-being of participants. The interview guide followed the main dimensions of environmental justice principles and included questions regarding perceived losses and injustices, civil participation and mobilisation, and identity and meaning of land. Data analysis was conducted using MAXQDA, with a coding system developed based on the dimensions of environmental injustice, including distributive, procedural and recognition justice. MAXQDA facilitated the organisation and retrieval of codes, ensuring a consistent and structured analysis across the dataset.

We also collected and analysed supplementary data from official statistics, national legislation, EU reports and activist reports related to land grabbing to have a more complex overview of the phenomenon studied. Finally, we build on our previous research and additional data, encompassing interviews with peasant association members from all over Romania, (see Velicu and OGREZEANU 2022 ).

### 3. Land grabbing by a thousand cuts in a global perspective

When a land entrepreneur acquired one unit of UAF (economically viable plot) from an owner of a finca in Colombia, it is considered as a normal everyday market transaction, and no one bothers to raise an issue ... By the time the impact is visually obvious, their momentum and spread are already quite advanced. (Borras et al. 2024, 14)

The above quote perfectly summarises the situation in Romania: pin-prick land grabbing is one of those situations in which the extractive violence is insidiously installing itself in manipulative or abusive relations of power, hidden in plain sight. It can refer to small-scale, scattered, less visible or even non-legible for databanking, usually non-corporate instances of land accumulation, but also to visible forms of coercive or abusive relations and by exploitation of distress and poverty (Borras et al. 2024). Eventually, this land may end up in corporate control as many actors are lured by the spectacle of the land rush (Tsing 2003): land buyers, speculators, brokers, moneylenders, adjudicators, surveyors, map makers, cadastre recorders, con artists, notaries, etc.

Only a few studies illustrate the phenomenon, especially in Europe. For instance, by describing the phenomenon of 'suitcase farmers' in Poland – i.e. non-resident/external/distant or urban elites taking over land in the rural protected areas – Biczkowski et al. argue that the neoliberal pressure to 'catch-up' with the West set the Polish society into a neo-colonial context: land appropriation driven by the availability of financial support instruments for agricultural activities under the EU-CAP led to increased asymmetries of power and inequalities, resulting in further peripheralisation and pauperisation of

rural regions in most post-socialist countries (2023). Similarly, Gonda discusses how local oligarchs in Hungary consolidated their power, further marginalising the poorer farmers in rural areas (2019). Also, in Ukraine, the phenomenon of 'land riding', which refers to illegal practices such as sawing or harvesting land without permission, falsifying documents to appropriate land, resembles the concept of pin-prick land grabbing (Borodina and Yarovyι 2019). Studying land grabbing in Russia, Vorbrugg (2019) introduces the term 'dispersed dispossession' to shift the focus away from strictly land dispossession and towards forms of dispossession that are more elusive, such as the deterioration of infrastructure, the devaluation of land, and the breakdown of social structures.

More cases illustrate this dimension of land grabbing as a non-European issue. Sud (2014) is concerned with insufficient knowledge on the role of intermediaries in India: middlemen, local anchors, or 'economic gangsters', familiarised with the local idioms and possessing sufficient knowledge of the region, are facilitating land deals while normalising the capitalist discourse on the rural as 'empty' (Baka 2013; Cotula et al. 2014; Hermele 2012; Levien 2011). Intermediaries are frequently employed by international actors to hide the grabber from sight; they epitomise corruption, use violence as an economic tool, and support the creation of what is less a free flow of capital than a complex system involving the work and collaboration of multiple stakeholders of globalisation (Fisman and Miguel 2010).

Beban, So, and Un (2017) go beyond a focus on the brute force involved in land grabs and look at the forms of legitimation, regulation and coercion that intersect in Cambodia's property regime. Their work shows how increased engagement with Western commodity markets has motivated state and private concessionaires to use different means of land exclusion, with less outright force but more focus on repressive regulation and discursive legitimation. These exclusionary powers work through informal political connections, secrecy and obfuscation, which the authors term the 'power of informality'.

People are also excluded from land through the use of law, market-based mechanisms, legitimising discourses and informal political networks, and these may be just as insidious in their effects. (Beban, So, and Un 2017, 2)

Other authors have detailed the power of informality and local customs: for instance, Hilhorst, Nelen, and Traore (2011) reveal the customary, informal mechanisms that support land grabbing and how competing claims lead to local conflicts, while these, in exchange, become opportunities for land grabbing by agribusiness in West Africa. In the context of the food crisis in 2007, and a growing public policy discourse focused on the modernisation of agriculture, family farms have been forced to renounce agriculture. Most deals are facilitated by family relations, while intermediaries play a key role, sometimes even putting pressure on landholders, using their position of power to convince people to sell. Land grabbing is often facilitated by disagreements within clans or even between generations. Secrecy, fraudulent behaviours and lack of accountability characterise many land transfers among the customary landholders, which eventually favour conflicts and leave environmental degradation (Hilhorst, Nelen, and Traore 2011).

Similarly, in Uganda, Kandel (2014) shows that the majority of land conflicts are actually over very small plots of land within communities and even families and involve 'national capital'. The author mentions that '95 per cent of recent land transactions involve local

civil servants, politicians, traders, and business people` (Kandel 2014, 8). Similar to our stories in Romania, this phenomenon is a reflection not only of the global commodities crisis of 2008 but also of local socio-ecological changes, such as the declining power of the elderly, migration, land tenure ambiguity or corruption. Perelman argues, however, that the current wave of land grabbing and associated conflicts are not mere antagonistic disputes to be resolved through legal channels, but rather a historical process of land alienation necessary for capital accumulation (Perelman 2007). Small producers are dispossessed of their customary rights to use land and thus separated from the basic means necessary for their social reproduction. For Perelman, this interpretation is important precisely because, if accepted as a structural perspective to the overall problem of land grabbing, the solutions presented so far – such as clarifying tenure, reducing corruption or mediating conflicts – will not suffice, especially in (post)war. Also using the framework of social reproduction, Chung (2017) analyses the ‘new enclosures’ in the Coast Region of Tanzania, showing how these processes have a deeply gendered dimension. The argument put forward is that beyond the ongoing erosion of means of social reproduction, land enclosures ‘gradually displace people from their cultural practices, socio-ecological knowledges and historical memories, which are deeply rooted in the land, and which are articulated in gendered ways’ (Chung 2017, 103).

Friis and Nielsen (2016) discuss the fine line between force and complicity which characterises small-scale land acquisitions and which eventually has large-scale implications. In China, investors establish networks of local middlemen who facilitate negotiations over land directly at the village level, thus enabling them to circumvent any formal involvement of the government. Despite the apparent small-scale or short-term nature of these leases, the forceful acquisition strategies, coupled with the rapid land use conversion, result in longer-term alienation of land for the local communities. Similarly, Yunan Xu (2018) examines small-scale land grabbing in Guangxi, China, which she terms ‘grabbing by villagers’ or ‘intimate’ land grabbing. She argues that some villagers themselves may often be seen as grabbers and not just victims of these changes.

We argue that the concept of pin-prick land grabbing is, therefore, a necessary and welcome addition to the literature, helping to make sense of an already identified, yet not quite understood phenomenon of less visible, insidious tactics of scattered and small-scale land grabs, which often elude the public perception of the phenomenon. Before diving into our empirical analysis of the phenomenon, we will take a closer look at how land grabbing is discussed in the Romanian context.

### ***3.1. Land grabbing in post-socialist Romania***

Romania has emerged as a significant site of land grabbing in Europe, driven by its fertile agricultural land, relatively low land prices, and integration into the global markets (Burja, Tamas-Szora, and Dobra 2020; Popovici, Mitrică, and Mocanu 2018; Voicu 2022). Romania is often given as an ‘example’ of countries where land grabbing occurs with the greatest intensity in Europe (Bouniol 2013), featuring also in the 2015 European Economic and Social Committee’s own-initiative opinion on land grabbing in Europe (Constantin, Lumină, and Vasile 2017). The ‘fuzziness’ in land property relations (Verhoog and Stoica 2019) and favourable national and European legislation have accelerated the phenomenon of

land grabbing (Bouniol 2013; Chiurciu et al. 2023; Constantin, Luminița, and Vasile 2017; Popovici, Mitrică, and Mocanu 2018; Van Der Ploeg, Franco, and Borrás 2015).

Verhoog refers to Verdery's concept of 'undoing' the collective (2003) when describing the post-1990s agro-economical context, meaning the transformation of physical and social landscapes 'from horizontal family state farms to large-scale commercial farming, which resulted in social and economic polarisation' (Verhoog and Stoica 2019, 27). The transition period was characterised by a major rollback of state support in rural regions (Cosma, Ban, and Gabor 2020, 9–10; Mamonova and Franquesa 2020). Overall loss of meaning of rural life tends to be a main leitmotif: local food production, biodiversity and cultural knowledge have been gradually disappearing in a context of economic migration and privatisation of agriculture (Bouniol 2013; Burja, Tamas-Szora, and Dobra 2020; Chiurciu et al. 2023; Constantin, Luminița, and Vasile 2017; Petrescu-Mag, Petrescu, and Petrescu-Mag 2017; Velicu and OGREZEANU 2022).

Since Romanian agriculture has become heavily polarised, with a dual agricultural system (Constantin, Luminița, and Vasile 2017) comprising both large industrial farm holdings and small family-owned farms, conflicting interests between these two groups have emerged. This divide has exacerbated land grabbing, as the growing dominance of industrial farms has marginalised small farmers, pushing them out of the land market (Burja, Tamas-Szora, and Dobra 2020; Constantin, Luminița, and Vasile 2017; Popovici, Mitrică, and Mocanu 2018). There is broad recognition of the contribution of the EU-CAP system of subsidies to the increasing disparities among the member states and the small versus large farms (Bouniol 2013; Chiurciu et al. 2023; Constantin, Luminița, and Vasile 2017; Verhoog and Stoica 2019). In post-socialist countries, the CAP has fuelled land grabbing, not only because of the size-based subsidies that privilege large holdings (Van Der Ploeg, Franco, and Borrás 2015) but also through the prospect of future CAP gains that drives investors into pre-accession land rushes (Hajdu and Visser 2017). While the concern for soil degradation and ecological loss has seemed secondary, most authors point out the 'brutal commodification' of land and monoculture expansion, which has caused environmental damage through soil degradation and loss of biodiversity (Burja, Tamas-Szora, and Dobra 2020; Constantin, Luminița, and Vasile 2017; Petrescu-Mag, Petrescu, and Petrescu-Mag 2017; Popovici, Mitrică, and Mocanu 2018; Verhoog and Stoica 2019).

Very few scholars have actually researched qualitatively and in depth the factors that have led to land grabbing in Romania. Notably, if we see land as a form of commons (Ferrando et al. 2020), the long-term study of Voicu and Vasile (2022) is illustrative here for our argument related to the insidious forms of relations leading to land grabbing: as common land, forests continue to be claimed by rural communities for their holistic virtues (or socio-environmental value) rather than as an individualistic sum of parts or property. Similar to our intention here, they show how forests are extremely vulnerable to being commodified in a context of ambiguous property regimes, community divisions and societal disputes (lordăchescu and Vasile 2023).

There are various voices critical of this phenomenon within Romanian civil society (Velicu and OGREZEANU 2022). For instance, in their activism for the rights of peasants during the last two decades, the Romanian association Eco Ruralis (ER), in collaboration with the Transnational Institute (TNI), have placed land grabbing as a problem on the political agenda of the European Union. Their collection of studies illustrated the negative

means and consequences of land acquisitions. ER defines land grabbing in line with the definition given by Via Campesina:

Land grabbing is the control (whether through ownership, lease, concession, contracts, quotas, or general power) of larger than locally typical amounts of land by any persons or entities (public or private, foreign or domestic) via any means ('legal' or 'illegal') for purposes of speculation, extraction, resource control or commodification at the expense of agroecology, land stewardship, food sovereignty and human rights. (Baker-Smith and Szocs-Boruss 2016, 15)

Hence, as they have argued, it is important to call it land grabbing: while the process of acquisition may be a neutral market one, land grabbing, even as mere concentration of resources, nevertheless usually implies unjust aspects within and beyond the process of acquisition.

#### **4. Pin-pricking Hârtibaciu: fieldwork results**

This section presents the main findings of our research. We organise this section as follows: (4.1) we highlight the context in which land grabbing occurs in Hârtibaciu; (4.2) we illustrate how the broader rural decline of post-socialist transition has paved the way for processes of land concentration; and (4.3) we identify the strategies employed by local elites and corporate interests to pressurise vulnerable populations into selling their land.

##### ***4.1. Contextualising the rise of land grabbing in the Hârtibaciu Valley***

The Hârtibaciu Valley (tr. Valea Hârtibaciului) is a region located in central Romania, in the south of Transylvania. The region includes vast pastures and forests that are part of the Carpathian biodiversity corridor, making it one of the most ecologically significant areas in Romania, being partially a Natura 2000 Site. We found out about the rise of land grabbing from our network of social activists: 'Hosman Durabil' (HD) (tr. Sustainable Hosman) – a local organisation, established in 2005 to defend natural and cultural diversity in the region. Members of HD observed that their access to formerly free paths, fields and pastures was blocked due to newly installed kilometres of electric fences by a cattle megafarm. Living in various villages in the Hârtibaciu Valley, they were also witnessing stories about questionable ways in which land was bought or leased.

In the early post-socialist years, much of the land in the region had been purchased by small local investors, often described by villagers as 'local barons', who exploited political connections and social influence to acquire property. Taking advantage of people's uncertainty and the prolonged neglect of rural communities by the post-socialist governments, these actors resorted to intimidation and deceit to push landholders into selling. After EU accession in 2007, the prospect of CAP subsidies sparked a new rush for land in the region, as expected payments boosted land values and drew domestic and foreign investors eager to secure land (Hajdu and Visser 2017). Over time, as many of these early investors ended up selling or went bankrupt, Karpaten Meat (an Angus cow producer in the region) has expanded its operations by absorbing their assets and consolidating its position in the region.

Karpaten Meat (KM) has developed a successful business, buying or renting thousands of hectares of land for their cattle megafarm. Founded in 2008, KM expanded rapidly, managing 10,000 hectares of land to support around 9,000 Angus cattle. Although the company's main activity is meat production, its long-term strategic focus is directed toward land. Since 2013, Karpaten Meat has been majority-owned by the Swiss investment fund Agrarinvest Plus, founded and managed by two former Credit Suisse bankers. This fund has become one of Romania's major agricultural investors, now controlling over 14,000 hectares of farmland in Romania. Agrarinvest Plus is building its portfolio by consolidating fragmented plots into larger parcels to increase land value and future resale potential.

In a colonial fashion, one official representative of Karpaten Meat discusses their work as giving Transylvania a 'new chance' to prosper at a time when 'no one' else is willing to invest in it (Interview, Man, Romanian, Hosman, 2024). Yet, as we will illustrate below, numerous testimonies indicate the insidiously complex means that facilitated their concentration of land. For instance, discussing with the lawyer collaborating with HD, we found out about the so-called 'salami-slicing' tactic: cumulative land acquisitions are being registered in the name of different companies, behind which the activists identified the same one or two corporations. The purpose of this tactic is to avoid environmental impact assessments and hide the actual mega-development project taking place, preparing for potential (other forms of) extractivist economic activities by making it appear as small-scale, banal market transactions (Ashwood et al. 2022; Velicu 2020). As one resident mentioned,

It's a fast-growing business and phenomenon, and it makes it like a national issue somehow because this kind of business is rolling all over Romania. (Interview, woman, German, Hosman, 2024)

The company employed an 'ingenious' method to acquire land (2015); because peasants were reluctant to sell, Agrarinvest Plus proposed swapping land as an effective tactic for land consolidation. Yet, behind this seemingly benign strategy lies a subtler form of insidious violence rooted in deep asymmetries of power between agribusiness and smallholders. During our interviews, this tactic appeared widespread: large-scale investors pressured peasants into disadvantageous land exchanges. While the media portrayed these transfers as consensual transactions, in practice, they often involved implicit coercion and complexity in what constitutes 'choice' and 'optional' for vulnerable low-income communities (2020). In the following two sections, we first discuss the overall loss of ability to live a decent life in rural areas. Secondly, we show the mundane and insidious violence by which locals were pushed towards selling.

#### **4.2. Post-socialist transition, rural loss and land grabbing**

The post-socialist period saw one of the most rapid transitions from a centralised to a free market system (Ban 2014; Vincze et al. 2025), which in rural spaces translated into the loss of the basic structures that supported a collective form of social (re)production, from cooperatives or irrigation systems to common animal husbandry. These sharp 'cuts' in the fabric of the rural community have left the local population unable to maintain their livelihood. In this section, we present the slow degradation of rural life that has contributed to the rise of pin-prick land grabbing.

Many respondents refer to a general degradation of their villages: some mention the gardens left wild; others talk about a general degradation of public spaces, such as community centres, which parallels the deterioration of social relations. This is tied inadvertently to the loss of infrastructure and state services in rural areas. Transport, access to water and access to medical services are just a few of the losses suffered during the years of transition, when neoliberal policies led to a rollback of state support systems in the countryside (Dorondel et al. 2022; Mamonova and Franquesa 2020). For instance, one of the villages we studied became famous for privatising its water source in the 1990s, during the privatisation of the agricultural cooperative. Although the municipality was in the process of connecting the village to the national water supply system at the time of the interview, this remained a pressing concern for the community. This example reflects a broader pattern of structural neglect of rural areas. Another common complaint was the lack of transport and the difficulty of accessing doctors, which is concerning considering the growing number of elderly:

Back then, the council could pay a road worker to dig the ditches, and in winter, when there was snow, they would make sure the buses could run. Now there are 13 councillors, but no one does anything anymore. (Interview, Saxon, woman, Movile, 2024)

I feel deeply troubled when I see only weeds and uncultivated land ... It looks like a dead village, overgrown with weeds everywhere, filled with filth, not a single flower around the monument; it's pure devastation. (Interview, Saxon, woman, Altana, 2024)

Things are no longer as they were ... People used to help each other to work or to do anything, now nobody helps anybody. (Interview, woman, Romanian, Hosman, 2024)

Many of our interviewees were lamenting the loss of a sense of community, with everything it entails: feelings of estrangement, rupture between generations, a loss of continuity and of connection to land. With the loss of community came the loss of traditions, community rituals and festivities, moments in which the whole village used to gather and work or celebrate. Besides a contracted social life, the loss of community was indicative of another loss: it has been increasingly difficult to find workers (labour force) in the village. The transition years created opportunities for international migration, which expanded further after Romania acceded to the EU. The young have seized the opportunities brought by open borders and set out on migratory paths (Anghel and Cosciug 2017; Corman and Croitoru 2023; Cosma, Ban, and Gabor 2020), leaving behind the elderly population, who are unfit for hard agricultural labour and vulnerable to coercion and harassment. With a break in generational systems of support for agricultural work, many villagers are forced to give up their lands. In addition, the loss of agricultural tools, particularly tractors, after the privatisation of state farms played a crucial role in eventually facilitating land grabbing (Verdery 2003).

They're gone (the tractors). They melted them down. The so-called 'Terminator' came and sold everything for scrap metal. They were cutting them up day and night, cutting and hauling them away for scrap. It was a real plunder because almost all of them were still functional. (Interview, man, Romanian, Hosman, 2024)

Even though the shepherds left, they went to work abroad ... that is why the electric fences appeared ... you have nobody to work with anymore. (Interview, man, mayor, Romanian, Nocrich 2024)

The villages will turn into mere dormitories. (Interview, man, activist, Romanian, Hosman, 2024)

Traditionally, peasant households relied on animals not only for food and labour but also as a means of maintaining their connection to the land. However, in the post-transition years, fewer and fewer people kept animals, particularly cows. Multiple testimonies reveal several factors that pushed people to abandon animal husbandry. On the one hand, selling milk became either unprofitable due to falling prices or the lack of milk collection cisterns coming to the village. On the other hand, new municipal policies restricted animals' access to public roads, making it impossible to reach common pastures. Without the ability to graze their livestock, many villagers faced rising costs for feed and care. Pastures and small farmland parcels were either abandoned or sold off piece by piece, creating openings for external actors – whether agribusinesses, speculators, or wealthier local landowners – to accumulate land through fragmented acquisitions and often merely to access EU subsidies.

The dairy products were no longer being paid for, and that's how it all disappeared. They used to collect the milk in cisterns and take it to the processing plant in Sibiu. They just stopped coming. And because of that, we sold the animals. (Interview, woman, Roma, Hosman, 2024)

You can no longer live out of agriculture ... unless you have 400 sheep and take subsidies for them ... otherwise it is more expensive to keep the sheep than to buy cheese. We are being forced to give up production. (Interview, man, Romanian, Hosman, 2024)

All of these material losses that we describe here, which have eroded peasants' autonomy and their ability to sustain their livelihood, have resulted in deserted communities that stand no chance in the face of massive investments and a rush for the land. These losses, stemming from the systemic state abandonment of rural spaces, have significantly exacerbated the challenges faced by local populations trying to sustain life in the countryside. The vicious cycle of abandonment has triggered a systemic chain reaction which individuals have little power to resist. In the following section, we discuss forms of insidious violence, such as abusive and uneven relations of power within the communities that, when put together, have resulted in massive land grabbing.

#### ***4.3. Land grabbing as violence hidden in plain sight***

The post-socialist transition has led to the loss of the rural social fabric and a profound crisis of social reproduction, which has undermined peasants' capacity to sustain themselves autonomously from the land. In this context, new actors have emerged, ready to profit from the exhaustion of local populations caught in increasing precarity. We identified multiple land disputes, most of them concerning small individual plots which, when taken together, represent a significant share of the agricultural land in the area and a normalisation of violence overall (Velicu 2014/ 2020 ): disputes over rent, delay of rent payments, unauthorised use of land, illegal fencing, deceit and harassment. While these conflicts may appear minor or isolated, they create an atmosphere of mistrust and conflict that wears down the more vulnerable small landowners, who end up seeing land commodification as the only option. These constant pressures are part of the dynamic pattern of the 'hidden in plain sight' neoliberal extractive violence. The final

corporate land grabbing comes as a result of already existing internal pressures, harassments or intimidations, adding to the structural inequalities by domestic actors (Fairbairn 2013).

In the first years of transition, locals felt ‘suffocated’ by different investors and ‘local barons’. Wealthier individuals acted in a more or less abusive/(non)-consensual manner towards those who had less capacity to work their land, who eventually felt obliged and shamed to sell. Numerous locals tell the same story of how vulnerable people (usually women and the elderly) have been tricked or forced to sell. While precarity and age, among other factors, led to less ability to perform the (typically collective) agricultural labour, vulnerable farmers experience guilt and lower self-worth (the intangible loss of dignity) on top of the emotional distress of having to accept the loss of ability, purpose, autonomy and agency (Velicu et al. 2026 *forthcoming*; see also Tschakert et al. 2019). Missed rent payments are a classic situation confronting small landowners. The inability of law enforcement to intervene once again discourages ordinary people from taking action or standing up for their rights. In some cases, the tenant continues to use the land, which makes it even more difficult for the owner to reclaim it.

He just stopped paying us. And we still pay taxes ... We even went to court, but in the end, we gave up on the trial, too ... Oh, no, I won't go and beg, I won't do it anymore. (Interview, woman, Romanian, Altana, 2024)

If you do not comply, they force you ... one has to have a lot of guts to confront them, you may even need physical force. (Interview, man, Romanian, Hosman, 2024)

Furthermore, there were numerous accounts from senior women about the abusive use of their land by shepherds or local farmers. For instance, one Saxon lady told us angrily how she found out that a neighbour was ploughing her land without permission. When confronted, he answered that the land was not being used anyway. The story illustrates the ease with which these abuses happen. In most cases, the victims confessed to either not taking any action against the abuser or taking action by selling the land, mostly to KM. Feeling powerless in the face of injustice, some preferred to give up and sell the land, getting rid of a cause of great distress in their lives.

But there, on the opposite side near the forest, flocks of sheep always snuck in, and before I could go to cut the hay, they ate everything. I couldn't do anything about it; I had no one to fight with, no one to complain to. If you're a single woman, you're not taken seriously. (Interview, woman, Saxon, Altana, 2024)

What began as scattered sales soon added up, and years later, the landscape had entirely shifted, with people who remained in place experiencing further social isolation and alienation, and thus feeling haunted by the ‘inevitability’ of commodification (Velicu 2020). They sold in fragmented transactions, often for next to nothing, as buyers arrived in villages with notaries, aided by local intermediaries. In his interview, one of the main intermediaries recalls how he was approached by the investors:

I was in the centre of the village when they came to me and said: ‘I want to buy land. Could you please look into it?’ (Interview, male, Romanian, Hosman, 2024)

Over time, he became the key figure in these transactions, as villagers, desperate to sell, would knock on his door. Other respondents remember the work of the intermediary:

He kept insisting, asking me, 'Have you made up your mind yet?' They fence off the last piece of land from a smallholder who can no longer even visit his own field, making it easier for the company to take it. Some don't even have proper ownership papers, but that doesn't matter to them. (Interview, woman, Romanian, Hosman, 2024)

In the present day, KM has managed to develop its business in the region by profiting from both the bankruptcy of previous investors and the overall decay of the rural space. One local farmer explained that people go first to KM when they want to sell because they buy land even in the absence of legal documents. KM took advantage of the difficulties locals face in regularising their land ownership. Even 30 years after decollectivisation, many villages are still undergoing land cadastration, with property boundaries often remaining unclear<sup>1</sup> (Dorondel, Rodina-Taylor, and Rusu 2022; Verdery 1999). Our interviews revealed that numerous respondents were still waiting for their properties to be formally registered. Moreover, some reported that their land boundaries had been altered or relocated during the systematisation process. The prolonged delays in land systematisation created opportunities for land grabbers to exploit these inconsistencies and to use the disputed plots without authorisation.

Other factors facilitated the final transitions of land. A crucial tactic of slowly dispossessing people of their land, employed by KM, was through the act of fencing. The Angus farms use electric fences to keep predators away from the cows and, at the same time, to prevent the free-range cows from wandering off. Yet, fencing plays another duplicitous role: consolidating land by virtually pushing people out, forcing them to sell. We documented multiple testimonies of people being forced to sell through this tactic. Take, for example, the story of a local man who one day found his land inside the fence of the Angus farm. He is one of the few who took direct action and dismantled the fence surrounding his land. His action was met with threats of violence that he was in a position to resist, as he knew they were bluffing (and had no papers). More importantly, he was a former city hall employee and had good connections, so he felt he could stand up to them. But this has not been the case for others; when people denounce abusive fencing, they are usually offered to swap the land for another in a different location. This swap is usually to the disadvantage of that person whose land is fenced; the land given for exchange is generally of lower quality or in a worse location. This tactic takes away the free space of negotiation and forces a power dynamic.

You no longer have access to your land. They've put up a fence, you don't know how to get there ... this is intimidation. These companies don't respect the law, they don't care about how I feel. (Interview, man, German-Romanian, Hosman April 2024)

In addition, the overall frustrations created by the ever-decaying standard of living in the countryside reignited long-held ethnic conflicts, in which Roma are particularly

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<sup>1</sup>In post-socialist Romania, the legal framework governing systematic cadastral registration is established by Law no. 7/1996. The chaotic circumstances of the first decade after the Revolution led to numerous inconsistencies within the property system. Land title distribution was significantly delayed due to various factors: difficulties in identifying specific plots, overlapping ownership claims, the absence of inheritance documentation, as well as administrative bias and corruption (Dorondel 2016; Verdery 2003). To address these challenges, the National Agency for Cadastre and Land Registration (ANCPI) implemented the I.N.S.P.I.R.E. programme (Infrastructure for Spatial Information in the European Community) between 2015 and 2023. This European directive seeks to harmonise and digitise cadastral systems across EU member states. However, at the time of our fieldwork, the process of land systematisation was still incomplete, with many villages only partially undergoing the systematic registration process.

affected. They are the first to be blamed for not wanting to work the land, yet their apparent unwillingness to work the land has to be put in the context of the long-lasting 'unthinkable' historical injustice that the Roma suffered in the territory of today's Romania (Boatcă 2025). For 500 years, Roma were enslaved, only being liberated in 1856. Being excluded from the land reforms of the 1920s (Tesăr and Matei 2019), the structural lack of land ownership of the Roma was reproduced during the decollectivisation, as land was restituted to previous owners, recreating inequalities existent in pre-collectivisation rural Romania. In an interview with a Roma community leader and mayor's adviser, the persistence of racism was identified as one of the key injustices he believes still affects the countryside:

I deeply regret that, at the local and national level, this racism, this xenophobia exists and persists, and it will never disappear. (Interview, man, Roma, Nocrich, 2024)

## 5. Concluding discussion: pin-prick land grabbing as environmental injustice

In this article, we uncover the 'hidden in plain sight' forms of violence of pin-prick land grabbing, putting forward the need for an environmental justice approach to this phenomenon. We, therefore, contribute to the emergent debate on the less visible, small-scale scattered instances of land accumulation (Borras et al. 2024), showing the structural multilayered aspects of the phenomenon of land grabbing as a complex environmental injustice issue (Busscher, Parra, and Vanclay 2020; Martinez-Alier et al. 2016; Mincyte and Bartkiene 2019). Dispossession needs to be reframed not as a single event but as an ongoing incremental process of erosion of capacity for social reproduction (Chung 2017; Fernandez 2018; Mezzadri et al. 2024). Throughout our interviews, each land sale was reported more as a defeat: each sold parcel seems to reflect the exhaustion of having to deal with working the land. Central to this process are the cumulative losses that gradually pushed locals to sell their land: the loss of infrastructure, the disintegration of community ties, the collapse of food production and distribution systems, and the depletion of labour power.

Against the backdrop of these losses, domestic actors and corporations use different tactics of pin-pricking land, such as illegal fencing, abusive use of land, intimidation or harassment. We see the injustice of pin-prick land grabbing rooted in the way land grabbers leverage and exploit the vulnerabilities of local populations. These tactics target particularly marginalised categories (women, the elderly, Roma, the disabled) who face systemic disadvantages, as they often lack access to resources, legal support, or the ability to work the land. The sense of loss and pain does not only stem from land itself being sold or rented but also from the lack of choice, as the individuals concerned are often questioning the real freedom of the new regime. The illegal/informal use of their land has further deepened the sense of powerlessness among small landowners, as they watch their property being exploited without consent. This adds to a deep sense of humiliation, as landowners find themselves in a position of pleading for what is legally theirs. This exhaustion, both emotional and bureaucratic, often leads them to give up their land altogether, just to escape the ordeal. This layered vulnerability shows how land grabbing is not just a matter of property but also about exploiting existing inequalities, reinforcing a cycle

where the most marginalised are the first to lose access to their land or forests (Iordăchescu and Vasile 2023; Ribot and Peluso 2003).

Moreover, the injustice of pin-prick land grabbing goes beyond land grabbers preying on the vulnerabilities of local populations, it is also responsible for fortifying pre-existing injustices (Busscher, Parra, and Vanclay 2020). In other words, it has contributed to producing the so-called 'losers' of the transition (Anghel 2015). While those who were young, and had the conditions to migrate, were able to escape the consequences of the decay of rural communities and the encroachment of large agribusinesses, the elderly and those without alternative means of livelihood were left behind, facing increasing precarity (Mitrică et al. 2020; Teşliuc, Grigoraş, and Stănculescu 2016). Furthermore, these categories – and especially Roma – have been scapegoated for their own marginalisation and shamed for not wanting to work the land, reinforcing stereotypes of 'the lazy poor' or the 'welfare queen' (Marin et al. 2012; Vincze 2015), in a continuation of racial/state capitalist lack of recognition of their historical exclusion from land and basic rights (Boatcă 2025). Framing land grabbing as a form of environmental injustice allows us to see how 'pre-existing injustices exacerbate the impacts of land grabbing' (Busscher, Parra, and Vanclay 2020, 516).

The scholarship we use here, on environmental injustice, has helped us point out these various historical traumas that are contributing to peasants' marginalisation and alienation from their livelihoods (Anguelovski 2015; Cadieux and Slocum 2015; Velicu and OGREZeanu 2022). An intersectional perspective on rural environmental conflicts (Kojola 2019; Malin and Ryder 2018) also helped us emphasise the unequal distribution of harms and the reproduction of 'sacrifice zones' in the quest for resource extraction, with little or no regard for the human and non-human life (Álvarez and Coolsaet 2020; Zografos and Robbins 2020). However, more research needs to go deeper into the connections between large-scale land rush and the slow, hidden in plain sight structural inequalities that make it possible.

The concept of 'environmentalism of the poor' (Martinez-Alier 2002; Nixon 2011) supports our intention to visibilise pin-prick land grabbing as the 'thousand cuts' that damage a just, sustainable and convivial interdependence between marginalised subsistence communities and their environments. The changes brought about by land grabbing throughout the landscape and local economy result in immense (in) tangible losses (Busscher, Parra, and Vanclay 2020; Dunlap 2020; Padiaditi and Moquay 2022; Velicu 2020). Land grabbing is part and parcel of what may be called a dimension of prospective environmental injustice that is rarely discussed: even before any extractive harm is being done, communities are damaged by land alienation and the loss of social fabric (Velicu 2020). Therefore, a justice approach to land grabbing allows for more consideration of the small-scale, less visible but prospective dangers and normalisation of harms against workers in rural areas continuously rendered as surplus (Li 2011).

What seemed a matter of free choice is a hidden pattern of both structural drivers for land abandonment and coercive practices, which work as two sides of the same coin: one making smallholders unable to subsist on the land, the other making dealing with these disputes unbearable, which renders land ownership a burden. In this article, we show how the phenomenon of pin-prick land grabbing reproduces historical injustices and exacerbates existing forms of exclusion. The loss of land, as our respondents express, is not just

the loss of a material good or even of an intangible value associated with a traditional way of life for which they grieve (Velicu et al. 2026 *forthcoming*). The implication of the leitmotif 'we had no choice' is political: such loss reflects the experience of disempowerment, part of the violence of pin-prick land grabbing we wished to illustrate in this article.

## Author contributions

CRedit: **Irina Velicu**: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Ioana Savin**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Valer Simion Cosma**: Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing; **Ioan Sebastian Brumă**: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – review & editing; **Minodora Sălcudean**: Conceptualization, Resources, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

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