

# Flattened under the supermarket steamroller

Divided and disorganised as they confront the supremacy of the supermarkets, Romania's small farmers could well face extinction. For years now, chain stores have been taking hold at the very core of the food markets, engulfing the activity of the small, independent fruit and vegetable producers. These small growers have had no other choice than to conform to the standards imposed by the large chains in the hope of selling their products. Those without the resources to adapt face the prospect of impoverishment or even extinction. In the meantime, the supermarkets are seeking to capitalise on an "authentic", local and organic farming image.

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Journalists

Like predators encircling their prey, various supermarket chains are closing in around the market in Obor. Whether it's the French supermarkets of Auchan and Carrefour, or the Belgian retailer Mega Image, they have blatantly set up shop in the immediate vicinity of Romania's largest food market, located to the east of the capital city, Bucharest.

Steluța (57) casts her mind back to 2016, the year when Veranda Mall was built right next to Obor, where she has been selling her fruit and vegetables since 1990. The new shopping centre would become home to a Carrefour hypermarket covering 10 000 square metres and operating in direct competition with her. "Our sales have declined since then, and we have had to drop our prices," she reveals without showing the slightest bit of anger or resentment. "People would rather go over there because it's warm," adds Elena (54), who runs a fruit and veg stall next to Steluța. Both women

have an overwhelming air of resigned inevitability about them.

It is certainly cold inside the market, even though the rolling shutters encasing the market area are down, preventing the damp and icy wind from blowing through the 4 000 metres-squared ground-level space which accommodates some 400 fruit and vegetable stalls like those run by Steluța and Elena. We are standing in Obor Market's new building; it was built in 2010 to take over the market's activities from the old hall, which had more charm but was in a state of disrepair. The two upper floors are warmer and more comfortable, comprising around a hundred small market pitches for cheesemongers, butchers and other small artisan food producers, as well as space for a pharmacy and, for example, shops selling household products. By and large, this market complex does not have a great deal to envy in the neighbouring Veranda Mall or Carrefour. That said, everyone is cold here

on the ground level. It may well preserve the fruit and vegetables, but it takes its toll on the men and women who sell them. It means that you have to keep moving.

Steluța is on her feet for 12 hours a day, from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., mainly standing still. She eats standing up and leaves her stall only to visit the toilet. "Our legs really ache," she complains. While her husband, son and daughter-in-law attend to their small hectare of land in Băleni, 80 kilometres from Bucharest, she takes care of selling the produce in Obor. It would be more difficult and less profitable to sell her fruit and vegetables in Băleni, given that many families out in the country — unlike the city dwellers — farm their own small plots of land. Not to mention the fact that prices in Bucharest are higher than out in the provinces.

She returns home only once a week, on a Saturday evening, and returns to Bucharest on the Tuesday morning. During the week, she rents a room in an apartment

near Obor which she shares with another seller from Băleni. "We can't go back home every evening, because of the transport we'd need. We are better off paying the 20 lei [4 euros] and sleeping here," Steluța explains. After a hard day's graft, the women cannot even look forward to returning home to their families. They don't make much money. The summer months bring their advantages, with more produce and more customers, and although they are still on their feet 12 hours a day, at least they do not have the cold to deal with. Today, very few customers are coming past their stalls. To look at them, you would think they were some kind of endangered species, the small producer practising semi-subsistence farming,<sup>1</sup> who does not make sufficient sales to invest, save or contribute towards his retirement and who will have to work until he dies, unless his children can afford to take care of him.

### Accepting the hand you have been dealt

"We aren't afraid of poverty," Cătălin begins. Listening to his story, it is easier to understand Elena and Steluța's apparent approach of accepting the hand you have been dealt without fuss, keeping out of the politics and shying away from any fight. A member of the Roma community, this stout 62-year-old owns three and a half hectares of land in Covasna (250 kilometres from Bucharest) and has sold his potatoes, carrots, onions and corn for the past 22 years at the market in Drumul Taberei, a neighbourhood located on the other (west) side

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<sup>1</sup> Semi-subsistence and subsistence farms are generally defined as small, family-run farms which meet the family's own food requirements and supply to the market on a limited scale only.

of Bucharest. "God willing, we can produce 60 tonnes per hectare. When the weather is bad, we get only 20 tonnes. If the markets were to open only at the weekend, like in France or Britain, we would rear a few more animals, we wouldn't starve to death. I was born poor, I will die poor." His farm work, which is more closely connected with the elements than with the state authorities (with whom he has an almost non-existent relationship), his faith in God (shared by the vast majority of Romanians), his food self-sufficiency, and being his own boss all give him a degree of independence. The help he receives from his six children, whether toiling in the fields in Covasna or sending a little money from abroad, as in the case of four of his children, supports a self-sufficient way of life of which he is proud and which seemingly conveys the message of their not needing anyone and managing on their own.

However, as the conversation progresses, it becomes clear that life has become harder over the years. "Ten years ago, I was selling five tonnes of potatoes a week. Since the supermarkets have shown up, I need two months to sell the same five tonnes," he explains. A Mega Image supermarket has also been built at Drumul Taberei market. And not just nearby; right in the middle. Cătălin also refers to how habits have changed. "Before, people used to stock up in large quantities. Now, they take three potatoes, a stick of celery and two carrots: just enough to make a soup. And young people don't come to the market; it's mainly the old who come." In the past, he would sell all his produce here, but that is no longer possible. To survive, he had to diversify, which meant making sales across the whole region and selling to wholesalers who would, in turn, sell at the markets in Brașov, albeit at a lower price than in Bucharest. But why not sell to the supermarkets? "You would need more land and storage facilities to be able to guarantee sufficient and constant supplies of produce each month." A further concern is that, like most small farmers, he has no protection: no unemployment or proper retirement provision, and he will be eligible for the minimum pension only (700 lei/140 euros).

### "The smallest will disappear"

Back to Obor, where, standing just a few dozen metres away from Steluța and Elena, Mihai (47) and Roxana (45) are faring a little better. This couple from Văleni, some 130 kilometres from Bucharest, purchased

enough land to leave subsistence farming behind and expand their activity. They use their five hectares to produce between 150 and 200 tonnes of apples, pears, plums and potatoes per year. They have been selling their produce in Obor since 1995, but they also sell to a wholesaler at a lower price per kilo.

They are, to some degree, self-sufficient, as they have a cow, pigs and chickens for their own consumption in addition to their fruit and vegetables. However, they are much more critical of the system than the other people we have spoken to: "Since the supermarkets arrived, sales have plummeted, and producers are suffering. The smallest will disappear. The market is saturated with imported products, there's no room anymore for local producers. The big chains are on a mission to eradicate us, one by one," Mihai speaks out. "The products coming in from overseas create unfair competition because we don't benefit from any subsidies. For my five hectares, I've received 500 euros this year in subsidies from the APIA [Agricultural Payments and Intervention Agency]. What's more, I've paid out 6 000 euros in tax to the state."

To resolve this issue of "unfair competition" from overseas, a law was passed in 2016 requiring at least 50 per cent of the stock on hypermarket shelves to be sourced locally. The AMCRC (Romania's association of supermarkets and large chains) referred the matter immediately to the European Commission, arguing that the law was introducing unfair conditions, that the market should remain free and that it was wrong to stipulate that a particular quantity of products must come from a particular country. The European Union agreed, and the legislation has since been blocked, the Romanian Parliament not venturing to draft new legislation on this issue. "European regulations on food security have dealt a significant blow to traditional agricultural production practices in countries like Romania," explains anthropologist Monica Stroe. "Their transposition into national law has driven a large segment of small producers and semi-subsistence farmers out of the market completely."

This year, Mihai and Roxana are removing one of their plantations, which they have tended and harvested since 2001/2002, and turning it into a modern plantation, thereby enabling them to farm it using modern methods. "If you don't mechanise, you end up with a shortfall in your workforce," Mihai explains. At a time when tens of thousands of Romanians are leaving each year for western Europe to do

farm work in the wealthier countries, there is a severe workforce shortage in the fields of Romania. Some sections of the work cannot be mechanised, but they somehow manage to find labour, although they do most of the work in the fields themselves, with the help of their son, who is currently studying agronomy. They are hoping he will carry on the family business. They work for eight months in the fields and four months at the market. Time is of the essence: the apples have to be sold by the spring because they cannot be in both places at once. Here, they too are on their feet for 12 hours a day. Mihai does not have a back problem; he has been working since the age of 14 and, he assures us, "my body has adapted", but Roxana has a slipped disc. A few years back, she wanted them to stop farming and do something else for a living. They argued about it. "We'd invested, we couldn't just stop," Mihai explains. "We'd bought land, tools, machinery, a warehouse, 40 per cent with our own money, 60 per cent with European funds. Right now, we are getting back what

we paid in, and our profit will be reinvested. You have to expand to be able to handle foreign competition. Otherwise, your business will disappear."

### The necessity of self-reliance

Mihai and Roxana feel that they have been abandoned. "The system doesn't help us. At the local elections [in September 2020], the candidates pledged to provide an anti-hail station. However, once they were elected, they did nothing. The authorities won't get involved; in fact, they even derail our efforts. Sometimes you get the feeling that they are seeking to destroy local small producers."

Is this laissez-faire attitude on the part of the authorities an expression of their institutional failure or of their undeclared strategy for modernising Romanian farming by increasing the speed with which the smallest and the weakest will disappear? To Mihai's mind, small farmers' concerns

play second fiddle to the interests of governments, multinationals and supermarkets. Compared with the food industry giants, small farmers have a meagre financial presence on the market. Yet there are a great many of them: Romania is Europe's most rural country, with 46 per cent of its 20 million inhabitants still living in the countryside. According to Eurostat, in 2018, some 23 per cent of Romanians were working in the agricultural sector, figures that far exceed the statistics for Bulgaria, Greece or Poland. This will be no surprise to the farmers, informal workers, day labourers and small-, medium- or large-scale farmers. The small-scale fruit and vegetable producers among them can be counted in their tens of thousands.

↴ Many people of retirement age continue to work in very difficult conditions. Photo: © Florentin Cassonnet



However, when asked about the trade unions that safeguard their rights, they struggle to give an answer. Elena does not even understand the concept of the trade union and it has to be explained to her. "There was an attempt to create an association to organise our workers formally 10 years ago, but it didn't work because we couldn't find a common denominator. So we all have to be self-reliant," Andrei (36), a potato and cabbage farmer in the village of Lungulețu, concedes. "Producers have too many differences, we can't all be categorised in the same way," explains Ionuț (24), another producer in Lungulețu. "We are treated differently depending, for instance, on the standard of our businesses, our wealth and the number of hectares we have. I farm seven hectares, but another farmer might have thirty hectares, another might have fifty, and another one just two hectares. Some of us are producers and intermediaries, whereas others are just producers. Some have six tractors, others have just one."

This self-reliance is enhanced by another key feature of the trade, which is its poker game-like nature, and the thrill that induces. "There are some bumper years when you can make lots of money, and you develop a

↓ **The commercial centre Veranda, which houses a Carrefour, was established in 2016 right across the road from the Obor market.**  
Photo: © Florentin Cassonnet



## *The majority of small producers use toxic substances while ignorant of their correct usage and their own safety.*

taste for it," Ionuț explains. "You put money in, and you don't know how much profit you'll make. You can win five or six times your stake, or you can lose the lot, like at the poker table. Then, you go from town to town with your lorry load of produce. You call traders to find out the prices locally and you go wherever the prices are the highest. You can sell your produce in three hours, two days or a week. There is no security, it's a lottery. You just have to keep going with your fingers crossed."

### **A struggle to organise**

Ștefan Nicolae confesses that there is a particular individualistic mindset among small producers inasmuch as they think they can get by on their own. However, the president of AGROSTAR, Romania's National Federation of Farmers' Trade Unions, believes structural issues in particular to be behind the lack of any organisation to protect the rights of these farmers. "A trade union organisation needs a proper budget, and therefore monthly membership payments, which is a complicated matter when you are

dealing with small producers and their low incomes. Of course, without financial support, you cannot develop an organisation that will endure in the long term, with a president and experts to resolve economic, social or legal problems, and which offers professional services to its members." Organisations have been set up and they have worked for a short while in response to specific grievances — but then they go into "hibernation".

Nonetheless, the trade is crying out to be formally organised, primarily because working conditions are problematic. "The majority of small producers use toxic substances while ignorant of their correct usage and their own safety." By a certain age, many of them have fallen ill. "They need an occasional medical check-up as well as health and safety inspections because they also work with all manner of new farming equipment without always knowing how to use it properly." This leads to accidents.

Moreover, there is the supermarkets' monopoly to consider. "We are in an uneven battle against economic giants. Sadly, we don't have the capacity to fight them as we don't produce enough to meet demand all year round, which is why produce is imported from overseas, and we are not formally organised." As far as Ștefan Nicolae is concerned, "the supermarkets have become the divine power". They lay down all the conditions and decide from whom they will buy. "You have to sell at a very poor price through intermediaries or go to the market where you spend 12 hours a day in the cold to sell your goods. But we are the ones to blame, the producers, because we didn't see that we have to be organised first if we are to beat this monopoly and acquire bargaining power."

### **Marketing cynicism?**

While small farmers are losing a little more ground each year to the major supermarket chains, these chains are stepping up their initiatives to include the fruit and vegetables grown by the local small producers in their product ranges. For example, Mega Image has launched its "Gusturi Românești" label,



↑ Roxana and Mihai cannot escape the remorseless law of the market: those who do not adapt disappear. Photo: © Florentin Cassonnet

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Carrefour is working with Cooperativa Agricola and Creștem România BIO, and Lidl and Kaufland have also begun promoting local small producers on their shelves.

Have they finally woken up to the fact that their aggressive strategy towards the traditional markets has damaged the already impoverished social fabric, or are

they merely adopting a new "greenwashing" marketing strategy, seeking to capitalise on an "authentic", local and organic image of farming? "Today, in the wake of the many health-related scandals that have erupted in Europe, consumers are increasingly concerned with ensuring the traceability of products and short supply chains," anthropologist Monica Stroe comments. "Relying on small-scale farming imagery, the food industry — in essence a multinational, faceless industry — is striving to create an image for itself with which everyone can identify and which is both locally rooted and trustworthy."

However, Mihai explains: "it is very hard for producers like us to get our produce into the supermarkets". With his five hectares, he is, in fact, in a better position than the likes of Steluța, Elena and Cătălin. "We have to separate the produce, wash it, wrap it in a special, costly wrapping and transport it... If they find two or three apples with a slight blemish in one load, they send the whole shipment back. We also have to complete loads of paperwork and satisfy a number of control measures to be granted approval. And don't forget that, as most of us don't have the means to supply the same quantity of produce throughout the year, we have to go through an intermediary." In

practice, a large proportion of small farmers cannot fulfil the conditions — based on European regulations — imposed on local producers by the supermarket chains.

And yet this is still the objective, regarded as the be-all and end-all for the small producer. Those who can will thus need to adapt to the supermarkets' requirements. "Production will go from strength to strength. We have many fertilisers, all manner of technology to assist us, but it is becoming increasingly costly to invest, with fewer and fewer opportunities for making a profit if your business is not a critical size," Andrei predicts. His strategy is to take out leases on other land in addition to the six hectares he owns in order to boost his production, in the hope of selling to Mega Image's "Gusturi Românești" product line. Ionuț likewise wishes to invest in order to bring his business up to the required standard and sell to the supermarkets without having to go through an intermediary. "I've seen how business is done, how it works, how you transport, how you prepare. I have the land; all I need now is a warehouse and a contract." And what if he is dealt a losing hand in this new game of poker? He smiles and, ever the optimist, remarks: "We can live our lives rich or poor, it doesn't matter." ●