



CHAPTER

6

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HERBS, HEALTH AND POLITICS

 MÓNIKA PAKOT

“Why would you pick a place like this for a European gathering?” asked a journalist, gazing around our small Transylvanian village, host to Forum Synergies’ second European Herb Gathering in 2018. The assumption was clear: European gatherings of this nature

should take place in the spaces we associate with ‘Europe’ i.e. urban, Western centres. Even key decision-making about rural issues and rural lives are often made far from rural areas. But for me, sustainable rural development needs to be grounded in the real-world experiences of rural

communities, the rural population needs to be seated at that table. When thought of like that, the village of Lupeni is actually the ideal place for a gathering such as this one.

Transylvania is a mountainous terrain, a fact which spared it from much industrialised agriculture:



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heavy machinery would struggle to negotiate the rocky outcrops, steep slopes and tricky access to remote areas. This meant that the ancient, abundant woodland and rich biodiversity were kept largely intact. The area is home to small-scale, mixed agriculture focused on using traditional practices. *“Don’t have all your eggs in one basket”* is a concept deeply rooted in the mentality of the peasants. This careful cultivation preserves both natural and cultural heritage and maintains the delicate harmony between humans and the natural world.

COLLECTIVISM VERSUS SELF-SUFFICIENT COMMUNITIES

In Romania, the harmony between humans and nature has often been disrupted by politics. Between 1940 and 1962, the communist regime expropriated farmland *‘en masse’*. Private property was limited to household farms and collective and state farms became the primary landowners. It was a forced collectivisation: my uncle was told that he would lose his teaching position unless his family gave up their land. He did not have a choice. As small farms disappeared, the way and quality of farming changed.



Collectivists cultivated the land in large teams. Individual incentive was limited and so the quality of the farming and care for the natural systems in which it operated was limited.

The tight-knit, self-sufficient communities in rural areas became a problem for Nicolae Ceaușescu, general secretary of the Romanian Communist Party. In 1970, under the *‘systematisation of the territory’* programme he forced an aggressive industrialisation of the countryside, including some parts of Transylvania. That resulted in the destruction of villages, the demolition of houses and the uprooting of people. Families were moved into towns and put into small flats. Local oral histories tell us that elderly people began taking their own lives, in their own homes, fearful of the forced evictions.



1a. 1b. 1c. European Herb Gathering 2018 in Lupeni, Transylvania



2. Orchard with traditional fruit varieties and vegetables

“For many, living off the land enabled them to survive the political insecurity of the transition years.”

**Journey
through time**



STABILITY IN UNSTABLE TIMES

When I was a child, Romanian city dwellers had to queue up for hours each morning just to get basic food. From the start of the 1980s, meat, oil and sugar and later bread and dairy was rationed, as food was in short supply. In the countryside, things were quite different. We had an orchard bearing traditional fruit varieties with various vegetables and grains growing between the trees. Cheese and milk we made from our grandparent's sheep and cows, and we would gather medicinal and aromatic plants for teas and ointments. The food was fresh, simple and delicious.

The Romanian celebration of food and the shared meal finds its roots in that time. When relatives and friends from the city visited us, our table boasted rich pickings. We would

prepare the food for several days to celebrate religious holidays, or births, marriages and deaths. Life under communism was tough but eating together was a way to forget the past and ignore the future. In those moments, only the present existed. This kind of feasting together made the grey everyday bearable - you were alive because you had eaten!

The communist regime fell in 1989 and with it, Romanian industry too. Those who had been forced off the land and packed into the small urban flats, had the chance to return to their villages and reconnect with their rural heritage. For many, living off the land enabled them to survive the political insecurity of the transition years: if communities were able to produce their own food, they did not have to rely on a crumbling state and fragile economy for their food provision - they would be safe.

NEW OPPORTUNITIES AND NEW THREATS

The threats to human-nature harmony are not a thing of the past, however. In recent years, the fragility of this relationship has again become clear as reckless development and rapid modernisation has taken hold on much of rural Romania. Corruption, illegal logging, and land grabbing undermine stable development. Even today, many farmers have not had official ownership of their land returned such that, even if they are eligible to it, they cannot access EU subsidies. Many of the roughly 4 million small farmers have very little or no money for developing or stabilising their farms.

At the same time big investors, teaming-up with local and national

politicians, are buying up vast tracts of land to use as investment funds. Increasingly, land is under the control of non-farmers who are interested in maximising their profits from natural resources. Romania's accession to the EU opened this land also to foreign investors, who profit from the comparatively cheap land prices.

A study by the Transnational Institute in 2017 has shown that around 5,3 million hectares of agricultural land belong to foreign nationals. That is 40% of the total Romanian agricultural area of about 13,3 million hectares. Small farmers with very little capital cannot compete

with such entities.

What can we learn from these decades of political upheaval and change? There is some stability in *'tradition'*. When we hold on to our traditional practices of cultivation and our traditional knowledge, we are better able to look after ourselves and each other. We need to think about progress and development beyond the limited frameworks of modernisation, industrialisation and globalisation. Here in Transylvania we want to support a rootedness and connection with our natural surroundings and value our traditional knowledge-holders.

"Increasingly, land is under the control of non-farmers who are interested in maximising their profits from natural resources."



European Herb Gathering

3. Logo of Forum Synergies' Rural Actors for Health Programme



A EUROPEAN HERB GATHERING

Memories of these times flooded back to me as I prepared for the [European Herb Gathering](#). This emphasis on good hospitality is still very much alive in my community, a desire to share food and share space. So we decided to host our guests in the family-run guest-houses of my local village. Enabling the participants from 14 European countries to really connect with the local population and support the local economy enacted a key philosophy of Forum Synergies. Besides, I wanted to introduce our guests to 'zakuska', an eggplant and paprika spread, 'palinka', a traditional fruit brandy and 'csöröge', a typical fried cake of the region. All these products have a story, having survived the darker days of communism and expropriation of the peasants, eating them connects you with the impact the communist regime had on our relationship to the land and the natural world at large.

I work with the [Foundation for Quality of Life](#), an organisation dedicated to mapping and preserving

traditional knowledge of sustainable rural living. We save traditional seeds, collect local knowledge related to medicinal and aromatic plants, support small-scale farming and help to develop small businesses and cooperatives. Whilst working to save traditional fruit varieties, I met the Forum Synergies team in 2010 as part of the '[Farmers' Ecology](#)' programme. Here the emphasis was on identifying and exchanging traditional farmers' knowledge.

MEETINGS GROWING COLLABORATION AND FRIENDSHIP

Simone gathers local, traditional knowledge about plants and their health benefits whilst running her own business in the Lesachtal, Austria. You will meet her later. *"The topic of herbs was already in my heart for quite some time,"* she recalls. *"From the moment I started my own small herbal business I was aware of and limited by all the strict regulations which forced me into legal 'correctness' but which didn't care about the quality and healing potential*

PEOPLE!



It all started more than 10 years ago. As a nutritional scientist, **Karin Buchart** became curious about the traditional use of herbs for healing and cooking in Pinzgau, Austria, the region she comes from. Collecting knowledge was not enough. She is the founder of the association **TEH** (Traditionelle Europäische Heilkunde) - a project that puts herbal products based on this knowledge on a regional market. This initiative has become a success story, involving quite a number of actors and generating additional income opportunities.



4. 1st European Herb Gathering, Lesachtal, AT, 2012

of my products. I was curious to learn more about the situation in other countries." We met back at Philippe's place in 2012 where we realised our shared enthusiasm for herbs. Straight away we decided to build something together.

Simone and I thought "Let's gather all those working in the field of medicinal and aromatic plants across Europe. Let's find out what they are doing, how others are making a living from producing, processing and marketing herbs and how we can support our small herb producers. Let's find out about the legal frameworks within which these small businesses have to operate. Let's reconnect consumers with local herbal products and the traditional knowledge which helped produce them." That very same year, we launched the first European Herb Gathering in Lesachtal, Austria as part of the Forum Synergies programme *'Rural Actors for Health'*.

"Let's reconnect consumers with local herbal products and the traditional knowledge which helped produce them."

RURAL ACTORS FOR HEALTH

A bit of an homage to the holders of traditional local knowledge about the potential of aromatic and medicinal plants mixed with the awareness of the increasing threats to that knowledge. The 1st EHG - European Herb Gathering (2012, Lesachtal, AT) sought to bring together those local holders, actors on the political level and/or actors involved in other NGOs in order to enable a constructive exchange about challenges and needs in the herbal sector and business. The diversity of more and more strict legislative requirements in different countries was easily identified as one main driver for insecurity and finally giving up of mainly local, female actors to stay in or start a small business. In 2018, the 2nd EHG in Romania, the contribution of herbal activities to sustainable rural development was in the focus of the workshop. Practical exchange on options of how to deal with the legislative framework ended up in lively discussions and a positive spirit that solutions can be found. The planning of the 3rd EHG has just started and hopefully a next meeting will take place in 2020.



KNOWLEDGE - RURAL, POPULAR, SCIENTIFIC - WHAT COUNTS?

The first European Herb Gathering was a resounding success and I left with real energy to follow this path of herbs further. I began to identify the key people in my region who still hold traditional knowledge of medicinal and aromatic plants. These are usually elderly women who we found did not even really consider themselves as knowledge-holders. Their knowledge was experientially gained, handed down from generation to generation. This cycle has been disrupted; the traditional ways no longer believed. With the passing away of these women, we feared we would also lose the knowledge they hold.

I made a film with a friend called 'Traditional Herb Therapy in Odorhei Region' to try and hold on to this. We wanted to bring this rural, folk, supposedly non-scientific way of

knowing out of obscurity and into the attention of the public. Not only was this a way to preserve this knowledge, it also proved to be evidence to the women themselves that their knowledge was culturally valuable. We won the audience award at Mediawave International Film Festival in 2014. People were interested.

TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

I began to host herb workshops to hand this herbal knowledge onto others. We tried in particular to attract and support low-income families who cannot afford health insurance. Sharing this knowledge about collecting and using medicinal plants would help reconnect them with nature and be active in their own healthcare provision. This is the important thing: traditional knowledge is free. It does not require payment

to large pharmaceutical companies or the state, it is not something that only those with more money can have access to. No, it allows people to act autonomously; communities can care for themselves. This does not need to operate outside of health insurance but can work alongside it. Others who came along were young mothers, keen to ensure the health of their children, and rural women interested in starting small herbal businesses to increase the family income.

We began to see how herbs are related to bottom-up sustainable rural development: harnessing traditional herbal knowledge can increase the health and wellbeing of often disenfranchised rural communities as well as supplementing the income of individual households. Knowledge is stable, it cannot be taken away, despite political changes. It does not need top-down funding or permissions. It allows people to look after themselves and each other.



OPPOSITE

5. Women, holders of herbal knowledge, main focus of the film 'Traditional Herb Therapy in Odorhei Region'
6. Mónika Pakot handing on traditional herbal knowledge

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7. 8. Training on herbs and their processing by Foundation for Quality of Life

TOWARDS A EUROPEAN NETWORK OF HERBALISTS

The first European Herb Gathering was a success, so much so that it left us with many more questions and things we wanted to explore. In particular we wanted to examine how we might think of herbs as a common good and to unpick and

translate the European and national legal framework and its implications for those working with herbs. To build a network we needed more than one event, we needed to create systems of cooperation and co-learning. This is how I came to host the second European Herb Gathering in my own small village in Transylvania.

Important in these gatherings is that everyone brings their own skill-set

and set of experiences and is willing to get stuck in. It is not about us teaching people but about learning together, from one another and moving forward collectively. One way we did that is through the Market of Initiatives where some participants share what they are working on. For example, Grégori Lemoine from the French NGO *FloréMontois*, shared how this organisation uses walks and ethnobotanical courses to help people better understand the wild edible plants of the Diois mountains. We also heard from Roland Teufel, a young herbalist, permaculture- and forest gardener from Austria who offers workshops for children and young people. For him it is important that this knowledge is passed on to the younger generation.

"It was exciting to meet so many different people with the same interests and to exchange findings and experiences with people from other countries," said Magdolna Pakot, a

MARKET OF INITIATIVES: SHARING PROJECTS

Markets of Initiatives are gatherings with time for informal exchanges and small working groups. We offer an open or a clearly defined theme or agenda. We give the floor to all participants. They may present their projects or initiatives in their own way, have their own stands, show videos, make speeches like on a marketplace. Everyone is allowed to walk around, gather information, participate in discussions, or exchange publications, products and contacts. During a Market of Initiatives participants may choose how much time they wish to spend at each stand or project.

local herbalist, *"Sometimes you could feel the vibration between the people when they talked about their work with herbs. At other times you start to speak and the other person already knows how you're going to finish your sentence."* Finding out how other people are tackling similar issues can provide ideas of where work is still needed. For example, local participants were annoyed to find out that compared with other countries in the EU, Romania has no national strategy for medicinal and aromatic plants. They felt that regulations in Romania are more rigid than in other

EU countries with a lack of financial support and state recognition for those working in this area. For many, working with herbs can thus only be a hobby. These realisations emerge through exchanges.

SOLIDARITY GROWS AT DINNER TABLES

The *'systematisation of territory'* programme I mentioned earlier generated a wave of protests outside Romania. In 1988, the Opération Villages Roumains Association was founded in Brussels. In only a

few months, this initiative grew to unexpected proportions and similar movements were created in France, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Sweden, UK, Italy, Spain, Norway and Denmark. Their plan was to adopt all 13,123 villages in Romania in order to protect them from destruction. It was an astonishing movement and a beautiful example of inter-European solidarity – witnessing and aiding those in need. This is what the European project at its best is all about. In a smaller, simpler way, this kind of solidarity is what Forum Synergies tries to foster in its



"As the local host, the gathering felt to me like a big family meeting."

European gatherings, whether the focus is herbs or forests or farmers' knowledge. By assembling from all corners of Europe, we are confronted not just with our shared interests but also with our different struggles, for example that Romania is far more rigid in its herbal regulation. With the knowledge and experience of these different struggles, we are better able to support each other, a real grassroots network of rural

actors. What an exciting prospect for sustainable rural development.

Even more exciting is that this solidarity can be built over dinner tables. As the local host, the gathering felt to me like a big family meeting. We prepared our best food and most beautiful places, to share our lives and lifestyle for some days with our visitors. We wanted to share stories of the past in order to shape a more wholesome future together.



9. Market of Initiatives during the 2nd European Herb Gathering
10. Traditional way of drying herbs

THE TRANSYLVANIA EXPERIENCE IN A NUTSHELL

When we think about solidarity in these terms the journalist's question at the beginning of this chapter - *"why would you pick a place like this for a European gathering?"* - seems even more absurd. The rural world is not an apolitical space. We are directly affected by policy often constructed very far away from us. But we are also taking our livelihoods into our own hands.

By learning from our forebears, taking the traditional knowledge that particularly the elderly members of our community hold, we are able not only to preserve our cultural heritage, but also to help build resilience.

Through Forum Synergies we have been able to begin building a network of people working with herbs right across the continent. The European Herb Gatherings have been a space to share experience, information and ideas and support one another. It is a way to value, hold on and

pass on our traditional herbal knowledge.

In Transylvania, the countryside has often been far more stable than the cities, despite the political turbulence of the twentieth century. This stability is in part because we have maintained our traditional practices, our small-scale agriculture, our fragile, quiet harmony with the natural world and our hearty enjoyment of good hospitality. Should you make it out to these parts, I'm sure you would find yourself most warmly welcomed.



