

From peasant agriculture to collectivization and forced industrialization during the communist period through land dispossession: a piece of history, present status and outlook in Turceni region, Romania

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Abstract

The process of collectivization and industrialization in communist Romania that took place between 1949–1989 led to radical political, social, and economic changes. In the countryside, peasants lost their lands that became the property of the communist state. Some dispossessed lands were used for the construction of large-scale industrial projects such as coal-fired power plants. This was the case when land was needed for the construction of the Turceni Thermal Power Plant located in southern Romania.

Our study follows the general development of the historical and socio-economic situation of the communist period. In addition, we focused on the perception of dispossessed people regarding the status of owned or inherited lands, the process of restitution through the application of post-communist land reforms, the current situation of dispossessed lands, the forms of protests, and of the existence of the degree of attachment to the agricultural land.

Keywords: *peasant agriculture, land dispossession, collectivization and industrialization, land recovery, Turceni Thermal Power Plant, Romania*

Introduction

Coal-fired power plants are large-scale installations that require land for their construction and expansion. Their construction and expansion have occurred many times by dispossessing landowners, leading to a series of protests against these projects (Camisani, 2018; Temper et al., 2020).

In the African continent, in South Africa, numerous communities living near coal-fired power plants and coal mines have been dispossessed of their land (Cock, 2019) and the process of dispossessing agricultural land for bio-fuel production has faced opposition from landowners in rural areas who depend on these lands for their livelihood (Akinbami et al., 2021).

In Asia, there are cases when the land at the location of coal-fired power plants have been appropriated through expropriation. In India, coal mining is associated with the dispossession of land, expansion of coal mines, construction of thermal power plants throughout the country, as well as the exclusion of social injustices and the associated loss of livelihoods in the local population (Lahiri-Dutt et al., 2012; Lakhanpal, 2019; Roy & Schaffartzik, 2021). Land in the village of Hempur, Jharkhand, India, was acquired through coercive practices for the construction of a power plant rather than for mining (Lahiri-Dutt et al., 2012). In Andhra Pradesh, in central India, an area of 1350 acres of land was acquired by expropriation, which was not only needed for the location of a refinery, but also for a coal-fired power plant and a colony for dispossessed and

displaced villagers. Interestingly, the purchased land was fertile and suitable for agriculture for the villagers (Os-karsson, 2013). In certain situations, beyond the importance of some regional investments and employment opportunities, as was the case with the construction of the Rampal power plant in southwestern Bangladesh, land grabbing was done by dispossessing the poor agrarian population (Hossain et al., 2015; Mahmud et al., 2020).

In Poland, a country whose energy base is based on coal, is faced with land use conflicts, namely enforced displacement, land dispossession, and patrimony deprivation (Markuszczyńska, 2021a). Large mining-energy projects that include coal mining and coal-fired power plants face NIMBY-type opposition from the agricultural population (Markuszczyńska, 2021b).

In Romania, such situations, generated by the dispossession of agricultural land for the purpose of building and expanding some industrial, respectively energy projects have not been elaborated to date. Therefore, we address the following research questions:

Q1: What is the historical and political framework of land dispossession during the communist period?

Q2: How does peasants' perception of the process of dispossession differ?

Q3: What is the current situation of the dispossessed lands?

Theoretical background

Land dispossession and land grabbing

In specialized literature, two synonymous terms are generally used (Andreas et al., 2020; Jahnavi & Satpathy, 2021; Korfiati, 2020): land dispossession and land grabbing (Borras & Franco, 2010). They are used for cases where states force people to give up their land or the resources that they own or use. Land dispossession is an extensive process that results in displaced populations and destroyed livelihoods, and it occurs worldwide (Korfiati, 2020). It is more often observed in the south, but it also occurs in the global north, developed on account of capitalist relations (Franco & Borras, 2013; Hadjimichalis, 2014). Land grabbing is a concept that was coined in the 2000s and highlights the rush for land, water, forests and other common property resources (Borras & Franco, 2012; White et al., 2012) in the context of the food, energy, and climate change crises (Borras & Franco, 2012) or 'the capturing of control of relatively vast tracts of land and other natural resources through a variety of mechanisms and forms, carried out through extra-economic coercion that involves large-scale capital, which often shifts resource use orientation into extraction, whether for international or domestic purposes' (Nyantakyi-Frimpong & Bezner Kerr, 2016, p. 4). Large land acquisitions were made in different countries in Africa, Asia, and South America for the development of mining projects, production of food and biofuels, or conservation of some areas to mitigate climate change (Jahnavi & Satpathy, 2021). Land grabbing is considered a *'necessary cost of development'* (Satpathy, 2021, p. 43).

Land dispossession is closely related to the conversion of common property into private property following land grabbing (Jahnavi and Satpathy, 2021), and land grabbing is *'the appropriation of land and homes without the due process of law or unjust application of law, and sometimes even inappropriate, opaque and unjust laws'* (Carter and Harding, 2015, p. 100).

In rural India, for example, Levien (2013) stated that most of the forms of manifestation against accumulation through dispossession were done for the construction of dams, slum demolitions, Coca-Cola plants, and power plants.

Land attachment

The term place is a complex concept to interpret, strongly influenced by a series of physical, economic, and social realities (Easthope, 2004; Massey, 1995), and it is the subject of numerous scientific debates. Places *'are also interpreted, narrated, perceived, felt, understood, and imagined'* (Gieryn, 2000, p. 465), and man can have a biographical, spiritual, ideological, or narrative relationship with a place (Qingjiu & Maliki, 2013). Man develops a positive emotional relationship with a place (Scannell & Gifford, 2010), the attachment to which is based on the interaction between emotions, knowledge, beliefs, behaviours, and actions (Proshansky et al., 1983). Place attachment manifests itself at both the individual and group levels and is influenced by the age and socio-cultural characteristics of individuals (Giuliani & Scopelliti, 2009; Scannell & Gifford, 2017). As Harvey (1996, p. 301) stated, *'attachment to place is an integral part of being in the world'*.

A specific form of place attachment is the sure and deep attachment of a farmer to his land (Burja et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2021), but historical, political, and imposed economic needs create favourable conditions for the dispossession of the land, which determines the breaking of the social relationship between peasants and their land (Bose, 2020). As owners of agricultural land, farmers: *'live, work, recreate, and socialize on their farm... and farms are locations with history, symbolic meaning, and repositories of emotion'* (Quinn & Halfacre, 2014, p. 118).

The instability and uncertainty of today's (Massey, 1995, p. 48) increasingly dynamic world consisting of multiple transformations and conceptual and structural resettlement imply a stronger emotional connection of man to his place (Easthope, 2004). In post-communist Romania, the economic and social organization as well as personal and family interests have profoundly changed people's thinking and emotional baggage concerning places, which is felt more and more in the rural environment as well.

Materials and methods

Study area

The town of Turceni is located in the region of Oltenia, in the southern part of Gorj county, at 44° 40' 59.99" lat N and 23° 22' 0.01" long E (Fig. 1).



Figure 1: Geographical location of the TTPP: in Romania and Gorj county (a.); Turceni Energy Complex (TEC) (b.)

Turceni had the status of a village, but the massive investment in the thermal power plant caused the population to grow and it was eventually declared a town, following the application of Law no. 83/April 5, 2004 having 856.16 ha of urban land and 7037 ha of extra-urban land. There are some 8300 residents living in the town, according to the data provided by the Gorj County Community Directorate for Registration of Persons, with 5120 households and 7698 dwellings. The town is located at an altitude of 122 m and has a total area of 7893 ha and a longitudinal shape determined by the vicinity of the Jiu River.

The Turceni Thermal Power Plant (TTPP) together with the Rovinari, Jieț Nord, Jieț Sud, and Tehomir Mine lignite coal deposits, which account for 95% of the coal deposits in Oltenia (Anastasiu et al., 2018; Popa & Predeanu, 2018; Tomescu et al., 2022), make up the TEC. The TEC is the largest energy complex in Romania (Racoceanu et al., 2016; Tătar, 2018) and one of the largest in Europe (Gav-

rilescu & Cioboiu, 2021). The location of the TTPP was determined by the close proximity of the previously mentioned coal mines. The construction of the TTPP started in 1973, and it began operating in 1978 (Popa & Predeanu, 2018), when it had an installed power of 330 MW and gradually increased so that in 1989, it reached 2310 MW which provides about 10% of the annual electricity consumption in Romania (Tomescu et al., 2022).

Research methods

The present paper relies on extensive field research conducted in two close communities: Turceni and Ionești. We used a nuanced approach of mixed methods (Finney, 2021; Hooijen et al., 2020), questionnaires, interviews (sit-downs, walking, and telephone inter-views), mass media and photography. A flow chart of the sources and methodology applied are presented in Figure 2.

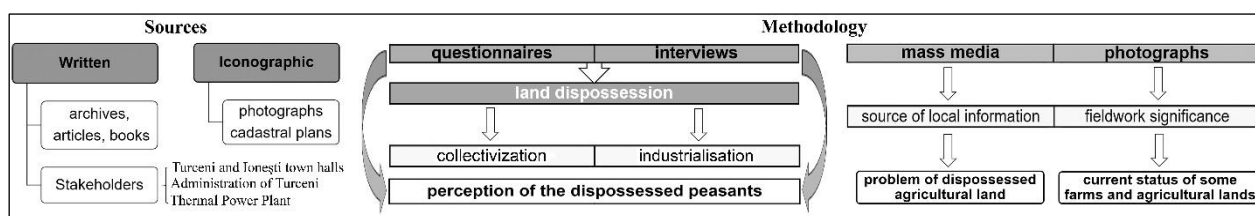


Figure 2: A flow chart of the sources and methodology (detailed in the text)

Questionnaire and interview design

For the first case, those questioned and interviewed were selected according to the identification of the so-called key informants, who included the persons whose lands were dispossessed, and in their absence, their direct heirs. For the second case, former and current mayors of the Turceni town hall and some public officials of the same town hall were the key informants. We focused our methodological approach on several key elements, grouped according to the performed analyses, as follows: the importance of the TTPP to the residents of the area; the periods of land acquisition, the dispossession process during the communist period, and the current status of the lands dispossessed by the communist regime, owned by right or inherited; the current situation of repossession; forms of land recovery (protests as well as requests submitted to the town hall and other competent authorities); forms of compensation; and the transmission by inheritance to future generations and giving up of the land.

All questionnaires and interviews were recorded and translated into English, and all participants consented to the questionnaire and interview, respectively.

In May 2022, we applied 230 questionnaires to the residents of the TTPP area, to the people who live in the town of Turceni, and to the residents of the Ionești commune. The questionnaires were applied face to face at the people's homes, thereby avoiding group discussions (Clifford

et al., 2010; Yang et al., 2017), even though restrictions related to the Covid pandemic in Romania had been removed in April. When building the questionnaires, we used simple, easy-to-understand formulations and closed-answer questions to identify point perceptions of the inhabitants living in the area of the TTPP, as well as semi-structured questions that gave the respondents the opportunity to specify deeper aspects of the land recovery process.

The interviews gave us personal and in-depth information about two dual processes: on the one hand, the dispossession of peasants from their main source of livelihood (land), and on the other hand, the efforts to recover land in the current post-communist context. We used the semi-structured interview (Leech, 2002; Longhurst, 2010; Noy, 2023) to encourage the interviewees, residing in the town of Turceni and the commune of Ionești, to express their opinions and argue the statements, with the aim of obtaining answers that would confirm the issue of land being lost for the TTPP and to discuss the recovery of this land. We conducted a total of 20 interviews in June 2022, each lasting between 40 and 60 minutes. Of these, 12 (60% of the total) were sit-down interviews (Evans & Jones, 2011; Irvine et al., 2012), and were conducted in the households of the interviewees, considering the comfort offered by their respective homes as well as the fact that many of the interviewees were elderly. These interviews gave us the opportunity to specifically discuss the context of land loss, economic and social context of the

70s, and the sudden shift from peasant agriculture to a deeply industrial typology and efforts of the interviewees to later recover their land during the post-communist period. It should be noted that, in order to obtain a complete picture, we conducted interviews with some officials directly involved in the land recovery process, former mayors, current mayors, as well as some public administration officials, and some members of the TTPP. Walking interviews are being increasingly used in qualitative research (Mason, 2021; Sheller & Urry, 2016) and highlight the connection between an individual and a place (Evans

& Jones, 2011). We conducted 4 walking interviews (20% of the total) due to the desire of the interviewees to show us the areas of the lands that belonged to them and their families but are currently an integral part of the TTPP. We also conducted telephone interviews (Block & Erskine, 2012; Musselwhite et al., 2007) with 4 people (20% of the total), considering that they refused face-to-face meetings owing to the Covid pandemic as well as to protect their personal identity. They are shorter in duration and cost less (Irvine et al., 2012). The characteristics of the questionnaires and interviews are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Questionnaires and interviews

Period		Survey Sample								No. of questions	
October 1 - November 1, 2021		Gender		Age		Study level					
		52% male		16.2% people < 40 years old		17.1% women - primary education				15 close	
		48% female		49.5% people between 41-65 years old		14.7% men and 8.6% women - middle school				9 semi-open	
				34.3% people > 65 years old		31% men and 20% women - high school				1 scaled	
						5.2% men and 3.4% women - university					
				20 Interviews		face to face - 12 sitdowns interviews - 4 walking interviews - 4					
Period		Age		Primary school		Middle school		Studies/age group		University	
November 2021		15-30,		male female		male female		High school		male female	
		15% < 40 years old						male female		male female	
		45% between 41-65 years old						3 2		3 1	
		40% > 65 years old				1		1		4 2	

First source of local information

Mass media is the first source of local information (Lester & Hutchins, 2013) and is a force of political mobilization which 'serves as a conduit to social context by relaying key information about social conditions to citizens' (Martin, 2008, p. 180). Mass media help citizens defend and promote their opinions (Eskens et al., 2017; Zalupca, 2016) and can influence the final outcome of disputes (Sobczyk & Badera, 2013; Taylor et al., 2000). Although, in Romania, conflicts related to land are mentioned in the mass media, they do not appear in official statistics due to the low interest of authorities in keeping records of conflicts (Rusu et al., 2011). Five county newspapers (romani-libera.ro, pandurul.ro, igj.ro, gorjeanul.ro and gsd.ro) were chosen as a news archive, using the following keywords: dispossessed lands. The variables were the name of the newspaper, name of the article, and date of publication.

Fieldwork photograph significance

Moreover, to view some of the dispossessed lands that now belong to the TTPP and to verify some answers result-

Until the establishment of communism, Romania had been an eminently rural country (Bejtja & Bejtja, 2014), such that the ownership of agricultural land was an old aspiration of peasants and was achieved specifically after

ing from our investigations that indicated the abandonment of some houses and households, as people were no longer interested in the land, we conducted a field trip and investigation in the south of the town of Turceni, using photography for the geographical aspect of the fieldwork (Davies et al., 2019; Sidaway, 2002). This research method demonstrates the excellent association between geography, fieldwork, and photography (Schwartz & Ryan, 2003). Photography provides accurate representations of real situations, is a useful resource for researchers, and 'can deliver a powerful descriptive message' (Rose, 2008, p. 155). To evaluate some variables from our database, we used the dichotomous and trichotomous scales (Bogliacino et al., 2022; İlker et al., 2011). In this regard, we considered the perception of the surveyed respondents on the dispossession process and distance of the dispossessed lands from the TTPP.

Results and discussion

A top-down paradigm shift: from peasant agriculture to collectivization and industrialization

the land reforms that took place after the First World War, in 1921 (Table 2). A retrospective look shows us that in 1930, around 77-80% of the country's population of 18 million was made up of peasants (Iordachi and Dobrinu,

2014; van Meurs, 1999); in 1948, they still represented 75% of the total population (Stanciu and Mihăilescu, 2018). The collectivization of agriculture that occurred between 1949–1962 was extremely unpopular (Gürel, 2014; Wolz et al., 2020) and was recognized as a means of political control rather than as a lever for economic development (Fitzpatrick, 1996), as it was considered a form of abusive dispossession of land which led to the most radical transformation of village life, production agriculture, population flow, social relations, and means of living (Irimie, 2014; Verdery & Kligman, 2011). During the 1945–1989 period, the so-called Marxist model of the country's development was applied in Romania, which focused on abusive collectivization of peasant agriculture and the forced industrialization (Bański, 2017; Cucu, 2022); hence, 94.2% of the country's agricultural heritage was collectivized (Bański, 2017). The process itself (see Table 2) led to a radical change in the country's economy, the creation of the centralized economic planning system, and the totalitarian

domination of the communist party (Bogaerts et al., 2002; Săgeată et al., 2021). Industrialization began by achieving either new industrial objectives or expanding the existing ones by attracting labour from the countryside (Săgeată et al., 2021). During the period between 1965 when Ceaușescu came to power within the Communist Party and 1989 when the December Revolution took place, large industrial facilities were built and involved a high consumption of raw materials, energy, and economic costs, as well as inefficient production (Bărbieru, 2015). In this context, thermal power plants based on the use of coal were the most important economic objectives and energy sources during the communist period (Boștenaru-Dan & Boștenaru-Dan, 2021). The TPP is a very good example of the conversion of rural land for industrial purposes (Zhao, 2009) that involves dispossession, poverty, and even pauperization, as it was the case with the large energy constructions and mining operations in Romania (Velicu, 2019) and also globally (Li, 2010).

Table 2: Main stages of the collectivization and industrialization process in Romania and in particular in Turceni area

No. crt.	Laws/historical event	Legislative clarification and its impact
1.	The agrarian reform from 1921	the expropriation of a part of land surfaces belong to landlords and the transfer of ownership to peasants who did not have the means of livelihood, which led to them living under difficult conditions
2.	Law no. 186/1945	abolishment of estates, still leaving the right of the boyars to own up to 50 ha of land
3.	Decree 83, 1949	nationalization of all lands owned by the boyars, and the establishment of State Agricultural Farms. This year, nobleman Alexandru Calotescu-Neicu had his property confiscated, and his family was arrested
4.	1961	the forced cooperativization of agriculture; peasants were forced to register all the land they had, including animals in their households, under the State Agricultural Farms. there were two Agricultural Production Cooperatives in the Turceni area, one in the village of Turceni and the other in the village of Gârbovu, covering over 500 ha of land
5.	Decree no. 226 and Decree no. 76, during the 1964–1972 period	lands from Oltenia region were transferred to the ownership of the Romanian state; there were also land use changes for some areas in Gorj county (no longer agricultural use) the installations of the TPP would occupy 485 ha of the arable surface of the Turceni commune, which occurred during the period of 1971–1980
6.	Law no. 58 and 59/1974	No possibility for citizens to buy land; surfaces were removed from the civil circuit and could not be alienated by sale-purchase or donation; only through legal inheritance could the ownership of land be transferred.
7.	Land fund law no. 18/1991 and Law no. 10/2001	guaranteeing the right of ownership over land or other assets and the obligation of the authorities to make amends for the damages caused by the abusive takeover by the state

There were two dominant ideas of the communist collectivization period: *„state-led dispossession and state dominance in land tenure and land use”* (Zhang, 2018, 2). Large areas of land were nationalized, small ones were collectivized, and Agricultural Production Cooperatives (A.P.C.) were established (Bański, 2017) (see Table 2). After the end of the Second World War, between 1949–1962, the region of Oltenia, where Turceni is located, like the entire countryside in Romania, entered the abusive sphere of collectivization (Lățeș, 2009). This process, conducted according to the model of the Stalinist kolkhoz (collective farm) (Hall et al., 2015; Tauger, 2004), led to the removing of rich farmers, portrayed as parasitic and reactionary (Cousins, 2022) and to the destruction of the peasantry as a class from a social, political, and moral perspective owing to the imposition of the single party and the communist state (Avram & Osiac, 2005). It was only in the mid-70s that the industry, which went from a slogan to a myth,

became the most important economic sector in Romania, the countryside holding still 29% of Romanian workers (van Meurs, 1999). During this period, large industrial investments were made (Ianoș et al., 2010; Irimie, 2014), especially in the energy sector, when new coal mines were opened and expanded and hydropower and thermal power plants were built (Colesca and Ciocoiu, 2013). Thus, around the time of the Revolution of December 1989, the state socialist sector in agriculture represented 90.7% of the entire agricultural area of Romania (Banciu, 2018). Considering the conditions of relief, soil, and climate, Oltenia currently has a large agricultural potential (Bălțeanu et al., 2013; Mocanu et al., 2018), accounting for approximately 79% of the total area, of which 68.5% is arable land.

In the Oltenia region and implicitly in our study area, in a complicated historical and political context, determined by the interwar period and more specifically by the end of

the Second World War and the period immediately following, the process of collectivization and industrialization took place in many stages (see Table 2). The installations of the TTPP planned for the period 1971–1980 occupied 485 ha of the collectivized arable surface of the Turceni

commune, which had belonged to peasants. Later, another 700 collective ha were occupied by the specific constructions of the TTPP as well as for the ash pit (G.D., 60-year-old, economist, ex-mayor of Turceni) (Fig. 3).



Figure 3: TTPP and the expropriated lands on which the access roads were built and expanded

Source: authors (2022, 2023)

The communist state was the owner of all the land in the area and gave the land for the TTPP -for its construction and expansion... until the Revolution, the agricultural areas of the Turceni commune, as it was then, covered more than 7700 ha; however, they did not belong to the people, but to A.P.C. - and to whom the management considered it necessary to give to, such as the TTPP (D.D., 77-year-old, retired civil servant). It should be noted that the lands were first collectivized, ending up being used by the TTPP through expropriation, and the peasants were, thus, dispossessed of their lands. This is an example of the unfair application of the communist law (Carter & Harding, 2015), that of collectivization, and dispossession without recognizing the right to compensation (Petrescu-Mag et al., 2017), for the purpose of grabbing land by the TTPP and as a cost of energy development (Pařšová et al., 2021; Satpathy, 2021).

An overview of land dispossession and the difficulties of their recovery

The former owners were involved in the recovery process, and, in their absence, their direct heirs. The difficult and long-term land recovery process was carried out by only 120 farmers (57.1%) out of the total of 210 investigated. The process lasted between 2 and 15 years. Sixtyfour persons (53.3% of the those who applied) still do not have an answer from the authorities. The other farmers ($n=90$, 42.9% of the total of 210 surveyed farmers) have not yet applied for retrossession owing to various reasons: they cannot find the property documents, they have difficulties in reconstructing the old agricultural areas, and bureaucracy of public officials (Fig. 4).

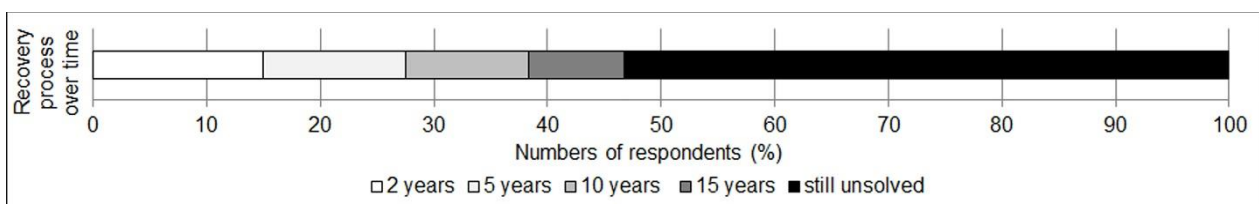


Figure 4: Duration of the agricultural land recovery process (the analysis refers only to the number of farmers who submitted the documentation for land recovery)

In this regard, the respondents mentioned that they have land located at various distances from the TTPP. Regardless of the distance, just as in other situations

(Yennetti et al., 2016), the respondents unanimously declared that the land represents their life and the means of subsistence (Mihalache & Croitoru, 2011) from generation to generation (Fig. 5).

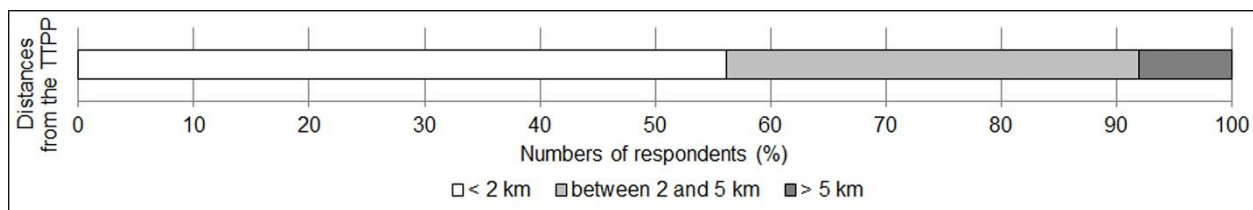


Figure 5: Distances from the TTPP

Land expropriation started with the implementation of Decree no. 226 and Decree no. 76, during the 1964–1972 period (see Table 1) when the peasants still had agricultural land, and continued to prevail during the 1971–1980 period, when the design and decision regarding the construction location of the TTPP took place, according to all the respondents.

According to the respondents, the dispossession of land was an abuse on the part of the state institutions,

while other people strongly argued that the taking over of land represented an economic necessity and an opportunity for the development of the region (Fig. 6a), as was also mentioned for the coal quarry nearby in Roșia Jiu, Romania (Bora & Voiculescu, 2021) or for the reservoir on the Danube river at Porțile de Fier – *Iron Gates*, Romania constructed for energy purposes (Văran & Crețan, 2017).

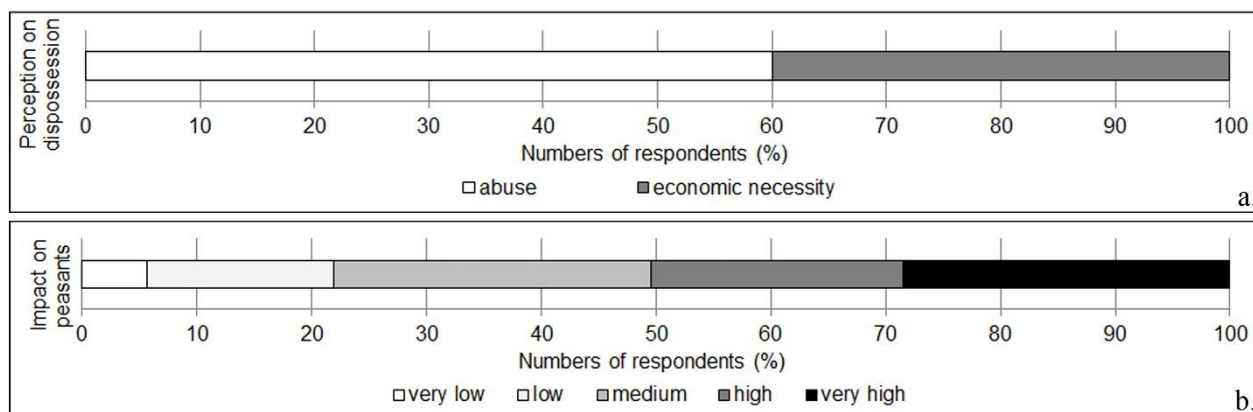


Figure 6: Abuse or economic necessity (a) and effects on the peasants by the loss of agricultural land (b)

In such situations, people attached to their land generally oppose dispossession (Baldwin et al., 2017; Young et al., 2018), but the process was inevitable considering the area's energy project represented by the TTPP. Similar situations are found in other areas (Yennetti et al., 2016) where the loss of agricultural land is compensated for by the promises of economic development in the area. The Romanian communist state, being totalitarian, thus exercised its coercive power to accumulate land through dispossession, coercion being an essential element of the strategy of the communist ideology (Adamson, 2007; Șerban, 2014).

Forty-six people (21.9% of the total respondents) appreciated that their life quality was affected to a small or very small extent by the loss of land, 106 people (50.5% of the total respondents) were affected to a large or very large extent, while 58 respondents (27.6% of the total respondents) appreciated that they were moderately affected by these abusive land acquisitions (Fig. 6b).

In general, the forms of protest in the energy industry, for example the extraction of coal, the presence of thermal power plants, renewable energy, and wind power projects (Lakhanpal, 2019; Roy & Schaffartzik, 2021) are de-

termined by the acquisition and forms of land dispossession (Chakravorty, 2013; Lahiri-Dutt, 2012; Lesutis, 2024) and are part of ecological justice (Martinez-Alier et al. 2016). The taking over of land from the local community can generate conflicts or manifestations in the form of protest by some of the affected people, in front of some institutions, aiming to express the degree of dissatisfaction using measures deemed as abusive. However, in our case, only 10 people questioned (4.7%) were aware of public protest actions taking place in front of the TTPP, the town halls, or the prefecture, and 5 people (2.3%) participated in protest actions, confirming to a lesser extent the involvement of people in these forms of manifestation of dissatisfaction in areas with activities related to the energy industry (Frantál, 2016). The low involvement, similar to other former countries in the communist bloc (Mamonova, 2015), was attributed to the 45 years of communism (when protests were prosecuted), the aging of the rural population (17.7% of rural residents are over 60 years old in Turceni and 19.2% in Ionești), the fear of repercussions and frustration with the authorities; according to Mamonova et al. (2020, p. 6): *“rural protest groups remain mostly fragmented and only informally linked, which limits their ability to challenge the status quo”*.

The interests of the residents affected by the loss of land were not defended by any organization or association of the former owners, a fact highlighted by all the people

we interviewed. Instead, the situation of land loss was presented to a certain extent in the mass media (Table 3), as reflected by the answers of 7 (3.3%) interviewees questioned.

Table 3: Articles in the local press, regarding the problem of land being dispossessed for the TTPP but also in some nearby villages

Online newspaper	Publication date	News title
www.romanialibera.ro	22.08.2022	Octopus of soils at the Turceni Energy Complex
www.pandurul.ro	31.07.2021	Mayor: we want to take over the land from the CEO. There are large surfaces
www.igi.ro	27.11.2014	Property titles for all the locals of Turceni
www.gorjeanul.ro	15.09.2016	On hunger strike for a land located under the ash pit from Ceplea
www.gsd.ro	28.09.2007	Jilț career, strangled by real estate interests

The people questioned also provided answers regarding their intentions for using the land if they were to recover it: the main use would be for agriculture, some

would leave the land as an inheritance, some would use it to build a house or farm, and others would sell the land (Fig. 7).

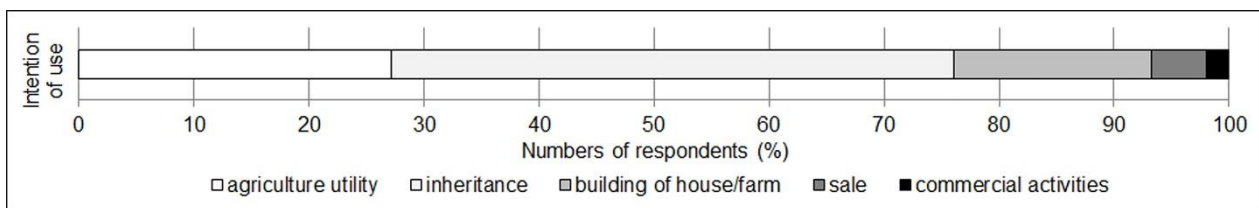


Figure 7: Intention to use the agricultural land



Figure 8: Abandoned houses (a. and b.) and abandoned households and agricultural lands (c. and d.) in the southern area of the city of Turceni

Source: authors (2023)

Most people were attached to their lands, and the attachment becomes stronger once the concept of exclusive possession is understood, that is, if individuals are granted the right to use the land according to their requirements (Devine-Wright, 2011; Graybill, 2013; Markuszewska, 2021b).

The second group of respondents mentioned that they bought land from former owners or heirs on the basis of documents drawn up and signed in the presence of witnesses, but in the absence of neighbours to certify the dimensions of the plot. They have not yet received the right of ownership because of the bureaucracy, but especially because of the lack of supporting documents at the Turceni City Hall. We can say that, in this situation, the former landowners and their heirs no longer feel attached to the

land nor have an emotional connection with the rural environment in the sense shown by Markuszewska (2021a) even if they have spent their entire lives in this environment, which should strengthen the feeling of rural attachment.

The third group of respondents mentioned that they are no longer interested in recovering the land, considering that they are old and they no longer have the financial and technical means to work the land, their children have changed their lifestyle, and are looking for better living conditions either in the bigger cities in Romania or in other European countries. This confirms what Rusu (2002) mentioned about Romania-that about 55% of the country's agricultural area is owned by the elderly or by people who do not live in the countryside. However, the disinterest

and abandonment of land when leaving the village is specific to Central and Eastern Europe, resulting in the depopulation of villages (Pașakarnis et al., 2013). The young people who left completely lost contact with the places of origin of their parents and grandparents and also lost the opportunity to strengthen ties with the communities they come from (Berry et al., 2015; McCuaig & Quinn, 2011). We identified these situations in the southern part of the town of Turceni, where there are houses, households, and abandoned lands that no one cares for anymore, as well as in the village of Ionești (Fig. 8).

Controversies and ambivalent attitudes of land dispossession and restitution

Testimonies and regrets of former owners and their descendants

The conducted interviews highlighted the big problems of land dispossession and the efforts to recover them. Peasants from the villages of Ionești and Turceni owned land since the beginning of the last century, after the 1918–1921 land reform (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2003; Petrescu-Mag et al., 2017), after the expropriation following the Second World War, from 1945 (Lakatos, 2014; Lup et al., 2018), but also through acquisition according to law 308/1953:

'these lands belonged to the people, because some had lands after the Agrarian Reform of 1921, then the law 308 of 1953 obliged the boyars to give the lands to the peasants, as was the case with the mother-in-law of the boyar Calotescu-Ruxandra Bolintina-or Dinu Stolojanu, Păunescu' (D.D., 77-year-old, retired civil servant);

'my mother had land given by the Calotescu boyar... the land belonged to my family... a few decades ago, I think after 1920, my family had plots in several places here' in the area (D.V., 53-year-old, engineer);

'my in-laws had two plots of land, one of about 40 ares and another of about 50 ares' (L.D., 50-year-old, teacher);

'some residents acquired large areas of land through the appropriation of those who participated in the war after 1945 and through the donations of some lands made by the boyar Calotescu' (N.I., 64-year-old, retired teacher).

The plots were inherited from generation to generation, thus strengthening the status of these lands (van Dijk, 2007; Zhllima et al., 2021), confiscated for the TTPP:

the land belonged to my mother ... she had received the land from her parents (A.M., 57-year-old, accountant); my parents had land received from their maternal grandparents (E.D., 83-year-old, retired farmer);

applications have been registered at the Agricultural Registry since 1991 for the recovery of inherited land (G.D., 55-year-old, driver)

we acquired the land from our parents who are no longer alive... if during the communism the land was taken by A.P.C., we lived without having the right to it...but it's

people's land, inherited from their parents, why not have it now? (M.E., 62-year-old, retired teacher).

The general perception of the residents affected by the loss of land is that there was an abuse on the part of the state authorities – residents were forced to sign that they agreed to give up the land in exchange for some family members being employed at the TTPP or simply to apply the policies of the Communist Party, without taking into account the interests of residents and specific needs of the local community:

they promised that, if they gave the land, they would employ the youth at the TTPP. You didn't really have anything to do, it was an obligation, you couldn't oppose the communist party... (D.V., 53-year-old, engineer);

at that time, there were certain constraints such that you, the mayor, could not lead the TTPP that employed your people (I.D., 67-year-old, retired engineer, former mayor);

people's plots of land were used to build the TTPP (E.D., 83-years old, retired farmer).

People definitely regretted the loss of lands, as it can be seen from the answers of our interviewees:

my plots were good; I had good harvests; I had pasture and vines; more than 1 ha was arable land (D.V., 53-year-old, engineer);

my children can have this land; it's up to them what they will do with it, but at least I know that I left them something that is rightfully mine (M.E., 62-year-old pensioner, former teacher).

The sadness associated with the loss of land is obvious, since it was the main or only source of income for the people; moreover, people were attached to their lands and to the agricultural community of the area (Urry, 2016), the agricultural land being passed down from generation to generation as a heritage with deep roots in families (Markuszevska, 2021b).

Those surveyed and those interviewed mentioned that their heirs (children of former owners) gave up, resigned or showed disinterest due to the difficulties of obtaining possession:

the children, if they want to search further, it is their job; however, now a lot has changed; they can no longer work the land (D.V., 53-year-old, engineer);

our children are not going to tie their heads anymore...they have made a living in the cities, further away; they are no longer walking around the land (M.E., 62-year-old, retired teacher)

my children were told to quit because they don't need the land (N.I., 64-year-old, retired teacher).

Some respondents have highlighted the fear: *many quit because, you see, maybe it affects their job; the main job is the TTPP (A.V., 48-year-old, medical assistant).*

Although they made many attempts to recover their lands after 1989, many of the peasants did not succeed to the lack of cooperation, bureaucracy (van Dijk, 2007), cumbersome administration, and loss of the title deeds:

in our family, the mother kept trying to take possession of the title to a plot of land of over 50 ares (5000 square meters) ... before the year 2000, she first submitted an application to the town hall... there are many trails to be made for documents; you don't always find cooperation... many people have given up on asking for a property title or the land for which they already have been given the title; it's too much confusion (A.N., 38-year-old, teacher);

it was very difficult ... people submitted applications to the City Hall, a committee was formed, then further steps were taken to the county committee, and from there, those who received approval went further to the national committees from Bucharest (D.D., 77-year-old, retired civil servant);

after the Revolution, around 1990–1991, I applied to the Turceni City Hall for repossession... either in the city of Craiova or they sent me to the Archives in the city of Tg. Jiu (D.V., 53-year-old, engineer);

requests have been registered at the Agricultural Registry since 1991 for the recovery of inherited lands (G.D., 60-year-old, economist, former mayor of Turceni);

some 20–30 years ago, there were over 100 requests from residents within just a few months. They all received approval, but they were all rejected by the capital city (D.D., 77-year-old, retired civil servant);

I keep making trips to Archives in the city of Tg. Jiu for possession, but it is taking a long time and I don't know if it will be resolved (T.A., 50-year-old, energy expert);

so far, we have not been able to recover our land... requests have been made for many years to the town hall, to those at the TTPP, but we do not receive any solution or any answer (M.E., 62-year-old, retired teacher).

Yesterday and today, an arch over time - the role of the TTPP in the economic development of the area. Although they lost their lands, some dispossessed peasants appreciated the achievement of communism through the construction of the TTPP, a situation similar to the coal mining in Rosia, nearby, where some of the peasants who lost their lands for the benefit of the expansion of the coal industry appreciated the communist achievement (Bora & Voiculescu, 2021). Despite all these problems associated with recovering land and putting the old owners or heirs in possession, the opinion of those interviewed is that the presence of the TTPP is beneficial in the area:

It has helped develop the whole area. Through jobs, people had more money, schools built, and everything that is now (I.C., 78-year-old, retired teacher);

the influence of the TTPP on the socio-economic development of the town is large; the TTPP had and has a very important role, contributing to the payment of taxes and fees monthly—quarterly to the local budget—and at the same time, being the main entity that offers jobs (G.D., 60-year-old, economist);

the TTPP, through the fees and taxes paid to the local budget, contributed to the development of the commune, being the main workplace of the inhabitants of the Ionești commune (R.C., 76-year-old, retired teacher)

the TTPP is the main source of income for many of the inhabitants of area (T.A., 50-year-old, energy expert).

It was observed that the job opportunities offered by the TTPP benefitted many residents, even if they could not compensate for the loss of agricultural land, thus contributing to the precariousness of the means of livelihood (Yennetti et al., 2016).

As in other cases, the TTPP should have granted compensation to those affected by the project (Noy et al., 2023, p. 2) and only to those with property titles. Despite all the efforts made, the people who were wrongfully dispossessed of their land succeeded to a very small extent in getting their land back, and in most cases, they were compensated with derisory amounts:

they paid very little, like 1300 lei for a pogon, which is very a little; (A.V., 48-year-old, medical assistant);

monetary compensations... could hardly be offered (D.D., 77-year-old, retired civil servant);

I can say that, until the year 2000, no compensations were granted; there are property titles, but the changes in the legislation and the fact that the residents did not establish an association for carrying out expropriation and compensation actions meant that, until now, nothing is resolved (I.D., 67-year-old, retired engineer, former mayor).

There were also singular situations when owners or legal heirs received some compensation: *approximately 100 residents received very small financial compensations for their 30–40-acre areas (R.C., 76-year-old, retired teacher).* This form of compensation was also found in the responses of those questioned. A former official of the town hall (D.D., 77-year-old, retired civil servant) testified that *until the end of 2006, almost 300 property titles were issued for an area of almost 350 ha of land, including forests; in order for you understand what we are talking about, there were two title deeds for 75 ha of forest... but many problems remained unsolved...* All land restitutions are natural rights (Csongor, 2009; Elster, 2004) and have symbolic, moral and cultural importance (Șerban, 2017). Former owners who accepted financial compensation for dispossessed land (Stan, 2006) found that it was insufficient, as in other parts of the world, such as China (Zhao, 2009). In contrast, 300 people who received property titles did not receive dispossessed land.

The energy company was not actually interested in offering compensation to those dispossessed of land. Although several forms of restitution are known (Hartvigsen, 2014), in Romania, the main approach was the restitution of land to the former owners (Hartvigsen, 2014; Swinnen, 1999), *"full direct and specific, and within historical boundaries"* (Thelen, 2005, p. 26–27), in the present case, the monetary compensation option was applied to a lesser extent. According to field investigation and interviews at the town hall and with many of the dispossessed, approximately 700 families were dispossessed, which means that a bit over half (57.1%) benefited from either compensation or property titles.

Weak protests; fear and disinterest

The transition from one property system to another has occurred through tension, protests, and violence (van Meurs, 1999; Lakatos, 2014; Zhang, 2017). The TTPP is a form of economic capital created and owned by the totalitarian Romanian communist state that promises a better life, as shown by Lesutis (2024). According to the literature (Bourdieu, 2003; Žižek, 2008), the type of symbolic violence that takes place through language is a prerogative of discourse; the word usually stands for forceful human destruction of property (Valentić, 2016) and was specific to the period of land dispossession of the peasants. The use of violence through discourse in propaganda monologues and meetings generated consent for the new regime established in Romania (Adamson, 2007; Avram & Osiac, 2005). In the same context, the creation of the TTPP is an expression of symbolic violence (Lesutis, 2024) in which dispossessed peasants become elements of submission-exposure of the dispossession process. Ana Pauker's speech is eloquent in this sense; at the Regional Conference of the Communist Party in Bucharest on 15 August 1945, Pauker, the undoubted communist leader of those times, said that peasants must be trained in the process of cooperative agriculture and that it was important to have A.P.C. (Lakatos, 2014). The power of a non-democratic regime, such as communism, influences the type of violence it uses, which is stronger in the initial phases of establishing and consolidating the regime (Andriescu, 2012), land dispossession, and the collectivization process as defining elements of the justification of the institutionalisation of the regime. Unlike other areas in Romania where peasants protested against collectivization (Andriescu, 2012; Petrescu & Petrescu, 2007), in our study area, land expropriation did not attract protests and riots for fear of reprisals and deportations, although the peasants were not convinced of the benefits of collectivization (Andriescu, 2012; Avram & Osiac, 2005). On the other hand, the so-called work of persuasion or rather persuasive coercion must also be taken into account, with the peasants being manipulated and convinced of the superiority of collectivization, thus obtaining the pro forma adherence of the peasants rather than their active persuasion (Verdery, 2011).

Only after 1990, the dispossessed people sought justice: *everyone inquired about it; I didn't hear that there were any protests... those who wanted their land back, each went to the town hall* (D.V., 53-year-old, engineer);

some even lost the processes with the TTPP and, for this reason, the locals got a little scared (E.C., 65-year-old, retired teacher).

In these particular cases, non-involvement can be observed (Frantál, 2016), either because of carelessness, because some people are employees of the power plant, the major places of industrial employment being in rural areas (Li, 2010; Velicu, 2019), or because they do not want to disturb the local authorities.

However, the lack of protests can be justified from another perspective. The strategy of the communist authorities was based on highlighting the economic necessity of implementing the energy complex on collectivised lands, which were subsequently ceded to the TTPP. Thus, trust in the institutions of the communist state that would favour the social acceptance of energy as an element of regional economic development has increased (Yenneti et al., 2016). Moreover, the TTPP employed many farmers who enjoyed stable jobs even if they lost their traditional means of livelihood related to agricultural land.

Unlike other situations, for example the forms of protest in the Czech Republic (Frantál, 2016), in this case, the forms of dissatisfaction only led to the initiation of legal procedures and lawsuits for the recovery of lands and not to the establishment of an association to represent the interests of the dispossessed:

people gave up too easily in recovering some rights; only a few individual actions were taken in the courts. Some even lost the lawsuits with the TTPP and, for this reason, the locals were a bit scared (E.C., 65-year-old, retired teacher);

the inhabitants did not establish an association for carrying out expropriation actions (I.D., 65-year-old, retired teacher).

This confirms the poor development of civil society in Romania (Ilovan et al., 2022; Mungiu-Pippidi & Dusu, 2011), primarily because during the communist period associations were practically forbidden, and agricultural cooperatives were not forms of free association, but state-controlled.

Social justice, heavy and delayed process

At the time of land dispossession and its transfer to the construction of the TTPP, the issue of social justice was not raised, considering the regional economic importance of investment in the energy industry at that time. Even in different historical periods, the current problem has been similar to other problems worldwide (Levien, 2013; Nilsen, 2010). The appearance of the TTPP affected the livelihoods of more than 700 families. The loss of land through dispossession and collectivization in a predominantly agrarian area became a state policy in Central and Eastern Europe (Cucu, 2022; Petrescu-Mag et al., 2017); the problem of social justice appeared much later after the Revolution of December 1989. The restitution and restoration of private property lost through expropriation was part of land reform (Law no. 18/1991) and the social justice policy of the Romanian government (Blacksell & Born, 2002; Hartvigsen, 2014; Triantis, 2018). After decades of communist ideology, the Revolution of December 1989 broke egalitarian barriers. In Romania, an institutional and coherent framework was created for the retrocession of collectivised lands and ceded to a TTPP. However, the process is still cumbersome, unstable, and has long delays due to socioeconomic interests and of the communist ideology still present, focused on egalitarian dogma (Rusu et al.,

2011), even if the land context allows appropriate compensatory mechanisms in other parts (Yenneti et al., 2016). Unfortunately, the situation regarding property and the right to it from the period of collectivization and industrialization, as well as the current situation of land, owners, and heirs, largely prevents the goals of equity and social justice from being achieved. Therefore, the land reforms that came into force in 1991 (Cartwright, 2017; Dabu & Aligica, 2020; van Meurs, 1999) remain a never-ending story in Romania (van Meurs, 1999).

Typology of rural households

The cumbersome system of land retrocession and the fulfilment of land reform, and implicitly of social justice, created a certain structure for agricultural households. Following field research, we identified three household categories. The first category is agricultural households, comprising people who work in agriculture and want to recover their dispossessed lands on which they can carry out agricultural activities or which can be bequeathed for the same purpose. There are also pluriactive households owned by people working in both agricultural and non-agricultural activities, and who want to build houses. The third category is represented by inactive, abandoned households (Rusu, 2002; Sofer & Bordânc, 1998), owned by the inheriting generation, who left them, a frequent situation in other areas of Romania as well (Müller et al., 2009) and old people. The reasons for land abandonment are determined by demographic constraints (ageing population) or by the socioeconomic framework and unadapted agricultural systems (Terres et al., 2015) due to the lack of labour and agricultural machinery. Contrary to the findings of Angelstam et al., (2003), who argue that the high density of the rural population plays a negative role in the abandonment of land through the increased demand for cultivated land; in our case, Turceni and Ionești do not face such an issue since young people leave these settlements.

Conclusion

Our study provides answers to three research questions: (i) What is the historical and political framework of land dispossession during the communist period? Q2: How does peasants' perception of the process of dispossession differ? Q3: What is the current situation of the dispossessed lands?

This study analyzes a lesser-known stage in the turbulent history of communist Romania in the Oltenia region, which includes two inseparable stages. First, it concerns the simultaneous stage of the cooperativization of agriculture by seizing peasant lands and the aggressive process of industrialization, after World War II. Thus, traditional rural livelihoods based on agriculture were significantly affected.

The second stage, which constitutes the focus of our study, is land recovery after the Romanian Revolution of

December 1989 as a late but necessary form of social justice. Questionnaires and interviews that revealed the peasants' perception of abusive dispossession, the past and current state of dispossessed lands, as well as the recovery efforts through the framework created by the post-communist land reform of 1991, were useful in this regard.

Unfortunately, owing to the cumbersome and inefficient bureaucratic system, the loss of documents proving ownership, the lack of land for retrocession, and its voluntary abandonment by the young inheriting generations significantly hinders the goals of equity and social justice.

It should be noted that many claimed lands are under TTPP and their annexes. The towns of Turceni and Ionești do not have enough available land for the retrocessions requested by the former owners, and retrocessions on other sites than the original ones are inconvenient either because of the long distances and the lack of available agricultural land or the dissatisfaction that would arise among the native population.

To a small extent, former owners were compensated with modest amounts of money, and some received title deeds without owning the land. Some have abandoned recovery, while others want to sell their land and, in the best cases, leave it as an inheritance for their children.

In this context, land reform is far from being fulfilled, and land recovery may remain a desire for the next generation to invest effort and work in traditional livelihoods.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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