



**Comerțul exterior al României cu produse agroalimentare: 1990-2020 (Romania's Foreign Trade in Agri-Food Products: 1990-2020)**, Tudorel Andrei, Bucharest: Publishing House of the Romanian Academy, 2022. ISBN 978-973-27-3475-9

Food security is an important subject for any human being, regardless of whether one is a specialist or not in the field of food; the subject is (or should be) all the more important for Romania, which, although it is a country with a huge agricultural potential, (1) it still imports large quantities of agri-food products, and (2) food security does not yet constitute a coherent field of research in Romania. The scientific articles on this subject are not frequent, and the discussions on this subject within the country are rather outside the Romanian academic field: it is mostly about press articles and opinions expressed within the personal environment or through social networks, which include debates on the costs of agri-food products and their imports.

In this context, the publication in Romania of an academic book about this intensely debated subject, with relevant data regarding a long period of time, is necessary and welcome. The author is also the president of the (Romanian) National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies, therefore the credibility of the analysis and the value of the scientific contribution of the book are indisputable.

The seriousness of the situation is revealed by citing sources that show that this situation is not a new one, but it dates back to the foundation of the Romanian modern state. In the book, there are extracts from well-known personalities in Romania, such as Mihai Eminescu (*Publicistică* [Press Publications], 1877-1880), Nicolae Xenopol (*Bogăția României* [Romania's Wealth], 1916), and Virgil Madgearu (considerations for the period between the two world wars) that have denounced since the past centuries Romania's export of heavy and bulky products with low value, and the import of processed products which are (much more) valuable. In 1939, a work by the Superior Economic Council even refers to agri-food products, a situation still current after almost a century: "We thus have a primitive export that greatly influences the profitability of production. In fact, Romania is an exporting country of raw materials and semi-finished products" (p. 155).

Although economic principles show that specialization is necessary, since a

state cannot produce everything on its own, and therefore imports are inevitable, Romania's situation in the imports of agri-food products is not in line with its possibilities, both agricultural and technical. As the author proves in the book, Romania has a more precarious situation than even the Eastern European countries that are members of the European Union (EU).

The book aims to present the important characteristics of Romania's foreign trade in agri-food products over the last thirty years, trying to identify the major causes that led to the increase in imbalances between their exports and imports. The author also notes that the analysis over a long period shows that the causes are not accidental, but structural, with major dysfunctions being identified at the level of production, processing, and capitalizing of the raw materials from agriculture on domestic and foreign markets (p. 19). These issues are also related to local and international contexts (such as the accession of Romania to the European Union), as detailed in the book.

The analysis that the author proposes is carried out in nine chapters. The first chapter has a title written in the first person plural ("We have agricultural potential, but we import impressive quantities of agri-food products"), which may indicate the author's attachment to the subject, but also his desire to draw attention to the gravity of a subject that directly concerns us all. This chapter is a good summary of the book and the context and reveals a bleak picture: for example, an average Romanian conventional person registered the largest trade deficit in the category of Meat and edible offal, despite having exported much more live animals than it imported throughout the transition period. The author makes brief comparisons with three eastern-European countries, also members of the European Union (Bulgaria, Hungary, and Poland), and, by comparison, Poland registers the largest surplus in foreign trade with products in the category Meat and edible offal, although this country registers one of the largest trade deficits in the category Live animals. The different sections of the chapter have useful conclusions, such as that, to improve the trade balance, it is necessary to have positive trade contributions from many categories of products (not only four categories as of now – Live animals, Cereals, Oilseeds and Oil Fruits, and Tobacco and Tobacco Substitutes), and from the processed products (not only from raw materials as of now, as those listed before). All three countries mentioned above have a better trade balance than Romania and could be used as models to adopt better strategies to develop this fundamental field – for example, Hungary has a positive trade balance for 15 categories of products,

which is the best balance in this field of all four countries presented. At the same time, the trade results in this field expressed in euros show unbelievable figures: during the period 2000-2020, in the agricultural field, Poland had a surplus of 65 billion euros, Hungary 47.4 billion euros, Bulgaria 13.6 billion euros, while Romania was the only country with a deficit (cumulative from one year to another), and a considerable one by the way, of 20.6 billion euros, although the share in the used agricultural area was 7.2%, compared to 2.6% for Bulgaria (p. 41). All of this leads the author to conclude that Romania has allowed itself "the luxury" of importing agri-food products, instead of developing its domestic production, this being a great burden for the future, the deficit being difficult to be combated in the short term.

The following chapters detail the previously presented aspects. Thus, the second chapter refers to foreign trade in agri-food products in the period 1990-2020 and begins with a useful presentation of the changes in the structure of agricultural land ownership in the last thirty years. The third chapter analyzes the characteristics of resources and the use of agri-food products, highlighting the fact that the current economic space in the EU is a dynamic one, in which competition and free movement are defining elements, Romania has to streamline its agricultural production; for example, in the case of pork, although it is a product for which Romania has a zootechnical tradition, consumption is covered by imports in a proportion of 45% (p. 79). The fourth chapter focuses on the characteristics of foreign trade in agri-food products, the author emphasizing that of the entire value chain created internationally in the context of the market economy, in many cases of products in Romania there are only two elements of this chain: the production of agricultural raw materials, and the sales units of agri-food products largely coming from imports (p. 89).

Chapter 5 analyzes an important and delicate subject, the possible causes of trade deficits in foreign trade in agri-food products; the author identifies causes such as low productivity in agriculture, the deficient irrigation system, the production structure, etc. In Chapter 6, the author delivers a comparison between Romania and the three Eastern European countries in the field of the characteristics of foreign trade in agri-food products, the results being unfavorable to Romania, very important for balancing the economy in general and the agricultural sector, in particular, being the trade surplus obtained from the development of a large number of product categories that generate a trade surplus.

The characteristics of Romania's foreign trade in agri-food products with other

countries are the subject of the seventh chapter, which highlights another of the Romania's major issues, not only related to the high trade deficit but also to the difficulty of developing competitive production capacities and a sales chain that would allow it to regain/cover the domestic market (p. 244). Chapter 8 studies the degree of concentration (the extent to which the market is dominated by a small number of large firms) of imports and exports of agri-food products, an important parameter for the level of competitiveness of a market (p. 300), the author's calculations proving a high degree of concentration especially in the case of exports, which significantly affects small and medium-sized firms and the development of strong value chains at the national level. The concluding chapter continues the analysis of the causes that directly or indirectly affect Romania's trade balance with agri-food products, insisting on the impact that imbalances in agricultural production have on the Gross Domestic Product.

Although it contains some theoretical aspects, such as some calculations, the application of economic theories, or a discussion of the competitive advantage, the book is essentially empirical, presenting data as such (in text and tables) and in figures (which have the disadvantage to be in greyscale, although in the text colors are mentioned). Given its topic and accessible language, the book can be of interest to geographers, economists, and policymakers, but also to any Romanian who has concerns about the origins of the food and the state of this field in Romania.

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