

Editors' Note

The 20th anniversary of the European Union's enlargement marks an important milestone for Central and Eastern European countries, providing an opportunity to reflect on the profound transformations that have taken place in their rural areas and agricultural sectors. The accession of these nations to the EU not only reshaped their economies (Poczta 2020) but also had a lasting impact on their social structures (Jambor, Gorton 2025), environmental practices (EC 2025), and agrarian landscapes (EP 2011).

The accession of Central and Eastern European countries to the European Union in 2004 was not only a political and economic milestone but also a turning point for their rural and agricultural sectors. Pre-accession expectations were largely driven by the prospect of market integration, increased investment, and policy alignment through the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). However, the realities of accession brought both anticipated benefits and unforeseen challenges — ranging from farm consolidation and structural transformations to environmental regulations and rural depopulation. As we reflect on two decades of EU membership, it is crucial to assess whether the integration process has truly delivered on its promise of balancing agricultural competitiveness with rural sustainability.

The special issue of *Wieś i Rolnictwo* (WiR) (*Village & Agriculture* [V&A]) titled *From Transformation to Stabilisation: Rural Areas and Agriculture 20 Years after the European Union Enlargement* aims to capture these changes through diverse national perspectives, highlighting both shared experiences and unique national trajectories. The collection of articles featured in this issue addresses key aspects of agrarian transformation, land ownership, rural identity, sustainability, and the evolving socio-economic landscape in post-accession Europe.



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Land Ownership and Agrarian Structures in Post-Accession Europe

One of the most critical themes explored in this issue is the transformation of land ownership and agrarian structures in the context of EU accession. The paper "Challenging Access to Land in Central European Countries: Some Comments on the 'Bundle of Rights' and 'Webs of Power'", authored by Marie-Claude Maurel, examines how legal and social norms governing land access have evolved, revealing power struggles over land rights and the increasing influence of agrarian capitalism. It highlights the complex interplay between legal frameworks and informal power structures that have shaped land markets, demonstrating how post-accession policies have contributed to land concentration and the emergence of new agrarian elites. Similarly, the paper "An Experience of Decollectivisation in Search of its European Itinerary: The Case of Lithuania" by Jurgita Mačiulytė delves into the post-Soviet shift from collective farming to family farms, emphasizing the role of historical land structures in shaping contemporary rural development. The study underscores the uneven nature of these changes, with varying farm sizes and economic models coexisting, reflecting broader political and economic transformations.

In Estonia, as discussed in "From Collectivisation to Commodification: Transformations in Estonia's Rural Landscape and Identity" by Hannes Palang, land restitution following independence was initially driven by nationalistic ideals linking land ownership to identity and justice, yet over time, economic pressures have led to increasing agricultural professionalisation and concentration. The article sheds light on the commodification of rural spaces, with the countryside increasingly serving recreational and heritage-preservation roles alongside agricultural production. This shift reflects broader socio-economic changes in rural Europe, where traditional agricultural activities must compete with tourism, conservation efforts, and alternative land uses.

Socio-Economic and Agricultural Transformations

Another key aspect of this special issue is the broader socio-economic transformation of rural areas, particularly the challenges posed by depeasantisation, rural depopulation, and shifting agricultural involvement. The article titled "Agricultural Involvement in Hungarian Society Since EU Accession", written jointly by Imre Kovách and Boldizsár Megyesi, provides an in-depth analysis of declining small-scale farming and the changing patterns of agricultural participation in Hungary, offering a comparative perspective on sustainability and rural resilience. The study reveals the impact of EU policies on small-scale producers, showing how rural livelihoods have been reshaped by changing market structures, demographic

shifts, and new farming incentives. Meanwhile, the paper “The Transformation of Polish Agriculture and Rural Areas Since EU Accession” by Józef Stanisław Zegar, presents an overview of Poland’s agricultural and rural development, considering the impact of EU policies and the role of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) in shaping prospects. The article discusses how CAP funding has influenced farm modernisation and structural shifts while acknowledging broader economic and social dynamics that have affected rural Poland over the past two decades. Poland’s experience illustrates the dual impact of EU membership – offering new opportunities for growth and innovation while also accelerating structural transformations that challenge traditional farming communities.

The Role of EU Policies and Crisis Management in Agriculture

The broader implications of EU expansion and crisis management within the agricultural sector are also explored in this issue. The paper “Expanding into a VUCA World: Reflecting on Crisis Management in the Aftermath of EU Expansion” authored by Denis Fischbacher-Smith applies crisis management theory to agricultural and food system challenges, illustrating how volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) shape EU agricultural policies and responses to crises. The article raises critical questions about the resilience of food systems and the preparedness of the EU to navigate future disruptions. By drawing on historical crises, such as the UK’s Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy crisis, the study highlights the need for proactive crisis management strategies and adaptive governance structures to address emerging food security challenges.

These discussions are particularly relevant as the EU continues to face new challenges, including climate change (Vigani et al. 2024), global market disruptions (WB 2024), and geopolitical instability (Ducros 2022). The ongoing transformation of rural areas and farming practices necessitates policies that balance productivity with sustainability, ensuring that agricultural development aligns with environmental and social objectives. The integration of ecological farming practices, investment in rural infrastructure, and the development of circular economies in rural areas are all critical components of the EU’s evolving approach to agricultural and rural development (Buzek 2023).

Environmental and Sustainability Aspects of Rural Transformations

In addition to economic and structural changes, EU accession has played a crucial role in shaping the environmental landscape of rural Europe (Almeida et al. 2023). The transition towards more sustainable agricultural practices has

been influenced by EU directives and funding mechanisms aimed at promoting biodiversity, reducing carbon footprints, and supporting rural environmental stewardship. While modernisation efforts have led to increased productivity and efficiency, they have also raised concerns regarding biodiversity loss, soil degradation, and the environmental impact of large-scale industrial farming (Lanz, Dietz, Swanson 2018). The case studies presented in this issue reflect these tensions, showing how different countries have navigated the trade-offs between economic viability and environmental responsibility. The introduction of EU sustainability programs, such as the LEADER initiative and agri-environmental schemes, has provided new opportunities for rural communities to engage in conservation efforts, diversify income sources, and develop resilient agricultural systems.

Looking Forward

Taken together, these contributions illustrate the profound impact of EU accession on the agricultural and rural landscapes of Central and Eastern Europe. The transition from centrally planned economies to market-driven agricultural systems has been marked by both progress and persistent challenges. While increased access to European markets, policy support, and rural development initiatives have fostered modernisation, these transformations have also led to structural inequalities, land concentration, and social changes that require further scrutiny.

While the past two decades have brought remarkable changes, many questions remain about the future trajectory of EU agricultural and rural policies. How will the CAP continue to evolve to balance environmental sustainability with economic viability? What role will digitalisation and precision agriculture play in shaping farm structures? How can policymakers better support smallholders, particularly in regions where land concentration and rural outmigration persist? This special issue not only reflects on the past but also invites a forward-looking discussion on the policies and strategies needed to navigate the next phase of European rural development.

Concluding Remarks

As we mark the 20th anniversary of the EU accession of countries in question, it is evident that agricultural and rural transformations are ongoing processes rather than completed transitions. The studies presented in this issue provide valuable insights into the complex interplay of history, policy, economy, and society in shaping the agricultural landscapes of Central and Eastern Europe. However,

further interdisciplinary research and policy dialogue are essential to address emerging challenges and opportunities. We hope that this issue catalyses continued scholarly debate and informed policymaking, ensuring that rural areas remain vibrant and sustainable in the decades to come.

All in all, by analysing historical developments, policy impacts, and contemporary trends, as well as new economic, environmental, and geopolitical uncertainties this special issue provides valuable insights into the evolving dynamics of rural and agricultural systems within the EU. We hope that this collection of articles will contribute to a deeper understanding of the long-term effects of EU enlargement and inspire further research on the future of rural development in the region.

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