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Agricultural Involvement in Hungarian Society Since EU Accession

Abstract: The paper discusses the links of the Hungarian population to agriculture between 2005 and 2021. It discusses the consequences of depeasantisation in recent decades, the decline of small-scale food production (food self-provisioning and subsistence farming) and in the involvement in agriculture. Our analysis is based on statistical data, and a series of representative surveys from 2005, 2015, 2018 and 2021. The results not only show how food production and agricultural involvement has decreased, but also the social patterns of participation and involvement in agriculture. The extremely rapid decline of the agricultural population and the changes in the proportions of participating groups, and in a wider perspective, the consequences of Hungarian depeasantisation in an international comparison and its impact on sustainability and environmental values.

Keywords: depeasantisation, agriculture, sustainability, land concentration.

1. Introduction

In the mid-20th century, the agricultural population was still the largest social group in Hungarian society, accounting for more than half its population. This proportion has been steadily declining since then, and has shrunk to a few percent in the three decades since 1990 in particular. Such a change has a decisive impact on the structure and quality of society as a whole in several respects. Accordingly, the fate of the peasantry, its response to certain historical turns, its decline

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and disappearance, has been a recurrent theme in social history, sociology and social science literature in general for decades, for example: (Valuch 2015; T. Kovács 2012; Kovách 2012; K. Kovács 2007; Juhász 2006; Harcsa, Kovách, Szelényi 1998; Szelényi 1988; Márkus 1973). In recent years, however, consideration of the agricultural population seems to have declined. 2016 was the last year of publication of summary works dealing with the conditions of the period (Kovách 2016; K. Kovács [ed.] 2016).[1] More recently, research has tended to avoid agricultural topics, instead focusing on settlers, gentrification, representation, development and social issues, food consumption, local power and politics, and the COVID-19 effect. Agriculture as a food security issue or in relation to climate change and as an element of tradition and identity (politics).

The two questions of our study are therefore: the shifts in composition of the active participants in food production since 2004 and the social position of the farmers, agricultural workers and their descendants in today's Hungarian society.

1.1. Theoretical Framework

Our paper builds on two broad theoretical frameworks. The first is the depeasantisation, based on the volume of studies entitled *Europe's Green Ring* (Granberg, Kovách, Tovey [eds.] 2001b), which describes the emergence of the peasantry in the later industrialised regions of Europe, Eastern and Central Europe, the Mediterranean and the North (including Ireland and Iceland) and the processes of disappearance of the traditional peasantry, and the second is the transformation of food systems over the past decade and today (see for example [Bruckmeier 2024], or [Granberg 2023]). The final study in *Europe's Green Ring* (Granberg, Kovách, Tovey 2001a) takes account of regional and national differences in the meaning of "peasant". The authors have developed a concept of "peasant" for comparative purposes,[2] and have proposed an analysis of the process of depeasantisation in three dimensions. Social depeasantisation is the change in the function of farming in the new production practices and strategies of farmers and their families. Structural depeasantisation is the disintegration and disappearance of the peasantry as a social class. Cultural depeasantisation follows from the former and affects society as a whole through the reinterpretation of national and local

[1] The volumes by Tibor Valuch (2024) and Teréz Kovács (2020) summarise historical processes in which the strictly synchronic social phenomena naturally receive less attention.

[2] This includes having control over farming decisions, emphasising that the peasantry had very different paths in Europe, but that the "peasant" emerged more in the early modern post-feudal period. The peasant has the skills to recognise and assert his interests. Peasant production, with the family as its central unit, is also meaningful in terms of culture and identity.

identities and the transformation of local communities. Studies in the Czech Republic, East Germany, Russia, Poland, Hungary, Estonia, and Bulgaria (Alanen 2001; Begg, Meurs 2001; Bruckmeier, Kopytina 2001; Gorlach, Starosta 2001; Kovách 2001; Majerová 2001; Varis 2001) have indicated that not only the creation of the peasantry but the process of depeasantisation was different in the seven former socialist countries. Land reprivatisation and agrarian restructuring were carried out using different techniques. National agrarian policies have conceptualised the dismantling of socialist structures and institutions differently. This volume is a testimony to the fact that years before the 2004 enlargement of the EU, it was already apparent that the decline of agriculture in GDP production and the labour market, the disappearance of the traditional peasantry in the accession of Central and Eastern Europe could rapidly approach the rates of the Western centres of development. Rural population decline, on the other hand, is much slower and stagnation may be a realistic alternative in many places.

The *Europe's Green Ring*, published in 2001, summarised the irreversible state of the disappearance of the peasantry, but also foretold its acceleration. One convincing sign of this is the fact that, according to Eurostat (2022), the share of individual farmers in Europe fell by 37% between 2005 and 2020 and land-use concentration increased. Eastern European agricultural economies (Romania, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria) and Italy have seen the fastest decline in the number of family farms. In the Czech Republic and Slovakia, the concentration of land ownership (and the mass disappearance of small farms) occurred even earlier, around the turn of the millennium, with privatisation. The share of the rural population[3] in the EU was estimated by the World Bank[4] to be 24% in 2023. In the states that joined in 2004 and afterwards, it was between 24% and 46% in 2023.

In Hungary, during the period of accession to the EU, Tibor Valuch (2003) and Imre Kovách (2003), in their discussion in the *Századvég* journal, also listed the facts of the depeasantisation of the rural population, which is not decreasing in terms of its share, which all can weaken the traditional adaptation abilities, economic and cooperation strategies of the rural population, which is essentially not decreasing in terms of its proportion (on this elsewhere Harcsa, Kovách, Szelényi [1998]). The debate has complemented and clarified the concept of peasant decentralisation at several points (Benda 2003; Harcsa 2003; Laki 1997). Gábor Gyáni (2003) questioned the international extensibility of the concept of peasant and peasant decentralisation, and instead emphasised the primacy of research

[3] The definition of the rural population is far from clear within the EU, and aggregate figures follow member states' definitions, whose methodologies are not uniform and reflect historical, cultural, statistical and administrative perceptions and practices.

[4] https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.RUR.TOTL.ZS?locations=EU (access: 9th December 2024).

on regional formations. In some respects, he questioned the possible dramatic consequences of the uniquely rapid shrinkage of the agricultural population.

The other strand of the depeasantisation debate was indirectly linked to the rise of larger family farms and agricultural enterprises. Teréz Kovács (2020; 2012) argues that individual farmers have retained a significant part of the peasant work ethos and economic strategies and that therefore the application of depeasantisation is only partial. Already in the 1990s, István Harcsa and Imre Kovách (1996) showed that, of the owners and managers of larger agricultural enterprises, middle and upper managers with a higher education and experience in the agro-industrial enterprises of the socialist era were in the majority. The research by Katalin Kovács (K. Kovács, Váradi [eds.] 2013; 2005; K. Kovács 2005), Mónika Váradi and her colleagues (Váradi [ed.] 2008) or Tünde Virág (2010) have revealed the consequences of depeasantisation, especially the facts of mass impoverishment. Land ownership and land use was concentrated in a few thousand farms in a short period of time (Kovách 2016) and by the late 1990s more than a million family farmers had abandoned food production. By the third decade of the 21st century, the process of the de-agriculturalisation of Hungarian society was in fact complete.

Rural sociology in Poland has also observed a decline in traditional peasant farming and the transformation of rural society and communities. Maria Halamska (2016) has shown that the decline in the number of Polish farms has accelerated significantly, and the concentration of land use has also intensified. Many farms are in a state of transformation, one of the products of which is the emergence of quasi-peasant and quasi-peasant farms. Farms have become highly differentiated according to whether they produce for the market or for their own consumption, and their production/sales decisions are increasingly influenced by political decisions and practice. According to Halamska (2004), the disappearance of the peasantry in Poland is not inexorable, but it is happening much more slowly than in the West, and from time to time large numbers of food producers are recreating the elements of mentality, identity and farming methods similar to peasant farming. The three essential dimensions of rural transformation in Halamska's approach (2011) are de-ruralisation, de-agriculturalisation and the re-stratification of society, which is quite close to the *Europe Green Ring's* concept of depeasantisation. The conclusion of the intervening hundred years (Halamska 2020) also points to the inevitable transformation and disappearance of the largest number of the traditional European peasantry.

Paweł Starosta and his various co-authors (Czibere et al. 2021; Starosta 2010; 1998; Starosta, Draganova 1999) have been studying community relations and trust in Polish villages at risk of emigration for decades in international comparison. This shows how the traditional order of local communities, still functioning in the 1990s,

has been disrupted by political and economic structural change, social stratification, emigration and immigration. He also stresses that local community cooperation has not disappeared, but that its traditional peasant frameworks and forms have changed. In his series of publications on peasantry, Krzysztof Gorlach and his colleagues have compiled a fundamentally new approach to peasantry as a result of a large empirical study (Gorlach et al. [eds.] 2021, p. 202). They have explored the strategies, response potential, advocacy, technical adaptation skills, and perceptions of sustainability of farmers and peasants, i.e. forms of activity that are means of adaptation, survival and change in a globalised world.

The second part of the theoretical framework is related to studies that argue that, because of globalisation and Europeanisation, agriculture is not only important for food production but also for other functions like preserving biodiversity, rural lifestyle and providing different services. In the apt metaphor of Leo Granberg (2023), peasants have become, or should become, "gardeners of the ecosystem". The issues of sustainability, climate crisis, addressing environmental challenges, safe food production or biodiversity conservation are intertwined with the basic activities of agriculture (Bruckmeier 2016; Hospes, Hadiprayitno [eds.] 2010) and closely linked to this is the food production for the market and one's own use.

The literature on the role of subsistence farming aims at revealing the factors shaping it in the contemporary Central and Eastern Europe. Research in the 1980s and 1990s argued that subsistence farming in the socialist period was not a means of poverty reduction, but a response to the shortage economy (Alber, Kohler 2008; Rose, Tikhomirov 1993; Szelényi 1988). Today, the economic and social significance of subsistence farming has changed significantly, motivated not so much by economic factors as by households' cultural and social characteristics.

Some authors argue that it is also a local answer, a form of resistance to intervention of the capitalist state, or the hegemonic efforts of the large estates, like land grabbing and state/political intervention (Dorondel, Şerban 2019; Gonda 2019; Mamonova 2017; Varga 2017; Visser et al. 2015). This interpretation is especially widespread in case studies from the successor states of the former Soviet Union, but appears in papers about Hungary; for example, in the argumentation of Noémi Gonda (2019) on the Hungarian case.

Petr Jehlička and his colleagues argue that food self-provisioning, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, is linked to a lifestyle. In this context, it is an unintended sustainability practice (Jehlička et al. 2020; Sovová, Veen 2020; Jehlička, Smith 2011) and as such, it can be an alternative to industrial agri-food systems because it contributes to food sovereignty, sustainability and community regeneration (Bródy et al. 2023; Balázs 2016; Balázs, Pataki, Lazányi 2016; Dorondel 2016; Smith, Kostelecký, Jehlička 2015; Mincyte 2011).

In a recent study (Kovách, Megyesi 2023), we found that for Hungarian subsistence farmers, environmental protection or sustainability is not a major motivation in food self-provisioning.

2. Data, Concepts, Trends

Agricultural activity has been steadily declining since 1990. At the end of the 1980s, 1.1 million people were employed in co-operatives and state farms, and more than half of all households produced food for their own consumption. By 2020 we could witness a dramatic decrease: although at least 750,000 produced food at some level (for sale, their own consumption) or owned land without being involved in any kind of production (Table 6), the number of professional and subsistence farmers fell. Presumably this number is much higher because the number of people producing food for self-consumption has huge uncertainties, as they are disregarded by the HCSO's farm-size calculations (Kovách 2016), and the changes in the threshold calculation in 2020[5] make it even more questionable. In addition, there are more than one million households producing food for self-provisioning, which are below the official farm size and thus were not included in the agricultural census statistics.

The number of farms has declined sharply (Figure 1) and the latest data confirm a further decrease in the number of people participating in agriculture (Table 6).

Table 1. Agricultural land-use concentration in Hungary (2014)

Tabela 1. Koncentracja użytków rolnych na Węgrzech (2014)

Size of the land (ha)	Total land area (ha)	Number of holdings (number)
1–5	176,706	69,496
5–10	207,700	28,994
10–50	877,646	40,258
50–100	538,319	7,673
100–200	630,476	4,520
200–over	2,508,724	4,126
Total	4,939,570	155,067

Source: own calculation based on Single Area Payment Scheme (SAPS) data, Hungary 2014.
Źródło: opracowanie własne na podstawie danych Jednolitej Płatności Obszarowej (JPO), Węgry 2014.

[5] KSH Change of economic threshold from 2020.

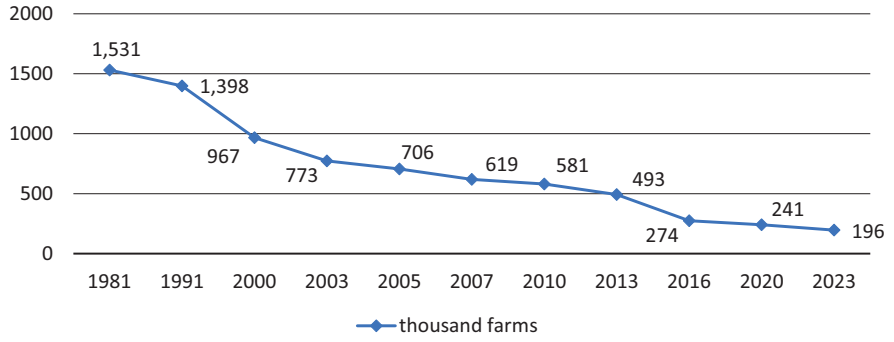

Figure 1. Change in the number of farms[6] in Hungary (1981–2023)[7]

Rysunek 1. Zmiana liczby gospodarstw rolnych na Węgrzech (1981–2023)

Source: own study based on KSH (2023).
Źródło: opracowanie własne na podstawie KSH (2023).

The high concentration of land use (Table 1) has been continuous since the turn of the millennium and is among the highest in Europe, as the table below, presenting the situation in 2014 shows (Kovách 2016; KSH 2016).

3. The Agricultural Involvement

There are many variations in the way the population is connected to agriculture (Table 2); in the following paper we aim to explore this complexity. Agricultural statistics collect primary data on agricultural production and farm structure; this is why we decided almost 20 years ago to introduce the concept of agricultural involvement, which, in addition to the different ways of being involved in agriculture, also takes account whether the respondents' parents or grandparents were farmers, farm workers, managers or whether the household owned land, without involvement in any active food production.

The first data collection on agricultural involvement was a survey in 2005, one year after EU accession. We then defined five types of agricultural involvement in the Hungarian population: (1) those who were directly or heavily involved in agriculture were employed or self-employed in agriculture, retired from agriculture, had a degree in agriculture, owned more than one ha of land or

[6] Farms above the KSH threshold, whose values have changed in 2020: they have shifted upwards (Changing the farm threshold from 2020, KSH).

[7] Other data from the HCSO shows that in 2022, 142,713 farms had agricultural income.

produced at least partially for the market. The "weakly" involved are those who have a small landholding (less than one ha) or produce food only for their own consumption on a hobby or subsistence level. Two additional groups are "indirectly involved": those who have a farmer among their parents and grandparents, but were not involved in any kind of agricultural activity, and those who have no link to food production (Kelemen, Kovách 2007) (Table 2). Trends show a rapid decline in participation in agriculture in all aspects (Tables 3 and 4).

Table 2. Characteristics of the groups of agricultural involvement in Hungary

Tabela 2. Charakterystyka grup zaangażowanych w działalność rolniczą na Węgrzech

Nature of agricultural involvement	At least one of the following is true
Directly involved in agriculture	Worked in agriculture as an employee or contractor, retired from agriculture
	He has a degree in agriculture[8]
	Owns significant land holdings (over one ha)
	Production at least partially for sale
Weakly involved in agriculture	Owns less than one ha of land
	Produces for own consumption only
Indirectly involved in agriculture	A farmer among parents or grandparents but no agri-involvement of the respondent
Not involved in agriculture	None of the above is true

Source: own study.
Źródło: opracowanie własne.

[8] Due to a lack of data, this aspect could not be included in the analysis in this study (data for 2018 and 2021 are not available).

Table 3. Changes in agricultural involvement of the Hungarian population (2005–2021; in %)

Tabela 3. Zmiany zaangażowania ludności węgierskiej w działalność rolniczą (2005–2021; w %)

Agricultural involvement	2005 (N = 872)	2015 (N = 3,553)	2018 (N = 2,498)	2021 (N = 4,669)
Directly involved in agriculture	21.5	11.9	10.0	10.0
Weakly involved in agriculture	30.4	46.0	18.7	9.8
Indirectly involved in agriculture	9.7	8.8	14.0	14.8
Not involved in agriculture	38.5	33.3	57.3	65.4
Total	100	100	100.0	100.0

Source: own research on integration and disintegration in Hungarian society, 2015 (OTKA 108836[9]), KEP2, KEP3[10].
Źródło: badanie własne nt. integracji i dezintegracji społeczeństwa węgierskiego, 2015 (OTKA 108836), KEP2, KEP3.

Table 4. Population's involvement in agricultural activity in Hungary in the years 2005, 2015, 2018, 2021 (in %)

Tabela 4. Zaangażowanie ludności w działalność rolniczą na Węgrzech w latach 2005, 2015, 2018 i 2021 (w %)

The dimensions of agricultural involvement	2005 (N = 1,000)	2015 (N = 3,553)	2018 (N = 2,700)	2021 (N = 5,000)
Produce for own consumption only (Food self-provisioning)	36.6	33.4	20.7	12.7
Produces (also) commodities	9.7	2.9	2.8	4.0
No agricultural activity	53.7	63.8	76.5	83.3
Land less than 1 ha	10.8	11.7	7.0	4.5
Land over 1 ha	10.2	4.0	5.0	2.6
Parents or grandparents were farmers, but the respondent has no agricultural activity	39.2	33.6	26.3	24.7
Degree in agriculture	6.7	2.9	no data	5.4

Source: OTKA research on rural and urban people, integration and disintegration in Hungarian society, 2015.
Źródło: Badanie OTKA nt. ludności miejskiej i wiejskiej oraz integracji i dezintegracji społeczeństwa węgierskiego, 2015.

[9] OTKA (Országos Tudományos Kutatási Alapprogram) – National Scientific Research Program.

[10] KEP (Magyar Tudományos Akadémia Kiválósági és Együttműködési Program) – Hungarian Academy of Sciences Excellence and Cooperation Program.

4. Analysis of Involvement in Agriculture

In this study, we describe each group's agricultural involvement in detail: farmers, former and current agricultural workers and landowners with a particularly strong connection to agriculture, who are collectively called directly agrarian-affected and account for 10.3% of the agrarian population, those with a looser connection to agriculture, who produce only for their own consumption (11.7% of the total population), and finally, those with an indirect connection to agriculture whose parents or grandparents were involved in agriculture but are no longer (14.4%).

Below we analyse each of the groups of agricultural interest. To better visualise the link to agriculture, some groups have been further disaggregated. The subgroups of the agro-contacts are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Groups involved in agriculture in Hungary (2021)

Tabela 5. Grupy osób zaangażowanych w działalność rolniczą na Węgrzech (2021)

Agricultural Involvement Group	Agricultural subgroup	Features	Number of respondents	%
Directly involved in agriculture	Farmer	Producing for the market	166	10.3
	Agricultural worker	Has a job in the agricultural sector or has retired from the agricultural sector	227	14.1
	Landowners	Owns more than 1 ha of land but no food production	74	4.6
Weakly involved in agriculture	Produce for self-provisioning	Food production for self-consumption (FSP) or using less than 1 ha of land	455	28.2
Indirectly involved in agriculture	Farming ancestors	Parents and grandparents were farmers	693	42.9
Total			1,616	100.0

Source: own study based on KEP3 data.
Źródło: opracowanie własne na podstawie danych KEP3.

Table 6. Groups related to agriculture in Hungary

Tabela 6. Grupy powiązane z rolnictwem na Węgrzech

Agricultural commodity producer	166,448 households (KEP3 2021)
Income from former agriculture	142,713 households (KSH 2022)
Above-threshold economy	196,000 farms (KSH Agricultural Census 2023)
Produce food for own consumption	718,665 households (KSH 2022), 646,789 households (KEP3 2021)
Agricultural workers	200,500 persons (KSH 2022)
Owns land with no current agricultural activity (excluding undivided common land)	84,530 households (KEP3 2021)
Is involved in food production or owns land	752,942 households, 18.4% of all households (KEP3, KSH)
All households with at least one household member with agricultural ancestry	893,804 households, 21.88% of all households (KEP3, KSH)
With agricultural ancestry without current agricultural activity	565,931 persons (KEP3, KSH)
The number of inhabitants of villages	2,876,304 persons (HCSO 2024)
The rural population of villages and towns of less than 25,000 inhabitants	5,475,579 persons (HCSO 2024)

Source: own calculation based on Hungarian Central Statistical Office (HSCO) and KEP3 data.
Źródło: opracowanie własne na podstawie danych Węgierskiego Głównego Urzędu Statystycznego (HSCO) i KEP3.

4.1. Those with a Direct Involvement in Agriculture

The group of those with a direct involvement in agriculture included those who produce agricultural goods for the market, are currently employed in agriculture, worked in agriculture before retirement, or owned more than one ha of agricultural land. This group is relatively large and quite heterogeneous, its subgroups: farmers, agricultural workers and landowners are thus analysed separately.

4.1.1. Farmers

According to our data, farmers represent approximately 3–4% of the total adult population in Hungary and account for 10.3% of the population involved in agricultural production. This group is frequently highlighted in public discourse, particularly as issues related to agriculture and food production consistently feature in the media. Within the context of those affected by agricultural challenges, farmers are among the more economically advantaged groups, as indicated by the data presented in tables 9 and 10. They have a comparatively high net monthly per capita

income, signify one of the most developed segments in the population involved in agriculture, and are markedly represented in higher socioeconomic classes.

Despite these advantages, farmers' educational attainment remains below the national average. Data reveals that over 40% of farmers have attained a maximum of eight years of primary education, compared to the national average of 28.7%. Moreover, fewer than 14% possess a tertiary education certificate, while the national average is 17.2%. Correspondingly, the health outcomes of this population also fall below the national average. These discrepancies may arise from a variety of factors. Although contemporary farming is not exclusively a manual occupation, the prevalence of small-scale farmers in rural areas exposes them to environmental hazards such as pesticides, combined with potential regional and social determinants affecting health outcomes.

Among the prominent studies conducted on farmers, *Földből élők* [Living off the Land] edited by K. Kovács (2016) stands out for its comprehensive methodology, employing both qualitative and quantitative analytical tools to examine the state of agriculture in Hungary (2016). These studies also delineate a typology of farmers (Megyesi 2016a; 2016b), which is not wholly transferable to the present analysis. Also within this volume, (Csurgó, Kovách, Megyesi 2016), authors show that the significance of education in the farming sector is increasing. However, our data provide a nuanced perspective, indicating that low educational levels persist among farming populations.

The available data suggest that, beyond the group defined as farmers (those who primarily derive their livelihoods from agricultural commodity production), there are individuals who engage in agricultural activities on a smaller scale. Prior research has documented that a substantial portion of farmers are registered entrepreneurs, a trend that is corroborated by the current analysis (Erdős, Szőllősi 2023; Csurgó, Kovách, Megyesi 2016).

4.1.2. Agricultural Workers and Landowners

According to data of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (HCSO), the agricultural sector in 2020 comprised 244,000 annual labour units, marking a significant decline from 2010.[11] Family labour, which comprises non-employed individuals, remains the predominant component of the agricultural workforce; however, its proportion has decreased from 69.6% a decade ago to 56.7%, in parallel with the decrease in the number of smaller farms.

[11] https://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xftp/ac2020/mezogazdasagi_munkaero_generaciovaltas/index.html#amezgazdasgimunkamennyisge2010tafolyamatosancskken (access: 9th December 2024).

What do we know about the group identified as directly involved in agriculture but not classified as farmers? This group includes individuals who either currently work in agriculture, have previously held jobs related to the agricultural sector, or own more than one ha of farmland, yet do not engage in food production for the market.

Agricultural workers and landowners represent 6.4% of the total sample and 18.7% of the population involved in agriculture. This subgroup consists of individuals who either maintain employment in agriculture, have retired from the agricultural sector, or possess more than one ha of arable land, with the latter category being analysed separately.

Most agricultural workers in this group have or had agricultural employment, or owned more than one ha. It is worth noting that the group of landowners and farmers is not complementary. It is also important that only approximately 50% of this group reported having an ancestor involved in agricultural work.

This group is the oldest, economically most disadvantaged, least politically conservative, and least educated within the agrarian community, with 55% having completed only eight grades of education. Predominantly residing in small towns and villages, they share similarities with the group of food self-provisioners. The members of this group live in the smallest households and exhibit the lowest levels of embourgeoisement (Kovách et al. 2024; Gerő, Kovách, Kristóf 2023; Gerő, Szabó 2023; Kovách, Kristóf 2023). Food self-provisioning is relatively frequent among the members of this group: 30.8% engage in food self-provisioning, representing 17.8% of all people engaged in food self-provisioning. According to our data, this group of those involved in agriculture lives under the hardest conditions.

Several studies have explored the living and working conditions of agricultural workers. Prior research suggests that this category may encompass mostly those engaged in public employment (Csoba, Sipos 2020; Csoba 2017; 2010; Koós 2016; Kovai 2016). However, our findings do not substantiate this claim, as according to our data, public employees are not present among agricultural workers. Some authors argue that this group may be the so-called rural labour reserve (Vígvári, Kovai 2020), yet direct evidence for this assertion remains elusive; agricultural labour does not appear to be a defining characteristic of public employees. It seems that agricultural day labourers are more likely to be found within this group, as exemplified by the detailed case studies by Anna Hamar (2016, 2015).

Another aspect of our research investigates the transformation of agricultural employment, particularly in light of emerging technologies and the digitalisation of agriculture (Bazsik, Bujdosó, Koncz 2022; Szőke-Kovács 2020; 2021). Our data do not support the hypothesis of a substantial increase in demand for highly skilled labour within agriculture. While our previous research (Csurgó, Kovách,

Megyesi 2016) indicated a trend towards higher educational attainment among farmers and farm managers, this observation is also corroborated by HHCSO data from 2020.[12]

4.1.3. Landowners (Those with Involvement in Agriculture Only through Land Ownership)

The smallest group within those directly involved in agriculture is made up of landowners. They belong to this category because they own more than one ha of land. In total, 130 people in the sample own more than a ha of arable land; 41 of them are farmers (i.e. only 24.6% of farmers own land) and 74 people own land without farming or working in agriculture. In other words, 60.2% of owners with more than one ha of land do not farm it. We would be wrong to assume that this is a well-off urban group.

Although they have more than one ha of land, this does not really provide the average per capita net monthly household income of the sample, nor the average income of those heavily involved in agriculture: while that average is 169,000 HUF, the average for those heavily involved in agriculture is 199,000 HUF. This group is only slightly better educated than the average for the group involved in agriculture and the proportion of urban and metropolitan residents is seven percentage points higher. Both the HCSO and our data show that the number of landowners is steadily decreasing: in 2005, more than 10% of respondents owned at least one ha of arable land, while in 2021 the share decreased to 2.6%. Parallel to this, the share of those owning less than one ha of land also fell from 11.7% to 4.5%.

4.2. Subsistence Farmers, or Those Weakly Involved in Agriculture: Food Self-Provisioners

In the international literature, there is an open debate on the definition of the concept of subsistence farming (Kovách, Megyesi 2023). The HCSO is not able to estimate exactly how many households produce food for their own consumption and in what quantities. The HCSO links the definition of farm to the minimum size of products and does not collect data on the food production of households that are below this minimum. As a consequence, larger groups of subsistence producers (up to many tens of thousands) are not included in the food-producers' statistics (Kovách 2016). Our research definition of subsistence farms largely corresponds

[12] https://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xftp/ac2020/mezogazdasagi_munkaero_generaciovaltas/index.html (access: 9th December 2024).

to the EU definition of the category[13] and adopts the concept by (Barnett, Blas, Whiteside [eds.] 1996).[14]

Commodity production often goes hand in hand with on-farm consumption of one's own products. 21% of all self-provisioning farms also sell food on the market. In 2021, four-fifths of all commodity farms also produced food for their own consumption, which was also a characteristic of traditional peasant farming (Kovách 1988). The number of farms producing exclusively for their own consumption was in the millions of units until the years after the millennium,[15] then it started a rapid decline, followed by an even steeper decline from the mid-2010s (Tables 1 and 3).[16] Anti-poverty social land programmes and other local initiatives have created new forms of food production for self-consumption (Kovai, Pulay 2024; Franklin, Kovách, Csurgó 2017). The COVID-19 period has valorised safe, controlled-source food, with more and more urban dwellers moving into rural areas to grow vegetables and fruit and raise livestock. The question is whether data collection covers new community and individual forms of subsistence production. But what is certain is that the number of subsistence producers is declining very rapidly. In 2015, 36% of households produced some food for their own consumption, in 2021 it was only 12% (Table 4). The proportion of food producers producing exclusively for their own consumption within all agro-involved decreased from 46% to 9.8% in the same period (Table 3). The combined share of households producing for their own consumption and for consumption only in addition to the production of goods was 15.8% of the total in 2021 (KEP3).

In our categorisation, "the marginally agriculturally insensitive" are those who do not produce for sale, but only for their own consumption or possess less than one ha of land and have no other connection to agriculture. 82% of those who produce only for self-consumption live in villages and small towns, the highest proportion of all those involved in agriculture. Their average educational attainment is significantly higher than that of those directly involved in agriculture. In terms of occupational mobility by father, the average of both downward and upward mobile is higher than for those directly involved in agriculture.

[13] "Subsistence farms are agricultural holdings which produce primarily for their own consumption and sell part of their production", European Commission Regulation, 1698/2005, Article 34(1), quoted in (Fritzsch et al. 2010, p. 16).

[14] Subsistence farming: the farming activity is a subsistence strategy; the product is consumed directly; only a few purchased inputs are used in the production process; and the proportion of products sold is low (Barnett, Blas, Whiteside [eds.] 1996).

[15] 1.1 in 2010 in million KSH (Agrárcenzus 2010).

[16] According to a special request from the HCSO, in 2022, 718,665 households produced food for their own consumption, but we do not know how many of these farms also produced food for sale. According to the KEP3 data, nearly four-fifths of all producers for sale also produce food for their own consumption.

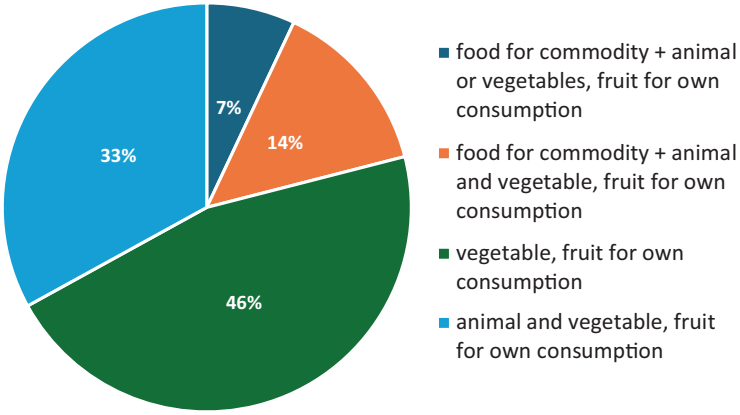

Figure 2. Groups of producers (also) for their own consumption (N = 792; in %)

Rysunek 2. Grupy producentów rolnych (w tym produkujących na własne potrzeby) (N = 792; w %)

Source: own study based on KEP3 data.
Źródło: opracowanie własne na podstawie danych KEP3.

According to their social characteristics, there are two characteristically different groups of the weakly agricultural involved. Middle-aged or older, following traditions and constraints, supplementing their income with home-based production, living in small settlements, with a peasant background, lower disintegrated social status, basically immobile and downwardly mobile compared to the father's occupation, slowly inactive, rather right-wing, one group that is not averse to animal husbandry in addition to crop production. The other group is younger, upwardly mobile or immobile, more educated, including urban immigrants and city dwellers, with a less peasant background, active and connected in local community affairs, not financially deprived, committed to citizenship, and more inclined to grow vegetables and fruit.

The emergence of the second group justified the question of the extent to which European tendencies attributed to subsistence production have also appeared in Hungary. The prevailing view is that high-input subsistence production in post-socialist countries is a kind of silent sustainable activity because it uses fewer chemicals and fertilisers and produces healthier food (Jehlička et al. 2020; Balázs, Pataki, Lazányi 2016; Smith, Kostelecký, Jehlička 2015; Jehlička, Smith 2011). According to the KEP2 survey data (2018), environmental and sustainability values were very low (8th out of 9 values) for subsistence farmers, which had changed significantly by 2021, with environmental aspects becoming the fourth most important value, as shown in Table 7.

It is common to propose subsistence production for analysis as a local strategy of land expropriation and resistance to state/political interference (Gonda 2019; Mamonova 2017; Varga 2017); or as an alternative to the industrial agri-food system, which can contribute to food sovereignty, sustainability and community renewal (Balázs, Pataki, Lazányi 2016; Mincyte 2011). The period of the COVID-19 epidemic significantly increased the value of healthy food and saw a resurgence of urban migration to rural areas; but community considerations are less important than individual ones in the reasons for subsistence production. That said, since 2018 we have seen no change in the situation where the compulsions and motivations to produce for one's own consumption are being systematically re-enforced in Hungary.

Table 7. Reasons for farming among Hungarian producers

Tabela 7. Przyczyny prowadzenia działalności rolniczej przez producentów węgierskich

Farming is important for me…	Farmers			Agricultural workers and landowners without food production			Self-sufficient producers		
	Average	N	Std. dev.	Average	N	Std. dev.	Average	N	Std. dev.
Because I also practice gardening	6.98	167	9.152	5.24	93	3.118	4.71	443	6.841
Because it is my hobby	5.72	167	2.869	5.35	93	2.983	4.20	443	3.082
Because of family traditions	6.02	167	2.836	6.94	93	2.707	5.18	443	3.071
I produce food that cannot be bought on the market	5.69	167	3.039	5.75	93	3.133	4.87	443	6.869
Because it is healthy	7.61	167	2.486	8.28	93	1.831	8.57	443	4.233
Because it saves me money	7.78	167	2.317	7.90	93	2.484	7.80	443	2.556
I produce in an environmentally friendly way and protect the environment	8.04	167	9.467	8.20	93	8.791	7.69	443	8.243
I help my relatives out of family obligation	5.97	167	2.910	4.57	93	3.279	4.41	443	7.738
Because it gives me access to fresh food	7.99	167	2.397	8.62	93	1.693	8.95	443	4.440

Source: own study based on KEP3 data.
Źródło: opracowanie własne na podstawie danych KEP3.

4.3. Indirectly Involved in Agriculture: Peasant Origin

The third main group of agricultural respondents (14.8%) includes those who do not produce food but have ancestors who were involved in agriculture. We asked respondents about the agricultural activities of family members going back two generations (parents, grandparents). According to the logic of agricultural involvement, among those who are heavily involved in agriculture (farmers, farm workers, owners of more than one ha of land) or who are only involved in agriculture for their consumption, some have, or have had (peasant) ancestors involved in agriculture.

Nearly a quarter of all respondents (23%) come from families that have or have had an ancestor in agriculture (Table 8). This indicator is likely to be skewed downwards due to forgetting or concealment, but it is also true that when calculated over 25-year year-generations, this indicator is not too far from the true proportions. Nearly 40% of the cohort over sixty years of age had agrarian ancestors, which corresponds to the proportion of the peasantry in the fifties and sixties. For those aged 40–59, 32%, for those aged 26–39, 21%, and for those aged 18–25, 8%; this corresponds to the combined proportion of cooperative members, state farm workers and small-scale food producers employed in the non-agricultural sector at the time of birth of each cohort

A significant proportion of the 2021 agri-involved do not have an agricultural background. Only a third of farmers, half of farm workers and landowners, and just over 40% of subsistence farmers came from a family with a partial or full agricultural background. The descendants of the group with only ancestry in agriculture, interviewed in 2021, no longer have any links to agriculture. Not only has the number of people involved in agricultural production declined radically since 1990, but there has been a significant influx of people from non-farming backgrounds into all groups of people active in the agricultural sector. The share of non-agricultural workers in the agricultural population is 57%. 63% of those with an agricultural background have left agriculture (Table 8), one of the motivators of which is their mobility between settlements. The proportion of people with an agricultural background is highest among those moving from rural to urban areas (41%). Even among those who still live in rural areas, just over a quarter were born into peasant families. Of those moving from urban to rural areas, 78% have no agricultural background (i.e. those moving back from non-agricultural families). In the light of the above, the proportion of people with agricultural backgrounds is expected to fall rapidly among the active agricultural population.

Differences between agricultural and non-agricultural family backgrounds are typical in the total agricultural population. In terms of monthly net household

Table 8. Agricultural involvement by having agrarian ancestors

Tabela 8. Zaangażowanie w działalność rolniczą a posiadanie przodków rolniczych

	Agrarian ancestor	No agrarian ancestor	Total
Farmer	59	115	174
	33.9%	66.1%	100%
	5.4%	3.2%	3.7%
Agricultural worker and landowner	153	148	301
	50.8%	49.2%	100%
	14.0%	4.1%	6.4%
Subsistence farmers (weakly involved in agriculture)	189	266	455
	41.5%	58.5%	100%
	17.3%	7.4%	9.7%
Only through ancestors, indirectly involved in agriculture	693	0	693
	100%	0	100%
	63.3%	0	14.8%
Not involved in agriculture	0	3,053	3,053
	0	100%	100%
	0	85.2%	65.3%
Total	1,094	3,582	4,676
	23.3%	76.7%	100%
	100%	100%	100%

Source: own study based on KEP3 data.
Źródło: opracowanie własne na podstawie danych KEP3.

income per capita, agricultural workers and landowners have the lowest incomes in both origin groups (HUF 151,000 in the former and HUF 143,000 in the latter). Farmers with no agricultural background have the highest incomes (HUF 182,000 with the largest standard deviation of all group incomes, compared to an average income of HUF 164,000 for farmers with agricultural ancestry). Family agricultural background is clearly associated with a financial disadvantage for all groups. The lower the intensity of agricultural participation, the higher the average monthly net per capita household income, which may be explained by the fact that the same slope holds for educational attainment: those with a strong agricultural background

have the lowest educational attainment, while those with only an agricultural background through their ancestors have the highest.

5. A Comparison of Groups Involved in Agriculture and Those not Involved

When comparing the different groups involved in agriculture (Kovách, Megyesi 2024) with the group not involved in agriculture, we found that the stronger the agricultural involvement, the lower the per capita household income and the higher the age of the respondent. The educational attainment of the agricultural respondents is lower than that of the non-agricultural respondents.

The degree of social capital of members of each group does not differ significantly. Here again, the different dimensions of social capital (level of trust, involvement in networks and the ability to act for one's community and interests) are found in the groups involved in agriculture. Even more interesting is the poor subjective health of the farming and agricultural worker group. While the national average is over 70%, the proportion of farmers and farm workers who consider their health at least good is just 50.7%.

The relationships between the composition of each group involved in agriculture and the above variables were examined using a multinomial logistic regression model.[17]

The explanatory power of the model is 19.6%, i.e. age, education, income, health, family size, degree of urbanisation, type of settlement and regional location of residence are all factors that can be used to estimate the degree to which someone belongs to one of the groups of interest. Gender, affiliation with political ideologies, labour intensity, labour-market situation and acceptance of norm violation do not show any correlation with involvement in agriculture.

6. Conclusions

In the study, we have provided a detailed description of the social patterns of involvement in agriculture to describe the post-depeasantisation rurality in Hungary. We found a clear trend of a steady and sharp decline in all groups involved in agriculture. Agricultural production has practically become detached from rural society in the sense that the population of villages and small towns

[17] Age, gender, highest educational level, activity rate measuring labour-market status, per capita household income, left-right self-classification, population of the settlement of residence, citizenship index, three categories of residence type, subjective health status, household size, acceptance of exclusion, and regional location of residence – were included in the model (Kovách, Megyesi 2024).

Table 9. Sociodemographic characteristics of the groups of agricultural involvement in Hungary

Tabela 9. Społeczno-demograficzne charakterystyki grup zaangażowanych w działalność rolniczą na Węgrzech

	Farmers	Food self-provisioning	Of peasant origin (indirect)	Not involved in agriculture	Total
Age	54.48	53.18	50.78	45.93	48.40
Are you working?	1.88	1.87	1.82	1.54	1.65
Per capita household income	156.718	159.642	188.272	199.382	188.498
Left-Right self-classification	4.39	4.28	4.32	4.31	4.31
Budapest	3.70%	2.10%	15.90%	24.00%	18.10%
County seat	14.00%	8.60%	22.20%	18.70%	17.50%
City	36.60%	37.40%	35.60%	34.40%	35.20%
Municipality	45.60%	51.90%	26.30%	22.90%	29.20%
Max 8 classes	48.30%	37.10%	30.30%	23.40%	28.70%
Apprenticeship training	18.30%	24.80%	23.10%	23.30%	22.90%
Graduation	22.20%	26.90%	30.40%	33.60%	31.20%
Diploma	11.10%	11.20%	16.20%	19.60%	17.20%
18-25	7.00%	6.70%	8.90%	11.00%	9.80%
26-39	15.80%	18.10%	23.20%	31.50%	27.00%
40-59	32.70%	35.50%	32.00%	34.50%	34.10%
60+	44.40%	39.70%	35.80%	23.00%	29.10%
Household size	2.13	2.31	2.14	2.21	2.2
Place of residence Population – 2022	28.316	18.159	47.353	49.261	43.036

Sex of respondent is not significant.

Source: own study based on KEP3 data.
Źródło: opracowanie własne na podstawie danych KEP3.

is constantly withdrawing from the production of food for the market or their consumption, and the proportion of people of non-agricultural origin is increasing among both farmers and subsistence producers.

The structural and social depeasantisation has taken place and although the identity politics that has found its way to the masses makes extensive use of the relics of the peasant world, it is a kind of celebratory, representative and consumer-oriented culture that has no organic link with the past peasant everyday life, family and community organisations. In international comparison, the disappearance of the Hungarian peasants is somewhere between the Western European models (represented today by the case of small farms in Italy) and the unstoppable but prolonged depeasantisation in Poland, and presumably in Romania and the Baltic countries. The advantage of slower depeasantisation may be that it is less disruptive to active or passive peasant strategies of response and partial autonomies; to the lived, internalised relationship to nature, sustainability and climate change; and to the adaptation of individuals, families and local communities to major transformations.

All types of agricultural involvement are associated with a less favourable social situation, except for the upper groups of the large and medium-sized landowners. The social indicators of those who leave agriculture and move from the countryside are generally more favourable than the averages for those who are active in food production, and the rapid decline in the number of small farms is one reason for this. The income and education levels of agricultural workers are lower than those of workers in similar jobs in other sectors. The decline in all elements of the link to food production does not lead to land scarcity and the tensions that lead to it, especially politically manifested conflicts. Although farmers, especially those in younger age groups, consider land prices and land shortage to be one of the most serious obstacles to production (Czibere et al. 2021; Kovách et al. 2022). This is only an internal conflict among a few thousand larger land users, which has been periodically calmed by external intervention by governments through direct land privatisation, auctions and the allocation of undivided communal land to individual farms. The livelihood and food supply of local society is not essentially dependent on participation in local agriculture, and therefore its condition and ownership are not a source of social tension. This is one of the reasons why the pacifying and neutralising effect of the political integration of rural societies can be so successful. Although the findings of the paper clearly show that the idyllic rural images used by the mass media and political actors are ideological and misleading, it seems to be another pacifying mechanism. The idyllic images of the countryside are substituted for discourses about real conditions (Horzsa, Kovách, Megyesi 2024; Kovai, Pulay 2024).

Despite growing interest from urban dwellers, the decline in production for one's consumption continues. Its motivations are more individualistic, in contrast to the growing cult of community gardens and sustainability values in other regions

of Europe, including former socialist countries. The rapid separation of the masses from the land could radically weaken the effective protection of the natural environment and other principles of sustainability. It is also true that we have measured a strengthening of positive values about the environment, but this has had little direct practical consequence in terms of a decline in control over land. Industrial pollution and road-network development are also much more subject to environmental conflict than agricultural land or chemical use. Practical/producer activism related to healthy food is much more of an urban movement.

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Annex

Table A1. Characteristics of groups involved in agriculture in Hungary

Tabela A1. Charakterystyka grup zaangażowanych w działalność rolniczą na Węgrzech

	Farmer	Directly involved in agriculture, but not farming	Food self-provisioning (groups weakly involved in agriculture)	Indirectly involved in agriculture	Total
Budapest	0.6%	6.0%	1.5%	15.7%	8.4%
County seat	23.4%	7.6%	7.9%	21.5%	15.3%
City	33.5%	40.9%	39.6%	36.2%	37.8%
Municipality	42.5%	45.5%	50.9%	26.6%	38.6%
Central and big city	29.5%	14.3%	16.3%	30.9%	23.5%
Small town, village	69.9%	79.7%	82.2%	53.4%	68.1%
Men	48.8%	46.5%	45.5%	44.0%	45.4%
Women	51.2%	53.5%	54.5%	56.0%	54.6%
Max 8 classes	40.7%	55.6%	35.2%	30.8%	37.7%
Apprenticeship training	18.6%	15.2%	24.8%	22.5%	21.4%
Graduation	26.3%	19.2%	27.5%	29.9%	26.9%
BA/MA	14.4%	9.9%	12.5%	16.8%	14.0%
18-25	7.2%	6.6%	6.2%	8.8%	7.5%
26-39	13.9%	15.9%	18.7%	23.7%	19.8%
40-59	39.8%	29.8%	34.7%	32.0%	33.2%
60+	39.2%	47.7%	40.4%	35.5%	39.5%

Table A1 – cont.

Tabela A1 – cd.

	Farmer	Directly involved in agriculture, but not farming	Food self-provisioning (groups weakly involved in agriculture)	Indirectly involved in agriculture	Total
Working	58.4%	52.3%	55.3%	58.4%	56.4%
Unemployed	3.6%	1.0%	3.3%	1.4%	2.1%
Inactive	38.0%	46.7%	41.4%	40.2%	41.5%
Good or very good	53.3%	49.5%	65.5%	62.1%	59.8%
Satisfactory	35.9%	37.2%	27.5%	28.0%	30.4%
Bad or very bad	10.8%	13.3%	7.0%	9.8%	9.8%

Source: own study based on KEP3 data.
Źródło: opracowanie własne na podstawie danych KEP3.

Table A2. Integration model and agricultural involvement in Hungary

Tabela A2. Model integracji i zaangażowanie w działalność rolniczą na Węgrzech

	Farmers	Food self-provisioning	Of peasant origin (indirect)	Not involved in agriculture	Total
Connected, politically active	13.6%	17.1%	16.3%	6.9%	10.2%
Locally integrated	9.2%	6.7%	6.9%	4.8%	5.8%
Politically integrated	13.1%	12.2%	16.7%	15.9%	15.3%
Norm following relationship rich	8.2%	12.9%	16.6%	15.1%	14.3%
Standard-setting integrated into labour market	13.6%	18.3%	12.8%	23.6%	20.3%
Norm traitor, outcast	20.7%	7.6%	11.7%	20.8%	17.9%
Norm following disintegrated	21.6%	25.2%	18.9%	13.0%	16.2%

Source: own study based on KEP3 data.
Źródło: opracowanie własne na podstawie danych KEP3.

Zaangażowanie w działalność rolniczą w społeczeństwie węgierskim po akcesji do UE

Streszczenie: W artykule podjęto analizę związków ludności węgierskiej z rolnictwem w latach 2005–2021. Omówiono konsekwencje depezantyzacji w ostatnich dekadach, spadek małoskalowej produkcji żywności (samowystarczalności żywnościowej i rolnictwa na własne potrzeby) oraz zaangażowania w sektor rolny. Analiza opiera się na danych statystycznych oraz serii reprezentatywnych badań przeprowadzonych w latach 2005, 2015, 2018 i 2021. Wyniki badań pokazują nie tylko, jak zmniejszyła się produkcja żywności i udział ludności w rolnictwie, lecz także pozwalają zidentyfikować społeczne wzorce uczestnictwa i zaangażowania w ten sektor gospodarki. Przedstawiono ekstremalnie szybki spadek liczby ludności rolniczej, zmiany w strukturze ludności rolniczej oraz – w szerszej perspektywie – konsekwencje depezantyzacji na Węgrzech w kontekście międzynarodowym i jej wpływ na zrównoważony rozwój oraz wartości środowiskowe.

Słowa kluczowe: depezantyzacja, rolnictwo, zrównoważony rozwój, koncentracja ziemi.