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Us and them. Is the COVID-19 pandemic a driver for xenophobia in land transactions in Romania?

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 is a humanitarian challenge that puts a spotlight on the need to understand the new provocations and how to prevent the escalation of different types of conflict. The present contribution gravitates around three major problems – foreign land grab, COVID-19 pandemic, and xenophobia. To the authors’ best knowledge, this is the first study that investigates how COVID-19 has influenced the xenophobia feelings and the perceptions on foreign land acquisitions. Therefore, one objective is to investigate Romanian landowners’ attitudes toward land grabbing effects, consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, and xenophobia. Another objective is to reveal how well a set of variables could predict the preference for the nationality of the buyer in land transactions. The binary logistic regression indicates that the preference for the nationality of the buyer in agricultural land transactions can be predicted by three variables. The effect of COVID-19 on population health is found to have a significant prediction power. Even if only a moderate to low level of xenophobia among the interviewed persons is present, when land is under discussion, negative judgments and feelings towards non-Romanian citizens emerge. Authors consider that correcting misperceptions can be achieved through information campaigns using messages that reinforce positives outcomes of foreign investments. The study provides empirical justification for regulations, law enforcement mechanisms, and information campaigns that should profoundly reflect and support the multicultural dynamics of the European societies.

1. Introduction

COVID-19 pandemic, this unrivaled health and economic crisis, has shown humanity how economic, social, and also the environmental conditions can intersect to worsen the effects of the health crisis. The United Nations motto “healthy land = healthy people” is now truer than ever and it refers to the role that land can play during COVID-19 in the prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery phases of the pandemic (United Nations. Convention to Combat Desertification, 2020). That is why, now more than ever, humanity should marshal the efforts to support rural community resilience and secure rural livelihoods.

This real-time pandemic has exposed not only the limits of the health system, but also the precariousness of national food systems translated into food shortage, “stocking up” consumers’ behavior, and price volatility (Béné, 2020). Laborde et al. (2020) outlined that food price instability and the shift in food demand towards cheaper are among the main threats posed by COVID-19. Similarly, Akter (2020), who presented findings from a preliminary assessment of the impact of the lockdown restrictions on food prices in Europe, found a significant positive impact of “stay-at-home” restrictions on overall food prices. This disruptive shock asks for adaptation (Benton, 2020) understood by some in ensuring access to agricultural land – the key link in providing food products (Muraoka et al., 2018; Petrescu-Mag et al., 2019). Consequently, emerging evidence during pandemic supports the assumption that land rush is also determined by the need to ensure access to staple food products. During the COVID-19 crisis, many countries have considered food protection measures, like export prohibitions.

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translated into a decrease between 6% and 20% (Espitia et al., 2020) of the global food export supply. Kazakhstan, for instance, with a share of 3% in global wheat exports, has announced export restrictions; similarly, Russia is reportedly considering a ban on wheat exports (Glauber et al., 2020). Egypt has introduced a three-months export ban on vegetables, while Cameroon has instituted a prohibition on fresh and frozen fish products coming from China (Breton and Chemutai, 2020). Romanian authorities have banned the sale of several agricultural products, including wheat, corn, and sugar, outside the European Union (EU). The Romanian government intends to allow the sale of products in the EU, but buyers must prove that merchandise is not intended to be exported. Practically, as explained by Laborde et al. (2020) these quantitative restrictions imposed by states have destabilized prices because they have reduced the capacity of markets to adapt to production shocks through changes in exports. There is still a lot of uncertainty though, as to how long the COVID-19 will last and how the global economic consequences will be in the medium and long term (Elleby et al., 2020).

In the current pandemic, the links between epidemic risk, economic affairs, and xenophobic reactions can be easily observed (White, 2020). In recent years, media contributed to the proliferation of the idea of imbalances in the domestic market when foreign entities own the most fertile agricultural land. Such messages, accompanied by an increase in agricultural prices during the COVID-19 crisis [estimations point between 2% and 6 % on average (Espitia et al., 2020)], caused fear of food insecurity and great concern throughout Romanian society. Small farming is still dominating Romanian agricultural landscape (Petrescu-Mag et al., 2017) and, as in many parts of the world, this might appear inefficient in the current agricultural economic conditions dominated by the prevalence of global capital (Guiomar et al., 2018). However, the contribution of small farmers to the rural sustainability was researched and demonstrated in various studies (Ricciardi et al., 2018; Unay-Gailhard and Bojnc, 2016).

There is an induced feeling that the functioning without any constraint of the land market is unfavorable to the Romanian farmers. This concern, as it will be shown in the next section, also caused unprecedented legislative changes. The media mainly negatively reports on COVID-19, whatever it is about the number of infections, death, or lack of food on the shelves. This increases negative emotions that have become contagious. In such situations fear can make threats appear more imminent (Mobbs et al., 2015; Van Bavel et al., 2020). Fear often produces great behavior changes, sometimes reflected in how some feel about and react to others, in particular, foreigners. The exitance and the control of COVID-19 misinformation spread by the online and offline hate community and other extremists are acknowledged to be an urgent problem worldwide (Iyengar, 2020; Kouzy et al., 2020; Schild et al., 2020; Velasquez et al., 2020). Unreliable information has inflamed prejudice and xenophobia (Jakovljevic et al., 2020). Donald Trump, for example, referred to Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) as the Chinese virus (Zeng et al., 2020). Russell (2020) documented racist incidents on Asian people in the U.K. because of the pandemic.

The COVID-19 puts a spotlight on the need to understand how the society reacts to the new provocations and how the escalation of different types of conflict that may result from COVID-19 can be escalated. Practically, in the light of the SARS-CoV-2 context in which we are still, the present study draws upon authors’ perception of the exacerbation of feelings of hate towards foreigners. In the absence of scientific studies to report and analyze these situations, this perception is based mainly on evidence reported in the grey literature (e.g., TV reports, blogs, newspapers). The thinking and lifestyle of each individual have been impacted by this crisis and, probably, we may never return to the normality before COVID-19 (Butu et al., 2020). The COVID-19 crisis is still unfolding, so our understanding of the implications of the pandemic is limited and this asks for collective and individual actions.

The aim of the present study is to develop evidence on the level of xenophobia within the Romanian land market. More to the point, two main objectives were set. The first one is to investigate Romanian landowners’ attitudes considering three dimensions – perceptions of land grabbing effects, perceptions of consequences of the current pandemic, and xenophobia. As Barry (2019) points out, xenophobia does not operate as an absolute, static phenomenon, it is dynamic and dependent on social and historical context. Thus, the present study assumes that COVID-19 pandemic could be a source of xenophobia and this is why to know how Romanian landowners perceive foreign land grabbing within the current pandemic is worthy of investigation. Next, following the understanding of xenophobia as the “attitudes, prejudices and behavior that reject, exclude and often vilify persons, based on the perception that they are outsiders or foreigners to the community, society or national identity” (The United Nations Organization, 2001), the measurement of Romanians’ xenophobia is included in the analysis.

Their feelings are measured on a five-item hierarchical xenophobia scale (that includes personal fear, fear of cultural change, fear of cultural change/ losing identity, fear of disloyalty, and political fear) developed and previously used by Van der Veer et al. (2013).

Within this context of discussion “xenophobia in land transactions” encompasses attitudes, prejudices, and behavior that exclude foreigners from all forms of distribution of and access to land. The second objective is to reveal how well a set of variables can predict the preference for the nationality of the buyer in land transactions. It is in this context that the following research questions were asked: “What are Romanians’ perceptions of land grabbing effects?”; “What are Romanians’ perceptions of consequences of the current pandemic”; “What is Romanians’ level of xenophobia?”; “Can the preference for the land buyer nationality be predicted by the set of the selected variables?” These are some of the questions left unanswered in the emerging body of literature on land grabbing in Romania. Much research has been conducted on land grabbing worldwide (e.g., Bunks and Theesfeld, 2018; Margulis et al., 2013; Petrescu et al., 2020; Teklemariam et al., 2015) and the context laid out by COVID-19 increasingly outlines why and how pandemic generates uneven socio-economic vulnerabilities and risks (e.g., Klassen and Murphy, 2020; Laborde et al., 2020; Leach et al., 2020; Noy et al., 2020), this study is the first one that puts in the same equation COVID-19, xenophobia feelings, and land grabbing.

The article proceeds as follows. The “Background” depicts the context of the debate and it reveals the connections between land grabbing, the COVID-19 pandemic, and xenophobia. The third part describes the methods used. The fourth section synthesizes the findings from the questionnaire. In the fifth section, we discuss and reflect on the results and the methodological approach. Concluding remarks are presented in the last section.

2. Background

Uncertainty and fear amid this crisis is understandable, but these emotions cannot legitimize xenophobia that also encompasses a “psychological state of hostility or fear towards outsiders” (Reynolds et al., 1987). As declared by the president of the International Organization for Migration, Antonio Vittorino (2020), combating xenophobia is key for recovery after this pandemic.

A relevant example is that of a rural community called Ditrazu, from Harghita county (center part of Romania) with about 5000 people. The locals of Ditrazu revolted against foreigners who came from 7000 km to work in a local bakery. The citizens invoked that they do not eat bread kneaded by the hands of foreigners and these non-Romanian citizens will bring diseases (Copaceanu, 2020). The attitude of the locals was supported by the priest, which led, in the end, to physical violence and the departure of newcomers from the locality. The paradox of Ditrazu is that a minority itself – the Hungarian minority (who possess Romanian citizenship and whom the authors have not at all considered non-Romanian citizen) is intolerant of foreigners. The association between foreigners and disease is a recurring topic in the scientific literature on immigration (Markel, 1999; Markel and Stern, 2002). Reported
elevated fears and misconceptions surrounding COVID-19 among villagers in India may have led to higher levels of xenophobia (Mamun and Griffiths, 2020). Xenophobia manifestation arose on a background of insecurity and threat caused also by COVID-19 and, especially, on a fear of losing something, such as rights, privileges, relatives, or access to resources.

In Romania, the existing social and economic inequalities in the rural area (e.g., scarcity of young farmers, low income, precarious information, and educational level) (Petrescu-Mag et al., 2018) and the phenomenon of marginalization of agriculture in society (McElwee and Annibal, 2010; Mejilboom and Staffleu, 2016) have heightened the vulnerabilities of the farmers in terms of health, economic, and other impacts of COVID-19 (Bennett et al., 2020). In the context created by pandemic, the feelings of hatred exposed in Ditrau fueled by manipulation and lack of public responsibility, show that xenophobia is recomposed according to other criteria, where food security and health protection are gaining a relevant role. As per Graef (2013) land conflicts are shaped by the different meanings associated with land, viewed as the productive asset, “the home”, or as the means of livelihood. The political discourse around land grabbing is often shaped by preconceptions and anxieties (Kag and Zoomers, 2014). Therefore, it is not surprising that the “rush for land” has caused all over the world resistance that occasionally involved evictions or armed violence (Gómez et al., 2015; Woods, 2020). Justified and strategized in political discourses and policy measures based on capital need (Galaty, 2013), the loss of national sovereignty is reported to be an outcome of these agricultural investments (Lavera, 2013). Different understandings of sovereignty are brought into questions within large land deals as these entail exogenous claims on land and its resources (Graef, 2013). “Land” seen as a finite resource that is allocated, distributed, and owned (Elden, 2010) is a fundamental resource of the nation-state, a central element on which states build their sovereignty. In this regard, one noteworthy study was one of Petrescu-Mag et al. (2017) dedicated to land fragmentation and land grabbing in Romania. There, the authors showed that the interviewed people considered that if the land is sold to foreign investors, national security is the most vulnerable aspect; also, they answered that they would prefer to sell to a Romanian buyer, which is a clear statement in favor of the national ownership of the land. In the neighboring country, Hungary, land is part of political discourses which appeal to the so-called obscure interests of foreigners on Hungarian territory. Sándor Fazekas (former Minister of Rural Development) was claiming in 2014 that “We will not move an inch on the strictness of the Hungarian Land Law. We will defend Hungarian land; we will defend the acacia and palinka” ([Index, 2014] cited in [Brawner, 2020]). Similarly, to a certain extent the Zimbabwean seizure of land can be seen as xenophobia (Kersting, 2009). Practically, this approach to land suggests the need for a less strictly material approach to it and its value (Brawner, 2020). Based on The International Social Survey Programme’s (ISSP), Gugushvili (2016) reported the opinion of citizens in 32 countries across the world on the permissiveness to buy land. Russians were ranked first among the respondents who are against the land selling to foreigners, while the most liberal group of countries was made of Switzerland, Finland, Spain, and Sweden.

The agricultural activities, the use of natural resources, national security, and also the survival of rural heritage are based on land management. Within the pandemic context, the greater risk for food insecurity comes from the demand side and not from the supply one (Siciliano, 2014), and this is one more reason for which food security has reached the land markets. Addressing the link between land tenure and food security from an economic perspective, according to Maxwell and Wiebe (1999), land tenure [understood as a set of regulations under which land is owned, used, transferred, and succeeded (La Croix, 2002)] can be viewed as the supply side, while the food security as the demand side. Consequently, within the global competition for food supply, transnational corporations and foreign investors are setting, even more, their sights on agricultural land acquisitions (Robertson and Pinstrup-Andersen, 2010). This phenomenon, colloquially known as land grabbing, had been visible before, especially in developing countries (Petrescu-Mag et al., 2017; Siciliano, 2014). However, with particular regions more affected than others, large scale land acquisitions are present and more and more reported in the scientific literature mainly in the Central and Eastern European countries (Bunkus and Thesfeld, 2018; Gonda, 2019; Petrescu-Mag et al., 2017; Visser and Spoor, 2011).

In Romania, the restriction of land acquisition for foreigners (where “foreign” is understood as a non-Romanian citizen), regulated under the Accession Treaty of 2007, expired on January 1, 2014. Since then, many foreign investors have purchased agricultural land, placing Romania on the map of land grabbing. At present, there is a major lack of adequate information regarding how much land is owned by foreigners. Estimations point that more than 10 % of the land is owned by foreign investors (European Parliament, 2015). According to the Romanian Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (2020a) which has to approve the transactions over 30 ha, one of the most recent deals (May 2020), was of 107 ha of arable land (in western Romania bought by a German citizen) for 680 000 euros (6 296 Euro/ha). Till May 2020, eight land transactions over 30 ha were concluded (compared to 19 selling offers in 2019, data on the concluding contracts for this period are not available (Romanian Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2020b)). However, the number of transactions under this surface is unknown and they might sum up to large surfaces. Similar protectionist regulations can be found in other parts of the world. In Argentina, foreigners can own up to a maximum of 15 % of all agricultural land while in Brazil foreign ownership cannot exceed 25 % (Perrone, 2013). In Israel, 92 % of the land is state-owned and it cannot be sold (with several limited exceptions) (Hodgson et al., 1999); in Poland, since January 2018, a new restriction on the sale of the property is in force (Stacherekz et al., 2019).

Along with the development of the COVID-19 pandemic, rapid changes in land legislation also took place [Law no.175/2020 (Parliament of Romania, 2020)]. Significant modifications have been made to the conditions that buyers of agricultural land must meet outside the built-up area, the categories of preempts and the conditions that they must meet, the manner of exercising the right of preemption, the competition of preempts, the powers of the authorities, over-taxation in case of alienation earlier than 8 years. For example, to be eligible to buy agricultural land, a natural person has to have the domicile / residence on the national territory for at least 5 years, before the registration of the sale offer; to carry out agricultural activities on the national territory for at least 5 years, before the registration of this offer. Similarly, legal entities must meet a set of cumulative conditions (for at least 5 years prior to the registration of the sale offer). One is to provide documents showing that from the total income of the last 5 fiscal years, at least 75 % represents income from agricultural activities. The agricultural land cannot be sold earlier than eight years. However, if this happens, the seller has to pay a tax representing 80 % of the difference between the initial purchase price and the sale price. One of the discussions related to this normative act was that no land put up for sale should be resold except to the state. It should be noted, however, that the Romanian state has not bought any agricultural land since 2014, when the agricultural land market for foreign citizens was liberalized (although it has the right of pre-emption). Since then, over 110 000 ha have been put up for sale (Barbulescu, 2020).

3. Methodology

3.1. Description of the study area and location of interviewed landowners

Romania is member state of the European Union (EU). It is situated in the southeastern part of Central Europe and shares borders with Serbia (to the southwest), Bulgaria (to the south), the Black Sea (to the southeast), Ukraine (to the east and to the north), the Republic of Moldova (to the east), and Hungary (to the northwest). Romania is the
The perception of interviewed people was investigated on three dimensions: land grabbing, the COVID-19 pandemic, and xenophobia (Table 1). As one emotional aspect found in the understanding of xenophobia is the fear, a five-item hierarchical xenophobia scale was used to assess the fear-based reactions to foreigners. This scale was developed by Van der Veer et al. (2013). The five items were rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = totally agree, depicting the highest level of xenophobia to 5 = totally disagree, indicating no xenophobia). The order of the items reflects different levels of threat that interviewed people experience regarding foreigners: personal fear, fear of cultural change, fear of cultural change/ losing identity, fear of disloyalty, political fear (Table 1). It must be pointed out that this scale measures feelings towards foreigners in general and not related to land.

The survey data were analyzed in Excel and SPSS. Frequency were calculated to present the interviewed persons’ perceptions of land grabbing consequences, COVID-19 pandemic effects, and xenophobia. Chi-square test was used to determine whether two categorical variables were related (e.g., gender, residence area). The Mann-Whitney U testis explored differences between two independent groups on a continuous measure (e.g., do males and females differ in terms of their perception of the gravity of the effects of COVID-19 on food security or on their perceived importance of the agricultural land to ensure food security during pandemic).

Binary logistic regression was performed using SPSS to test how well a set of variables (“It is good that agricultural land to be bought freely, in any area, by foreign investors”, “It is good to sell the agricultural land to foreign investors if Romanians do not work the land”, “The effect of COVID-19 on food security”, “The effect of COVID-19 on population health”, “Xenophobia” – the average score) can predict “The preference for the nationality of the buyer in land transactions” (Romanian vs. foreign). For binary logistic regression, an average score was calculated for the five xenophobia variables, measured on a scale from 1 (total agreement) to 5 (total disagreement), where higher agreement meant indicates higher level of xenophobia. The average score is 3.66, which indicates shows a moderate to low level of xenophobia among the interviewed persons.

4. Results

The sample characteristics are presented in Table 2. Descriptive

![Image of Romania map with some counties marked in red](image_url)

**Fig. 1.** Study area and location of interviewed landowners on the Romania map (the ten counties where the interviews were carried on are marked in dots).
Table 1
The investigated variables.

| Investigated variables | Questionnaire question/statement | Answer options |
|------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------|
| a. Perception of foreign land grabbing consequences | a.i. How do you consider the phenomenon of foreign land grabbing in Romania? | 1—very beneficial to 5—very harmful |
| b. Perception of the effects of foreign land grabbing | b.1. It is good that agricultural land to be bought freely, in any area, by foreign investors | 1—total agreement to 5—total disagreement |
| c. Preference for the nationality of the buyer in land transactions | c.1. If the price is the same, to whom do you prefer to sell your agricultural land? | 1—To a Romanian buyer, 2—To a foreign buyer |
| d. The influence of COVID-19 on the importance of agricultural land in ensuring food security | d.1. How has the COVID-19 pandemic changed your opinion about the importance of agricultural land to ensure food security? | 1—Their importance increased a lot, 5—Their importance decreased a lot |
| e. Perception of COVID-19 pandemic on several agricultural-related determinants of land grabbing | e.1. COVID-19 pandemic will increase foreign land grabbing | 1—total disagreement to 5—total agreement |
| f. Perception of COVID-19 pandemic on several quality of life determinants | f.1. Food security | 1—not at all serious to 5—very high severity |
| g. Personal fear | g.1. Interacting with people from other countries makes me uneasy | |
| h. Fear of cultural change | h.1. With increased foreign companies and investors in the country, I fear that our life will change for the worse. | 1—total agreement to 5—total disagreement |
| i. Fear of cultural change/loosing identity | i.1. I am afraid that our culture will be lost with increase in immigration | |
| j. Fear of disloyalty | j.1. The establishment of foreign companies in the country and the way they operate are out of control | |
| k. Political fear | k.1. I doubt that foreign investors will put the interest of our country first | |

Table 1 (continued)

| Investigated variables | Questionnaire question/statement | Answer options |
|------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------|
| a. Perception of foreign land grabbing consequences | a.i. How do you consider the phenomenon of foreign land grabbing in Romania? | 1—very beneficial to 5—very harmful |
| b. Perception of the effects of foreign land grabbing | b.1. It is good that agricultural land to be bought freely, in any area, by foreign investors | 1—total agreement to 5—total disagreement |
| c. Preference for the nationality of the buyer in land transactions | c.1. If the price is the same, to whom do you prefer to sell your agricultural land? | 1—To a Romanian buyer, 2—To a foreign buyer |
| d. The influence of COVID-19 on the importance of agricultural land in ensuring food security | d.1. How has the COVID-19 pandemic changed your opinion about the importance of agricultural land to ensure food security? | 1—Their importance increased a lot, 5—Their importance decreased a lot |
| e. Perception of COVID-19 pandemic on several agricultural-related determinants of land grabbing | e.1. COVID-19 pandemic will increase foreign land grabbing | 1—total disagreement to 5—total agreement |
| f. Perception of COVID-19 pandemic on several quality of life determinants | f.1. Food security | 1—not at all serious to 5—very high severity |
| g. Personal fear | g.1. Interacting with people from other countries makes me uneasy | |
| h. Fear of cultural change | h.1. With increased foreign companies and investors in the country, I fear that our life will change for the worse. | 1—total agreement to 5—total disagreement |
| i. Fear of cultural change/loosing identity | i.1. I am afraid that our culture will be lost with increase in immigration | |
| j. Fear of disloyalty | j.1. The establishment of foreign companies in the country and the way they operate are out of control | |
| k. Political fear | k.1. I doubt that foreign investors will put the interest of our country first | |
therefore, indicating support of the model. The Cox & Snell R Square and the Nagelkerke R Square values suggested that between 12% and 31.2% of the variability in preference for the nationality of the buyer in land transactions was explained by this set of three variables.

The influence of gender and the residence area (rural/urban) on the preference for the buyer nationality was tested using chi-square test and it was found no statistically significant difference between men and women and between those who lived in rural and urban area for the preference of the buyer nationality (c.1.) (the level of statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$). The Mann-Whitney U test was used to test the differences between men and women in terms of their belief that COVID-19 would increase foreign land grabbing and no statistically significant difference was found. The Mann-Whitney Test was also used to test if men and women differed in terms the perception of the gravity of the effects of COVID-19 on food security (f.1.) and on the perceived importance of the agricultural land to ensure food security during pandemic (d.1.). In both cases it a statistically significant difference ($p = 0.02$) in the perceived gravity and perceived importance was found. Women perceive a very higher severity of the effects of the pandemic on food security and men perceive the highest decreased importance of the agricultural land to ensure food security during COVID-19.

| Variable                          | Category             | Gender (%) | Years |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------|------------|-------|
| Gender (%)                        |                      | M          | F     |
| Age (mean)                        | 5092                 | 57.5       | 42.5  |
| Education (%)                     | Primary education    | 6.3        |       |
|                                   | Secondary education  | 50.6       |       |
|                                   | Higher education     | 43.1       |       |
| Residence (%)                     | Urban                | 44.3       |       |
|                                   | Rural                | 55.7       |       |
| Residence in another country (%)  | Yes, you or one of your family members lived for at least three months (now they live in Romania) | 40.7       |       |
|                                   | No                   | 59.3       |       |
| Monthly income (%)                | Maximum 1000 Ron     | 2.4        |       |
|                                   | (200 Euro)           | 19.6       |       |
|                                   | 1001–2000 Ron        |            |       |
|                                   | (201–400 Euro)       |            |       |
|                                   | 2001–4000 Ron        | 37.3       |       |
|                                   | (401–800 Euro)       |            |       |
|                                   | 4001–6000 Ron        | 25         |       |
|                                   | (801–1200 Euro)      |            |       |
|                                   | Above 6001 Ron       | 15.7       |       |
|                                   | (1201 euro)          |            |       |

Table 2: Sample characteristics.

Fig. 2. Perceptions of land grabbing (percentage of total sample).

Fig. 3. Preference for the nationality of the buyer (percentage of total sample).
Discussion

The results of the present study revealed a medium to high perceived harmful consequences of the land grabbing phenomenon. Also, the majority of Romanians disagree with the free sale of agricultural land to foreign investors. This is in line with the wave of headlines about the danger of land grabbing in the last five years. A series of more or less amplified reports of the need to provide "news" on food or national security issues linked with the presence of foreign investors in agriculture has created the perfect framework for politicians to promise laws that no longer allow foreigners access to the agricultural land market. This has already happened with the enforcement of Law no.175/2020. The context created by the new amendments raises our concern that instead of effective economic measures to stimulate Romanian farmers to become important players in the real estate market, the new changes create a favorable climate for two things, at least. One, to consider foreign investors as "the others", those with hidden economic interests. Practically, through the imposed restrictions, the
The higher the level of xenophobia is, the more likely he/she is to prefer a Romanian buyer, all other factors being equal. For every increase with one level in the perceived gravity of ‘The effect of COVID-19 on population health’, the odds of him/her preferring a Romanian buyer increases by a factor of 0.524 [Exp(B) = 0.524, Table 3]. This correlation shows that in a context when preservation of Romanian land ownership is pursued, landowners could be told that who works the land is not the most important criteria for deciding who deserves to buy it, and that Romanian ownership should be preserved even when land is left unworked by Romanians. Its preservation for foreign investors seems to be not negative on average. It can be clearly stated that the fear of foreigners is not the driving emotion in Romania, while both the United States and (western) Europe are dominated by a fear of the “other” as well as a fear of losing national identity (Moisi, 2010). The results from the xenophobia dimension bring to fore the potential power of emotions in society if they are treated as evaluative “judgments” (Listz and White, 1986), regardless if it is about land transactions, COVID-19 pandemic, or other issues.

The binary logistic regression shows that that the preference for the nationality of the buyer in agricultural land transactions can be predicted by three variables: the idea that the “It is good to sell the agricultural land to foreign investors if Romanians do not work the land” (b.2), “The effect of COVID-19 on population health” (f.2), and “Xenophobia (the average score)”. It can be considered that the predictive power of the model is acceptable (the three variables explain between 12 % and 31.2 % of the variability in the buyer nationality preference) because this is the first attempt to observe which variables can influence this seller preferences in the context of COVID-19 pandemic and concerns about xenophobic attitudes.

People who do not agree with the idea that “It is good to sell the agricultural land to foreign investors if Romanians do not work the land” (b.2) prefer a Romanian buyer, all other factors being equal. For every decrease with one level in the belief that “It is good to sell the agricultural land to foreign investors if Romanians do not work the land”, the odds of him/her preferring a Romanian buyer increases by a factor of 0.379 [Exp(B) = 0.379, Table 3]. This correlation shows that in a context when preservation of Romanian land ownership is pursued, landowners could be told that who works the land is not the most important criteria for deciding who deserves to buy it, and that Romanian ownership should be preserved even when land is left unworked by Romanians. Its preservation for future use can be an option to consider, too. In the opposite scenario, when the achievement of foreign land ownership is targeted, convincing people that it is more advantageous to sell the land to foreigners when Romanians do not work it may increase the chances that sellers decide in favor of a foreign buyer. This could be done, for example, by highlighting the importance of having fresh local agricultural products when the land is used, regardless of the nationality of the owner.

“The effect of COVID-19 on population health” is also a significant predictor for the preference of buyer nationality, according to Sig. value (p = 0.034). People who perceive more serious the effect of COVID-19 on population health prefer a Romanian buyer, all other factors being equal. For every increase with one level in the perceived gravity of “The effect of COVID-19 on population health”, the odds of him/her preferring a Romanian buyer increases by a factor of 0.524 [Exp(B) = 0.524, Table 3], all other factors being equal. A possible explanation may be that these people see foreigners as a threat and when they already perceive a situation as dangerous (the serious effect of COVID-19 on population health) they do not want to add another one (foreigners owning Romanian land).

The calculated average score of 3.66 points for the five xenophobia variables indicates a moderate to low level of xenophobia among the interviewed persons. The highest contribution to this score (equivalent to the lowest xenophobic level) is brought by the first variable – 54.3 % of the people do not feel uncomfortable when they interact with foreigners (g.1.). This is a positive outcome which implies that interviewed people do not have a problem with foreign people in general, but with what they believe that the foreigners will do. Consequently, a decrease in the xenophobic feelings can be achieved by modifying their beliefs with regards to foreigners’ actions. This can be done, for example, by giving examples of foreigner investors’ positive actions, or by implementing measures that prevent/limit their intervention in the direction feared by local people –The realistic conflict theory suggests that negative feelings towards foreigners become pronounced when people feel threatened by them (Stephan and Stephan, 2017). However, in the present case, none of the five perceived investigated fears obtained very high scores. These findings confirm that similarly with what was found for central Europe (Beller, 2020) the Romanians’ attitude towards foreigners seems to be not negative on average. It can be clearly stated that fear of foreigners is not the driving emotion in Romania, while both the United States and (western) Europe are dominated by a fear of the “other” as well as a fear of losing national identity (Moisi, 2010). The results from the xenophobia dimension bring to fore the potential power of emotions in society if they are treated as evaluative “judgments” (Listz and White, 1986), regardless if it is about land transactions, COVID-19 pandemic, or other issues.
land from this group, they should first make efforts to change people level of xenophobia, in particular people’s fears related to the five variables describing xenophobia in this study (Table 1, variables g to k).

Another option would be to diminish the importance of landowners’ xenophobic feelings in the decision about selling their land or by increasing the importance of other factors involved in the decision-making process (the most common one is the price, but others can also matter, such as preservation of traditions or of people’s usual way of living).

Results infer that even if Romanians are not xenophobes in general (according to the average score measured on Van der Veer et al.’s (2013) scale (3.66 points)), when land is under discussion, negative judgments and feelings towards foreigners emerge. The reason may be that there is a strong connection between people and their land and they feel directly affected by land transactions. Therefore, land may be a driver for xenophobic feelings and the international context can also intensify them. In a Europe where nationalist discourses are visibly invigorated by the political environment that cultivates the vision of a national home that is diluted by the increasing number of immigrants (Adam, 2015), the strong nationalism may enhance in-group solidarity.

We acknowledge several limitations of the present study. A representative sample of the population at the country level will increase the reliability of the results. Also, the understanding of citizens’ perceptions of land grabbing effects, COVID-19 pandemic, or xenophobia can be enriched by extending the analysis with simulations of real situations in which respondents are affected, to reveal their reactions, and also by including other variables (e.g., attachment to the land). A future study should also consider the addition of new independent variables in the model to increase its predictive power. Trends in xenophobia across time periods and birth cohorts would be just as important to investigate. A very interesting direction for future studies is the development of an instrument to measure xenophobia in relation to land.

6. Conclusion

This contribution assumed that the COVID-19 pandemic is a driver of changes. How to respond to these changes remains a challenge. The COVID-19 is a true vulnerability for humanity that asks for a deep evaluation of our priorities and needs. The crisis we are going through has shown us that food security is one of the pillars of the concept of human security in the broadest sense. We are much more aware now than before that there is an imperative for national food security and land tenure security strategy. The current National Agri-Food Strategy for the period 2015–2020–2030, elaborated in 2015, is outdated. Also, one way to respond to this pandemic is to go local and less intensive, to create agricultural systems that are resilient to the ongoing and future shocks. This requires to consider small farmers as an important player of sustainable agricultural systems, to demand decision-makers to evaluate and plan for how to protect the land rights of small farmers and their access to markets, especially during this crisis. We are also aware that large land-based investments will continue to exist and develop, but they should be aligned with an updated national strategy for food security. Transparent and fair negotiation procedures for land management projects that affect rural communities must be implemented. If it is to find a logo for a social campaign that will promote small farming in a context where land grabbing has become a phenomenon, this will probably “be informed before you sell! Be informed before you buy!” These catchwords outline that information and education are central in creating new values and attitudes and they provide important tools for addressing land management issues, all the more so as large-scale land acquisitions are at stake.

We are on a fragile shore – the land which is perceived as a symbol of national security and cultural perpetuation. So, it is timely and necessary to investigate how this pandemic has influenced the xenophobia feelings and the perceptions on foreign land acquisitions, both aspects being directly connected with food security. The perceptions on three dimensions – land grabbing, the COVID-19 pandemic, and xenophobia – were investigated. The findings indicate that the majority of Romanians perceive the harmful consequences of foreign land grabbing and they do not agree to freely sell the agricultural land to foreign investors. Despite these statements, it was found that Romanians have moderate to low feelings of xenophobia.

COVID-19 is a humanitarian challenge with lasting or even permanent effects on how people think, live, and work. The unpredictable consequences surrounding public health, security, food availability, incomes, together with misinformation about COVID-19, has created a climate of fear. Misperceptions correction can be achieved through information campaigns, targeting both the landowners and the general public. For example, messages can be designed to reinforce positive contributions of foreign investments (e.g., the contribution of foreign land investors to the welfare of the rural community – construction of educational, health facilities). This observation should be retained, even if we cannot consider those surveyed as xenophobes in general because the rapid changes and uncertainty brought by the COVID-19 pandemic create fear or insecurity, and this can lead both to xenophobia and violent reactions to the “outsiders”. In other words, land may be a trigger for xenophobic attitudes. Lastly, it must be acknowledged the crucial role that state institutions, politicians, and mass media play in the making of the culture of xenophobia. They have the power to shape societal attitudes through regulations, law enforcement mechanisms, and information campaigns that should profoundly reflect the multicultural dynamics of European societies, in general.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

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