Audit of Forest Restitution Process. Some Findings Regarding the Romanian Space in the Post-Communist Stage

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Abstract: This paper takes up a highly important topic, both for the environment and for the domestic economy, by resorting to the performance audit method applied to a component of the activity developed in the forestry sector. We have basically set out to emphasize the weaknesses that have long been present here, in relation to the forest retrocession process and with specific focus on the occurring causes and consequences. On the other hand, we have tried to identify certain ways to bring about the long needed recovery. The scientific background has been set by resorting to the most significant academic research in the field, textbooks and audit standards, reports of the Court of Accounts, regulations, etc. by taking into account the statistical data and the information confirmed by prestigious state organisations/institutions.

Keywords: *forest economics; external audit; deforestation; retrocession; juridical flaws.*

How to cite: Lazar, C.M., Hurjui, I., Asalos, N., & Bostan, I. (2019). Audit of Forest Restitution Process. Some Findings Regarding the Romanian Space in the Post-Communist Stage. *Logos Universality Mentality Education Novelty: Law*, 7(2), 66-79. doi:10.18662/lumenlaw/28

1. Preliminary viewpoints

Forests are particularly important for economic and social life, if we were to consider the fact that 1.6 billion people are directly dependent upon these resources in order to meet their needs (Bucătaru-Sava, 2012; Urs, 2013); more than 2 billion people benefit from bio fuel for cooking and heating their dwellings etc. (Mery, Alfaro, Kanninen, & Lobovikov, 2005), while the workforce engaged in the forestry sector amounts to over 12 million people worldwide (FAO, 2007). However, forests currently cover less than 1/3 of the earth's land surface, and their surface is constantly decreasing, as the global deforestation rate being around 7.3 million hectares per year (Bradford, 2018). The deforestations taking place, particularly in developing countries (and the conversion of the forest land for farming) account for about 12-15% of the global CO₂ emissions (van der Werf, 2009). As forests play a vital part for life on earth, the issues related to their protection and sustainable management have been closely observed by numerous researchers throughout the world (Joseph et al., 2009; Jha & Bawa, 2006; Martinez, 1998; Devillez, Duran, & Renson, 1999; Hansen, Stehman, & Potapov, 2010). The warning signals that have been triggered show that deforestation and forest degradation lead to the shrinkage of the biomass and of the exploitable amount of wood, to changes in ecological processes and self-adjusting mechanisms, as well as to the diminishing of biodiversity (Rodgers, 1997). Romania is endowed with a wide forest variety (Figure 1) and is one of the few European countries whose territories still foster virgin forests, that amount to about 250 thousand hectares (MARD, 2013: 34-35).

Figure 1. Map of forests in Romania
Source: "Harta pădurilor..." (n.d.)

The national forestry fund includes (in the year 2017) a total area of 6 565 thousand hectares, of which the forest area is 6 406 thousand hectares, respectively. 1/3 of the country's surface, being relatively stable over the last five years (NIS, 2018). The resinous species cover 1 924 thousand hectares (30.0%), and the hardwoods, in turn, occupy 4 482 thousand hectares (70.0% respectively) (Marin, 2010); the surface of the forest vegetation outside the national forest land amounts to approx. 350 thousand hectares.

In 2017 a volume of wood was harvested at 18 316 thousand cubic metres, 5.0% lower than in 2013 (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Dynamics of wood mass harvesting (2013 – 2017)
(NIS, 2018)

Of the total harvested volume, the beech and the oak constitute each one third of the total harvested volume, and the beech, oak and various hard and soft species are altogether another third. Referring to the surface area of the state-owned forest fund, managed by ROMSILVA (The National Forest Administration), this is 3 189 thousand hectares, lands covered with forest representing approx. 99%. Of these, 1/3 returns the beech, 1/4 - resinous, 1/5 - oak, etc. (NIS, 2018). Concerns in terms of forest sustainable management are numerous in Romania as well, as proved by several scientific research papers in the field (Bouriaud, 2008; Coandă & Stoiculescu, 2005; Dănescu, Costache, & Mihăilă, 2010; Doniță & Soran, 1994; Măciucă & Lupăștean, 2004). Forest economics is seen as a multiple function branch, but two aspects should become the objectives of specific development projects (CPPPDA, 2013: 38-39). These are (1) expanding the forests by planting new trees and (2) rational exploitation of forest resources. The situation is far from simple, if we were to take into account the fact that people believe forests to be a general benefit (biodiversity, climate, soil protection, water protection, etc.), while owners are interested in exploitability (RCA, 2013a).

However, establishing the balance is quite a difficult matter which depends on the development of societies and also entails that the state should take over certain administration costs. Under these circumstances, as concerns the issues related to the complex process of forest retrocession, which has been enforced as a restoring act after 1990, mainly as a

consequence of the forests having been publicly owned after 1948, we wish to use the instruments of performance audit to reveal the difficulties encountered in the analysed field and try to make certain suggestions means to lead to a visibly increased efficiency.

2. Materials and Methods

The present work uses published information primarily from FAO, ECA, GR, NIS, ROMSILVA, RCA, etc. and other regional level/local-specific case studies. Our investigation focuses on the period during 1990-2010, the data and information that have been used are public, and their validity is guaranteed by their presence in various scientific papers published under the aegis of prestigious public organisations/institutions. The analyses and correlations drawn by the authors have taken into account the latest editions of the journals published by these institutions, mainly consisting of statistical papers, standards, procedural guidebooks, reports (RCA, 2013a; RCA, 2013b; ECA, 2008). The rigorous and scientific nature of the audit is visible in the relatively recent papers of several renown specialists in the field (Carmichael, Willingham, & Schaeller, 1996; Boulescu, Ghiță, & Mareș, 2001; Loebbecke, 2003; Goodwin, 2004; Willekens, 2005; Cosserat, 2005; Dănescu, 2007; Fraser & Chris, 2009), by taking into account the European context. The activity of ROMSILVA – that is in charge with the management of the state forest land – is periodically subject to performance audit conducted by RCA, as Supreme Audit Institution (Boulescu, Ispir, Dascălu, 2009; Dascălu & Nicolae, 2006; Bostan, 2010a, 2010b, 2011), as is the case of other national bodies that currently manage substantial state resources, and the respective reports and summaries are posted on the RCA website in due time.

The audit activities entail procedures that are exclusively in compliance with the international audit standards and with the best practices in the field. The audit criteria have been selected through the use of professional reasoning and have been extracted from the current normative framework (RP, 1990, 2005, 2008; GR, 2008, 2009a, 2009b).

3. Results and discussion

The activity of ROMSILVA is governed by the Ministry of the Environment and Climate Change (MECC). Its purpose is the sustainable and unitary management of the publicly owned forest land in order to augment the forests' role in the improvement of the environment conditions and in providing the domestic economy with specific goods and services

(GR, 2009a, 2009b). It further coordinates and implements the national programme for the equine genetic alleviation. It is also in charge with the administration of 23 national and natural reserves where the publicly owned forest land has a significant weight, ensuring biodiversity in these protected areas (ROMSILVA, 2014). The enforcement of the sustainable management principle in European countries entails the fact that forest ownership rights should not be considered as an absolute right, as the balance between the general interest of the community and the owner's private interests should be governed by the law; up to a certain extent, the Romanian legal standards do take this aspect into account (RP, 1990, 2000, 2005). The changes in ownership rights – in terms of the retrocession occurring after 1990, after the enforced state ownership of the forests in 1948 (Kuemmerle et al., 2012) – are quite topical in terms of the integrity and the development of the forest land surface, since the new categories of owners have various attitudes concerning the preservation of the forest use and/or with the possibility to expand it. Here is how the situation evolved (RCA, 2013a) in the context we are concerned with. At the end of 1990, the surface of the forest land was of 6 367.66 thousand hectares, of which the forests' surface was 6 248.99 thousand hectares and that of other land was of 118.67 thousand hectares. The surface of the forest land at the end of 2010 was of 6 515.17 thousand hectares, of which publicly owned 4 363 thousand hectares and privately owned 2 152.17 thousand hectares. The publicly owned surface amounted to 3 338.90 thousand hectares, of which 3 224.95 thousand hectares were actually forest covered, while 113.95 thousand hectares – other land. During 1990-2010, the surface of the publicly owned forest land diminished by about 3 000 thousand hectares, through retrocession to legal and natural persons, after the enforcement of the land fund laws.

The retrocession laws (RP, 1990, 2000, 2005), were rather confusing and lacking in vision and have thus given rise to abuse, conflicts and disputes etc., and often extended the restoration process of the ownership rights (in Table 1 we have presented the status of the restoration of ownership rights as concerns the forest covered land), thus endangering the stability of the forest system and of the timber market.

Table 1. State of the restoration of ownership rights over forest covered land (RCA, 2013a)

- thousand hectares -

Types of ownership over the national forest land	Forest land surface in 1948	Forest land surface:						
		Demanded through restoration claims (1991-2010)	Validated through active procedures or Judge's Orders	Inducted by local committees	Not inducted and not released by RNP	Of which compliant with the law:		
						No. 18/1991	No. 1/2000	No. 247/2005
State ownership	1 879							
Natural persons	1 516	1 906	1 352	1 213	139	9	44	86
Joint ownership	1 330	1 515	801	736	65		26	39
Communes, cities, religious and education organisations, foundations	1 761	1 503	1 142	1 111	31		10	21
TOTAL	6 486	4 924	3 295	3 060	235	9	80	146

As can be noted, the forest land claims made by natural persons exceed the forest land surface owned at the end of 1948 by 390 thousand hectares, and if we were to include joint ownership, apart from natural persons, their claims exceed the said surface by 575 thousand hectares.

According to the calculations of the Romanian Court of Audit, a surface of about 561.17 thousand hectares has been reclaimed or is in various stages of the administrative or juridical retrocession process, without meeting the criteria established by the law (in Table 2 you will find a summary of the juridical flaws), and have been classified as litigious cases.

Table 2. Juridical flaws in the claims for the restoration of ownership rights over forest land (in terms of the subject of the claim, claimant and ways in which the claim has been justified)

Subject of the claim	Claimant	(In)consistency of the claim
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Much larger surfaces than the ones actually owned in 1948 by the dispossessed; • Forest covered land surfaces expropriated by the state through agricultural reform laws or for which the state has paid damages; • Lien encumbered forests in favour of the state and taken over by it in exchange for certain debts; • Forest land that was part of a company's assets without the land fund laws referring to such retrocession; • Publicly owned forests managed by public foundations; • Forest land included in the "enemy assets" category by the truce laws; • Total forest land surface owned by joint ownership organisations before 1948, even though not all previous co-owners had heirs and not all the heirs have made claims; • Forest land surfaces that were part of established natural reserve; • Forest land that never belonged to the state. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individuals deprived of inheritance rights; • Unlawful or contested representatives of certain joint ownership types; • Joint ownership types that are not or cannot continue to have the rights and obligations of legal persons / business organisations; • Proxies holding mandates whose authenticity cannot be verified since they have been issued abroad; etc. • Religious organisations that have used but not owned forest land. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Claims that were not backed by documents showing ownership rights and requiring witness testimonies and extra-judicial examinations; • Deeds that could not be considered ownership rights; • Old and irrelevant documents (since the pieces of land have often undergone significant changes and so the forest land surface owned by the dispossessed claimants in 1948 was much smaller or did not exist anymore).

If all the said claims were to be granted, the forest land surface owned by the state would be much smaller than the one held in 1948, even though certain objective elements should prevent this from happening. And this, all the more so as the law confines the categories of individuals entitled to restoration, and, on the other hand, the restoration of the ownership rights of those individuals entitled to make claims, which also means the acknowledgement of the inheritance, but certain people have not made such claims. Subsequently, a number of legacies have thus inevitably remained vacant.

The abusive restorations of ownership rights (Ignătescu, 2013) over forest land amount to about 10% of the surfaces already instituted or about to be instituted (RCA, 2013a), at the end of 2012, while 983 litigious cases in various stages were being tried in law courts, claiming the restoration of ownership rights over forest land surfaces amounting to 660 thousand hectares. However, even if it's absolutely legal, the retrocession of ownership rights over forest land surfaces leads to excessive breakage, thus hindering the unitary and efficient implementation of sustainable management policies for forest resources in Romania (ECA, 2008), in line with the European trends (European Commission, 2010). A significant risk that may occur is

the slow cessation of mountain forests clearance, thus leading to a more accentuated frequency of floods, by accelerating the slope runoff of the water from torrential rains towards catchments.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

The law on forest control and management has been separated from the one referring to the restoration of ownership rights, thus triggering negative effects on the publicly owned forest land surfaces. What remains to be done now is for the Ministry of Public Finance (MPF), as representative of the Romanian government and the MECC, in charge of forestry activities, to take immediate measures and give solutions for the closure/completion of the restoration/retrocession of publicly owned forest land surfaces. On the other hand, the MPF should take action to restore the ceded forest land surfaces to the state, given the juridical flaws presented above.

A recommended course of action would be to hire the services of law firms to represent the interests of the Romanian government in order to stop the abuse and illegal actions that would lead to the further illegal retrocession of other land surfaces.

It would be equally important to organise an inter-ministry committee (with members from the MPF, the MECC, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Regional Development), that would analyse the history and the legal status of the large forest properties during 1920-1990, so as to develop a solid documentation to be filed and to support the complex cases tried in law courts or to be launched in order to compensate the government.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions to improve the quality of the paper.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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