Forum Synergies scholarship 2026 – Report

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Host Institution: După Gard, Posaga de Jos

Scholarship Programme: Forum-Synergies

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Executive Summary

My two-week scholarship placement at După Gard, a permaculture project nestled in the Apuseni Mountains of rural Romania, constituted far more than a conventional agricultural internship. It represented an immersive educational experience that bridged sustainable agriculture, grassroots community development and reflective inquiry into the social and cultural fabric of a post-communist rural society. During this period, I gained practical hands-on knowledge like fruit-tree grafting while simultaneously engaging with the broader challenges and opportunities that define rural revitalization in Transylvania.

După Gard – Project and Setting

My Forum Synergies Scholarship took place in Posaga de Jos, a small village nestled in a beautiful narrow valley of the Apuseni Mountains in Romania. For a period of two weeks I was hosted by După Gard, a permaculture project founded by Ioana, who grew up in the village herself, and her husband Andreas, who moved from Germany to build a life here with her. Together, they established the area's first campsite and grew their vision of a thriving, self-sufficient permaculture farm. On their farm they host volunteers, offer workshops and supply some fresh produce to a slow food restaurant in the region – a quiet but powerful effort to revitalize rural life and promote permaculture as a sustainable path into the future.

I came here after graduating in sustainable economics to learn about how bottom-up initiatives and projects can revitalize rural areas in an ecologically and economically sustainable fashion. And indeed, my experience has been insightful in many ways. Overall, my learnings can be divided into three broader topics: Permaculture, Romanian Society and Rural Sustainable Development.

Permaculture - A Sustainability Approach and Lifestyle

Permaculture is best described as a design philosophy that mimics patterns found in nature to create sustainable, self-sufficient systems and can be applied in gardens, farms or even entire communities. It works with natural cycles rather than against them, minimizing waste and human effort over time. Personally, I wasn't entirely new to the concept when I arrived in Posaga. Back in 2022, I had completed a Permaculture Design



Fruit-Tree Grafting

Course (PDC), but my knowledge had remained largely theoretical. The two weeks of living and working inside an actual permaculture project did refresh my knowledge and added new hands-on skills like fruit tree grafting. Additionally, I discovered the rich foraging culture that is still very much alive in the villages of Transylvania. Wild herbs or mushrooms remain a genuine part of everyday life here. One afternoon I got a taste of it when Ioana's mother cooked a simple but delicious sorrel soup from freshly picked leaves. On a visit to a nearby permaculture project called *Ermitaj Malin*, we were introduced to a striking fungus called "Chicken of the Woods" – named for its remarkably meat-like taste and texture.

Because of memories like this, my time in Posaga was a quiet reminder of how beautiful a simple life can be. Turns out fresh air, good food, meaningful work and good people around is really all you need.

The Village Posaga – Reflections on Romanian Society

It was my first time in Romania, but people kept insisting that I didn't get a representative picture of the country, as the region of Transylvania is supposed to be quite distinct from the South in many ways. It is argued that the region's character has been deeply influenced by its minorities: A German population that has lived in Transylvania for centuries but largely emigrated to Western Germany when communism took over after World War II, and a Hungarian community that remains very much alive today, with its own villages and cultural identity. Even though many people have been referring to Transylvania as less chaotic and more economically developed, life in the villages remains far from comfortable and easy. Most people still work their own land in largely self-sufficient ways. It was a very common picture to see elderly people doing hard physical work in the small, characteristic fields of the region. Additionally, most people still keep a handful of livestock, which is watched over by the many dogs, that are to be seen on almost every street corner. Unfortunately, those dogs are often treated poorly. In stark contrast to e.g. cows that are valued for the milk they provide, and therefore often even named, dogs are largely seen as tools for protection. Commonly they are being kept "low maintenance" with little food just free in the streets or put on shockingly short chains

when to aggressive. A rather surprising insight for me was the fact, that many people I spoke with lamented the lack of cohesion and solidarity in Romanian villages. This, as I was told, is rooted in the memories of communist times, when mutual surveillance and corruption were undermining peoples trust – in authorities as much as in their neighbors. As a result, people tend to operate within smaller, clan-like structures that look out for their own. My hosts Ioana and Andreas are no different in this regard, as they rely mostly on a handful of people and families, most of whom have been close to their family for generations. Yet there are signs that things are looking up. The scattered community of Posaga seems to be slowly recovering, as a woman I met from a neighboring village even spoke of it as an encouraging example of a healthier and more connected community.



Kristina and baby goat

But to build on this progress, things must improve economically as well. With the region's mining and forestry industries mostly shut down, jobs are scarce. Many young people leave for cities or abroad, leaving behind ageing communities. But Posaga is not without life. For a village of around 300 people, I find it remarkable that it still has a primary school, a pharmacy and two mini-markets. Some people even return after years away. During my stay I met Kristina, who had lived in Germany for a time but came back because, as she puts it, Posaga is where she feels most free. She now runs her late granduncle's farm – caring for the land and many farm animals. She consciously chose a rather hard life, also taking on work that has traditionally been considered a man's domain. And when I asked her who works harder in Posaga, men or women, she didn't hesitate to answer: the women. Remarkably, it is the men who are far more present in public life, chatting in the streets or doing the more visible work, while the women largely carry the load at home. Kristina says this dynamic gets enhanced by the problem of alcoholism, which is widely spread among the male population. A young man from Posaga named Andrej went so far as to describe some men's attitudes toward women as outright misogynistic. Nevertheless, Kristina has earned genuine respect in the community, including that of

men, but she is quick to say she considers herself an exception. Today she is considered one of the most active members of the community, and maybe she'll inspire some younger women with her independence and self-confidence.



Sustainable Rural Development – Grassroot Initiatives

Now what kind of action can be taken to develop rural Transylvania in a sustainable way, and what is the role of bottom-up initiatives here? One very inspiring project I learned about tackles exactly the previously described gender imbalance in rural Romania. Coline, who I met at the permaculture project *Ermitaj Malin*, came up with the idea of an herbal tea cooperative, which is led by women. It is aiming at empowering women through economic independence, as many women struggle to make an income due to little education and job opportunities. Thus, many women are economically dependent on their husband, which can easily lead to precarious situations if the man is dead, alcoholic or unavailable for other reasons. This is where the cooperative comes in by offering women from the nearby village a job for collecting wild herbs for teas, which are sold in the cities or even abroad. As the organisation will be a cooperative, its governance structure includes all its members, including the women, collecting the herbs. Cooperative is still in the implementation phase, and I very much hope it will be a success,

but Coline also told me about some struggles she has in implementing the project. Even though she got a grant for the project, it is difficult to meet all the legal requirements. Coline states that the legal framework at large benefits big companies with a lot of capital or the capacity to borrow such. This is why many small businesses in Romania don't even try to comply with the laws, making use of the grey areas and the inconsistent enforcement of those laws.

Another challenge is to implement the cooperative governance structure, which Coline wants to be based on the concept of *sociocracy*. A community-based approach like this, struggles to gain acceptance in Romanian Society, just because the wording itself reminds people of communism. This is an aspect I came across time and time again. Community-oriented projects and initiatives seem to genuinely suffer from scepticism by the locals, as they are easily linked with the traumatic memories of the communist era. Anything that triggers those memories of expropriation, surveillance and oppression doesn't stand a chance, even though it is just through using similar-sounding vocabulary. Even attempts to build networks or joint ventures between multiple businesses appear to be difficult, as a guy called Veri told me. Veri moved from the city into the same valley as Andreas and Ioana with the dream of making a living with eco-tourism in that area. Therefore, he aims to connect multiple small businesses in a collective effort to increase the region's attractiveness for tourists. He stresses that finding partners and convincing people that collective action can create mutual benefits is not easy. Instead, people often react with distrust, assuming that he is trying to secure an unfair advantage for himself.

This is why many people are seeing networking as a crucial step towards a more sustainable Romania. The same applies to the Romanian permaculture movement, which consists of numerous projects whose members are largely occupied with addressing their own challenges and pursuing their individual activities. This is also the motivation behind Andreas' project of establishing a Romanian Permaculture Association, which he is currently trying to build using the methodology of *Dragon Dreaming*. A similar approach is followed by Jean-Philippe, a befriended activist of the După Gard project, with his initiative *Regenerative Futures Transylvania*. All these actors aim to connect small initiatives and individuals in a collective effort toward a broader goal. This seems to be the task at hand right now – in Romania and many other parts of the world. Rural development is a complex process involving numerous people and institutions. While there is no shortage of motivated and highly idealistic individuals working toward positive change, it is important to recognize that their impact will remain limited if they continue to struggle in isolation with their own individual challenges.

Till Britsch, 27.05.2026