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Sacrificing Romania's Rich Traditions

Press release by the Working Horse Association of Romania

Driving from our tiny mountain village to the town of Bistrita the other day, we stopped several times to take photos of villages travelling by horse cart. We felt it important to capture these traditional Romanian images because they won't be here forever.

Certainly not if the Romanian government continues on its present course. Between new laws that make crucial aspects of the traditional Romanian lifestyle difficult to sustain, and overly strict—often downright ridiculous—interpretation of EU law, this government seems dedicated to destroying its country's rich traditions.

One does not have to travel far outside of any Romanian city to see that most of the population still makes their living off of the land, through farming and forestry, using horses for both labour and transportation. Most of these people continue to use traditional methods of agriculture by choice AND necessity; modern equipment is not only impractical for the small plots of land and rough, often mountainous terrain, it is prohibitively expensive. So are petrol and diesel fuel.

Yet in its race to modernize, the Romanian government has decided that tradition, and those who cling to it, are expendable. One of the most damaging laws recently enacted (Article 71 of the Highway Code) forbids horse-drawn vehicles from travelling on national highways. It is a law that persecutes the majority of Romania's population, a law as ill-conceived as Ceausescu's plan to systematise the villages. Apparently the urban bureaucrats in Bucharest failed to consider that in many areas of the country the main road connecting the local towns and villages is the ONLY road available, and therefore, was designated as a national highway during the Communist era. They failed to see that, beyond the congested environs of Bucharest, many "national highways" are relatively quiet. Some are not even surfaced with asphalt or concrete.

The Romanian government claims that "10% of road accidents are caused by horse carts." We should rephrase that: "10% of accidents involve horse carts." Most of these accidents are caused by car drivers travelling too fast or driving carelessly. However the law-makers are motorists, and prefer to blame peasant farmers who have no voice in law-making. The law-makers ignore the fact that making rural life more difficult will not only increase unemployment, it will rob Romania of one of its greatest assets: tradition.

There is more. Banning horse carts from highways is another step towards eliminating what is unique and attractive to tourists. Romania's potential as the next great travel destination is being squandered, and the Romanian people will once again be the ones who suffer for the ill-conceived actions of their government.

Unfortunately there is evidence that the Romanian police are using Article 71 of the Highway Code to persecute Roma. Television news coverage has shown police officers harassing Roma and confiscating their horses. Not only is this an example of institutional racism, the Romanian police force does not have the capability to care for confiscated horses, which may have gone on to suffer neglect or maltreatment as a result.

The Working Horse Association calls for a change to the Romanian Highway Code. Horse-drawn vehicles must be allowed to travel on all highways except for those few where the risks are excessively high. A national survey is required to establish, according to intelligent criteria, where motor traffic simply is too dense for horse-drawn vehicles to travel safely. Every other road must be available to horse-drawn traffic.

The Working Horse Association calls on the Romanian government to cease persecuting people who use horses. Instead, the Romanian government should take positive steps for equitable safety: funding comprehensive road safety awareness programmes, strictly enforcing speed limits, and where necessary investing in dedicated paths for horse-drawn vehicles parallel to national highways. The government should promote rural life, for productive small farms offer Romania's best chance for a healthy, sustainable future.

Julian Ross
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Lunca Ilvei, Bistrita-Nasaud
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Brief Biography

Julian Ross left his native England in 1999 for Romania, founding the Stefan cel Mare Equestrian Centre (www.riding-holidays.ro). He is dedicated to introducing foreign visitors to the natural beauty and traditional lifestyle of Transylvania. The Working Horse Association is a non-profit association dedicated to promoting the welfare and use of draught horses in Romania.