

Stefan Dorondel

Transforming the Socialist Landscape: New Rural Elite, Property Rights and Land Use. Changes in Post-socialist Romania.

This book project discusses and analyzes changes in property rights that have driven the transformation of land use since the collapse of socialism. It will be the first thorough study that draws explicit connections between post-socialist legal and political transformations on one hand, and landscape changes on the other. Among the key questions that I aim to answer are the following: who has benefited from natural resources and how does preferential access to these natural resources lead to transformations in land use? How has land reform changed property rights in the two villages that serve as case studies? What impact did the access to natural resources have on social relations in the two villages?

Most of the literature on post-socialist agrarian transformations has focused on social dynamics linked to either land or forest. Decollectivization and land restitution meant that collective farms were dissolved and the assets including land were passed to pre-1945 owners or their heirs. Land reforms unfolded simultaneously with the decentralization of the state and the delegation of administrative decisions to a local level. Although forests represent an important livelihood for rural residents, the topic has only recently been tackled by scholars. As it is a valuable natural resource, the state maintains as many rights as possible to co-manage privatized forests. Thus property rights over forests are still in continuous negotiation at multiple, interrelated levels. Throughout Central and Eastern Europe, land has been differently valued than forests. The increasing demand for timber in the European markets, the liberalization of the price of timber in Romania, and the restitution of forests to the original owners has led to an increased value of wood.

The book will analyze four types of changes in land use: land fragmentation (the outcome of breaking up collective farms), agricultural extensification (agriculture practiced by worker-peasants), deforestation, and the extension of built-up areas. I define land use as the social and economic purposes for which land is managed (Watson et al. 2000). Different actors having different agendas produce the four types of land use. However, the biophysical elements are not only a simple arena in which struggles for natural resources take place but play an important role in structuring the social and economic relations at the local level.

Social scientists have analyzed the post-socialist agrarian transformations by looking at economic, political and social mechanisms but no work, to my knowledge, has attempted to further the analysis by looking at the transformations of landscape. This project seeks to explore how changes in property rights lead to changes in land use: land fragmentation, extensive agriculture, deforestation, and transformation of pastures into build-up areas, with the socialist landscape itself changed as a consequence. I understand landscape as the interactions of social practices and the biophysical environment in the context of political and economic forces operating at different levels (Neumann 2005; Zimmerer, Basset 2003). The totality of "land-use types" (including land, forests, and build-up areas) captures properly the meaning of "landscape" as I use

it here. The book will document these changes because instead of looking at land rental or land ownership as other scholars have done, it will examine the importance of off-farm jobs and of differentiated access to forests.