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**Common Forest, Private Benefits: Access to State and Politics in a Village in
Postsocialist Romania**

After 1989 the restitution of land and forest was one of the most important tasks the Romanian government had to deal with. The process of restitution aimed at the agricultural land as well as the forest. The property laws referred to private as well as common forms of ownership. This paper analyses the forest dynamics in a postsocialist village called Dragomiresti¹. I explore the context in which the village received its common property forest back from the State. The forest dynamics is marked in Dragomiresti by two sets of relationship. The first one is the relationship between villagers and the National Park whose protected forests overlap with parts of the private forest. The second set of relationship is in between the political actors from the local council and the forest owners. Those who lost more in this process are the forest owners. Those who gain are those who have a good political position which is used as an asset for gaining access to the village natural resources.

Dragomiresti is a mountainous commune composed of three villages: Dragomiresti (this is the administrative centre of the village where the mayor office is), Podu Dambovitei and Ciocanu. The total of population living in the commune is 1100. From ethnically stand point the commune comprises only Romanians. The village looks like a bucket surrounded by the Bucegi Mountains to the east, Iezer-Papusa and Piatra Craiului Mountains to the west. The

¹ This is not the real name of the commune. Some of my informants asked me not to use their real names when I'll display the information based on their accounts. Since this paper, as many others dealing with postsocialism, presents some phenomena that are susceptible to break the law I preferred to anonymize my informants name as well as the villages. All other descriptions are real.

village is located between 840 m altitude up to 1240 m above the sea. Ciocanu, the highest village of the three is located at the historical limit between Wallachia and Transylvania. Almost half of the commune territory lies in the “Piatra Craiului” National Park.

Villagers of Dragomiresti received not only their private forest back but the collective forest too. The law 1/2000 stipulated that the forest should be given back not only to the former private owners but also to the communities as well. Through the same law, the commune received 70 ha, the administrator being the mayor office. The communal forest, which should not be confused with collective forest, is the outcome of a tacit understanding between the Second WW veterans. Those who fought in the war received, in 1945, small plots of forest. In 1948, when the communist regime decided to nationalize all forests, the veterans decided to offer their forest received in 1945 to the village. Of course, the forest has been then nationalized by the state. Through the law 169/1997² the commune received this forest back. This should be used for communal purposes: for providing heating for the communal service buildings (dispensary, schools, church). Sometimes, the village council approve to sell firewood to a lower price to some of the most poor people or old people in the village which never had private forest.

When the law approved the restitution of collective forest some of those whose families had rights to the *Obste*³ started to inquiry about the documents which prove the existence of collective forest. The documents showed that collective forest was not individuated on villages the collective property rights have been established. Thus, Dragomiresti received the collective forest together with Rucar, a bigger village at 10 km away. But the forest laws compelled the associations to either watch themselves the forest or to engage the SFD to watch it for them. In 2002, when Dragomiresti and Rucar received the collective forest decided to joint with other three *Obsti* from the nearby villages and to create a Private Forest Department (PFD). The PFD has the mission to watch the forest and to make sure that the private as well as the commercial exploitation is made by the rules established by the forestry laws. They have to watch around 5000 ha of collective forest. As for Dragomiresti the total rights to the collective forest totalizes 500 ha. In the management council of Rucar-Dragomiresti *Obste* had to be appointed villagers from every village which is a part from this

² This law has never been applied in practice. The provisions of this law have been put in practice by the law 1/2000.

³ The *Obste* means literally community, common but also was used in the medieval documents to designate a village. It has also the meaning of « an entire entity », something which cannot be divided (Stahl 1998)

arrangement (three villages composing Dragomiresti commune and 2 villages composing Rucar commune). From Dragomiresti there were two people which have been voted by villagers as council member. But those people were rejected by the other villages and finally, Dragomiresti has not one single member in the council. Most of the members are from Rucar and from Podu Dambovitei, since these villages are the biggest and with the highest number of inhabitants. Of course, those who started to inquire about the collective forest were those who finally were appointed as members of the running council. They establish the management of the forest, when, where and especially who should exploit the forest. At the end of the year every shareholder receive a certain amount of money after the Obste retain money for paying the employees. Money is obtained from wood exploitation, from the lease of the alpine pastures for whoever pays more for that and from the NTP (wild fruits, medical plants and mushrooms).

Dragomiresti had also its own collective forest. This used to be called the “small collective forest” (*ob^otea mică*). It was actually an entire mountain where only the villagers of Dragomiresti had the right to use it (for forest and pasture) without paying money. This forest was just regained from the State in 2004. The total surface of this forest was 52 *fârtare*. All the historical documents proving the ownership to small collective forest have used as a unit of measure *fârtare* [no equivalence in English]. This forest was shared by families not by households. Every family in the village had a certain amount of *fartare*. Why this small collective forest is important and how the elite of the village manage to hijack the rights of the owners will be analysed further. For now it is important to show that the villagers of Dragomiresti had also their collective forest, which was different from the “big Obste”.

We can draw two types of relationship on the forest dynamics map: one is concerning the relationship between the private forest owners and the National Park Piatra Craiului and the other one regards the relationship between the private owners and those who have access to political positions. I will start with the first relationship.

The first law who established the property rights over forest was voted in 1991. In 1990 already a small part of the actual Piatra Craiului National Park (PCNP) has been established as a protected area having the status of a national park⁴. The aim of the park was to protect the forest, the biodiversity and the landscape but also to “maintain the traditional land use” in this area (Plan 2004: 2). The Park has 14773 ha, 6967 being in the Arges County (the other 7806

⁴ Actually, the first action for protecting this area has been taken in 1938 for a total surface of 440 ha. All the information about the PCNP is based on the Management Plan (*Planul de Management al Parcului National Piatra Craiului*, 56 pages) which has been approved in June 2004. The plan is still not published. I thank to the general manager of the Park, Mr. Horatiu Hanganu for sending it to me before being published. My account over the park is also based with a several hours interview with the General Manager of the Park.

are laying in the Brasov County). Within the Park there is an amalgam of property rights: State, private, and communities hold in the same perimeter property rights over forest and pastures. The next table points out the property rights associated with the resource within the National Park.

Table (apud Plan 2004: 6)

Land Cover	Owner	Surface (ha)	% out of the total surface
Forest	State	5854.6	39.62
Forest	Mayor offices	678.7	4.60
Forest	Churches	90	0.60
Forest	Communities	1367	9.20
Forest	Private	1877	12.70
Meadow	Private	2938.2	19.88
Pasture	Communities	590.2	4
Building area	Private & communes	381.4	2.60
Rocks (picks)	State	373	2.58
Rocks (picks)	Communities	622.9	4.22
Water	State	Length = 281 km	-
Arable	Private & Communities	-	-
Total		14,773	100

Out of these figures Dragomiresti commune has a surface of 507 ha in administration (3.44 % from the total surface of the Park). The administrator of this forest is Dragomiresti Mayoralty. The state forest is administrated by the Forest National Department (*Regia Națională a Pădurilor ROMSILVA*). The private forest is administrated by the owners themselves. The collective forest has been given back outside the park, so there not too many overlaps with the park.

The forests on the Park's territory are split in three categories: one category of forest is that which should not be touched at all (the core zone of the Park) (24% of the park's forest). On some other 16% the cutting of trees is possible but only for conservation purposes. The rest of the forest has protection and production aim and only 2% are considered by the state as

having only production purposes. Almost 26% of the total area of the park represents pastures and meadows which belong to private persons, to the Obste, or to the communes.

The development of the park is overlapping with the process of forest restitution. It should be noticed that until august 2003 there were no strict boundaries of the park although, there was a clear surface belonging to the park. The park territory has been marked only from 2004. In 2002 when the law 1/2000 had to be implemented villagers received a large portion of their forest within the park. The implementation of this law supposed a protocol between the mayoralty and the National Department of Forest. The latest gave a portion of the forest calculated for the written and approved requests by the former owners (mayoralty's forest included). Then, the NFD would have passed all the rights and duties over that forest land to the mayoralty. From that very moment what happen in that forest is the responsibility of the mayor's office not their responsibility.

Some of villagers simply refused to take their forest back on the park's territory. The mayoralty threatened them that if they refused their forest then they will never get back any forest at all. But just few of them had the courage to refuse the plot and to sue the mayoralty. But why people refused or at least protested against the park? The answer is that they have not complete property rights over their forest. To the law requirements every owner should obey as a part of the duties of their property rights, they also have to obey to the rules of a national park. That makes them very unhappy. One of the most usual sentences I have heard was: "Am I an owner or the park? If I am the owner I don't see any reason to obey what park wants. If I am not an owner then they should took back this plot and to give me another one somewhere else."

The conflict between peasants and the National Park is due to the two types of values and ideologies each part bears: the park has what we might call an "environmentalist" ideology. This ideology is the backbone of every natural park in this world. It is enough to read the Management Plan for understanding the aim of the park:

"The PCNP has as main aim the protection and the conservation of some representative samples for the bio-geographic national space, containing some special valuable natural elements of physical-geographic, floristic, faunologic, hydrologic, geologic, palaeontologic, soil, or of any other nature. The park offers the possibility of scientific researches, educational, touristic and recreational visits" (Plan 2004: 1).

It should be noticed also that the main reason of the park is not only to assure some scientific or tourist activities but its mission highlights pretty much the national level. As Sikor (forthcoming) pointed out when the subjects are the land and the environment there are

always tensions between local and wider interest. In the same time, the State, which is the owner and the administrator of the park, sought to keep as much control as possible over its valuable natural resources. Its actions concern the well being of the nationhood thus it propagates a “non-utilitarian” ideology.

A second ideology is represented by the villagers and we might call it “utilitarian”. This ideology is quite simple and could be resumed as follows: the forest belonged to their ancestors, and they need the forest for their livelihood⁵. Villagers of Dragomiresti think very “locally”. I never heard during my fieldwork people agreeing with the park project (the preservation of nature and biodiversity) but their complaints were merely of practical extraction: “the forest is my property and I do whatever I want with it. I need the forest for livelihood...” was the leitmotiv in Dragomiresti.

The complaints come from both sides: the park is complaining that the villagers (not only those from Dragomiresti) are stubborn and they do not respect the land use regulations imposed by the park. In the Management Plan as well as in my interview with the general manager of the park two problems were regularly signalled: private owners do not have sustainable forest exploitation behaviour and they overgraze the pastures and meadows from the park (which could be private, collective or communal). The complaints of the park are expressed basically at the level of contemporary villager behaviour.

The disputes are also at the level of claims since the villagers question the Park history which is indeed a new one⁶. They base their claims on their historical rights over surrounding forest. Doing participatory map I often heard villagers coming up with this question: “where was the park when our grandfather owned these forests?” They emphasize the fact that this is a state manoeuvre for limiting the land reform. They also think this is a way the State maintain as much as possible the control over the forest. They actually dispute the property rights of the Park (and through this villagers dispute the property rights of the state) which interfere with their own property rights. As Thomas Sikor (forthcoming) put it for another region and referring to land in local people’s claims forest is not so much a matter of biodiversity or landscape amenity but it is a local valuable economic asset.

The state tries to preserve as much power as possible over the natural resources. When this is not possible than at least tries to take advantage as much as possible before giving back the forest. A good example of the state behaviour concerning forest is the fact that some of the

⁵ As Tsing (2001) pointed out this type of conflict is quite usual everywhere expressing the relationship between national parks and local people which rely on the resources protected by the state.

⁶ As I pointed out the protected area has been founded in 1990 but only from 2000 the park took a shape. So the history of the park is pretty much contemporary with the land reform.

forest which was given back has been made on a plot which has been previously deforested. If we look on the participatory mapping we notice that big forest exploitation during the period of late communism has been restituted to villagers. In this way, the villagers received a very young forest which hardly could be exploited for anything else but firewood.

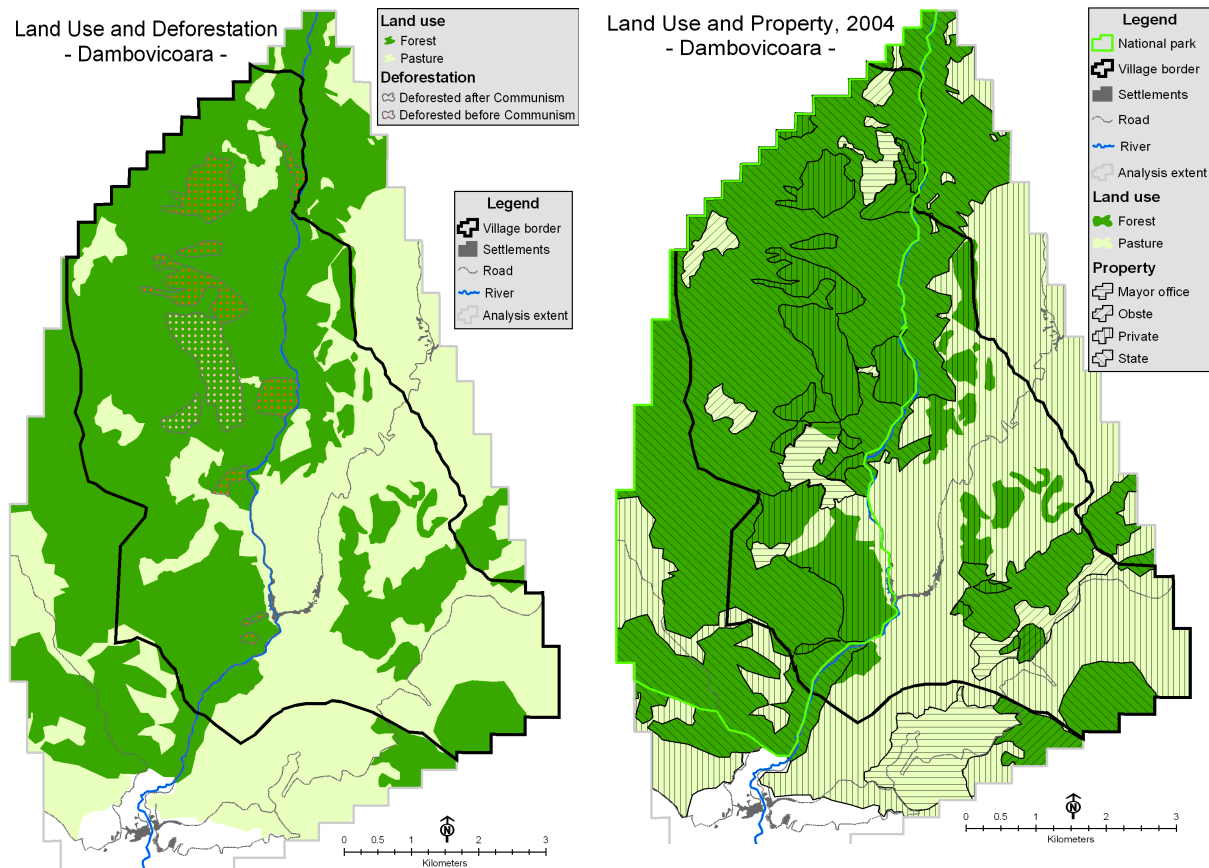


Figure No. 1. Participatory map showing deforestation before and after 1989.

The relationship between the park and the villagers concerning forest management is important because it plays a major role in the mechanism of differentiated access to natural resources.

The second type of relationship which we are mapping is between forest owners and the political actors which have privileged access to forest. There are two types of privileged access to forest: one is the access within the family, the other one is the access to political position. The first type of access is based pretty much on the second type of access. I will point out both types of access through different political actors in the village: for the first type I will give an account in which the main actor is the vice-mayor, for the second type the main actor is the mayor of the commune.

The actual vice mayor of the commune has been until 2004 a local council member and he is also the head of the Liberal Party. The vice-mayor extended family received three ha of forest. As the law requires the former owner receives the forest (or the land) and only after that the heirs (if the owner himself is not alive anymore) have to go to the notary and to debate the succession. In this case there were three families, each one claiming one ha of forest. Their common ancestor had three ha and every of his offspring claimed one hectare. So, the vice-mayor family should have obtained just one hectare. Before receiving the papers that would have stipulated were his hectare is lying the vice-mayor has cut almost all three ha. He sold the trees and the money he obtained he build a guest-house. He also took advantage of the fact that he was a member of the local council and he understood quite fast that he could cut the family forest without any juridical problems. Besides, the brother of his wife is the county head of the Liberal Party which means more power at the regional level. Although at the time his party was sitting on the opposition banks in Parliament he knew there will be no legal problems. He also understood better the weaknesses of the law and he knew how to exploit that law: if the legal succession is not established yet, the three families have an undifferentiated right to forest. The law does not specify what happen if one family or one person simply cut the trees. The only barrier to cut the tree are the provisions of forestry code (so the obligatorily study and the supervision of a forest guard). But, one might noticed that these are *technical* requirement not *property rights* requirements. Having political position and political support at the local and regional level he had a better position to cut the family forest. From his political position he was also acquainted with laws requirements⁷.

But political position is just a part of the story. It is the most relevant one but still the image is not yet complete. We also should look at the background of those who were able to benefit from their position⁸. In Dragomiresti there are villagers which are more skilled than others and thus are able to benefit from their political position. Those who worked in the socialist commerce are more skilled than others to negotiate, to position themselves in such a way to be on the “right side” of the law thus not suffering the consequences of the law. In a shortage economy as the Romanian economy was those who had access to socialist commercial activities were in the best position not only to acquire economic benefits but also their activities were at the limit of the law. Very often, they had to balance between the strict

⁷ The *Monitorul Oficial* (The official public document of the Government. Any law after is voted in Parliament and signed by the President of Romania comes to live only after it is published in the Monitorul Oficial) is received monthly at the mayoralty. Although it is a public document I never heard in my fieldwork experience (I am referring to my entire experience as fieldworkers which started in 1997) in Romania an ordinary villager to ask Monitorul Oficial in order to be informed over the new laws and governmental decisions.

⁸ For the same approach based on skills acquired in a preferential position within socialist state see for instance Giordano and Kostova (2002), Lampland (2002).

provisions of the law and the obvious advantageously position they held. Having access to staples they very often sold inaccessible commodities (like good salami, import commodities, like coffee, Bulgarian tobacco etc) ‘through the back door’ (*prin spate*). This behaviour created special skills for understanding the opportunity of a situation. Where most of the villagers saw simply the rehabilitation of their property rights and a historical justice some of the people as the vice mayor and some other political actors I will describe below saw an opportunity for doing successfully business.

The second type of access, which is the most important one in Dragomiresti, is based on access to political position. The mayor draws mostly the benefits from the common as well as the communal forest. The mayor’s story is very important illustrating how the political power gives access to community’s natural resources (forest, water, roads).

The communal and the collective forest have been given back through law 169/1997. The villagers received the collective forest back in 2002 while the mayoralty received back in 2001. Both types of associations exploit the forest in the same way: they are obliged, by the law, to organize auctions and the better offer of an exploitation firm should be accepted as winner. Of course, those who organize these auctions have the possibility of hijacking them in their own interest. The mayor’s wife has such a firm of forest exploitation. Since he is employed in administration he has no legal right to own such firm. But this is not a problem for his wife. In 1993 he opened such a firm understanding that the forest exploitation represents a wonderful opportunity to make good money. How does he use his position for influencing forest exploitation?

There are several ways he uses his position for privileged access to forest: the first way is to influence the auctions. As I already said, the collective and the communal forest have to be exploited by forest firm exploitation. In order to choose the firm the administrators of the forest (the collective forest council and the mayor office) have to organize an auction. For both types of forest the mayor’s wife firm gained the auctions⁹. Since I never attended to an auction myself I could not say for sure what was happen there. But what I can do is to provide some accounts which circulate throughout the commune. This account refers to how the mayor’s wife firm gain the auction for exploiting the communal forest. It seems that there is a mechanism at work which helps the mayor to win the auctions. The auction is held secretly until few days before it happens. Then, in a small, local, newspaper the auction is advertised. Of course, for those who have firms it is difficult to prepare all the papers they need in order to attend to the auction. Of course, the winning firm has time to prepare all the

⁹ For the collective forest there are three exploitation firms. It seems that one of them is the mayor’s wife firm.

papers it needs to. In order to be validated at the auction should attend at least two firms. The other firm is a friend's firm which attend to the auction but without any serious intention to win. Finally, the winner is declared the best positioned firm which had all the information needed it. This is a mechanism through which the mayor's firm won some auction. She used the husband position (which need to approve the quantity of wood which will be cut it) in order to access the forest. But this is not the whole story. The mayor decided that the communal roads had to be repaired. This was of course, a decision in the community favour. But, the money the mayoralty need for repairing the roads have to be from the local funds. This is a good reason for the mayor to decide that the communal forest needs to be exploited. In this way, a communal service also brings nice money in the mayor's pocket as well. Public ownership becomes a source of income for private persons. As other authors pointed out throughout Central and Eastern Europe countries there are rather fuzzy intertwines between public and private sphere (Sikor forthcoming; Verdery 1999; 2003; Stark 1996). This situation brings economic benefits for those in privileged positions.

Attached to the late observation, I also should add that the externalities¹⁰ are to be paid by the community as well. The firm which exploit the forest uses heavy trucks for transporting the thick trunks¹¹. These trucks basically destroy the communal roads as well as the small bridges which cross the Dragomiresti River. Especially in the fall, when it is a rainy time, the communal roads become impracticable. The roads which are destroyed by a private firm are repaired with communal money. Moreover, the local council decided that the mayor office should take a tax from all the car drivers which visit the cave. The price is modest, 5000 ROL (around 15 eurocents) but contributes to accruing the annual mayor office income. Yet, the private firm is exempted from paying any tax to the mayor office. Although there were propositions to raise taxes from the firm which exploits the collective forest the mayor office opposed¹². Finally, the firm pays no road tax to the mayoralty. The asphaltting of the communal roads had several advantages for the mayor: he stopped the villagers complaining that the trucks destroy the communal roads, he also improved the time in which the trucks

¹⁰ "Externalities arise when an individual or a firm takes an action but does not bear all the costs (negative externality)" (Kaul, Grunberg and Stern 1999: 5).

¹¹ While I was in the commune I could count even 12-13 transportation in a day. We should imagine that six days per week these heavy trucks produce noise and contribute massively to destruction of the communal roads and bridges.

¹² Some of the councillors which are the political enemies of the mayor proposed this tax in one councillors meeting I have attended. But, as I was figuring out my self, the mayor position it is too strong to be challenged by these councillors. Moreover, the mayor has leverage on them. For instance, an ordinary local council meeting is paid with a certain amount of money while the extra-ordinary meetings are paid less. Even when

transport the trunks¹³ and he protects in this way the trucks which roll on a good road instead of a muddy or an irregular stony road. Finally, the road asphaltation was a good opportunity to access the communal forest, apparently in the communal interest. In the same time he was in the best position to manipulate this situation in his family interest.



Figure No. 2. Full loaded trucks belonging to the mayor wife's logging firm

A second way to benefit from his position in order to gain benefits from the forest exploitation is to have cheap “black market” labour force. His firm has a team of 5 employees. They are poor people with no other possibility of gaining money but working in the forest. The entire team earns 90.000 RON (around 2 euro) for one meter of cut timber. They cut like 100 meters per week. Of course, they do not work all the time. When it is raining and the machines cannot climb the slopes they do not work and they do not get pay at all. He affords to pay less money than he would have paid if the workers would be officially employed. Moreover, when there is a control from the state departments he finds out among the first. So, he has time to dismiss the entire team. These controls are made quite often. They are meant especially to verify if the forest plots auctioned are exploited by the state rules. Of course, as I have learned in my staying in the village very often the firms (all of them, not only the wife's mayor firm) cut more than they auctioned. I was in the village when this control from the Ministry of Forest has been announced. It was in a day in which I have decided to go in the northern part of the village territory to take the GPS points. The only way

¹³ Of course, it is a big difference, even for these huge machines which are built for off-roads, if the loaded trucks roll on an asphalt road or roll on mud.

to get there was to take a truck which would go in that direction for loading trunks. Then, I would have come back in the village with the same truck. Although I was waiting several hours no truck was circulating. Only the next day I have found out from the mayor office employees about the control of the Ministry of Forestry.

As a head of the local land commission the mayor was able along with some other local officials to establish the “legal” measurement of a plot. As I explained above, Dragomiresti village had also a “small Obste”, a collective forest of their own. The documents do not speak about hectares but about fartare. But the land reform laws refer only to the State formal units of measurements (hectares and acres) neglecting the local units of measurement. The local commission led by the mayor established that 1 fartar is equivalent with 3 ha. But elderly village declared that they know a fartar was equivalent with 6 ha, not 3 ha as the commission established. Some elders gave me an account about an engineer which measured in 1936 the whole Dragomiresti Mountain, where the collective forest was located. He found that the 52 fartare means 300 ha. He made a report which is still kept in the village by a member of one of the most ancient families in the village. Apparently, only the richest families in the village were the owners of this small collective forest¹⁴. Since nobody knew exactly how much that means in hectares, acres or meters (the State accepted units of measurement)¹⁵ the members of the local land commission transformed that after their interest. The mayor as a head of this commission was able to manipulate these measurements. The mayor had the interest to shrink the surface of the small collective forest. First, he tried not to challenge too much the Park interests. This is the reason that when some people received forest in the park simply refused to take it. So he then decided that they should receive forest on the Dragomiresti Mountain, although he knew that this forest belonged to Dragomiresti families. Secondly, this mountain is not on the park territory and if there is private property it is easier to be manipulated than if it is collective one. If the entire mountain would have been given back to former owners than he would have to deal with several people if he would want to exploit forest there. Third, the forest outside the park is easier to be exploited than if there is on the park territory. In this way he had to shrink the fartar from 6 ha to only 3 ha. He was able to turn in his favour the whole situation because the regional commissions had no idea how much a fartar should be. They left this decision in the local

¹⁴ The villager who gave me this account was in fact that whose family kept the document in secret during communism. After 1991 he was also a member in the land commission for the law 18. He declared that seeing the injustice made by this commission he resigned and he refused to take part in the commission for the law 1/2000.

¹⁵ This is a part of what James Scott (1998) called legibility of the state. The state planners need formalized grids in order to manage the state territory. Legibility of the state means uniformity of the landscape throughout the state territory.

commission hands. Moreover, on the old documents there were the family names of those who had *fartare* in the small collective forest. But there are no limits between the forest plots and there are no limits between the Dambovicoara Mountain and the neighbour mountain which already belong to the park. This fuzzy situation coming from the historical way of marking ownership worked in the mayor's favour.

Another way to benefit from his position, maybe the most important one, is to allocate private forest plots preferentially. As I already described in the fifth chapter the head of the local commission which deal with the land reform laws is the mayor. He took advantage from this position in several ways. First, he did that by allocating "good" forest to some people. As I explained above, villagers would consider forest of two kinds: "good" forest and "bad" forest. Good forest refers to that forest which could be exploited not only for firewood but also for other commercial purposes, especially to be exported¹⁶. For that, the trunk must not be contorted and should be thick enough. Good forest is also that forest which is located next to a road so it is easily to be exploited. A good forest in terms of high trees quality but located on the very deep slopes or close to the mountain picks is useless. He had two reasons to do that. First reason is a strictly political one. He rather advantaged people from Podu Dambovitei, which is the largest village in Dragomiresti commune. In this way he attracted a good amount of votes in his favour. The second reason is of an economical character. He offered good forest to some old people in the village. Before, he assured that at least half of this good forest will be sold to his wife's firm to be exploited. That means the owner sell not the forest, as they pretend to do, but only the trees¹⁷. Several informants gave me an account in which the mayor allocated ten ha of a very good forest to an old lady from the village. The forest was located next to the main road so it was very easy to be exploited with very cheap costs. Then the wife's firm bought five hectares from that forest and exploited it. The old lady which does not move too much and she has no family was persuaded that the price she received (like 30 million lei per hectare, around 800 euro) is a good one. The exploitation firm would receive between 200 euro per cubic meter up to 380 euro per cubic meter for beech and 95-140 euro per cubic meter for spruce fir. The old lady was happy that this amount of money would add to her bleak pension and she thought she benefited from his family heritage. But the exploitation firm gained much of the profit from this business.

There are also persons which benefited from the forest restitution although they were never entitled. Another episode will reveal better the mechanisms of forest access. The person

¹⁶ A "young" forest of 10-20 years old is good only for firewood but not for commercial exploitation.

¹⁷ As I explained when I have analyzed the situation of Davidesti, owners do think that they sold "the forest" ("*am vândut pădurea*"). Actually, they sell only the trees. In the mayor office register they are still the owners.

who is charged with the forest restitution in the mayor office, let's call her Maria, gave me an account about how his father received forest in some other place while he had few hectares of forest very close to his house¹⁸. This was the forest of his father before nationalization. He wanted this forest less for "personal" reasons, in terms of Radin (1993), but for economic reasons. First, this is a good, old forest which could be already exploited. If he would have sold some wood he would have done a quite good amount of money. Secondly, being very close to their household it would have been easier to cut and to transport to their garden. The slight slope would do the transportation very easy: when the snow is coming they just cut the trees, then they put the trunks onto a sled and a horse would simply pull the sled. He would need to engage like two or three persons for that. If the distance is bigger than the forest owner has to employ at least four people to help him to bring the trunks at home. Thirdly, it would have been no need to cross somebody else's field. In Dragomiresti, since all the plots nearby the village are private plots when somebody wants to transport the trunks then he needs to cross a field (a pasture). The result is very often that the field is damaged, so the field owner cannot mow the field anymore. Thus, the forest owner has to pay a certain amount of money if he wants to cross somebody else's field. Fourthly, the forest would have been better watched since nobody would be able to cut trees without Maria's father to hear the noise of the chain saw. The last reason, maybe the most important one for Maria's father was that he received there 1 ha of forest through the law 18. That means he would have had like five ha of forest in one single emplacement.

But the forest, says Maria, was too good in order to escape the mayor. Because she was there he waited until she took a vacation and she left the village going to the Black Sea shore. During these two weeks the mayor arranged that these hectares of good forest to be allocated to a friend which supported him a lot during electoral campaign. Moreover, the new forest owner would have not been entitled to have forest at all since his family had no forest before 1948.

These examples show us that the forest has powerful political meanings. The mayor has political support from the Social Democratic Party (SDP). He uses this support in order to get access to natural resources in this community. I have asked several people why not they protest against what they consider to be an abuse of the mayor. They replied to me:

*"the mayor has connections to high level. If you fight with him you fight with the state.
You can't win when you fight with state"*

¹⁸ Her house is at the edge of the village. The forest would have been at less than 500 meters away of his house (which is her house as well since she is living still in her parents' house).

Another informer told me:

“I was there when the mayor has been called by the prefect. They seemed to be in very friendly terms. But all people from this village know that he is well known in the central government as well. We know sir his power” (C. F., man, 42 years, Dragomiresti).

A relevant fact which could support at least some of these allegations is that the President of The Parliament, so the second important political man in state, visited Dragomiresti during the national political campaign, although this village has little relevance in terms of votes, Dragomiresti being a quite small village of 500 people. This visit highlighted the political support the actual mayor had from the central government and from the main political party in Romania¹⁹.

The mayor invested a lot of money not in the productive assets but in relevant social relations. This is a way of maintain differentiated access to natural resources. Berry (1982) pointed out a similar situation for African settings in which the investments are put rather in social relations than in economic assets which would improve the quality of the product. During the local political campaign for the mayor office he has spent a lot of money for ‘buying’ the old people votes (he brought them cooking oil, sugar, flour, meet etc). His counter candidate publicly said that if he will win he will verify all the contracts the mayor office has with the forest exploitation firm (the mayor’s wife firm). He also declared that he wants to evaluate the forest status (private as well as communal) in order to check all the arrangements of the mayor office. Of course, in this framework the struggle for the mayor chair was very harsh. The mayor just took four billion lei (around 150.000 euro) loan from a bank for investing in forest, in some trucks and in exploitation of the natural source of water. If he would have lost the competition his access to the village natural resources would have been seriously questioned. He had also the support of the head of the opposition party (National Liberal Party) which is the actual vice-mayor. The allegations in the village are like the mayor promised that if he wins he will offer the vice-mayor position to this guy. But, as other said, there is also a matter of family. The mayor’s wife is a member of the same family as the actual vice-mayor. So, the later one would have to fight against his own kin²⁰. I surmise

¹⁹ Wee should see this political support as bilateral. The mayor receives political support which is converted to social and economic advantages. The central politicians are assured by these kinds of people that they will grasp votes. It seems that the mayor is particular good on that.

²⁰ In a small village like Dragomiresti the politics is running differently than in the big cities. At the countryside nobody will ask for a political program. Villagers simply judge from the family perspective (if the candidate

that this would be no moral problem for him. He rather refused to support his party candidate because he was afraid that the mayor will become his enemy. He simply stood away for these local elections. Moreover, the liberal candidate is a part of the largest kin in the village. So, he had the support of this kin. The mayor is born in Podu Dambovitei, but his father was born in a village lying 8 km away of Dragomiresti commune. His mother was born in Podu Dambovitei, but she belongs to a kin which is not very large. So, he had not too much support from his own family. On the other hand his wife was born in Dragomiresti village but in a family which is not very numerous. If we compare the genealogies of the two families (Uretu and Belduganu) than we will understand the fact that the mayor won this elections through mobilizing the wife's family and also the former vice-mayor family (and his wife's family which is entirely located in Ciocanu, the third village composing Dragomiresti commune). The former vice-mayor is also a SDP member and he needed the mayor's support when he dismissed the public station and transformed it into a private parking for his own restaurant. To the family mobilization we should add the "electoral charities"²¹ for the old and poor people. He has spent a lot of money for doing these "donations".

Coming back to the forest exploitation I should add also that the mayor's firm does not exploits the collective forest (*padurea de obste*) since there are two other firms which already exploit this forest. If he would auctioned it he would have shared the benefits with the other two firms and with 17 members of the *Obste* council which take all the decisions regarding the forest exploitation. This is the main reason he obtained recently²² through court that the Dragomiresti collective forest to be separated from the Rucar collective forest. About 500 ha out of 2700 ha (as the Rucar-Dragomiresti-Papusa Obste has) will go in the Dragomiresti Obste ownership. This is a way of having access to even more forest than he exploited so far.

From his position he also mediates between the National Park and the villagers. The Park has been founded in 1990 and it extended its limits almost every year. As I showed above many villagers received their forest within the National Park, which limits the people's management over their own forest. The mayor and some other local councillors take advantage from these tensions by encouraging the State's representatives and weakening the owners' position. I have been attended to a local council meeting in which the mayor tried to

belongs to a hard working [*gospodar*] and honest family). The families which are related each other would support "their" candidate against another candidate coming from a different family. Of course, there are other aspects too, which are more "politically" than the family affiliation: for instance if the candidate's programme contains improvements for the village livelihood (which is rather orally spread than in meetings with the voters).

²¹ There were a lot of reports in the Romanian newspapers about similar acts in many places in Romania.

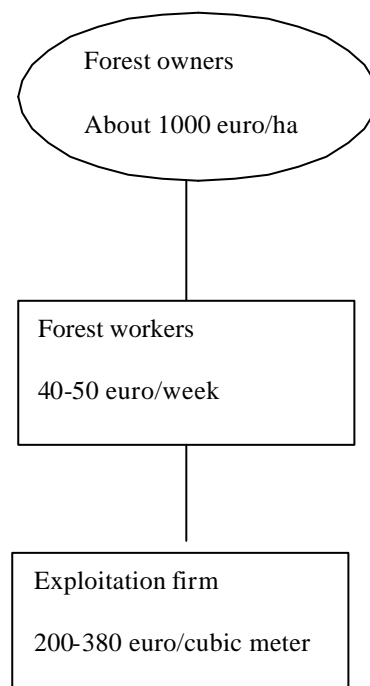
Generally, the SDP have spent a lot of money at the national level for "buying" votes especially from the poor people.

²² I learned that when I did participatory mapping in Dragomiresti (June 2005).

obtain the approval of local councillors to change a deed in order the park to take over a private plot which is of great interest for them²³. In this way, the mayor office tries to collaborate with the Park general manager which could restrict the exploitation of his forest firm.

The commodity chain analysis (Ribot 1998) shows that the mayor, which has the firm, is in top of the chain. He employs 5 people to work in the wood. The whole team earns 90.000 lei for one meter of trunk. Every week they cut something like 100 meters (total 9 million lei per week for 5 persons). When is raining they do not work and they do not get any money. They are those which jeopardise their lives in the wood (very often accidents happen and people die). On the same line are the drivers of the mayor's trucks which earn a salary of about 3-4 million lei per month. The next on the chain are probably the owners of the forest, when it is the case. If they sell to the mayor they sell it quite cheap (up to maximum 50 millions per one ha). The mayor's wife received most of money. When she exports trunks or timber she earns between 200 euro per cubic meter up to 380 euro per cubic meter for beech and between 95-140 euro per cubic meter for spruce fir.

Here is the commodity chain diagram which point out that the mayor is in the top of the chain. That means he benefits from his access to political position.



²³ Recently somebody discovered a plant which is protected by law. And since the Park received 50.000 euro from the EU, especially as their mission is to preserve the nature in the region, they wanted to take over that small forest plot.

Conclusions

One of the conclusion is that there is a strong political meaning of the forest. The access to the forest as the main natural resource as well as the process of social differentiation is based on political meanings of the forest. That means the forest constitute not only the subject of the political discourse but also the aim of the political action. Politics, forest and social differentiation are strictly linked in the case I have been described so far. Pulling out any of these three elements would lead to a misunderstanding of the forest dynamics and linked to that of the agrarian differentiation in both villages.

An important point is that there are external pressures under forest owners exercised by the Park, which is interested in keeping as much as possible the control over natural resources in the area. This pressure is used by the mayor who, from his position, intermediate the property relationship between the park and the private owners. Actually, there are three agendas regarding forest in Dragomiresti: the state's agenda, which is conflicting with the villagers' agenda, and the mayor's agenda. As an intermediary between the other two agendas he is able to fulfil his own economic interest.

The forest owners bear actually almost all the costs. Those who have access simply buy the trees and exploit them. They pay only for the trees they exploit, leaving aside the fact that very often the price they offer is less than the market price. The owner is responsible, according to the forestry law (26/1996) to pay the reforestation two years after the clear cutting. They also will pay probably a huge amount of money as taxes for a land which will produce again in twenty maybe thirty years. From this perspective ownership is rather a bundle of obligations rather than a bundle of rights. For those who are the subject of such unfair deal forest become mostly a "bad", in Verdery's terms than a "good" (Verdery 2004; de Waal 2004).

As a final conclusion of this paper I suggest that access to the political positions is the most important for one in order to appropriate natural resources. Access to state positions or to the political positions assure that the business runs successfully.

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