

Politics, Local Brokers and Negotiation of Natural Resources. An Ethnography of the Postsocialist State

Dr. Stefan Dorondel¹

- 1st Draft, Do not cite -

Abstract:

One of the main tasks of the newly postsocialist governments was the restitution of land and forest to the historical owners. While land restitution received much attention from the scholars, forest restitution has been slightly neglected. I explore in this paper the relationship between a newly established National Park and the private forest owners in a village from Walachia (Southern Romania). The head of the commune and the local political elite mediate the relationship between the National Park and the private owners. The ethnographical findings suggest that the forest restitution seems to be the outcome of this local/national negotiation. This paper seeks to highlight that one of the main features of the property in postsocialism is represented by the negotiations among different actors, at various levels. Not only the state and the local politics play a major role in establishing property rights, as other scholars have pointed out, but also the 'discursive meanings' upon the natural resources 'shape' the distribution of property rights at the local level. I ethnographically document how the local political elites manipulate the national and international discourse over the nature protection and use it as a tool in the property negotiation at local level.

Keywords: *Forest, property, negotiation, National Park, postsocialism, Romania.*

After 1989 the restitution of land and forest was one of the most important tasks the postsocialist governments had to deal with. The process of restitution aimed at both agricultural land and forest. The process of restitution in the postsocialist countries has created great opportunities for the local elite to hijack the land reform laws into their own benefit (Verdery 2002; 2003). Especially those people who work in local administration (as the state employees at the mayor's office) or those who are elected in the local offices (as the mayor, the vice-mayor and the local council members) were in the best position to get access to natural resources.

¹ "Francisc J. Rainer" Institute of Anthropology Bucharest, Romania, Email: dorondels@rz.hu-berlin.de

This paper seeks to highlight that one of the main features of the property in postsocialism is represented not only by the negotiations among different actors, at various levels (Stahl, Sikor, Dorondel 2008) but also by the mediation of local powerful brokers. These brokers mediate between the local and national level but also between private owners and the state. Thus, not only the state and the local politics play a major role in establishing property rights as scholars have pointed out but also the 'discursive meanings' (Paulson, Geza, Watts 2003: 209) upon the natural resources 'shape' the distribution of property rights at the local level.

As I will point out in this paper, the local political elite use the international and national discourse over the biodiversity protection according to their personal advantage. Their last aim, in using this international discourse but also the European Union requirements concerning the environment, is to get privileged access to local natural resources. In this paper, when I refer to state I refer to regional and national government. The local government is elected by villagers thus should be considered as an intermediary between local people and regional and national government. I also refer to the National Park managers which are the administrators of the state forest since the state owns the Park. They are responsible with the state forest protection, flora and fauna from the park, and are entitled, by law, to restrict private owners' activity on the park's territory.

In the postsocialist process of emerging new property form, the boundaries of public property and the private property are blurred. In a still uncertain economic and political environment some actors have the possibility to 'mix' property form. As Stark (1996) has pointed out, in the Hungarian industry the assets are devolved onto satellite firms while the liabilities are centralized in the state enterprises. This process, specific to postsocialist countries, is a variant of 'recombinant property' (Stark 1996). Stark has defined 'recombinant property' as the process of triple boundary blurring (blur of the boundaries of public and private, blur of the organizational boundaries of enterprises and the blur of the boundedness of justificatory principles (ibidem: 996). In the postsocialist process of emerging new property rights over natural resources the mixture of property is not formal but informal. As many other authors have pointed out, the postsocialism redefined property rights (Hann 1993; Verdery 1996; Hirschhausen 1997). Decollectivization and the restitution of forest to former owners meant the transfer of property rights from the state or collective hands to private hands. The transfer of rights came along with the transfer of duties as well. Within this process one may notice a conflict between the state and the new owners. While state emphasizes the duties of the new owners, owners rather emphasize the newly acquired rights letting aside duties (Howarth 1999; Sikor 2006). The different accent of both actors put on either rights or duties is reflected by the discursive meanings of the property rights. When the object of property is the forest, this accent becomes even more conflictual. While the land is not the subject of so many restrictions from the state, forest has a tremendous different regime.

The state has two reasons to treat forest with a special attention. One reason is that forest is the most valuable natural resource in many rural areas (Staddon 2001). The state, as the former owner of the Romanian forest between 1948 and 1991, has tried to restrict as much as possible the access to forest. In 1991, when the state issued the first land reform law, the prior 1948 owners could claim one hectare only. Through the same law (18/1991), the former owners could claim up to 10 hectares of land. Through the law 1/2000 former forest owners could claim up to 10 hectares while land could be restituted up to 50 hectares. Obviously, state paid more attention and issued more restrictions in forest restitution than in land restitution. The second reason is that the state perceives forest not only as a commodity but as providing public services as maintaining biodiversity, protecting watersheds and providing ozone (Dorondel 2007; Sikor, Stahl, Dorondel 2008).

The other major actor in this play, the private forest owners, conceives forest as a major livelihood. Private forest owners are not interested in values such environment; they see forest as a way of capitalizing the household or securing the cash for the household's members. They based their claims over forest on the historical rights of the households or of village over the common forests.

In between these two actors are the brokers of the community. Having a political position within mayor's office, they mediate between local and national level adopting, at the time, different discourses over forest. These brokers not only negotiate property rights over forest (Stahl, Sikor, Dorondel 2008) but they also mediate between various actors and between various levels. In short, all the actors involved in this game need mediation of these powerful people: state needs them in order to communicate with forest owners. This is the only channel the regional and national government as well as the park managers dispose in order to communicate the political decisions to villagers. Forest owners need them in order to communicate with the regional and national level of the state. As mediators between various actors and various levels, local brokers draw economic benefits for themselves. They configure *de jure* and *the facto* property rights in the village. They set up formal property rights in the village since the mayor's office is entitle to restitute forest back to former owners and to issue land titles. They also set up *de jure* property rights since it is in their power to hijack the restitution laws in their own or their friend's benefit (Verdery 1996; 1999; Dorondel 2007; 2008). Thus, we may conceive property rights not only as a 'bundle of rights' (Bromley 1991) or as a 'bundle of powers' (Verdery 1999) but also as *a process of mediation and negotiation* between state and private owners in which a major role is played by local powerful brokers.

This paper proceeds as follows: in the next section I describe the fieldwork setting and the actors involved in forest restitution. Then, I explore the ways in which the mayor of the commune takes economic advantage by mediating

between state and the villagers. The final section points out the conclusions of the paper.

The National Park, forest owners and forest restitution in a mountainous village

Dragova is a mountainous commune composed of three villages: Dragova² (this is the administrative centre of the village where the mayor office is located), Podu Dambovitei and Ciocanasu. The total of population living in the commune is 1100. The village looks like a bucket surrounded by the Bucegi Mountains to the East, Iezer-Papusa and Piatra Craiului Mountains to the West. The village is located between 840 m altitude up to 1240 m above the sea. Almost half of the commune territory lies in the 'Piatra Craiului' National Park (PCNP) (see Figure 1).

Villagers of Dragova 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's 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 from the government, in 1945, small plots of forest. In 1948, when the communist regime decided to nationalize all forests, the veterans donated their forest to the village. However, the forest has been nationalized by the state. The commune has received this forest back in 2003. This forest should be exploited for communal purposes only: firewood for heating the communal buildings (dispensary, schools, churches etc.) or obtaining funds for reconstruction of the village roads. 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.

In 1990, already a small part of the actual PCNP was appointed as a protected area, having the status of a national park³. 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, out of which 6967 ha in the Arges County (the other 7806 hectares lay in the Braşov 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.

² This is not the real name of the commune or the villages.

³ Actually, the first action for protecting this area was 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 Național Piatra Craiului*, 56 pages) which was approved in June 2004. I thank the general manager of the Park, Mr. Horatiu Hanganu for having sent it to me, before its publication. My account over the park is also based on several hours interview with the General Manager of the Park.

The participatory map (see Figure 1) clearly points that most of the private forest (the vertical lines) lies within the park territory. The border of the park is represented on the map by the river. The next table points out the property rights associated with the resource within the National Park.

Table no. 7 (*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

Dragova commune has a surface of 507 ha in administration (3.44 % from the total surface of the Park). 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 communal forest is administrated by the mayor's office and the local council members.

The forest on the Park's territory is split into three categories: one category of forest is represented by the core zone of the park where cutting is completely forbidden: 24% of the park's forest. On other 16% the tree cutting 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 Obște, or to the communes (Plan 2004).

The development of the park has been overlapping with the forest restitution process. It should be noticed that until august 2003 there were no strict boundaries of the park, although there was a clear section of forest belonging to the park. The park territory was marked only in 2004. In 2002, when law 1/2000 had to be implemented, the villagers received a large portion of their forest within

the park. The implementation of this law supposed a protocol between the mayoralty and the NDF. The latter gave a portion of the forest based on the written requests made by the former owners (mayoralty's forest included) that were approved by the land commission at the County level. Then, the NDF passed all the rights and duties over that forest land to the mayoralty. From that very moment what happened in that forest was the responsibility of the mayor's office, not of the NDF (thus the state).

Some villagers simply refused to take their forest back on the park's territory. They refused the forest or, at least, protested against the park because they did not have complete property rights over their forest. Every owner should obey to the law requirements as part of his/her property rights duties, and he/she also should obey to the rules of the National Park. That makes them very unhappy. One of the most usual sentences I heard was: *'Am I the owner or is it the park? If I am the owner, I don't see any reason to obey to the park's commands. If I am not an owner, then they should take back this plot and give me another one somewhere else'*.

The mission of the Park, conflicting with villagers' property rights, is clearly stated in the Management Plan:

'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 research, educational, tourism and recreational visits' (Plan 2004: 1).

It should be noticed also that the main aim of the park is not only to assure some scientific or tourist activities, but its mission is based pretty much on a broader interest. The legitimacy of its claim is aiming nationally not locally. As Sikor (2006) pointed out when the subjects are the land and the environment, there are always tensions between local and wider interest. At 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.

The relationship between the Park and villagers is tensed. The complaints come from both sides: the Park manager is complaining that the villagers (not only those from Dragova) are stubborn and 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 overgraze the pastures and meadows from the Park. Regardless the property regime of the pastures (which could be private, collective or communal) owners have to obey the Park's rules.

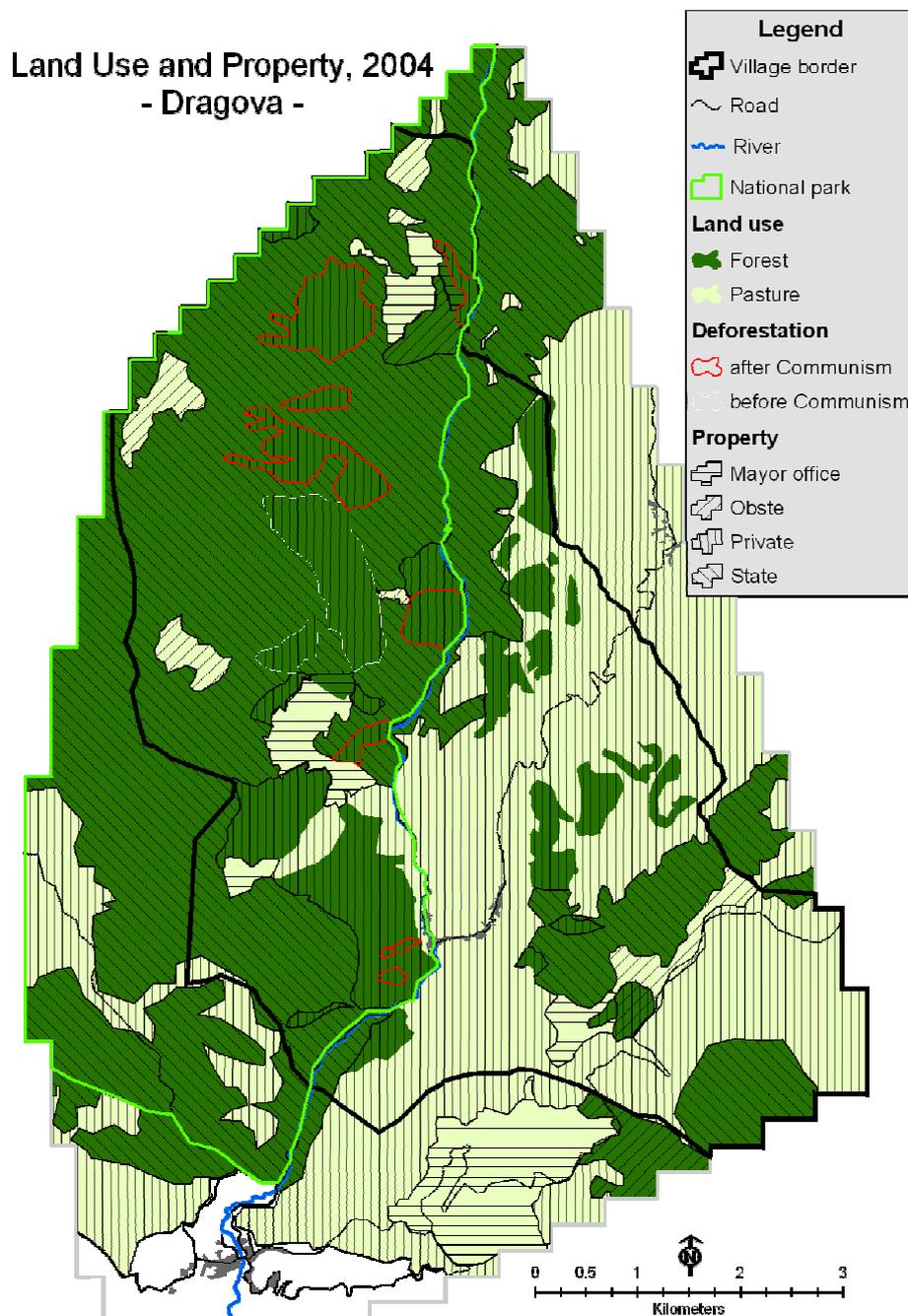


Figure 1. Participatory map showing the property rights over forest and the edge of the National Park.

The disputes are also at the level of claims since the villagers question the Park history which is indeed a new one. 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 grandfathers owned

these forests?” They emphasize the fact that this is a state manoeuvre for limiting forest restitution. The villagers also think this is a way the state maintains as much as possible the control over the forest. Dragova inhabitants actually dispute the property rights of the Park and, through these lens, villagers dispute the property rights with the state which interfere with their own property rights. As Thomas Sikor (2006) put it, for another region and referring to agricultural 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, the state tries at least to take advantage as much as possible before giving back the forest. A good example of the state behaviour concerning the forest is the fact that some of the forest that was given back was previously exploited by the NFD. The participatory mapping (figure 2) points out that a forest which was exploited in late communism was given back to former owners. On the map, the forest marked with yellow points represents the private forest which had been exploited few years before the collapse of the socialist regime. In this way, the villagers received a very young forest which hardly could be exploited for anything else but firewood.

Now, let’s see how this hidden struggle between the Park and the local people is mediated by the mayor.

The mayor of the commune: mediating between state and private forest owners

The mayor is the village broker *par excellence*. He was elected for the first time in 1996 and then in 2000 and 2004. His position within the local administration entitles him to play the role of a mediator. Firstly, he is elected by the members of the commune, thus he is, theoretically, accountable to them. He has to put in practice his political program, to fulfil the voters’ needs. In the same time, he is the head of the local land commission, which means he is the one responsible with the implementation of the land reform at the local level. Thus, he is also accountable to the Prefecture, which represents the regional government and it is the representative of the national government at the county level. The mayor’s position is perceived in a double way: villagers perceive him as the representative of the state at the local level. The regional and the national government perceive him as the representative of the village, the person entitled to speak in the name of the community.

From his position, the mayor also mediates property conflicts between private owners but also between the National Park and the villagers. 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

counsellors take advantage of these tensions, by encouraging the state's representatives and weakening the owners' position.

The mayor is also in the position to manipulate the national discourse on biodiversity conservation. In the process of the negotiation with the European Union the Romanian state had to fulfil certain conditions in order to be accepted. The toughest negotiations between the EU and Romania, which started in 2000, were on agriculture and the environment⁴. Among the 31 chapters to be negotiated as prerequisites of Romanian integration the environment was the most challenging for the Romanian government. The protection of nature and biodiversity was among the issues on which the Romanian state had to work hard in order to achieve a 'European standard'. Thus, all the governments after 2000 engaged in a 'nature protection discourse' at national level. Through mass-media, the Romanian government emphasized the necessity of nature protection while issuing new laws on natural parks. The local governments also were urged to implement measurements for nature protection.

Beginning with 2003 the National Park has received 580 000 euro in the context of the EU project Life Nature. The program aims to protect natural habitats and different species of plants and animals throughout the European countries. The biologists have found a species named *Ligularia siberica* which grows on a small portion of the park. The park argues that this portion of land should be transferred from the public domain into the park's land. The administration of the park complains about the opposition of several council members who support the fact that one villager who received his land back in that area to keep his plot. The transfer of that small plot into the Park's property actually signifies the nationalization of the land since the Park represents the state. This was the position of those local council members who supported the land owner.

I witnessed a local council meeting in which the vice-director of the Landscape Guard, the prefecture representative and some representatives of the Park simply urged the councilors to convince the farmer who owned that plot to give it up. The state representatives' arguments, supported by the mayor, were: '*we are responsible in front of Europe about what we are doing with our flora and fauna*'; '*we'll have troubles from the central government, but also from the international organizations if we don't have a submissive attitude and we do not protect our natural heritage*'.²⁷ In this discussion the mayor positioned himself on the side of the park. He had several reasons to do it: firstly, he needed an approval from the Park management to exploit a source of water in his own interest. This is why he

⁴All information regarding the negotiation between the EU and Romania could be found on <http://www.eic.ro/Dosar%20UE%20RO.pdf> (page has been accessed on April 24, 2008).

made concessions and he promised to the park manager and the regional government that in the meeting he would solve the problem. Secondly, his wood business often interfered with the Park's interests. Therefore he had no incentive to position himself on the villagers' side. As in other regions of the world (Franklin 2002; Wells and Williams 1998; Zingerli 2005) conservation policy and the political discourses over forest, intertwine at different levels and express political and economic interests of different actors. In this case, the pressures coming from above, from the central government, were used by the mayor in the process of property negotiation at the local level.

The mayor also knows how to strengthen his position. During the national elections campaign he succeeded to bring in the commune the President of The Parliament, who is the second important political man in the state. Although Dragova has little relevance in terms of number of voters, the second important man in the Romanian state stopped in the commune for almost one hour. This visit highlighted the political support the actual mayor had from the central government and from the main political party in Romania at that time⁵.

Actually, the mayor controls the external relations of the community with the Park (as he mediates this relation) and with the national politics (as the Parliament's president visit in the village proved it). He has a double system of reference: as mediator of the Park with the locals, he helps the Park in the relations with the stubborn locals. As mediator with the central politics he presents himself as the only one who is able to help the community by constructing a road to Ciocănaş, promising people that he will be helped by the central government to get PHARE funds for that, or taking back the Obşteia forest etc. In this way, he is the central pawn of the local policy and the 'filter' of the outside relations of the community. The mayor's office chair helps him to consolidate his position as the main actor having access to politics and natural resources as well.

Brokering political relations and access to forest

I have highlighted so far how the mayor mediates the relation between Park and the private owners. Both parts need him in order to communicate. This section shows how the mayor beneficieate from the broker position. He uses his position to influence the forest property relations in the village by faking the timber auction, controlling the force labour market and controlling the forest restitution procedures.

In 1993, the mayor has founded a timber exploitation enterprise. In 2000, when the law has stipulated interdiction for local administrators and local office's representatives to do any kind of business, the mayor passed the firm to his wife.

⁵ We 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 this kind of people that they will grasp votes. It seems that the mayor is particular good on that.

However, from his position he was able to influence the forest property relations in the commune on the benefit of his wife's firm. There are several ways he has influenced the property relations.

The first way is to influence the auctions. In order to select the firm which will exploit the forest, the administrators of the forest (the collective forest council and the mayor's office) have to organize an auction. Very often, the mayor's wife firm gained the auctions. 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 needed papers. 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. This is a mechanism through which the mayor's firm won some auctions. His wife used the husband position (he needs to approve the quantity of wood which should be cut) in order to access the forest.

The mayor also decides when the communal roads have to be repaired. This was of course, a decision in the community's 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. The externalities are paid by the community. The firm which exploits the forest uses heavy lorries for transporting the thick trunks (see the photos 1 and 2)⁶.

These lorries destroy the communal roads and the small bridges which cross the Dragova River⁷. Especially in the autumn, when heavy rains fall, 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's office should impose a tax for all the car drivers who visit the Cave. The price is modest, 5000 ROL (around 15 eurocents), but it contributes to accruing the annual mayor's office income. Yet, the private firm is exempted from paying any tax to the mayor's office. Although there were suggestions to raise taxes from the firms which exploit the collective forest, the mayor's office opposed⁸.

⁶ 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.

⁷ This is not the real name of the river.

⁸ Some of the members of the local council who are political enemies of the mayor proposed this tax in one meeting. But, as I was figuring out my self attending to that meeting, the mayor's position 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 less paid. Even when the meeting is declared extra-ordinary, thus the local council members should receive less

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 and he also improved the time in which the lorries transport the trunks protecting in this way the trucks which roll on a good road, instead of a muddy or on irregular stony road.

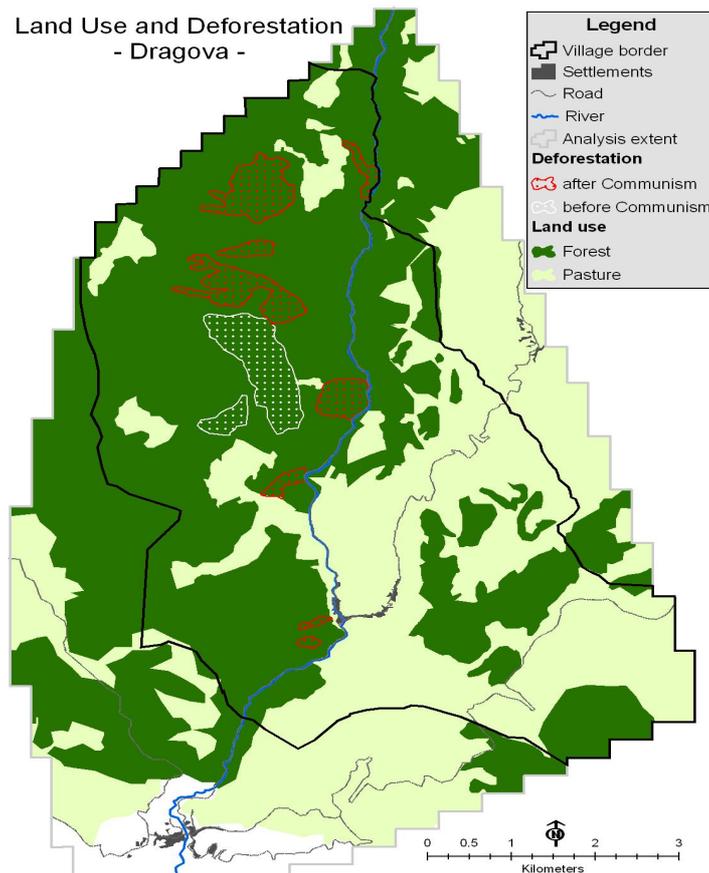


Figure 2. Dragova: participatory map

money, the mayor transforms the meeting into an ordinary one. Thus, the council members receive more money. I was told that this was a regular practice.



Photo 1 and Photo 2: The timber exploitation firm's trucks.

Finally, the road asphaltation was a good opportunity to exploit the communal forest, apparently in the communal interest. At the same time, he was in the best position to manipulate this situation in his family's benefit. In this way, a communal service also brings nice money in the mayor's pocket. Public ownership becomes a source of income for private persons.

One use the communal forest has it is to cover some social security for the elderly, widows and poor people in the village. That means that every year the local council decides which family is entitled to receive wood for heating their houses during the long winter. Without this help several household from the village would probably be in much difficulty to survive the harsh and long winters⁹. At the same time, the mayor heats two targets: one is that he passes as the champion of the poor and old people's protector and he has, in the same time, another strong reason to exploit the communal forest.

As a broker of the community and as the chief of the commune, he gains economically and politically. The figure no. 3 shows how the mayor gains. From his position he draws political advantages: he supports the poor in exchange for the votes. Actually, when he ran for the mayor's office, he emphasized that another mayor would not be probably as sympathetic with the old people as he was during his mandate. He also threatened his workers that if they did not convince their families to vote for him, he had to stop the forest exploitation and they would be dismissed.

As a head of the local land commission the mayor was able, along some other local officials, to establish the "legal" measurement of a plot. Dragova village had also a 'small Obste', a collective forest which belonged to several families only.

⁹ At this altitude the cold weather starts at the end of September and ends at in late April. During this time it is impossible to live in an unheated house.

The documents proving the ownership do not speak about hectares but about *fârtare*. 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 *fârtar* is equivalent with 3 hectares. But elderly declared that they know a *fârtar* 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 Dragova Mountain, where the collective forest was located. He found that the 52 *fârtare* means 300 ha. He made a report which is still kept 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 forest¹⁰. Since nobody knew exactly how much 52 *fârtare* mean in hectares, acres or meters (the State accepted units of measurement)¹¹ the members of the local land commission transformed the old measure according to their interest. As the regional commission had no idea how to transform a *fârtar* into a hectare, they simply left the local commission to decide on this issue.

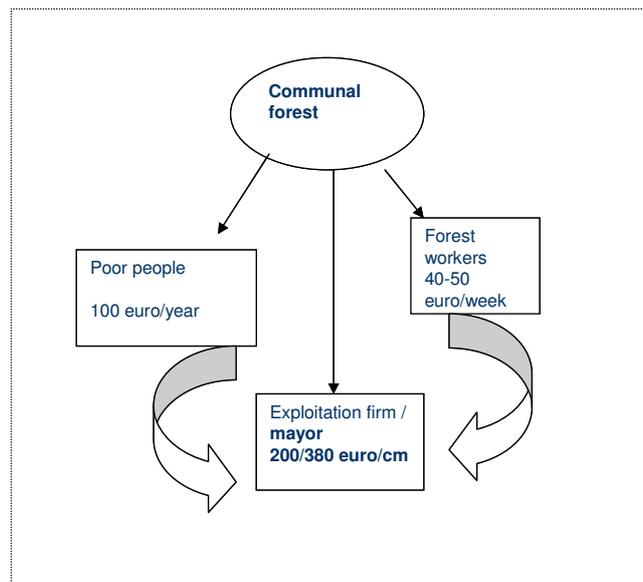


Figure 3. Diagram showing the economic and political gains of the mayor

The mayor had the interest to shrink the surface of the small collective forest. First, he tried not to challenge too much the Park's interests. In exchange, he

¹⁰ The villager who gave me this account was in fact the one whose family kept the document in secret during communism. After 1991 he was also a member of 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.

¹¹ 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.

asked the Park manager not interfere with his business. The mayor decided that those families who refused to accept the forest restitution on the Park's territory to receive forest on the Dragova Mountain (Small Obste) although he knew that this forest belonged to other families. Secondly, this mountain is not on the Park's territory thus would be easier exploitable. The mayor was able to turn in his favour the whole situation by protecting the Park interest (no private forest on the Park's territory). In the same time, he managed to satisfy several villagers by giving them forest outside the Park.

Another way to benefit from his position, maybe the most important one, is to allocate private forest plots preferentially. As the head of the local commission which deal with the land reform laws he took a huge advantage. He was able to allocate 'good' forest to some people.¹² 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 Dragova commune. In this way he attracted a good amount of votes in his favour. The second reason is of an economic 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.

Conclusions

As I have pointed out, the mayor is the one who mostly gain from the position of the broker. He is also the one who negotiate the forest property rights in the commune. As a broker, he mediates the community relations with the outside world. He communicates with both regional and national governments but also with the Park. Positioning himself as the mediator of the community's relations he secured a strong position within the village. His position cannot be challenged by anybody in the village. The accepted invitation of the President of the Romanian Parliament was a clear sign of his force at both local and national level. He presents him self as the representative of the state at the local level. As one villager told me once 'fighting with the mayor means fighting with the state'. From this position he controls indeed the forest relations in the commune. He is thus able not only to negotiate in his advantage local forest property relations but also to control the wood market. As other studies have pointed out, devolution of powers from central to local level has put mayors in the best position to hijack the land reform laws in their benefit (Verdery 2002). Studies on the Romanian forests have highlighted the fact that local elite get access to forest (Vasile 2007a; 2007b) based on their political position. The mayor and the representatives of the

¹² A 'young' forest of 10-20 years old is good only for firewood but not for commercial exploitation. Villagers 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. This means 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 exploitable. A good forest in terms of high trees quality but located on the very deep slopes or close to the mountain pick is useless from villagers' point of view.

State Forest Department are in the best position to negotiate the meanings and the actual forest property relations at the local level.

As the head of the mayor's office, he tried to collaborate with the general manager of the Park. The manager is the one who could restrict the exploitation of his forestry firm. Thus, the mayor supports any activity of the Park as long as it does not intersect with his own business. As I have shown, there is a dispute of property rights over forest among private owners and the Park. Both actors have their own agenda and its own legitimacy claims. The conflict between peasants and the National Park is due to the two types of values and ideologies that each part claims: the Park has what I shall call an 'environmentalist' ideology. This ideology is the backbone of every natural park in the world. It should be noticed also that the main aim of the park is not only to assure some scientific or tourist activities, but its mission is based pretty much on a broader interest. The legitimacy of its claim is aiming nationally not locally.

A second type of ideology, which I shall call 'utilitarian', is expressed by villagers. Villagers' ideology is quite simple and could be resumed as follows: the forest belonged to their ancestors, and they need the forest for their livelihood¹³. The villagers of Dragova think very 'locally'. I never heard during my fieldwork people agreeing with the park's projects (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 Dragova. Villagers legitimize their claim based on the historical rights over the forest and on a moral economy (the livelihood argument). In between these two clearly distinct and conflictual agendas is the mayor's position having his own private agenda. Both parts need him since he is the channel of communication for both Park and villagers. He negotiates with the Park and offers support against villagers like in the case when the Park asked to receive back a plot where a rare flower grows up. He also negotiates with the Park when villagers need to cut trees in the private forest on the Park's territory.

Using his position, he contribute to the fuzzy intertwines between public and private property. He gains from improving the communal roads because his wife's firm gains all the forest exploitation auctions. My findings support other authors who have pointed out that the unclear boundaries between private and public led to economic and politic benefits for certain actors (Sikor 2006; Verdery 1999; 2003; Stark 1996).

Finally, his position as a broker of the community with outside world strengthens his powers at the local level. Controlling the outside relations of the community helps him to impede the emergence of competitors. From this powerful position he influences the forest restitution process and the forest property rights in the commune.

¹³ As Tsing (2001) pointed out, this type of conflict is quite usual everywhere expressing the relationship between national parks and local people who rely on the resources protected by the state.

References

- Bromley W. D.** 1991. *Environment and Economy. Property Rights and Public Policy*. Oxford UK & Cambridge USA: Blackwell.
- Dorondel S.** 2007. *Agrarian Transformation, Social Differentiation, and the Land Use Change in Postsocialist Romania*. Dissertation at Humboldt University Berlin.
- Dorondel S.** 2008. They should be killed': forest restitution, ethnic groups, and patronage in postsocialist Romania. In: D. Fay, D. James (eds.): *'Restoring what was ours': the rights and wrongs of land restitution*, Routledge, London (in press).
- Franklin S.** 2002. Bialowieza Forest, Poland: Representation, Myth, and the Politics of Dispossession. *Environment and Planning A* 34: 1459-1485.
- Hann C.** 1993. From Production to Property: Decollectivization and the Family-Land Relationship in Contemporary Hungary. *Man (N.S)* 28: 299-320.
- Hirschhausen B. von** 1997. *Les nouvelles Campagnes Roumaines. Paradoxes d'une "retour" paysan*. Paris : Belin.
- Howarth W.** 1998. Property Rights, Regulation and Environmental Protection: some Anglo-Romanian Contrasts, in C. M. Hann (ed.), *Property relations. Renewing the anthropological tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 181-200.
- Paulson S., Gezon L. L., Watts M.** 2003. Locating the Political in Political Ecology. An Introduction. *Human Organization* 62(3): 205-215.
- Plan** 2004. *Planul de Management al Parcului National Piatra Craiului*, manuscript, 56 pages.
- Scott C. J.** 1998. *Seeing Like a State. How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Conditions Have Failed*. New Haven, London: Yale University Press.
- Sikor T.** 2006. Land as Asset, Land as Liability: Property Politics in Rural Central and Eastern Europe, in F. and K. von Benda-Beckmann, Wiber, M. (eds.), *Changing Properties of Property*, New York, N.Y.: Berghahn, 2006, p. 175-204.
- Staddon C.** (2001a) 'Restructuring the Bulgarian Wood-Processing Sector: Linkages between Resource Exploitation, Capital Accumulation, and Redevelopment in a Postcommunist Locality', *Environment and Planning A* 33: 607-28.
- Stahl J., Sikor T., Dorondel S.** 2008. Institutionalization of Property Rights in Albanian and Romanian Biodiversity Conservation. *International Journal of*

Agricultural Resources, Governance and Ecology (in print).

- Stark D.** 1996. Recombinant Property in East European Capitalism. *American Journal of Sociology* 101(4) January: 993-1027.
- Tsing A. L.** 2001. Nature in the Making, in Crumley Carole C. (ed.), with A. Elisabeth van Deventer and Joseph J. Fletcher, *New Directions in Anthropology and Environment. Intersections*, Walnut Creek, Lanham, New York, Oxford, Altamira Press, pp. 3-23.
- Vasile M.** 2007a. The sense of property, deprivation and memory in the case of Obstea Vranceana. *Sociologie Romaneasca*, vol 5(2): 114-129.
- Vasile M.** 2007. The sense of property, deprivation and memory in the case of Obstea Vranceana. *Sociologie Romaneasca*, vol 5(2): 114-129.
- Vasile M.** 2007b. *The ability to perform corruption. Access to common property and power relations*. Paper presented at American Anthropological Association's Meeting, November 28 - December 2, Washington D.C.
- Verdery K.** 1996. *What was Socialism and what comes next?* Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Verdery K.** 1999. Fuzzy property: Rights, Power, and Identity in Transylvania's decollectivization, in M. Burawoy and K. Verdery (eds.). *Uncertain Transition. Ethnographies of Change in the Postsocialist World*. Lanham Boulder New York Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc: 53-81.
- Verdery K.** 2002. Seeing like a mayor. Or how officials obstructed Romanian land restitution. *Ethnography* 3(1): 5-33.
- Verdery K.** 2003. *The Vanishing Hectare. Property and Value in Postsocialist Transylvania*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
- Wells M. P. and Williams M. D.** 1998. Russia's Protected Areas in Transition: The Impacts of Perestroika, Economic Reform and the Move Towards Democracy. *Ambio* 27 (3): 198-206.
- Zingerli C.** 2005. Colluding Understands of Biodiversity Conservation in Vietnam: Global Claims, National Interests, and Local Struggles. *Society and Natural Resources* 18 (8): 733-744.