

CPR FORUM *Europe Regional Report*

Central and Eastern European Commons

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I want to take the liberty and present a rather polemical commentary on the nature of academic and policy debates about Central and Eastern European (CEE) commons. My comments are informed by my knowledge of the scant literature on the topic. They are restricted to rural resource management, as I cannot claim any knowledge of other fields. Nevertheless, I hope that they will help readers put the presentations at the Brescia conference in perspective and appreciate their contributions to an understanding of commons in the region.

I want to describe three narratives permeating discussions of commons in CEE. My account of the narratives will be highly stylized for reasons of simplicity. These narratives are commonly found in writings on commons in the region. Yet they are not confined to debates about commons in CEE. I believe that the narratives – and what I derive from them – are more generally found in discussions of commons.

The first narrative deplores a general absence of commons in CEE. In fact, in this narrative, commons have been absent from the region for five decades or so. Communism is the culprit, because the collectivization of agriculture and state management of forests in the 1950s eradicated long-standing traditions of common management. In this view, the challenge is now to recover lost traditions and protect those from further intervention by states in CEE. This is a view that is found not only among common people but also scholars in the region.

The second narrative also observes a lack of commons in CEE. In contrast to the first view, this narrative locates the decline of common management in much more recent times. Capitalism is the one to blame, because it erased all forms of collective management in the region. The advent of capitalism in the 1990s put an end not only to collective forms of cultivation but also to common management of pastures, irrigation systems, and other ‘common-pool resources’. In this view, the solution is now to preserve certain collective elements of socialist agriculture and forestry that, in hindsight, prove superior to their capitalist equivalents. This perspective is widespread among rural people in CEE but not very popular among scholars in the region.

Western scholars seem to be more sympathetic to this narrative. Just as the first two, the third narrative notes the scarcity of commons in CEE. Yet it does not locate the causes in socialism or capitalism but in the design of the property reforms implemented across the region after 1990. Privatization has dominated the agenda of politicians, government officials, and international advisors in the region. They have enacted, implemented, and support policies that privatize all land and other assets previously under the control of socialist cooperatives, state farms, and – to some extent – state forest enterprises. In this view, regional politicians and government officials need to promote commons by allowing rural people to acquire land and other assets jointly.

Privatization should not only allow individuals to gain new ownership rights but also afford the same possibility to groups. This narrative is seen with some doubt by people and experts in the region. Nevertheless, it finds strong support among international advisors.

These narratives are obviously different from each other. I would even suggest that they are incompatible with each other. They are incompatible because they are grounded in different underlying notions of commons. The first narrative understands commons as a form of resource management undertaken by communities separate from the state. The second narrative holds a diametrically opposed view of commons, recognizing the state as the key forum for collective action. It does not separate between state and communities as the first perspective. The third perspective, finally, defines commons as a form of group ownership. In this narrative, commons are after all not that different from private ownership and management.

The papers presented at the conference deserve credit for discussing concrete cases of commons. Their findings question the general validity of the three narratives commonly found in academic and policy debates. They not only attest to the existence of commons in CEE, but also suggest the value of research being informed by the three perspectives – and engaging them.

Central and Eastern Europe, I believe, provides fertile grounds to examine different notions of commons, which I have barely touched here. As for the region, I hope that scholars will continue to engage and develop all three perspectives by way of empirical research on concrete commons. Beyond the region, I think it is important to recognize the different perspectives and use them for more theoretical inquiries into the nature of commons and their relations with different societal models. This, perhaps, could be a special contribution that research in CEE could make to research on commons.

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