

Terre et propriété à l'est de l'Europe depuis 1990. Faisceau de droits, relations de pouvoir.

Marie-Claude MAUREL

Review by Elodie Douarin 22/11/2021

The transition from centrally planned towards more market-oriented systems, which started in 1989 to 1991 in Eastern Europe, has been extensively studied. This book proposes to revisit this process but focusing on the much narrower issue of the return to private property rights over agricultural land and its impact on farm structure. This is a much less studied aspect of the reforms, but one with far reaching consequences. The analysis presented discusses this process with a specific focus on people's relationship to land ownership itself and some aspects of the evolving legal framework and economic environment supporting or constraining these relations.

The main strength of the book is to present a coherent narrative over an extended period of time to describe key aspects of institutional change in the region. This is done through looking at key stages in the process and relating the legacies of past experiences with the distribution/redistribution of land rights. The narrative presented thus examines the trajectories followed in the early years of the transition away from central planning, during the pre-EU accession period, and when the moratorium on foreign ownership of agricultural land was lifted in the countries investigated. The analysis presented builds on case studies investigated over a period of 30 years by the author herself. These case studies have been the object of earlier publications, and the book itself focuses on key findings from these, which are complemented with a broader review of the relevant empirical literature. The countries covered in the book are (north to south): Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and later Czechia and Slovakia, Romania and Bulgaria, with some occasional mentions of the countries of the former Yugoslavia, for comparison. But the most detailed case studies are probably the ones focusing on Lithuania, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia, where the author has carried out more extensive work through the period covered.

More specifically, the book is structured in 3 parts, with the first part focusing on presenting a timeline of events to embed the analysis explicitly in its socio-historical context, thus allowing for a discussion of the role of long-run historical legacies. While this section is mostly descriptive, it is useful in establishing the origin of specific values and beliefs attached to the land by the local populations, and key information to describe the agricultural sector - these are later useful to the author's presentation of the trajectories followed in different contexts. Parts 2 and 3 present the core focus of the book and discuss the process of privatisation and distribution/redistribution of agricultural land in Eastern Europe from 1989/91, with part 2 focusing on the early years of transition and part 3 focusing on the EU accession period and beyond. The political decisions shaping this process are discussed in the frame of competing views over appropriate trajectories of evolution.

As stated by the author, the book takes an institutional evolutionary lens and the narrative presented is mostly guided by empirical facts, rather than theory (page 21). This approach works and an important contribution made by the book indeed comes from the fact that the account presented is embedded in the longer social history of the region and convincingly supported by the empirical evidence presented. That said, I find the subtitle to be slightly misleading, as to me, it implies that the book should contain a detailed political economy analysis of the reforms, when it rather presents a credible account of the reforms, in which the role of political forces is described. More specifically, the

notion of “*faisceau de droits*” is under-explored in the book, being limited to considerations around direct versus indirect use of the land (or own cultivation versus renting out), and (more crucially) power relations are described rather than fully analysed. On issues relating to the political economy of the changes described, a more structured conceptual or theoretical lens could have been helpful, to support a more critical discussion of counterfactuals and alternative lines of explanations: we are given a coherent narrative, with confirmatory descriptive evidence, but are other interpretations possible? Why did specific actors ended up having more weight in the decision-making process at different stages? Why are other outcomes seemingly presented as more desirable by the author? The general context of transition could also have been discussed more extensively and critically. In particular, what was the objective of the transition as far as agricultural land and the agricultural sector more broadly were concerned? Why exactly are some outcomes deemed more socially acceptable? Is public opinion the main factor? What about efficiency considerations? Etc.

The book remains an impressive achievement and a very useful read, given its detailed presentation of an intriguing issue over a wide period of time, for the useful and detailed review of the empirical work conducted by the author herself, and for the extensive literature review conducted to complement it.