

REINVENTING THE PEASANTS: LOCAL STATE CAPTURE IN POST-COMMUNIST EUROPE

by Alina Mungiu-Pippidi *

Abstract:

This paper takes up a neglected dimension of the social and political life of post-communist countries, that of rural life. With the resurgence of subsistence farming, on the ashes of communist-era collectivization, features of rural politics, which this paper refers to as 'neo-dependency', have resurfaced. The entrenched institutional structure of small villages generate certain subjectivities and political behaviors that, in turn, reinforce the institutional structures themselves, in a vicious circle that makes rural reform extremely difficult. After a brief survey of some of the major social scientific approaches to the peasantry, over the course of the twentieth century, this paper outlines a multidisciplinary approach to the problem. The paper presents comparative data on peasant voting behavior and political opinions as well as an anthropological case study, based on fieldwork in two very different Romanian villages. Based on this analysis, the paper presents a model of local state capture, based on the persistence of communist-era local power brokers. In many cases, the very same communist-era officials control local access to resources, placing them at the center of patronage networks – as 'gate-keepers' – that cut the populations of small villages off from any contact with the political and social life of the more modern cities. The democratization of the countryside is of paramount importance to the success of many post-communist countries, and understanding the agrarian sector is a necessary first step in this direction. This paper seeks to make a modest methodological contribution to this monumental task.

Keywords: peasantry; rural; agriculture; collectivization; state; voting behavior

* Alina Mungiu Pippidi is a Professor of Political Science with the Romanian National School of Government and Administration.

The argument

After more than a decade since the beginning of the transition process for post-communist European countries, the outcomes could not be more different. Eight countries have become members of the European Union; two – Romania and Bulgaria – are said to be on track, despite the great distance separating them from the first group; and, at least one other – Croatia – has a good chance of joining Europe in the next decade. The remaining countries, however, are lamentably lagging behind, with some countries struggling through transformations that seem unfinished and others that appear finished, but failed. The explanation for this wide variation cannot but be multifold. This paper is in essence methodological: it stresses one factor that has been consistently underestimated, and, in addition, suggests a different approach to it that is essential for reinterpreting it in a meaningful way and crafting adequate policies to address it.

At the beginning of the period of transition, this factor was labeled the 'urban-rural divide'; later, it was recast as the 'agrarian problem'. Social scientists at the beginning of last century spoke, more modestly, of either the issue of 'land' or of 'peasant' society. As David Mitranyi insightfully observed, seen from the West it was a land problem; seen from the East, it was a peasant one. In recent years, there has been little coordination between comparative political scientists working on voting behavior, economists working on agriculture, and anthropologists working on social change in rural post-communist Europe. This is surprising given that a considerable synthetic tradition existed on this subject in the first half of the 20th century (Mitranyi 1930, 1951; Stahl 1998; Roberts 1951). Spanning the disciplines, however, is essential if this factor is to be granted its due, and if the rules of the game operating in the new countryside are to be adequately grasped. To demonstrate the first point – the significance of the rural factor – this paper will present regional comparative data; to understand the second, the analysis will draw on anthropological data, focusing on a Romanian case study.

If observed closely, politics in rural societies looks rather spectacular. It usually entails a fair number of coups and abortive revolutions, ambitious reforms and brutal assassinations. If observed from afar, however, it produces an almost unbearable sensation of monotony. Coups only change the person of the dictator; assassinations prove sooner or later to have been senseless. Cities tend to push for reform; rural areas have a propensity to resist change, at the risk of stagnation. In the inspired formula of Samuel Huntington: 'whoever rules the rural, rules the country' (1956: 292). Even a change of regime, despite

producing considerable suffering, does not modify the essential constraints under which all governments must eventually operate. The state is weak; society is strong, with a life of its own, proceeding alongside formal structures.

The strong link between the level of democracy and the position of the peasantry was recognized by the historian Barrington Moore jr. (1966), who saw the non-repressive commercialization of agriculture – the creation of farmer agriculture – as a foundation of democratic development. The remarkable resistance of peasant societies to change and progress has traditionally been explained by two distinct sets of causes. On the one hand, blame is laid on peasant culture. Peasants, as described by 20th century anthropologists, emerge as passive, collectivist, envious, fatalistic and distrustful creatures – clearly not the stuff that democrats are made of (Redfield 1955, 1956; Foster 1965, 1967). Politicians have often held similarly negative conceptions of peasants. Indeed, most modernizers – from liberals to Lenin – looked upon peasants as the primary obstacles to social and economic progress. On the other hand, in a somewhat kinder assessment, based this time on cases from the Third World rather than Europe, and motivated by the need to explain why peasants did not revolt against the oppressive regimes ruling over them, peasants are seen more as non-consensual victims than voluntary contributors to the conservative order of things. Especially in the Latin American context, scholars have identified the rural upper class as the primary political opponent of democracy (see, for example, O'Donnell, 1978). From this perspective, oligarchs, usually landowners, are seen as holding peasants captive, since the latter's autonomy is too limited to allow for the expression of their true political values. However, they still manage to resist their rulers through a variety of everyday forms of resistance (Scott 1984). Foot dragging, gossip and theft are no longer, in this view, expressions of a degraded peasant character, but expressions of protest under conditions where no other means are available. Peasant values are therefore not inherently conservative; peasants endorse their conservative landlords because they are given no real choice.

Clearly, the post-communist agrarian social and class structures are different from both the 'Junker' and the 'farmer' models that formed the contexts within which these theses were developed. Large-scale mechanized and collectivized landholdings, as well as the partial transformation of property relations since the fall of the old regime, have produced rural social structures that diverge considerably from Latin American models. In addition, the situations in rural post-communist Europe vary greatly from country to country, with clusters in the Baltics,

the Balkans, Russia, and Ukraine, while Poland, which was largely not collectivized, remains the great exception. However, the nearly universal experience of decollectivization seems to have produced similar patterns everywhere: a return to family plots and subsistence farming, a 'peasantization' of the urban unemployed who revert to subsistence agriculture on their recuperated lots (Leonard and Kaneff 2002), and a drastic decrease in production, as household consumption, rather than commercial exchange, becomes the main destination for crops. Peasants may have strongly resisted collectivization in the time of Stalin (Fitzpatrick 1996), but today they resist decollectivization and evince a deep reluctance to accept markets. They demand subsidies and are opposed to the liberalization of land markets. A small subgroup of market-oriented farmers – owners of larger plots – is gradually emerging in some places, though, except in Poland, it is nowhere larger than 5%. Land markets have been slow to appear everywhere, due to the logistical difficulties of restituting property in the absence of cadastral evidence. Even so, differences still outweigh similarities, with large state farms still important in Russia, average sizes of holdings much higher in the Baltics than in Central or South-Eastern Europe, and little or no property reform in Central Asia (Wegren 1988).

However, an examination of the political behavior of peasants reveals a clear pattern. Scholars working on voting behavior in post-communist Europe have long pointed out that peasants tend, as a general rule, to vote for the wrong people. If a dictator is at hand, such as Milosevic, peasants vote for him; if a candidate seeks an additional, unconstitutional mandate, as did Iliescu, they support him; if there is an extant communist party, it is usually maintained by a peasant constituency (Mungiu 1996; Wegren 1998; Gordy 1998). They are also unlikely to be democrats – though old age and poverty, rather than any inherent peasant character, may account for this (Rose, Misher and Haerpfer 1998). In short, there is evidence to show that peasants in post-communist Europe behave similarly to peasants elsewhere, and the differences among countries may be a function primarily of the size of their respective peasant populations—a legacy of development from pre-communist times (see Table 1). The other explanation, pointing to the informal institutions of the countryside as supportive of a system of abuse of peasants by predatory elites, has been far less popular, though some anthropologists (Humphrey 2000) and political scientists (Jowitt 1993) have encouraged researchers to look beyond the 'land' question. By and large, the reinvention of politics in the countryside has remained largely unexplored, and the little attention devoted to rural post-communist Europe is absorbed in studies on land reform and agriculture.

Table 1. Workforce in agriculture and PPP in ECE countries

	CZ	ES	HU	PL	SL	BU	LV	LI	RO	SK
% of workforce in agriculture	5	7	6	19	10	27	15	17	38	6
GDP/capita adjusted by purchase power parity PPP - % EU	57	41	51	40	69	28	29	38	25	48

Data for 2001. Source: Eurostat

The rural factor in comparative political analysis

One notable exception is the recent study by Kurtz and Barnes (2002), which examines whether states with larger agricultural sectors, all other things being equal, have a more difficult time establishing democratic politics. They measure agrarian dominance as the rural proportion of the population, a rough indicator of the size of the political base that might plausibly fall under the domination of the agrarian upper-class (or its functional equivalent). They found that large rural sectors had a negative impact on the liberalization of politics, regardless of the peculiarities of the social organization in communist agrarian systems. This result holds even when controlling for the level of socio-economic development. 'It is also important to notice that this effect is not because of any correlation between GDP and size of agricultural labor force, because the former is a poor predictor of democracy on its own. The causal mechanism here seems clear. Post-communist agrarian elites have strong interests in retaining an authoritarian governance system, and they have inherited extensive organizational structures for quelling dissent and/or distributing benefits' (Kurtz and Barnes 2002). The only country that seems to be exempt from this pattern is Poland. In addition to showing that a large rural sector – controlling for level of development – is inauspicious for democratization, they also found economic liberalization and socio-economic development to be of lesser importance than previously thought. Instead, they determined external conditionality to be the most important factor of democratization.

The main weakness of the Kurtz and Barnes analysis is their reliance on Freedom House scores for democratization as the main dependent variable. However, if we consider the rural factor in models based on public opinion data – such as the World Values Survey's pooled sample for East Central Europe – residence in rural areas does remain a negative determinant of democratic orientation, controlling for age, wealth, collectivism, education, and religion (see Table 2). In the ten EU accession countries, as well as Romania and Bulgaria, people residing in rural areas show a lower

appreciation for democracy than their urban counterparts. In addition, they are significantly more traditionalistic; they attend church services more often; they are more egalitarian, resisting the idea of great income disparity; and, they believe the state should play a significant social role. These findings persist when controlling for subjective welfare.

Table 2. Rural residence as predictor for democratic attitudes

Determinants	Model 1	Model 2	Scales used
Wealth	.090***	.089***	Subjective evaluation of financial situation of household; 1-low; 10-high
Education	.100***	.097***	Age finished school in years
Age in years	-.086***	-.083***	No. of years
Town size	.090***	.083***	Village - 1. City over 200 k - 8
Christian Orthodox	--	.010	Dichotomous Orthodox 1; else - 0
Scale religion	.025	--	1 Muslim 2 Orthodox 3 Catholic 4 Protestant 0- Atheist or else
Religious	.005	--	Dichotomous Self-declared religious 1 else - 0
Collectivism	.085***	.086***	State vs. citizen responsible for one's welfare Scale from State - 1 Citizen - 10
Constant	2.15*** (.086)	2.26*** (.076)	B (std error)
N	8559	8559	
Adjusted R2	6.2	5.9	

Legend: OLS regression models with dependent variable 'Democracy best system of government despite shortcomings'; the scale is with 1 - minimum agreement and 4 - maximum agreement; Year of polling 1995 for World Values Survey. Pooled database includes Hungary, Czech Republic, Poland, Romania, Croatia, Slovenia, Slovakia and Bulgaria. Values are 'beta' standardized coefficients unless specified otherwise.*** significant at 0.1%; not marked means variable was not significant.

With controls for age and education, rural residency is also a

significant predictor of the preference for strong leaders. The values of rural residents indeed appear less democratic and more authoritarian than those of urban residents, though the bivariate correlation between authoritarianism and rural residence is not significant. Both subjective and objective controls for wealth fail to alter the conclusions, though, in any case, multinational surveys of wealth should be viewed with skepticism, since peasants tend to under-declare income and report higher rates of satisfaction with the economic situation of their households than urbanites do.

If we examine individual country samples further, we get a mixed picture. In a large Romanian sample (CURS 2000, N= 14 000), peasants turn out significantly less statist than urbanites, and no more collectivistic. They are less nationalistic and more optimistic overall. However, this questionnaire is not based on the World Values Survey, but rather on the model of the 'The Authoritarian Personality' questionnaire. It finds clear evidence that peasants are significantly more obedient than city dwellers. Controlling for age, wealth and education, peasants, far more than city dwellers, believe that leaders should be obeyed even when they make mistakes.

Table 3. Rural residence as determinant of main political attitudes

Dependent variables	Rural	Education	Income	Age
Communism good idea	NS	--	--	+
Statism (state should be responsible for all, not individual)	- 0.05**	--	--	NS
Obedience (leaders should be obeyed even when wrong)	0.10***	Below high school, in favor; college, against	NS	+
Nationalism	- 0.42***	+	+	NS
Economic optimism	0.41***	NS	+	--

Source: Romanian Center for Urban and Regional Sociology 2000 survey. Analysis reported in Mungiu-Pippidi 2002. N= 14 000; NS means non-significant; + or - indicate the sign of the correlation. The table summarizes five linear regression models. 'Rural' is a dichotomous variable, 1 rural residence, else 0. The dependent variables are 1 to 5 scales.

Reviewing the evidence from the World Values Survey and our

national sample, it is clear that the rural factor is important, but its precise significance remains ambiguous. Clearly, peasants are more obedient toward their leaders and less enthusiastic about democracy. But does this account for their conservative and passive political attitudes, even when the status quo is so unfavorable to them that they have every interest in its overthrow? The answer to this question cannot be found except by going deeper into the anthropological research.

The case study

If we consider the accession country with the largest percentage of agricultural workers, Romania, voting behavior in the rural areas indeed appears peculiar: in the 1996 and 2000 elections, 45% of the votes in rural areas were cast for the main successor to the Communist Party, the Romanian Social Democrat Party (formerly National Salvation Front, then Social Democratic Party), compared with 32% in urban areas. In the earlier elections of 1990 and 1992, the proportion of peasants voting with what they called 'the state' was even greater, double the proportion in urban areas. This electoral dynamic was affected by successive splits in the dominant party, which created confusion among the rural electorate. In local elections, however, the same party is supported in almost every rural area. Furthermore, residence in rural areas has remained the main predictor of electoral support for President Ion Iliescu, from 1990 to 2000, even in complex voting behavior models. However, not all rural areas are alike: those that display typical residual communist attitudes are the poorer sections of overwhelmingly rural counties with few, and recently established, towns.

When analyzing political cognition we also find the level of ignorance considerably higher among the rural population than the urban (see Table 4).

Table 4. Political literacy compared – urban versus rural

Questions	Urban	Rural
Follows electoral campaign daily in newspapers	23	14
One hour or more of electoral campaign watched on TV the previous day (2000)	32	16
Matters greatly if a candidate stands on the right or the left	9	5
Does not know if the left or the right stands for closer incomes	41	48
Does not know if the left or the right favors private property	39	47

Source: poll CURS 2000.

Is 'authoritarianism' an intrinsic rural or peasant feature, or can we

trace its other determinants? Comparisons of urban lifestyles and social indicators with corresponding ones from rural Romania point to a multiplicity of factors accounting for the differences between urban and rural subjectivities. The personal income levels of rural inhabitants are only about 60 percent of those of urbanites; rural populations are also older and less educated than urban populations (see Table 5). However, not only the differentials between the urban and the rural, but also the low level of income and education in general is a matter of concern. Poverty and lack of political information are worse by half in the rural areas, but the urban levels are also centuries away from developed Europe. Considering that the 'urban' is largely a recent and incomplete communist creation, the 'rural' may even comprise more of the country than these indicators show, extending beyond mere formal residence in the countryside.

Table 5. Rural-urban social indicators compared

Variables	Urban Mean (Standard error)	Rural Mean (Standard error)	Total population Mean (Standard error)
Age	44 (16)	49 (18)	46.34 (17.02)
Education	4.7 (1.4)	3.4 (1.3)	4.13 (1.50)
Personal income/month Euro		40 Euro	21 Euro
Household income	65 Euro	42 Euro	54 Euro

Source: poll CURS 2000.

In the summer of 2001, I spent three months in two Romanian villages with a team of graduate students interested in political behavior. Between them, the two villages represent considerable variation. The first, Scornicesti, a plains village, was fully collectivized, industrialized and systematized, since it was Ceausescu's birthplace. The traditional village was demolished, industries and housing blocks were built, and neighboring villages were forced into administrative subordination. During the 1989 Revolution, villagers hounded the Ceausescu family, but reelected the communist mayor, Constantin Neacsu, who remains the village's most influential political figure. The other village, Nucsoara, is a mountain village that was never collectivized. Since resistance to communism was strong here, political opponents were chased into the mountains and executed. Their lands were divided among the villagers, starting with the communist leaders. The villager who helped the secret service break the ten-year resistance movement became the successor to the resistance leader – the pre-war, local broker –

only he acts more as a gatekeeper. Although Petre Ungureanu, a forester, has never been mayor himself, he is the kingmaker who determines who the mayor will be. Together with the village clerk – Maria Serban, herself the daughter of the former communist mayor – they control access to the village's main resources, meager as they are: wood, property titles, and government subsidies. In addition, Ungureanu, a godson of the partisan leader, has assumed the position of godfather for most of the village. The model outlined below is based primarily on fieldwork in these two villages.

Wherever restitution policies failed to create large, prosperous or, at least, autonomous farms, electoral support is usually brokered between the local and central authorities, with the former acting as a 'gatekeeper' between the village and the rest of the world. The local authority controls access to every resource in the area and is instrumental in consolidating the votes of villagers in support of a single party. In this way, in poor villages the vote is practically collective, not individual, and the voters' indifference to the ideology of candidates can be largely explained by the fact that, indeed, ideology matters little to the way voting is determined. The organization of political life in the countryside reinforces this style of politics, since anticommunist parties rarely have headquarters, while the successor to the Communist Party is usually based in the village hall or another grand communist-era building.

Kurtz and Barnes speculate that power over property and property restitution is the mechanism through which rural elites exercise control. However, there are clearly other mechanisms at work, as well. Their want of cash makes peasants dependent, in almost every way, on the few gatekeepers in the village. Since they can no longer steal from the collective farm, as they used to, peasants depend entirely on what they produce. In much of the region, they sell their crops to the state-owned monopolistic agency; only recently has a market for agricultural products begun to tentatively develop. Gas, wood, subsidies for basic products, and vouchers for machines, are all in the hands of small village elites, comprised mostly of agronomists and former kolkhoz employees in plains villages, and foresters, still state employees since most forests remain state-owned, in mountain villages.

In Romania's rural areas, we find a political culture typical of underdeveloped rural societies, giving support to scholars who find grounds for comparison between Latin America and post-communist Europe. The roots of underdevelopment are older than communism. The early twentieth century literature on the failures of economic development in Romania largely focuses on the lack of economic sustainability of small rural holdings, so-called 'subsistence farming' (Mitranyi 1930; Roberts 1951). The dream of a prosperous peasantry, on the Western model, was undermined by a large surplus of agricultural population combined with a drop in

productivity after the 1918-21 land reform, which dismantled large property holdings. Nevertheless, some peasants managed to gain a degree of economic autonomy, if not prosperity, by 1945, only to end up either in the Gulag or the collective farms, after the Soviet army imposed communism. By 1989, except for mountainous regions, where pastures constitute the only available land, Romania was fully collectivized. A 1990 presidential decree, and two land restitution acts, in 1991 and 1997, have since attempted to restore the 1945 state of affairs, creating over 600,000 land-related lawsuits by 1998. While failing to reconstitute pre-communist property holdings, these acts did manage to reestablish the pre-communist problem of subsistence farming (see Table 6). Furthermore, the distribution of property after 1990 empowered the local, communist-era bureaucracy, which controlled both the property archives and the legal power to decide over restitution matters, turning it into a veritable 'predatory elite'.

Traditional rural societies and communist societies had many things in common. Both were characterized by distribution patterns of social and legal rights that were unpredictable from a rational standpoint, but entirely predictable from an understanding of the structures of authority that generated the unwritten rules of the game. In such contexts, political behavior is determined by the struggle for 'survival' – usually determined by membership in the 'right' status group, the group well connected to the source of power and privilege. This model has been labeled 'neo-traditionalist' (Jowitt, 1993), but 'neo-dependency' would be more apt, since many factors cause the political dependency that makes peasants a captive constituency. The communist state replaced feudal structures as the exploiter of the peasantry. The former rendered peasants once again landless and impoverished, after a brief interlude between the two world wars, recreating the political dependency of the period before the extension of the electoral franchise.

Table 6. Dimensions of rural property in historical comparison

Size in hectares	% 1918	% 1949	% 1999
Under 5 (subsistence farming)	75	76.1	81.6
5-10	17.07	17.8	15.1
10-20 ha	5.49	4.89	3.1
Over 20	2.54	1.2	0.2
Total land available	3,280,000	3,067,000	3,211,507

Source: Encyclopedia of Romania, Romanian Academy, Bucharest, 1939; Romanian National Statistics Office (CNS).

Other factors also contribute to the continuing political dependency of the peasantry: the persistence, even after decades of communist industrialization, of a significant surplus in agricultural population; the lack of productivity, since in over 50 percent of farms most work is done with horses; the existence, for most of the transition period, of a single state agency with the legal right to buy the crops; and, the poverty and parochialism which cut the villages off from political information. In other words, formal institutions, old and new, contribute to the voting behavior of the peasantry as well as to the formation of their political attitudes, and these attitudes, in turn, serve to reinforce the formal institutions. This vicious circle creates a veritable political 'black hole', where rules from the more modern urban areas do not apply in the countryside. The towns vote based on electoral campaigns, launched from the radical right to the radical left, though most successfully from the political centre. On the other hand, the villages vote, in their own words, 'for the state', and the only campaigns that affect them are those of bribery and coercion by local elites. In focus groups, peasants describe party politics as the source of all evil and corruption. Directly electing a President who would, in turn, appoint a non-political government seems to represent their ideal political system.

This model demonstrates two important facts: first, subsistence farming is the structural basis for the condition of political dependency, which makes the latter extremely resilient; and, second, the institutions of neo-dependency have produced corollary subjectivities, which have in turn reinforced these institutions. Peasants have learned to be submissive and to stay out of trouble. They seek a paternalistic leader to protect them from local predators, whom they identify with political parties. This leader's failure to do so does not affect them greatly, since they are realistic enough to know that they have to accommodate the strongmen of the village in any case. Political dependence is too anchored in recent historical memory to be shaken off easily. As we have seen, in Nucsoara and Scornicesti, not only do memories of past punishment linger with villagers, but a less dramatic system of rewards and penalties still supports the former system, even after the Gulag, executions and demolitions are no longer practicable threats.

Can this model be applied to the entire region? Undoubtedly, there is considerable variation across the region, but the model seems to apply to a large extent wherever subsistence farming has sprung up on the ruins of communist collectivization. The collectivization of agriculture under state socialism has long been recognized primarily as a means of political control, rather than economic development (Lewin 1968; Fitzpatrick 1996), and its infrastructure remains in place throughout much of the

post-communist region (Kurtz and Barnes 2002). Neo-dependency has proven less enduring in urban areas and larger villages, because of the development of new market relationships to compete with it, even if it proved successful in slowing the market economy's progress toward becoming, in the words of the European Commission, 'fully functional'. However, in the small villages, this is how politics still functions, or, rather, malfunctions. This may well provide an explanation for why vertical accountability does not seem to operate in some post-communist countries. We need, therefore, to understand the structure of the agrarian sector, not just its size, as a first step to formulating effective policies not only to boost agricultural production, but also to democratize the countryside, where neo-dependency constitutes a strong obstacle to successful transition.

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