

Land concentration, land grabbing and land conflicts in Europe:

The case of Boynitsa in Bulgaria

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This chapter examines the socio-historical processes in Bulgaria that have led to the very visible trend of land centralisation, or land grabs, since 2007. It draws on a case study of land grabbing near the village of Boynitsa in northwest Bulgaria. This region, often described as the 'poorest region in the EU',¹ has the highest rate of unemployment in Bulgaria. The chapter sets the issue in the broader context both of land grabbing and the socioeconomic transformations of land property relations that have characterised Bulgaria's post-1989 shift from state socialism to (neo) liberal capitalism.

After the relative economic expansion in the 1970s and 1980s in northwest Bulgaria, the region was severely hit by the economic downturn, particularly in rural areas, caused by rapid de-industrialisation after 1989. After the collapse of state socialism and the 'shock therapy' of economic liberalisation, a wide process of de-industrialisation and severe economic downturn swept through the entire country during the 1990s. Initially this affected the agricultural sector and in the late 1990s also the industrial sector, along with policies of mass privatisation and radical austerity. These shifts initially led to land fragmentation and subsequently to re-consolidation of land ownership that excluded most of the rural population, thus, facilitating land grabs. The social effects of this process at the micro level are illustrated by the case study.

The chapter opens with a short overview of the historical political economy of the transformation of land property relations in Bulgaria. This is important in order to understand the dynamics behind land property relations under state socialism and what happened following its collapse. It is also key to going beyond regarding 1989 as a watershed between two integrated, static and non-contradictory systems. Land relations under state socialism were quite dynamic, marked by various struggles, tensions, and changes, and formed the ways in which land relations shifted with Bulgaria's integration into (neo) liberal global capitalism.

The next section explains how the dominant actors came to be formed in the post-1989 period: the larger Bulgarian agricultural agri-businesses, foreign investors, the vast number of smallholders, the investment funds and the agricultural cooperatives. It can be argued that the latter were a form of a resistance to the attempted imposition of a particular land regime by the Bulgarian government in the early 1990s.

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The third section examines the post-1989 land relations and conflicts, including the initial land fragmentation and the subsequent land re-consolidation. These trends are viewed within the more general context of various forms of land grabs, understood more broadly as taking control of land for capital accumulation. In other words, it offers a potential typology of the dominant forms of post-1989 land grabs in Bulgaria. It also examines the various forms of resistance to land grabs, which remained for the most part embedded within the general context of the environmental movement, and failed to expand further. It focuses on the social relations that facilitated grabs of agricultural land.

The final section takes the form of a case study of land grabs near Boynitsa. It examines at the micro level the wider issues raised in the earlier sections. In 2011 Boynitsa attracted mainstream media attention in Bulgaria as a large Chinese company had leased 2,000 hectares (ha) of agricultural land as part of its first deal of a promised 10,000 ha in the region. This deal was widely advertised by the government, which assured the company full support as being highly beneficial for the general development of the region. Nevertheless, at the end of 2012 the company suddenly announced its intention to terminate the contract.

1. The Historical Political Economy of Land Relations in Bulgaria

Prior to the imposition by state socialism of land collectivisation and industrial modernisation of the Bulgarian countryside during the 1950s, Bulgaria's agricultural production remained embedded in fragmented land ownership by a large class of subsistence farmers. This peasant class had been consolidated in 1979 when the Bulgarian state was formed out of the Ottoman Empire. Importantly, within the Ottoman regime of land relations, the peasants enjoyed *de facto* control over their land and the Sultan attempted to strictly regulate the appropriation of agricultural surpluses by the feudal-military classes (Karpat, 1972; 2002).

The subsistence smallholders were further entrenched in the countryside with the formation of the state in 1878 (Crampton, 1983). During the Russo-Turkish war, which eventually led to the formation of the state, the Bulgarian peasants initiated a wide process of land expropriation and gained control over all productive lands (many Turkish peasants were forced to flee during and after the end of the war), and also extended the agricultural frontier (e.g. by deforestation). The provisional authorities at the time were unable to prevent either the mass migration, or the expropriation and cultivation of the land by the Bulgarian peasants. The government had little option but to allow them to use the vacant land, which was taken over by local communities, not by individuals. The communities refused to pay the rent demanded by the previous owners since they claimed the land belonged to them. Despite government efforts to supervise, record and keep the process of land expropriation in check, many new areas were cleared and a sizeable amount of land was expropriated without the process being officially recorded.

The newly formed state violently imposed its authority on the peasantry. For example, in 1900 the army intervened to stop peasant riots against taxes on agricultural production. The whole period between 1878 and 1946 was, in fact, characterised by a process of consolidation of these small, predominantly subsistence farmers. They represented 80% of the Bulgarian population in that period, with 1 million production units owning on average 4.3 ha of land before World War II (Csaki et al., 2000). They became the most numerous and important social group, and were at times involved in deadly confrontation with the military and the state. The peasants also organised themselves both economically, with the formation of a wide-ranging cooperative movement, and politically in the shape of a peasant party that was

able to win elections and came to power twice in the inter-war period. Their agrarian ideology was a unique blend of anti-militarism, anti-nationalism, populism and (non-Marxist) anti-capitalism that aimed to achieve an alternative form of modernisation based on a Balkan federation of small-scale farmers. Their rise to power was curbed only by the bloody military *coup d'état* of 1923 and the imposition of an authoritarian nationalist regime (Bell, 1977). The peasants nevertheless remained the backbone of the Bulgarian villages. It was only with state socialism that peasants were separated from ownership of the land (with the peculiar processes of enclosures that happened with the collectivisation), which also brought about the separation between land and labour.

Until 1946, therefore, Bulgaria was a country of small-scale community farming, in a general state of economic underdevelopment (Daskalov, 2005: 255–7). Gerschenkron (1966: 233) shows that industrialisation could not take place in Bulgaria since the existing forms of agriculture were highly inefficient (in the particular sense of achieving high economic growth) and predominantly based on subsistence farming, whereby the peasants held direct control over land. Thus, industry lacked a strong agricultural base upon which to build. Gerschenkron explains Bulgaria's post-liberation lack of industrialisation by stating that 'poor, stagnant, and inefficient agriculture could serve neither as an adequate raw-material basis for industry nor as a source of effective and growing demand for industrial products' (*ibid.*) He further tries to explain it as being the result of government irrationality and 'militant nationalism' (pointing to the expansionary policies in Macedonia and Thrace), concluding that the decisions of the ruling classes were not 'particularly felicitous' (Gerschenkron, 1966: 233). This perspective misses one key point, namely the fact that with the liberation the peasant communities were able to entrench their land ownership and to impose a regime of small-scale subsistence agriculture. Thus their social reproduction did not rely on economic growth. The elites, on the contrary, were forced to look for non-economic means of reproduction, which may explain their 'irrational' militarism and nationalism.

Exploitation remained extra-economic, via war, usury and taxation. Taxation was hard to maintain since the Ottoman social institutions had collapsed with the formation of the Bulgarian state while it also proved difficult to build new state institutions. This explains why there was no industrial boom and industry remained largely artisan and small-scale (Daskalov, 2005: 313). Peasants were in possession of their land and their reproduction did not depend on markets. Non-market agricultural production meant also that there were no incentives or possibilities for investment in technological development. For example, in 1934 peasants still used wooden ploughs (Begg and Meurs, 1998). This also explains the failure of attempts to initiate state-led growth. Elites were unable to sustain themselves solely through exploiting the peasant population and so resorted to corruption, patronage and clientelism (Crampton, 1983: 158–169). When this did not provide enough, they began to look for external (geopolitical) means of accumulation, namely war.

This overview shows that the process of land fragmentation is inextricably linked to the formation of the Bulgarian state in 1878. As mentioned, the peasants farmed the land communally and did not have strict, individual property rights. Technological development was hampered, and the subsistence and heavily labour-intensive production was not for the market. Agricultural practices were embedded both in inherited traditional communal forms of extended family ownership (e.g. *zadruga*), as well as in a wide variety of emerging cooperative organisations (Gruev, 2009).

Agriculture during state socialism

The Bulgarian Communist Party came to power in 1944, but consolidated its power fully in 1948 by eliminating the opposition, the strongest of which was the agrarian political movement. Collectivisation began in 1946 and was basically an attempt to reproduce the Soviet kolkhoz agricultural model of heavily

centralised collectivist forms of land ownership. By the end of the 1950s this process had been largely achieved and about 90% of the arable land was organised in over 3,000 state-led cooperatives (averaging 1,200 ha). The processes of centralisation continued throughout state socialism. For instance, in the 1970s these cooperatives were consolidated into 161 larger units, averaging 24,000 ha each (Csaki et al., 2000). Mechanisation and industrialisation led to very high rises in productivity, which doubled between 1958 and 1983.

This is what the Soviet economist Yevgeni Preobrazhensky dubbed ‘primitive socialist accumulation’ in the 1920s during the New Economic Policy (NEP) period in the Soviet Union.² The idea was that successful socialist modernisation required the appropriation of ‘peasant surpluses’ by the state to feed industrial development. The radical implementation of ‘primitive socialist accumulation’ in the Soviet Union started with the abandonment of the initial attempts to impose market socialism with NEP and the intensely violent collectivisation under Stalin in the 1930s, which culminated in the rural famines and the ‘elimination of the kulaks as a class’ (Fitzpatrick, 1994; 1999). It also has to be taken into account how the concept of ‘kulak’ (peasants who tended to own more land and were considered more affluent) was used against practically all peasants who were perceived to resist collectivisation. In Bulgaria there were hardly any large landowners, with few farmers having over 50 ha. Nevertheless, the kulak concept was still widely invoked by the Bulgarian Communist Party, and ceased to mean big landowners, but was deployed against any ‘enemies of the people’ – such as any real or perceived forms of resistance, especially in the 1950s. In Bulgaria this was reflected heavily in the first five-year plan, adopted in 1949, and meant extracting all possible resources from agricultural production, including the ‘freed’ labour created by mechanisation and land consolidation (Gruev, 2009).

The violence of the primitive socialist accumulation in Bulgaria created great tension in rural sector. In particular, the northwest witnessed the strongest opposition to the imposition of state socialism. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the antagonisms were not generated by conflicts between the individual owners and state-imposed collectivism (Fitzpatrick, 1994; 1999). It was rather a conflict between, on the one hand, the pre-socialist forms of cooperative and communal agricultural production that allowed peasants to retain ownership of their land, and, on the other hand, the attempt to impose the Soviet kolkhoz model of centralised collectivism that aimed to mediate the relationship between land and labour via the bureaucratic mechanisms of central planning. Paradoxically, this achieved results similar to those of the capitalist countries, namely the separation between agricultural work and the land. A major difference is that rural modernisation and industrialisation in capitalist countries was achieved by using the market as the prime mediator between land and labour. In other words, the peasants lost their direct control over the land and agricultural work became ‘free’ wage labour and thus both access to land and to agricultural production were via market institutions. In contrast, state socialism imposed the bureaucracy as the mediator – albeit, ironically, with similar outcomes.

The tendency towards extreme centralisation inherent in that particular model of central planning led to what the Hungarian economist Janos Kornai called the ‘shortage economy’. The idea of this analytical model is that, in socialism, shortages exist not only for consumer commodities, but also for production resources, materials, labour etc. In other words, finding markets in order to realise production was not the main problem, as it is in capitalist systems. Rather, the problem was to obtain the means to produce commodities. That is why industrial management often engaged in practices of vertical integration, trying to secure inputs and other factors of production. There was also a tendency to employ more workers who were kept idle in most situations, and mobilised only according to the need for production in stock. These processes led to what Verdery (1996) called a competition for the accumulation of means of production.

The tendency towards centralised agricultural production was thus a structural feature of the socialist economy and not simply a result of unreflexive government planning. It is also key to understanding that it generated shortages for agricultural production, both for consumers and for the means to feed production (e.g. pigs for the meat industry).

The accumulation of these shortages generated the social need for their compensation, realised mainly as various forms of concessions by state socialism and opening pockets of market socialism. In the agricultural sector this meant that alongside the processes of centralisation, there was a concomitant process of decentralisation, permitting private production on small plots of land called 'personal land-holdings'. They were called 'personal' for ideological reasons (because the dominant discourse opposed private ownership), but in practice this was small-scale private production not solely for subsistence needs, but also to compensate for the aforementioned deficits. The central authorities also made these concessions as a response to resistance. Despite the radical shift of the majority of the population from being small-scale subsistence farmers to industrial workers, many found ways to continue farming, either in semi-legal or illegal urban farming, or garden farming by rurally based industrial workers. As a result of these forms of resistance, the agricultural sector was radically transformed in a process that the anthropologist Gerald Creed, who undertook fieldwork in the 1980s in northwest Bulgaria, called 'domesticating the Revolution' (Creed, 1997). Peasant resistance, and the compromises made by the Communists, led to the effective reinstitution of new practices to overcome the separation between labour, ironically 'freed' only after socialist modernisation, and the land.

This affinity between central planning and small-scale market-based agricultural production was legalised and subsequently supported by the government. From the 1960s, the government even started to distribute smallholdings (0.5 ha), including to urban populations, who by that time represented over 70% of the population. Also many pensioners took advantage of the schemes, migrating seasonally to rural regions. The 'personal' plots were worked during leisure time and their productivity was very high. For instance, in the late 1970s 30% of maize, 24% of milk and half of all potatoes and eggs were produced on such 'personal' plots (Meurs and Djankov, 1998:52). And these figures only reflect the production that entered the formal market, with much of the produce sold directly via illicit networks and/or for household consumption. The personal plots were very well integrated within the structure of the large-scale state-run cooperative farms, which provided the machines, seeds and agro-chemicals and guaranteed their markets (Begg and Meurs, 1998: 247–8).

In 1997, the Bulgarian Communist Party, recognising the high efficiency of the decentralising measures and along with the impasse to growth arising from radical centralisation, adopted a policy that aimed to extend such forms of market socialism into what was called the New Economic Mechanism (NEM). In 1982 the NEM was extended beyond agriculture to include the rest of the economy. The goal of these processes of liberalising socialism was to decentralise decision making, tighten internal budgetary control of individual economic units and create incentives for managers to increase productivity, without forfeiting central planning (Meurs and Djankov, 1998: 49).

The antagonistic symbiosis between small-scale, low-input agricultural, and the centralising forces of centrally planned agricultural production proved to be structurally important for post-socialist liberalisation reforms. Throughout the 1990s the rural populations attempted to protect the large agricultural cooperatives, as expressed in their electoral support for the former Communist Party. This was not necessarily to support of the cooperatives as such, but the structures that enabled small-scale production. The spread of the low-input agricultural practices also enabled Bulgarians not to completely lose their connection with the land and with food production in general with the modernisation of the agricultural sector in the 1950s. This also functioned in the strategies for extra-market food procurement

during the crises of the 1990s (Protect the Future and Za Zemiata, 2011).³ Nevertheless, the post-1989 structural transformation of agricultural production gradually marginalised small-scale production and with the new centralisation, as from the mid-2000s, they were unable to reproduce themselves. This is because small-scale agricultural production lacked the previous levels of institutional, economic, etc. support. They not only lost their guaranteed markets, but sometimes faced legal constraints on selling their produce (for instance because of EU's hygiene standards for milk production) (*ibid.*, pp. 43–49).

Post-socialist transformations

This historical overview helps to ‘unpack’ the formative social forces shaping the key actors to emerge after 1989. The (neo)liberalisation of Bulgarian agriculture was marked by two interlinked processes. On the one hand, the dissolution of the state-run large-scale cooperatives, in particular the privatisation of their capital (e.g. machines, buildings and livestock), in what became known as the Liquidation. This was done quickly and was accomplished by the mid-1990s. On the other hand, it proved very difficult to achieve land restitution, namely the attempt to return the land to the ‘original’ owners from before the collectivisation of 1946. The result was a two-fold shift in Bulgaria’s agrarian structure that happened both too fast (Liquidation) and too slow (land restitution) (Begg and Meurs, 1998).

The public debate regarding the liberalisation of agriculture and land ownership remained the pivotal point of conflict in the early 1990s. The ex-communists (Bulgarian Socialist Party – BSP) argued that it should be implemented slowly and were seen as pro-cooperatives. Conversely, the democratic anti-communists (United Democratic Forces – UDF) were trying to push more radical reforms, as they believed the communists had entrenched themselves in the rural cooperatives and that the only way to prevent corruption was to dissolve them as fast as possible. Ironically, this Liquidation of the state-run cooperatives is now widely remembered as an instance of extreme ‘corruption’.

The first elections were won by the BSP, supported by the rural population, mostly for reasons related to agricultural policies and land rights, but the UDF won the second free elections, in 1991, and subsequently initiated the Liquidation. It aimed to stop the potential conversion of the elites from the socialist cooperatives into elites of the new, private ones. This was intended to prevent the allegedly communist influence in the agricultural sector. It led to a massive destruction of capital (e.g. livestock sold to be eaten, machines for scrap metal, buildings abandoned). The experts responsible for the process, called Liquidation committees, were political appointees, and very often UDF sympathisers based mostly in larger cities. The rural regions continued to vote predominantly for the BSP. This exacerbated rural–urban tensions, and many villagers felt that the Liquidation measures were being forced on them by incompetent urban intellectuals.

This led to many forms of direct and indirect resistance. A good example is the notorious case of Tsalapisa. This is a small village in central Bulgaria where some of the first Liquidation committees were appointed. The villagers occupied the municipality for several months and did not allow the Liquidation committee to enter the building in order to prevent them from dismantling the cooperative by selling off its capital. In the end, the riot police intervened and evicted the occupiers so that the committee could assume its functions (Creed, 1997).

The 1994 parliamentary elections saw a second victory for the BSP (although the government collapsed in 1997 in the midst of a deep political and economic crisis), mostly supported by the rural population, driven by grievances related to the agricultural reforms. Villagers saw the BSP as a means to defend the old cooperatives. This does not mean that they defended socialism as such, but rather, as Creed (1997) has shown, the reformed, ‘domesticated’ socialism they had achieved through decades of resistance.

As explained earlier, the state cooperatives provided the backbone, the conditions for the survival of the small-scale agricultural production units, by guaranteeing markets and providing physical and financial inputs, all of which was won via strong resistance under state socialism, and was able to reinstate the direct link between land and labour. The BSP's strong electoral success in the 1990s could be interpreted as a form of resistance to the imposition of the new regime of agricultural production by farmers trying to protect what they had achieved under state socialism. Such resistance in fact tamed some of the more radical dimensions of the agricultural liberalisation policies (for example livestock was no longer 'liquidated', after legislative reforms pushed by the BSP). Nevertheless, the general direction remained intact.

The second key ingredient of the post-1989 agricultural reform was the land restitution. Whereas the Liquidation happened much too fast, the restitution was extremely slow. Restitution aimed to restore ownership to the 'original' owners and not to the farmers and agricultural workers. It was anticipated that the reform would finally erase socialist history and allow for agricultural production based on individual land ownership. This liberal vision was based on an idyllic understanding of what agricultural production was like before collectivisation, substituting the historical lack with an imagined loss.

The restitution faced a series of severe problems. First, as explained above, before 1946 land was distributed among a vast number of smallholdings in the hands of peasant farmers working the land on a communal and traditional basis. For instance, in 1934 the average plot was 6.8 ha (Begg and Meurs, 1998; Gruev, 2009). Primitive socialist accumulation had pushed most peasants towards the towns and cities, transforming them into industrial labour. This meant that their heirs did not necessarily want the land offered to them as restitution or that they had any desire to engage in agriculture. Another problem was that restituting millions of plots of land caused bureaucratic chaos, especially as only about 12% could be restituted directly, 'since construction, the planting of perennials, and other changes have fundamentally changed the structure of farmland' (Begg and Meurs, 1998: 252). Over 90% of claims were for plots of under 1 ha, and even this might be an underestimation as claims were made on behalf of the whole family by one member and later further divided.

The restitution process was also highly problematic as property was treated as being linked to family lineage rather than to those actually cultivating the land. The idea of restituting property to the heirs of the original owners also effectively excluded populations whose parents and grandparents did not own land. This particularly affected the Roma, who were involved in agricultural production under state socialism but lost this land after 1989 because their parents did not own it. With the subsequent rural economic degradation many Roma were pushed towards cities, often in informal settlements. For instance, in a cooperative, near the city of Bourgas (located on the southern coast of the Black Sea), only 40% of the employees could make claims to land for these reasons (Begg and Meurs, 1998: 253).

This radical fragmentation of land, along with the liquidation of capital, produced a sustained rural economic decline. Both the Liquidation and the restitution process bred intense rural resentment as a village woman, interviewed by Gerald Creed (1997), revealingly stated: 'First the communists made us give up our land, and now the UDF is making us take it back. It's like getting slapped on both sides of your face'.

In sum, for most Bulgarians, access to land in itself was not the most serious concern. In fact, it was land fragmentation that proved to be one of the major causes of rural economic degradation and underdevelopment. This is specifically the case in the northern region of Bulgaria, where agricultural production is focused mostly on grain. This means that its efficiency is dependent on land consolidation and mechanised production. The restitution process redistributed land to a vast number of people who did not necessarily want it and had little or no economic incentive to take advantage of it. At the same

time, the capital of the old cooperatives had been liquidated, rendering land ownership economically meaningless. The severe fragmentation of land ownership was the major impediment to the agricultural economic growth in the northwest, at least up to the mid-2000s, when land was again consolidated. Prior to state socialism grain was produced in a labour-intensive manner, along with the traditional collective production practices. A return to this form of production was structurally impossible, both because of decades of urbanisation, and also because social needs had radically changed and practically no one wanted to return to small-scale subsistence farming.

Land sovereignty and food sovereignty

Despite the fact that access to land, given the peculiar combination of the restitution and liquidation policies, did not lead to economic development, it was centrally important in enabling many people to survive the crises of the 1990s. As already mentioned, rural resistance had forced the Bulgarian Communist Party to make many concessions and to redistribute small plots of land. These ‘personal’ plots were not only of key importance for the national agricultural production by compensating for the ‘economy of shortage’, but were also used to produce food for family consumption. Both rural and urban populations were engaged in this kind of farming. Moreover, such practices served to establish a new type of direct link between industrial labour and the land, hence keeping alive the stock of agricultural knowledge. It has been common for retirees to take up residence in a village and engage in gardening or small-scale animal husbandry and to send food to their families in the cities.

1989 triggered severe commodity shortages in Bulgaria, resulting in serious food insecurity in the 1989/1990 winter, particularly in urban areas. The 1996 economic crisis presented another challenge to food security. This time, it was not due to food shortages but to hyperinflation and low incomes that impeded people’s access to food. The strategies of extra-market food procurement, established during the period of state socialism, were to prove formative in the development of mechanisms to cope with both of these crises. Urban dwellers had direct, non-market access to food via friends and relatives in the countryside. This tradition continues to this day. For instance, one study found that in 2010 more than 60% of the population was involved in regular extra-market food production.⁴ Another study shows that in 2008 alone, Bulgarians produced 208 million jars of homemade fruit and vegetable conserves.⁵

This shows that the successful rural resistance during state socialism, what Creed called ‘domesticating the Revolution’, was able to restore a direct link between labour and land and food production. This could also be understood as a ‘people’s counter enclosure’ that was able to reclaim its ‘land sovereignty’ (Borras and Franco, 2012).

The original process of enclosures, in the sense of separating land and labour and the installation of the central plan as the key mediating force between them, was imposed in Bulgaria in the 1950s with the process of ‘primitive socialist accumulation’. Such forms of resistance forced the Bulgarian Communist Party to make compromises and to initiate a process of the land distribution in the form of ‘personal plots’. In this way communities managed to restore their relationship with land and thus achieve levels of land and food sovereignty. The system, as described above, comprised a complicated interconnection between local communities, industrial labour, ‘personal’ plots and the state-run centralised cooperatives. This historical conjuncture was formative in mitigating shortages during state socialism and of some of the worst effects of the crises of the 1990s. However, with the post-1989 changes and the uprooting of the old cooperatives, this symbiotic relationship was broken. Even though the egalitarian access to land, at least initially, was extremely widespread (with the land restitution), it could not sustain the connection between land and labour. The recent trend of land consolidation, mostly in the hands of large-scale Bulgarian investors, is a new form of private enclosure. The way

it is played out, in socio-political terms, has not only disabled the demands of a proactive campaign in favour of popular counter-enclosures, but has also eroded the very possibilities for any defence against land grabs in the first place.

The small-scale farming structures of state socialism were highly dependent on the state-run co-operatives. With their dismantling, the low-input practices lost their foundations. Moreover, the new international market integration made it even harder for them to survive. The latter is very clear in the small-scale dairy sector, for example, as it was completely unable to meet common hygiene standards, among other problems posed by market liberalisation.

2. Beyond the 'Transition and on the Path towards Land Grabs

After 1989, unlike in the Ottoman times or after 1878, the consolidation of a vast small peasant class was structurally impossible, despite the fact that most of the population obtained small plots of land. Nevertheless, rural people who got hold of land attempted to sustain the cooperatives whether in a completely new form, or by reviving the old state cooperatives. This was seen as a way to avoid fragmenting the land, particularly important in grain-producing regions, without forfeiting control over it – as would happen if the land were leased or sold. In 1992 half of Bulgarian farmers wanted to put their land into a cooperative, and by 1994 nearly 1,300 agricultural cooperatives had been registered (Begg and Meurs, 1998).

What is critical here is that the 1990s' land reform distributed land to a very large number of people and effectively fragmented land ownership. Access to land was thus largely not an issue, but what did matter was lack of access to economic incentives (e.g. to capital, that had been forcibly liquidated, and to credit or markets). This processes led to serious rural degradation throughout Bulgaria, mostly apparent in the northwest. There was a major drop in the use of arable land from the 1990s up to the mid-2000s. What needs to be stressed here is that the reasons for the severe rural underdevelopment are not psychological⁶ (e.g. lack of entrepreneurial ethos, etc.), but strictly economic, as explained above. What this means is that it was economically more viable, from the point of view of the new and fragmented small-scale owners, to sell or lease their land to private investors. This not because they lacked information about the 'true value' of land, but for structural economic reasons.

The recreation of the cooperatives was an attempt to seek an alternative, but it was hard for them to sustain themselves economically. This was not only connected with lack of access to capital, but also the more general conditions in the 1990s. Access to land was not the main problem, but rather the loss of international markets, the severe financial crises in the 1990s, lack of credit, etc. The liberalisation of international trade, with the WTO membership in 1996 and EU accession in 2007, created additional pressures to the cooperatives, as they were ill-prepared to compete in the new international markets.

The large-scale state-run agricultural cooperatives had been dismantled and the new ones were functioning in completely different situation. Their capital had been liquidated and the conditions that made small-scale production possible had been uprooted. In other words, low-input production lost its guaranteed markets (formal or informal), and access to essential inputs was no longer assured.

The process of re-consolidation of ownership in the hands of private investors took many years, and was able to lead to more effective forms of private production only after EU accession in 2007. This happened to coincide with the global food and economic crisis. These combined factors constitute the structural conditions that led to the rapid increase of land grabs, particularly after 2010. Centralisation

of ownership in northeast was relatively easier, partly because of a stronger investment interests in the highly fertile and basically ‘geographically’ well-disposed areas (e.g. presence of large-scale arable plots, access to water for irrigation, existing infrastructure). The land in that region was leased by large Bulgarian investors (or *Arendatori* in Bulgarian) who specialised mostly in grain production. Some of the *Arendatori* also bought large plots of land. These investors operate throughout Bulgaria but are mostly based in the north.

Another important new player in the consolidation of land ownership is the special investment funds (SIFs), which enjoy government support. For instance, in 2009 a new law was passed to facilitate so-called ‘voluntary consolidation’. If owners have 10% of the land in a region where land is fragmented, they can initiate a procedure whereby the government can swap their land (with municipal or state land, for example) in such a way as to consolidate it. Over the years, these SIFs have obtained a lot of land from the new smallholders, but it is usually spread out. For instance, Advanced Terrafund is such an investor, declaring its goal to obtain 25,000 ha⁷ by the end of 2012 and subsequently to lease it for farming. These organisations will greatly benefit from the new legislative amendments. Although the *Arendatori* and the SIFs, are competing to accumulate land, both also benefit greatly from the current EU agricultural subsidies, namely direct payments per unit of land.⁸ Some of the SIFs are partly or fully owned by foreign investors. This will be expanded further in the end of the next section.

Foreign investors step into this same context. Until the current land consolidation trend, they found it difficult to invest, as it was institutionally difficult to obtain sufficiently large areas of land. Now they can directly lease or buy land that has been consolidated.

Overall, the implementation of the new regime in the 1990s, along with the liberalisation ‘shock therapy’ and the concomitant transition from state socialist semi-periphery to capitalist periphery (Prodanov, 2012) meant that most prospects for accumulation of capital lay within what David Harvey (2005) called ‘accumulation by dispossession’. According to Harvey, dispossessing public ownership was structural for post-1970s accumulation, a process that he links with the more general investments in non-productive sectors and to the subsequent financialisation of the economy that culminated in the global recession from 2007.

It was a very violent development, even if direct force was seldom applied, apart from the sporadic gang wars in some of the large cities. The sociologist Lawrence King claims that the mass privatisation processes in Russia in the beginning of the 1990s were associated with higher mortality rates of 12.8% among the adult male population (in Stuckler et al., 2009). King states that these high rates might be related to the higher male unemployment rates caused by privatisation. This trend has been repeated, according to King, in other post-socialist rapid mass privatisation schemes. Most of the deaths were directly caused by stress or alcohol-related diseases. Although there are no similar studies on Bulgaria, one can assume similar trends.

This dispossession process played out very clearly with the post-socialist primitive accumulation, marked by unprecedentedly radical privatisation of public assets, such as the Liquidation. This process is often understood through the lenses of ‘corruption’, and ‘transition gone wrong’, as if there were a peaceful and non-violent way for the transition to capitalism – and as if these recent historical shifts were not characteristic of practically all countries from the 1970s onwards, albeit not at identical levels or at the same time. All this means is that accumulation by means of dispossession of and control over land (e.g. land grabs) was an important recourse for accumulation after 1989 and are could not be attributed solely to the post-2007 emergence of new global actors. These specific investment practices can be most clearly linked with land grabs in non-agricultural economic sectors, as it will be expanded in the next section.

3. Types of land grab in Bulgaria

This section examines the more general context of various forms of land grabs (LGs) in post-1989 Bulgaria, understood as obtaining control over land via dispossession for the purposes of capital accumulation. This is most visibly the case for non-agricultural land. The section offers a potential typology of the dominant forms of post-1989 land grab, without narrowing the issues down to the period following the 2007/8 crisis in food prices, or the global phenomenon of land grabs. Specifically, it addresses the following types of LGs in Bulgaria: (a) investment in the tourist industry (predominantly golf, ski and sea resorts); (b) mining projects; (c) liberalisation of legislation related to the production of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) (d) urban development (e.g. dispossessing Roma communities, gentrification); and (e) agricultural development by investors, domestic and foreign.

(a) Land grabs for tourist investment. These are cases of privatisation of land for the construction and expansion of large-scale resorts, i.e. changes in land use for recreational purposes that could be subsumed into the wider 'trend of land artificialisation'. De-industrialisation after 1989 and the transition to a 'service economy' increased the importance of the tourist sector. This intensified with EU accession and there was a boom in investment in ski and sea resorts, and golf courses.

Some of the means by which land was acquired were surrounded by major corruption scandals. One of the most scandalous and politically charged mechanisms is the use of provisions for land swaps. Lands swaps were successfully used in implementing the retracted land restitutions. As discussed above, in the early 1990s the government attempted to restore land to the 'original' owners from before state socialism. The problem is that land use had dramatically changed between 1946 (when land collectivisation was initiated) and 1989, due to industrialisation, collectivisation of agricultural production, etc. For example, some of the arable land was converted to forests. Another problem was the lack of clear land registries from 1946, which further complicated restitution (Giordano and Kostova, 2002: 80). All this meant that only a small fraction of land could be restituted directly and the processes proved immensely difficult and slow. The other major rationale behind the land swaps is as an instrument to facilitate land consolidation.

This mechanism has been highly abused, most prominently for the acquisition of publicly owned land in areas of investment interest for tourist developments. The abuse of land swaps has been under the mainstream political, media and citizens' spotlight for more than 10 years, and been radically contested to the point of becoming a synonym for corruption. The 2003 Forestry Act allowed swaps of over 3,300 ha – land evaluated at low prices is exchanged for a territory of roughly the same size but worth a hundred times more.

Other land grabs related to such investments include constant attempts to privatise national parks and/or giving building permits, often illegally, in protected territories. This was the case with the Stranja national park, when the government attempted to change its status in 2006, thus opening possibilities for tourist investment in protected and/or agricultural lands. This initiative was stopped after a huge wave of protests. After years of struggles, one of the hotels that had been already built was demolished.

A similar case is that of the Vitosha park, which covers large parts of the Vitosha mountainside near Sofia. There is already a ski resort, but the company that runs it wanted to extend it. This was legally impossible as the company wanted to expand into protected territories. The investor lobbied to change the legislation and went on an investment strike, closing down all ski lifts in 2011 and 2012. The lobbying succeeded in getting the legislation amended in 2012, giving the company the right to extend lifts and build other tourist infrastructure on publicly owned land in the Vitosha park. This means that the

company could essentially privatise common land without legally owning it. This provoked widespread social outrage and in the summer of 2012 there were massive protests and street blockades all over Bulgaria, which succeeded in pushing the President to veto the decision, the Parliament to retract the legislative amendments and the Sofia municipality to force the company to end the investment strike and to start the ski lifts in the winter of 2012.

One more example of land grabs for tourism purposes is the rapid expansion of the golf industry, which also involves water grabs. It is difficult to estimate the exact figure, but according to an article in the prestigious Bulgarian magazine *Tema*,⁹ from 2000 to 2005 about 600 ha was converted to golf courses that had been established or were under construction. Another revealing example is the media scandal caused by the publication of an investigative journalist piece in *Le Figaro*,¹⁰ according to which the government distributed agricultural subsidies, in the forms of direct payments per hectare, for the development of the Bulgarian golf industry. According to *Le Figaro*, €4.25 million of public money was spent on golf courses and 'military terrains'. The agricultural ministry has denied such allegations.¹¹ It is important to note that supporting the golf industry has been a declared aim of several governments. For instance, there is a special government agency charged with stimulating the development of the sector. In 2013 Bulgaria will host a major international golf competition, with the support of the government. The government has even tried to distribute land for the creation of golf courses for free in order to stimulate the industry¹² in the form of various public–private partnership (PPP) schemes.¹³

Land grabs related to the development of the tourist industry in Bulgaria have been very strongly contested. It is around them that the environmental movement, arguably the strongest social movement in the country, consolidated, particularly after 2006 with the formation of the NGO coalition 'For the Nature'. This movement has contributed to mainstream political discourse and been the subject of attention in the mass media. The resistance to LGs saw the process of EU integration as the main remedy for such grievances, such as the inclusion of large territories within NATURA 2000.¹⁴ The environmental campaigns supporting NATURA 2000 took part in a very wide number of civic actions – mass demonstrations, small artistic events, street blockades, flash mobs, petitions, film screenings, leafleting, working with the media, debates, press conferences and public lectures, concerts, lobbying politicians, among others. The mobilisations were both at the grassroots and at a more expert NGO level. They tended to involve mostly urban youth, predominantly from Sofia. The same movements have also been very active for the protection of national natural parks, using similar campaigning strategies. What emerged from this was a very strong and highly visible environmental social movement that can influence political decisions. At times it succeeded in stopping a series of investment projects, in particular the privatisation of land for tourist over-development (ski and sea resorts) that would have degraded the environment and limited free public access to those areas.

Since the movement did not contest land grabs as such, but focused only on corruption issues, it finds it hard to expand its critique to include legalised LGs. NATURA 2000 was seen, however, as an indirect instrument to limit the centralisation of land property. It also mobilises around promoting alternative rural development and supporting small businesses, such as eco-tourism, small-scale extensive farming, and so on.

The case of Irakli makes clear the nature of the impasse. Irakli is located on the coast of the Black Sea. It is currently a 44 ha conservation area. Under state socialism it was used as a children's camping site, but was abandoned after 1989. In the 1990s it became a free camping site on and near a large beach. A large investment project was proposed in the mid-2000s, the resistance to which played a critical role in the emerging environmental movement and is thus an important symbol. With Bulgaria's accession to

the EU, Irakli became part of NATURA 2000, as a result of the environmentalists' efforts. They saw the potential not only to preserve it as a natural park, but also to maintain the free camping site – in other words, remaining environment-friendly and keeping open access. In early 2013 the movement started an information campaign about a 2009 building permit for camping houses. Construction started on 2 November 2012. Despite its initial claims that there are no irregularities, after mass protests and growing civil mobilisation by the environmental movement, the government was forced to admit that some aspects of the environmental impact assessment (EIA) had been flouted. Construction was stopped temporarily. Since the violations of the EIA involved the exact types and number of tourist facilities to be built, construction work can resume once the legal irregularities are rectified. This shows that being absorbed in legalistic critiques, and focusing on the process of the transaction itself, may lead to an impasse. If everything is legal and transparent, there is little basis for questioning a similar land grab. This explains why, in early 2013 the environmentalists prepared a detailed proposal for a new network (with stricter rules and regulations) of conservation areas throughout the Black Sea region, making this their major demand. Without dismissing conservationism in itself, it is important to acknowledge that it is incapable of questioning the wider processes of land grabs as such, and that its stance is essentially defensive. Moreover, even when it achieves local successes, it cannot contest LGs beyond the conservation areas.

(b) Land grabs for mining projects, particularly fracking and cyanide gold mining. Although these investment projects did not necessarily include the acquisition of large tracts of land, social movements challenging them saw the projects as potentially gaining control over agricultural land. Both gold-mining and fracking projects were strongly opposed by environmental NGOs and movements. They also generated strong rural resistance, precisely on the grounds that rural populations perceived them, as a threat to farming, both indirect (because of land and water pollution) and direct (fracking companies demanded unrestricted access to agricultural land they do not own).

The proposed legislative provisions to allow the fracking companies unrestricted access to agricultural land enraged farmers. The protests against shale-gas mining were vocally supported by the National Association of the Grain Producers, the organisation of the large-scale, mechanised grain producers in northern Bulgaria, who produce for international and national markets. Most of them lease the land they use and the size of their holdings varies, with the larger ones being about 20,000 ha. Eventually, the movement against shale-gas mining achieved a ban. Bulgaria became only the second EU Member State to do so.¹⁵

The resistance against cyanide gold-mining projects have also been quite successful.¹⁶ For example, in 2005, the citizens of Popintsi (a village in southern Bulgaria where there is a gold-mining investment project) managed to temporarily stop an investment project by a big Canadian mining company. The local villagers staged large-scale protests and blocked the road so the technical equipment could not reach the mines. Social and environmental movements are still contesting these investment projects.¹⁷

(c) Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs). Many farmers and consumers regarded attempts to liberalise GM crop production as an attack on seed sovereignty, and indirectly limiting the options over land use. For instance, the environmental association *Za Zemiata* organised a series of meetings between farmers and the internationally known Canadian farmer and activist Percy Schmeiser, who had famously won a court case against Monsanto for polluting his land with GM seeds. The major farmers' show on national TV (*Brazdi*) also aired documentaries related to that case. This made many farmers aware of the fact that the invasion of patented GM seeds may restrict their autonomy over land use. For example, contracts may force farmers to buy seeds from the same

company each year. Obviously, patented GM seeds do not lead to changes in land ownership, but the privatisation of Bulgaria's genetic heritage was perceived by both consumers and producers as compromising autonomy over land use, and thus limiting both land and food sovereignty. The view that GM seeds might endanger autonomy over land use was also pivotal for the environmental movement.

The declared goal of the anti-GM movement in Bulgaria, which started in the late-1990s, was to raise concern about the corporate control over food, land, and seeds. The protests turned into a real movement in Bulgaria in 2004 with the participation of organisations from different parts of the country. It achieved a temporary ban on GM production. The movement gained momentum in December 2010 when the government tried to lift the ban, but the broad-based anti-GM movement stopped it.

The anti-GM movement raised wider (mostly consumer) concerns about food, seed and land sovereignty, and public health. In 2010 and 2011, it gave rise to another movement, namely the formation of consumer cooperatives, inspired both by La Via Campesina's concept of food sovereignty, as well by Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) practices in the rest of Europe. The understanding of GM as a threat to the autonomy of land use was also an important aspect. This movement was also greatly stimulated by its participation in the anti-fracking campaigns. It was formed around the understanding that GMOs were only one of the problems posed by the contemporary global food system, and that these will be overcome only by instituting new forms of direct links between the production and consumption of food – in other words, finding ways to go beyond the alienating forces of the market that prevent the direct connection between the consumption of food and the land and labour needed to produce it. This enables the new **food justice movement** to pose much more critical questions about the land-grab processes than can movements that are focused only on challenging instances of corruption.

(d) Land grabs for urban development, particularly for informal or semi-formal settlements, including 'slums'.¹⁸ This type of land grab is the only one that sometimes involves the use of direct violence in order to evict people for the purposes of gentrification. Recently, a major Bulgarian human rights NGO won a case in the European Court of Human Rights precisely on the grounds of the right to housing, and thus achieved a temporary halt to this type of land grab.¹⁹ Although LGs for urban development do not limit access to or control over agricultural land, but rather the access to land needed for the realisation of the right to housing, they are indirectly linked to the 1990s' land-restitution reforms. As mentioned earlier, restituting land to 'original' owners from 1946 automatically excluded the Roma, who did not own any land before state socialism, although many were employed in the agricultural cooperatives before 1989. This is one of the reasons why the Roma were among the worst affected by the economic decline in the 1990s and were pushed to urban areas, often into informal settlements.

(e) Land grabs for agricultural production. The global expansion of land grabs after the 2007/2008 food crisis did not become a mainstream concern in Bulgaria. In fact, the concept of land grabs is not widely used, even by NGOs. On the contrary, to the extent that foreign direct investment (FDI) was attracted to the acquisition of agricultural land, government institutions and the mainstream media tended to see it as a potential means to overcome the long-term rural economic stagnation that had resulted from the decollectivisation in the early 1990s. The lack of land consolidation and fragmentation of ownership stemming from the concomitant processes of land restitution and the Liquidation were understood to be the main obstacle to rural development post-1989.

All the talk about the necessary consolidation misses the radical trend to re-centralise land that has been visible in the last years, and that this consolidation and the upwards shift in agricultural economic growth has not promoted rural development in terms of creating jobs and overcoming the social crisis. In 2010,

Land concentration, land grabbing and people's struggles in Europe

Bulgaria had a total of 370,500,000 agricultural land holdings and 4,475,530 ha under cultivation (Eurostat, 2012). In 2010 these were distributed as follows:

- 3.2 % of less than 2 ha
- 2 % of 2–4.9 ha
- 1.6 % of 5–9.9 ha
- 2.1% of 10–19.9 ha
- 1.6% of 20–29.9 ha
- 2.6% of 30–49.9 ha
- 4.5% of 50–99.9 ha
- 82.4% of over 100 ha

Source: Eurostat, 2012

Despite figures that clearly show that most holdings are over 100 ha, the supposed 'lack' of consolidation, investment and efficiency is still used to explain widespread rural underdevelopment and poverty in the mainstream media and political discourse. The government continuously calls for land consolidation, which has been the rationale for various legislative reforms to facilitate the trend. For example, the government stimulated the creation of 'special investment funds', whose purpose is to centralise land ownership. Moreover, legislation was passed allowing big private companies to till 'idle lands' (called 'white spots') they do not own, if the owners do not declare their intention to use the land each year (see more in the last section).

The global shift to large land investment was also seen as a means to further land consolidation via attracting FDI, at least within mainstream political and media discourse. For instance, the Chinese investor in Boynitsa was seen as a means to 'consolidate' the land, even though the investor actually leased land from a large Bulgarian company that already owned it. Thus there was no serious challenge to agricultural land grabs.

The government had actively attempted to attract FDI in agriculture after the crisis. The current agricultural minister, for instance, recently organised an international press conference, declaring that agriculture is the most promising sector for foreign investment. In this public relations exercise, the minister stated that Bulgaria had greatly improved its rural infrastructure. He highlighted the increased opportunities for subsidies, expecting €2 billion in the next round of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).²⁰

Despite its constant efforts to attract FDIs in the agricultural sector, the government has achieved only limited success. In 2011 only 1% of all FDI was in agriculture, forestry and hunting.²¹ In fact, this reflects a more general trend of the drop in the relative importance of agriculture in the Bulgarian economy, whose share of gross added-value fell from 11% in 2002 to 5.6% in 2011.²²

FDI in land used to be impeded by land fragmentation. Large foreign investors find it institutionally difficult to organise the acquisition of land from a vast number of smallholders. It is even harder to arrange to lease such land. Using national capital to achieve land consolidation is what enabled larger investors to step in. For instance, the Chinese investor in Boynitsa had leased the land directly from a major national agricultural investor who had taken many years to consolidate this land.

10. Bulgaria

As already mentioned, there is a clear trend towards land consolidation, to the extent that in 2010 less than 15% of all agricultural landholdings are below 50 ha and 82.4% are over 100 ha (Eurostat, 2012). The agricultural report issued by the Bulgarian agricultural ministry for 2010 showed a significant decline in the number of registered agricultural holdings – by 44.4% compared to the 2003 agricultural census.²³ On the other hand, the average size of land holdings more than doubled from 4.44 ha in 2003 to 20.1 ha in 2010. In 2003 there were 668,000 land holdings. The total arable land at that time, according to the agricultural report, was 2,900,000 ha. In 2010 the same report notes that the number of landholdings fell to 357,900 and the total arable land rose to 3,628,000 ha. It is clear that while the number of production units is falling drastically, the amount of arable land in Bulgaria is substantially rising.

The recent global explosion of land grabs for agricultural production in the context of the economic and food crises, and the general transition towards a more flexible global food regime, was also reflected in the Bulgarian agricultural sector.²⁴ The country has received increasing investment from China, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Israel. Other investors include individual traders and investment funds.²⁵ For example, Jeffrey Notaro, who worked as a Wall Street trader for about 20 years and is currently CEO of Global Quest, set up an investment fund called Black Sea Agriculture²⁶ and had reportedly closed deals for 113 ha of agricultural land by the end of 2011.²⁷ This size is quite small, but what is important is that Global Quest is an example of new types of investor, as both Mr Notaro, based in the USA, and the company's executive officer in Bulgaria, have a background in the finance industry. The example also matters because the goal of the company, according to its website, is to acquire much larger tracts of land along the Romanian and Bulgarian Black Sea coast, in what they call the 'Black Sea Farm Belt'. The land that they buy is subsequently leased (usually for five years) to companies that work it.

There is a serious lack of in-depth analysis of this new wave of land grabs by foreign investors in Bulgaria and most articles on the topic are of a journalistic nature. CRBM [now Re: Common] (2009) 'The Vultures of Land Grabbing' is one of the few studies that mention cases of such LGs in Bulgaria. There are cases documented in studies such as the CERES Agrigrowth Investment Fund, a grouping of: Raiffeisen Centrobank AG, global investment funds like Firebird Management, Black RiverAsset Management, and Mezzanine Management and private equity companies like Rosslyn Capital Partners. They have acquired more than 22,000 ha and by 2008 had raised capital of about €45 million.²⁸ The CRBM study also shows that ELANA, one of the largest non-banking financial groups operating in Bulgaria since 1989, had by February 2009 acquired 29,320 ha of agricultural land. Elana Agricultural Land Opportunity Fund is owned by QVT Fund LP (Cayman Islands) 49.5%, Allianz Bulgaria (owned by the German Allianz Group) 16.46%, and Crédit Suisse Securities (Europe) Ltd PB 8.39%.²⁹ Investment funds do not directly work the land but lease it to agri-businesses.

The predominant large-scale farming businesses are, however, the national *Arendatori*, who rarely form direct alliances with foreign investors. The domination of national capital is specifically the case in northern Bulgaria where, as stated earlier, the main crops are grains and maize, and thus farming efficiency is strongly linked with the need for large tracts of land. Large-scale national agricultural investors could also be described as land grabbers in that their activities effectively exclude local communities and authorities from decisions regarding how the land is used, for what purposes, etc. Capital-intensive farming offers little or no employment. In other words, they need the land but not the local labour force. They also separate grain production from livestock breeding, thus furthering exclusion of local labour. Land is either leased or bought. Several large agricultural grain producers dominate the market, some of which are also engaged in processing.

There has been almost no effective resistance to land grabs and to the separation of labour from land because these processes are largely presented as a rural development opportunity. This is despite the fact that consolidation is spectacularly inefficient in providing employment. There is hardly any well-articulated resistance to this type of land grab. The attempt to form cooperative agriculture in the 1990s could be seen as an attempt to form an alternative, but it was hampered not by the lack of access to land, but because of insufficient access to capital, markets, etc.

Resistance to land grabs

The most visible resistance to LGs was articulated in movements closely linked to the environmental movement. Two co-existing trends or narratives can be observed in the same movements and groups. In other words, the same organisations are engaged in both types of campaigns. Both are mutually advantageous insofar as they complement rather than contradict each other.

First, there are approaches that do not address the problem of control over land directly, but integrate it into a wider critique of 'corruption' and the degradation of the natural environment. They deal with land grabs for the over-development of tourism and the privatisation of national parks. While these movements crystallised after 2006, they inherited the discourses of earlier Bulgarian environmental movements from the end of the 1980s and the 1990s. They were embedded in a critique of state socialism's industry-led environmental degradation and not in a critique of land grabs. What also characterised them was their tendency to address the environmentally destructive practices of national capital, which was involved in the investment projects in question, and to focus less on the role of foreign capital. The privatisation of land arising from such projects was interpreted as a problem of a broken political system, the 'incomplete' or 'mistaken' 'transition to democracy', and not as a means for accumulation of capital by means of dispossession. The main remedies sought, sometimes very successfully, were the instruments (usually either conservationist such as NATURA 2000 or anti-corruption) provided by membership of the EU and democratisation in general. In short, they focus on the processes of the transaction, and not necessarily on its substance.

The second tendency in the environmentalist discourse became more clearly discernible after 2010, and was linked with the anti-GM and the anti-fracking movements. As mentioned earlier, environmental movements tended to understand GM and fracking projects not only as a threat to public health, but also as a potential land grab, in the sense that they might restrict the owners' autonomy over land use. This grew out of the realisation that it is not strictly to do with corrupt Bulgarian elites, but that the widespread social and environmental issues are embedded in a global system that is inherently problematic. This is why they began to articulate a more proactive critique, seeking to propose alternatives beyond mere legal arrangements and defensive strategies related to specific investment projects. This was associated with a critique of FDIs (quite different from the far-right nationalist stance), and a questioning of trade liberalisation in relation to food, seed, water and land sovereignty. The formation of a new food cooperative movement after 2010 was inspired by CSA projects in other European countries, as well as by La Via Campesina's concept of food sovereignty. It was better able to question the relationship between land, food, production and consumption, and started to look for ways to restore the links between production and consumption and between land and labour. Thus it is better equipped to articulate a critique against land grabs as such. The new strand of critique, which sought to propose novel alternatives to transcend the gulf between consumption and production, was not intended to oppose the first trend, but rather to extend and complement it.

4. The Case of Boynitsa

This section illustrates how the dynamics described in the previous sections play out at the micro level in one Bulgarian village. It is based on fieldwork conducted in early January 2013, which included extensive interviews with the mayor and another municipal staff member, the director and two members of the main cooperative, two members of the second cooperative, four elderly owners of small plots of land, five unemployed residents, one shopkeeper, three employees of the *Arendatori* (one based in Boynitsa, the others in villages nearby). Fieldwork had been conducted in the same village in the summer of 2012. Articles in the national media on agriculture in Boynitsa were also reviewed.

Boynitsa was selected as an example of the social dynamics outlined in the preceding sections because it attracted a lot of mass media attention when a large Chinese investor announced its intention to acquire large tracts of land there. The government officials presented this FDI as an excellent way to overcome the social crisis facing the region.

Boynitsa is considered to be one of Bulgaria's poorest villages and is located in the northwest Vidin region. Its current population is about 450 people, down from over 4,000 in 1946. It has been predominantly a grain-producing region, with the production of grain tightly linked to vegetable production and animal breeding. The mechanisation of agriculture in the 1950s did not change that, but after 1960 there was a steep rise in the number of people working on personal plots and in small-scale animal breeding. One small rubber factory was also built in the village (but went bankrupt after 1989) and employed 40–50 people. The initial attempt to revive the cooperatives in the 1990s failed and the larger Bulgarian businesses started to dominate agricultural production and have, at least until now, outstripped the larger foreign investors.

Foreign investment

The village attracted a lot of mainstream media attention in 2011 because a Chinese state-owned corporation, The Tianjin State Farms Agribusiness Group Company, leased 2,000 ha for €10 million near to Boynitsa. The land was used to grow export-oriented flex crops, namely maize. There was no fundamental change in land use. The deal is only one of the first planned by the corporation and in 2011 it announced plans to acquire another 10,000 ha in the northwest region of Bulgaria. The government had assured the company of its full support. The company leased the land from a major *Arendatori* that had managed to consolidate land over a period of years. According to the people in the village, the *Arendatori* had bought the land very cheaply in the early 1990s.

Chinese investment in Bulgaria is strategically important because it is not only the first in the country but also the first such case of its kind in the EU. The poor regions in the northwest are seen to offer a high return on investment, and this is where the first deals with the Tianjin State Farms Agribusiness Group Company were closed. In fact such deals are only part of larger wave of Chinese investment in Bulgaria, including in car manufacturing, and Chinese investments in Bulgaria grew by 320% in 2011 alone.

The locals were not consulted before or during the deal. Even the municipal authorities had no prior information. The mayor was called on the phone one evening to be informed that on the next day representatives of the Chinese company would meet with the Bulgarian agricultural minister and the media in the village centre, and that she was expected to attend. This is how she was advised of the deal.

The Chinese company sub-contracted a Bulgarian agricultural business to farm the land, and kept its representatives in a city nearby. The locals had basically no contact with the representatives, but were generally very well predisposed towards them, being genuinely interested in 'their culture'. The mayor

had almost no contact with the representatives even though she says that she tried to invite them to various local celebrations. Only once did one person agree to come to 'tell them about the Chinese culture' in the cooperative pub in the village centre.

In November 2012, however, the Chinese company suddenly announced it will terminate its contract and will move from Boynitsa to other regions in Bulgaria. It seems that the first deal was an initial experiment, aimed at checking the limitations and the prospects for such investments in Bulgaria.

'How China was not able to survive in Boynitsa', 'Bye, Bye Boynitsa', 'The Chinese are Fleeing Boynitsa Only After One Year', and 'The Second Largest World Economy Did Not Survive Boynitsa' are some of the headlines in the mass media about the withdrawal of the company. According to *Kapital*, the main liberal weekly in Bulgaria, the company moved out because it had been cheated by the *Arendatori* Melinvest and got less land and of poorer quality than expected.³⁰ This was confirmed in the fieldwork, based on interviews with the local authorities and residents and the head of the cooperative. The same article also dispels any expectations that the foreign investor might provide employment and development in the region, and says that all the company left was the damage to the water pipes caused by heavy machinery. Other publications refer to the low yields achieved by the Chinese company, because of the poor quality of the land it leased, much of which it was unable to work.³¹ Again the fieldwork and research confirmed this version of events. All of the interviewees shared the view that the main reason for the company's withdrawal was that it had been swindled by the *Arendatori* who leased the land. Press articles say³² that the Chinese had allegedly paid for 2,000 ha but got only 1,250. The remaining 750 ha had not been used for over 20 years and were by then forested. In other words, the company was given the worst possible lands if it hoped to achieve high short-term yields. Thus their yields were extremely low – 90–100 kg maize per 0.1 ha, whereas other companies in the region get yields of 300 kg of maize on the same area. The local authorities confirmed this information.

The company representatives made no official statement about the withdrawal, but the media reports and our research suggest that the company decided to make a new attempt near the city of Pleven, located in the central northern part of Bulgaria, and Plovdiv in central Bulgaria. This initial failure, nevertheless, shows that the high expectations that FDI will bring jobs and development are ungrounded, as implied by the fact the Bulgarian government is not as eager to advertise future deals as it had done before.³³

Employment

Few of the locals are employed in agricultural production: the Chinese company employed none and the *Arendatori* have only few employees. The latter tend to employ someone to renew the leasing contracts with the local smallholders. The municipal authorities are by far the largest employer (employing few dozen people). They successfully apply for various EU projects that provide temporary and precarious jobs. Many of the projects are 'life-long learning' or retraining programmes with names such as 'A New Beginning'. The locals affectionately refer to these simply as 'The Programme'. There is no illusion that these initiatives will help people find employment as there is practically none, especially in some of the fields in which they are trained. For example, some participants in 'The Programme' were trained to become urban gardeners. But in a village of a little over 400 people it makes little sense to train up to ten urban gardeners in their late 40s. One of the participants of 'The Programme' jokingly said that in the last few years he has sat in more classes than during his entire secondary education. These EU projects, in fact, serve as a type of 'workfare' programme, in the context of a country that had already undergone radical austerity measures in the 1990s, long before the current austerity packages in the EU. There are little or no social welfare possibilities for the locals, which is why the municipal authorities are heavily engaged in adopting various EU projects. In fact, a very large part of the mayor's time goes

into submitting such applications. The villagers appreciate her efforts: she is widely respected and is currently serving her second term.

The municipality takes advantage of the opportunities provided by the idiosyncratic EU workfare programmes in order to have a pool of labour for public works – small repairs, cleaning, etc. The workers occupy a small shack in the village centre during the day in case they are needed, or tend to spend their idle time in the cooperative pub nearby.

All this breeds deep social despair, expressed by everyone who was interviewed. There is a wide consensus that the last two decades have brought only misery to the village and that it is slowly dying out. Younger residents tend to move out to bigger cities or abroad in search of better job opportunities.

The cooperatives

Their future did not seem as bleak as in the early 1990s. Some villagers attempted to revive the old state cooperative and were able to secure some of the equipment that was not destroyed with the Liquidation. They continued to cultivate grain. The cooperative director expressed his pride that they were always up to date with their rent and redistributed all profits, unlike the *Arendatori*. The most severe problems they faced were being unable to sell their produce because of the loss of domestic and international markets. A final blow to the cooperative was the 1996 bank crisis, which led to a severe credit crunch. At the end of the 1990s it went into bankruptcy and moved out of agriculture. It retained the village cooperative shop and the local pub, leasing all the remaining agricultural land to the *Arendatori*. Still, the cooperative proved to be more efficient in negotiating on behalf of its members with the *Arendatori*, securing a better rent, and which is actually paid. This is important because, according to the interviewees, the *Arendatori* do not comply with the contract of the lease by either not paying anything at all or giving small amounts in kind (for instance, 0.5 litres of cooking oil per 0.1 ha per year). It is particularly difficult for the individual smallholders who lease their land to force large businesses to observe the contractual terms and pay the agreed rent.

Another cooperative that had been a local farmers' association was formed in the early 1990s. It was an attempt to start up a completely new organisation made up of a few farmers who had relatively more land (but far less than 50 ha each). Their fate was similar and eventually they were also pushed out of business by the *Arendatori*.

Thus, by the end of the 1990s, the *Arendatori* were by far the most important actor engaged in farming in the village. Their production practices were very different from those of the cooperatives, as they separated grain production from animal breeding (which had been the case during state socialism). This meant that, gradually, almost all the livestock was destroyed. The *Arendatori* preferred to forfeit all labour-intensive agricultural practices and focused on producing grain for the national and the global markets. In this way they also separated production from local sources of labour. These large companies operate across northern Bulgaria, so when they have to plough or harvest they do not require any local labour.

The *Arendatori*

The mayor expressed her concern that the huge machines used by the *Arendatori* break the water pipeline in the village each time they come to plough or harvest pipeline. She said that one of her major attempts, as a mayor, is to make them go around the village and not directly through it. Indeed, the village's central street was marked by the constant repairs to the water pipeline, although patching it up provided some local employment, especially for the idle participants in 'The Programme. This concern

is very telling regarding the whole process. Even more revealing was the mayor's gratitude for all the EU money going into local infrastructural projects. She had managed to completely renovate the road to Vidin (the regional town) and she had only one more major road to repair. Not only had that provided temporary employment, but finally the waterpipes would not break all the time under the weight of the heavy agricultural machinery used by the *Arendatori*.

The small landholders

Most of the interviewed locals still had small plots of land, but rarely over 1 ha. They tried not to sell it and did so only if they were in urgent need of money. It seems that money for medical treatment in the family is among the frequent reasons to sell land. In most cases, they tended to lease it out to *Arendatori*. The contracts usually last for about five to ten years. The price paid is actually much lower than the direct subsidies the *Arendatori* get from the EU. Many cases were reported that the land is only leased to get the subsidies, not to produce anything. As already mentioned, the *Arendatori* often pay in kind, which is not in the contract, but the small landholders are happy with anything they get, as the companies often pay nothing at all. The stated reasons for renting out their land are usually the smallholders' desire for the land not to be idle, preferring that someone use the land for production. This means that the (obviously limited) economic incentives of the rent are not always uppermost. Some of the interviewees said they consciously do not want to lease their land under the current conditions. There were many smallholders from outside the village who obtained land with the restitution process. As explained in the previous sections, this created a huge number of uninterested owners who left their plots idle – a phenomenon widely abused by the *Arendatori* for land grabs.

The idle lands ('white spots')

Recent legislation obliges all landholders to declare their intention to use the land each year by a specific date. If they do not declare their intentions, the municipality redistributes the land to the *Arendatori* for the 'average regional rent'. The rent is to be paid to the municipality and the original owners have three years to claim their money. The agricultural ministry says it has no idea how much land is part of these 'white spots', just that it knows 'they are not little'.³⁴

This legal reform was justified by the need to consolidate land and by fact that some lands are idle. Nevertheless, it is not an easy demand to meet since many smallholders are not even aware of its existence. Also many people find it difficult to be at a specific municipality on a specific day in order to register their intentions, particularly if they are living in another region.

The mayor stated that she experiences a lot of problems in getting the *Arendatori* to comply with the obligation to pay the municipality for those idle lands. She never experienced such problems with the Chinese company. One local woman said that although she had declared her intention to till her land (she has about 1 ha and uses it to produce fodder for her few cows), the *Arendatori* ploughed it nevertheless. All her attempts to seek justice with the police or the authorities had been futile. The mayor said that such cases of direct land grabs are not uncommon and that some are even worse – there have been examples of *Arendatori* ploughing up planted land. The mayor was advising the villagers whose land was grabbed in these ways to at least try to get the agricultural subsidies since they are formally the owners.

Many small-scale farmers across the whole northwest region have protested that the larger *Arendatori* use the legislative reforms to grab their land, not necessarily to plant anything, but often just to get the direct subsidies.³⁵

Attitudes towards the new land regime

In general, the attitudes towards the *Arendatori* were very negative. They were accused of not paying anything, grabbing land, not providing any employment and using land only to get the subsidies. The attitudes towards the Chinese company were more positive, but mostly because people were excited by the fact they were from China, finding that admirable and feeling sorry for the fact they were cheated. But the negative attitudes about the Chinese providing no jobs or development were identical. The mayor was impressed that the company actually paid for all the ‘white spots’ it had used, and that she finds it harder to force the *Arendatori* to comply. Some villagers expressed their gratitude towards the Chinese company, because it did not make the harvesters bury the fallen grain, which is the usual practice of the *Arendatori*. This allowed poorer villagers to gather some free grain.

Overall, the extreme underdevelopment and poverty in Boytnisa were neither the result of lack of investment (there are plenty of successful businesses operating there), nor because of the lack of entrepreneurial spirit (evidenced by the attempts to form two cooperatives). It seems that the new land regime had no interest in the local labour, but just in its land. The attempted alternatives (e.g. the cooperatives) failed not because of lack of access to land, but because they lacked access to other essential inputs and to markets. They were out-competed by larger private investors that enjoyed full government support, and recently were able to take advantage of EU subsidies. The failure of the Chinese investor in Boynitsa shows that it seems likely that the *Arendatori* will remain the dominant agricultural producers in the village. Lack of employment and alternatives will continue to push the local population to migrate to other regions.

5. Conclusions

In the last years there has been a revival of the agricultural industry since the severe downturn in the 1990s. The land has been consolidated and agriculture has been attracting investment, but without job creation or other means for local communities to earn a living. The cooperatives are being slowly incorporated by the *Arendatori*, either by leasing their land or by becoming minority shareholders in the private companies. The process of EU accession brought new rules for competition, e.g. new standards, which further limited the possibilities for the smaller farmers and the cooperatives.

The revival of industrialised agriculture did not restore the tradition of small-scale production in the ‘personal’ plots. As argued, this tradition was established with what could be understood as popular ‘counter-enclosures’ during state socialism. These forms of resistance succeeded in effectively reclaiming new forms of a direct relationship between the land and labour after the agricultural industrialisation period, showing the possibility of the mutually beneficial co-existence of low-input and large-scale industrialised farming. That is to say, they managed to effectively reclaim food and land sovereignty. However, small-scale farming and animal breeding collapsed with the dissolution of the old cooperatives, as they lost the structures on which they depended. This new wave of enclosure, by large private investors, led to the installation of a new production regime that is completely detached from the local communities and from other types of agricultural production (e.g. animal breeding). The restoration of economic efficiency, land consolidation, attracting investment and growth did not lead to rural development, particularly in the northwest, and it made little difference to the livelihoods of the local communities, who remained largely excluded from production.

Land consolidation achieved by the *Arendatori* enabled the inflow of FDI, although with only limited success, as the *Arendatori* had already entrenched their dominance in northern Bulgaria throughout

the 1990s. They have also secured favourable legislative reforms, such as the 'white spots'. It seems, and given the fact of the relatively low FDI in the agricultural sector, that for the foreseeable future this will be the dominant form of farming in the region.

In terms of providing employment opportunities and/or rural development there is no substantial difference between the large-scale Bulgarian and the foreign businesses. Neither has any positive effect for the local communities in this regard. Both production practices are also highly intensive and dependent on large quantities of petrochemicals, and so harm the environment. This may be a trivial observation, but it is worth pointing out that it is possible, at least in the Bulgarian context, to conflate the critique of land grabs with a defence of large-scale national versus foreign capital, which have identical production practices and hence social and environmental effects.

There was no direct resistance to land grabs in Bulgaria, which tend to have been presented as a way to overcome land fragmentation and restore growth – although obviously the expected social outcomes never materialised. Larger resistance to land grabs were rather indirect and embedded in the environmental movement. In recent years, the environmental movement has articulated a more direct critique of LGs and proposed alternatives. The emergence of the new food cooperatives, coming out of the anti-GM movement, signals this shift. Their goal is to establish new forms of direct links between production and consumption, connecting urban consumers and small-scale farmers. The real question is if those new (mostly) urban movements will be able to connect with the (remnants of) the rural cooperatives and small-scale farmers, forming much broader coalition to contest land grabs – and whether it could be a way to achieve a more effective and proactive popular counter-enclosure movement that can create new ways to connect labour and land.

Recommendations

The Bulgarian government should stop supporting further land consolidation. Land consolidation in itself does not lead to rural development or provide sustainable livelihoods. The government should instead support the small-scale farmers and the cooperatives. This can be done if the governments implements relevant elements of the 'Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security' (FAO, 2012; TNI, 2012) such as to:

- introduce ceilings on permissible land transactions and regulating how transfers exceeding a certain scale should be approved, such as by parliamentary approval (Article 12.6).
- promote a range of production and investment models that do not result in the large-scale transfer of tenure rights to investors, and encourage partnerships with local tenure right holders (Article 12.6).
- conduct prior independent assessment on the potential positive and negative impacts of planned investment on tenure rights, food security and the progressive realisation of the right to adequate food, livelihoods and the environment (Article 12.10).

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Endnotes

1. See: <http://www.eubusiness.com/news-eu/bulgaria-economy.e2g>.
2. NEP was the attempt to attract private investment in the Soviet Union in the 1920s in order to industrialise and as a 'transitory phase'. This attempt ended in the 1930s with the First Five Year Plan and Stalin's rise to power.
3. Protect The Future and Za Zemiata (2011) *Impacts of Trade Liberalization on Central and Eastern European Countries and the Implications on Developing Countries: Two Studies from Central (Hungary) and Eastern (Bulgaria) Europe*, pp. 50–52.
4. <http://goo.gl/RwiVu>.
5. <http://www.24chasa.bg/Article.asp?ArticleId=324048>.
6. A major explanation of the underdevelopment of the northwest is via references to the lack of entrepreneurial spirit, inherited communist mentalities, inflated public administration, etc. For instance, the mainstream liberal newspaper (*Dnevnik*) published a series of articles in 2011 making precisely that argument (<http://goo.gl/bBUkk> or <http://goo.gl/Zq2CT>). There are two problems with such a perspective. First, it blames the victim as it reduces social problems to individual responsibility. It obscures the social forces that create underdevelopment by reducing everything to the 'there is no society, but only individuals' – Thatcher's notorious definition of neoliberalism. Second, it disregards the empirical histories of the 1990s. Immediately after 1989 over a million businesses had been registered. In terms of land, in practically every village there was an attempt to recreate the cooperatives. Most of these businesses founded for economic reasons, and most cooperatives founded it hard as well. But this is hardly evidence of a lack of entrepreneurial spirit.
7. http://www.karoll.net/bg/?section=investirane_v_advance&id=32.
8. <http://temanews.com/index.php?p=tema&iid=634&aid=14792>.
9. <http://temanews.com/index.php?p=tema&iid=279&aid=6806>.
10. <http://www.lefigaro.fr/conjoncture/2013/01/02/20002-20130102ARTFIG00510-quand-la-pac-finance-la-chasse-la-peche-ou-le-ski.php>.
11. <http://www.24chasa.bg/Article.asp?ArticleId=1700833>.
12. http://www.farmer.bg/news_view.php?id=17652.
13. http://www.dnevnik.bg/biznes/companii/2009/01/27/622434_vtori_opit_za_durjavna_pomosht_na_golfa.
14. NATURA 2000 is an ecological network of protected areas in the EU, which make up 18% of the territory of its Member States. Bulgaria has 118 special protection areas for birds, which makes up for 22.6% of country's territory, and 231 special protection areas for habitats, which makes up for 30% of Bulgaria's territory (33.4% in total), all part of NATURA 2000. More information available at: <http://www.natura2000bg.org/natura/bg/index1.php>.
15. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-16626580>.
16. Organised by a coalition called 'Bulgaria without cyanides', comprising environmental NGOs and local initiative committees. Further information is available at: <http://cyanidefreebulgaria.org>.
17. www.novinite.com/view_news.php?id=141854.
18. Krastev, S. et al. (2012) 'Wide close eyes? The Role of the State in Land and Housing Occupation', research commissioned by the Sofia University Research Centre for Social Studies as part of its urban studies programme.
19. http://www.novinite.com/view_news.php?id=138791.
20. <http://focus-news.net/?id=n1714855>.
21. Annual Agricultural Report published by the Agricultural Ministry from 2012, available at: <http://www.mzh.govtment.bg/mzh/bg/Documents/AgrarenDoklad.aspx>.
22. Ibid.
23. Annual Agricultural Report published by the Agricultural Ministry from 2012, available at: <http://www.mzh.govtment.bg/mzh/bg/Documents/AgrarenDoklad.aspx>.
24. http://www.tni.org/sites/www.tni.org/files/different_responses_to_landgrabbing_0.pdf
25. <http://farmlandgrab.org/post/view/20591> and <http://farmlandgrab.org/post/view/20186>.
26. <http://blackseaagriculture.com/team.html>.
- 192 27. <http://farmlandgrab.org/post/view/20530>.

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28. More information is available at: <http://www.ceres.bg/?lan=EN>.
29. See more at: <http://www.elana.net/en/epm/investments.shtml>.
30. http://www.capital.bg/biznes/kompanii/2012/10/05/1920272_bai_bai_boinica/.
31. <http://www.trud.bg/Article.asp?ArticleId=1597811>, <http://www.trud.bg/Gallery.asp?GalleryId=1597812>,
http://www.spekulanti.com/imoti-zemia/25910-kitaicite_izbiagaha_sled_samo_edna_godina_v_-boinica, and http://www.capital.bg/biznes/kompanii/2012/10/05/1920272_bai_bai_boinica/.
32. <http://www.trud.bg/Article.asp?ArticleId=1597811>.
33. <http://www.mzh.government.bg/mzh/home/11-11-17/-3331362363.aspx>.
34. <http://www.segabg.com/article.php?id=608400>.
35. <http://farmer.bg/28341-Mutri-i-mestni-feodali-zavzemat-zemedelski-zemi>.