

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

by Alina Mungiu-Pippidi *

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

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

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