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TATJANA THELEN  
ANDREW CARTWRIGHT  
THOMAS SIKOR

LOCAL STATE AND  
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A NEW RESEARCH  
AGENDA AND  
THE EXAMPLE OF  
POSTSOCIALIST  
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Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, PO Box 110351,  
06017 Halle/Saale, Phone: +49 (0)345 2927-0, Fax: +49 (0)345 2927-402,  
<http://www.eth.mpg.de>, e-mail: [workingpaper@eth.mpg.de](mailto:workingpaper@eth.mpg.de)

# Local State and Social Security in Rural Communities: a new research agenda and the example of postsocialist Europe<sup>1</sup>

*Tatjana Thelen<sup>2</sup>, Andrew Cartwright<sup>3</sup>, Thomas Sikor<sup>4</sup>*

## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to contribute to the development of a new research agenda on and theoretical approach to the relation between local state formations and social security arrangements in rural areas. We argue that an analysis of these relations will enhance our understanding of the state in rural settings and of its interrelation to other networks of power. Social security is central for these relations. By adopting an anthropological definition of social security, we aim to overcome dichotomies of formal state and informal help as well as between state and non-state activities. We propose to address the topic by analysing and comparing access to the different kinds of resources distributed or mediated by local state actors. The paper starts with a general introduction to the theoretical framework and then gives an overview on existing research on the issues with special attention to postsocialist areas. Recent changes in the fields of state action have been especially profound in this region. Nevertheless we suggest that the proposed framework allows for fruitful application and comparison with other regions as well.

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<sup>2</sup> Tatjana Thelen, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Zurich, Andreasstr. 15, 8053 Zürich, Switzerland and Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, P.O.Box 110357, 06017 Halle/Saale, Germany; phone: (+ 49)-(0)345 2927-313; fax (+49)-(0)345 2927 -302; email: [thelen@eth.mpg.de](mailto:thelen@eth.mpg.de)

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Cartwright, Centre for Policy Studies, Central European University, 1051 Budapest, Nador Utca 11, Hungary, phone: (+ 36)-1-327 3000 ext 2397; fax (+36)-1 235-6170; email: [Cartwrighta@ceu.hu](mailto:Cartwrighta@ceu.hu)

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Sikor, School of Development Studies, University of East Anglia, Norwich NR4 7TJ, UK, phone: (+44)-1603-593372; fax (+44)-1603-451999; email: [T.Sikor@uea.ac.uk](mailto:T.Sikor@uea.ac.uk)

## 1. Introduction

Worldwide, rural areas have witnessed profound changes during the last decades. The spread of neo-liberal policies and globalisation, including the removal of import restrictions, abolishing price controls and state monopolies, as well as welfare cutbacks, affected rural economies in Africa, Latin America, Asia, and Europe. Among others, these changes strengthened the so-called private sector also in areas such as provision of social security and have been often described as state withdrawal. In this paper, we argue that rural developments are hard to capture using simple dichotomies such as state/market and public/private. We suggest that a comparative analysis of relations between local states and social security arrangements might offer a way to gain new insights into the transformation of rural societies under neo-liberal reforms. By adopting an anthropological definition of social security, we aim to overcome dichotomies of formal state and informal help as well as between state and non-state activities. Instead we focus on the interrelatedness and embeddedness of state actors in local social security arrangements.

We take postsocialist Europe as our field site to explore some of these tendencies and their possible effects. While a great number of studies has focused on the different types of local states in central and eastern European countries (Munigiu-Pippidi 2003, de Waal 2004, Verdery 2002, Way 2002, Stark and Bruszt 1998), there are relatively few that have focused on their relationship to local social security arrangements. Starting with the observation that the tremendous political change in the region transformed the power and activities of the local state, we assume a great diversity of relations between social security arrangements and various state actors. In some countries, decentralisation programmes transferred the running and, to a large degree, the financing of public services into the hands of local authorities. At the same time, access to endogenous rural assets changed dramatically as did household incomes and participation in the labour market. Some of the main elements affecting this new relation between local authorities and social security were, and are, endowment with natural assets, proximity to trade centres or borders, the degree of demographic changes, and externally driven alterations in administrative functions. New theoretical work is needed to capture the nature of interrelation for different formations of local states and social security arrangements.

We further propose two fields of analysis: access to productive resources and the allocation of social assistance. Although there has been some research on the impact of access to productive resources in agriculture and forestry on rural social security in former socialist countries (Sik and Redmond 2000, Sik 1998, Albert and Ferge 1996), the question has not been tackled in the integrative sense proposed here. However, there are strong indications that the patterns of local state action in this field have a great impact on the nature of social security, especially in rural areas. Questions to be explored would be how local governments implement new social security regulations, how local patterns of access are affected locally by civic associations and other non-state actors such as the church, and how changing definitions of need are shaped and experienced by various social actors. Research on these topics should enable us to ask how far the provision of social welfare at the local level is influenced by the relationship between local state actors and other economic and political actors, or that whether the practice of social service provision can be likened to the development of a client network. Although we concentrate here on the transformations in central and eastern European countries (CEE countries) after socialism, we

assume that this perspective also allows for fruitful analysis in other countries. We first introduce the general theoretical framework before describing in more detail the development in CEE countries.

## 2. Theoretical Approach

In order to study the working of the state in rural areas and its interrelation to other networks of power we apply a social-anthropological understanding of social security. As Franz and Keebet von Benda-Beckmann argue with regards to Indonesia (1998: 143–144), social security is crucial for an understanding of the workings of the state because it is central to the relations between rural populations and diverse local state actors. In many, if not all, parts of the world, villagers enter into relations and cooperation with civic servants because the latter provide access to various resources such as connections outside the village or economic resources such as salaries or project funds. But many local civic servants not only provide social security resources, they also depend on local resources for their own social security. Some may receive low salaries so that they establish other economic activities, for which they need relations. Or they might be born and stay in the village and later be in need of care after retirement. The degree of mutual dependency and social security needs influence the establishment of closer or looser links.

We understand social security as a variety of arrangements, through which people acquire food, shelter, education, and care. It goes beyond formal institutional provisions and includes the combined efforts of individuals, groups, and organisations to overcome insecurities “to the extent that the contingencies are not considered a purely individual responsibility” (F. and K. von Benda-Beckmann 1994: 14). Social security in this understanding emerges through diverse practices, relationships, ideologies, policies, and institutions.<sup>5</sup>

Recent approaches to the state also stress diversity and complexity. The conceptualisation of the state has been transformed from an understanding of states as undifferentiated, organic entities acting in a consistent fashion to more complex webs of institutions, actors, policies, and initiatives, all of which emerge and converge at different local, regional, centralised, or national levels (Bierschenk 1999, Ferguson and Gupta 2002, Lipsky 1980, Migdal 1994, Mitchell 1991, Scott 1998, Sikor and Lund forthcoming). This approach has also generated increased attention to the processes of state-building and local state formation in postsocialist states (Offe and Elster 1998, Oi 1995). Local states are composed of different actors, some that are locally elected or appointed, some that are delegated by regional or central authorities, and some that are affiliated to national political parties or are independent. We understand local state actors in reference to what Lipsky (1980) in his seminal study called “street level bureaucrats”. Depending on the local context, this may include social and health workers, teachers, members of local governments, or policemen; all those who are in direct contact with the local population.

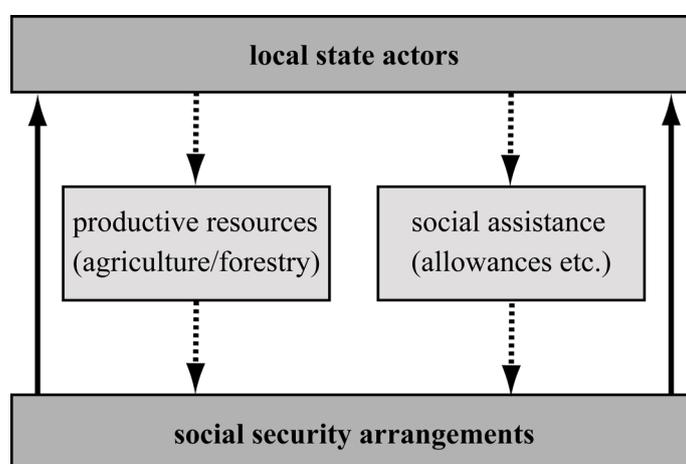
Agrawal and Ribot (1999) argue that different local actors can have different powers (e.g. the power to create new rules, make decisions, implement and ensure compliance) and are accountable to different audiences. According to the authors, accountability is of key importance to the success

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<sup>5</sup> The more limited concept of social security as something that was tied to a centrally regulated system of health, old age, and unemployment insurance in industrialised countries has been critically assessed since the 1980s (Ahmad et al. 1991, F. and K. von Benda Beckmann et al. 1988, Leliveld 1994, Midgley 1984, Partsch 1983). Instead, scholars argued for the multi-layered nature of social security also visible in western welfare states, as evident in the theory of welfare pluralism or welfare mix (Johnson 1987, Zacher 1988).

of decentralisation policies. Local governments have administrative and fiscal powers and can be held accountable by the local electorate. Although these structural differences are important, they are nevertheless limited, because they concentrate on the interactions of local state actors with local residents only in the “public” domain. Activities outside the realm of legal regulations are then considered illegal deviations or irrelevant. However, especially in rural settings, they frequently inhabit highly ambiguous roles with overlapping or multiple competencies, whereby a local official is simultaneously also a local resident, a family member, a neighbour, party member, or head of a local public foundation, and a local entrepreneur. In Indonesia, F. and K. von Benda-Beckmann (1998: 158) identify four types of connection between local civic servants and other local residents. They constitute different social networks, in which social security is a central element: 1. civil servants who live and work in their native villages, 2. civil servants who live and work in a village where they have no relatives; 3. civil servants who live in town but visit their home village frequently; 4. civil servants who live far away. In each case, the local state actors have different social security needs within the village that account for different activities as private citizens and public office holders in connection to other local residents. In other circumstances other factors might be decisive for the interconnection of local state actors and the local community. It is a matter of empirical research to find out how such actors assume locally significant roles in different contexts, and what the crucial factors are in determining the nature of relations. Here, we suggest that exploring access to various resources is a promising way to approach this question.

We assume that in rural areas access to productive resources in the agricultural and forestry sector and access to social assistance help constitute the relationship between local states and social security. By productive resources, we mean arable land, pasture land, forests, as well as water. To some extent, this can also extend to certain agricultural inputs such as seeds and machinery. By social assistance, we do not so much mean those items where the levels and conditions are set by law such as child benefit, maternity pay, or state pensions. Instead we focus more on state resources that are allocated in the form of needs assessments or means testing, with critical input from local state actors. The organisation of conditions of access to both resources constitutes a crucial field of local state action and often an important source of income for local populations. By examining these ties in detail, it is possible to conceptualise the nature of the relationship between the local state and social security in the rural areas (see figure 1).



**Figure 1: Thematic scheme**

Having introduced our main assumptions, we will give an account of the relevant literature on local states and social security, with emphasis on research in former socialist countries. We will first describe how postsocialist changes have led to differentiated changes in local state formations and institutional influences on social security. We then go on to investigate access to productive resources and social assistance and finally provide an outlook on further fields of inquiry and possible fruitful comparisons.

### **3. Local State Formations and Social Security after Socialism**

Postsocialist countries have undergone tremendous political, economic, and social transformations in the past twenty years. Most early postsocialist reforms of state structures were based on a rejectionist critique of the omnipresent socialist state. Although the extent varied, in the early 1990s, there was a general trend to dismantling central state structures (Aslund 1992, Klaus 1992, Grzymala-Busse and Jones Luong 2002, Kornai 1990). This process was accompanied by decentralising and, more recently, some regionalising tendencies alongside a profound reorganisation of the extent, form, and provision of welfare.<sup>6</sup> Together with economic restructuring these developments created severe hardships for many people in the region (Nazpary 2001, Pine 2002, Kideckel 2002, Karjanen 2005, Walker 1998). The popular notion of state withdrawal to describe these developments, however, is problematic when used in an analytical sense, because it implies a superficial concept of ‘the state’ that is a singular entity with clearly-defined boundaries and modalities. The complex and contradictory nature of reforms in former socialist countries, particularly the ways in which a range of state bodies, actors and institutions, far from being in retreat, continue to shape social life, albeit in altered form, becomes hidden (Read and Thelen 2007). For example, although the property reforms of the 1990s were often described as privatisation or restitution processes, and figures often presented to say that 70, 80, or 90% of property was now in private hands, in the retention of certain properties, in the supervision of private land owners, or the allocation of use rights to new ones local officials continued to exert significant influence over local socio-economic activities.

#### *3.1. Exploring the Local State in Postsocialist Countries*

In the first phase after socialism, many local governments acquired new competences and responsibilities, such as the running of schools and kindergartens. In many cases, they became the most important local agents of public administration. Later, in the second half of the 1990s, in countries trying for accession to the EU, membership requirements were translated into national legislation that included the creation of new governing institutions and introducing new approaches to rural development (Network of Independent Agricultural Experts 2004, van der Ploeg et al. 2002, Petrick and Weingarten 2004). As part of the accession to the EU, new regional bodies were developed, beginning a long process of reorganisation of sub-national government. The pre- and post-accession EU-programmes became sites of important central/local struggles involving new formations of local, regional, and micro-regional governance. One consequence of the

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<sup>6</sup> Serbia constitutes one notable exception to this general development. Having had a long history of local self-government, the early 1990s represented a phase of centralisation instead of decentralisation as in other postsocialist countries and many powers were consolidated by the central state. This came as a surprise and was part of the nation building. Only more recently have municipalities again gained more power and decisional autonomy (see Sevic 2005).

Europeanisation of public administration has been the greater emphasis given to intermediate bodies and to inter-village co-operation, something which has important effects on the regimes of social welfare.

In Hungary for example, from the middle of the 1990s, the system of 3,125 local self-governments has been recognised as working less and less efficiently and to be increasingly expensive. There were a number of laws passed to encourage greater co-operation between local self-governments, and in 1996, an intermediate tier of regional administration was introduced for the first time. Although their powers were initially limited, the regional bodies and their micro-regional counterparts have become increasingly important, particularly with the onset of regional funding through the structural funds. Act CVII of 2004 on the multi-purpose micro-regional alliances of local governments was introduced to promote harmonised development of the 149 micro-regions, and to ensure a balanced increase in the standard of public services provided by local governments. According to the law, the multi-purpose micro-regional alliances of local governments, among other things, can coordinate the tasks of education, social services, and health care, in some cases, these alliances can take over these tasks from the local self-governments. The central budget financially supports this sort of alliances. A similar process of sub-national reorganisation took place in Romania, with the introduction of eight NUTS II<sup>7</sup> regions and legislation to encourage greater cooperation between different communes in the provision of social welfare services. In such contexts, the impact of these administrative changes on local well being depends very much on the resources, abilities, and social security arrangements of the local leaders.

In addition to the introduction of new regional state units, a number of parallel local state institutions were established and function more or less in accordance with each other. In Hungary, although by no means comparable in terms of budget, capacity, or responsibility, the so-called minority self-governments have a number of responsibilities that bear on social security (Csefkó and Pálné Kovács 2004). With regards to differentiated powers and accountability, they can have different interests compared to actors delegated by the central state. For example case workers in the Serbian centres for social work are accountable to central state bodies. Another example comes from environmental decision-making, where local governments hold different powers and are accountable to different actors across Eastern Europe (Sikor 2005). Local governments in Poland enjoy significant leverage over local zoning, including the designation of protected areas. In contrast, local governments in the Czech Republic have no say about the siting of protected areas and do not participate in decisions about the design of agri-environmental stewardship schemes.

Similarly, some local state actors became linked to international actors present in the region during the course of reforms. In the course of pre-accession programmes such as PHARE and SAPARD, rural development assistance adopted the project format and co-funding requirements of EU funds<sup>8</sup>. Furthermore, a range of internationally sponsored projects is involved in community building in the rural areas. For various reasons, such as community organisation, local human resources, external support, and previous experience, individual state actors have different capacities to attract external resources (private investment, central state funds, NGO funds, regional development funds, international aid projects). A lack of embeddedness of local office holders in

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<sup>7</sup> NUTS (Nomenclature des unités territoriales statistiques/Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics) is a standard for the statistical classification of administrative divisions in the EU member countries. The NUTS Level II usually designates regions or provinces.

<sup>8</sup> For an impact analysis of the EU rural SAPARD programme see [http://cps.ceu.hu/rural\\_development\\_projects\\_sapard.php](http://cps.ceu.hu/rural_development_projects_sapard.php).

regional and (trans-) national networks may affect their ability to attract other actors and, therefore, generally the availability of socio-economic resources. The analytical approach proposed here involves an inclusive perspective on the dependencies between local state actors and the central/regional bodies and their local personal networks.

### *3.2. Studying Social Security in Postsocialist Countries*

Like local state formations, social security arrangements have undergone tremendous change since the socialist period. Definitions of need and the fulfilment of caring obligations changed in public discourse as did the legal regulations (Haney 2003, Read and Thelen 2007, Standing 1996, Thelen 2006a). The (re)emergence of conservative gender discourses alongside the rhetoric of liberal economic transition constructed home and kinship as the most authentic forum for care provision. In contrast to the socialist states that shared a commitment to the emancipation of women through their full time participation in the labour market and took over some caring responsibilities, the new discourses re-positioned women typically as carers rather than workers.<sup>9</sup>

State institutions in many of the former socialist countries were a key (if not the dominating) presence in social life and welfare. As a major source of income, wage labour and state-regulated pensions were guaranteed, and subsidised consumer goods were almost universally available. State services (frequently distributed through the workplace) included education, transportation, child care and cultural facilities (Adam 1991, Kornai 1992, Standing 1996, Read and Thelen 2007). Additional resources were distributed to categories of people such as women or youth, who were defined as having particular needs (Haney 1999, see also Kay 2007). In the rural areas, the collective farms assumed the meeting of these responsibilities to a varying degree. In Russia, Humphrey (1983) described the 'Karl Marx' collective farm as a "total social fact". In Hungary and Romania, agricultural cooperatives were less all-encompassing (Kideckel 1993, Bell 1984, Hann 1980), and they were almost non-existent in Serbia and Poland. On the whole though, socialist enterprises were important sites of state-organised welfare. Excluded from or at least neglected in this system of redistribution were those who did not want or were unable to work.

Socialist welfare frameworks did reduce socio-economic inequalities significantly, thereby contributing to the legitimacy of the socialist state. Nonetheless, they were criticised for producing 'low quality' services (Verdery 1996). Frequent shortages ensured the continued importance of other social security institutions, such as kinship, ethnic and religious communities, and patronage networks. These were vital for maintaining strong rural-urban exchange relations (Simic 1973). As frequently commented on in the literature of the region, it was commonplace to rely on a range of personal networks to gain access to goods and services that were in short supply (Ledeneva 1998, Verdery 1996, Wedel 1986, for an overview see Sampson 1985-86).

Everyday social security arrangements thus relied on a series of conditions that were to be radically altered after 1989. Reformers and policy-makers from within and outside of the region promoted the 'withdrawal' of the state from many areas of social life and the 'contraction' of the socialist welfare system (Aslund 1992, Klaus 1992, Kornai 1990). Throughout the region, levels of unemployment and poverty increased but also diversified after 1989 (Kalb, Svašek and Tak 1999, Stark and Bruszt 1998, World Bank 2004). Variations in the nature and extent of land reforms, the

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<sup>9</sup> Despite the mother-worker ideology, women were overrepresented in less well paid public care and education services and the significance of women's role as carers was frequently reiterated (Einhorn 1993, Gal 1994, Gal and Kligman 2000a, 2000b, Haney 1999, Haukanes 2001, Huseby-Darvas 1996, Lapidus 1978, Pine 2002, Read 2005, 2007).

different consequences of farm restructuring, distinct migration patterns, and overall economic development brought about significant differences in the level of rural poverty. In many regions, landed property and household production gained greatly in importance, as did the importance of the aforementioned rural-urban relations (Kaneff 2002, Konstantinov 2001, Mungiu-Pippidi 2003). Significant numbers of rural inhabitants still work on small holdings received in the course of the property reform generating crops for sale and home consumption (Lerman 2004, Sabates-Wheeler 2002, Sikor 2006).

Despite neo-liberal discourses, there is growing recognition that the post-1989 goal of creating a liberal, residual welfare state based on a mix of social insurance, social assistance, and private services was rarely implemented in a straightforward manner (Standing 1996). Influenced by specific local economic histories and socialist government policies, the processes of restructuring and the waves of reform were the outcome of struggles between different interest groups, often with contradictory outcomes. As a result, some areas of welfare, such as health care, education, and maternity and family benefits, were subject to far less radical reform than others (Haggard and Kaufman 2001: 4, Sotiropoulos 2005: 296). Moreover, at least initially, the closure of large socialist enterprises (previously central to frameworks for state-provided social security) and the subsequent large numbers of unemployed workers led governments to assume responsibility for designing special state-sponsored unemployment programmes (Sotiropoulos 2005: 269). At the individual level, e.g. among the unemployed, this has resulted in an increasing reliance on state frameworks and provision. In other areas of state provision, however, responsibility was transferred from centralised institutions to local state bodies. In Hungary, for example, residential care for the elderly was allocated to the local authorities in one of the first acts of decentralisation.

The decentralisation of welfare regimes also brought new non-state and international actors on the scene (Caldwell 2004, Read 2005, 2007). Whereas during the socialist era, the role of religious organisations in providing material forms of security and their public role in morally defining need was in most cases radically diminished or even oppressed by the state, religious actors now grew in importance. Similar to even the most liberal states like the US, postsocialist states defined new roles for the faith-based provision of social security, the political and economic reforms in the 1990s in general granted more room for faith-based charity. In Hungary, for example, there has been a revival of faith-based schools, not only in the capital and larger cities, but in small towns as well. It is possible for citizens to delegate part of their tax to religious welfare institutions (Mahieu 2006). In Russia, non-orthodox religious organisations are only allowed to enter the country on the condition that they act as NGOs assisting the needy (Caldwell 2004). In both cases, the new religious actors provide social security resources partly because they are legally obligated to and partly because they receive state resources. Thus, even in the case of an emergent welfare pluralism, the state continues to regulate and/or finance these services in full or in part, although the priority and rationale for doing so has shifted. The presence of new and old actors such as churches, civic associations, and international charities inevitably has a significant effect on the overall social security arrangements of individuals, families, and communities. But the precise nature of these impacts has rarely been explored ethnographically (Read and Thelen 2007) and even less so in the rural areas where these changes were particularly pronounced.

#### **4. Linking Local States and Social Security: productive resources and social assistance**

This short overview already indicates some connections between the local state and social security in CEE countries. In this section, we explore these more explicitly in the context of access to productive resources and social assistance. Both serve(d), albeit in opposing ways, to legitimise the socialist and postsocialist states. The privatisation of productive resources was ideologically aimed at securing the legitimacy of postsocialist governments. In rural Romania, for example, the allocation of use rights to former collective farm workers was not only a conscious effort to secure livelihoods, it simultaneously freed the state of significant parts of its former caring obligations (Verdery 2002, Petrick and Weingarten 2004). Such actions can legitimise the local state and give significant responsibility and discretion to local state actors.

Small-scale agricultural activity as a supplement to social assistance is particularly relevant for people in disadvantaged positions. This has been confirmed, for example, by greater participation of the unemployed, elderly pensioners, and “other inactives” in agricultural work (Kovács 2007). In the first phase of transformation at least, semi-subsistence agriculture acted as a “social buffer” for former employees of state enterprises who migrated from urban to rural areas in many regions (Petrick and Weingarten 2004). Apart from being a means of subsistence, the sale of agricultural produce is also an element of social security arrangements when the proceeds, for example, are invested in children’s education (Cellarius 2004).

Sometimes the connections between access to productive resources and social assistance as a means of social security regulated by the state find explicit expression in legislation that ties access to land to the provision of social assistance. In Romania, for example, following the restitution of property, those who had access to family land were not considered unemployed and hence were not entitled to social assistance (Swain and Vincze 1998). Similarly, in Serbia, only those with no land are eligible for financial assistance (Nikač 2005). Rural-urban migration left local governments with the problem of abandoned land. In both Hungary and Romania, there are state programmes for securing unwanted land in return for enhanced pensions. In the case of land, for example, the long drawn out privatisation process in Romania allowed local mayors to hold onto land that was ‘unclaimed’ (Verdery 2002). In Hungary, land was allocated to local mayors under the social land programme.

In other cases the connections between the local state and social security are not prescribed by law but emerge out of local social networks. In remote villages in Hungary, for example, local governments assume the role of former co-operative farms in providing local farmers with access to information, markets etc. (Kovács 2007). There are strong indications that patterns of local state action in this field are highly interconnected with other local networks of power and local social security arrangements.

##### *4.1. Access to Productive Resources*

As in other parts of the world, the rural populations of Central and Eastern Europe always have secured and maintained access to productive resources in various ways. In countries that had collectivised agriculture, access during the socialist period to productive resources such as land, seeds, machinery, and forest wood was often dependent on being a member of the collective farm. As the land was privatised and restored to former owners and their heirs, many of these access rights were lost (Harcza, Kovách and Szelényi 1998). In this initial phase, rural residents gained

new forms of access to agricultural land, forest, and machinery, primarily through property reforms instituted by the central state (Verdery 2003, Swain 2000, Sikor 2004) that were, however, implemented by local state actors. Through their membership in the land commissions, they often had a significant role in shaping access distribution among the competing claims. Land reforms provoked also extensive legal disputes that had a profound impact on familial and social relations. These processes of land reform implementation have received much scholarly attention and the many case studies demonstrate the diversity of local solutions (Cartwright 2001, Dorondel 2008, von Hirschhausen 1997, Thelen 2003)<sup>10</sup>. Besides land, local state actors could also have decisive influence on access to mobile productive resources such as machinery, seeds, and to information on auctions or state programmes as important assets (Thelen 2003). In some cases, mayors and local councils were eager to use their new responsibility to improve local situations and promote economic growth, for example by re-designating agricultural land for residential development (Sikor 2005, Buchowski 1997). In other cases, local state actors took personal advantage of the situation, extorting bribes, charging illegal fees, and transferring good land or logging permits as part of a patronage network (Verdery 2002, Dorondel 2008, Stahl 2007). In parts of Albania, mayors and their rivals have repeatedly made promises concerning land titling as a way to gain votes in local elections (de Waal 2004). Some of these activities formed part of the social security arrangements of these local state actors, and have lasting effects on the social security of other local actors. These descriptions of local forms of power were primarily made during a period of massive change (privatisation). Since processes of this kind have largely been completed in agriculture (they are still ongoing in the forest and water sectors) there is a need to explore the extent to which these formations have stabilised.

In the second phase of reforms, rural inhabitants acquired access to productive resources through a much more diverse set of 'access mechanisms' (Ribot and Peluso 2003), principally shaped by the property arrangements that resulted from land reform. Significant numbers of rural inhabitants and new agricultural companies rent land from private and occasionally public actors. In Romania, it is common to find sharecropping arrangements with other villagers (Verdery 1999), but also a huge number of 'absentee landlords' living in urban areas, who were able to claim benefits derived from farming or forestry as a result of their control over land (Giordano and Kostova 2002, Cellarius 2004).

In addition to the local governments, other new state actors mediate access to productive resources. In Hungary, for example, three of the existing agricultural advisory services play significant roles in the information flow between the central administration and the local level, thereby promoting improved access to external resources. Agricultural advisors, representatives of the oldest of such extension services, do perform administrative tasks (collecting and mediating information from the local level towards the centre) and advise individual producers. Thelen (2003) describes how the agricultural advisor distributed information differentially according to his own network of social relations within the village. In contrast to the other advisory services, the agricultural advisors have been accused less frequently as means of top-down political influence, but are gradually being supplanted by private consultancies. In Bulgaria, the local forest officers, who issue permits for new forest owners before they can legally harvest timber, also exert an influence over property (Cellarius 2004). Local state actors might also administer the auctions of

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<sup>10</sup> See also various case studies at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology: <http://www.eth.mpg.de>.

timber quotas for the communal and state-managed forests, granting them significant leverage in the distribution of benefits derived from logging (Dorondel 2008). Still, the substance of local property rights is often contentious, with shares that are undivided within families that are scattered throughout the country or even abroad. It is also still the case that boundaries can move with the turn of a plough. Restrictions on private action are also sometimes resented, for example, limits on logging are seen by owners as unwarranted infringements on their rights.

Besides the access to these productive resources, access to water resources in many countries still relies heavily on the actions of local state actors. The collapse of the former irrigation systems and the rarity of individual wells can leave many rural inhabitants dependent on local state officials for access to irrigation water. The irrigation systems are either run by state-owned public companies, who place their local agents in positions of direct control over water distribution (Penov 2004) or have been formally transferred to water user associations or similar public organisations (Theesfeld and Boevsky 2005). In some places, small-scale systems have been taken over by informal local groups with or without explicit support of local governments (Sikor 2005). In all three cases, local state officials typically retain a strong influence on the distribution of water, whereas in terms of accountability, the specific nature of the officials – elected local officials or agents of centralised state agencies – varies.

As this short discussion highlights, local state actors play a significant role in shaping the quality and quantity of access to productive resources in CEE countries. In some localities, where power relations are more decentralised, local state officials assume considerable regulatory powers. In others, where administrative regimes are more fragmented, local state officials compete with other powerful actors for control over productive resources. At the same time, the practices of local state actors reflect the nature of their accountability to local people. In the presence of strong accountability mechanisms, local state actors serve the interests of the local population, such as the local council in the environs of Warsaw discussed by Sikor (2005). Where local accountability is weak, local state actors can serve their own interests or those of central state agencies, as in the case of certain local leaders examined by Dorondel (2008) in Romania. Access to productive resources constitutes local relations of power, and vice versa. Postsocialist property arrangements not only reflect the nature of the local state but also affect the “state of the post-socialist state” (Sturgeon and Sikor 2004).

If we take the role played by the individual social security arrangements of state officials as central, the examples given above indicate how several local state actors utilised the period of accelerated change to construct a safety net of wealth and power for themselves and their families, and at the same time created patronage networks that constitute the social security arrangements for villagers. If their future plans and caring obligations for family members include further access to local productive resources, it is likely that a number of these instances and structures will shape local social security arrangements for some time to come. However, these networks might also change as property rights become more settled, officials get exchanged, and new people come in. Thus, the somewhat closed nature of former socialist village arrangements becomes open to outside elements. This is something that is particularly tied to inter-village relations and the reorganisation of sub-national governance. For various reasons, such as competition with EU farm subsidies, unfamiliarity, or lack of trust in state promises by rural people, these programmes have had uneven impact. It is an open question whether local governments will gain more control over land in the future and how this might influence income generation and social security amongst the poorer rural

populations, and what it might mean for intergenerational transfer. In addition, given the difficulty that some of the rural population have in securing enough to live on, both state and non-state programmes and projects have gained in significance. Such local projects often develop their own rules (on so-called project law, see Weilenmann 2005) and policies (Mosse 2005), and actors (such as the “new project class” observed by Kovach and Kucerova 2006) can increasingly shape local access to productive resources. Moreover, the ownership of property in productive resources strengthens the importance of inheritance as a means of social security, an aspect that has not been sufficiently explored in postsocialist empirical research so far. Since the beneficiaries of most of the postsocialist land reforms were older persons, it is not yet clear whether the current generation will want the land gained by their families. Whether or not they assume the familial land will depend on such considerations as the strength of the land market, the size of the plots, and the number of heirs living in the village and in the town. Apart from these more conventional contributions to social security, there might be emergent alternative uses like eco-tourism and non-material benefits such as individual satisfaction of engagements in one’s own plot and local environment (Horská 2004).

#### *4.2. Access to Social Assistance*

Similar to the field of access to productive resources, postsocialist reforms also introduced crucial alterations in the systems of redistribution. Kalb (1997: 205) argues, that these systems are “culturally so formative precisely because their managers and protagonists generally undertake action in order to shape their recipients in the light of their own moral motivations”. The rationale underpinning new welfare regimes has altered with the shift from universal to more targeted systems of provision with strong moral underpinnings.<sup>11</sup> Increasing numbers of forms of social assistance are no longer defined as a legal right, and have become increasingly stigmatised such as assistance for mothers (Nash 2003, Haney 1999). Although ‘deserving’ assistance (especially in relation to men) might still be measured according to individual ‘willingness’ to work, gradually diminishing opportunities for employment (particularly among low-skilled workers) means that fewer people can meet this requirement and as a result find themselves socially marginalised. This shift constitutes a major restructuring of ‘dependence’, similar to that in the field of productive resources described earlier. In both cases, access to resources is no longer formulated as a right acquired by citizenship or through membership of a social group, such as women or collective farm workers, but individualised according to proof of entitlement or some notion of need and deservingness. In contrast to land reforms, such changes in rural societies have not attracted much scholarly attention, and existing research concentrates on urban areas (Haney 2003, Caldwell 2004, Read 2005, Rivkin-Fish 2005). Hence, more research is needed to fill the gap by exploring the mechanisms involved in the distribution of social assistance in rural settings. The fact that need in the rural areas is often linked officially to the access to productive resources is of particular interest here.

Similar to changes in the economy of access to productive resources after socialism, local states also gained increased importance in the field of social assistance. Again we find a mix of centrally delegated ones and those connected to local government. Local bodies acquired new responsibilities, giving them more room to manoeuvre in some areas of provision. Local

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<sup>11</sup> In some countries these development began already in late socialism (for Hungary see Haney 1999).

governments gained new competences, such as raising taxes, and became recipients of bloc grants not tied to particular fields (Pickvance 2003: 12). In poorer regions, where local governments are frequently unable to provide adequately for their populations, distribution depends to a greater extent on local economic conditions, as well as on local norms and power relations. Social assistance in Serbia is still centrally organised but distribution takes place via local social centres (Nikač 2005). In Romania, responsibility for evaluating social assistance claims lies with the communal social workers, whose duty it is to test means locally. Dorondel (personal communication) found on the contrary that these actors in his research areas often relied on statements from local government in their research areas. Thelen found that child allowances in a Romanian village were paid out by local school teachers as a means of ensuring regular school attendance. The kindergarten in a Hungarian village was officially kept open during the summer so that one child, whose family was known to be unable to feed her adequately, could attend despite the absence of other children. These observations demonstrate the significance of local values in actual redistribution practices, which should be explored on a more systematic and comparative basis.

Ethnographic studies have shown that it is crucial to focus on civil servant-client interaction when reviewing mechanisms of social assistance distribution (Allahyari 2000, de Konig 1988, Howe 1990). Here, local understandings of the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor are negotiated. Ethnic differences in the postsocialist area can account for differences in standards of living but also for local definitions of what is considered to be an appropriate standard of living (Kovács, personal communication). In addition to the Hungarian self-governments mentioned earlier, new (international or locally-based) welfare institutions have taken over functions formerly carried out by state officials and may or may not be supported by local authorities (Barr 2005). In order to distinguish local state provision, regulation, and direct distribution, it is important to look at distribution practices at local offices and the distribution of social assistance in relation to other sources and services. As noted above, many of the social services in the countryside were formerly in the hands of the co-operatives. Although the legal foundations of ownership have now changed, some private and state enterprises continue to deliver social services, and local governments have assumed responsibility in a community-building effort (Haukanes 2007, Thelen 2007).

As mentioned above, neo-liberal decentralisation, pluralisation, and reduction of state provided social security is accompanied by a corresponding request for more care to be provided by the family. In the postsocialist context, this was associated with appeals for more ‘traditional’ gender arrangements. Nevertheless, the norms and practices developed during socialism did have a decisive influence on caring practices in families and the attitude of the latter to social assistance (Thelen 2005 and 2006b). Romania, for example, showed the highest percentage of feminisation in agriculture during the socialist period, so that a female retreat to the household seems unlikely. By contrast, even under socialism Hungary pursued family policies with long maternity leave and a lower degree of female participation in the labour market, postponing the emergence of female unemployment as far back as the late 1960s (Haney 1999, Einhorn 1993). Such differences can impact on family patterns of support (Thelen 2006b).

As in the case of productive resources, migration is another factor for social assistance distribution. The term “orphaned pensioners” occurred in Albania in this respect (de Soto et al. 2002). With the out-migration of those most likely to care of children and the elderly, a great many more people have become dependent on local offices. In many instances, existing social security

arrangements have reached their limits, as in the case of Romania, for example, where a vast number of children are being looked after by grandparents or in state institutions while both parents work abroad. On the other hand, economic migrants send remittances, and face-to-face communities allow for widespread knowledge of these sources of income. Given a situation in which local state actors know about these resources, the question arises whether they still acknowledge people, who have close kin working abroad, as eligible for state support. This is for example a crucial consideration in Romania, where almost ten per cent of the population works abroad, or in Serbia with its longstanding experience of work migration to Western Europe. In decisions about eligibility to state support local state actors apply central norms but also local ones, and their activities go well beyond pure distributions, they also influence and shape changing notions of family and kinship.

## **5. Summary and Outlook**

In this paper we proposed a research agenda bringing the concepts of local state and social security together in a comparative framework that promises new theoretical insights into the working of the state in rural areas as well as into its interrelation with other social networks of power. As areas of inquiry we identified access to productive resources and state assistance as central fields of state action. Insights into the kind of relations allows for overcoming simple dichotomies of state/non-state or public/private and avoiding normative assumptions about assumedly public or private activities of local state actors. In sum, it allows for a more differentiated analysis of the outcomes of neo-liberal reforms than simple images of state retreat.

Postsocialist countries have seen profound reconfigurations of public and private sectors that cannot be captured by the image of state withdrawal (Read and Thelen 2007). Instead, the analysis of local patterns of state formations and social security might allow insights into the complex and contradictory nature of reforms, particularly the ways in which a range of state bodies and actors continue to be of great importance. Identifying mechanism that further or hinder the development of situations that enhance the standard of local well-being or the increase of social inequalities respectively might contribute to the increasingly important, albeit challenging, policy area of rural development at national, EU, but also international level (Laschewski and Neu 2004, van der Ploeg et al. 2002). Demographic developments such as world wide aging processes might contribute to an increasing importance of such access questions. With regards to the example of the CEE countries, the access question might become more important because of the peculiar age structure of land ownership, especially in countries like Hungary and Romania with a fast aging rural population. More land might become available to the local state by dint of abandonment and, in the case of these countries, explicit policies to encourage land transfers in exchange for higher pensions. At the same time, personal relations of care might get increasingly scarce, a gap that can hardly be filled by access to state resources of social assistance. In these situations, local self-governments are potentially sidelined as the critical site for delivering social welfare, partly as a result of regionalisation and partly because of such demographic development.

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