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Rural settlements in transition – agricultural and countryside crisis in Central-Eastern Europe

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Abstract: The paper presents a synthesis of French and Bulgarian researches on the transition in villages in Central Eastern Europe. The main points focus on three questions, the rural unemployment and the crisis of small towns, the demographical deterioration, the new relations between villages and towns. A generalization of the rural central places' visual change and metaphors is proposed, completed by a typology of rural settlements. The question of the rural administrative divisions is discussed, with its implication for the future. As a whole the paper gives a contribution to the problematic of the likely development in the rural evolution pattern throughout Europe.

Key words: transition, rural settlements, Central Eastern Europe

The project of a socialist modernity in the countryside was based on the removal of the opposition between the rural and the urban way of living. This has been realised via the combination of two strategies. The collectivisation of the land has resulted in a system of salaried employment in the agriculture which destroyed the economic independence of the peasants and the rural craftsmen. Along with the development of infrastructures and services a general reorganisation of the rural settlements network was carried out, enhancing the role of the rural central places and the similarity of the urban lifestyles. In fact, in all Central-Eastern European (CEE) countries, the socialist period was synonymous to a phase of accelerated urbanisation supplied mainly by rural emigrants.

How did the failure of the communist system and the transition to a liberal economy modify the rural structures developed in the 40 years prior to 1990? Is the CEE countryside drifting to a diversification of the functions comparable to that observed in the Western world? Does it have a sufficient adaptation

capacity to soften the shock brought by the transition?

These questions relate to the more general problematic of the likely *convergence* in the rural evolution patterns throughout Europe. Their answer is dependent on a prior analysis of the dominating features of the countryside in the major European regions and especially in the CEE countries undergoing enormous changes nowadays. This is actually the aim of this article, based on numerous direct investigations and on specialised publications¹.

Although agriculture was the first sector embraced by the decollectivisation/privatisation processes in the CEE countries, it is now in a profound crisis of transformation. During the crisis some original features of the socialist countryside have been lost, while the whole pattern of organisation is deeply disturbed. One is surprised by the discrepancy between the local political opinions insisting on the importance of the countryside for the re-emergence of stable growth and the real activities on both institutional and individual level little engaged in helping the countryside development.

The transition from a centrally steered to a market oriented economy has so far resulted in few physiognomic changes in the countryside. At the same time the functional, or rather disfunctional changes are tremendous, especially in respect of depopulation and a consequent decrease in population density of large rural areas, rising unemployment and diminishing rural services, etc. While many old landscapes and metaphors have remained, the countryside has become a scene of new agents of change.

Crisis of the countryside and the small towns

Unemployment in the countryside is generally higher than in the urban centers: this can be explained by the four following circumstances.

1. The countryside in Central-Eastern Europe (CEE) has suffered severely from unemployment generated by *industry and services*.

The industrialization of the countryside during the communist period was to a great extent due to the localisation of *subsidiaries of urban plants* in many villages. These rural affiliates usually produced unfinished goods, later finalised in the central urban enterprise. Often this was organised within the agricultural state or cooperative farms, engaging much of the local cheap and poorly qualified labour force. This model was particularly popular in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, where during de-collectivisation nearly all industrial subsidiaries in the countryside proved to be a burden for the restructured central plants, and most of them were subsequently closed (Zrinscak 1994). Many urban industrial employees *commuted* from the nearby villages, or were accommodated in *workers' hostels* (the latter originating from more distant places, while not losing contact with the countryside, where they used to own houses, lots of land and which was their permanent residence). This group of so-called peasant-workers was the first to be dismissed and *brought back as unemployed* in the countryside. Such development was common in the Hungarian Plain, in Eastern Slovakia and Romanian Moldova. Another source of rural unemployment was the *reduction of the number of workplaces in the local services*, especially in the smaller settlements.

2. Agriculture under communism was known by its low labour productivity and poor output levels. As a rule, employment in agriculture was kept far higher than economic necessity. De-collectivisation led to a *disengagement* of many occupied in state and cooperative farms. The *reduction in salaried workplaces* was particularly strong in the state agricultural enterpris-

es. Areas containing large numbers of such units are showing 20% and more unemployment ratios (for instance in the west and north of Poland, where the rural employment fell by 75% of the 1980s level). According to the pace of the land re-privatization in a given country, the disengaged labour force has moved to private agriculture. Its productivity is generally even lower, as the mechanisation has fallen, the atomisation of lots (from 2 hectares in Bulgaria to 8 hectares in Poland as an average size per household, (Lenormand 1995), the financial instability, and the advanced age of those occupied in the new private farms. Thus agriculture is experiencing enormous difficulties in an unfavourable environment.

3. Due to the transfer to private farming of those formerly occupied in the state and cooperative farms, as well as of the former peasant-workers dismissed from the closed rural industries and services, as also to the arrival of some retired urban dwellers, the overall percentage of *the employees in agriculture has increased in most rural regions* (Table 1). The small private agricultural enterprises became the refuge of all those dismissed or threatened by unemployment.

Thus, the *higher unemployment in the countryside* is primarily a result of de-industrialization and the decay of *local rural services*.

In general, the *strictly agricultural occupations have increased* since 1989 in most of the Central-Eastern European countries, as a result of land privatisation, the switch to private farming of those formerly occupied in industry and services, and the return to the countryside of some retired inhabitants, etc.

4. Rural unemployment is *spatially scattered*. Also the scale of the productive units in the countryside is much smaller than in urban centers. The unemployment in the villages, although higher, is not regarded and made public as a social and political threat as it is perceived in the cities.

Services in the countryside have also suffered a serious drawback, due to the serious crisis in agriculture and

Table 1. Ratio of the agriculturally employed to total employment, %

	1990 (FAO data)	1995 (AGRA-EUROPE data)
Poland	20.8	25.6
Hungary	11.5	10.1
Romania	20.2	35.2
Bulgaria	12.2	21.2

the consequent lack of finance available to former state or collective farms.

The main objective under communism was the fulfilment of certain production targets assigned by the planning authority. In light of this, *services were perceived and located as an extension to production units*. They were subordinated to productive functions, while the state and cooperative farms financed the establishment and the running of the local services, such as shops, schools, kindergarten, canteens, restaurants, sporting facilities, cinema, recreation and entertainment. Their uneven distribution reflects the economic status of the local agricultural enterprises. This is why the managers of these enterprises were in practice, the most powerful local authority.

After the decline of the communist system, agricultural enterprises had to limit themselves to strictly productive and marketing functions. The local authorities were assigned much freedom in administration, but their budgets were drastically reduced, as they could *no longer count on the financial support of the state farms and cooperatives*. In such a situation, the former network of the rural services could not be maintained at the same level.

The separation of services from the productive functions witnessed nowadays in the CEE countryside is a common phenomenon in the West. But it is not yet clear whether in the CEE the main result will be a selective reduction of the services, or the development of some new central places in the changed socio-economic circumstances.

Demographic deterioration

Rural depopulation embraces the whole region of Central-Eastern Europe, with the notable exception of the areas belonging ethnically and culturally to the Islamic world. The general demographic crisis affected first the *former GDR*, Hungary, Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia, and later Romania. The traditional model of the birth rates – high in the villages, lower in the urban centres – has generally disappeared, except in Galicia, Eastern Slovakia and Romanian Moldova.

In the former communist countries in Europe, the urbanisation was based largely on the emigration of rural inhabitants to the towns. This process is extremely advanced in Bulgaria, where the share of the urban population has increased from 25% in 1946 to 69% in 1993. The result was a severe depopulation of large areas (for instance in the north-west of the country). As a consequence of the decreasing number of women in the reproductive age, the birth rate in the countryside fell to 6.4% in 1994, while in the urban centres it remained at 12.9%, in spite of the higher

fertility per woman in the villages. It seems that in Bulgaria, the age structure of the rural population has been irreversibly upset and is doomed to further decrease.

In all CEE countries the *rural population is getting older* (even in the Muslim areas of the Balkans, though their population is still relatively young). The process of ageing is more or less drastic, according to the rate of the urbanisation process. This can be illustrated by the example of the Wallachian plain, which exhibited the youngest population in 1930 Romania, yet the oldest in 1993.

Typical for CEE (except Poland) is the *high feminisation of the work* (Milanovic 1990), contrary to the trends in Western Europe, where the masculinisation is prevailing. In the CEE it is men who usually take leading positions in countryside management and mechanisation. Women are, as a rule, doing the ordinary (usually physical) field work. An interesting phenomenon is the behaviour of the young rural population. The changed socio-economic conditions are favouring the active participation of the young peasants in agrobusiness activities of their own. In reality though, this is hampered by the fact that the *lion's share of the land belongs to the elderly owners*, who prefer to stick to the neo-cooperatives. It seems that for a long time ahead, demographic structures (especially age) will play a decisive role in land ownership.

Towns versus villages: new relations, new contrasts

In the centrally planned economy the *town clearly dominated the countryside* through the imposed political-administrative hierarchy. During the post-communist transition, the town is still dominant, but via different mechanisms of a socio-economic nature. We can then speak of a modification of the urban role in the spatial 'production' and organisation.

Re-privatisation in the countryside implies that a large part of the land should be returned to the rightful owners who are urban dwellers. This is the key to understanding the discrepancy between the meaning of the new land laws and the ambivalent reaction to them by the rural population. Although differing from one country to another, it is a common feature that many of *those eligible for the restoration of land are urban citizens*. This is the case with 1/3 of the potential land owners in Hungary and over 1/2 in Bulgaria. These countryside-rooted urban dwellers have almost lost contact with agriculture, as they were deprived of land ownership in the past, or their links were, if any, of a different nature (for instance, recreation purposes, or the provision of food, etc.). On the other hand, many rural families are not qualified for

re-privatisation, as they did not possess land prior the collectivisation.

The collectivisation of agriculture in the CE Europe, practically completed in 1960s, was an integral part of the national planning supersystem. Notable exceptions were Poland and Yugoslavia, where less than 1/4 of the farming land was included in big enterprises, generally state owned. Collectivisation has stirred up a deep social unrest in the countryside, including the removal of the local elites and their replacement by groups belonging to the communist *no-menklatura*.

The massive emigration from the countryside to the urban centres caused enormous demographic, social and economic dislocation.

The *first emigration wave* in the 1950s affected young families or rather only men, while the children and their mothers remained in the countryside. This was often a temporary migration. The *second wave* in the 1960s embraced the rest of most young rural families, stripped of their land, ill-paid on the collective farms, and feeling too dependent on the local authorities. They decided to settle in the urban centres, where many new working places were offered in the quickly developing heavy industry. An important stimulus for emigration was produced by the unfortunate closure of many village schools (within the campaign of upgrading and concentration of the teaching facilities (ref. to Bulgaria-Doykov and Bachvarov 1969). A permanent transfer to the town was perceived to be in the interest of the children's education and life opportunities. The *third wave of emigration*, less significant numerically and temporally not so clearly cut, usually involved elderly relatives.

Today it is the *children of the post-collectivisation emigrants*, who are qualified for land re-privatisation comprising of large part of the arable land and forests. They see their land property not as a base for re-emigration to the countryside, nor as a start of agrobusiness, but rather as a source for rent, or real estate, which can be sold. This explains the support given to the agrarian parties by the urban dwellers in countries like Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria. The difficult economic situation drives the countryside-rooted urban citizen, to make a profit out of their land property. Actually, renting land lots in Bulgaria and Romania equals 30% of the total value of the agricultural production per land unit. This cannot raise but suspicion among the rural inhabitants regarding the urban land owners. The political parties trying to protect the remnants of the former system, have promptly made use of the peasants' fears, building on the traditional resentment towards the urbanites.

During the first free elections in 1990, a *chasm between the electoral behaviour of the rural and the urban*

populations emerged. The regional differences (except for ethnic voting), turned out to be less significant than the diverging electoral results of the countryside versus the urban centres, especially the big cities (Bilaut 1992). The countryside has retained a conservative approach to the liberalisation and the economic credo related to large scale privatisation. Except in the Czech republic, the next election results were not so contrasting, only because some of the urban dwellers have supported the conservative approach. This made possible the return to power of political parties identified with the former communist parties (more or less reformed).

The most striking example is the Polish countryside. In Poland private agriculture was largely the norm, so the land privatisation was not a crucial issue. Yet, the peasants felt unhappy when the centrally fixed prices of agricultural goods were lifted, while the purchase price was lowered in the urban markets and by the processing industry. In this perspective, one understands why the agrarian parties have played a decisive role in pushing the right wing parties aside.

Old and new administrative divisions

The territorial administrative reforms in CE Europe and the *development of new autonomous local authorities* is a phenomenon of a magnitude comparable to the re-privatisation of land ownership. The reform is advancing on the space networks inherited from the totalitarian regime (Rey 1994, 1995). The former divisions were disapproved (especially many of the favoured local administrative centres), by the rural population.

The project of building the socialist society implied a *removal of the contradictions between the city and the village*, aimed at upgrading the rural quality of life and in the name of the new, socialist kind of man, associated with the city, whereas the real aim was to alienate the population and make it easy to manipulate. We may recall here the concepts of the 'socialist agrotown' (agrograd in Russian) as a final solution of the contrasts between the countryside and the city, and the arbitrary urban elevation of many villages, often as a result of political lobbying, while its functions nevertheless remained rural. Spatially, the practice was quite different from the grand theory. The communist period was marked by a rapid growth of dehumanised industrial towns and a general spatial *concentration of the rural settlement networks* depriving the hamlets and other dispersed forms of habitat (Magura 1990; Hirschhausen- Leclerc 1994).

Since the 1950s, attempts at a more rational spatial hierarchy were introduced, retaining commonly three

levels: urban centres – small towns – villages. Within this, different models, schemes and definitions were applied, in order to elaborate a rational concept of development of the settlement network, including the services' outlets. The localisation of the settlements and the local services, similarly to developments in Western Europe, generally reflected the Christallerian model of spatial distribution. This is in itself quite illogical, as the space in centrally planned economy was organised to cater for the political-administration system. Our point here is, that the Christallerian space organisation, regardless of its initial aim, can fit the objectives of a totalitarian regime.

The effectiveness of the spatial organisation of the settlement network in the CEE led to many shortcomings, as the selection of the central places was subordinated mostly (if not only) to the needs of the political power. This brought about the introduction of a variety of schemes of regulation and concentration of the settlements on national, regional and local levels. In the Hungarian plain a large part of the dispersed small settlements (*tanya*), were merely liquidated. The so-called systematization of the Romanian villages under Ceausescu *wanted to eliminate the villages 'with no future', whereas the importance of the rural central places was re-affirmed. In fact most destructions were intended as a prelude to redevelopment of civic centres in villages which did have a future.* Bulgaria went furthest to create 300 settlement systems, which were the low administrative units, between 1979–1981. They contained villages, cut off from any local administrative functions. However, this 'innovation' created so many problems that the government had to rapidly switch to a more sophisticated scheme.

In Bulgaria and Romania, the authorities put forward the objective of local self-sufficiency in food and other consumer goods, which was nothing else but a tacit recognition of the inability of the centrally planned economies to secure the living standards and a search for a solution in an autarchic fashion. Such planning practices have resulted in the dismantling and loss of legal status of many small settlements. In the same time even in consolidated villages the population felt it lost its roots, as the major link with the place – the land property – was practically nonexistent in most of the CE countries.

In the CEE as a whole, the *administrative reforms* ended with the simplification of territorial divisions and the reduction of space administration levels, as well as the enlargement of the lowest level units. The former smaller low rank units, with prior long existing central functions, lost their positions. As a rule, the local population was not consulted on these new territorial divisions.

Similar changes of the size and number of the local

administration units, can be observed in the West. But in the CEE, where the link between the territorial division and political power was very strong, the divisions are still perceived as a symbol of the old regime, which should be abolished. No surprise then, that the local elections were carried out under slogans calling for new administrative divisions. The desire to remove the old regime networks is prevailing, as well as the anxiety to restore the prior division.

Reforms in this direction were approved in Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Bulgaria, and in the remaining countries the projects are about to be finalised. *Thus we may witness the return of the administrative fragmentation*, which in the West is regarded as an obstacle to the modern space management in sparsely populated zones. Against the background of such differences, a confrontation between the *local rationality and the national interest* (Rey 1996b) can be observed. The striking of a balance between the small and the big territorial units containing much internal differences, goes along with conflicts among neighbouring settlements. Some central places are putting pressure upon the government, trying to acquire urban status. In many cases this has proved to be successful. On the other hand, the peripheral villages, remembering the erstwhile practices, fear a new subordination and marginalisation.

Heterogenisation the rural areas

The transition of the CEE is dominated by two interconnected, though essentially different and contradictory processes: a deep general crisis and the development of a new socio-economic system. The nature of the tangible environment is determining the spatial structures and dimensions of these processes. An attempt at quantitative generalisation of the rural landscape changes is presented in Table 2.

There is no doubt, that Central Eastern Europe is made up of two main zones: *Central Europe and the Balkans, which are quite different geographically and culturally.* The differences between the two zones and inside them- among the countries and between the regions of any country-, tend to increase rapidly. This growing divergence is especially typical for the rural areas in the whole region.

The type of rural space is expressed by the following criteria : density of the population in a given area, the pattern of settlement localisation, the share of the population occupied in agriculture and the proportion of the rural population to the total. The last criterion is often decisive in the debate over the local autonomy, involving the integration or subordination of the rural settlements with regard to the urban centres (Rey 1996b).

Figure 1 throws light upon the existing types in respect to the rural population shares:

- a. areas disclosing very high and quasi-uniform shares – Albania, parts of Serbia and Bosnia, north-eastern Romania, as well as Bulgarian areas with Muslim minorities;
- b. countries with very low shares of rural population- Czech Republic, ex-GDR, Polish Silesia;
- c. the majority of countries in the region display very differentiated and even contrasting shares of rural population on the national level: Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, most of Romania and Bulgaria. Generally the share of the urban population exceeds the rural settlers from 50% to 200%.

In the countries of old industrialization (Germany and Czech Republic), the villages have been subordinated to the urban structures for a long time. In fact, here the urban dwellers support much of the rural infrastructures. The *Czech and Saxon villages*, highly dependent and connected to small industrial towns, represent an original part of *the highlands of Central Europe*. There, regional urban-rural networks developed prior the industrial revolution. Although agriculture is in crisis, it is of a rather marginal importance, due to its limited volume. On the other hand,

the rural areas are asserting alternative functions such as recreation and second homes' development. In the most industrialised areas of Bohemia, Saxonia and Polish and Czech Silesia, the crisis in agriculture is to a great extent the result of the high pollution by the industry and mining.

On the contrary, the low share of the rural population in Bulgaria, Macedonia and Montenegro, testifies to a *rapid and brutal urbanisation*, reflecting the unstable economic base. For these villages there is no rescue in sight. Physically (and cartographically), the villages are there, but empty of permanent population and socio-economic properties. The rural population is ageing and dying out. What will the urban population undertake regarding its roots? What we can see now is an unwillingness to re-migrate to the countryside, even during the worst crisis years. Some re-migration has developed recently in Albania, as the countryside is more secure during the civil war (but it is doubtful that those seeking refuge in the villages, will stay there for good) and in Serbia and Bulgaria, possibly as a reaction to the higher cost of living in the cities. In the countries with the biggest inherited contrasts in rural settlement, such as Poland, Hungary and Romania, agriculture and the countryside exert a

Table 2. Generalisation of the rural central places' visual changes and metaphors

Communist period	Transition to liberal economy
1. Connection to the regional and national road network	1. Church and religious events rehabilitated
2. Headquarters of the collective farm and enterprises buying agricultural or forestry goods	2. Private shops opened offering a variety of goods, incl. agricultural instruments and materials
3. Buildings of the local administration and the Party branch	3. Clubs of the local political parties, activists' meetings
4. Medical centre	4. New or restored pubs, kiosks and cafeterias
5. Cultural club and cinema, often used for official events	5. Reduction of the public transport, while private bus link with the town and the transport junctions (of passengers or agricultural products to be sold in the town)
6. Buildings and premises of the collective or state farm near the settlement-machinery park, stores, cattle sheds, dairy farm, industrial subsidiaries, canteen, etc.	6. Further development of second residences, letting rooms for a rural tourism
7. Grocery shop at the center, belonging to the collective farm	7. Deterioration of the roads and local infrastructures
8. School and kindergarten (closed after young families exodus)	8. Deterioration of the cultural activities and infrastructure
9. Church surrounded and marginalised by modern buildings	9. Vacant or misused buildings and machinery of the collective or state farm, unrepaired, abandoned, sold cheaply or misappropriated
10. Big blocks of arable lands near the settlements	10. Privatisation and segmentation of the lands, many lots unused
11. Building, or turning village houses into second homes of urban residents originating in the place	11. Industrial activities stopped, relevant premises closed, stolen or misused
12. Use of the courtyards for subsistence agriculture and animals breeding	12. Small private firms development based on agriculture-dairies, handicrafts, commerce, etc.
13. Permanent or temporary propagandist decoration of the central buildings	13. TV satellite aeriars, advertising at the central square, in the shops and bars and at the road junctions

big impact on the internal political panorama, and on all solutions regarding the national space organisation and management.

The settlement-creating impulses and the very distribution of the settlements, reflect the natural environment (relief structure, availability of water and mineral resources), the socio-economic factors (the character of social and economic organisation, ownership and land parcellation), and the technical conditions (roads and infrastructures). Although we cannot exhaustively present these conditions, we would like to draw attention below to some characteristics relevant to the demographic mass of the rural settlements and to spatial distribution tendencies.

In the north – in Poland, the Czech Republic and Eastern Germany – the *elongated configuration* of the rural settlements prevails (along roads, crossroads, near railroad stations or agricultural raw materials processing enterprises). The villages are generally smaller and more dispersed than in the Danubian and Balkan countries. The changes in the Polish countryside are less advanced, whereas significant differences survive between Greater Poland, Lesser Poland and Mazovia.

After World War II, in the plains of Hungary, Romania and the Balkans, the *size of the villages has become bigger, more concentrated, and densely built* (in Serbia and Bulgaria – a bigger, mostly rural settlement, with some urban functions as well). Dispersed settlements (the *tanya* in Hungary, *mahala* or *kolibi* in the Balkans) developed as a result of the socio-political conditions (Hungary) and both social and natural environment (in the Balkans the dispersed settlements are typical of remote mountain areas with an altitude of 500–1500 m).

In the Panonian countries and the Balkans, the countryside has lost much of its demographic potential, due to emigration, very low birth rates and high mortality of the rural population. Regardless of the ongoing concentration of the settlement network, the average village has also decreased in size, along with the big reduction of the rural population share in the total population at a national level. This has resulted in some reduction of the average size contrasts between the villages in Central-European states and the Balkans.

Here, as no reliable data are at our disposal, we do not elaborate on the forced emigration and ethnic cleansing, which have distorted the demographic landscapes of ex-Yugoslavia, and more specifically in Bosnia and parts of Croatia.

An attempt at a typology

Any grouping in the rural settlement system in CEE is extremely difficult, due to the multitude of versatile changes, to the deep differentiation of the natural and socio-economic environment. Besides, in the CEE long perceived as a monolithic region, the old cleavage between Central Europe and the Balkans has re-emerged and moreover, further differentiation may be observed at a lower level, as each country is developing independently. A comparison of agricultural productivity discloses great variation, as well. Sharp divergences feature in the countryside of the Muslim populated regions: Albania, Kosova, Bosnia, Sandzak, Western Macedonia, Rhodope and Dobrogea in Bulgaria.

In this situation, the comparisons make sense only at a very generalised level. What we offer here is a *synthesis of the synthesis*, concentrating on several rural settlement types:

1. *The Polish countryside* can be characterized by its well preserved agricultural function, relatively good demographic structure and environmental situation, except for some industrial zones in the south. There are substantial regional differences, while the western and northern peripheries display a more 'socialised' type of countryside, as much of the population has settled after 1945 and was occupied in state agricultural enterprises. The majority of the countryside however, reveals a close continuation of the functions both in rural settlements and agriculture.
The major shortcomings of the Polish countryside are the notorious insufficient investment in agriculture and the underdevelopment of the local infrastructures, especially services. In general, the Polish countryside has suffered least socialist restructuring, and it retains consequently a large demographic, productive and ecological-recreational potential.
2. *Bohemia, Moravia, Saxonia* (and to a certain extent, Silesia), have been industrialized and urbanised before all other regions examined, generally long before the communist episode. This is an area of deep environmental changes. At the same time, the capital input and productivity of the agriculture, as well as the investment in infrastructure and services are much higher. Actually, we cannot speak of villages in the traditional sense here, as in the densely urbanised and industrialized areas, the borders between the urban and rural have been to a great extent erased.
3. The *Panonian type* characterizes Hungary, Slovakia, Croatia (especially Slavonia), Eastern Sloven-

ia, Banat and Voivodina. Here many of the countryside functions were retained, while modernisation started as early as in the 1970s. Hungary is the typical country, which has managed to modernise its agriculture even during the communist rule. Marked differences exist between the countryside and agriculture profiles of the Hungarian Plain, Dunantul (Western Hungary) and the north-east peripheries. At the same time, poor demographic potential is revealed in all parts of the country.

The countryside of Serbia and of some parts of Croatia, discloses features typical of both the Balkans and the Panonian region.

4. *Romanian type* (in Wallachia, Moldavia and Northern Dobrogea) is in a sense transitional, between the Panonic and the Balkan types. Besides, similarly to the Polish type it is characterized by a relatively large demographic and agricultural potential, whilst the rural infrastructures and services are in a rudimentary stage of development.
5. The *Balkans proper*, have lost many of the specific functions of the countryside, as a result of the land collectivisation, a large part of the rural population having migrated to the urban centres. The latter are not stable either, lacking sound economic bases under the present socio-economic conditions. The countryside population is nowadays elderly, and the share of the ethnic minorities is increasing. This situation reflects the catastrophic economic state of the former socialist countries in the Balkans, although they have rich traditions and much natural potential for the development of agriculture. A typical country here is Bulgaria, where the countryside degradation is extremely marked.

Conclusions

Communism has disappeared as a political system in Central Eastern Europe, but its space organisation impacts will stand for a long time, both in the landscapes and the voluntaristic hierarchical networks.

Against that background, we can anticipate a further drifting apart of the main two sociocultural zones- Central Europe and the Balkans, as well as, within the zones, *between the states and their regions* (for instance, the bifurcation between the Czech Republic and Slovakia, or on a regional level- between Bohemia and Moravia, Western and Eastern Hungary, Muslim populated areas in Bulgaria versus the rest of the country). As a rule, the rural areas closely linked with the urban agglomerations are in a better demographic and socio-economic situation.

The new divergences reflect the mosaics of the natural potentialities, the development of national and

regional markets and the urban agglomerations' supply and demand. The impact of the urban markets is becoming central to the whole rural socio-economic life, as they have progressively replaced the economic planning regions, based primarily on the heavy industry created during the era of centrally-steered development.

Thus, a new spatial polarisation is underway. The CEE countryside will not be able to rapidly obliterate the artefacts and metaphors of the past.

Our hypothesis is that before integration with the European Union will take place, the CEE countryside is undergoing a period of fragmentation, diversification and internal divergence.

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Note

1. This paper offers a synthesis of recent french researches made in collaboration with bulgarian, hungarian and romanian researchers. The investigations have been made with 1) a research contract supplied by the French Ministry of Research 2) three theses of doctorat at the University of Paris I (B. von Hirschhausen on Romania, G. Zrinscak on Czeck Republic, F. Gerbault on former DDA – the two first with books published in 1997) 3) other field works in Bulgaria and Hungaria.

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