

# The great leap Westward - China and the land grabs in Ukraine and Bulgaria

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## Abstract

The recent global rise of food prices has predicated the explosion of land-grab practices at a global geo-economic scale. In Eastern Europe, although the post-socialist ‘great transformation’ entailed the commodification of the land, unsettled land ownership and undeveloped land market offered, at best, only a short-lived and tenuous protection from land-grabs. The global financial crisis impacted particularly strongly the resource-dependent, export-oriented economies of Bulgaria and Ukraine. Consequently, instead of striving to develop the potential of the small-scale local farmers, the political elites of the two states have responded eagerly to offers for mega land-acquisitions, issued by powerful international actors such as China.

Drawing on the Polanyian conception of land as a ‘fictitious commodity,’ the analysis employs a critical geography framework in order to situate the discussion within the theoretical debate about the social construction of land(scapes) in a post-Polanyian context. Next, the inquiry focuses on two recent Chinese land acquisitions, which are taking place in Bulgaria and Ukraine. The constructivist analytical perspective of the study allows exploring the socio-political construction of the ‘land’ and discussing the social resonance of the two ‘land grabs.’ By exploring the framing of the major arguments of the movement for further land commodification and the ones of the protective counter-movement, the analysis strives to provide an insight into the collective identities supportive of the neo-liberal expansion and the ones opposing it within the post-socialist states.

## 1. Introduction - the global ‘hunger games’

Since 2007-2008, world food and fuel prices have risen sharply upward, doubling or tripling the cost of key food items (FAO, 2013; Brown, 2011). The dramatic increases in the price of food have strengthened the hunger for land. From 2008 to 2009 national governments and private investors purchased over 40 million hectares of land (Deininger and Byerlee, 2010) – a rise of 1000% from an average of 4 million hectares per year for the previous forty years. The purpose of the mega-land acquisition has been to ensure (or invest in) “food security” given the likelihood of further food and fuel price increases. This phenomenon has been popularly referred to as a “global land grab.” Land grabs can be defined as the large-scale acquisition of land or land-related rights and resources by a corporate, non-profit or public buyer for the purposes of resource extraction geared towards external consumers (where external means off-site rather than foreign). The rise in land acquisitions has generated a heated debate, with powerful institutions, such as the World Bank<sup>1</sup>, supporting the practice of nations selling vast agricultural lands to foreign investors. In Polanyian terms, this institutionally-endorsed movement towards the ‘foreignisation of the land’ (Zoomers, 2010) or ‘new enclosures’ has incited the rise of an opposing counter-movement, also global in geo-scope, yet localised and fragmented in terms of action. Strong positions have been taken on the impacts of mega land-acquisition investments on the environment, rights, sovereignty, livelihoods, development and conflict at local, national and international levels (Cotula and Vermeulen, 2009).

However, the majority of the research on the land grabs has been focused on Africa, Asia, and South America (Zoomers, 2010; Borras et. al. 2012), while Eastern Europe has remained outside of the research attention. Furthermore, the privatization of the Eastern European land is a recent phenomenon; until recently unsettled land ownership titles, lack of market institutions, and under-developed land markets have provided some legislative and political shelter and certain degree of protection from the ‘land grabs.’ Now the post-crisis Eastern European governments have to face new financial constraints and the public suffers from wide-spread unemployment and impoverishment; thus the pressure to look at the last public asset left – the land - as a source of immediate cash is particularly strong.

Karl Polanyi argued that land is a fictitious commodity, so intertwined with the identity and lives of the people who inhabit it, that it can never be a simple ‘trade item,’ sold without consideration of the livelihoods and attitudes of the people (Polanyi 2001). Yet today in Eastern Europe the perspective of ‘land as a commodity’ is strongly present in the official government discourse, so the analysis will start by expanding upon the Polanyian discussion by drawing on

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<sup>1</sup> The World Bank has described the process in a particularly benign way, referring to it as the ‘rising global interest in farmland’. Future Agriculture, Land Grabbing in Africa and the New Politics of Food, Policy Brief 041, June 2011.

contemporary theoretical polemics, which argues about the duality of 'land(scapes)' as both material and ideational entities.

## **2. The Eastern European lands(capes) – a theoretical analysis**

Traditional perceptions have privileged one aspect of the representation of the land – its geospatiality and physical presence, as a concrete material reality. The materialistic perception of the land has also dominated the complex domain of 'spatial' concepts, which it evokes and is also a referent to - such as space, landscape, etc. In classical political thought, 'the word 'space' had strictly geometrical meaning' (Lefebvre, 1991: 1), 'space was treated as the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile' (Foucault, 1980: 70). Classical theorists, such as Friedrich Ratzel, saw space and nature merely as physical territory and resources to be exploited by the state.

In modern critical political geography the notion of space as a physical context *only*, separate from the social, is now contested as a misleading epistemological foundation. The organization and meaning of space is increasingly seen as the product of social translation, transformation, and experience, resulting from processes of social, political and cultural construction (Hourihane, 2003; Lefebvre, 1991; Goonewardena et.al, 2008; Shields, 2004, Soja, 1989). Rather than being catalogued by the imposition of pre-existing geo-political templates, landscapes are seen as social constructs which shape empirical reality and are simultaneously shaped by it. Yet, this construction is never an ethically neutral process (Michael, 2000: 50), due to the simultaneously material and ideational nature of the land(scape).

A lands(cape) is inherently defined by simultaneous and irreducible reference to *both* the material/ 'natural' environment *and* to the social and intellectual environment (Sack, 1992: 3), wherein *space* is set of places, and *place* is a location in space; while a *landscape* as the visible quality of place (Sack, 1992: 2). When space takes place, 'what takes place is fractured, fissured, and fractal: events are cracked open' (Doel, 1999: 135), because it is impossible to have a position 'which is not already a relation, an ex-position to something (someone?) other' (Kamuf, 1991: xiii-xiii). Thus, place is always already 'stretched,' 'distaniciated,' and 'disembedded' (Giddens, 1990;

Giddens, 1984). Stephen Daniels talks of the ‘duplicity of landscape,’ meaning the irreducibility of landscape to either its material or its ideological dimensions. Place, as a phenomenological-experiential entity, combines elements of nature, social relations, and meaning, so the experience of place is always an experience of the three realms (Cresswell, 1996: 157). Social commentary is always *written into* the arrangements and relations of space; place, as both ideal and material phenomenon, combines the objective and subjective (Entrikin, 1991: 5), and connect the mental to the material as the actions in a place constitute particular interpretations.

Landscapes are highly complex discourses in which a whole range of economic, political, social, and cultural issues is encoded and negotiated (Daniels, 1993). Contemporary scholarship also regards landscapes not only as places shaped by lived experience, but also as symbolic entities. Thus, landscapes can be interpreted as texts that interact with the social, economic, and political institutions and can be regarded as signifying practices ‘that are read not passively, but, as it were, rewritten as they are read’ (Barnes, 1992: 5). In the case of Bulgaria, the post-1989 ‘renaming process’ has re-named areas, whose names once referred to the Bulgarian anti-fascist movement – the ‘partisani.’ The old names, mostly generic and descriptive of the landscape features and often in Turkish, such as ‘Kara Dere’ (‘the Dark Ravine’), have once again been reinstated, and all references to one of the major confrontations in recent Bulgarian history and to its victims have been silenced.

Now, by retaining the discussion about the ideational dimension of the ‘land’scapes the analysis will proceed by elucidating the role of neo-liberal governmentality in the land mega-acquisitions, taking place in Bulgaria and Ukraine.

### **3. The agricultural sector of Bulgaria, Ukraine, and China**

In Ukraine approximately 42 million ha of land (69% of the total land area) are under agricultural production. Agriculture accounts for 10% of the Ukrainian GDP<sup>2</sup> and approximately 69% of the arable land is cultivated (2005). The Ukrainian agricultural exports are 3.14 billion

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<sup>2</sup> According to the latest available World Bank data.

<http://www.worldbank.org/eca/pubs/envint/Volume%20II/English/Review%20UKR-final.pdf>

USD (2005). Agricultural land in Bulgaria is 5,326 million ha,<sup>3</sup> of which 461,000 or 9% is abandoned (2003).<sup>4</sup> One of the reasons for the abandonment of the land is the dearth of cheap and reliable banking credits for small farming businesses. Now in Bulgaria agriculture contributes 5.2% of the GDP, a dramatic decline since its peak of 26.6% in 1997 (2007).

In China agriculture accounts for 16% of its GDP and 50% percent of the employment<sup>5</sup> (WB 2000). Since 1980, the share of the population which is rural has fallen from over 80% to 64% (WB 2000). The world's most populous state has less than 9% of world's arable land, but it has to produce food and other agricultural products for a fifth of the world's population<sup>6</sup>. Chinese agriculture is not sustainable in the long-term, and the people will eventually face a vulnerable food supply (Ching, 2007: 3). Given the rising food prices China may become bankrupt and unable to feed its citizens. Some Chinese analysts are also alarmed at the prognosis that 'foreign countries will be gradually taking over a larger share of the Chinese food market' (Ching, 2007: 29). Undoubtedly, Beijing cannot resolve the issue of secure food supply on its own and every solution will inevitably involve interactions with other states. Consequently, compelled by the growing demand of an increasingly affluent population and constrained by an insufficient amount of arable land, China has had to acquire an overseas agricultural policy. Beijing aims to ensure food security, with the goal of 95% self-sufficiency. This is a hard-to-reach goal - China has become especially active in overseas land acquisition, and one of the dominant players in the Eastern European land markets. It is troubling that China's food security goal is not coupled with strong commitment to land-use sustainability as well as commitment to redress the degraded environmental condition of many land areas within China. Nevertheless, in 2009 China already owned 2 million hectares of arable land overseas. Some critical analysts have pointed out that Western companies have been doing 'land grab' purchases in Africa for a long time, so China's land purchase policy is just following a precedent, set by the West.

#### **4. Markets and minds in the Eastern European lands**

Ninety-nine years ago, the first two decrees of the Bolshevic Revolution were the 'Decree about Peace' and the 'Decree about the Land.' The land reform ensured that the land was taken away from the hereditary aristocracy and given to the people. Today 'in order to achieve the most

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<sup>3</sup> Out of the total area of the Bulgaria state - 11,099,000 ha.

<sup>4</sup> According to the latest available World Bank data.

<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/6551/457840PUB0Inte101OFFICIAL0USE0ONLY1.pdf?sequence=1>

<sup>5</sup> Christopher Findlay, 2005, China Country Assistance Evaluation, Agricultural Sector, Washington, DC: The World Bank Evaluation Operations Department, [http://ieg.worldbankgroup.org/Data/reports/china\\_cae\\_agriculture\\_wp.pdf](http://ieg.worldbankgroup.org/Data/reports/china_cae_agriculture_wp.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Pao-yu Ching, 2007, How Sustainable is China's agriculture? A closer look at China's agriculture and Chinese peasants, [http://www.archive.foodsov.org/resources/resources\\_000009.pdf](http://www.archive.foodsov.org/resources/resources_000009.pdf)

efficient use of the agricultural potential, the land in Ukraine must become a commodity,' stated the former Ukrainian president Victor Yanukovich.<sup>7</sup>

In post-Washington-consensus Eastern Europe very few public goods have avoided the mass privatization. The results of a process, guided by the speed of privatization, rather than by considerations about the best market price were dismal - the Eastern European privatization 'deals' did not lead to the much-touted 'economic efficiency,' but to a spiral of speculation.<sup>8</sup> In a market, flooded by cheap assets many investors have aimed at the quickest dismantling of their purchases, and the latter's expedient re-sale for maximum current profit. Yet, the 'lessons of privatizations past' do not seem to trouble the strapped-for-cash Eastern European governments and recently, in both Bulgaria and Ukraine there has been a push to further the privatization of the public land.

The deals cash-for-land between China and the two Eastern European states are indeed 'grand deals,' because they involve millions of hectares of arable land. However the mega-acquisitions have not been an unqualified success. In Bulgaria the attempted lifting of the existing moratorium on the purchase of land by foreign citizens met with public resistance, and a parliamentary moratorium stopped the process. Ukraine, on the other hand, seems to have signed off the 'grand deal,' even though far from everyone is happy about it.

The discussion will now consider each of these two grand land purchases cases in greater detail, exploring the major frames characterizing the 'great debate' about furthering the neo-liberalization of Bulgaria and Ukraine by expanding their land markets. Drawing on Karl Polanyi's concept of the 'double movement,' the exposition will discuss the movement towards the expansion of the scope and influence of the Eastern European land markets and the up-surging counter-movement of protection. The analysis will then comparatively elaborate the discursive frames characteristic of the land pro-market movement and counter-movement, and the scale thereof (European, national, regional, local) in both post-socialist states. In this way the discussion will provide an insight into the collective identities supportive of the neo-liberal expansion and the ones, opposing it within the post-socialist states.

#### **4.1 Ukraine – 'China's largest overseas farmer'**

Post-socialist Ukraine has been re-integrated into the global political economy in a subordinated position, which leads to an inherently weak bargaining position. Consequently, the biggest country in Europe, Ukraine is soon to become, in the words of the Chinese press: 'China's largest overseas farmer.' Today Beijing is poised to make an "unprecedented foreign investment" in the Ukrainian agriculture sector, leasing 3 million hectares of farmland worth more than US \$2.6

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<sup>7</sup> Juri Romanenko, Budem Agroelfami Yanukovich vzial kurs na agrarnuyu oligopoliiu, 02.10.2013, Hvylya, <http://hvylya.org/analytics/economics/budem-agroelfami-yanukovich-vzjal-kurs-na-agrarnuyu-oligopoliiu.html>

<sup>8</sup> One notable example, amongst many, is the sale of the Bulgarian national air carrier – Bulgaria Air, to a foreign investor. The company was quickly stripped off its assets and declared bankrupt. The Bulgarian government later re-purchased the company at a greater cost than the price, at which it initially sold it.

billion. If this deal goes through, this would be the biggest reported Chinese land-lease or purchase. As for Ukraine – the purchase amounts to 5% of its territory and 9% of the arable land. The deal is for 99 years with the right of either party to terminate the contract, if desired, but not before the expiration of the first stage (50 years) and the Ukrainian territories will acquire ‘the status of extraterritoriality’ for China.<sup>9</sup> The agreement was signed in June, 2013 between the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC) and KSG Agro, Ukraine's leading agricultural company. XPCC, also known as Bingtuan, is a quasi-military organisation established in Xinjiang in the 1950s to reclaim farmland and consolidate defences against the Soviet Union, whose "granary" at that time was, ironically, Ukraine.<sup>10</sup>

The official discourse, referring to the ‘grand deal’ lacks references to ‘sustainable land use practices,’ or about the goals of sustainable agriculture. Instead, there are long-term ambitious goals: a 50-year plan sees Ukraine initially providing China with at least 100,000 hectares - an area almost the size of Hong Kong - of high-quality farmland in the eastern Dnipropetrovsk region, mainly for growing crops and raising pigs. The produce will be sold to two Chinese state-owned grain conglomerates at preferential prices. This project will eventually expand to three million hectares.

But not everybody in Ukraine is so optimistic about the grand deal. Critical voices accuse Yanukovich of trying to turn Ukraine into an ‘agrarian oligopoly.’ ‘For the Ukrainian foreign creditors, the creation of a full-fledged land market will become an instrument of reinsurance in the event of default of the Ukrainian state. Then it will be possible to withdraw real assets for the debt, primarily land as the most important asset of Ukraine’ writes the Ukrainian newspaper Hvyliia (Romanenko, 2013). Others warn in darker terms that ‘Ukraine is trading with its body, because everything else is less profitable’ (IA REX, 2013). ‘This would be the disgrace of Kiev,’ states Andriy Novak, Chairman of the Committee of Ukrainian Economists.<sup>11</sup>

The frame analysis of the discursive arguments, characteristic of the movement supporting the land deal emphasizes the ‘land as a commodity’ stance, and the economic benefits associated with it. The frames of the counter-movement’s arguments are more diverse. The ‘social justice’ frames emphasize the issues of fairness, inherent in the trade of land, especially when the deals are of such large scale. Another important frame is the ‘realpolitik’ frame, whereby the land is perceived as a ‘state asset,’ a poker chip to be traded during the ‘debt games’ between the state and powerful international investors. The counter-movement also employs an emotive

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<sup>9</sup> Informacionnoe Agenstvo REX (IA REX), Torgovat telom, Teritoria Ukrainy postupila na rassprodaju, Pokupaet Kitai: mnena, 25.09.2013, <http://www.iarex.ru/interviews/41523.html>

<sup>10</sup> Mandy Zuo, Ukraine to become China's largest overseas farmer in 3m hectare deal, 22.09.2013, South China Morning Post, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1314902/ukraine-become-chinas-largest-overseas-farmer-3m-hectare-deal>

<sup>11</sup> IA REGNUM, Interview with Andrei Novak, 24.03.2013, <http://regnum.ru/news/polit/1711257.html>

anthropomorphic ‘moral agent frame,’ which personifies the land, ascribing to it agency and volition.

#### **4.2. Bulgaria – China and the EU-subsidies game**

China wishes to expand its agricultural land holdings in Bulgaria as well. Bulgaria’s arable land is predominantly the property of small owners. There are only two large land funds and in 2011 a Chinese state company selected to do business with one of them. The ‘Tianjin State Farms Agribusiness Group Company’ rented 20,000 dka of land for 20 years, as announced in 2011 by the Bulgarian newspaper Capital.<sup>12</sup> The contract stipulated that the Bulgarian land owner will receive 250,000 euros rent for the land use. At the opening ceremony the head of the Chinese company Bao Zhishen talked about planned investment of 30 million euros and the right-wing Bulgarian press described it as ‘an enormous sum.’ The right-wing newspaper ‘Capital’ referred to the Chinese state company as ‘the new carers of the old land’ (Capital Editorial, 2011). ‘This is part of a new global tendency,’ was the approving verdict of the newspaper. ‘Capital’ attempted to present the deal in even more flattering terms, by referring to the reasons for the Chinese land acquisition as ‘romantically-nostalgic’ of the former socialist connections between Bulgaria and Ukraine.

The neoliberal discourse of ‘Capital’ also constructed an Orientalist representation of the rich and active foreign investor versus the poor passive Bulgarian natives. Moreover, an investor with commercial interests was framed as a benefactor to the poor and undeserving peasants, who were presented as requiring the constant supervision of the Chinese managers in order to satisfactorily fulfill their duties. Yet, even the right-wing press had to eventually admit that the Chinese investment did not amount even close to the promised sum of 30 million euros.

Only a year after the promising business deal, ‘Tianjin State Farms Agribusiness Group Company’ had already decided to discontinue the agricultural activities on its initial location, due to the lower than expected agricultural yield. The newspaper ‘Capital’ then lamented – ‘in an autumnally-sad way, the Chinese adventure in the poorest Bulgarian village has now ended.’<sup>13</sup> In spite of the investor-nostalgism, however, even ‘Capital’ conceded that the Bulgarian public road infrastructure was heavily damaged by the Chinese investor, as it was not suited for the heavy equipment, used by the Chinese company. Yet, even though the heavy agricultural machines incurred destructive damage on the public roads, ‘Tianjin Farms’ was not required to make any repairs. The missing discourses about ‘public responsibility’ and ‘investor responsibility’ also bring attention to the relatively narrow focus on agriculture, conveyed by the references to the ‘land.’ An

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<sup>12</sup> Capital Editorial, Novite stopani na starata zemia, 25.11.2011, Capital, [http://www.capital.bg/biznes/kompanii/2011/11/25/1212700\\_novite\\_stopani\\_na\\_starata\\_zemia/](http://www.capital.bg/biznes/kompanii/2011/11/25/1212700_novite_stopani_na_starata_zemia/)

<sup>13</sup> Capital Editorial, Bye, bye Boinitsa, 05.10.2012, Capital, [http://www.capital.bg/biznes/kompanii/2012/10/05/1920272\\_bai\\_bai\\_boinica/](http://www.capital.bg/biznes/kompanii/2012/10/05/1920272_bai_bai_boinica/)



expansion of the discursive focus to the larger scope of the 'landscape,' thereby contextually situating the agricultural fields within broader set of relations, carries the potential of bringing additional attention to the social impact of the externalities, resultant from the activities of the land's new owners.

In spite of the difficult beginning, China's interest in acquiring Bulgarian land has not waned and in July 2013 the Bulgarian newspaper 'Standart' announced that the Chinese state company, now called 'Tianjin Farms Cultivation Group,' will be buying Bulgarian fields worth 50 million US dollars. The fields will be planted with lucerne and fodder maize, which will then be exported to China, according to an announcement made at the Bulgarian-Chinese business forum in the luxury Sofia hotel 'Sheraton.' 'Tianjin Farms' is now planning to buy other cheap Bulgarian assets, such as Bulgarian wine and essential oils.

Although this is a small deal, compared to the Ukrainian mega-land acquisition, Bulgaria's EU membership offers other advantages. First, it provides direct access to the EU, the largest market in the world, and secondly - every registered agricultural producer is entitled to EU subsidies. In the case of "Tianjin Farms," if the ceiling of the direct payments per hectare per annum is estimated at 25.70 leva (EU funds plus additional payment from the Bulgarian state), then the combined subsidy from the Bulgarian state and the EU would nearly cover the rent paid by the Chinese company (Capital Editorial, 2011). Consequently, rather than 'romantically-nostalgic' reminiscence about old socialist Bulgarian-Chinese ties, it is the EU subsidies that make Bulgaria an attractive investment location for non-EU investors.

#### **4.3. Bulgaria's moratorium on the sale of land to foreigners**

Currently China leases the Bulgarian fields, since Bulgaria does not allow direct foreign land ownership. Yet, the moratorium on the sale of land was almost lifted in October, 2013, as the parliament went to vote on the motion to release the moratorium on land purchases by Bulgarian non-nationals. Widespread public protests and condemnation of the motion effectively halted the process and the parliament upheld the moratorium until 2020.<sup>14</sup> Surprisingly, the center-left Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) voted in support of the motion. BSP, who claims to represent the left ideas in Bulgarian politics, argued that currently the Bulgarian oligarchs are buying the land at prices below the fair market price, so allowing competition from abroad will result in increased land prices. Even though this was the party line, the individual BSP deputies voted overwhelmingly to reject the motion.

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<sup>14</sup> Elitsa Martinova, Parlamentat nalozi moratorium varhu prodajbata na zemia na chujdenci, 22.10.2013, OffNews, <http://offnews.bg/index.php/256389/parlamentat-nalozhi-moratorium-varhu-prodazhbata-na-zemya-na-chuzhdentsi>

In the important debate about the moratorium on the sale of land to foreigners, the right-wing and far-right political parties, such as the center-right GERB<sup>15</sup> and the nationalist Ataka<sup>16</sup> openly opposed the land reform. The far-right Ataka even asked for a national referendum on the issue, but the position of the center-right GERB was rather contradictory and unpredictable. Soon after the parliamentary vote GERB's leader Boyko Borisov radically changed his position by stating that GERB had voted mistakenly in support of the moratorium, 'misled by the populism and craziness of Ataka.' The reaction from the high echelons of the Bulgarian public administration has also been contradictory and unpredictable. The Minister of Agriculture first supported the extension of the moratorium by stating that 'earth and gold are sold only in the end of one's life;' next he said that the decision is 'absurd;' finally he announced that the Ministry will develop rules for the sale of land to foreigners.

The abrupt political turns, characteristic of the stance taken by the Bulgarian center-right on the land sales moratorium, lead to the consideration that pressure from an external party could have elicited the sharp political repositioning. Indeed, support for the fall of the moratorium on the sale of land to foreigners came from the highest office in Brussels – the president of the European Commission Jose Manuel Barroso. In a meeting with Barroso the Bulgarian Prime Minister Plamen Oresharski ensured the EC president that 'there is no way that Bulgaria would make amendments to its accession treaty, but we will look for ways to reconsider the parliamentary decision.' 'The quicker we find a solution, the better it would be for Bulgaria,' added Oresharski. Yet already in January 2014, the parliamentary decision to extend the moratorium on the land sales to foreigners was considered as non-constitutional by the Bulgarian Constitutional Court (BCC). The BCC decision came as a result of a request submitted to BCC by 55 parliamentary representatives from the ruling Socialist and Turkish minority party coalition.

The discourse analysis of the arguments against the fall of the moratorium showed that they were framed in the 'realist/realpolitik' frame – upholding the moratorium was a 'citizen and patriotic duty' and issue of 'national interest.' Allowing foreigners to buy Bulgarian land would be 'yet another step towards the loss of sovereignty for Bulgaria,' 'this would harm our national interests, as the foreigners who buy the land may use the land for other uses, rather than for agriculture.' Arguments for the fall of the moratorium were of 'formal legalistic contractarian frame,' referring to Bulgaria's 'legal obligation, as an EU member,' and stating that 'we would be a bad party to a contract which we have signed,' 'this would harm the external image of Bulgaria,' 'in this way we defend the European orientation of Bulgaria.' However, both sets of arguments emphasized the instrumental value of the land, and even the emotional appeals were framed by reference to the land as a repository of monetary value. Although the arguments counter-posed the

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<sup>15</sup> GERB is the Bulgarian abbreviation of the Bulgarian center-right political party Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria.

<sup>16</sup> Ataka, the name of the Bulgarian right wing nationalist party stands for the word 'attack.'

internal vs the external dimensions of Bulgaria's politics, both sets of arguments were underscored by the 'neo-liberal' costs-benefits frame.

## **5. Land ownership in Eastern Europe – deal or no deal?**

The research evidence suggests that land deals take place predominantly in countries with weakened economies and low levels of transparent governance. The land serves as an offshore 'extraterritorial' investment for richer countries, even though it could support local economic growth if utilized properly. The geo-economic magnitude and geo-scope of the land acquisitions preclude the possibility of taking into account the full range and extent of agrarian and social changes that occur pursuant to a 'land grab,' as well as their strategic implications for poor people's livelihoods. However, one of the major implications is that the cash-strapped governments seemingly place more emphasis on their obligations to the foreign investors, rather than to their own people. The deferential treatment of the foreign investors may indeed lead to quick profits for few privileged government officials, yet the public losses such private gains entail mean that the governments are in danger of transforming from peoples' representatives to representatives of the foreign investors.

The frame analysis of the major arguments for and against the sale of large land areas to foreign investors revealed that the neoliberal frames were the dominant discursive structures in the arguments supportive of the land commodification. The 'land as a commodity' frame was used both in Bulgaria and Ukraine in order to support the land market expansion.

The counter-movement against the commodification of the land has raised diverse opposing frames. In Ukraine, several different frames have emerged: the 'social justice,' 'realist/realpolitik' and the 'moral agent' frames. Bulgaria's counter-movement espoused two major frames: the 'realist/realpolitik' and an 'opportunity cost' frame, the latter being openly neoliberal in character. It is notable that in the case of Bulgaria there has been a reaction to the counter-movement, with the neoliberal movement responding by a new pro-market frame – the 'formal legalistic EU-contractarian' frame. Thus, the Bulgarian political space is shaped by a hierarchical scale, which is missing from the Ukrainian discourse – the EU-scale. In both cases though, the discourse has been framed as a debate about the 'land,' without a mentioning of the 'landscape(s),' the socio-ecological context within which the mega land-transactions will take place. The parsimony, inherent in the reference to the 'land' sets the terms of the discussion, narrowing the discursive horizon to a singular, de-contextualizing, functionalist (purely materialist/agrarian) dimension.

According to the analytical findings, the diverse nature of the Ukrainian discursive counter-movement frames provides broader and more comprehensive perspective for resistance to the neo-liberal drive for further land commodification, as compared with the relatively narrower counter-

movement frames, which have emerged in the Bulgarian political discourse. This finding can potentially indicate that the counter-movement for land protection has possibly mobilized more diverse social groups in Ukraine, than in Bulgaria.

In terms of vertical hierarchy, the Bulgarian political space is hierarchically more differentiated than the one in Ukraine (as it includes the EU-scale), but this hierarchical complexity has not yet been utilized in the counter-movement, pro-protection discursive frames. The dominant discursive frames are national in scope. The reason for this phenomenon can be found in the parliamentary-political nature of the movement for land commodification, which entails a discursively framed scale which is national in extent, thus pointing at the role of the state in the Eastern European market-making. In both Bulgaria and Ukraine the hierarchical scale within the state has become invisible, submerged into the 'national' scale. Consequently, although the regional and local levels should be the sites of progressively strongest resistance, as any processes of land commodification will have an immediate local and then regional impact, currently these local/regional discourse currently do not contribute towards the counter-movement discourse. One possible explanation would point out at the general pattern of excluding the commercially less important local/regional discourses from the powerful national media groups, which are based in the capital.

In relation to the horizontally networked dimension of the discourses - Bulgaria and Ukraine share the feature of the horizontal disembodiedness of the discourse – thus, no parallels are sought in the experiences of the neighbouring countries or further abroad. Therefore, the major counter-movement discourse in both Bulgaria and Ukraine frames land commodification as a realist threat to the very existence of the state, while the commercialization movement frames the land grabs in terms of neoliberal economic gains.

The discourse of the land-marketization movement is also characterized by the emergent Orientalist construct of the rich investor/poor native. The worthy-of-support Other bears virtues, such as wealth and holds high expectations of the native Self. The monetary poor native is lazy, does not understand the value of the land and only the intervention of the superior Investor is able to motivate him to do a proper job. Therefore, the ethical implication of the right-wing discourse is that the poor native Self is deservedly poor, and it is right that the land should be taken away from him, so that the rich Other can use it for maximum profit. In this way the right-wing discourse attempts to deprive from moral grounding the counter-movement opposing the land grabs, shifting on the poor the blame for being poor. It is also important to note, that in contrast to the 'realpolitik/realist' arguments of the counter-movement, the neoliberal discourse does not differentiate between nationals and non-nationals and openly sides with the rich Self, counter-posed to the poor Other.

The mega land deals in both Bulgaria and Ukraine have currently been put on hold, yet ‘land grab’ mentality is still very much present in the highest levels of the political establishment of the two states. In the neo-liberal world of Eastern European politics the land is to be put to use for maximum profits, rather than recognizing its value as a common good, and the inherent common social purpose of its use. Consequently, questions about what can be done so that the socio-economic relations with the land are governed by the principles of ‘sustainability’ and ‘public responsibility’ are not even asked, much less answered.

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