

AGRICULTURE AND LANDSCAPE IN 21ST CENTURY EUROPE: THE POST-COMMUNIST TRANSITION

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Abstract: The most important recent political development has been the accession to the European Union in 2004 of eight former communist states and their integration to the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). The CAP as a largely uniform policy trying to cater for the needs of the very varied agricultural industry in 27 states across both Eastern and Western Europe is itself undergoing a radical transformation as politicians attempt to shift the main focus of its activities from production subsidies to a more broadly conceived sustainable rural development strategy. The paper concludes that for these changes to be managed effectively and to support stable and sustainable rural landscapes there must be publicly-led regional strategies in place.

Key words: Agriculture, European Union (EU), Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), landscape change, post-communist transition

1. Introduction

For more than 40 years in the second half of the 20th century most of Central and Eastern Europe was in the thrall of the Soviet Union and its communist ideology. This paper surveys how agriculture and rural life in this part of Europe has adapted following the collapse of soviet hegemony in the years since 1990 and the impact that the changes have had on the rural landscape. It concentrates particularly on the accession to the European Union (EU) in 2004 of eight former communist states and how they are being integrated into the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). This issue is given added relevance for two reasons. First, the CAP is a largely uniform policy trying to create an open food market for the very varied agricultural industry in 27 states across Europe and, thus, in rather a perverse way, aping the attempted uniformity of collectivisation in the former communist controlled parts of the continent, though from a very different political and economic starting point (Gray 2000). Second, the CAP itself, as part of the Agenda 2000 programme, is undergoing a radical transformation as politicians attempt to shift the main focus of its activities from production subsidies to a more broadly conceived sustainable rural development strategy based on decoupled direct payments. It is hoped that this process of transformation will also help make the CAP more compatible with the global drive, spearheaded by the World Trade Organisation (WTO), for reduced levels of national protection for agriculture (Commission of the European Communities 1998, Lowe et al. 2002).

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2. Context and background

The feudal organisation of agriculture and rural life in Europe, as well as the associated landscapes, changed only slowly up until the middle of the 20th century. For the most part, land was held in large estates, with peasant smallholders eking out a living marketing their own produce on the margins of the main economy. Nevertheless, rural employment did slowly decline in the face of a two-pronged attack. First, from the growing levels of mechanisation diffusing across the continent from Europe's more industrialised nations (Germany, France, the United Kingdom) and, second, from the growing access to, and dependence on, imported overseas food supplies. Even so, despite the gradual change, in 1950 many European countries still had more than 50% of their employed population working in agriculture and in some Balkan states – Romania and the former Yugoslavia for example – the proportion was in excess of 75% (figure 1). Even in the more industrialised countries of Western Europe – France and Italy for example – the proportion was greater than 30% and only in the United Kingdom was the proportion in single figures (Judt 2005).

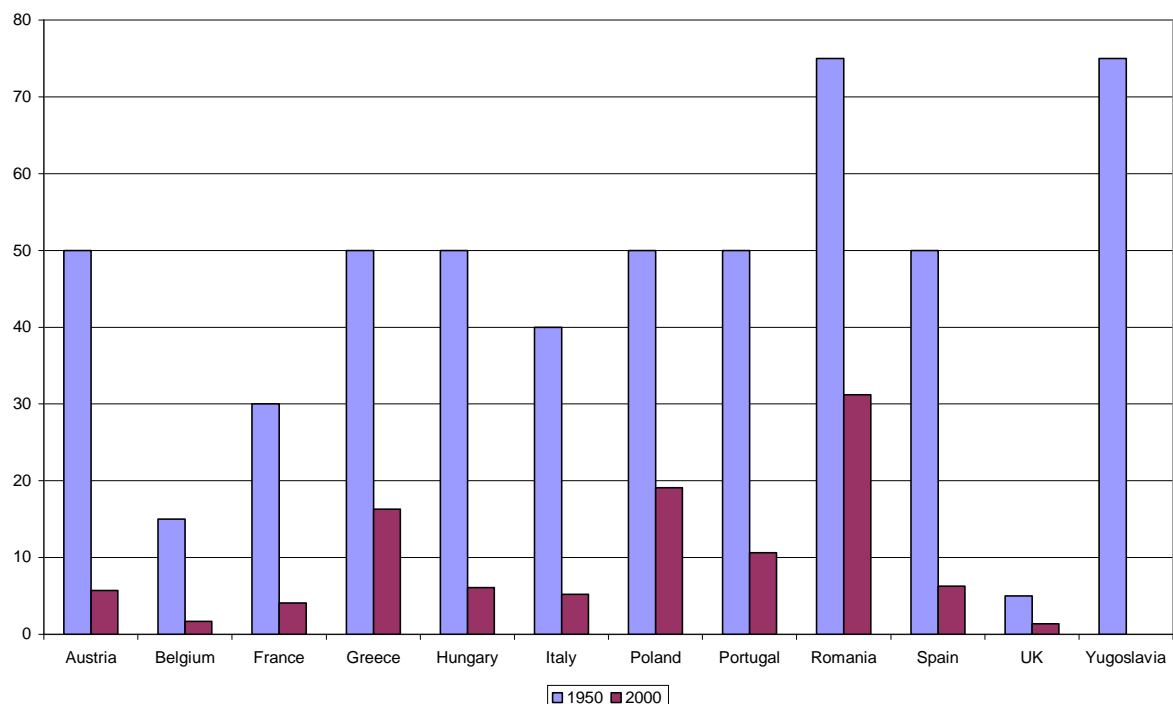


Fig 1. Employment in agriculture in selected European states (approximately 1950 and 2000 (%)). As Yugoslavia no longer existed as a separate state in 2000, there are no data available.

In this context, the situation in the former Soviet Union is instructive: the reorganisation of agriculture by the new, revolutionary, Soviet government in the 1930s into large collectives was widely opposed by small peasant farmers, who did not want to give up their land and surrender their economic independence to a far off national government, even more remote than their erstwhile feudal landlords. The intransigence of the so-called *kulaks* was vilified by both Lenin and then Stalin and it is estimated that some 2 million of the rebellious peasants were executed or deported to labour camps to end their organised resistance to collectivisation. In Europe there was no such overlay of state-sponsored violence and here a similar widespread reluctance to abandon the country for the city met with greater success, despite the grinding poverty that many small farmers had to endure.

It was only in the second half of the 20th century that the abandonment of the rural way of life for the urban alternative in towns and cities really began to gather pace. The data in figure 1 show that in the countries of Northern and Western Europe by the turn of the 21st century, the norm was for about 5% of the working population to be employed in agriculture, and only in some of the poorer Mediterranean countries (Greece and Portugal) and parts of Eastern Europe (Poland and Romania) was the proportion in double figures. Nowhere did it approach the levels in excess of 50% that had been commonplace in 1950.

Amongst the EU-25 there are just five states that now have more than 10% of their labour force still working in agriculture (figure 2), but only in Poland, where there are over 3 million farmers, do the absolute numbers produce a significant anomaly in the overall pattern of a rapidly diminishing level of direct economic dependency on the land.

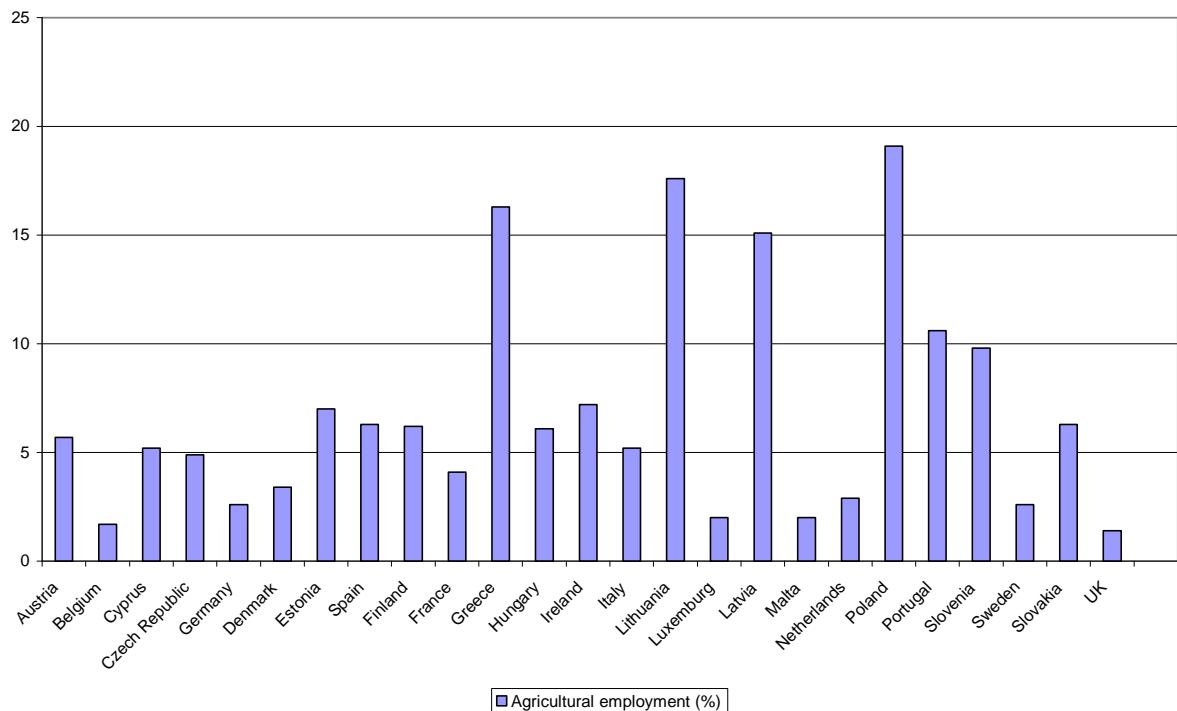


Fig 2. Employment in agriculture in 2002 in EU-25 (%) (Commission of the European Communities 2002).

In many ways, however, the picture is deceptive, for in the EU as whole just over 50% of the total land area, some 2 million km², is now given over to agriculture, meaning that the industry still remains the dominant influence on the shape and look of the landscape (figure 3). The way the industry develops is, therefore, a matter of fundamental importance for the future of the European environment. Furthermore, if the area of land under forestry (some 1.7 million km²) and all the various forms of nature conservation (some 1.1 million km²) are also included then over 94% of the land area of the EU may be classed as rural, making rural policy a matter of critical concern for all Europeans, no matter whether they live in the town or the country.

3. The challenge of enlargement

Agriculture in Central and Eastern Europe evolved very differently in the course of the 20th century from that in Western Europe and this difference is at the root of the challenge of EU enlargement. Eight of the countries that joined in May 2004 (Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia and Slovenia) are former communist states, as are Bulgaria and Romania, which became members of the EU in 2007. The two Mediterranean countries that have also joined (Cyprus and Malta in 2004) are both too small to have anything but a very marginal impact on the overall picture and will not materially alter the thrust of EU agricultural policy.

To varying degrees, agriculture and the rural landscape in the former communist states have come through a prolonged period of radical reorganisation, resulting in a marked duality in farm structures. On the one hand, there are the effects of the widespread collectivisation and the creation of state farms, resulting in a relatively small number of very large units, while at the other there is a myriad of very small farms, mainly catering for family or very local needs and operating outside the industrial food production system. What is notably absent is the medium-sized family farm, so characteristic of much of Western Europe, the promotion of which is one of the main tenets of the CAP. Indeed, small and medium-sized enterprises of all kinds had no real place in the former centrally planned economies.

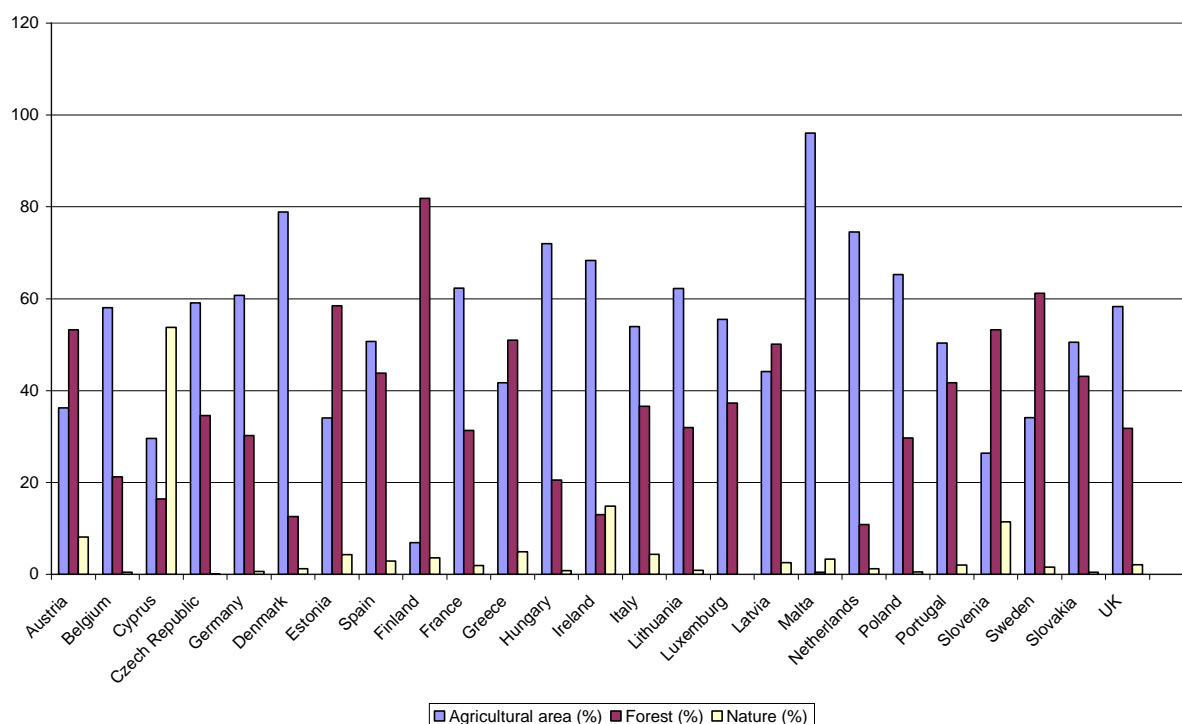


Fig 3. Agricultural land, forest and protected natural areas EU-25 (%).

Nor has this picture altered fundamentally since the collapse of the communist system in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989. The market model may have been embraced, but the large farm units have survived, if somewhat reduced in size, and small, part-time, farms are still a widespread feature in the landscape. In summary, there are now four main types of farm enterprise:

1. Very small, mainly economically barely viable holdings, whose owners earn most of their income elsewhere. In all the new accession states these constitute the majority of holdings.
2. Small to medium-sized family farms. These are relatively few in number but are now slowly increasing in number, partly as a result of the CAP.
3. Large corporate farms, many of which are successors to former collectivised or state run enterprises, in some cases now run by their previous managers, in other cases by foreign investors, mostly from Western Europe.
4. Cooperatives, which were communist collectives or, in a minority of cases, state farms.

Country	Collective / cooperative farms		State farms		New corporate forms	Individual / family farms		Concentration of land
	Pre-1990	Current	Pre-1990	Current		Pre-1990	Current	
Bulgaria	4 000	637	1 615	735	-	0.4	1.4	90
Czechia	2 578	1 447	9 443	521	690	5.0	34.0	82
Estonia	4 060	-	4 206	-	449	0.2	19.8	60
Hungary	4 179	833	7 138	7 779	204	0.3	3.0	92
Latvia	5 980	-	6 532	340	309	0.4	23.6	20
Lithuania	2 380	-	1 880	-	310	0.5	7.6	30
Poland	335	222	3 140	620	333	6.6	7.0	40
Romania	2 374	451	5 001	3 657	-	0.5	2.7	50
Slovakia	2 667	1 509	5 186	3 056	1 191	0.3	7.7	97
Slovenia	-	-	470	371	-	3.2	4.8	40

Tab 1. Average farms sizes (ha) by organisational form and the concentration of land in the new accession states. Concentration of land is calculated as a percentage of agricultural land in top 10% of largest farms. The EU-15 concentration of land = 40 (European Commission, Lerman et al. 2004, National Statistics, Rizov 2006).

The entities that have emerged from the collectivised and state farms of communist times are admittedly rather smaller, but for the most part they have retained their corporate structure, operating as cooperatives or limited liability companies. They are now very much farm businesses, with a mix of high technology and a relatively large numbers of employees, rather than family run concerns. As such they have the potential to be very successful within the increasingly competitive market environment that agriculture in Europe has to face.

1. As the very large farms from the communist era have reduced in size, the average size of individual holdings, both household plots and other family farms, has increased substantially from, on average, 0.5 ha to between 5 and 20 ha. At the same time, they have also begun to separate into two distinct groups in terms of size, as described below.
2. There is a growing number of market-orientated, full-time, family-run farms, some of which are quite large. It is they that are responsible for almost all the observed growth in the average size of holdings.
3. The rest, which are by far the majority, are barely viable as independent economic entities. They survive through a combination of foregoing a proper return on the capital investment in the land and buildings that make up the holding, and access to government subsidies. In many cases, off-farm earnings make little additional contribution to overall income (figure 4). If all farms greater than 5 ha in size are included, in Poland over 70% of farm income is generated on the farms themselves and the proportion in Hungary is over 50%. But this is by no means only a feature of farms businesses in Central and Eastern Europe; it is widespread in Western Europe as well. In Germany over 85% of farm household income is generated on the farms themselves and in France the proportion is 75%. Indeed, only in the United Kingdom, Ireland and Denmark does off-farm household income form the bulk of earnings for farmers (Rizov 2006). Across Europe the survival of marginal farms has traditionally been encouraged by the CAP and domestic government policies for agriculture and rural areas. They may not be viable judged against market economic criteria, but they show no sign of disappearing because of their importance for household survival, despite current efforts at reform (Kostov and Lingard 2002).

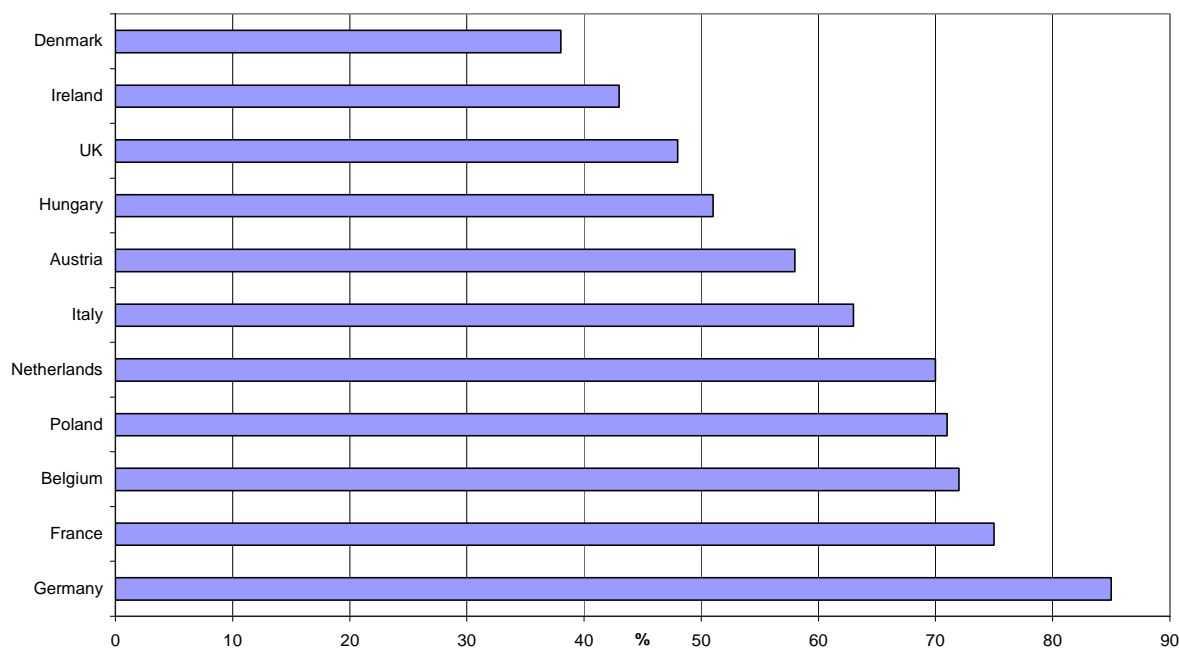


Fig 4. Farm income as a per cent of total farm (>5 ha) household income in selected EU Member States (Rizov 2006).

In order to see how much reform is required in order to bring farm structures closer to the EU norm, it is instructive to see how far individual new accession countries deviate from those in the pre-2004 EU-15 (Lerman et al. 2004). As can be seen from figure 5, 50% of farms in

the EU-15 occupy just 10% of the land, whereas 10% occupy 40%. By contrast, in Bulgaria 80% of farms occupy 10% of the land and 10% occupy 80%, a bi-polar pattern that is broadly similar in the Czech Republic and Hungary. However, the pattern is by no means uniform: in Slovenia, as well as Poland, Romania and Estonia, the proportions are 50% and 40% respectively, precisely in line with the EU-15 average. At the other end of the scale, in Lithuania the proportions are 20% and 35%, indicating that here the large farms are now over-fragmented in comparison with EU-15 and the picture is much the same in Latvia. In both these countries it may well be necessary to take steps to encourage some amalgamation to create more larger units, the opposite of the situation in most of the other new accession countries.

However, the inter-state picture does not, however, tell the whole story. In many respects, regional differences are of much greater significance and it has even been argued that one of the main impacts of the EU itself has been to reduce the disparities between Member States, while at the same time exacerbating internal regional disparities (Getimis 2003). As far as agriculture in the new accession countries is concerned these inter-regional differences are of particular significance in Poland, by far the largest farming industry. Crescenzi (2004) has argued forcefully that a major consequence for Poland of integrating into the CAP will be a marked sharpening of regional disparities in farm size and farm incomes.

Faced with this complex picture, the EU has had to wrestle with some difficult dilemmas in deciding how best to integrate the new accession countries into the CAP (Commission of the European Communities 2002, Wichern 2004). Without any intervention they estimate that the production of cereals, oilseeds and pigmeat would have gradually increased, while milk and beef production would have declined and there would have been a growing need for food imports. The introduction of the CAP, phased in over a decade, has already subtly altered the picture. Cereal production has continued to increase, but so too, to a much smaller extent, have beef and dairy production. On the other hand, the production of pigmeat has actually begun to decline, despite a growing market demand for pork and all manner of pork products. In landscape terms the overall effect has as yet been difficult to measure, but there has been an increase in the area of arable land, and a slow decline in the numbers of livestock reared. In addition it seems as though the gradual steady increase in the forested area across the majority of EU Member States, including the new accession states, is continuing at the expense of agricultural land generally (United Nations Environment Programme 2007).

It is, however, direct payments that have caused the greatest difficulty for the EU and which potentially pose the greatest force for landscape change. Under the terms of the CAP direct national subsidies are not permitted and all such payments must be distributed through the CAP from Brussels. Combined with an unwavering insistence that the CAP should be a single policy applied equally across all Member States, this means that all the new accession countries will ultimately have equal access to payments available across the EU. Currently the EU, as part of its Agenda 2000 reforms, is trying to boost direct payments for environmental and social policies in rural areas by a phased reduction in production subsidies (see next section), but this has raised some difficult problems in the new accession states. There are a number of concerns with such direct payments, but one is that they will act as a disincentive to the many small so-called subsistence farmers to diversify out of agriculture, because they will provide just sufficient support to keep their enterprises viable. It will also, therefore, slow down the rate of amalgamations and the growth of medium-sized family farms. The solution has been to phase in such direct payments over a ten year transition period, which is of course unpopular with the farmers affected.

It remains to be seen whether the Commission can hold the line in the face of this opposition to such a fundamental shift of focus in the CAP and what impact the policy will have on the process of landscape change. If it is successful and well-targeted to the right regions, as opposed to countries, it could help reduce the marked duality that presently exists in the structure of farm holdings. If it fails, it will perpetuate an economically unsatisfactory structure with a small number of very large and profitable farms and a very large number of tiny smallholdings that are unviable as independent economic entities. It is of course a moot point as to whether this will be seen as a positive or a negative for the future of the rural landscape.

4. Agenda 2000 and the re-shaping of the CAP

The enlargement of the EU from 2004 onwards to include former communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe is only one of several pressures for change on the CAP and the new Member States have to adjust to these others, as well as their newly acquired status within the EU. Ever since 1992 the CAP has been in the throes of an evolving programme to reduce production subsidies and bring farm prices in the EU more in to line with those in the world as a whole. Furthermore, there has also been a shift of emphasis within the CAP itself to make agriculture more socially responsible and environmentally friendly. Agenda 2000, which covered the period from 2000-2006, was the framework within which this overall process of gradual change was to be managed (Commission of the European Communities 1998).

Essentially, therefore, the current process of CAP reform began in 1992 (Lowe and Ward 1998). As part of an initiative in that year by the Commissioner for Agriculture, Raymond MacSharry, the guaranteed support prices for cereals and a number of other key agricultural products began to be progressively reduced and quotas imposed on some others, notably milk, with a view to reducing prices closer to world levels and bringing output and market demand more into line. To help compensate farmers for their inevitable loss of income, the Arable Areas Payments Scheme was also introduced. It allowed farmers to claim support payments based on the area used to grow cereals, linseed, oilseeds and protein crops, such as peas, beans and lupines, but, in return, all but small producers had to 'set aside' part of their arable land, taking it out of production. Set aside was not primarily an environmental initiative, but a largely unintended environmental benefit of the innovation has been to introduce an element of untidy wildness into many rural landscapes, though the impact is transitory, as the areas under set aside change from year to year. Indeed, the CAP has had similar unintended environmental impacts in a number of different areas, the outstanding examples being the way in which the beef and sheep headage premiums have helped sustain large swathes of European grasslands and the flora and fauna associated with them (Andersen et al. 2000).

The Agenda 2000 reforms have seen a further 15% cut in the support prices for cereals, a further 20% cut in beef and veal support prices, and, from 2005, a further 15% cut in support prices for milk and milk products. More radically, the programme also inaugurated a raft of measures specifically to embed environmental targets, in addition to set aside, into the price system. All Member States now have to draw up environmental action plans and can make up to 20% of price compensation contingent on farmers meeting certain specified environmental goals, a process known as cross-compliance. Indeed, a shift of focus in the CAP, away from price support for specified agricultural products and towards a broader, more multi-functional, rural development policy is the most important change for the long-term that has been ushered in by Agenda 2000 (Commission of the European Communities 2004).

The new emphasis on rural development is a major shift of focus, though to a limited degree it has always been part of the CAP through the 'guidance' element in the European Agriculture Guarantee and Guidance Fund (EAGGF), which funds the policy. However, this so called 'second pillar' of the CAP has historically never been anything but a minor element in comparison with the price support of the 'first pillar', the 'guarantee' element (Lowe et al. 2002). Guidance only accounts for about 10% of the overall expenditure and, ironically, since Agenda 2000 came into force the absolute amount of money allocated to it has remained virtually static in real terms at €4.3 billion annually and this against a background of growth in the cost of price support, which peaked at €39.8 billion in 2002 and has only declined by a little over 5% since.

Nevertheless, as a declaration of intent the regulations that have implemented the rural development aspirations of Agenda 2000 are likely to herald a new and more holistic era in European agriculture. Even though it may be some time before existing commitments to price support and budgetary constraints allow the new social and environmental goals to be realised, it is to this re-focused policy that the new accession countries from Central and Eastern Europe have to adjust (Council of the European Communities 1999, 2005). The range of things deemed to constitute rural development is impressive, ranging from measures to restructure the social and economic fabric of rural communities, including support for non-agricultural activities such as tourism and craft industries, to all manner of environmental protection initiatives, particularly those fostering greater sustainability in rural areas. The precise mix of measures chosen in

each country will be left to individual Member States and it is likely that there will be marked differences in emphasis between them. Lowe et al. (2002) have demonstrated how differently France and the United Kingdom have responded to the new emphasis, with France looking to use the programme to strengthen the economy of the family farm, while the United Kingdom is much more concerned to develop a more extensive environmental agenda in rural areas, a long-standing national aspiration (Marsden 1995). The particular problems that the new accession countries are facing has been acknowledged in Agenda 2000, at least in part, by SAPARD (Special Accession Programme for Agriculture and Rural Development), which earmarks a special fund of €520 million a year for rural development to help them adjust to the newly expanded rural development agenda of the CAP, though this is a paltry sum in comparison to the size of the EAGGF as a whole.

It is abundantly clear, however, that Agenda 2000 is far from the final word on CAP reform. Even before the programme had been formally endorsed, influential voices were being raised in the United States and Europe claiming that it would be little more than a stepping stone along the road to reducing still further agricultural price support within the EU and bringing them even closer to world levels (Kelch 1999, Swinbank 1999). The tortuous, and so far inconclusive, negotiations currently taking place within the WTO to achieve additional reductions globally in national export subsidies and import levies illustrate just how contentious the whole issue is. Significantly, one of the main stumbling blocks in the negotiations was the refusal of the EU to do more to reduce the artificially high guaranteed prices for agricultural products in Europe, a hurdle that in theory at least was removed when the EU ministers agreed to decouple direct payments from production in 2003 (Swinbank 2005).

5. What future for European rural landscapes?

Against this background of change in the CAP, there is much confusion in Europe about the future of rural landscapes, a fact underlined by the ambivalent response to the Council of Europe's European Landscape Convention, which was opened for signature in 2000 (Pedroli 2004, Wascher and Perez-Soba 2004). The purpose of the Convention is to develop a pan-European approach to landscape conservation strategy, though what this will mean in practice is still far from clear. Member countries have been slow to sign up to the Convention and even slower to formally ratify the agreement and incorporate it into their body of national law. Only 31 of the 47 member states of the Council of Europe have so far ratified it. The list includes the majority of EU member countries, though two (Malta and Sweden) have signed but not ratified the Convention, and three (Austria, Estonia and Germany) have still not signed.

It is, of course, extremely difficult to define the essential components of landscape; though many ingenious attempts have been made over the years (see, for example, Palang et al. 1998, Palang et al. 2000, Semm and Palang 2004). It is clear from this and other work that landscape is always a mixture of biological, physical and human components, all three of which are in different ways contested and, therefore open to a variety of interpretations. It is also clear that, when faced with landscape change, people prefer there to be historical continuity. But, if change has to happen, they invariably want it to engender a feeling of certainty, predictability, welfare and well-being. Hence, radical change, such as that resulting from collectivisation is generally an anathema, and the current attempts to reform the CAP and to integrate the new accession countries from Central and Eastern Europe will only meet with public support if they eschew this, or any other such a drastic option severing explicit links with the past. Rural development will not be politically acceptable, if it does not also conserve at least the veneer of rural tradition and heritage.

The challenge for agriculture, then, is to find a sustainable future for old cultural landscapes, based on sound economics and widespread public consent (Vos and Meekes 1999). It is no easy task, but there are useful indicators to a viable way ahead (Mander and Jongman 1998, Thompson 2005). Whatever policy is adopted, it is abundantly clear that large units, organised as agri-businesses, are here to stay. In that sense, the advent of the CAP in the new Member States will change the nature of large farms so that they fit more comfortably with the market model, but do little to undo the land amalgamations and re-drawing of the rural landscape that collectivisation fostered. Support for the small and medium-sized family farm may be an aspiration of the CAP, but the financial benefits for large producers of the CAP mean that family

farms will only ever be a part, and probably a small part of the agricultural scene. Even after the decoupling of production from direct payments from the CAP which occurred in 2005, it seems unlikely that the pressure on profit margins will make it possible for family farms to survive economically without significant additional sources of off-farm income. Regionally directed subsidy payments may make their continued existence viable in a few chosen areas, but these will be the exception, rather than the rule.

Evidence of the lack of enthusiasm for small-scale farming has emerged from the results of the programmes of property restitution that have operated in different guises across Central and Eastern Europe since 1990s. The aim has been to return land and property illegally confiscated under communism (and fascism) to its 'rightful' former land owners, but invariably, when these former owners have had agricultural land returned to them, the overwhelming majority have not returned to farm the land, but rather sold it to add to the existing already large farms (Blacksell and Born 2002a, b).

The consequences for the rural landscape of this have been considerable. Collectivisation during the 40 years of communism destroyed many of the most distinctive pre-existing landscape features, in particular field boundaries, drainage systems, local track networks, mixed farming systems, including small-scale forestry, and a multitude of traditional farms buildings. Any hope that these might be resurrected as part of the post-communist transition since 1990s has been in vain. The large farm structures and their associated man-made landscape features have remained intact; it is essentially just the management systems that had changed.

Across Europe as a whole, therefore, there is a dual process of, on the one hand, intensification into large agri-industrial units and, on the other, marginalisation as land that is economically unviable for agriculture is abandoned. One of the most important insights into this duality of intensification and marginalisation is that they are actually two sides of the same coin: investment and development in one area can inevitably lead to abandonment and decline in another. It follows that individual farm based solutions are unlikely to be successful in promoting a healthy industry and a sustainable rural environment. The emphasis needs to be on regional, publicly-led strategies, which have been arrived at democratically and which recognise the demands of all types of farm business. Sustainability is not a goal that can be achieved, either by blanket national strategies, or by the sum of decisions taken by individual land managers; it requires regional strategies which accept that the essence of thriving landscapes is more than the sum of their component parts (Cobb et al. 1999, Jongman 2002). It is a lesson that has been brought home with dramatic force in the United Kingdom as a result of the bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE, commonly known as mad-cow disease – MCD) epidemic in cattle that has blighted agriculture and the rural landscape in that country since the early 1990s, and by the serious outbreak of foot and mouth disease there in 2000 (Ray 2002). It is also worth noting that the threat of a widespread outbreak of a global pandemic of bird and pig 'flu' poses similar challenges, but on a much greater scale.

Coping with risks such as these is always going to be exceptionally difficult. By their very nature diseases spread, but reducing the scope of the vectors that transmit them makes a significant contribution to containing them. Smaller-scale, regional farming systems, especially if they result in less movement of livestock, will help with the challenge of containment, even though there can never be any complete answer. Equally, large and more industrialised farming systems are more likely to be able to bear the cost of investment in advanced hygiene and other measures, which will also contribute to controlling the spread of disease and other risks to animal health. This underlines a more general warning that, although regional strategies, based around individual landscapes and recognising the importance of difference, offer the best prospects for operational success in promoting environmentally sustainable rural development, the best laid schemes are doomed to failure if they are not accompanied by stringent coordination at all levels of government from the local, to the national and the international (Firbank 2005). Learning this lesson has been central to the success of the environmental Agenda 21 that came out of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992 and must be taken on board by those devising the new rural development strategy for Europe (Blacksell 2006).

The outlook for such a publicly-led regional approach to rural development is by no means

entirely bleak. There have been a number of initiatives at both the national and international level that have already achieved some notable success (Holloway et al. 2006). The regional nature parks that, in a variety of national guises, are widespread throughout Europe have had substantial success in reviving ailing rural economies by-passed by the changes in the agri-food industry. Amongst these, the national parks in the United Kingdom (Lloyd et al. 2004, McCarthy et al. 2002), and the 44 *parc naturels régionaux* in France are prime exemplars of the way in which landscape conservation can be married to policies for securing the future of the rural economy. At the international level the EU has also been active in helping to underpin fragile rural economies, not least through the Leader+ programme (Department for Rural Affairs 2003).

Nevertheless, the development of regional rural development initiatives such as these is unlikely to produce any quick solutions. It took more than half a century for the national parks in the United Kingdom to establish themselves and be generally accepted as an effective framework for delivering overarching regional rural development strategies. For much of that time they were little more than an adjunct to the land-use planning system, with little influence over the direction of policy in their rural environments as whole. Now, thanks in no small part to the decoupling in 2005 of agricultural production from direct payments from the CAP, the National Park Authorities are able to perform a much wider strategic role in directing the rural economy as a whole. It has been a hard-fought war of attrition to achieve this and great care must be taken in assuming that similar solutions will be possible across the EU generally. Political and economic conditions still vary widely across the 27 Member States and it is they that will ultimately dictate the kind of rural land management systems that are achievable, though successful exemplars in other countries can only act as an encouragement.

6. Conclusion

The transition from communism to a market economy and the political disciplines of the CAP and the EU in general has been a tortuous one for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. The strains are clearly evident in Europe's rural environment, but the unambiguous message now emerging is that a policy to manage the changes based on agriculture alone cannot provide a long-term sustainable strategy. There is much more to the rural environment and rural development than agriculture and, while this has been theorised extensively in both the academic literature and in policy-making fora, too often it has yielded an inadequate response by policy-makers and planners in the landscape. It is a salutary fact that the general thrust of the way in which policy-makers believe the CAP needs to be reformed has changed little since such efforts first began in the 1960s, long before there was the least prospect of the EU extending into Central and Eastern Europe. Politically, however, it proved very difficult to modify the policy so that it did not automatically reward farmers for increasing production. Since 2005, with the decoupling of production from direct payments from the CAP, at least a framework for reform is now in place. There is now an opportunity to focus much more on the rural landscape as an end in itself, rather than it being viewed as the backdrop against which agriculture and food production is managed. Already there is some evidence that such innovative programmes can work; the challenge now is to extend them so that they embrace the whole of the rural landscape and not just the remoter margins.

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