

Property, memory and emotions in narratives about village forests

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-draft version-

Abstract: The paper will analyze the value and meanings attributed to recently restored community-owned forests in rural areas of Romania, stressing on the role of emotional commitment enhanced through memory and historical symbolism.

Background information¹

In Romania, the immediate property reform in 1990 did not consider the restitution towards former juridical owners, such as villages. The restoration of *former village forests* did take place very late after the fall of communism, in 2000, when the newly elected right-wing ruling coalition had as a declared target to undo mistakes of the law 18/1990 and to do ‘more’ justice for the former owners, be they individuals or groups.

Of great importance in this discussion is that forests in pre-communist times were mostly owned by juridical bodies (48.5% of total forest property, according to Cartwright 2001: 115), like villages or common-descent groups, named *obsti* or *composesorate*, who dissolved under the communist rule, becoming merely state property.

The subject of my paper is one of these collective private forms of property over forests, *obstea*, recently re-established on a decentralised foundation. My focus is on the communities from Vrancea Mountains (eastern part of the Carpathians) which have a particular evolution of property rights, comparing to other communities in Romania.

The ownership of forests in the Vrancea Region might be called the ‘most collective’ form of property in Romania, since there is no account for an individual precisely measured share, the village being the only entity that holds rights. The institution of *obstea* is the actual juridical owning body (from a legal point of view it is not clear what the *obstea* actually is – the most common juridical denomination is that of an association). It operates through an elected administrative structure, the *obstea* council and the periodical village assembly (*adunarea generala*), though being a participative self-governance institution.

In brief, this institution has as operational task the management of the common property (mainly forests and pastures), aiming to raise funds for the local development (through investments in infrastructure, small businesses or touristic activities). The invested profit reaches in some communities an amount of 80.000 euros. In fact, *obstea* is the most powerful instance of rural development for the region (Mantescu 2006).

The communities are heterogeneous concerning the economic performance of *obstea* (Vasile 2006a: 119). In few cases, the management of the council is very good and the

¹ For a detailed descriptive discussion see Vasile 2006a, Vasile 2006b and Mantescu 2006

general assembly has an effective decision-taking role. In some other cases, there are many discussions about corruption and abuses involved and the visible economic outputs are at a very low level (*ibidem*). Generally in these cases occur sharp conflicts and long trials, which severely hamper the activity of *obstea* (*ibidem*: 119-120).

Besides the *obstea*, there are also other forestry structures, the *ocol silvic*, which is responsible in the region for monitoring and guarding the resource. There are five such *ocoale silvice* for all the *obsti* in Vrancea.

Introduction

This paper aims to go beyond the discussion about economic performance of *obstea* or the discussion about institutional arrangements briefly described above. It aims to analyze the symbolic side of this property form for the members of the community and the sense of property that the villagers develop around it, from both material and sentimental point of view. It is important to assess the ‘introverted’ side of property in terms of individual feelings, perceptions, meanings, because the fundamental characteristic of this property regime is the participation of every individual in an equal manner. Thus, the reader is invited to inquire and understand the grassroots mechanisms, motivations and ways of thinking behind the visible processes.

In this property regime, the individual does not hold any measurable right. He is not the owner of a precise plot, the only object to be owned here is the “right to be a member”, meaning the right to vote in the village assembly and to receive an annual quota of wood, constantly changing according to the population number and annual decisions about individual shares. He cannot look to his property and feel satisfied about his crops or large surface of land, or whatever other tangible entity.

In this situation, keeping in mind that the individual revenues from the forest are not very high², one might think (in full liberal way) that the individual does not attach any value to the forests.

In this chapter, I will argue that this is partly true, as long as we consider only the material meaning that people attach to property. They manifest an oscillation between deprivation, based on the perceived economic value, and the feeling of actually being a proprietor, based on memory and affective commitment.

I had the opportunity to do short inquiries on collective forests in other parts of Romania (2 villages in the Bucovina Region). The comparison proved spectacularly fruitful with respect to displayed meanings. In this region, as anywhere else in Romania excluding Vrancea, the system of establishing rights is genealogical (the member inherits the right after the death of the parents, the right is divided among brothers) and this form of property does not have a long history in the village. The economical returns are mainly individual advantages. It is mostly relevant that when the individual advantage is at stake, and individuals are not bounded to any sentimental customary foundations, they show against the collective regime. Almost exclusively, the value of the forest is a pragmatic one. Considering this comparison, what makes the Vrancea case outstanding is the affective bond, meaning the memory of former practices and the historical legitimacy that keeps the resource significant in people’s mind and life, although mostly deprived of its material value.

The feeling of being a proprietor is difficult to define in theoretical terms. I see it mostly as a sense of ownership, which includes the functional and economic value of the property

². For a two adults household, about 80 euros, approximately 5% from the total annual household income

objects, but is not limited to it. It includes as well the awareness of the property rights, and, on top of all these, it includes the emotion of being an owner. In contemporary Romania, one often hears about the attachment that peasants feel towards their land, although in material terms the land became a burden, which requires more inputs than it produces economic outputs. In the case of Vrancea forests, the produced outputs exist, but they are mostly community returns, and are often thought of as being illicitly appropriated by the powerful. Thus, the relationship between the individual and the forest is more complicated than the relationship between the peasant and his land. I see this feeling mostly as a process, as a dynamic and changing sentiment, which is difficult to grasp and to make clear-cut allegations about.

The aim of the chapter is to grasp these meanings, values or feelings, the way they contribute to narratives either of deprivation or of feeling as a proprietor. Another target is to analyze the way in which they are produced by different types of actors.

I present the flow of these ideas (the concept belongs to Wolf 1990, quoted in Nuijten, 2003) by analyzing narratives produced by different people. Even though I speak about deprivation, the narratives in this case are not ‘hidden transcripts’ (Scott 1990) of dominated people, meaning narratives developed among the powerless about and against the powerful that are only voiced behind their backs. In some cases from Vrancea, the producers of these narratives overtly struggle either to take over power, or to impose their point of view in village assemblies.

For reaching the above-mentioned aims, I consider several points in the discussion. Firstly, I will consider the “conflicting” narratives of feeling as a proprietor and of being deprived. Then, I will try to see the two major components of these narratives, the material and the affective meaning of property. A very important point in the discussions with my informants is the periods to which they refer as references for comparison. I will treat the period before communism as the “narrative of access” and the communist period, the latter enabling the discussion of the narrative of functional property (state-owned, but functional for local people) as detached from the ownership dimension. The final discussion will be about the narratives of individualization or collectiveness.

“Our forest does not belong to us”

I will introduce the discussion about sense of property by presenting two case studies to illustrate how sense of property might be understood through apparently contradictory discourse.

Case 1: True people of Vrancea

This case is that of a younger person (N.C., age 44, village of Nereju). He proves to have very good knowledge about the past, but not from his own experience, only from stories told by his parents; he is the son of a *chiaburi* family that was oppressed when the communists took over power, his father was in prison for 8 years. He shows a strong attachment to the forest, by discourse and by effective involvement in the first attempts to legalize the collective property in 2000. He was one of the leading actors in the restoration process for his village, but retreated afterwards from all committees.

“The obstea is us. That which we were given by Steven the Great is our merit”.[...] We must have the heart of true people of Vrancea, to prove that we are the heirs of Stephen.” [...] Yes, it [the property] is ours, but if I cannot take it to the market to sell it, than I do not know why they [the executive committee and the forestry structures] argue that it is ours. I do not feel as a proprietor because I see that nothing is actually mine.”

We see in this case how the forest belongs to the villagers when the affective content is at stake and how it ceases to belong when they talk about material issues. The discourse moves from “we” to “they”, while *arguing for the idea of dispossession*.

Case 2: The soil is ours, but not the trees

This case is that of an older person (N.F., age 84, village of Spinesti). First, he says, *“People do not feel as proprietors anymore because before they went to the forest without being asked any questions”*. He places the reference before communism, emphasizing freedom of access and now, comparing to that period, one cannot feel as an owner. Few minutes later, he says that *“now it is our property, because they restituted it with this law”*. By placing now the reference in communism, he sees the change in the process of restitution and says that the forest now belongs to them. Then, when I tried to make him aware of the contradiction in his thoughts, he also tried to explain, *“Yes, it is ours, the soil is ours, the forest is ours, but one cannot take wood without restrictions, it is under forestry regime. In the past property was property, nobody interfered. We were the masters, like I am the master of this house.”* In this phrase, he makes the difference between ownership and use. Ownership is not complete, unless there is also right to use the resource freely. The interference of restriction is the one that limits him to feel as a proprietor. To be a proprietor is to be *“the master”* and to use. In this sense, the contradiction can be understood again as *a feeling of dispossession, of deprivation*.

One important issue, which breathes throughout all narratives, is the impossibility to draw a clear-cut conclusion whether somebody considers himself a proprietor or not. The same persons use in their discourse expressions like *“our forest”*, *“our obstea”*, while saying, *“It doesn’t belong to us”*. It is commonplace knowledge in social anthropology that informants’ discourses are very often contradictory (Heady, Gambold Miller, 2006: 43). In my case, it has to do with variations of discourse according to discussed situations. One essential factor intervenes to structure the dissonance, as I tried to show in the discussed cases: whether they refer to the material or affective sense of property. Usually, when they talk about affective issues, the forest belongs to them, and when they talk about material meaning of property (including access and use of the resource), they feel dispossessed. It is obvious that people do not keep those analytical frameworks separated during their speech and that is why one can find apparent contradictions.

Who feels as a proprietor? The role of memory

Trying to solve contradictions, and to move away from a relativistic interpretation of discussing only situational sense of property, I “forced” people in the questionnaire survey to place themselves in the categories of “feeling as a proprietor” or “not feeling as a proprietor”. The result was that 42.2% feel as proprietors “a lot”, 32.7% feel as proprietors “to some extent” and 24.1% do not feel as proprietors at all.

<i>Do you feel as a proprietor of the village forest?</i>	
A lot	42.2%

To some extent	32.7%
Not at all	24.1%
Total	100%

Table 1. How many villagers feel as proprietors?

Furthermore, from the survey I could make the portrait of those who feel as proprietors. They are usually indigenous (born in the village), elderly people without higher education, with larger individual property (hay fields and pastures), implicitly with larger livestock.³ This portrait tells us that the “proprietors” are those with a more “traditional” profile. This profile corresponds to the category of people that are more actively involved in the village meetings, in other words those who manifest themselves more as proprietors. Thus, one might observe that they do not only declare their sense of property for the survey, but actually act as proprietors as well.

The variable of being better off in a traditional sense (owning hay fields and livestock) is important because it has very much to do with the kind of experience that they have had before communism. In this region, the traditional wealth of a household today is usually a sign of wealth throughout generations. Consequently, if somebody had the possibility to access the forest before communism (had good oxen), that experience will enhance his affective bond to the forest and in the same time, due to the break of access that he suffered during communism, he will tend to appreciate more the restitution of forests. This does not mean that this category holds a stable and coherent sense of property. It is only a tendency to manifest sense of property more pregnant than the others do. They still display contradictions in their discourse and emphasize the negative aspects of the present.

Not only the elders have manifested a good sense of property. The case is often when younger people do so too, as in case 1.

Nonetheless, the percent of elderly people that feel a lot as proprietors is much higher than the same category of younger people, as showed in the table below. From the population above the age of 60, 59.9% feel a lot as proprietors, comparing to the 31.1% of population below the age of 60 who feel the same.

<i>Sense of property</i>			<i>Knowledge about the past</i>		
	Below 60	Above 60		Below 60	Above 60
<i>A lot</i>	31.1%	59.9%	<i>Good</i>	7.4%	23%
<i>To some extent</i>	37.9%	26.2%	<i>Weak</i>	15.9%	32.8%
<i>Not at all</i>	31%	13.9%	<i>Not at all</i>	76.7%	44.2%
	100%	100%		100%	100%

Table 2. Comparison of sense of property and knowledge about the past at different ages

It is not the age itself and the experience embodied in age that constitutes the explanation, but it is the knowledge about the past (before communism) that determines property feelings.⁴ In Skibris’s terms, memories can be seen as a source of “emotional capital” (Heady, Gambold Miller, 2006: 34). Consequently, the emotional capital can be translated into sense of property.

³. Significant correlations between variable “sense of property” and “born in the village”, age, education, individual property surface, number of large animals owned

⁴. idea also visible through statistical significant correlation between variable measuring knowledge about the past and variable measuring sense of property

As we can see in the table, the age itself does not necessarily induce a good knowledge about the past; good knowledge is a characteristic of only 23% of the people above 60.

The memory as emotional capital enhancer can be perceived twofold. Firstly, I consider memory as experience, as remembering past practices and secondly as collective memory, in the sense of a stock of knowledge about the past that circulates inside the community, the communicative memory (Assman 1995).

I showed in this section that the sense of property over the forest commons depends mostly on the level of knowledge about the past. Through memories and communicated stories, this type of property gains emotional capital. Property appears significant and worthy in its affective meaning (see section on affective meaning for a more elaborate discussion), although the value diminishes when looking at the economical significance, as I will show in the next section.

Narratives of deprivation

Most of my informants, although they placed themselves in the category of “feeling as a proprietor” expressed a certain ambivalence. The many negative things that they see nowadays happening to the forest, things over which they feel to have no influence at all, make them argue that the forest is theirs only “by the name”, but not virtually.

Case 3 *“Now the obstea is ours, by name, but others eat it. The bosses do what they want, the president with his subordinates. For me, I do not have the right to take anything without papers. I had better buy it directly from others.”*(V.S., Praznicel, age 75, village of Haulisca)

Here we see the idea of deprivation through the metaphor of “eating”. This metaphor appears many times in interviews. It expresses the idea of use and fulfillment of basic needs. The old man makes the difference in power between the committee and ordinary villagers. Those without power are deprived of their “right to use”, by the bosses and through the mechanism of imposing formalities (through the bureaucracy, the discourse encompasses the idea of state in the background).

Case 4 *“We are not even allowed to go and check what is happening with the forest without announcing this in public. What kind of control might it be then? [...] We are not the masters of the forest anymore. They extract, they make auctions, they sell, and we know absolutely nothing.”*(V.R., age 50, village of Vranceaia)

In this case, the repeated term ‘they’ points out the lack of control expressed through the lack of information. This is one of the quite rare cases where the idea of being a proprietor is not associated with the idea of use, but with the idea of participation and monitoring. Thus, deprivation occurs through vitiating the democratic practice and transparency.

Case 5 *“The village’s forest is now in the hands of thieves, they handle it. The forest belongs to the president together with the forestry department.”*(P.B., age 55, village of Nereju)

Here appears explicitly the idea of corruption, applied to the committee and to the local forestry authorities. The fact that “they handle” and “the forest belongs to them” includes deprivation on every level.

The concept of deprivation includes the illegitimate state of things. All discourses above contain reference to injustice. The man in case 4, who is only 50 years old, refers to a regime when people were masters⁵, even if he did not experience it directly, precisely to underline illegitimacy.

⁵. suggested by the word “anymore”, “we are not masters anymore”

It is very important to observe that people usually understand very well how the forest regime functions *de jure*. Most of them, albeit they did not experience a better period, have certain expectations according to the bundle of rights that they legally and equally hold.

They hold a certain idea about access and use. *Access* should be free for a man with his oxen or horses, and the extracted quantity should fulfill basic needs. They also hold a certain idea about *participation and power*. Power should be equally distributed among owners; they should be listened to or they should be at least informed about decisions.

In all these dimensions, the owners feel deceived and though deprived.

The question that arises at a more abstract level is “precisely, what is it that is been illegitimately taken away?”, what is the object of deprivation? Is it the right, or is it the effective wood? They refer to a deprivation of rights (case 3). However, I would rather call it differently according to which dimension we consider. If we consider *the dimension of use*, it might be a deprivation *of tangible benefits*, like wood, since they have to pay taxes, transportation or bribes, which in the end make them abandon the idea of getting wood. If we consider *the access dimension*, namely the physical access that people complain about, it might be deprivation *of right* to go into the forest and to chop and pull wood. *Obstea* institutions in certain villages explicitly deny access and employ professionals for these operations (*carausi*). When speaking about the dimension of *participation*, one is deprived of *the right* to be a part of the decision making-process (through the village assembly).

How could we understand deprivation and what are its sources?

The multi-dimensional deprivation has to be understood as different from removal of rights. The removal of rights occurred during the communist regime when the complete bundle of rights was handed to the state. The deprivation might be understood as a divergence between projected practices (the ideas that they hold about access, participation and power) and real practices. It consists in a process of turning the practice against the villagers, due to divergent interpretations of the same statutory regulations.⁶ The source of deprivation is the interpretation that the committee might give, sometimes on purpose to cover illegalities or to preserve power in few hands, and the way practices are bound to develop from this interpretation, against the interests of certain categories of villagers. *Thus, I am tempted to identify the source of the deprivation ideology in the instability of practices. Since practices are not yet embodied in a well-established pattern, people can claim them easily as illegitimate, if they contradict their ideas or interests.*⁷

Who precisely produces deprivation?

In the light of the findings above, the deprivation agent has to be the one that makes use of the instability of practices in order to drive them in the directions that he considers fit (or that serves best his own interest).

We saw in the presented cases that the first agent of deprivation is the president, together with his more “pale” councilors. They are usually seen to be accomplice with the local

⁶ e.g. An assembly is legally constituted if it consists of 50% + 1. In some villages this number is never reached, so a committee is entitled to decide by itself. This inconsistency could be avoided only by local informal arrangements. Nevertheless, it depends again upon the good will of the committee, if it makes a call for an informal arrangement to enable the participation or not

⁷ This explanation for the deprivation feeling solves also two dilemmas that I had constantly during my fieldwork – why do people always complain, despite the actual performance and achievements of certain committees – because there is room for manoeuvre; and why do elderly people not see the lack of logic in their totally free access claim – because they refer to another body of established practices, the only one available, which does not fit actual conditions, but fulfils needs of coherence and stability inside a certain customary code (which proves to be more important than rationality), for further discussion see section “Before communism” below in this chapter

forestry authorities (*ocol silvic*), namely the rangers and the more invisible bureaucratic structure inside the forestry department who decides annual quotas and places to harvest. The forestry authorities, although almost entirely privatized are still apprehended as a state structure (see below for more detail).

For several of my informants, the malevolent instance is external, seen as some diffuse powerful entity, partly as a state administrative structure (more central one such as legislators, ministry, or local one such as county department) and partly as a political structure. People think that the persons who are part of this combination held certain interests, material as well as ideological, in the property issues of the area. However, this idea of externally driven deprivation, although expressed in various forms throughout many interviews, does not appear as important as the locally driven deprivation.

People usually associate a certain type of economical behavior (free-riding, corruption) with power positions. There is a pattern of the culpable leader as a structure that reproduces itself in many forms and is embodied in the agencies of different actors in the villages and beyond it.

What is the explicit connection between deprivation and sense of property?

The centrality of discussing deprivation in a chapter about sense of property came to my mind while analyzing people's answers to questions about feeling as a proprietor. In different formulas, they say, "*We do not feel as proprietors because we feel deprived*". Logically, this is not correct, because one is deprived only of something that he is entitled with. Therefore, in order to feel deprived, first, they must feel entitled with something and here we already have a kind of sense of property. I see the relationship between sense of property and deprivation in terms of an assault. This feeling of deprivation deteriorates the sentiment of ownership.

In this context one must strive to understand what counterbalances this sense of deprivation in order to be able to declare "*I feel as a proprietor a lot*", for example when somebody asks for a survey answer. The deprivation refers mostly to material issues. However, the sense of property is not one-sided, is not only about the material value, it is also about affective value. I think that this affective bond is the counterbalance and the "special something" that the forest property in Vrancea Region has.

In the next section, I will separate the two components of the sense of property, material and affective and analyze what meanings each of them contain".

Components of property sense

Material meaning. Property = access & use

Usually, when the topic of the forest comes to the forefront in discussions, people tend to associate it firstly with economic returns. This incentive appears equally to argue for or against the sense of property: the satisfied ones say, "*We are proprietors because we take our share of timber and firewood*", while the unsatisfied say, "*We have to pay for this wood*", or "*What they give us is not enough*".

An important element is that this economic return is not seen as a profit, but as the fulfillment of a basic need. The use defines the property, rather than the value of owning or accumulating capital. Linked with this definition of property as a use-right, while looking closer to the interviews, one might observe that the sense of property is more *about the access to the forest*, the way in which they acquire this return.

Through the interviews, sense of property is devolved through access in multiple ways.⁸. The strongest idea is that of the concrete physical access. One has property when he goes to the forest and cuts down the trees himself. Property gives this freedom. However, the freedom is rational, limited (in the sense given by Rousseau) by the fulfillment of need, the proprietor “*goes to the forest and cuts down as much as he needs*”.

For them, the ecological security of the use-right is central to this collective arrangement. Contrary to what somebody might think considering the “tragedy of the commons” paradigm (Hardin 1968), these people seem to argue that a commons regime limits the individual in his attempt to deplete the forest. They say that the villagers would cut down irrationally only if the forest would be handed over as individual property (see section below on indivisibility). Thus, they are aware that the liberty of the total owner is different from the liberty that they have; nonetheless, they perceive theirs as better in an ecological sense.

Another way in which property is understood as liberty of access is towards the market. Several informants told me that a proprietor has to be free to go and sell his wood anywhere. Selling is a source of livelihood, since it is designated to buy other necessary goods and not to make a profit.⁹. This conception is again oriented rather towards a customary way of seeing property than towards a capitalist conception of market economy.

The analysis above leads us to a preliminary conclusion about the meaning that people attach to the expression “*being a proprietor*”. In this regime, property over the forest means in the first place *to access the resource in order to be able to make a use out of it*. This definition sounds very “traditional”. It seems to be very close to the pre-communist way of dealing with the forest.

Affective meaning. Property = Memory

Alongside with the material meaning exists the affective meaning of the forest. This affective meaning refers to the emotional charge displayed when remembering or invoking the past. The past of my informants involves the distant past of origins and the more recent past of modern times, which is conceived in dynamic terms of activities like harvesting and going to the market.

Usually, emotions come to the forefront when discussing about the forest in terms of collective inheritance and ancestral justice for mountain communities that have no other source of livelihood.

One important element of collective memory, which shapes the affective dimension, is the myth of property origins. The legend tells us that Stephen the Great in the XVIth century endows the founders of seven villages for their military merits with the Vrancea Mountains. This legend enjoys many believers today. When I opened the discussion about *obstea*, most of my informants started with telling me “*this forest is our legacy from Stephen the Great*”. Even though many versions of the story that I have heard lack elementary logic, the villagers, even the educated ones, believe in this legend.

The legend of the seven sons to whom the mountains were donated serves for strengthening regional identity through property (the local founders are related to a regional, supra-ordinated founder, the old woman Vrancioaia) and for legitimising property over the mountains from ‘*once upon a time*’.

⁸. Access in the context of natural resources studies might be defined as “the ability to benefit from things”(Ribot, Peluso 2003); the access issue for the Vrancea *obsti* is described in Vasile 2006b, pp. 110-113

⁹. One of my informants says, “*It is our property, our forest, than let us go with these 2 m³ to the market and let us bring home to the mountains corn and bread... we don't eat wood here.*” N.C., age 44, village of Nereju

In Vrancea, the link of a certain village to a certain mountain or forest area is not obvious through spatial arrangement.¹⁰ Thus, it seems that in Vrancea the mountain property does not belong to a population by virtue of some sort of ‘natural’ bond between the settlement and the surrounding territory, developed over a long period. The bond was created through practice from 1755¹¹ onwards.

People believe that Stephen gave this property to the *vrancenii* as a legacy, they fought for it in the past and thus, the contemporary *vrancenii* have to defend it as well. I encountered this idea in almost all conversations that I had.

Some informants see the property over the mountains as a compensation for the inhabitants, since they do not possess arable land in the plains. The idea of equity between larger units – the inhabitants of plains and the inhabitants of mountains, was established through an act of justice, made by the greatest *domnitor* of Moldavians. Here appears also the difficult livelihood of mountain men, comparing to the easy life in the prosperous plains. The historical act contributes to the balance of this inequality.

The legend stands for a source of legitimacy for the present property arrangement. Many of my informants cannot conceive the divisibility of the resource, since this is “*the old way*”, collective property is more than a commodity or a good, is a “*historical fact*”, a “*given*”.

In the light of the initial act everything appears as indubitable, (e.g. the unequal distribution of forests in terms of distance or quantity is seen as fair, since “*this is the way that Stephen gave it to us*”.

As I have shown above the legend is a source of legitimacy for present “structural” conditions of this regime, it solves potential inner and outer conflicts that might stem from perceived inequalities or inequities. The legitimacy of Vrancea’s property regime feeds itself with the charisma and authority beyond doubt of the greatest *domnitor* of Moldavia. In people’s representation, the legendary ‘given’ is immutable and thus the organisation principles cannot be changed at an ordinary man’s will.

The second way of transforming past times in emotional capital is, as I mentioned before, remembering and story telling. I showed above that a stronger sense of property is associated with a better knowledge about the past. Remembering how “*we used to live with the forest*” enhances nostalgia, contributing to the formation of personal identity. Story telling maintains collective local identity and it refers to personalities and events (achievements, fights) around the obstea and the forest. The symbolic and affective dimension of property is thus strongly nourished through the mechanism of contributing to the creation of identity, local and personal.

Material versus affective meaning - discussion

The powerful affective meaning appears as a source of enforcement for the sense of property, while the material side manifests itself in the form of deprivation ideas.

One of my informants expresses explicitly this idea of the affective counterbalancing the material, saying that “*I have no advantage [n.a. from the forest], but this soul of mine does not leave me alone... my ancestors fought the war together with Stephen the Great...*” (A.C., age 51, Nereju village).

¹⁰ The forests are all located in two areas: in the western and south-western part of the area, where the Carpathian Mountains border the region, while the settlements are spread along the river valleys. Only two of the villages are positioned next to the mountain (the Nereju village to the southwest and Tulnici to the west), while some of the villages are even 80 km away from their forest (the village of Negriesti); see the map enclosed

¹¹ The year of the first division of mountains among villages according to Stahl 1958

Comparing the two meanings of property, the more material meaning of “use” and the more affective of historical inheritance, one might observe that they belong to different registers – property as use is a functional property and property as historical legacy is based on the significance of ownership, property as “belonging to”. Frequently, the commons are associated more with the idea of property as function (Grossi 1981, quoted in Wiber 1991: 470). Therefore, it is important to assess the ownership dimension, bounded to the emotional/affective register.

Reference periods

Before Communism- The narratives of access

Throughout the chapter, there is one obvious idea – the period before communism highly contributes to the enhancement of sense of property, through the different mechanisms of memory. I showed above the emotional dimension that this period brings to the current members. I also showed that the material value is currently perceived through a traditional lens, sending us back to this period.

Nevertheless, the people’s perception about this period is far more differentiated. In a certain degree, this period serves as a double-edged weapon, because despite the positive contribution to sense of property, it might as well make one feel deprived in present, in the light of positive past events.

In the next section, my aim is to analyze the way in which different categories of people perceive this period.

Firstly, evidence from the quantitative survey shows that 36.5% of the population has knowledge about the past¹². (before the communism). From these, only 37.6% have ‘good’ and ‘very good’ knowledge, a percent of 13.7 of the total population. Most of these people are elders, men, and rich people in a traditional sense, own larger hay fields, pastures and livestock¹³.

The majority of those who possess information about the old *obstea* manifest the tendency to evaluate the past highly positive, comparing to the present. 80.9% appreciate that there was more freedom to access the forest, 71.1% consider that the old *obstea* achieved more for the village. There is no striking difference in the expressed opinion among villages; they all go more or less in the same direction. The observed differences occur because of the different situations at that time (e.g. in Nereju people perceive more freedom for the people to access the forest because it is the village nearest to the forest, in Vrancioaia, the achievements were significant indeed, as described in historical chapter):

Village	More freedom for the people to access the forest (yes)	The old <i>obstea</i> achieved more for the village (yes)
<i>Vrancioaia</i>	78.1%	83.3%
<i>Negrilesti</i>	67.9%	61.3%
<i>Nereju</i>	83.9%	58.3%

¹² I measured knowledge about the past, asking about specific events and what do they remember from that period and then appreciate this knowledge on a 4 items scale (very good knowledge, good, poor knowledge, total lack of knowledge)

¹³ all 4 variables (age, sex, surface of pasture plus hay field, livestock) correlate significantly with the variable measuring knowledge about the past at $p < 0.01$

<i>total</i>	80.9%	71.1%
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Table 3. Perception about old *obstea* (before communism) across villages

One category of people (~30 %) perceives the past equivalent to the present in negative terms. To this category belong most of the well-informed villagers, people that hold good information about past personalities and events and display a very good knowledge about present situations. Their complaints about both periods concern the depletion of the forest and the corruption. Equal depletion is a complaint that occurs mostly in the village of Nereju, because of its location, near to the mountain. Indeed, Nereju is the most visible area from where loaded trucks are driven out of the mountains (~10 per day). Thus, the present concern about ecological disaster recalls the symmetrical past element of “*carrying the mountains away with the little forestry train*”.

A small category perceives the past, compared to the present, in a negative way. These are usually persons in their 50s or 60s who emphasise rudimentary means of extraction in the past as a shortcoming in gaining profit for the community.

When not asked about specific issues from the past, but only general questions like “how was it in former times?” most of the elder people (from all villages) spontaneously give account about good old times where there was freedom to access the forest and where everybody made one’s livelihood out of harvesting and trading wood. Market is seen as a positive thing and exchange of goods is highly valued. The harsh transportation conditions and the long distance from the market (approx 90 km away from the villages) are not seen as an impediment for the well-being of households. Most of these issues are valued now because people do not access the forest as easily as they did before, the quantity of wood that they can harvest is limited, they do not have free access on remote markets, and they perceive that the State limits them, nowadays.

Usually people think about the past in better terms because of *individual* economical returns from the forest (the liberty to harvest, the value attached to sawmills and to markets – are linked to the economical return). Nevertheless, these revenues are not perceived as financial profit, but only the fulfilment of households’ subsistence needs.

When remembering the period before communism, the communitarian dimension is most often left aside, in favour of accounts about individual actions and uses. In most villages, this image fits the reality of former times. If one looks at the current reality, sees that the balance reversed, communitarian investments are preferred to distribution of larger individual shares. In some cases, the individual is not even allowed to enter the forest for harvesting his limited share.

Through this account, it becomes understandable why people who lived in that period feel deprived and say that they do not feel as proprietors. The material aspect of property diminished, in the form of use and access.

Of course, if it were for me to analyze their judgements, I would say that they are not fair to the present regime, because it is impossible to give free access to everybody in the way that it existed in the past. Nevertheless, most of them are aware of this fact, and still cannot escape their unfair feeling. The things have moved at a more advanced technological stage, some of their neighbours took the step further, and bought electric woodchoppers, yet their ideas about access remained backward, ‘unaccustomed’ to present technological conditions. I explained this lack of balance between ideas and actual conditions, through the fact that

ideas about practices are still embodied in the old “code” of customary ways, as the only one available as coherent and legitimate.

The role of this period in shaping the sense of property is ambivalent. On one hand, it enhances the “emotional capital”, thus the sense of property (as explained above). On the other hand, in its material aspects, it acts as a source of deprivation, by providing an established set of practices related to access, to which people refer, a set that does not fit the present conditions (legal restrictions, advanced technology).

Communist period and the idea of State-ownership. Narratives of functional property

Although the communist period means the seizure of forest property by the State, people continued to live near the mountains and to work, in a different manner, in forestry. They also needed and used wood and timber as fuel or construction material. I cannot neglect this period in my study, since it shapes the current ways of thinking about forest property. Nonetheless, the influence of this period is not uniform. When discussing the very beginning of the communist period, people perceive it mostly in negative terms, because they remember the atrocities, the imprisoned people, and the seized properties. When thinking about a later stage, where practices became more stable, communism appears in a better light. It also depends upon the persons. Some experienced bad times during the communist regime, while others did not.

It appeared difficult during the interviews analysis to separate people’s attitudes in coherent “for” or “against” the state-ownership regime. As far as the communist period is concerned, people do not detach in supporters and opponents according to age or occupational status, or even former status. It seems that the explanation lies on a very low level of generalisation, in the different experiences. Hence, I will give examples for every major argumentation direction.

Case 6 To use or not to use the forest?

The following example comes from my first host in Vrancea, *Culiță*, a man who was then 38 years old and worked as a free lancer in constructions. He manifests a strong and constant position against the intervention of state structures. He shows also strong local identity and affective attachment to the forest. During my fieldwork, he became a councillor in the *obstea* that I consider most successful of “my villages”, the village of Paulesti.

In one of our long discussions, he accounts for the communist period as a time when he went to the forest and watched it with the wish that one day these trees would belong to him or to local people.¹⁴ In the only discussion that I tape recorded with him, he presents his frustration also from a more material point of view:

“In communist times, I was looking at the others [forestry people] how they loaded trucks, and I could not load 2 trees in my carriage. I was not allowed back then, and we were working at night, at 4 in the morning we came home with a carriage of wood and we buried it, we hid the wood very well without any traces. Afterwards, we brought it to light when it was already old... It was a disaster.”

(C.H., age 38, village of Paulesti)

Although this idea of lack of benefits during communism appears in other interviews too, I encountered more often the version that people actually had access to wood. The access was

¹⁴ It was somehow surprising for me to find this affective bond at a young person. Moreover, it is even more surprising now, when I look through my data and try to find a similar emotional account and I do not. Probably it is not because people do not have such emotional accounts, but because I did not reach them. In the case of Culiță this appeared due to the special relationship that we developed in time and insightful discussions

in some cases informal, based on networking and bribes, but in the case of forestry workers, it was formal, people could pay a certain price, below the usual market price for the quality and quantity of their wish.

Interestingly enough, the idea of access comes to the forefront again when discussing communist period. Moreover, it comes in the same direction, for arguing better times in terms of access. The illegality of certain arrangements does not seem to hamper the perceived freedom.

Case 7. Example with the legal version:

"I needed a truck of firewood. I went to the forestry department, presented myself and asked them to approve for a truck of firewood for two families. And it was done, they approved it, we took it, everybody was happy. He said, you go there, and you arrange with the ranger how it suits you, you want to pull it yourself, you pull it, or if you want him to pull it you pay and that's it." (N.R., age 70, village of Vranceoiaia)

As we can see, access is understood as an easy way of getting things done. There existed an established practice, as he wants to emphasise through active and short sequences. Nevertheless, for this deal, he had to pay for the wood, but the payment is seen as legitimate, as it follows:

"Yes, I paid for it, of course one has to pay when it comes from the State, because the state takes care [of the forest]. The state pays for the ranger, the state organizes harvesting, and it plants and cleans the forest..."

Case 8. Example for illegal version:

"The forestry department was the master; it was the only one responsible. I went to the forest, I chopped down wood, all the other ones did the same, we arranged things with the ranger and it was done." (V.R., age 50, village of Vranceoiaia)

In this case, the well-established code of behaviour appears again, through the expression *"all the other ones did the same"* seen as legitimate although illicit. Back then, one had to do the best out of the given situation. Now, the given situation is much better, but people feel restricted:

"Nowadays, one knows that [the forest] is his, but he can not take what he needs."

As we can observe, people believe that ownership itself does not automatically represent a source of fulfilment of need.

From the cases above, we see that people perceive better the communist period when access and fulfilment of use come to the forefront. Although access took many times an alternative form, as illicit access, in people's representation the most important thing is the code of established practices. This body of customary use makes the forest more available than ownership itself. As the analysis about material value of property shows, the most prominent meaning is the "use". Therefore, an explanation for the approval of the state-ownership regime is to be found in the presence of an established set of customary practices, which enabled an informal use-right. This set of practices was very much based on the tacit arrangements with the rangers, thus we could name it a corruption-based set of practices.

Nevertheless, the corruption of state-enforcing agents was far more acceptable for people than the corruption of local committee of *obstea*. Many people from Vrancea have a differentiated perception of corruption practices. They see it on different levels, depending on who performs it and on the effective quantity of embezzlement.

A shared assertion for many of my informants was that in communist times, things were better, because only the forestry department was subtracting wood from the forest; now the mafia

has two heads – the department and the *obstea* committee. The metaphor of “eating” appears again:

Case 9: two masters

“Before it was only the forestry department eating the forest; now, the obstea [committee] eats too. For us, villagers, there is nothing left to eat.” (T.H., age 78, Village of Paulesti)

Other important motivations for people regretting the communist regime are those commonly deployed by literature on post socialism, like existence of well-paid jobs in forestry, order and rationalisation of extraction.

The rational extraction appears also in the opposite way, like organised extraction for a superior depletion of the forest. Consequently, extraction appears in both ways, as limited or exaggerated.

The state–ownership regime appears as negative in the light of collective benefits. In terms of achievements for the community, the communist regime fades away. They say for example,

“They [forestry authorities] had cut down the forest and our village did not benefit a thing. You could see forestry authorities buying all kinds of Jeeps, but now when it came in our property, you can see something done for us... little, but something.”(G.C., age 30, village of Nereju)

Illicit deals, like those described above, worked out only in the interest of the individual. The only financial supplies for communities were the state budget money. As one can observe now passing by villages in Vrancea, this money was not enough to bring the communities to a decent standard. People perceive the backwardness of their villages, in terms of infrastructure, when they compare it to many other rural communities in Romania.

The discussion above could be summarised in a table as follows:

Positive	Negative
Fulfilment of individual need	Lack of community advantage
Easy informal + formal access	Hardships in access
Less corruption, in quantitative sense	Emotional discomfort regarding historical injustice
Order in exploitation + limited extraction	Exaggerated extraction
Jobs provided	
Legitimacy of practices, including corruption	

Table 4. Aspects of state-ownership regime, informants’ assertions

People experienced the communist period in different ways and the communist period had different stages that account for dissimilar present allegations. In the early years of communism, people from Vrancea (and from everywhere else in former communist countries) experienced hardships. Thus, if one thinks nowadays about that period, the present property arrangement appears as a better one. However, if the reference is placed at a later stage of communism, where practices regarding forestry were already established and seen as legitimate, many people are inclined to develop nostalgia and to feel deprived of the present property regime over forests. In this case, property as functional prevails over property as belonging to.

State-intervention or state-ownership as a solution for the present?

The history of Vrancea accounts for an autonomous character of this region over centuries. Although in many periods the State was the encompassing authority, its effects on Vrancea were always diminished and had mostly a collateral character.

It is necessary to distinguish between two possible images of the state – local state and external state, when discussing its effective role and its reflection in local people’s flow of ideas.

Currently, most people claim the intervention of the state to stop abuses of power and depletion, to enforce participatory decisions. The image of the state that people appeal to in their claims is more in terms of “police, army and justice” or eventually the ministry of agriculture, however at a central level. Local state enforcing agencies (meaning people from the village or even from the nearest city) are not seen as enforceable enough, because they are corruptible as well.

At present, the local forestry departments (*Ocol silvic*) have a transitional status. Previously, it was definitely a state structure. Little by little, after year 2000, the four departments began to privatise. Nowadays, there are two completely private ones (Naruja and Tulnici), one mixed (Nereju) and one still belonging to the state (Vidra). Nevertheless, many of the workers remained the former state employees. Because of that, the status of this organisation is still ambiguous and the local people see them as local state representatives.

In case 9, I depicted the allegation of “two masters”. Many people think that one of the causes for the bad management is the involvement of the forestry agencies, involvement not for controlling or for advising, but for taking the lion’s share (in the form of bribes and taxes).

Usually, the people who are knowledgeable and involved in the decision-taking process (including members of *obstea* committees and the leaders of the opposition) hold a very strong position against the *Ocol silvic*. They say that *de jure*, the nature of the relation is that between a client (*obstea*) and a “guarding and expertise” firm. *De facto*, the *Ocol* is the chief. The members of the *obstea* committees usually see the encompassing state behind the local representatives and denounce unjustified taxes.¹⁵ and their lack of understanding the private nature of this property regime. In order to notice better the proportions of the “presence” of the *Ocol silvic*, one must observe that it is an important achievement for an *obstea* institution not to be financially indebted to the *Ocol*.

For this category of people (knowledgeable and involved), a target would be the enhancement of the private nature of the property regime and the detachment from the *ocol* from the state influence and backup, the *de facto* privatisation.

Lay people are divided in their opinions towards the state and the *Ocol silvic*.

39.9% of the population say that the *obstea* should not be autonomous, thus totally under central State authority.¹⁶ They support the opinion for *obstea* being subordinate to *Ocol* in a lesser degree, only 28.4%. Though, when I asked them about trust in the *Ocol* and I did not give them a middle option, the answers went definitely in the “low trust” direction, as shown in the table below.

	<i>State</i>	<i>Ocol</i>	<i>Trust in the Ocol</i>	
The state/Ocol should not interfere at all	25%	27%	Fairly, not at all	64%

¹⁵ to illustrate the lack of understanding of this communitarian property form coming from the state is that the state does not deduce the expenses for community’s benefices and levies taxes for these investments

¹⁶ When I designed the questionnaire, at a very early stage of the research I did not have imagined that a large category supports the intervention of the State; because of that, I designed this question rather in a smooth form, and instead of asking directly if they consider the State-ownership as better, I wrapped it in this relationship cloth. The number still shows the pro-state opinion.

The state/ocol should cooperate with obstea	35.1%	44.6%		
			Much	36%
Obstea should be totally subordinate to state/ocol authority	39.9%	28.4%		

Table 5. Relationship between obstea and the state/ocol silvic

Thus, we can observe that for a large category, the dimension of ownership and of private property does not make a significant difference from the socialist state-ownership. For them, it would be acceptable if the forest returns to its former property regime, in which the already established practices of access would be valid again. Nevertheless, it is important to notice that actors who might hold sufficient power to act in the direction of ‘handing’ the forests to the state (*obstea* committee and the ‘opposition elite’) do not support this position, quite to the contrary, they feel hampered by the state in its both central and local faces.

The analysis of opinions about communist period and state-property regime adds a new dimension to the study of property sense. It enables the view over the perception of private versus state property and ownership versus use. It becomes now clear that the sense of property in the case of obstea is not based on the private nature, not on the pure emotion of being an owner, of possessing something.

The attitude towards the communist period sheds light mostly on the material/pragmatic side of the resource. The data presented above leads to the conclusion that, for a large category of people, “having” and “owning” is not very important. More important is using and accessing.

Narratives of collectiveness

In other parts of Romania where I conducted short fieldworks I could observe (as I noticed in the introduction) the strong desire for individualisation of collective forests. There, the institution of obstea, although it exists, it is not as powerful as in Vrancea and nobody thinks about the communitarian dimension of property, about the community achievements to be drawn out of it. There, the only benefits are the individual shares that everybody gets.

I will not enter into a detailed comparative description; I just wanted to emphasize that the largely communitarian dimension of the Vrancea forest regime makes a difference from all other collective forest regimes.

Until now, the discussion was more about individual access and use; about people feeling deprived because their individual need cannot be fulfilled. Would it be reasonable to identify the deep cause of all this distress in the “tragedy of the commons”? Do people argue that the collective character of the property regime hamper their own individual interests?

In this final section, I want to grasp the nature of the collective dimension of property feelings in Vrancea by putting it in contrast with the idea of dividing the forests among villagers.¹⁷

¹⁷ Important background information is that 23% of the population declares to be a proprietor of an individual plot of forest (which grew during communism on individual hay fields, or was encroached before 1945). These individual plots are usually small, mainly young unusable forest, the mainly concern for their proprietors is to pay the ranger to guard it. The individual plot does not constitute a very important point of comparison for the people, but occurs sometimes in discussion, mostly as an external example “*these who have forest...*”.

The idea of division did not spontaneously occur in the discussion. Most of the issues I will discuss in this section are a result of the researcher challenging the informants with questions like “Do you think it would have been better to give back the forest individually?” or “Do you think that the solution for the misgivings would be the division?”.

The evidence of the quantitative survey shows that the supporters of division are not a majority: only 41% of the population.

Regarding the attitude towards the division of forests, I drew a typology, which might be seen as an ordinal scale going from “pro division” to “against division”:

- (1) Those that are for the individualisation;
- (2) Those who argue for a division into smaller units than the present ones, but not for the total individualisation;
- (3) Those that are against individualisation for various rational reasons;
- (4) Those that are into the collective idea so much that they cannot even imagine it divided.

The typology is based on selected interviews (29), in which occurs the discussion about the division.¹⁸ The distribution of answers in the set of interviews is given below:

<i>Category</i>	<i>Interviews (29)</i>		<i>Questionnaires (304)</i>
(1)	17%	24%	41.2%
(2)	7%		
(3)	41%	76%	58.8%
(4)	35%		

Table 6. Distribution of opinions about the division according to qualitative/quantitative data

For people in category (1), who think that the individualisation would be better than the current regime, the main arguments are of the type “tragedy of the commons”, based on increased responsibility, “I would not deplete my own forest”, “I would care for it to leave it to my heirs”. Others step out from the tragedy of the commons, highlighting the inequitable distribution of power involved in collective regimes, “The ranger would be then subordinated to me”.

Case 9 Land hunger and forest hunger

One “extreme” case, an old man (age 80) manifests an outstanding mercantile vision towards the forest property. He is the only one of my informants who told me that his share of the forest would be 5 hectares together with his wife and he consulted a lawyer in order to see if it is possible to divide his share of the rest of the *obstea* property. He is very much into calculations, like how much wood would it be allowed to chop in one year and how much money would it mean. He already owns a plot of 2 hectares of forest and he claims another 3 (apart from the *obstea* property). He manifests a constant “hunger for land”, he bought hay fields although he inherited a considerable plot, now his land property is about 20 hectares, which is a lot for the Vrancea Region.

The most interesting fact is that after he would get the share from the *obstea* forest, he would sell it entirely to the state, to make a good profit out of it.

¹⁸ We can observe in the table below that the difference in percentage between qualitative and quantitative analysis is of 16%, which means that we cannot treat the quantification of answers in the qualitative analysis as representative measures, but more as an illustrative set. That is why, in this case, the qualitative helps us more to understand the underlying mechanisms for attitudes ‘in favour of’ or ‘against’ division

Up to the point where he wants to sell it to the state, his discourse has a strong resemblance with the discourses of people in Bucovina region. It is important although to notice that which appears as a commonplace reasoning in Bucovina, here it comes through my data as a striking outlier.

People in category (2) are a small number of cases, only 2. They argue for the dismantling of *obstea* into smaller pieces, but see the impossibility of total division because of the unequal quality of the forest. However, they think that into smaller pieces, there could be more control, though a better coordination. By smaller pieces, they mean less people involved (and not less soil to “keep an eye on”), calculating the division according to the number of people “*We are 3000 members, so I think into 3 pieces, 1000 people would be more reasonable.*” (I.V., age 64, village of Nereju). Thus, the problem with participation bothers them more than the effective control of the forest itself. These local theories seem to go in the same direction with the collective action theory by Mancur Olson, arguing for the optimal number of persons involved (Olson 1965).

For category (3) people argue against the individualisation by deploying instrumental reasons of avoiding chaos, conflicts and the depletion of the forest. In the case of division, they see their fellow villagers as eventually turning one against the other, greedy to extract wood, and make profit. One of my informants who worked as a police officer in the village of Nistoresti (in Vrancea as well), reports that in that village more people had individual plots and that there were reported an increased number of thefts and an increased rate of violence. Another instrumental reason would be the resulting alienability of forest, thus the breakdown of equality between households, the creation of legitimately very rich fellow villagers.

Few of the informants in this category (3) see a priority in the community interest and argue that the villages will definitely remain backward in terms of infrastructure if the forests are divided.

Reasoning in category (4) might be best understood in Max Weber’s concept of *traditionally oriented rationality* (Weber 1904). In this category, people do not conceive the divisibility of the forest, because it is somehow by nature a common property. They say, “*This does not exist, the forest belongs to all villagers*” or explicitly “*this is tradition, we inherited it undivided*”, or argue with the legendary legitimacy, “*when Stephen gave it to us, he gave it undivided*”. In this respect, the traditional side of reasoning seems to touch more on the affective meaning of property.

Two of my informants see this kind of property so distinctive, as something that does not fit in the word “property” at all. The denomination of proprietors is only for those who enclosed forests before communism, merely for those who own individual plots. To illustrate this idea, I give the discourse of one of my informants who seemed outraged by my question about feeling as a proprietor of the *obstea* forest, and as an answer, he gave me a beautiful account of the *obstea* as a historically undivided soil:

Case 10 The immutable traditional sense

“There is no such thing [a proprietor]. From the obstea, this tradition exists...One cannot be a proprietor, because it has never been like that. It is a historical fact, it is a given from Stephen the Great.”(D.T., age 75, village of Negrilesti)

For him, the sense of property over the forests is explicitly something different from the sense of an individual property. The thing that gives its uniqueness is the historical meaning. In his conception, the perpetuated tradition of the initial act gives to this property an immutable sense.

The analysis presented in this section proves that the “collective” dimension is a very well established characteristic of the regime. Indivisibility is supported by both rational-instrumental and traditional types of reasoning.

Conclusion

In the beginning of the chapter, property appears as a contradictory construct. It is referred to in terms of both “our forest and their decisions”. The signalled contradiction stems from the balance in narratives between the rhetoric of deprivation and the rhetoric of feeling as a proprietor. Furthermore, this balance can be understood by referring to the twofold meaning involved. I have shown that the meaning of forest property in Vrancea Region moves back and forth between material and affective dimensions, accounting either for property as “use”/ “functional” or for property as “ownership” including affective/symbolic dimension. In narratives, the property discussed is conceived in both ways. People emphasise one or the other according to the issue discussed or according to their experiences.

However, no matter how much I would like to formulate a more general assumption, the mechanism above is not valid for all other kinds of property. Especially, it does not function for other kinds of contractual or almost newly formed commons. It is the traditional foundation and the historical legacy that enhances the affective meaning of this regime and gives the ‘emotion’ and symbolism of ownership. Through historical legacy, I mean not only the myth of origin, but also the bond to the period before communism and to the practices of that period.

The anthropological literature suggests that both rational self-interest and emotional commitments are needed in order to act properly in the economic field (Heady, Gambold Miller, 2006: 50). Generally, the emotional side is harder to achieve, because it depends on structural incentives, on long-term relationships. In our case, I am tempted to state that the instrumental rationality of relating to the common forest will be achieved through a good performance of the actors involved in the property management, thus through actions dependent on agencies of local actors.

From their narratives about the past, both pre socialist and socialist, one important thing to be considered is *the set of established practices of access and use*. This set makes the property more functional for lay people. Otherwise, the deprivation ideas seem to invade to the more “idealistic” emotion / symbol of ownership.

The idea of community and ‘collective’ property is not important in the instrumental sense, as community returns, but in respect to common, shared identity and traditions.

Thus, my study asserts that a regime of common property is not all about calculations, performance, material value and revenues. It might contain a very strong affective/symbolic dimension, based on different mechanisms related to memory. In this case, the symbolic dimension is the one that keeps people interested and involved in the processes related to their forest property.

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