This article is about the decollectivisation of agriculture which took place in Hungary, Czechia, Slovakia and Poland in the first half of the nineteen-nineties as well as about changes in the agrarian structure which were to be observed during the next decade. We argue that significant structural transformations have affected the agricultural domain and altered the way it is used for production. As a result of the transfer of property rights, agricultural land and part of the forests have changed hands. The process of decentralisation of the methods of farming the land which has affected the area of agricultural production is occurring with varying intensity depending on the country and the region. Re-established as the result of decollectivisation, private ownership of the land has been dispersed among a large number of landowners, sometimes without any direct link with agriculture and the rural milieu. More than a decade after the privatisation of the land, the land market is slow to re-establish itself and to play its role fully. Furthermore, farming structures have not become more stable. In a certain number of cases, capital restructuring is taking place within enterprises that have taken over from the former collective farms. Weakened by the impact of greater competition, the less efficient farms have been gradually eliminated. The decrease in the size of the workforce needed for agricultural land continues. The restructuring of the agricultural sector remains incomplete. Far from being fixed, the picture we have
painted should be regarded as a snapshot rather than as the culmination of the transformation that has been launched.

**Key words:** Decollectivisation of agriculture, agrarian structure, central Europe.

**INTRODUCTION**

This essay is about the decollectivisation of agriculture which took place in Hungary, Czechia, Slovakia and Poland in the first half of the nineteen-nineties as well as about changes in the agrarian structure which were to be observed during the next decade. For the third time in the 20th century, the Central European countryside corrected the trajectory of its agrarian evolution. It did so for the first time at the beginning of the 20th century when, through many albeit unsystematic agrarian reforms, the newly emerging states in the region made an effort to solve their “agrarian issues”. These agrarian reforms, interrupted by World War II, were completed in the nineteen-forties by new communist governments or governments which remained under communist pressure. The new legislation (decrees and acts of parliament) of 1944–1945 lay down the rules of obligatory division of land among the peasants without compensation, which were implemented by 1948. Enforced in different years in different countries, as communist rule consolidated, they finalised the peasantisation of agriculture. This peasantisation was incomplete, because another radical process began in the late nineteen-forties, i.e. collectivisation.

The history of this process in Europe is still incomplete and its definitions have changed over the years. Collectivisation usually means liquidation of peasant farming by means of the creation, under political, economic and administrative pressure (as well as terror), of large co-operative farms. A French geographer defines the process slightly differently, taking as his point of departure the Soviet model of agriculture (organisation of production based on two types of large, non-private farms: the kolkhoz and the sovkhoz) and understands collectivisation as the popularisation of this model and its institutions throughout the world. Collectivisation in this sense took place in the nineteen-seventies. It made its last, ephemeral conquest in Portugal (in Alentejo and Ribatejo) after 1974.
collectivisation more broadly, as the process whereby organisational, production and social structures and specific mechanisms for their functioning are developed in agriculture. This is the specific process of absorption of the peasant farm by the so-called socialist economy, based on central planning. This process took place in two stages. The purpose of the first stage (1949–1962) was to lay the foundations for collective farming. In order to do this it was necessary to deprive the peasants of their economic autonomy, take control of their property and clamp them down within the collectivist organisational system. The second major stage of collectivisation – the nineteen-sixties and seventies – witnessed the implementation of collectivist agrarian order. This stage involved, above all, the development of agrarian structures in the broad sense, of a dual, welfare-and-production logic of their functioning and of the “new farm man”, i.e., decomposition of the farming occupation by introducing narrow professional specialities.

We will start with an assessment of the transition processes in the agrarian sector; the ways they have been carried out have turned out to differ considerably, and the extent to which their initial objectives have been achieved has likewise varied. Regardless of the results achieved, the moves away from collectivism demonstrate the influence of the agrarian legacy on the strategic choices and the routes taken by the restructuring process. In the second part, we will analyse the specific features of the way restructuring has been carried out in different countries and the diversity of structural forms resulting from this. Finally, we will consider the different processes of agrarian restructuring that took place on the eve of integration into the EU, and the part played in them by various categories of farming entities.

DECOLLECTIVISATION AND CHANGING PROPERTY STRUCTURES

Collectivist farming is farming based on large, complicated, hierarchic production structures which are rooted in collectivist property (i.e. property owned by either a group or the state) and which function according to a dual, welfare-productive rationale. “Decollectivisation is a process of elimination of collectivist farming in its two varieties: cooperative and state. Decollectivisation, therefore, must mean changes in ownership relations, changes in the ways production structures are organised and changes in functional rationale. Changes in the economic sphere (particularly in the property structure and organisational hierarchies) lead to changes in the social structure of the countryside. These
changes lead in turn to changes in attitudes and values. Decollectivisation of agriculture is a significant part of the process of transformation in agrarian segments of post-communist societies” (Halamska 2008 p.8).

Decollectivisation thus conceived is a process which began in Central-European farming in the early nineteen-nineties. The concept itself, however, emerged in the nineteen-fifties and had a different connotation. Originally, decollectivisation meant the spontaneous process of dissolution of farming production cooperatives during the post-Stalinist thaw. Decollectivisation as it was then understood had a narrower meaning than it does today. There is also another difference between the two decollectivisations. Decollectivisation in the ’fifties meant the return to pre-collectivist status quo ante. Decollectivisation in the ’nineties did not lead to the reinstatement of any pre-collectivist status quo ante because of the different countries’ different socio-economic structures, their different locations on the modernisation scale and the advancement of world-wide globalisation processes.

The essence of decollectivisation is the change in the way property is conceptualized. Socialism – as Jadwiga Staniszkis demonstrates in her Ontology of Socialism – had its own systemic identity, largely determined by the specific form of ownership called collectivist ownership, a kind of collective ownership which cannot be divided into parts and which cannot change hands (Staniszkis 1989). And although, chronologically speaking, decollectivisation began with the destruction of collectivist logic, the so-called socialist farm (co-operative or state-owned), the nexus of the decollectivisation process had to be the change in the relationship of individuals to property and to each others involved in agriculture. Various types of agrarian assets, belonging to – often unidentified – collectives (the co-operative, the state), had to find concrete owners. Hence the appropriation process, the reverse of expropriation in the broad sense which was the framework for agrarian collectivisation, was initiated.

This multifaceted appropriation process has its own dynamic. We can distinguish three phases: a) the preliminary, euphoric, stage during which the legal foundations for appropriation are laid down, b) the optimistic, primary appropriation stage during which nominal owners are ascribed to property and c) the ongoing state of secondary, realistic appropriation leading to factual ownership. Secondary appropriation also involves transformation of the property structure which was developed in the previous stage. Concentration is a particularly interesting aspect of secondary appropriation.
Although liberalism has no structural foundations in any of the analysed countries and no historical tradition, except perhaps in Czechia, the vision of individual freedom, rule of law, respect for property rights and rooting of the economy in private ownership and the free market was ubiquitous in this part of Europe in the late nineteen-eighties. Liberal ideology emerged “first as a kind of communism rebours, and therefore largely as a set of principles which opposed the official ideology and were basically its reversal” (Szacki 1996, p. 91). Post-communist society did not have a civil base for liberalism, a so-called middle class, and private property was practically non-existent. What did exist, however, were the liberal reformers and it was they who began to declare capitalism as a model, an ideological project.

The idea that privatisation of agriculture is the logical consequence of the liberal option of transformation of post-communist societies. On the other hand, it has a logic of its own, rooted in the post-peasant (in the actual and/or ideological sense) nature of Central European societies populated by peasants, formerly collectivised peasants or their legal descendants. This is why the privatisation of agriculture is so politically important and the legal framework for this privatisation was usually developed prior to the first free elections in Central Europe. Therefore, legislation concerning privatisation also has an agrarian stigma. Through the choice of dates which are the reference points when determining property rights, through the use of a specific vocabulary, particularly the open use of the term 'agrarian reform, through the principles inspiring certain solutions (area restrictions of the value of compensation, recognition of the 'moral right' of those who work the land to own the land), through the allocation of plots to workers or 'landless' village people, through the accompanying concern about proper use of space (rational plot division), these acts of redistribution are acquiring the meaning of agrarian reform. All this reflects the complex ambiguity of the assumptions underlying this social restoration (Maurel, 1997).

Legislation concerning agrarian privatisation has its national specificity and is part of the more general transformation rationale in each country.

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2 By the actual post-peasant nature of these societies we mean the share of farming populations in these countries’ social structures in the late nineteen-thirties and the symbolically post-peasant popularity of agrarian ideology at that time, exemplified by the then powerful peasant parties.

3 In all cases, those dates included effects of communist agricultural reforms, conducted until 1948.

4 Limits in Hungary, Slovakia.

5 In Hungary.
Most liberal of all is the philosophy of change adopted by the Czechoslovakian reformers who acted on the assumption that the most important element of economic transformation was the emergence of owners because it was they, as responsible economic actors, who would find the best way to use their property and stimulate economic restructuring. The key words of the Czechoslovakian philosophy of agrarian transformation are: property rights sanctioning possession and unrestricted use of property, restitution, i.e., regaining nationalised property, privatisation meaning the transfer of state property to private hands, and transformation, meaning conversion of collective farms into other social forms of organisation of production. Acting on these assumptions, Czechoslovakia developed the most liberal, consistent and complex legislation including rehabilitation, privatisation, restitution and transformation laws. From 1990 on we have a series of legal acts regulating the restitution of property confiscated in various periods, crowned by the restitution act of 21st May 1991. Estates nationalised between 15.02.1948 and 01.01.1990 were to undergo restitution in kind. Their owners or heirs could apply for restitution in kind and, that not being feasible, they were to receive compensation, part of which was to be paid in cash and part in Restitution Investment Fund bonds. This major act of parliament continued to be obligatory in the two republics which resulted from the division of Czechoslovakia: the Czech Republic (Czechia) and the Slovakian Republic (Slovakia). It was supplemented in Slovakia by an additional act of parliament on the restitution of ecclesiastic and monastic property. The original act was amended in 1996 when the provision was added that satisfaction of demands for restitution is the obligation of the new owner or the Slovakian Land Fund (founded in 1991). Up to 150 ha of arable land and 150 ha of forests were to be returned. These limits were lifted in the Czech Republic. The framework for the transformation of agrarian production co-operatives were laid by a separate act of parliament passed in 1992. This act defined eligibility for participation in the division of co-operative property and the procedures for such division and it also gave the deadline for completion of the legal reorganisation of the farms (1993).

The Hungarian solutions followed a different philosophy, although here too, the key words were: property rights, private property, transformation, privatisation, compensation and restitution. In contrast with Czech philosophy, the Hungarian philosophy of transformation is not based on mass privatisation because Hungary adopted a different strategy, i.e., one of seeking and encouraging owners/users who had initiative and were willing to take the risk associated with maximally effective asset management. The Hungarian
authorities believed that mass privatisation, limited to modification of the property structure only, would not stimulate restructuring without which there could be no guarantee of effectiveness. (OCDE 1993, p. 54). The Hungarians wanted to achieve two mutually incompatible goals: to transform property rights and at the same time to ensure continuity of functioning in agriculture (Maurel 1997) – hardly surprising if we consider the place which agriculture occupies in the Hungarian economy. In this case, agrarian decollectivisation involved privatisation of state-owned enterprises and farms on the one hand and transformation of farming co-operatives on the other. This process was regulated by three groups of legal acts which reflected both the specificity of collectivisation in Hungarian agriculture and the considerable saturation of the as yet socialist Hungarian economy with market mechanisms. The legal framework for decollectivisation was provided by a number of acts of parliament: four compensation acts (1991), two acts regulating transformation of agricultural production co-operatives and several acts dealing with privatisation but not limited to agriculture alone. All in all, these acts rendered the process of decollectivisation in Hungary quite complicated and ambiguous, not only for the external observer. The procedure for compensation for nationalised land which was to be partial, regressive gradual decrease OR a lowering of tax rates for sums below a specific amount? and step-by-step was the most complicated of all.

Polish legislation is quite humble vis-a-vis the legislation presented above. This is justified to a certain extent by the size and specific nature of the collectivisation of agriculture in Poland\(^6\). The legislation is based on the same values which determined the specific rationale of the “Balcerowicz reform”, the values of functional economic liberalism which highlight such functions as effectiveness and efficiency and clearly neglect or underestimate other aspects of property rights. The legislation said nothing about reprivatisation, a situation which has persisted to this day with numerous economic, political and psychological consequences. The few existing acts of parliament dealing with decollectivisation in Poland fit into this philosophy very well. Only state-owned farms were to be obligatorily privatised in accordance with the act of 19 October 1991 which defined the forms and methods of their privatisation. Co-operative farms could be transformed but their transformation was not obligatory. After 1989 agricultural production co-operatives continued to operate on the basis of the co-operative law passed in 1982. A 1990 act decreeing obligatory liquidation

\(^6\) Sector of collective farming occupied approximately 20% of land.
of all co-operative unions gave farms complete independence but the possibility of property transformation was limited until autumn 1994 due to the still existing principle of indivisibility of co-operative assets. Certain possibilities of change of the internal structure are provided by the share valorisation act of August 1991 and the change in the organisation and operation of co-operatives and share revalorisation act of October 1992. These acts make it possible to privatise part of the co-operative assets (mainly houses) and to take the road of several stages to transformation of co-operatives into companies. But it was not until the cooperative law was amended in 1994 that property transformation became fully possible. This amended act states that the entire co-operative assets belong to the members cum natural persons and can be divided among them if the co-operative is liquidated.

The legal foundations for decollectivisation are reviewed in Table 1. The legal solutions pertaining to decollectivisation can be divided into several groups: a) legislation pertaining to restoration of full property rights to owners whose rights were limited by collectivisation (the peasant right to ownership of land in production cooperatives); b) legislation pertaining to restitution of, or compensation for, property which was confiscated or nationalised in a way recognised as illegal; c) free distribution of property according to a combination of “reparative justice” (according to input) and “re-distributive justice” (according to work effort); d) sales in various forms and e) handing over. A review of these categories leads to several conclusions. The legal solutions pertaining to privatisation of agriculture are not intrinsic, isolated or irrational. On the contrary, they are consistent with the global philosophy of transformation adopted by each of the analysed societies. This inchoate pattern will only emerge fully during the stage of economic and secondary appropriation. The legal solutions relating to privatisation of agriculture have their liberal and agrarian roots. These two ideological trends mingle in the discourse preceding the legislative procedure, the moment the project for social change emerges. However, even the first approximation in the form of new legal frameworks suggests withdrawal from liberalism and bowing to collectivism. Although the new decollectivisation law dissociates itself from collectivist ideology it adopts and legitimises a number of collectivist solutions.

This conclusion follows from the analysis of the new law from the perspective of: a) the attitude towards the post-war agrarian reforms, b) the adopted scale and character of restitution, c) the principles of distribution of indivisible co-operative property and d) the restrictions concerning owners’ purchase and sale of received property.
TABLE 1. A review of the legal foundations for privatisation of farms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transformation of co-operative farms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Czechia/Slovakia</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>obligatory transformation by 31 December 1992</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Procedures for privatisation of collectivised land</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>opinion of withdrawing land contribution and farming it individually available (factual) appropriation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yes, since May 1990</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>restitution and/or compensation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>complete/conditional restitution’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>allocation of land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Procedures for privatisation of the capital of co-operative farms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sales of 25% to eligible people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>distribution according to reparation logic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yes, since May 1990</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>distribution of max. 10% among employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>distribution according to redistribution logic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>increased proportion of share fund possibility of buying housing and cooperative land with - this fund</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Procedure for privatisation of state-owned farms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>restitution, sale leasing, Coupon privatization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>commercialisation and then sale or leasing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sales and leasing by tender, commercialisation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Restitution first of up to 150 ha of arable land in Slovakia, no limit in Czechia.

**For co-operative members who have no land contribution – 30 gold crowns, for co-operative employees – 20 gold crowns.

THE PATHS TAKEN BY POST-COLLECTIVIST RESTRUCTURING

The second, social phase of the decollectivisation is broadly understood as an appropriation process composed of the legal and economic appropriation. Within the framework of property rights this is the process of defining the
conceptualization of property. Rather than regulating “people-object relations” property rights regulate “people-people relations relating to the use of objects. Thanks to property rights, individuals can foresee beforehand what they can rationally expect in their relations with other members of the community” (Demsetz, 1967 in Brosi, 1993). Here, we adopt a wider perspective on the process of legal appropriation and view it as the general process whereby property rights in agriculture are organised and owners are designated. Two overlapping processes would be involved in this more general process: “designation” of a nominal owner to property or its parts and the purchase of ownership rights by individuals or groups.

The first of these component processes, i.e., owner designation, is an indispensable phase of privatisation but must not be equated with privatisation. First and foremost, it involves the procedures of structure transformation, valuation and division of previously indivisible, collectivist property and designation of each part’s rightful owner. When real estate is divided, the institution of central mortgage register must be restored. Parts of the property may be in kind (i.e., consist of tangible goods) or they may be symbolic (when they are parts of values, stocks or shares). The process does not always end in the legal designation of a private owner because it often involves taking over property by the state treasury. The property may later be privatised by means of other methods.

The second component process, i.e., acquisition of legal property rights, is both more complex and more interesting. Whatever the country, decollectivist legislation has two elements, both of which are extremely important for the further course of the process. First, change of ownership structure is not voluntary, it is compulsory and must proceed according to a predetermined rhythm. The legal acts precisely state the date of obligatory completion of the transformation of the property-structure of farming production co-operatives and the structural-functional transformation of state-owned farms (See Table 1, line “Transformation of co-operative farms”). Several goals seem to have informed this obligatory speed of transformation. The reformers wanted to gain the majority’s political approval and take advantage of the social enthusiasm. At the same time they did not want to leave the collectivist nomenklatura too much time to counterattack. The speed was probably also motivated by the need to change the agrarian production structure as soon as possible in order to avoid a drastic drop in agricultural production. Ownership rights are not acquired automatically and the future owner must demonstrate much determination and activity from the very start. The future potential owner, and often the former
owner, must apply for restitution or purchase within a specific deadline even if the property was misappropriated illegally. The time legally given to apply for restitution or allocation of property is very short.

The legislation concerning reprivatisation and decollectivist privatisation, as formerly defined, indicated who could acquire property rights in agriculture. However, not everybody who was eligible applied for restitution or the right to acquire land. In the analysed countries (except Poland) this technically complicated an economically complex stage resulted in the development of a large, spatially dispersed and heterogeneous group of owners of farm land and production capital. Everywhere the main new owners of the means of agrarian production were not people who actually worked in farming but people who were not currently working on farms [], i.e., former owners or heirs who now lived in towns and cities. This led to the development of a new albeit temporary situation in agrarian relations: fragmented ownership of means of production was separated from work.

From the formal/legal point of view the decollectivisation process was complete once property was distributed and each part was attributed to an individual, a nominal owner. Despite the formal, legal status of owners, new owners were confronted with many economic, social and psychological barriers that limited their freedom of the use of their property. The main economic barrier was the lack of a market for agrarian property. The main social barriers were rooted in owner characteristics: their “externality” with respect to farming, i.e., their “urbanity”, old age, other sources of sustenance, physical distance or lack of elementary farming and capital management competence. To this we must add psychological barriers. Although the vast majority of present owners have full legal right to their property they are vicarious owners by a caprice of history.

The stage of legal appropriation produced a large and very heterogeneous category of owners. After this initial phase of systemic transformation Central-Eastern European agriculture (except in Poland) became an agriculture of producers-cum-leaseholders rather than producers-cum-proprietors. In this situation, economic appropriation assumed two basically different forms: classical economic appropriation where the owner is the appropriating agent (proprietor appropriation) and factual appropriation where the manager is the appropriating agent (managerial appropriation). These are the two forms of economic appropriation which Françoise Simon identified in her analysis of the privatisation of Czech agriculture (Simon 1995) but this model apparently has a much wider meaning and can be applied to agrarian privatisation in entire Central Europe.
The following strategies can be identified within the proprietor appropriation model:

a) the subsistence-oriented strategy, i.e., the regaining or gaining of property which is usually not worth very much and using it for sustenance purposes;
b) the capital-securing strategy (“grab what’s yours and run”), i.e., taking over property (land, buildings, machinery) from the collectivist farm with the purpose or hope of later selling it; c) the collective-solidarity strategy, applied by employee co-proprietors of neocollective forms of organisation of production. Because owners-cum-employees have not discovered any other way of making use of their property than the neocollective farm, they are determined to keep the farm running and at this stage they treat it as a certain number of jobs;
d) the patrimony reconstruction strategy is very emotionally tinged and centres around regaining collectivised or nationalised land and reconstructing the farm which existed before collectivization; e) the enterprise strategy differs from the previous strategies in that it is fuelled by a widely understood project for a future farming enterprise rather than by memory of the past. This strategy has many varieties just as there are many types of agricultural enterprises and entrepreneurs.

When analysing all these real, economic appropriation strategies we must remember that the majority of new agrarian owners have remained passive. This passivity “is not a strategy deliberately chosen by the owners. First and foremost, their passivity expresses their lack of real means of realising their ownership rights. Lack of information, competence and behaviour patterns, and the lack of or the embryo state of financial markets and land markets explain why most owners were unable to utilise their ownership rights effectively” (Simon 1995, p. 265). This in turn gave way to the second type of economic appropriation, i.e., managerial appropriation. The managerial, non-proprietor type of appropriation had several variations anchored by two extreme strategies. The classic strategy is based on dispersed ownership. This enables the manager to control the owners’ doings. We find this classic managerial appropriation strategy in many new production co-operatives but also in joint-stock or employee-owned companies. The managers behave like active owners, i.e., they manage the property, but they do so on behalf of the owners who have delegated their rights to them. This classic, managerial type of appropriation often degenerates and this degeneration is facilitated by ‘soft’ ownership rights: the managers are used to governing shared property (that is nobody’s and therefore mine) and the owners are not yet in the habit of executing their rights. Here, appropriation was very seldom overt and direct. It was usually
based on various networks, mutual ownership, buying up stock with the help of various funds, e.g., social benefit funds. If, in the previous, classic version we had control of property through delegation (delegation property control), then here we have a different strategy: network property control. Is this, we wonder, just property control or is it a novel, post-collective type of ownership which we may call manageriate?

Because of the absence of any reference model, the interplay of the balance of power, and conflicts of interest, strategies for abandoning the old collectivist system have turned out to vary considerably.

**The path of appropriation and control benefiting “managers” in the Czech Republic**

In the Czech Republic, transformation was based on the restitution of property confiscated by the communist powers after February 1948, the restructuring of the cooperatives, and the privatisation of the state farms. Set in motion by the application of a complex legislative system, restructuring has left many questions unanswered and given rise to conflicts of interest between the different categories of social actors involved in the transformation process, particularly in relation to the control of the capital of the farms that have been privatised.

The Czech agricultural sector has experienced a limited restructuring of the family farm. In the early 1990s, the restitution of the land to its former owners might have favoured the establishment of independent farmers. To start with, this was encouraged by a policy of support for investment, but after 1994 the process slowed down. There are a number of reasons why family market farming did not become the dominant model. The social sector likely to become involved in such a project was relatively limited. The workers on the collective farms (discriminated against by the criteria for allocating shares in the capital) were hardly interested. The new farmers were recruited from among the descendants of the former owners and the group of specialists (agricultural engineers, agronomists, and so on). In the second half of the 1990s, the neo-cooperatives underwent a second wave of transformations, consisting in changing the legal status so as to be able to go ahead with a restructuring of capital. The number of cooperatives has continued to decrease in favour of corporate forms.

The privatisation of the former state forms has mostly given rise to corporate enterprises, or more rarely to farms run by individuals as sole traders. In the beginning, the land and assets were leased out by the state Land Fund. Since
1999, the state has started to privatise the lands that it retains (about 500 000 ha) but the process of selling them is a slow one.

In broad outline, three different categories of structure can be distinguished, depending on the origin of the property: farms originating in the transformation of the former cooperatives, the size of which has diminished; farms formed on the basis of restitution (about 50 000 farms run by sole traders have been established, covering about one fifth of the agricultural area); and farms originating in the privatisation of the former state farms. The structures that were established immediately after the transformation of the cooperatives and the privatisation of the state farms have changed relatively little.

Although the decollectivisation of Czech agriculture has been achieved, problems persist. Czech farmers have tried to adjust to the conditions of prices imposed by the market and have improved their productivity, but their economic efficiency still needs to make further progress. The development of the land market has proved to be insufficient, in spite of the sale of land by the state and measures providing loans for buying land. More than 90% of cultivated land is leased from a large number of private owners who live in the towns. This situation may eventually be a factor leading to vulnerability. Penetration by foreign capital will increase competition among farmers, especially as regards the leasing of land.

A neo-collectivist path in Slovakia

After the separation from the Czech Republic in 1992, Slovakia embarked on a different course, opting for a policy that was more conservative and more interventionist. Adopting a rhetoric calling for security of food supplies, economic stability, the maintenance of sufficient agricultural revenues, the preservation of agricultural activity in mountainous regions, and the protection of farmland, the government of Vladimir Mečiar implemented a policy of support for the agricultural sector. Accompanied as it was by measures discriminating against small farmers, this policy had the effect of directing the path taken by agricultural development in Slovakia towards a structural concentration of land and agricultural capital in the hands of interest groups with their origins in the former controlling elite. In order to preserve the level of organisation of the agricultural sector, a new law on the transformation of the cooperatives, adopted in 1995, aimed
at stabilising capital in the transformed cooperatives, thus effectively favouring their survival. In their new statutory situation, the cooperatives have survived, their managements having hindered the application of the law. Slightly later, the privatisation of the state farms was launched in 1996–1997, and the sale of the assets occurred in a way that favoured the former controlling elite. The arrival in power of a centre-right coalition in 1998 did not fundamentally alter the direction of these trends.

Deprived of political support, family farming has made little progress. The extreme division of the land into smaller units, the delay in identifying who had the titles to the land and in renewing the land registers, and the lack of starting capital, all impeded the establishment of this type of agriculture. Certain experts have pointed out that farming by middle-class farmers has never existed in Slovakia, and thus it could not serve as a reference model (Blaas, 2001). The limited development of the family farming model remains a specific characteristic of Slovak agriculture. Large-scale farms with a corporate status, with their origins in the transformation of the former collective structures, remain the dominant model.

The decline of the cooperative sector in Hungary

The path followed in Hungary is distinguished from the two previous ones by a more pronounced dualism and by an accelerated decline of the cooperative form in favour of farming structures with a corporate status. As in the neighbouring countries, decollectivisation was carried out without defining any clear and coherent agricultural policy. While some political parties (such as the Party of Small Holders) proclaimed the merits of small and medium farms, others, by contrast, defended the collectivist structures and did not want to dismantle them so as to preserve their production potential. The restitution of the land to the former owners from whom they had been taken took place in an original way by means of compensation (with vouchers being issued to a value corresponding to that of the confiscated property). Part of the land of the former collective structures was assigned to the newly emerging farming structures.

8 This law establishes, in place of the transformation participation shares of beneficiaries who were not members of the cooperatives, share certificates in the cooperatives which are trust securities (registered or bearer securities). The law obliges the cooperatives to issue these securities to the amount of the capital held by beneficiaries who are not members. Those who are members of the cooperatives may also ask for their participation shares to be converted into securities. The cooperatives have been very slow in regularising their situation by issuing these securities.

9 In spite of the steps taken in 1991 by Čarnogursky's government (the adoption of laws favouring restitution and the re-establishment of private property rights to the land).
farms was auctioned off and acquired by holders of the compensation vouchers. A significant proportion of the land also remained the property of members of the cooperatives, who were able to withdraw them from the collective structures in order to cultivate them or lease them out. Finally, in an attempt at social equity, plots of land were distributed to employees of the collective farms who did not have any land themselves. At the conclusion of the process of transformation of the former cooperatives, the capital other than the land was supposed to be divided up, in the form of a proportion of the property, to those who were eligible (active members, former members and their heirs, employees). Relatively egalitarian in its intentions, this privatisation process has benefited those who were capable of implementing active appropriation strategies and of developing these assets.

The decollectivisation process has ended in the widespread fragmentation of the land among a large number of owners and in a separation between the ownership of the land and its exploitation. Half a million people received more then two million hectares in a little less than five years. The reallocation of property rights created conditions for the transformation of farming structures, giving rise to new social forms of production. Transformed into cooperatives of landowners, the former agricultural collectives have set about adjusting to the new rules of the market economy by reducing their production costs (cutting back on investments, shedding surplus workers, etc.). At the beginning of the 2000s, the process of capital restructuring accelerated, with cooperatives being converted into companies with various types of legal status. The number and surface area of the cooperatives has continued to decline. In 2002, less than one tenth of the utilised agricultural area was farmed by cooperatives.

A limited decollectivisation in Poland

In 1989, Poland was virtually an exception within the Eastern bloc. The state sector (18.5% of the utilised agricultural area) and the cooperative sector (3.7% of the utilised agricultural area) were only of minor importance in Poland compared to a private sector that consisted of small individual farms covering 76.2% of the agricultural area. Although Poland did not have to carry out a large-scale decollectivisation, changes did take place in terms of the ownership and the use of the land. During the years 1992–1995, the state farms were abolished and the land transferred to an Agency for Agricultural Property of the Public Finance Department, which was in charge of administering this national land stock. The Agency has tended to favour corporate entities when allocating land for lease or for sale. The former split between the socialised sector (state farms and agricultural production cooperatives) and the individual sector has been replaced by a division
between agriculture carried out by private entities with a corporate status, mostly consisting of large-scale farms and agricultural production cooperatives (covering 2% of the area), and small – or medium – sized family farms.

Polish agriculture has undergone a rapid transformation. The break dates from 1989, from the moment when the transition to a market economy allowed the introduction of reforms and a radical change of direction in agricultural policy (with the abolition of state assistance for the agricultural sector and the dismantling of the network of “cooperative” services that formed the framework for agriculture). Over the period 1989–2004, growing distinctions can be noted between different types of farm, depending on their market position (farms working principally to satisfy their own needs and farms producing goods to meet the needs of the market), and also an increasing polarisation between large and small farms, with the decline of medium-sized farms and the concentration of land benefiting the large farms. Polish agriculture now consists of production units with very different characteristics, rules and goals for the way they are run.

The appropriation strategies described above throw light on the origin of the social forms of production[^10] that can be seen in the post-collectivist agricultural structures, and also on the mechanisms of reproduction and adaptation. The paths followed by the transition from one social form to another have been the subject of monographs (Maurel, 1994, 2005). Attempts to put forward general conclusions have been made (Laschewski, 1998). This is the case if we are dealing with the transition from the large estate to the state farm and its subsequent conversion into a corporate enterprise, or again with the journey leading from the agricultural production cooperative to the neo-cooperative. The small subsistence farm is generally considered to be the continuation of individual plots of land from the socialist era. However, the paths taken by the transition from collective forms (state or cooperative) to post-collective ones are not as straightforward as is often assumed. Each social form of production is defined by a specific way of linking up the three basic production factors in agriculture: land, labour, and capital. What position do the post-collectivist social forms occupy in relation to the previous ones, in what ways do they testify to a kind of continuity or, by contrast, to a break with the previous social forms?

[^10]: It is preferable to think in terms of social forms of production, supported by social actors with differing aptitudes, interests, and ways of acting.
The new cooperatives of owners

Under the legal form of cooperatives of owners (in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary), the former collective farms have carried out a conversion of a neo-collectivist type. With a reduction in their size and their material and human resources, they have taken over from the former structures. They are characterised by the hybrid and composite nature of ownership. The ways in which the land and the other assets have been divided up (in the form of shares in the cooperative) have led to the land and capital being divided up among a large number of owners and shareholders, and to an effective separation between the ownership of the land and its use. The connections between the production factors (land, labour and capital) bring into contact with one another (and sometimes into competition) social groups with varying interests (external owners, pensioners, employees, managers, etc.). As a consequence of these farming structures going into debt, and in order to try to achieve financial stability, capital restructuring is taking place on the initiative of the group of managers capable of implementing appropriation control strategies. These hybrid and transitory structures have been progressively converted into various legal forms (corporate farms).

The large business companies

These have their origin in the privatisation of the state farms on the one hand, and the conversion of the cooperatives of owners, on the other. In the case of the former state farms, the land is leased to institutions that have been established in an ad hoc way by the state (Agencies, Land Funds, etc.). They have often been privatised on the initiative of and to the benefit of the former senior managers (the group of specialists). Functioning in a corporate form (joint-stock companies, limited liability companies), they have employees (though fewer than the cooperatives) and produce exclusively for the market. Their principal objective is to make a profit, which means paying back the capital invested, paying their workers’ wages, and paying the ground rent regularly. Up until now the amount of the ground rent paid to the small landowners or the institutions managing the land that has remained state property has been quite low. The slowness of the procedures for restitution or the registration of rights, and the weak negotiating position of the hundreds of thousands of small landowners have held back the creation of a land market. Things will change after the end of a transitional period ranging from seven to twelve years after joining the EU, when citizens of other European countries will be able to buy the land. The competitiveness of this
The state-owned companies

They have been directly inherited from the former state farms over which the state has retained control, either in order to preserve a controlling interest in a particular branch of production (such as seed production or genetic selection in the case of the former agro-industrial units), or for lack of other alternatives. Placed under the control or the administration of Agencies for State Property (as in Poland and Hungary), they employ a paid workforce (labourers and managers) and attempt to function in the market context. Their number is tending to decrease.

The reappearance in many forms of family agriculture

This assumes various forms, differing in their size, the rationale behind the way they function, and the extent to which production is market-oriented. The smallest farms can be compared to the supplementary plots of land formerly allocated to farm workers for their own use. Land reform policies made it possible to increase the size of these plots (particularly in Hungary). Withdrawing a small plot of land from a large agricultural complex can be part of a strategy of preserving a family inheritance or of attempting to acquire a supplementary source of income (in Slovakia or Hungary). Small-scale family farming consists of subsistence or semi-subsistence units which survive in precarious conditions thanks to income from social benefit payments, notably in Poland (Halamska 2004, 2008 a).

Larger farms try either to revive a family approach, based on a close connection between capital, labour, and the family, or else to opt for a business rationale. Only a small number of these independent farms seem to be in the process of acquiring more land, investing, and modernising. Many of them experience difficulties in gaining access to credit, benefiting from appropriate technical assistance, and selling their produce on the market.

The conditions of reproduction of the various social forms of post-collectivist production (access to credit, professional training, technical supervision networks, forms of market integration, etc.), their way of organising professionally (associations, agricultural trade unions), and their political representation (agrarian parties) appear to be extremely varied. Depending on the country, these social forms are present in varying proportions, and their relative importance is constantly changing. Whereas the agrarian landscape (regrouping of small plots of land, extensive buildings, sometimes in a state of ruin) retains the imprint of
the collectivist system, the rationales underlying the production structures have
developed substantially due to their integration into the market economy (with the
exception of the subsistence farms). Under various forms and to differing extents,
post-collectivist agriculture continues to be characterised by a strong duality of
structures, a constant feature of the agrarian history of Central Europe, which is
currently assuming new forms.

**STRUCTURAL PROFILES ON THE EVE
OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION**

The changes in the appropriation methods resulting from the re-establishment
of property rights, the transformation of the former collective structures into
new legal forms (cooperatives, companies, small individual farms), and the
restructuring that has followed, mean that old categories no longer serve a very
useful purpose. The official legal status does not explain properly the structure of
capital nor the way in which the farms are managed. The definitions used by the
statistical agencies vary from one country to another (the status of the farming
entity, the fiscal system, social contributions, pension rights, etc.). The registration
of production units is not very reliable, especially as regards the small individual
farms (plots of land), which are not taken into account systematically. But these
small farms affect a large number of households and occupy a considerable
portion of the utilised agricultural area. Their importance has been recognised
by European agricultural policy, which uses appropriate measures to support
semi-subsistence agriculture\(^\text{11}\).

The structural diversity is the result of a reduction in the agricultural workforce
and the move away from structural concentration of the farms. In describing the
structural profiles, we have based our comparison on the homogenous statistics
collected by Eurostat. Immediately before joining the EU, Czech and Slovak
agricultures were characterised by concentrated structures, with more than
nine-tenths of the utilised agricultural area being used by large farms of more
than 50 ha. However, Slovakia retained a significant number of small individual
farms. Hungary was characterised by a lower concentration of the land, whereas
Polish agriculture differed from the others in having a polymorphous profile,

\(^{11}\) In the new member states, many “semi-subsistence farms” are to be found, which, while
still producing for their own consumption, commercialise the majority of their production. During
the course of the transition period, the European Union is aiding these farms by a specific measure
to help them to become viable units from the commercial point of view.
with the utilised agricultural area being divided up between small, medium, and large farming units.

**TABLE 2 – Farms in 2005: the principal characteristics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Farm size (in ha)</th>
<th>Czech Republic</th>
<th>Slovakia</th>
<th>Hungary</th>
<th>Poland</th>
<th>EU-25</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% of farms</td>
<td>% of UAA</td>
<td>% of UAA</td>
<td>% of farms</td>
<td>% of UAA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-5</td>
<td>53.0</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>90.0</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>89.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-10</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-20</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-50</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 50</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>92.6</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>94.2</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Farms larger than 1 ESU</th>
<th>Czech Republic</th>
<th>Slovakia</th>
<th>Hungary</th>
<th>Poland</th>
<th>EU-27</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of farms (in 1000s)</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>1082</td>
<td>7815</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permanent workforce (1000s of AWUs)</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>229</td>
<td>1727</td>
<td>9782</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permanent workforce per farm (AWUs)</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family workforce (%)</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>59.9</td>
<td>93.1</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UAA (1000s of ha)</td>
<td>3520</td>
<td>1840</td>
<td>4045</td>
<td>13132</td>
<td>161105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UAA per farm (ha)</td>
<td>133.4</td>
<td>142.7</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>20.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total livestock (1000s of LSUs)</td>
<td>2047</td>
<td>739</td>
<td>2104</td>
<td>2047</td>
<td>133492</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

UAA – Utilised Agricultural Area
ESU – European Size Unit
AWU – Annual Work Unit
LSU – Large Stock Unit

The continuing high concentration of land in the Czech Republic

The structure of farm sizes has a dual character. A large number of small enterprises own small areas (64% cultivate less than 2% of the total area), whereas farms that are larger than 50 ha, representing 15.2% of the total, cover the largest part (92.6%) of the total Utilised Agricultural Area (UAA). According to the statistical survey on farm structures carried out in 2005 by the Czech Statistical Office, there are 39,419 units held by “natural persons” (individuals – 93.3% of the total) and 2,833 held by “legal entities”, three quarters of which are corporate farms (70.7% of the UAA). The first category includes farms run by sole traders some of whom are officially registered, but the majority are not. Altogether, they cultivate 1 million hectares, or 29.3% of the UAA, which means an average size of around 26 ha. More than half of them have an area of less than ten hectares, but they cultivate less than 2% of the UAA. The largest of these farms are run by sole traders who lease the land (63.6% of the UAA under cultivation is leased).

The second category is made up of agricultural enterprises with various types of status. The enterprises of a corporate type number 2,154 and cultivate 45.9% of the area; the cooperatives number 584 and exploit less than a quarter of the UAA. In both cases, they are large farms covering several hundred hectares, the majority of which is leased. 136 enterprises (62 companies and 52 cooperatives) are bigger than 3000 ha. The profile of the agrarian structures varies depending on the region and the ways in which the farms are developed. Large-scale agricultural production, based in the centre of Bohemia, contrasts with agricultural areas with a large number of small farms, especially in Moravia where restructuring is progressing more slowly.

Large and small farms in Slovakia

In Slovakia, agriculture presents a level of concentration of the land just as pronounced as in the Czech Republic. The 2,600 farms with more than 50 ha (3.8% of the total) cover more than 94.2% of the UAA. The great majority of them are production units with the status of legal entities, resulting from the conversion of the former cooperatives. In the agriculture census taken in 2001, 1,522 registered farms were counted with the status of legal entities, cultivating 89.8% of the total area. They included 715 cooperatives. After having increased until 1996 (due to the impact of internal divisions), the number of cooperatives then started to decrease because some of them went into liquidation, but most were converted into various corporate forms. In 1994 70% of the cultivated area was concentrated in the hands of the cooperatives, but ten years later they
DECOLLECTIVISATION OF AGRICULTURE AND RESHAPING...

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cultivated just under half of it. Until the early 2000s, these farms functioned under a system of weak budgetary constraints, enabling them to avoid bankruptcy and liquidation in spite of high debt levels. The restructuring of their capital in the hands of managers and the introduction of management methods comparable to those of the private agricultural companies has helped move the cooperatives that are still active closer to the other corporate structures. Although a tendency can be seen towards a reduction in their average size, still more then two-fifths of corporate farms cultivate areas in excess of a thousand hectares. Alongside these large corporate farms, the growth of a new category of individual farms can be observed (Blaas, 2003). The proportion of the total area of agricultural land cultivated by individual farmers quadrupled during the 1990s. Four-fifths of these farms (not registered) come under the heading of semi-subsistence agriculture which provides a supplementary source of income (in the form of self-consumption) to households of pensioners or those who farm in addition to another job. A slow and incomplete restructuring process and the continued high degree of concentration of land and capital that benefit large, inefficient farming units are responsible for the lack of competitiveness in Slovakian agriculture (Csaki, Lerman, Nuñifora, Blaas, 2003).

A new relationship between large and small farms in Hungary

Because of its agrarian dualism, Hungary presents a very interesting scenario. The restructuring phase resulted in a reversal of the previous proportions of the land farmed by the small individual farmers and the large enterprises (cooperatives and companies). The former overwhelming domination by the cooperative sector (which held 62% of the land in 1989) and the state sector (26%) has given way to a more equal distribution between the private farms (which utilised 49% of the area in 2000), the corporate farms (30%), and the cooperatives (15%). These categories cover a great variety of forms in terms of size, status of the workforce, and the aim of the productive activity. Around 20 000 farms form the core of a family-merchant agriculture. The number of corporate farms has increased. In this sector, a process of concentration of production can be observed, benefiting a small number of large enterprises that may have originated in the conversion of former cooperatives and state farms, or may have been created *ex nihilo* on the initiative of entrepreneurs. The dual structure conceals a double process of concentration, benefiting a small number of family farms on the one hand and large corporate farms on the other (Ieda, 2003). Taking all types of farms together, 71% of the UAA is concentrated in the hands of production units with more than 50 ha; those larger than 100 ha hold 62%. In comparison with neighbouring countries,
Hungarian agriculture appears structurally more diversified, both in terms of social forms and of size. Although the bipolarisation remains largely present, it does not prevent the emergence of medium-sized structures in the form of family farms or specialised corporate enterprises (such as livestock farming of an industrial type or horticulture). Farms with company or partnership status cultivate 26.1% of the UAA. Overall, the corporate sector utilises 59.5% of the area.

Small farms of less than 5 ha cultivate 17.6% of the UAA. Not all of them are officially registered. Semi-subsistence agriculture accounts for 78% of this category. The proportion of small merchant farmers remains low. Because of a lack of capital and difficulty in gaining access to credit from banks, they are unable to become competitive.

The structural diversity of Polish agriculture

There are around 2 700 000 farms in Poland. More than 250 000 are “statistical farms”, appearing in the registers without achieving any sort of agricultural production. Roughly 1 million farms have an area of less than one hectare, whereas approximately 1 750 000 farms have an area greater than this. Family agriculture, has become largely the majority form, but it does not constitute a homogenous whole. A new form of structural duality runs through it. A model of commercial agriculture that is similar to the family enterprise model, is involved in strategies of land accumulation, and constitutes the modernist tendency. The great majority of these farmers are trying to increase their holding of land, but can only achieve this with difficulty. The lack of fluidity in the land market is one obstacle to their development. The consolidation of this professional agriculture would require a capacity for accumulation that the low profitability of agricultural production does not allow, and it would call for a more active policy of investment aid. The modernist transformation based on a market model is thus a highly selective process.

Semi-subsistence farming, increasingly marginal from the point of view of the economy, forms the core of family agriculture (69% of individual farms and 46% of the agricultural workforce). These are farms of a rural type covering a small area, in the hands of farmers who are often old. Withdrawn from the market, these farm owners live like small farmers or “virtually small farmers” (Halamska, 2004), but in reality derive most of their income from other sources than agricultural activity. Having reduced their level of production, simplified their system of cultivation, and abandoned animal production, are they still really farmers? While some of them have started to reduce their holding of land by leasing or selling some plots, others keep their lands, thus preventing other farmers
from expanding. This relative structural inertia is one of the factors behind the blockage of the land market. The implementation of a family commercial model is restricted by the survival, largely assisted, of a majority of small subsistence farms. Playing the role of a “safety net”, a farm with a social function keeps an excessive workforce on the land and postpones the anticipated restructuring. Considered in its various structural, social and cultural dimensions, the reduction in the number of small subsistence farmers appears to be the central theme in the post-communist transformation in rural Poland (Maurel, Halamska, Lamarche, 2003). The structural bipolarisation, the unequal opening up to the market, and the composition of the income of farming households are all indicators that give family agriculture a dual image. This is coupled with a geographical duality that can be seen in the distribution by area of the different types of family farms. The product of agrarian inheritances of longstanding, this differentiation has a double effect on the structure of rural agriculture (size of farms and size of workforce). The division of farms into small units in the southern part of the country contrasts with the more concentrated structures in the north and west, whereas medium-sized farms are representative of the western regions and to a lesser extent of the centre of the country. The predominance of small farms and the strong influence of rural farming go hand in hand. The purpose of agricultural production, directed either principally towards self-consumption or principally towards the market, introduces an additional geographical divide.

CONCLUSION

Significant structural transformations have affected the agricultural domain and altered the way it is used for production. As a result of the transfer of property rights, agricultural land and part of the forests have changed hands. The framework of land appropriation and the framework of the agricultural area have to a large extent been separated from each other, with the exception of rural Poland, where the method of farming by the owner continues to hold sway. The process of decentralisation of the methods of farming the land which has affected the area of agricultural production is occurring with varying intensity depending on the country and the region. Re-established as the result of decollectivisation, private ownership of the land has been dispersed among a large number of landowners, sometimes without any direct link with agriculture and the rural milieu. More than a decade after the privatisation of the land, the land market is slow to re-establish itself and to play its role fully. Furthermore, farming structures have not
become more stable. In a certain number of cases, capital restructuring is taking place within enterprises that have taken over from the former collective farms. Weakened by the impact of greater competition, the less efficient farms have been gradually eliminated. The decrease in the size of the workforce needed for agricultural land continues. This transformation, which is key for modernisation and growth in productivity, has advanced to very different degrees depending on the country and the region. The restructuring of the agricultural sector remains incomplete. Far from being fixed, the picture we have painted should be regarded as a snapshot rather than as the culmination of the transformation that has been launched.

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