

I HAVE LAND, BUT AM I THE OWNER? THE CHALLENGES OF AGRICULTURAL LAND OWNERSHIP IN ALBANIA BETWEEN HISTORICAL HERITAGE, POLITICAL LEGACIES, AND THE EUROPEAN INTEGRATION PROCESS

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Abstract: This article explores the complexity of land ownership in rural Albania by examining the historical evolution of agrarian reforms and the changes in the rural and agricultural landscape, the current and past legal framework, the challenges farmers face in the absence of formal property titles, and how it can be solved in the context of a candidate country to join the European Union (EU). This study adopts a multidisciplinary approach, drawing on indicators from the social sciences and humanities, political economy, history, and cultural heritage to analyze the trajectory of agrarian reforms and the local perceptions of rural populations. The empirical study carried out in two Albanian villages explores how these reforms have shaped Albania's agriculture and rural landscape. Above all, this study seeks to answer a key question: in Albania, owning land does not necessarily mean being the rightful owner – so what does ownership entail? With this study, the author seeks to clarify "*de jure*" property rights in Albania using the positive Roman rights of "*usus*", "*fructus*" and "*abusus*", and "*de facto*" how this works in practice, as shown by the example of two rural areas. We use Roman property rights, which are unusual in the literature on land tenure in Albania, given the country's historical past under Ottoman rule and the impact of Muslim property rights, which still influence the *de facto* use of land today. There are two main reasons for this choice: firstly, formal rights in the country create confusion between being a landowner without having full rights, and secondly, our perspective frames these issues in the context of EU integration and calls for a rethinking of the transition to the European legal system.

Keywords: Agricultural land, ownership rights, agrarian reform, de-collectivization, Albania

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Highlights

- Post-collectivist land reform, which aimed to reduce pre-collectivist inequalities, resulted in fragmented plots and unofficial land ownership.
- The majority of farmers still do not have formal title deeds, which prevents them from selling, renting, or leasing, preventing the development of the land market.
- Without formal land ownership, Albanian farmers will be excluded from EU agricultural subsidies and unable to take full advantage of integration opportunities.
- Legal and institutional reforms are urgently needed to harmonize Albania's land administration with EU policy and standards.

1. Introduction

Ownership rights in Albania have long been debated and marked by historical legacies, changing political regimes, and ongoing legal uncertainties. The twentieth century, in particular, witnessed profound changes in land ownership and tenure (Civici, 2010; Guri et al., 2011). Especially the collapse of the centralized regime at the beginning of 1990 introduced a new era for Albania's rural landscape, as in other Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs). The de-collectivization process initially became a large-scale movement to privatize land. With the aim of "entering Europe", most of the countries elaborated clear strategies and rebuilt the institutional legal framework to regulate land property and use rights, while others are still struggling with the issue (Maurel, 2024). On this latter, Albania stands as a case where land ownership rights pose the most problems. Nevertheless, clear property rights are not the only condition for EU membership. The country must deal with fragmentation and the small size of plots to improve its agricultural performance and competitiveness and comply with standards (Martinovska Stojcheska et al., 2024).

Despite these challenges, few studies have examined the intersection of land tenure issues in Albania and its compatibility with EU land policy, given that the country is a candidate for EU accession. This research aims to fill this gap by analyzing historical and contemporary land reforms and their implications for agricultural development, the perception of farmers and their relation with agricultural land, and the obstacles it presents in the integration process of Albania. Thus, the central hypothesis is that Albania's land trajectory and the limitations of agricultural property rights hinder agricultural development and are incompatible with European land policies. In this context, the paper targets two main research questions:

- Why have farmers in Lazarat and Dervician not claimed functional property rights of agricultural land?
- From a perspective of agricultural production, how can the land property regime represent an obstacle to the EU integration process?

In order to explore the hypothesis and answer the research questions, the paper presents a theoretical overview of private property rights in agriculture, as well as the historical evolution of land rights in Albania. Two case studies, Lazarat and Dervician, are then used to assess the extent to which farmers' perceptions and actions, which determine their use and management of land, affect property rights. Through this assessment, the study seeks to determine whether territorial property disputes are an obstacle to the improvement of Albanian agriculture and rural development. We use a behavioral approach to identify the relationships between the motivation to own functional land property and the possible investment/use.

The paper is organized into four sections. The first section begins with a theoretical and historical background. In the second, the methodological approach and the presentation of two study sites take place. In the third section, we introduce the empirical results. In the last section, the discussion of the results gives a clear statement of the challenges that property rights address in Albania, to finish with the general conclusion of this study.

2. Theoretical Framework

Many scholars consider the agrarian reforms of 1990 in the CEECs as a means of profound social transformations, especially in rural areas (Deininger et al., 2012; Thomas, 2006). Inspired by the Western model of institutions and market orientation (Müller & Munroe, 2008), the private property rights were the main objective of each CEE country. Considering that this model was far from what CEECs had known for at least 45 years, the EU Commission highlighted the need to support these countries in this matter through financial and technical programs like PHARE². A functioning market economy was a fundamental requirement for EU membership, and a key component of this is a well-functioning land market (Bogaerts et al., 2002; Gorgan & Hartvigsen, 2022). To meet the criteria, the CEECs implemented major land administration reforms. In this respect, the main challenge for the governments of these countries was to determine how private property rights should be granted. There were two conflicting questions to this matter (Hagedorn, 2004, p. 412):

- Should land be returned to former owners to correct historical injustices?
- Or should historic restitution be avoided to prevent inefficient land structures, opting for distribution or voucher-based allocation instead?

Various decisions were made in this regard, with most countries opting to restitute land to former owners. However, some countries, such as Romania, Albania, Russia, and Ukraine, adopted either a mixed approach or a per capita land distribution system (Hagedorn, 2004). Among these latter, Albania stands out as the most radical case (Deininger et al., 2012; Guri et al., 2011; Müller & Sikor, 2006; Zhllima et al., 2010). The Albanian government of the time decided to distribute all collective land and most of the state land to all family farmers, largely disregarding historical ownership rights (Cungu & M. Swinnen, 1999). The equal land distribution reform, characterized by redistributing land to former cooperative members and rural populations, without considering the previous owners in most of the country (Zhllima et al., 2010), brought challenges related to ownership rights, legal recognition, and market integration. Free land was distributed to the rural population based on the logic of the last user without exclusive ownership, as the farmers had no right to sell, rent, or transfer the property.

Given Albania's distinct approach to agricultural land distribution, where most of the land was allocated to former cooperative workers without formalized ownership rights to modify or sell the property, this study begins by examining different forms of private property rights. This is especially important in cases where privatization is not an adequate conception of private property rights (Hagedorn, 2004). Furthermore, since this research focuses on a CEE country, a region that experienced significant transformations in land ownership during the 20th century (Maurel, 2024), it is essential to start with some insights on the various forms of land ownership rights. These transformations include significant changes in land reform impacted by the two world wars, the introduction and collapse of planned economies, and open market economies (Bogaerts et al., 2002). In this regard, these countries have gone from the property rights of large landowners to land collectivization based on the Soviet model, followed by de-collectivization and the transformation of land rights into individual rights. Thus, changes in agricultural land are traced in this study as a sign of the evolution of legal and social norms based on the historical and political evidence (Maurel, 2021). The switch from the collectives' land tenure systems to private hands led to further investigation into the way land ownership was structured and the rights granted to landowners (Maurel, 2021, 2024). In addition, land reforms within CEECs have taken diverse paths. While some countries have successfully defined ownership rights and facilitated the development of a functional land market, others still face challenges in land ownership rights and policy implementation (Lerman, 2001; Sikor & Lund, 2009). In this context, it is essential to understand these dynamics to explain why land reform remains a highly controversial issue in post-transition economies and to assess its implications for economic development and public policy.

² The PHARE program is the EU's main financial instrument for the accession of Central and Eastern European countries. It was launched as a specific EC program, initiated by Council Regulation No. 3906/89. Its funding is used to channel technical, economic and infrastructural expertise and assistance to recipient states. The aim is to help these countries achieve market economies based on free enterprise and private initiative. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/enlargement/briefings/33a1>

2.1 Understanding agricultural land property and ownership rights

Land property is one of the most influential yet debated human constructs. The land property regime – the way of organizing and legitimizing rights and obligations – is a fundamental element of a society's political, economic, and social organization, and a source of power in access to wealth because it provides the means to access, exploit, and transform the land (Maurel, 2021). Since the beginning of human history, the importance of land has led society to develop customs and laws to ensure land security and define land rights. These rights include benefits and obligations for the owner or the possessor of the land. In this context, ownership is defined as a relationship between an individual and a thing, restricted to the combination of the right to use the thing, the right to receive its fruits, and the right to dispose of it temporarily or permanently (Colin et al., 2022; Sikor & Lund, 2009). Generally speaking, land ownership is defined as "*the legal power of individuals to dispose of the land. It is a relational concept that establishes a relationship between a subject and an object. The formation of this power of disposal simultaneously entails, in a basic way, rights and responsibilities* (Gosewinkel, 2014 quoted by Maurel, 2021, p. 11)." According to this definition, land ownership comprises a set of normative rules that govern how the owner disposes of, uses, and controls the land and the conditions of exchange and transmission (Maurel, 2021, 2024). In addition to normative rules, property is a social relationship constructed through a combination of cultural norms and social practices (Calo et al., 2024; Colin et al., 2022; Maurel, 2021). This combination of normative and social rules, and economic and cultural aspects, makes land ownership complex, and very different from one country to another, and from one period to another (Badouin, 1970; Calo et al., 2024; Colin et al., 2022). This combination becomes even more complex when considering the agricultural land.

Regarding agricultural land ownership, it entails the legal possession and control of land use for farming and related activities. It encompasses rights such as the ability to make land-use decisions and practices, manage agricultural activities, and control the production from the land (Slavchevska et al., 2021). It is important to understand the complexities of land ownership in order to develop effective policies and address issues including land security, productive agriculture, land fragmentation and rural development (Buabeng et al., 2024; Muchová & Raškovič, 2020; Slavchevska et al., 2021). Nevertheless, it has often been demonstrated that inadequate land rights and property titles hinder important productive and economic transactions and are the main cause of social, political and economic dysfunction (Lund et al., 2006). For instance, landowners may have different reasons for owning land, such as agricultural production, financial investment, rural lifestyle, or wildlife enterprise (Sorice et al., 2014).

Furthermore, agricultural land ownership is a dynamic concept that varies across countries and is influenced by cultural norms, legal frameworks, economic conditions, and political regimes. Thus, agricultural land ownership in post-socialist countries is shaped not only by elements specific to each country but also by a shared legacy of collectivization and its organization according to the Soviet model of kolkhozes (collective farms) and sovkhozes (State farms) (Lerman, 2001; Maurel, 2021; Maurel & Lacquement, 2007). In most CEECs, land ownership is a key factor as agricultural land and production still represent rural households' main wealth and real estate (Deininger & Feder, 2009). Thus, property rights in these countries are a hotspot since the decline of socialist regimes (Zhllima et al., 2010), and institutions play an important role in securing land and improving the economic performance of agriculture (North, 1993). On this basis, it can be said that one of the main obstacles to growth in some CEE countries, compared with others, lies in the weakness of their property rights system, and more particularly in the small proportion of land with the formal title of ownership (Deininger & Feder, 2009). If individuals do not have formalized property rights protected by government institutions and the law, they are not willing to invest in or mortgage their property, and the land market does not function (Dowall, 1993; Lund et al., 2006).

The question that arises here is to understand what formalized property means. According to Benjaminsen et al. (2009), formalization is associated with "making official" with written rules, and "documents" that can be understood as a system created by a statute. In this logic, formal rights mean possessing written titles to be considered the land owner. For instance, in Albania, former cooperative workers granted land by the state in 1991 received ownership titles called "*Akti I Marrjes se Tokes ne*

*Pronesi*³" but were forbidden to sell or rent the land with this title. Thus, in this work, the concept of ownership refers to the possession of official deeds relating to the property. In the literature on property rights and regimes, this situation is referred to as land inalienability (Benjaminsen et al., 2009). Furthermore, the concept of property used in this study refers to the possession of land under various rights of use. Indeed, this study, therefore, seeks to understand positive property rights in Albania and how the fact that most Albanians are not official landowners impacts the development of agriculture.

To fully understand formalized or positive land ownership, this study refers to Roman civil law, which classifies property rights into three categories: *Usus* – the right to use the land; *Fructus* – the right to derive income or benefits from the land (e.g., harvesting crops); *Abusus* – the right to alienate the land (sell, transfer or modify the land) (Colin et al., 2022; Maurel, 2021). For agricultural land to be considered fully functional property, its owner must possess these rights: *Usus*, *Fructus*, and *Abusus*. In this case, the complete and absolute property means exercising these three attributes. Thus, formalized land ownership implies secure rights to use the land, to profit from it, and to transfer or alienate it easily (Dowall, 1993). In transition countries, land transferability or alienability and market development are as important as land privatization when assessing land policies' impact on productivity and efficiency (Lerman, 2001). This explains our approach to entering and analyzing land ownership by the capacity of farmers to alienate (transfer the property).

2.2 Evolution of Land Reforms in Albania

Historically, the land administration system in a country is strongly linked with its political regime (Guri et al., 2011). The regime changes in Albania since its independence in 1912, instead of improving the situation of agricultural land, have had the opposite effect, with increased land conflicts within villages, land tenure insecurity, and decreased land use efficiency (*Ibid.*). To better understand this statement, the section will analyze the most impactful reforms, following the premise that without understanding the historical context of land administration in the country, it is impossible to understand the challenges of agricultural land ownership nowadays (Maurel, 2021).

2.2.1 *From the Ottoman heritage until the beginning of collectivization (1912–1945)*

Following independence (1912), Albania's agrarian structure was shaped by the heritage of Ottoman land ownership models (law of 1856), marked by the concentration of land in the hands of a few large owners (*latifundia*) and the predominance of small farms (Civici, 2010; Deininger et al., 2012). Confronted by this system, the new state faced various challenges in reorganizing the agricultural sector. The "çiflige," formed in various ways (Civici, 2010), represented a complex legacy that the newly independent state had to manage in a context of political and economic transition.

The first trace of agrarian reform emerged in 1924 when the government attempted to redistribute land ownership in favor of the peasants by confiscating land from the *latifundia* and allocating around 4 hectares to each family. However, this policy of creating a rural peasant society was short-lived, as the new government that arrived in 1925 opposed the expropriation of the big landlords by force and rejected the idea of "freedom for farmers" (Civici, 2010). According to Civic (2010), the second attempt to distribute land to peasant families took place in 1930 under the government of King Zog 1st. This reform decided to limit *latifundia* land to 40 ha plus 5 ha for their wives and 5 ha for each of their children (Roucek, 1933). The state bought the rest to distribute to landless peasants. However, the reform had little effect, with only 8,109 ha of land redistributed, i.e., less than 2.2% of the Utilized Agriculture Area (UAA), of which 3,411 ha were formerly State property and 4,698 ha belonged to large private landowners since even this government could not subdue the feudal system (Civici, 2003, 2010; Guri et al., 2011; Roucek, 1933). This was the last attempt to reform the country's agricultural land before the communist regime took place. Meanwhile, between 1930 and 1945, when the first signs of capitalism appeared, *latifundia* owners began to sell their land. This marked the emergence of a land market and the beginning of

³ The act of taking the Ownership of Land

a system of independent peasant landowners (Maurel & Lacquement, 2007). According to data from Civici (2010), by the end of 1944, private *latifundia* land (excluding that belonging to the state or religious communities) had fallen from 140,000 ha to just 52,040 ha. So, while in 1912, private *latifundia* were the largest landowners (55% of arable land), by early 1945, they had become one of the smallest (27% of arable land), marking a significant shift in Albania's agrarian structure.

2.2.2 The collectivization of land under the communist legacy (1945–1990)

The sale of land by the '*latifundia*' between 1930 and 1945 and the creation of a large class of peasants owning little land facilitated the collectivization of agriculture, as it was easier to manipulate this class than the large landowners. Moreover, in the early years (1945–1946), the regime decided to expropriate the rest of the large and medium-sized landowners (allowing only 40 hectares for these latter ones) and transfer their land (more than 155,159 hectares) to the poor and landless villagers (Guri et al., 2011). Under the slogan '*Land belongs to whoever works it*', during 1945–1946, all public and private land and religious land were expropriated. This first reform undertaken by the regime was similar to the reform undertaken by King Zog in 1930, with the difference that in 1930, the State had bought the land from the large landowners (Guri et al., 2011). In contrast, in 1945, the regime expropriated large owners, and the land became State land. This was more of a strategy than a land reform, as in other CEECs, aimed to eliminate the large landowners considered dangerous to the new regime. Thus, before land distribution was completed (at the end of 1946), the Communist Party launched a new program for the '*socialist transformation of agriculture and the collectivist organization of small farmers to create large state farms*' (Civici, 2010, p. 40). Collectivization was proclaimed as a strategy to increase productivity. Initially, cooperatives were structured based on village units, but this structure soon changed, as some villages had much land and fewer population, and vice versa. In the 1960s, the State announced the creation of 'united cooperatives' and 'superior cooperatives' on a regional basis. As a result, the number of cooperatives fell from 1,487 in 1960 to 643 in 1970 (Civici, 2010). Thus, in the early 1970s, there was no private land in Albania, except the house and small plots around the house, which were considered private gardens, limited to a surface of 200 m². All other land had been fully collectivized under the state system. In addition, the rural population was obliged to work in the state cooperatives to which their village belonged (Elezi, 2018; Sinani et al., 2016).

The collectivization in Albania differed from that in the former Soviet countries. While in the other CEECs, land officially remained in the hands of private owners during the period of collectivization, and even though all adequate decision-making power had been taken away from them, in Albania, on the eve of this system, agricultural land officially belonged to the State, demolishing the private ownership (Cungu & M. Swinnen, 1999; Skreli et al., 2024). Thus, compared to other CEE countries, Albania was the only one to have nationalized all land based on its 1976 constitution (Lerman, 2001).

2.2.3 The law 7501 "On land" and its application

After a long period of communist regime (1944–1990), Albania embarked on a market economy in 1990. Significant changes accompanied this new phase of the economy, and the most important was the privatization of agricultural land. In this latter, the Albanian government, through a vast land redistribution program, decided to privatize almost all cultivated land and give it to all rural families (Lemel, 1998; Müller & Munroe, 2008). The reform implemented profoundly altered the rural landscape, where cooperative land, with an average surface area of 2,000 hectares, has been fragmented into small plots of less than one hectare (see Fig 1). Thus, the reform distributed more than 600,000 ha of a total of 700,000 ha of agricultural land, previously controlled by the state and collective farms, to 490,000 families living in rural areas (Ciaian et al., 2018; Kodderitzsch, 1999). According to data provided by Ciaian et al (2018), the land was divided into around 1.9 million small plots with an average of 0.25 ha per capita. This situation has created an agrarian structure unique in Europe, characterized by many small private farms (around 1.2 ha) and highly fragmented plots (Ciaian et al., 2018; Civici, 2010; Cungu & M. Swinnen, 1999; Deininger et al., 2012; Guri et al., 2011; Zhllima et al., 2010, 2021). Moreover, the reform has favored subsistence farming, practiced by small farmers, unlike in other Central and Eastern European countries,

where large cooperatives and other agricultural entities occupy a large share of the land (Skreli et al., 2024).

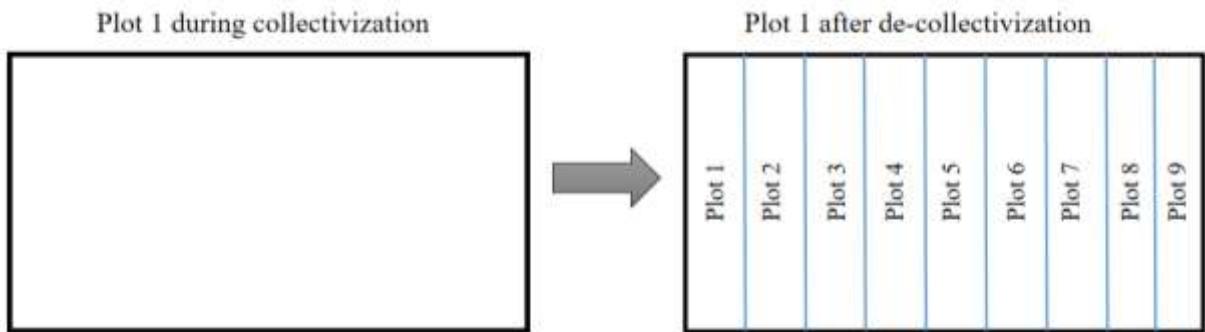


Fig 1. Visual demonstration of land fragmentation following the de-collectivization of agriculture. Source: Author's elaboration

The reform was implemented at the village level by a land distribution committee (Ciaian et al., 2018; Müller & Munroe, 2008), which explains our empirical approach entering at this level. The amount of land distributed was equal per inhabitant, determined by dividing the total land available in each village by the number of inhabitants. According to De Rapper et Sintès (2006), land reform in Albania followed a privatization logic, favoring the last user's rights over other approaches. Rather than a process of complete privatization – applicable to land that had never been private – or a policy of restitution based on the rights of the original owners, the reform focused on recognizing the claims of those who had most recently used the land (De Rapper & Sintès, 2006). The new owners received the AMTPs (The Act of taking the land into Ownership), often found in literature as *Tapi*, with limited rights on land. To be the owner with full rights (*abusu*), the possessor has to convert it, through Law 7843/1994, into a Property Certificate, often found in the literature as the final ownership title. So, from now on, when we talk about ownership in Albania, we consider formalized ownership as the possession of a Property Certificate. Thus, even though the objective was the recognition of private ownership, the rights for disposing of the land were limited since the owner was limited to alienating the property. This situation is not unknown in the country, since even during the period of collectivization, land was given to cooperatives as collective property. However, this land could not be sold, rented, or transferred. So even though the land was considered the cooperative's property, it was *de jure* the state's property.

3. Methodological approach and study sites

3.1 Study Research and data collection

This study includes an inductive approach based on the fieldwork conducted during October 2024. The research uses two instruments to analyze the impact of post-socialist land reform on property rights: firstly, the processes of de-collectivisation and their implementation at the village level, including the rights given to farmers at the moment of land privatization and the ownership situation today, and secondly, the level of agricultural production and development given through land use and land abandonment. Data sources include a time series of satellite imagery, a small-scale survey carried out at the village level on socio-economic, land ownership, and land use data, and secondary data on the level of land certification in the Gjirokastër district. The author used semi-structured surveys to collect the data through the snowball method. The qualitative data were collected through face-to-face interviews with the respondents. The QDA Miner 2025 software is used for data treatment.

The survey used in this study is divided into five sections. The first section deals with the socio-demographic variables of the respondents. These variables, such as age, occupation, household income, education, family composition, origin, etc., are essential for understanding how different groups perceive the human-land relationship. The second part deals with land tenure before collectivization, to understand the proportion of farmers who owned land, how this land was acquired, and how the Communist regime de-privatized it. The third part is devoted to studying land administration during

the communist regime. It explores the organization of land in the villages (division into cooperatives and their size, or into state farms), as well as the role of the interviewees within these state structures. In addition, this section seeks to understand the production system and the role of the private garden, the only individual property allowed to farmers, and its importance in the family economy. The fourth section explores the de-collectivization and land privatization mechanisms. It looks at whether land was distributed or returned, how this process was carried out at the village level, who was responsible for it, how much land was allocated to each family, and what property rights were established. In addition, this section looks at the production system put in place after the fall of communism, the crops planted, and the farming practices adopted by farmers (individual practice or forms of collective organization inherited from the previous system). The final section looks at the current land situation, analyzing the number of individuals with formal land titles and those without, and the reasons in both cases. It also looks at whether landowners have expanded or reduced the size of their landholdings, how and why, and how the land is currently being used. Finally, we asked farmers if they had the option of choosing the land area they would prefer and the location, what they would choose.

Given the high levels of uncultivated land in the study area and the fact that farmers highlighted the distance and small size of plots, we worked with satellite images to visually represent these changes in the rural landscape and to measure the average distance between the household and each plot in that household. Moreover, satellite images are used in this study to show the fragmentation of plots and the amount of land abandoned since the fall of communism. The chronological data comes from the Landsat image gallery for 1964 and from Google Earth for 1988–2024.

Sampling description

This study was conducted in two villages in the Gjirokastër district: the village of Lazarat and the village of Dervician. The sampling included in this study is composed entirely of men who are the official owners of the land. The criteria for choosing the participant were: being a resident in each of these two villages and having received land under Law 7501 in 1991. With these criteria, random sampling via the snowball method is used. Two cluster areas are identified to describe the sampling: Lazarat and Dervician. Thus, 40 interviews were conducted in the two villages, divided into 25 (62.5%) open interviews in Lazarat and 15 (37.5%) open interviews in Dervician. The respondents correspond to the following age groups: 7.5% of respondents correspond to the age group 31–40, 12.5% are between 41–50, the 51–60 group represents 40%, and 40% are over 61. The older generation of respondents can be explained by the fact that, at the time of the 1991 land reform, they were the head of the family and the ones who were recognized as receiving the land from their family, even though the land was divided on a per capita basis. This meant that the land of each family member was placed under the name of the head of the family, usually the oldest man in the house. Only if the man of the house died or was absent was the eldest woman recognized as the owner. In terms of level of education, the majority of respondents have a medium level (corresponding to high school), which can be partly explained by their age group. Most of them were educated during the communist period, when secondary education was widespread, while access to higher education was strictly planned according to the system's needs. Moreover, as most of them worked in socialist cooperatives, they are now either retired or have no fixed profession.

3.2 The case study of two rural areas in the Gjirokastër district

Gjirokastër, located in the south of Albania (see Map 1), is a cross-border district composed of 3 municipalities, 11 rural units (former communes), and 96 villages (Muco, 2024). The district of Gjirokastër was chosen for this study because it represents a unique case in the country: before collectivisation, agricultural land was entirely concentrated in the hands of a few large landowners known as *Agallarë* and *Bejlerë*. Following de-collectivization, agrarian reform was implemented in its entirety throughout the district. Thus, land fragmentation was even more pronounced in this district than in other parts of the country.

Within the district, the villages of Lazarat and Dervician were selected for empirical work because they have economic, socio-cultural, and ethnic characteristics that have a strong impact not only on land use, but also on the local population's relationship with their land, particularly their attitudes towards formal land ownership. Lazarat is part of the municipality with the same name (Gjirokastër), while Dervician, part of the municipality of Dropull, both are among the largest and most influential villages of Gjirokastër (see *MaChyba! Nenalezen zdroj odkazů.*). They act as physical and symbolic intermediaries between Albania and Greece. Lazarat is populated exclusively by Albanians, while Dervician has a Greek minority. This type of demographic structure strengthens the ability of both villages to promote cross-border cultural relations and define inter-ethnic relations (Aliaj et al., 2020). They are also close to the city of Gjirokastër and the border with Greece, an important economic gateway to the cross-border area (*Ibid.*). From an economic point of view, this position makes it easier to market agricultural products via a short marketing chain. On the other hand, the multi-ethnic composition, the differences in cultural and religious aspects, and the limited land access present social and economic challenges, particularly regarding land use and the land market development between the two border villages.

3.2.1 The case of Lazarat village

Lazarat is a village in the municipality of Gjirokastër, located only 3 kilometres from the city of Gjirokastër. Lazarat is a hilly village 420 m above sea level (*Ibid.*). It is bordered to the east by the city of Gjirokastër, to the west by Derviçan, and to the north by Mount Sopot. Lazarat is the largest village in the Gjirokastër district, and due to its proximity to the city, it is often considered a rural neighborhood of Gjirokastër. Although the village is the largest in the district, its population has declined over the last decade, like most rural areas in the country. As residents say, the most significant exodus in Lazarat occurred after 2014, whereas between 1990 and 2014, there was little movement. In 2024, the village officially had 3,273 inhabitants, compared to 3,700 in 2014⁴. However, villagers believe that the real number is much lower, as many people are still administratively registered in the village even though they no longer actually live there.

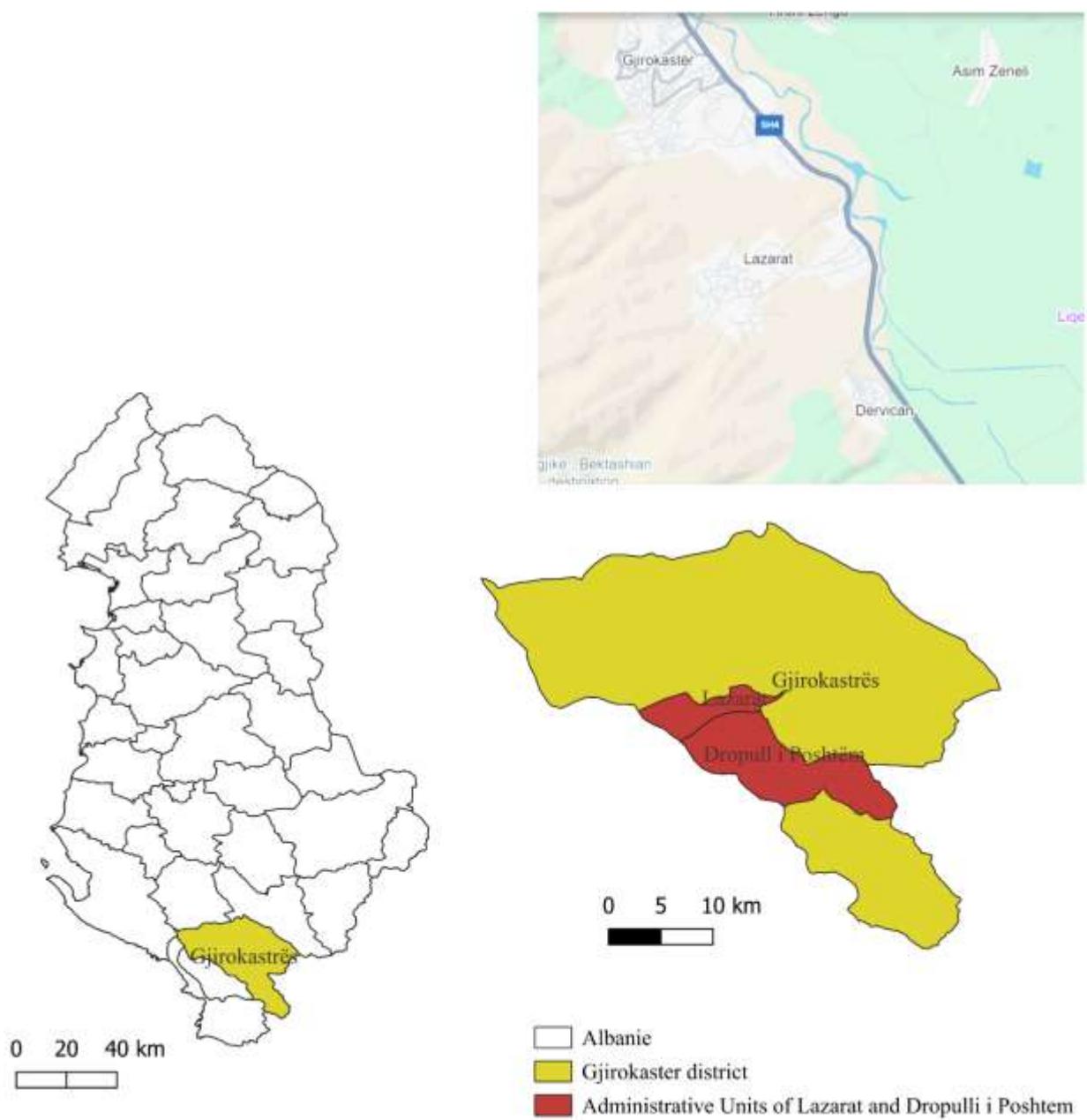
Due to its mountainous terrain, livestock farming is the main economic activity in the village. Agricultural land represents only a small proportion of the total area, and its distance from the village has led to it being used mainly for grazing, rather than for growing cereals or other crops. It has an area of 695⁵ ha of agricultural land. This area was organized in a state cooperative of a lower type during the communist regime and was mainly cultivated with cereals (maize, wheat, barley, and oats). Cotton was also planted in the region, but has now completely disappeared. With the regime's decline, all the village's agricultural land was divided equally between 626 families (a total of 3022 individuals) under Law 7501/1991. Under this law, each individual took 0.2 ha of land, giving an average of 1.1 ha per family. In the years following the collapse of the communist regime, farmers in Lazarat continued to grow cereals, even though on a very small scale. The end of the regime meant a shift to family production systems. Yet access to land was difficult due to its distance from the village, and the agricultural technologies that could be used were very limited due to the small size of the farms, resulting in a sharp drop in production. Today, much of this land has become pastureland, while much remains uncultivated.

3.2.2 The case of Dervician village

Dervician, sometimes found as Derviçan, is the largest minority village in the Gjirokastër district. Administratively, it is part of the municipality of Dropull and the *Dropulli i Poshtem* Unit, bordering the villages of Lazarat to the East and Goranxi to the West. Dervician has nevertheless been significantly affected by rural exodus, facilitated by its proximity to Greece and the Greek origin held by many of its residents. Today, the village has around 900 inhabitants, compared to 2000 in the 2010s. The village's financial source comes mainly from emigrant remittances and aid from the Greek government, as a large proportion of the inhabitants hold both Greek and Albanian nationalities.

⁴ Data supplied by the Gjirokastër Municipal Statistical Office.

⁵ Statistical data on the land are furnished by the institute of Statistics in Gjirokastër, the department of land administration.



Map 1. The location of the Gjirokaster district and the two villages studied within Albania. Source: data from DIVA GIS at the country administrative level and Google Earth

As in Lazarat, Dervican also suffers from limited access to land for farming, so livestock rearing continues to be the main rural activity. After the collapse of the communist regime, Law 7501 on land distribution was implemented and 657 hectares were allocated to 447 families out of a total of 667 hectares. Although minority villages had the same right to access land as Albanian villages, there were numerous discussions at the government level about the division of land in these areas. Thus, the land in Dervican was divided between 1,845 individuals, averaging 3,500 square meters (or 0.35 hectares) per capita. Agriculture and livestock farming have great potential, and were massively developed during the Communist era; however, they are practiced minimally today. The inhabitants attribute this decline to the mass emigration of young people and the feeling that the community's traditions are more industrial than agricultural. Historically, according to testimonies, the village men were employed in construction, office jobs, or other industrial sectors, while the women were mainly involved in agricultural work within the socialist cooperative. The village was a leading agricultural and livestock cooperative. The region produced staple grains such as maize, wheat, barley and oats. Other crops, such as orchards, vineyards and sunflowers, were also grown in the area. Today, the agricultural land, divided into plots under Law 7501, is mainly

leased to livestock farmers in the region or neighbouring villages (mainly Lazarat). The rent is very low, generally ranging from 1,500 to 2,500 leke per year per hectare, depending on the type and quality of the land. As the rent is very low, they usually exchange for a sheep or a goat. Thus, once a leading agricultural cooperative under socialism, Dervician's agricultural sector has since declined, with much of its land now either unproductive or used primarily as grazing pasture for livestock.

4. Understanding the land ownership issues and consequences through the empirical approach

In the villages of Lazarat and Dervician, as in most villages in Albania, after the decline of communism, agricultural land per capita was distributed. Two groups of individuals were recognized, and four types of land were allocated. The first group was made up of former cooperative workers, who received, respectively, 0.2 ha per capita in Lazarat and 0.36 ha per capita in Dervician. The second group was allocated a smaller⁶ amount of land, equal to 0.1ha per capita in both villages. The land allocated was divided into four categories in both villages. The first category of land concerns the lowlands, which are of better quality and represent the most significant part of the land. In Lazarat, each individual received an area of 1100 square meters of this type, whereas in Dervician, they took up a larger area, given the smaller number of inhabitants compared with Lazarat. The second category concerns the highlands, or as they refer to as non-irrigated lands, divided into approximately 500 m² in Lazarat and around 1000 m² in Dervician. Vineyards and arboriculture cover the third category, where farmers received 250 m² in Lazarat and 500 m² in Dervician. The fourth land type is hilly and gravelly, not very qualitative land. The rural population received less of this type compared to other types. As it was said before, the land was distributed to the rural population on a village basis. In this regard, a commission of 5 to 7 members was created in each village to distribute the land. This commission comprised members who held important positions in the agricultural cooperatives or had knowledge of the land. They were mainly agronomists, technicians, or drivers of agricultural machinery, topographers, and elderly people from the village. Then, a system of lottery was applied where all the parcels' numbers were written on closed paper, and each head of the household withdrew one. Thus, the location of the parcels for each type of soil was determined according to the number chosen by the farmer. The reform fragmented the land into millions of plots, where the average size varies from 0.4 to 0.7 ha (see Fig 2).

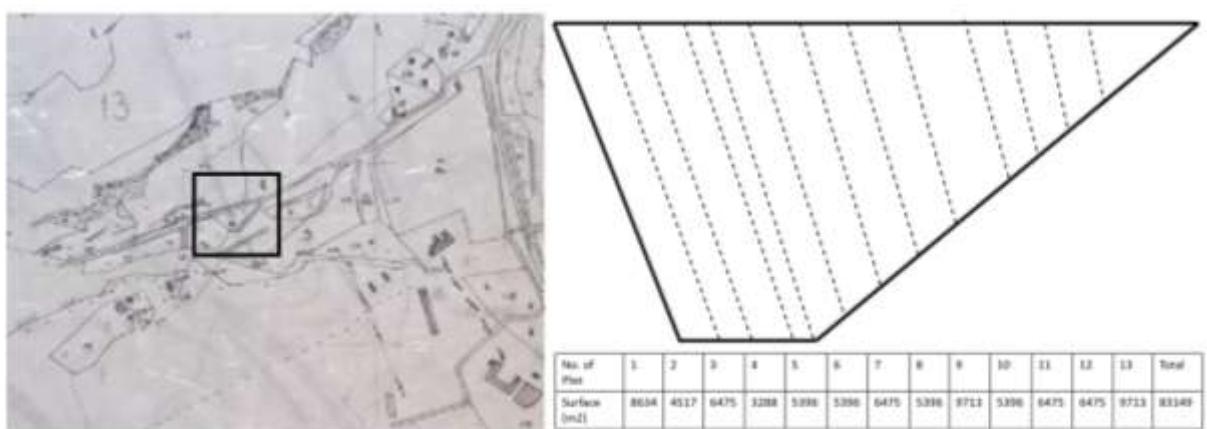


Fig 2. The figure illustrates how land was redistributed between families after the decline of the collectivist regime. The map on the left illustrates the organization of plots within socialist cooperatives, while the diagram on the right shows an example of plot 5, which initially covered 8.32 hectares and was divided into 13 plots, each measuring less than 1 hectare in size. Source: data and map provided by Qarku Gjirokaster

⁶ For example, a former worker in the cooperative at Lazarat had 3200 m and at Dervician 3600 m, while a non-worker in the cooperative had only 1000 m.

Although land was allocated according to the number of members in each family, the head of the family was legally recognized as the land owner. In practical terms, for each type of land, the number of people in the household was multiplied by the surface area allocated per inhabitant, included in one plot that was registered in the name of the head of the family. This is why the minimum number of plots in the area is 4, corresponding to the four soil types in the area. The official owner was issued an AMTP (Act of Taking Land into Ownership) to prove their right to use the land.

However, this certificate prohibits them from selling, renting, or leasing the land. Thus, even though the objective of land reform was privatizing and transferring land to private hands, these rights were limited. According to this fact, we can say that even if the land was privatized, *de jure*, the land remained state property. The farmers were/ and most of them are, legally, *usufructs* of the land. When we asked farmers if they have converted the AMTP into ownership certificate, which allows them to alienate the property (*abusus*), most of them (70%) deny having carried out the procedure, 5% are in waiting, and 25% stated that they have the ownership certificate. According to the data provided by the World Bank⁷, at the country level, only 10% of farmers have such a certificate, while 80% have AMTP, and 10% don't have any title.

Landowners who have a land certificate say that their main motivation for obtaining one is the guarantee of absolute rights over their land. This response is more common in the village of Dervician, which we associate with the Greek origins of the community (lack of belonging). Therefore, owning land with all the rights that come with it (*usus, fructus, abusus*) provides them with greater security, integrity, and a stronger connection to the territory – the symbolic value of land. In addition, they have also been made aware of the monetary value of land through their proximity to the Greek experience. Some, because of their Greek origins, identify themselves as being EU residents. “*Do you know that you are in Europe here (referring to the EU area)*,” said one resident of Dervician. With this in mind, they want to be fully recognized as landowners and hold land titles, believing that if Albania joins the European Union, they could benefit from CAP financial support for each hectare they own.

Meanwhile, in Lazarat, where the number of owners possessing property certificates is lower, the reasons are more related to the non-monetary value of land, like heritage and identity ties with the village. This is because the inhabitants perceive their land as being of low value and poor quality compared to that of Dervician. This perception is reinforced by the fact that, for many years (1998 until 2014), the village was known as a large-scale centre for Cannabis Sativa production. This activity, concentrated mainly in private gardens and certain public lands called *Musha*⁸, left vast areas of agricultural land unproductive. Today, the quality of the land is considered degraded and its conversion into productive land would require considerable investment. Furthermore, we believe that due to the high revenues generated by illegal activity, they are less interested in investing in agricultural production and therefore in formalizing land ownership, which they consider less profitable. Agriculture therefore suffers from a negative image linked to poverty.

On the contrary, those who do not have ownership certificate explained that the administrative bureaucracy, which is both time-consuming and costly, is the main obstacle to formalization. In Lazarat, they also added that, given the low economic value of land in the area, which does not motivate them to sell, it seemed pointless to them to initiate such a procedure. In contrast, in Dervician, the land is better located (close to the main road), and demand from non-agricultural activities increases the value of the land. This partly explains why farmers in Dervician were more frustrated and accused the Albanian government of being ineffective in protecting property rights. Indeed, the significant lack of formal titles is reflected in the poor functioning of the land market. Despite few sales of land in Dervician in small quantities and for non-agricultural purposes, the majority of farmers in both villages have the same quantity of land as they received by the reform in 1991.

⁷ <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/agfood/unlocking-albanias-agricultural-potential-fields-finance>

⁸ *Musha* (Ottoman nomination) refers to pastoral and forest lands belonging to the public sphere but used communally by villagers.

More importantly, people without a formal title are also those who do not cultivate their land. This is a major cause of low agricultural production in the region. On the one hand, many owners have given up cultivating the land to adopt an urban lifestyle, and on the other, the blockage of the market prevents the transfer of land to more active or efficient farmers. It is well known that private property rights encourage long-term agricultural investment (to intensify production) and land transactions (to achieve optimal agricultural structures) (Braverman & Guasch, 1990; Guri et al., 2011). When asked what they do with the land, some give it informally to others who even use it to cultivate fodder for animals or as grazing areas. They expressed that mostly they give the land for free, or in exchange, they have a sheep per year. The demand passes, mostly, through close bonds, so they accept it as a sign of solidarity. This is common for both villages. The difference is that in Lazarat, they rent only to village members, while in Dervician, they mostly rent to Lazarat people. This is because the minority community does not seek to lease land, preferring instead to transfer it to farmers in Lazarat so that it can continue to be cultivated or farmed. This helps to preserve the quality of the land and ensure land security, as the land is not left fallow. This also helps to maintain good relations between the two villages, despite recurring tensions linked to their socio-cultural differences.

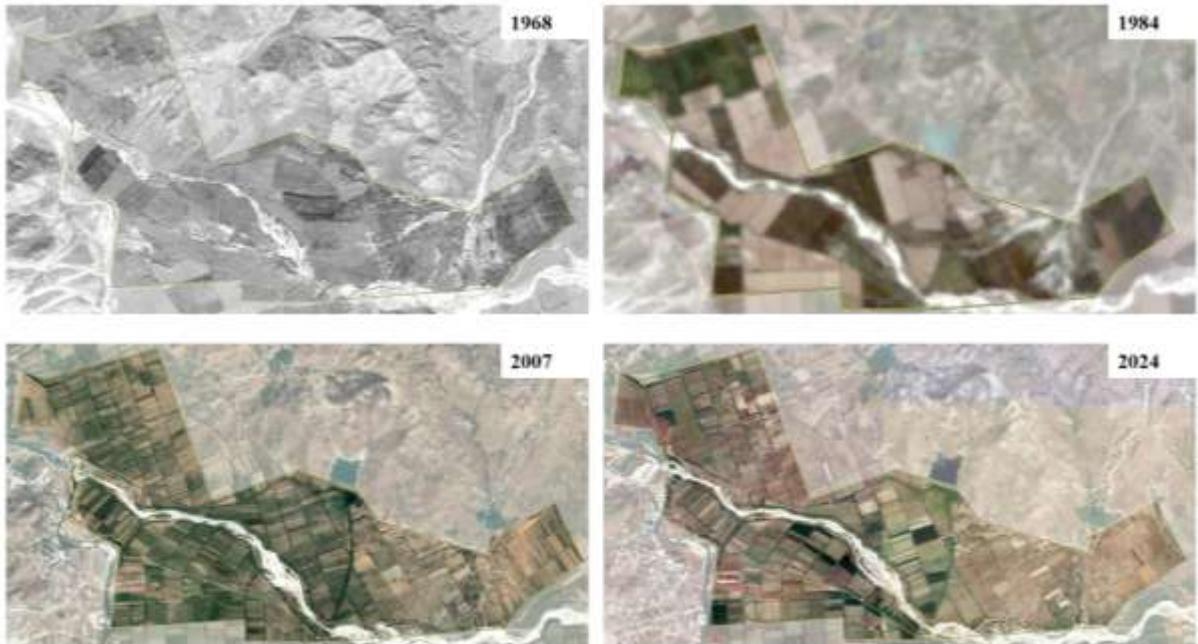
When asked why they don't cultivate their land, in Dervician, they cited firstly the small size of the plots, which does not justify the use of suitable farm machinery, and prevents them from benefiting from economies of scale. In their view, local land is best suited to growing staple cereals, but growing in small areas, the income generated from sales does not cover production costs. The second reason given is the lack of investment in the irrigation system. The deterioration of the old systems built during the socialist period, the lack of new infrastructure, and the effects of climate change, particularly the increase in drought episodes, have reduced the quality of the land. In these conditions, farming requires additional investment to improve soil fertility. Despite these two relevant reasons, the distance of the land from the village (mostly highlighted in Lazarat) is also cited. Dervician is located near the main road, with farmland on the other side of the road, while Lazarat is located at some distance from the main road (see *Map 1*). As *Map 2* shows, the average distance travelled by a farmer in Lazarat is 4 km from home, so the small size of the land does not justify the cost of this daily journey. The distance is calculated in a straight line, but the actual distance travelled by farmers is much greater. In addition, factors such as the advanced age of farmers and the low number of young people taking up farming also play an important role in not investing in and cultivating the land.

Land fragmentation and small plot sizes were mentioned by most farmers as the main reasons for the massive abandonment of land in the villages, as can be seen from the satellite images (*Map 3*). The fragmented structure of land means that farmers cultivate in several separate plots, often of a very small size (Hiironen & Niukkanen, 2014), which in Albania is less than one hectare. It is also seen as the main reason for poor agricultural development.



Map 2. This example illustrates the distance between household three and the various plots belonging to the family. The map also highlights the fragmentation of the plots and the considerable distances between them. Source: Muco and Charel 2025

Given that this fragmentation of land is the result of the 1991 land reform, we were interested in local perceptions of land distribution. When asked how the reform had been “sold” in the area, most of them replied that it had been largely accepted by the villagers. This was because most of the farmers in both villages had no land before collectivization. Even those who had land, the areas were small, and the family had extended over 45 years, so they would receive less with restitution. As a result, land reform in both villages was easily accepted by the farmers, as they were able to own land.



Map 3. This map illustrates the changes in the agricultural landscape in the study area during the initial phase of collectivization, the final phase of collectivization, the post-decollectivization period, and the present day. A comparison of the 2007 and 2024 maps also reveals visible signs of land abandonment. Source: Muco and Cherel 2025

Indeed, even the few families who initially refused were forced to accept, as the system was widely adopted by others. However, when asked about the way in which the distribution was carried out, two types of farmers were identified. The first emphasized the importance of having different types of soil. As they explain, this was very important in the early years of the market economy, as it enabled them to combat the poverty that had swept the country and to produce all the crops for their consumption. When asked if they could choose the size and location of the plot, what would be their preference, for this category, location was more important. Most of them identified coastal areas as offering better quality plots.

The other group explains that the distribution of land by category has been a ‘crime’ for Albanian agriculture. They added that they would prefer low-quality land, but have it in the same plot rather than having different types of land and having it fragmented. This is what they said when asked if they could choose to have as much land as they wanted and where they wanted it, with most saying they would prefer to have more than 5 hectares, and that location was less important. These latter see the consolidation of land as a necessity, because even today, after 35 years of market economy, the farmers in Lazarat and Dervicjan, as in most of Albania, are small-scale farmers, owning on average 1.5 ha of land and located in different spots of the village.

5. Discussion of findings

Agricultural land in Albania represents 24% of the country's total area. Even though this surface is considerably low, the agricultural sector represents a key element in the country's economy, contributing

18.6%⁹ to the GDP in 2022 and employing 35%¹⁰ of the total workforce. Nevertheless, the agricultural productivity is low, and the trading with EU countries remains low for Albanian agriculture. Moreover, farmers face a number of challenges, such as a lack of mechanization and modern equipment, unclear property rights, and insufficient access to finance, technology, services, and markets (Skreli et al., 2024). The current situation, highlighted by two villages, shows both governance and market failures. This situation has also been observed in other regions of Albania, as shown by empirical studies carried out by Albanian and foreign researchers (Ciaian et al., 2018; Civici, 2010; Cungu & M. Swinnen, 1999; Guri et al., 2011; Müller & Munroe, 2008; Sikor et al., 2009; Skreli et al., 2024; Zhllima et al., 2010, 2021). It is linked to many of the reasons mentioned in the results section, such as land fragmentation or the absence of clear property rights caused by the agrarian reform of 1991, which prevents owners from investing or selling their land. The idea that the absence of formal property rights over land can limit investment and development opportunities (Deininger & Feder, 2009) has prompted institutions to develop programs to systematically register land or improve the operation of land administration institutions. Considering the number of farmers still with AMTP, as given in 1991, it shows that these measures have not been effective, which hinders the potential of agriculture in the country. For Sinani et al. (2016), land reform in Albania has led to a 'tragedy of the private', because the institutions in charge have neglected the granting of private property rights. But why do we insist on the importance of formalized property rights?

The first important aspect of private agricultural land ownership is the development of land markets. Clear and uncontested ownership of agricultural land is one of the conditions of market economies, and the incentives associated with land ownership rights are generally considered to be one of the key factors promoting efficient agriculture (Lerman, 2001). These are seen as important agricultural productivity factors because they can transfer land to more efficient producers (Gorgan & Hartvigsen, 2022; Lerman, 2001). These transfers take place through the sale, leasing, and rental of land. Market functioning becomes even more crucial in order to benefit from the direct payments per hectare introduced by the government in 2022 to support farms that plant more than one hectare (Martinovska Stojcheska et al., 2024). Considering the current situation where farmers have on average 1 ha, this can only be achieved through the sale or rent of land. This phenomenon has been particularly noticeable in the Baltic countries, especially since they joined the EU. Therefore, the expansion of cultivated land through sales and leases has led to improved production and agricultural development. Or, in the Czech Republic, where plot sizes are relatively small, the formal rental market, facilitated by clear property titles, has led to a situation where land belonging to 3 million owners is farmed by only 30,000 large-scale farmers (Sklenicka et al., 2014). The land market can estimate the exchange of land between households and, to some extent, reduce fragmentation problems.

Furthermore, given that Albania is a candidate country, land fragmentation is an obstacle in the EU accession process. At the time of enlargement with the CEECs in 2004, one of the main challenges for the EU was to adapt the system of direct payments, which is essentially based on cultivated area (Maurel, 2024). Moreover, an important element of this accession process is compliance with the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), which involves adhering to EU agricultural standards, boosting competitiveness, and improving overall performance (Martinovska Stojcheska et al., 2024). In the new Member States, the predominance of small farms and the high fragmentation of land have complicated the application of this system, which was initially designed for larger farming structures. As a result, the systems put in place have often benefited large landowners, to the detriment of smallholders (*Ibid.*).

But is land fragmentation always bad? Asiaman et al. (2017) explained that land fragmentation is considered negative from a social, economic, and environmental point of view when it comes from external forces, as is the case in Eastern Europe. Land fragmentation is mostly linked with productivity losses for farmers as they can't work effectively in small plots (Rikkonen et al., 2025). We can cite here the study by Sklenicka et al., (2014) in the Czech Republic, which showed that land fragmentation and irregular plot shapes hamper productivity and prevent farmers from cultivating their land. Researchers in other countries of the CEE have shown that low productivity leads to abandonment of agricultural land,

⁹ <https://tgmstatbox.com/stats/albania-agriculture-sector-gdp-contribution/>

¹⁰ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.AGR.EMPL.ZS?locations>

as observed in the Lithuanian case by Jukneline et al. (2025). In addition to unproductivity, Rey Benayas et al. (2007) rank land property regimes and the land market among the main factors in land abandonment. The abandonment of agricultural land represents a change in land use that is a complex phenomenon (Rey Benayas et al., 2007). Some agricultural systems have been recognized for their conservation relevance, including biodiversity, habitat, and aesthetic values (Bignal & McCracken, 1996). According to Rey Benayas et al. (2007), four of the seven terrestrial ecosystems included in the European Union's Habitats Directive are dependent on agriculture, including temperate heaths and scrub, matorrals, grasslands, and wooded pastures, and will be lost if agriculture is abandoned. On the other hand, land fragmentation can be positive when it is a side demand from farmers who wish to diversify their production, spread their risks, and benefit from different types of soil, as is the case in the mountainous region of Switzerland (Asiama et al., 2017). We have observed these two points with the farmers in both areas. Those who want to produce for the big market and for exports see the fragmentation as an obstacle. Meanwhile, others see it as a social means to fight poverty.

Second, the clear and formalized ownership rights reduce land insecurity. In this regard, Zhllima et al. (2010) talked about two forms of insecurity in Albania: subjective and objective. On the one hand, objective insecurity is linked to poor documentation, registration discrepancies, inaccurate maps, etc., (Zhllima & Imami, 2012). Regarding the statistics in the country and data collected in the field, where most of the farmers do not possess the formal title, this insecurity is highly perceived in the area. This phenomenon is even more pronounced in regions where demand from non-agricultural activities is high, particularly in the coastal part of the country or, as we have seen in the case of Dervician. According to the study of Zhllima et al. (2010), in this case, owners and buyers declare that this prevents them from trading the land, and formal titles can solve the problem. On the other hand, the subjective insecurity is related to the pre-collectivization owners and the post-collectivization owners. To understand it better, let's remember that land distribution in Albania disregarded the former owners and divided the land among rural families in equal quantity and quality. Then, with the 7698/1993 law "for the restitution and compensation of pre-collectivization owners", many former owners requested the return of their land. But these lands already had a new owner following the 1991 land reform. This situation has created land conflicts between old and new owners and, in some cases, the land is "blocked", meaning it cannot be used by either party (Garnier & Crouteix, 2022; Zhllima et al., 2010). If we refer to the study area, this type of insecurity is less perceived compared to the first one, as most of the farmers did not have land before collectivization, and the land reform was largely accepted.

Third, formal and decisive land ownership facilitates land consolidation. Land consolidation involves a procedure for reallocating a rural area made up of fragmented farmland (Vitikainen, 2004). Land consolidation has been recognized as a major instrument of rural development, improving rural production conditions throughout Europe for over a century (Rikkonen et al., 2025; van Dijk, 2007). Most farmers, particularly in Dervician, based on the Greek experience, support land consolidation as a strategy for dealing with fragmentation and increasing agricultural production. However, no initiatives of this type have been recorded in the area. At the national level, several land consolidation pilot projects have been launched – in 2002, 2004, and again in 2010 – but with no real success. One of the main obstacles identified is the lack of ownership certificates for many farmers (Cela et al., 2018). According to the FAO (2013), as part of the project carried out between 2010 and 2013 in three communes in Central Albania, only 8 of the 90 landowners involved had formalized their land rights. Given the current situation of land ownership in Albania, the rental market is a more readily available instrument for consolidating land for agricultural purposes (Zhllima et al., 2021). According to the same authors, renting land is even more appropriate for growing fodder for livestock, as is the case in both villages. Same, Swinnen et al. (2006) and Sklenicka et al., (2014) have proven that the rental market is more responsive to the fragmented structure of agricultural production and for reorganizing the farming system. Nevertheless, the experience of continuing land consolidation policies in almost all Western European countries proves that a land market alone cannot guarantee optimal land distribution (van Dijk, 2007). According to Torre et al (2023), the issues of land and agricultural land have become essential for the territorial development of rural areas and the renewal of agriculture by producing quality products in large volumes, as they relate to the availability of a useful area of sufficient size to achieve satisfactory profitability thresholds. In contrast,

the diversified plots of the Albanian reform enabled households to produce different crops while meeting the needs of the family. The small size of the land has led to self-consumption farming. This form of production has made it difficult to live on farm income alone. According to Sikor et al. (2009), most farmers stopped cultivating certain plots because they found it more attractive to allocate their labor and capital to non-agricultural activities.

6. Conclusion

Three decades after the systemic transition, land issues remain a subject of scientific debate and public controversy in Albania. In this context, the agrarian reform of 1991 is the most analyzed to address whether this reform was the biggest mistake of the government of the time. This question is mainly related to low agricultural production, massive land fragmentation, and abandonment observed in the country since the de-collectivization. Nevertheless, even before collectivization, agriculture in Albania had shown itself to be inefficient, as evidenced by the small area under cultivation and the large number of owners who did not work the land. In pre-collectivization, land was very unevenly distributed among the population, with some having large amounts of land, while others had very small plots. The post-collectivization reform, presented as a means of reducing the inequalities of pre-collectivization by distributing the land of the same quality equally, gave the rural population the possibility to possess land of different soil. But this reform, at first glance, socially, provoked many problems for the development of agriculture, which even 35 years later remains unsolved. In this respect, the biggest issue faced by farmers is land ownership, which is the main obstacle to the functioning of agriculture. The land division under Law 7501/1991 did not enable farmers to obtain Property Certificates, which means that even today, most farmers do not have formal documents attesting to their rights to alienate the property and develop the land market. Despite some attempts to structure land ownership systems, notably during election campaigns, these efforts have been less productive due to persistently high levels of informality. As a result, Albania still faces unresolved land disputes, such as restitution claims, non-functional land markets, lengthy and costly plot certification procedures, ineffective enforcement by state institutions and weak institutional enforcement, all of which undermine legal certainty and social stability. Thus, from the land ownership point of view, the 1991 reform is incomplete. This incomplete process has led to low agricultural productivity and widespread land abandonment, as we saw in the case of the two villages in the Gjirokastër district, represented visually by satellite images. Thus, the country needs to reform its institutions and policies to achieve legal and institutional harmonization with EU requirements regarding land ownership, because this process is long enough to discourage farmers from applying for definitive titles. Without formalized ownership, which can develop the land market and reduce land fragmentation, it's hard to talk about competitive and developed agriculture in Albania, as the EU policy requires it. Moreover, without recognized titles, farmers in Albania cannot benefit from the agricultural subsidies, as do farmers in current EU countries.

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