



FARMERS? LAND RIGHTS

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Azeri farmers who had to give their land for the construction of the pipeline, speak about the negotiation with the oil company. It seemed so easy to draw a long red line on the map, the conceptual strategic depiction of the pipe put to Sea, sucking out the black fluid and connecting it to a distant elsewhere. This is the ultimate corporate fantasy. But there were some major obstacles on the ground. For one, this space was not void: 20'000 farmers along the trajectory had to yield their land. Here began a corporate campaign that would define the land use politics of this project. The procedure of these negotiations is an excellent laboratory for studying the legislative regime of transnational maneuvers. Land-use policies are operational rules which define the property rights governing land-use and hence help determine who gets what, when why and where ? essential political questions. Like resources, land value is a fluctuating entity. That?s why local governments do not simply create a static system of property rights. Rather, land-use rules represent choices made in the changing context of local institutions. In the transition from a kolkhoz system to individual farming many things remained a bit vague and open also for this reason. This video clip engages in the land use politics of the transnational energy corridor, which is as much governed by the production, dissemination and withholding of knowledge than by interventions in national legislations.

The deal between the pipeline company and the host countries was simple in this respect: BTC gained the Right-of-Way for the pipeline across all three territories, including the right of expropriation. Once finished, it gives BP effective governing power over a strip of land 1?750 km long where the company may override all national, environmental, social, human rights laws for the next 40 years.

On a local level, Land Acquisition Agreements were the basis for the extensive negotiation process by which the farmers would be compensated for the terrain they contributed. Farmers were kept widely ignorant on the legal framework of the deal and on the meaning of crucial terms such as ?expropriation?. The actual contract, finally specifying the price offered for the land, was given to the farmers on the day of signature. There was no time for reflection, comparison or negotiation. In Azerbaijan, this hurry was exasperated by the inability of rural populations to read the contracts because their Cyrillic alphabet had only recently been replaced by the Latin alphabet and translation was not provided. All this resulted in situations where landowners were urged to agree on the offered amount of compensation. The lack of information was

turned into an instrument of pressure.

Soon after BTC Co. started land acquisition, criminal activities started to appear along the pipeline corridor. In certain provinces the list of names of landowners entitled to compensation was not kept anonymous but sent to local governments, to the police or had even been published in newspapers. Due to these indiscretions, armed and masked bandits turned up and typically extorted 10-20% of the sum from farmers who were on their way back from the bank. Inadequate compensation procedures have produced a climate of insecurity among the local population. In a number of villages in Georgia, land users were to find out about another form of violation regarding the leasing of meadows and pastures. When submitting a claim for compensation, unregistered land users discovered that the land they had been using for years and where the pipeline would pass, had just been leased by the chairman of the local government himself. In a direct action against this fraud over a contract, which should have been carried out transparently and publicly, the villagers blocked the highway. Subsequently, the chairman personally offered the establishment of a Community Based Organization in the village and to transfer the BTC money into the organization's account, but there was no legal obligation for him to do so.

To combat evasion and corruption by local governments, the farmers came together and demanded to get paid through the establishment of Community Based Organizations. In many provinces they succeeded in decentralizing the compensation process and revitalizing, at the same time, community centers. Their action changed the social geography along the construction corridor of the pipeline. All these occurrences reveal the multiple and shifting intersections of power and agency. What is the farmer's imaginary of this same space, those who have inhabited and labored the land for generations? What is their agency in this moment of contact with transnational interests? What is it that moves them to action? The relationship between people, space and technology generate a distinct power geography which is further discussed in subsequent files.

Cluster: Black Sea Files

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