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IARO 2004-2005
Russia

Topic of research

Russia's private individual farm (*Krest'ianskie (fermerskie) khoziaistva*) sector is not known for its success. Their contribution to national agricultural production is officially a meager 4% and their share of agricultural landholding is only slightly higher. The purpose of my research is to identify those factors and strategies that enable private farmers to succeed in an economic and political context that poses numerous challenges to their survival. Through their participation in networks, organizations, and institutions, these new economic actors are simultaneously responding to and reshaping the agricultural system in which they operate. It is this dynamic set of relations—and the individuals that they connect—that has the potential to define the future of the private sector in Russian agriculture.

Relevance and contribution to field: scholarly impact and policy significance

This research will contribute to sociological theories of the processes through which new patterns of wealth and income distribution emerge in the post-communist market transition. Additionally, this study engages many of the central theoretical questions in the sociology of agriculture, especially with regard to implications of peasant agriculture, the legacies of collective farming, and the role of family farmers for agricultural development. The unique economic and social position of the farmers who are the subject of this study also allows me to engage sociological theories on the relationship between free markets and civil society.

Findings from this research will speak to the effectiveness of existing development policies for stimulating a viable population of private individual farmers. Central to this process are policies affecting land privatization and sale, tax policies, and government support programs for agricultural and rural development.

Summary of approach and research methodology, including list of sites

I conducted ethnographic research in St. Petersburg and the surrounding region of Leningrad Oblast, primarily through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with government officials, representatives of non-governmental organizations, and farmers. Organizations included the St. Petersburg Farmer's Union, and the related Fund "St. Petersburg to Farmers" and the St. Petersburg Farmer Credit Cooperative. I also met with individuals at the Fund for the Support of Agricultural Development in Lodenoe Pole Raion, which is housed in the rural consultancy center with a new insurance company for farmers and a legal advice and support center.

While on extended visits with five different farmers in four different raions I took notes on daily activities and conversations, toured and photographed the farms, and conducted in-depth interviews. These visits usually lasted three days, although I spent significantly more time with one farm household. Farmers were selected in coordination with a

regional government official and therefore represent a non-random sample based on the combined factors of their selection, response, and ability or willingness to have me as a guest. I made every possible effort to ensure that the farms were distributed throughout the oblast and represented a variety of crop and livestock production systems. With those farmers who were willing, I also completed a survey to gather baseline data on individual, household, and farm characteristics. I interviewed an additional seven farmers during shorter site visits.

In addition, I attended two farm seminars, or field days, in two different raions where I was able to interact with a large number of farmers and observe their interactions with one another. These seminars bring together farmers, officials, and specialists in the region and provide an opportunity for the host farmer to showcase his production techniques. Perhaps equally important, these gatherings provide farmers with an opportunity to meet as a group to discuss problems they face and offer suggestions to solve them. These discussions provided great insights into farmers' perspectives on the current agricultural system and their thoughts regarding potential strategies for improving their own situation.

I also traveled to Moscow for approximately one week in order to interview researchers at the Centre for Peasant Studies and Agrarian Reforms and individuals working in national agricultural organizations. I conducted interviews with representatives of Association AGRO and affiliated organizations including the Foundation for Support of Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (RosAgroFund) and the All Russian Institute for Agrarian Problems and Information (VIAPI). These interviews helped contextualize my regional fieldwork in a larger national framework.

Summary of findings and preliminary conclusions

My findings remain very preliminary and reflect the exploratory nature of my research, and so I present them here as themes rather than as specific findings.

From the perspective of market transition theory I paid particular attention to individually held characteristics such as party membership, employment history, and educational attainment, as well as the strategic use of personal networks based on kinship, party ties, and shared educational or work experience. The demands of private farming go beyond agricultural production to require expertise in both Soviet bureaucratic procedures and new market institutions. Moreover, success often requires a willingness to experiment with new crops, methods, and marketing strategies. This combination of skills is rarely found in any one individual, and therefore it seems that successful farmers are best understood not as individuals, but as households. Strong personal networks based on kinship or longstanding friendships are important for production processes including labor, input supplies, or financing. In the marketplace however, farmers are building new relationships with buyers based on reliability, quality, and mutual convenience. These weaker ties provide a degree of certainty in the absence of strong contract enforcement and market stability.

The sudden withdrawal of state support and administration, particularly in the agricultural sector, is a central feature of the transition process. The appropriate role of the state

remains a source of great contention among farmers, specialists, and even government officials. Competing viewpoints arise, in part from engagement with different market institutions (e.g., wholesale marketing versus direct sale), and in part from varying degrees of influence retained by legacy institutions (e.g., former collectives on local administrations). Organizational strategies employed by private individual farmers tend to emphasize practical approaches such as credit and sales cooperatives rather than politically oriented advocacy or lobbying efforts to increase state support. This orientation may also reflect the impression widely held among the farmers I met that their sector has little political influence, especially compared to former collectives.

A theme I did not intend to emphasize in my research, but which arose so often it deserves mention, is the discourse on quality, ecological purity, and national origin of agricultural products. Accompanying concerns about cheap imported products from the United States, Europe, and neighboring former Soviet states, is the assertion that locally produced goods are higher in quality and more “ecologically clean”. Many farmers claimed that consumers prefer to buy agricultural products grown or raised in Russia and attribute the strength of their own customer base to the quality of their produce. It is large scale farmers selling products to warehouses who most directly confront import competition. In response, some farmers propose developing a regional trademark to indicate point of origin and quality, even in large scale distribution systems.

Suggestions for future research agendas for scholarly community

Much of the research on agricultural change in post-Communist Russia either emphasizes the process of decollectivization and legacies of large state and collective farms, or the significant share of production accounted for by home production on small household plots. If mid-size, privately owned and operated commercial agriculture is a key element in developing a modern agricultural system in Russia today, then a better understanding of the population working in this capacity is required. These new economic actors also represent an emerging source of rural civic leaders.

Additionally, existing official documentation requirements and current tax policies tend to encourage both systematic over-counting of the actual number of private farmers, and underreporting of agricultural production and employment. Further research that uses combined qualitative and quantitative methodologies is required to achieve a more accurate assessment of the state of private farming in Russia today.

Recommendations for the US policy community

Based on this preliminary assessment of my field research I would make the following recommendations to the US policy community.

- Private farmers face a severe cost/price squeeze made worse by cheap imports from the United States, Europe, and neighboring former Soviet states. US partnership programs that facilitate the adoption of better technologies to improve production are undermined by problems faced in the marketplace. For these programs to be effective in stimulating private agriculture, they must also incorporate and support efforts to improve farmers’ ability to find buyers for their produce at a profitable margin. US programs that provide training in marketing

and sales would benefit this population, as would US advocacy for agricultural support programs aimed at income smoothing and emergency assistance in case of crop failures.

- Russia still lacks a system of agricultural extension programs to connect researchers, specialists and academics with the agricultural community. In my region of study, one agricultural college seemed to be the sole academic institution able to provide advice, support, as well as new seeds and technology to farmers. Only farmers with former ties or personal connections to this university were likely to know about and draw on this resource. US partnerships to encourage and support the development of an extension system would benefit agriculturalists and rural development more generally.