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EL FUTURO DE LA ALIMENTACIÓN Y RETOS DE LA AGRICULTURA PARA EL SIGLO XXI:

Debates sobre quién, cómo y con qué implicaciones sociales, económicas y ecológicas alimentará el mundo.

THE FUTURE OF FOOD AND CHALLENGES FOR AGRICULTURE IN THE 21st CENTURY:

Debates about who, how and with what social, economic and ecological implications we will feed the world.

ELIKADURAREN ETORKIZUNA ETA NEKAZARITZAREN ERRONKAK XXI. MENDERAKO:

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The Emergence of Food Sovereignty Rhetoric in post/Euromaidan Ukraine

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Natalia Mamonova

While there is a burgeoning body of food sovereignty literature that examines context-specific iterations of food sovereignty or efforts toward it across a variety of scales and geographies, there is scant reference to the countries of the former Soviet Union. This shortcoming is a result of the assumption that food sovereignty has little relevance in the post-socialist countryside, where food politics have historically been largely subsumed by the state, and where socialist legacies of industrial farming incite negative attitudes towards peasant lifestyles and traditional farming, even among their practitioners. Indeed, hardly any food sovereignty discourse and mobilisation can be detected in these countries. Nevertheless, the rights to culturally appropriate food and a self-defined food system – those central to food sovereignty ideas – are not alien to the post-socialist population. These rights are deeply rooted in the longstanding tradition of food self-provisioning and, therefore, taken for granted, thus, representing a ‘quiet’ form of food sovereignty (Visser et al. 2015).

There are many factors that influence the ‘quietness’ of the post-Soviet food sovereignty. First, the continuation of the socialist dual agricultural structure seems to be culturally appropriate, which makes the coexistence of large farms and smallholdings possible. Second, peoples’ rights to culturally-appropriate food and self-defined food systems are not directly restricted by agribusiness activities; therefore, any right-related discourse remains rather implicit. Third, the post-soviet rural population has distrusted new collective endeavours and ideologies and lacked the experience of grassroots collective action, which limits any mobilisation efforts. Finally, negative societal perceptions of people’s farming and the ‘big is beautiful’ belief prevent the recognition of economic, social and environmental advantages of household farming, and, consequently, the uptake and spread of a food sovereignty rhetoric (for more information see Visser et al. 2015, Mamonova 2015).

This discussion note is aimed to highlight the ongoing transformation in Ukraine that led to the emergence of food sovereignty rhetoric. The Euromaidan revolution of 2014 was followed by the confrontation with Russia, the annexation of Crimea, and the war in several Eastern regions. This sequence of events drastically transformed Ukrainian national identity and triggered a surge of pro-European patriotism. The socialist past became linked with an image of Russia ‘looming as a warning of the “worst evil” of authoritarianism’, while the future became associated with utopian visions of ‘Europe’ and ‘democracy’ (Ryabchuk 2014). This transformation influenced the societal perception of traditional small-scale farming and associated practices. Formerly, household food production was seen as a coping strategy of an insecure population and a relic of the socialist past, which was doomed to disappear in the nearest future. Recently, many Ukrainian smallholders

have begun to view their farming as a sustainable alternative to large-scale industrial agriculture, which could feed Ukraine (and Europe) with ecological and healthy food.

In my recent study, I explained the ongoing transformation in popular discourses on traditional farming in Ukraine by the rising patriotism, the redefinition of national identity in opposition to the Soviet past, and Ukraine's current prospects for integration into the European Union. In particular, I argued the following four points. First, that the geopolitical conflict with Russia galvanised Ukraine's identity and patriotism, which, in its turn, generated optimistic sentiments among smallholders and inspired them to work hard for a better future of their country. Second, that the rejection of the socialist legacies as a part of Ukraine's contemporary nation-building induced a societal reassessment of the generalised Soviet belief 'big is beautiful' in agriculture. Until now, this belief had been used by the state and agribusiness to justify the process of large-scale land accumulation in Ukraine; it had also been shared by smallholders, who did not allocate great importance to their farming, seeing it as 'subsidiary' – not alternative – to industrial agriculture. Third, this study argues that the prospects of Eurointegration caused the spread of 'organic farming' ideas among Ukrainian smallholders, who hoped to benefit from access to the EU market. Finally, that the pro-European aspirations of small-scale food producers contributed to an emerging discourse on the 'rights to food and to farm'. The revealed transformation is highly important, as it creates a fertile ground for the development of a food sovereignty movement in Ukraine.

The ongoing changes in societal perceptions of traditional small-scale farming and associated practices could lead to a transformation of the 'quiet' form of food sovereignty into a more overt food sovereignty movement. However, this would depend on particular factors and conditions as discussed below.

The transformation might cease to evolve or reverse its direction when the patriotic sentiments decline if people would become disappointed in their pro-European ideals and their ability to change the status quo in their country. The new government has failed to meet its people's expectations for fighting corruption and instituting political reforms that would improve lives of ordinary people. Moreover, the Dutch referendum postponed the ratification of the EU-Ukraine association agreement. This was disappointing news for many Ukrainian smallholders who hoped that Eurointegration would give a boost to the development of small-scale farming. Furthermore, the current crisis of the European Union might make Ukrainians rethink their desire to see their country as a European Union member.

Furthermore, it is necessary to mention the differences between grassroots patriotism and a false national sentiment embodied by the modern Ukrainian authority. The contemporary Ukrainian government uses various instruments to propagate Ukrainian culture, language and national identity (in opposition to the Russian ones) that until now do not contradict to patriotic aspirations of the large share of the Ukrainian population. However, if (and when) this propaganda would reach the acceptance limit, it could provoke a countermovement, which would negatively affect grassroots patriotism.

Another obstacle on the way to developing an independent food sovereignty movement is the patrimonial nature of social relations in Ukraine. As revealed in this study, despite the reassessment of the socialist past and people's disappointment with the new government, rural dwellers still anticipate state support and protection as they were practised in the Soviet time. This hinders the emergence of independent initiatives from below. In addition, the high level of distrust towards community organisations decreases the possibility for collective actions, which are needed for the development of a food sovereignty movement. However, at the same time, the Ukrainian rural society has become more conscious about its fundamental rights and freedoms, and has developed hopes that collective civil protest can influence the regime transformation.

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