WHAT THE PEASANTS THINK: THE EFFECTS OF AGRICULTURAL RESTRUCTURING IN A RUSSIAN VILLAGE

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What does a post-communist Russian village look like? Is the unpredictable and lifeless economy preventing any real implementation of the market in rural areas or is something else responsible for the stalled growth of reorganized farming? This paper examines these two important questions. As part of a larger project examining a village level view of agricultural reform, this research strives to understand why, in many areas, the peasants are frustrated and unsupportive of farm reorganization.

This paper is based on one year of research from May 1997 to May 1998 on a reorganized farm called Moshkinskoe.[1] The farm is located in Central Russia, 87 kilometers north of Nizhnii Novgorod, Russia's third largest city. It was formerly a *kolkhoz*, or collective farm, which was organized in 1930 during Stalin's First Five-Year Plan and the sweep of forced collectivization. In March of 1994, this collective underwent one of the first land auctions drawing the attendance of Viktor Chernomyrdin and Anatoly Chubais.

By the end of 1992, Nizhnii Novgorod had become the leading city and province of economic reforms in Russia. The first privatization of any kind in the country had taken place here in April 1992 when the International Finance Corporation (IFC) assisted the privatization of shops. Led by the 34 year-old reform-minded governor, Boris Nemstov, the reforms were based on two main principles: 1) freedom of choice for individuals – privatization is a process designed to return control to individuals and must itself be driven by individuals; and 2) fairness -- in order to give equal access to all individuals, this process has to be transparent and radically different from the old way of "behind-the-scenes" decision making (IFC 1998).

The pilot farm reorganization was requested by Nemstov for several reasons. First, it would bring private ownership to the full chain of food production and distribution, thus guaranteeing the further development of the Russian food system. Second, privatization of farming could help to resolve the seemingly permanent problem of low productivity and resultant poverty in the countryside. Finally, there was the challenge: many consider Russia's collectivized agriculture unreformable, irreversibly ruined by lack of labor, discipline problems, alcoholism, poor demographics, and general hopelessness.

The Problem

The goals of Russian agricultural reform stress the conversion of collective-minded, rural individuals into active independent participants in a market economy. By encouraging self-motivation, self-reliance, efficiency and pride of ownership, the reform program seeks to sow the seeds of agricultural transformation in the spirit of the individual. The hope is that once legal, ideological and economic obstacles are removed, individual Russian peasants will naturally flourish in an environment of independent ownership and self-control. Needless to say, this has not happened. Instead, dissatisfaction has risen in many rural areas.

My research shows that there are three main barriers to successful agricultural decollectivization: 1) lack of cash flow, 2) problems with production, and 3) demographics.[2] In addition, there is a critical fourth barrier which, I argue, is most closely linked to the villagers' dissatisfaction. Despite being overlooked by policy makers and reform consultants alike, the continuing ruin of social services has deeply affected the quality of village life. For many rural dwellers, the change from an almost paternalistic system in which the State and the *kolkhoz* met most of their needs, to a system in which they rarely get paid, where they have seen the over-all standard

of living decrease, and where their complaints are met with encouragement to simply work harder, has proven confusing and frustrating.

I argue that it is the collapse of the social safety net that has been most distressing to villagers. The decrease in basic village social activities and the declining rural education system are concerns that most peasants want to discuss, but ironically few reform consultants or government officials even mention these issues.

Collapse of a Social Safety Net

Historically, the collective unit in Russia served one of the most substantial social roles in the lives of villagers.[3] The collective "provided the peasant with the means for existence, restrained social differentiation, regulated the economic activity of its members, responded to the interests of the majority, and enjoyed its support" (Eklof and Frank 1990:31). The *de*structuring of such a fundamental cultural pillar can only result in considerable social destabilization. Confusion and resentment linger in the village for two reasons. First, the reform promises have gone unfulfilled - there are no visible benefits in terms of quality of village life post-reform. Second, the agricultural restructuring process has systematically rewritten the code of conduct in the village by stressing the individual and his/her rights and opportunities. This runs contrary to the pervading sentiment of nearly every villager with whom I spoke, which is "If the majority of people are not benefitting from privatization, then it isn't worthwhile." For the majority to suffer while a few succeed is viewed as wrong and basically immoral. In addition, the privatization process is not at all driven by the individual. It is a top-down reform driven by Western economic or agricultural theorists and foreign investment.

Peasants' concerns are centered around basic life quality in the village *as a whole* as opposed to the potential for individual entrepreneurial endeavors. In one survey, over two-thirds (69.1%) of all respondents stated that improvements in "social services" would enhance the overall quality of life for rural inhabitants more than improvements in "the economy" (4.1%) (O'Brien et al. 1998:6).[4] This should not suggest that economic issues are inconsequential to villagers; certainly not. Their daily conversations center almost exclusively on financial matters. However, they have little hope for earning more money, and given that fate, they expect at the very least, to have the basic social services they've enjoyed throughout their lives.

View From the Village

> The general situation was better before, more joyful. We received our payments of 70-80 rubles a month and we could buy things, even a washing machine...and still have leftover money to live on. The *kolkhoz* would also give us some food, we had a nice school here, parties, and people lived better. Now, we never get paid, we can't buy anything, and we are supposed to be happy about the situation! Someone isn't looking at the real situation. I'll tell you, I don't feel any changes. No good ones. I don't know what democracy is, what capitalism is, it's all the same for me. It's just that now we work harder and have less. I don't understand.
>
> -- Lida, 62 year old Moshkinskoe resident.[5]

Under reorganization, local *raion* administrations were encouraged to take over most of the social service obligations in the villages. They are technically responsible for distributing funds received from the state government. They have yet to accept this new responsibility, either because of their own lack of infrastructure or, some suggest, their own corruption. This leaves farm directors in the position of having no resources for social services, but feeling pressure from villagers to maintain the local infrastructure. After the retraction of the strong and paternalistic arm of the state there was no positioning of a substitute form. Farm directors have become village caretakers as residents turn to them for jobs, answers, and support. Placating villagers and keeping the farm from collapsing are the fundamental concerns of directors with whom I spoke.

The Moshkinskoe farm director, Ekaterina Nikolaevna, felt that most of the villagers would never be successful with private farming. She said, “Just ordinary peasants... They were used to working all of their lives in collective organizations, they weren’t ready for these types of changes...collective working wasn’t bad, the peasants had developed a history of working together. This (way of) working together will survive despite present circumstances, because it takes a lot of people to work...the land. It’s all they know.”

The cultural club activities have sharply decreased in Moshkinskoe over the past 8 years. What used to be the center of social gatherings is now a lifeless building, the only activity occurring in the administrative offices of the Moshkinskoe farm on the second floor. Shura, a 69 year-old resident reminisced about the functions of the village club:

> The club was open every day. We even had a well-stocked library there and we could check out books to read, but now there aren’t any activities. The library is closed. I recall we had all kinds of concerts, but now we don’t have anything! Everyone stays home at night watching television. The youth don’t even gather at the club anymore, they gather at the “*kochegarka*” (stoke-hold) where they can stand around and drink and smoke.

It isn’t only the pensioners who feel frustrated by the collapse of village life. Svetlana, a 20 year-old woman who works as a bookkeeper for Moshkinskoe made comments that are representative of most young adults living in the village:

> ...I can say that we had everything we needed (when I was younger). We could afford to buy the food we wanted and clothes too. Things have changed for the worse. We are not paid. Sometimes we don’t even have money to live on...There is no involvement or programs with youth. In the past we had *Komsomol* which was responsible for such activities...but now no one has an obligation so there are no activities, especially in a village like ours, it is not so big.

The problem of responsibility is evident throughout the village. Villagers look to the farm director who looks to the local administrator who looks to the *raion* administration and so on. From the ground up, everyone shrugs their shoulders and claims that the job or problem at hand isn’t their responsibility. At one village meeting bitter complaints were made about the lack of street lighting, inadequate garbage removal, delayed wage payments, violent stray dogs, the lack of medicines in the village, insufficient transportation to town, and the unacceptable state of the local school. The farm and *raion* administrator said that something will be done about all of these things, but not very quickly because “it is our government you have to thank for these problems.”

School and day-care facilities in Moshkinskoe are also in a terrible state. The Moshkinskoe school closed in 1991 forcing all of the students to travel to the Kovrigino school, 5 kilometers away. The Moshkinskoe farm provides free transportation to school for the children, but the old bus often breaks down leaving them home for several days until replacement parts can be found or taken from farm equipment not in use.

The administrative director of the area noted the poor prospects for the future of the school:

> We have only 219 students, and only 6 students in the 11th form. We are considering cancelling the last two forms since there are so few students. Many students begin to work in the 8th or 9th forms because they do not want to stay in the village to work on the farm. In general, the education provided isn’t very good... We don’t pay for food for pupils and we don’t supply them with many of the necessary materials. A lot of parents may ask why this has changed, but this is our general situation in Russia.

Similarly, the day-care (*detski sad*) in Moshkinskoe closed years ago, so, again, the Kovrigino day-care became the only one available to serve four villages. In February of 1998 the Moshkinskoe farm administrators were worried because the day care had gone from four small classes, to two, due to the dramatically declining birth rate.[6] By March 1999 it had been closed. There is presently no day-care facility available for the children in the area. This is a situation that one villager described as “unthinkable” in Soviet times, “They would have never left us like this,

with no *detski sad* – it is a common thing and now we have nowhere for our small children to go. It can't get any worse."

Whether things were measurably better during the collective's days is subordinate to my main argument here. Villagers *believe* life was better, that they were cared for and that there was someone to whom they could look for leadership. Lida reiterated, "As for the *kolkhoz*, I think it was better when we had the communist *kolkhoz*. They gave us everything we need. But now, Ekaterina Nikolaevna never has money to pay people. I know three women who don't have enough money to buy even bread. So, this is the way people live now."[7]

Conclusions

While rural Russians make up a quarter of the total population and live scattered across the massive state, they have been forced into a sort of borderland existence. The collapse of the Soviet Union and subsequent reforms were acted out on Moscow's great stage while the reverberations were sent across the continent. Many look to Moscow to turn the nation around, and it will take considerable political reform and stability to enact long-term change of any kind. But who looks to the countryside? Who is keeping their finger on the pulse of the nation - the village? Who understands the nature of their troubles?

The greatest source of resistance comes from ordinary people, especially the most vulnerable, such as the elderly or infirm, who see the collective farm as the only real dependable source of services to meet the needs of their daily lives. Some retired people lament: "Who will bury me if there is no collective farm? The neighbors are good people, they will do everything they can, but the coffin, a truck and food can only be given by the collective farm" (O'Brien et al. 1998:38).

Farm directors best understand this belief and do not take their multiple, often incongruous, responsibilities lightly. One *sovkhoz* director said, "*Sovkhoz* leaders often help the villagers. They like the workers and can't turn them away...They provide all the necessary things for them. Due to this, the *sovkhoz* has survived. The most important thing here is not financial support, but spiritual support." [8]

When I asked Ekaterina Nikolaevna why she didn't strike out on her own as a truly independent farmer her reply was telling:

> To become a farmer wouldn't be difficult for me, but my aim was different. It was to organize those who can not work the land by themselves. I believe that in this situation one shouldn't just seek for his own personal needs, but instead take responsibility for the property we all have together and help to guide it. As the director, I can't just leave the people. The pensioners gave their lives to the farm, it is our responsibility to help them. This is our way. As long as the people need help, and I can give it, the collective will not go away. People would not survive.

Despite compelling reasons for Russian villagers to embrace privatized farming, historical and current situations complicate the transition. They still believe that they should be substantially supported by the state, and thus, by the *kolkhoz*. This is a reflection of the traditional social organization and relationships of village life which have not been adequately assessed or considered in the reform process (Wegren 1994, O'Brien 1998).

Until the social infrastructure of the village is mended, the collective *must* be maintained. The villagers and directors will not and *cannot* abandon their collectivity until reliable alternatives are developed. The problem is one of scope more than of detail. The collective or state farm has been the "city center," if you will, upon which villagers have relied for their most basic social and material provisions. These provisions were mandated by the state whose interest in maintaining an invisible yet productive village was both well intended and politically calculated.

Excessive focus on the current economic situation of the farm itself and not enough on methods by which villagers can maintain some sense of community and social well-being has met

with resistance.[9] A more all-encompassing approach to the way that local "cultural attitudes and values influence agrarian structures and policies" must be considered (Wegren 1994:477). This should be a more "bottom-up" approach which utilizes the collective structures historically in place within which most villagers feel comfortable working. Only then might we see a satisfied rural population and perhaps a productive rural economy in Russia.[10]

Notes

[1] The village of Moshkinskoe has 426 residents and lies within the administrative area of Kovrigino, population 1,420. Both are part of the *Gorodetski raion*.

[2] These problems are the result of economic and physical limitations in the village. Eradicating them is vital to the advancement of agricultural reforms. Many villages are operating in a near cashless environment, relying on barter to obtain goods and receiving wage payments in kind. Total sowing area has been drastically reduced due to lack of adequate machinery and labor. The potato harvest of Moshkinskoe was reduced dramatically from 29 tons per hectare in 1996 to an abysmal 8.3 tons per hectare in 1998. One reason for the lack of labor on the farm is outmigration. For example, in 1990 alone the Gorodetski raion saw the average number of rural workers reduced by 45% (RCC Bulletin, June 1997). The aging of the rural population also presents issues for concern. In 1994, figures show that 19.8% of the oblast population was aged 60 or over and in the Gorodetski raion, the figure was over 30% (Leitch & Brannan 1995). On the Moshkinskoe farm, pensioners make up 2/3 of the total number of people who have entrusted, or leased, their land to the parent farm.

[3] The collective perhaps came in second to the important social roels of nuclear and extended families. Other scholars, however, have argued that historically "...the commune was *the* most important reference group, even more important than such primary groups as the family and immediate neighbors." (stress added, Mironov 1990:18).

[4] This is especially telling in light of the fact that between 1992 and 1994 rural unemployment grew by more than 370 percent, and in 1994 alone rural unemployment doubled (Wegren 1998:234).

[5] When I was there she received 240,000 rubles a month as a pension (approximately $40).

[6] The over-all birth rate in Moshkinskoe is approximately 10 per thousand and the death rate is 56 per thousand. Thus, the population in the area is declining faster than the national Russian average in 1999 (12.5 births per thousand with 14.96 deaths per thousand).

[7] Note that she, like almost all of the villagers in Moshkinskoe, still refers to the farm as a *kolkhoz*. This may reflect the bleak reality that farm reorganization has resulted in the renaming of collectives rather than any true reorganizing.

[8] 24 January 1998, farm Alekseyevskoye, *Moskovski oblast*.

[9] O'Brien et al. (1998), make impressive and extremely important gains in this area.

[10] It is necessary to note that the state government fundamentally influences the success of reforms in rural Russia. Until there is a pro-rural (not simply a self-proclaimed "pro-agrarian") government which supports all aspects of village life, further attempts at economic reform will, I believe, be unsuccessful.

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