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### How far does “lukascism” go? Insights into moral and political economies of Vjetnam and other Belarusian villagers

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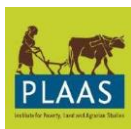


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## How far does “lukascism” go? Insights into moral and political economies of Vjetnam and other Belarusian villagers

*Aleh Ivanou*

### **Abstract**

*The paper addresses a specificity of the agrarian question and transition in Belarus, previously excluded from capitalist development first by the Soviet totalitarianism and later by Belarusian authoritarianism. It focuses on the moral economy and political economy mechanisms in Belarusian rural settings to understand where the present-day creeping de-collectivisation might lead to. It shows that the present rural and agrarian model does not serve the continuing basis for the nation, that the nationally specific moral economy is not averse to political economy, market and capitalism, and in an adverse case of isolation from political economy, the moral economy turns socially reactionary. The prospects for resistance or adaptation in the agrarian sector are assessed, and promising routes to rural emancipation are pinpointed as including institutionalisation of the local community, electability of local authorities, and the introduction of land market mechanisms. The end-to-end examination of contemporary authoritarian populism in Belarus (“lukascism”) situated it at the juncture of agrarian and political populisms and assessed its reach as limited by the older generation and its timeframe as set accordingly.*

## **Agrarian question**

First formulated by Marxists, “the agrarian question” concerns economic and political consequences of the introduction of capitalist relations into a traditional, self-sufficient peasant agriculture in a process of capitalist agrarian transition. An ensuing process of de-agrarianisation refers to the decline of agrarian-based activities and the diminishing importance of self-sufficiency due to income differentiation and labour migration. A particular form of de-agrarianisation is de-peasantisation whereby the peasantry demographically shrinks and lose its economic capacity and social cohesion (Drahmoune 2013).

In Belarus, where the agricultural sector is still dominated by socialist norms and therefore remains largely pre-capitalist, the agrarian question appears irrelevant. Villagers in Belarus are not properly peasants: they are accustomed to relying for their subsistence on the state. Indeed, only recently, the idea of self-sufficiency has been regarded sedition, as would any attempt to be independent of the Soviet totalitarian state. The hold on the village has been slackened by the present-day authoritarian Belarus regime, and a recent income differentiation and especially labour migration signal the arrival of capitalist relations and agrarian transition over what can be termed de-collectivisation (disintegration of the system of collective farms, or *kolkhozes*) but accompanied by many “usual” signs of de-agrarianisation and de-peasantisation. Focusing on the Belarusian village, this paper is about whether and how the agrarian question can still be posed and answered, where the agrarian transition could lead, and what is the role of the populist regime in these issues. However, I first define the usual approaches to the agrarian question, the perspectives of moral economy, political economy, and their combinations.

*Moral economy approach* negatively answers the original “agrarian question” whether onslaught of capital leads to the spread of capitalist class relations. Of its three major arguments, the *economic argument* of the moral economy presents the village as the continuing basis of a nation and the source of national food self-sufficiency; the *cultural argument* contrasts the unseemly industrialised modernity with the idyllic rural past, and the *political argument* views the peasantry as the stronghold of the social order, hierarchy, and political stability (Brass 2000). An early contributor to this approach A.Chayanov (The Theory of Peasant Economy, 1924/1966) considered the Russian peasant household as an economically undifferentiated (homogeneous) petty commodity producer, involved in self-exploiting subsistence provision (drudgery), avoiding accumulating substantial capital and class differentiation, disdainful for commerce, and either fighting capitalism openly or resisting it on a daily basis (Brass 2000; Edelman 2005). Exploring the village in Vietnam, J.Scott (The Moral Economy of the Peasant, 1976) focused on their subsistence ethic (peasant conceptions of social justice, rights, obligations, reciprocity and solidarity), pursuit of food security and risk aversion (such as avoidance of struggle for scarce resources), and either maintaining quiescence or at times growing rebellious (Haggis et al 1986; Fafchamps 1992; Peterson and Taylor 2003). Subsequent conceptualisations discerned the peasant’s penchant for investing resources in social relationships outside the family, to social rather than personal profit maximisation (and hence strong communal institutions), the special treatment of family land that should be passed among generations rather than sold, protecting their customary access to public land and forest resources, fighting excessive state control and immoderate commercial extraction (Orlove 1997; Brettell 1999; Edelman 2005), and expecting paternalist regulation of the market (Bohstedt 2010). A recurrent point of the moral economy research is its sheer anti-market entrenchment and preference for non-commercial and traditional values (Peterson and Taylor 2003, Edelman 2005).

A disagreeing *political economy approach* presents a heterogeneous peasant society (such as including landowners and wage-workers). It renders the peasant farm as a capitalist firm, and peasants as political actors and gain maximisers (Brettell 1999). It criticises Chayanovian theory for conflating rich and poor peasants and turning them into an abstract and historically static entity (Brass 2000); contrary to Scott’s theory, it elicits peasants’ individual rationality and opportunistic behaviour in pre-capitalist markets, sidelines their motivation by higher ethical values and reciprocity (Fafchamps 1992; Edelman 2005), and challenges the view that peasants are necessarily anti-market and averse to

commerce and private property (Brettell 1999). Peasant-workers are thus considered as wielding individual decision-making and strategic interaction (Brettell 1999), while their households—as expecting their subsistence to meet rising living standards and as not devoid of accumulation (Edelman 2005). The approach positively answers the “agrarian question” by admitting peasants’ transformation into proletarians (Brass 2000).

*The two approaches’ dialogue* might result in a middle ground: while the moral economy perspective accounts for pre-capitalist communities, and their persistence and mechanisms of engagement with the capitalism, the political economy approach better grasps peasant relationship with the land, risk, and the world outside the village. Indicating a tangible embodiment of the approaches’ rapprochement whereby a solidarity network is preserved longer-term via a lasting relationship of its otherwise self-interested participants, Brettell (1999) has shown how transactions over land preserved peasant communities. In Portugal and elsewhere in Europe, a fundamental relationship has been established between land transactions, finance capital, and population mobility, whereby seasonal migrants have for centuries kept leaving their communities to earn money to buy or rent land, and where these transactions tied peasants to one another and linked them to regional economies and other social classes (Brettell 1999). Finalising the rapprochement argument, there is a K.Polanyi’s (The Great Transformation, 1957) concept of the double movement: the commodifying land/labour/money movement (propelled by means of political economy) and the protectionist/regulatory counter-movement (driven by moral economy), thus presenting the two economies as part and parcel of a successful national development (McMichael 2006).

An adverse situation, in which the moral economy is uncompensated by political economy and treated as an essentialist ideology, is that of *agrarian myth*. In such cases, subsistence-oriented farming is regarded as a desirable form of rural community tied to a nostalgic “sufficiency ethic”. A village community is said to be instinctively egalitarian, the function of land and labour market and capitalist competition is neglected, opposition to the state is de-politicized, and resistance fails to address class issues (Brettell 1999; Brass 2000; Drahmoune 2013). The agrarian myth arrests socio-economic change, leads to nationalism and racism, and makes everyday resistance useless without addressing the decision-making echelons of state power. In what was the Russian Empire, the agrarian myth recurrently brought up nationalism and populism (Brass 2000). In its own turn, populism is defined as a strategy for winning and exerting state power (Weyland 2001), and an ideology pitching a uniform and virtuous people against unrighteous elites and dangerous “others” (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015). Populism might be either agrarian or political (Canovan 1981), and it is possible to think of situations where the two populisms combine and provoke democratic backsliding and outright authoritarianism.

## **Methodology**

Concerning the collection of empirical data, I spent most of 2016 and summer months in 2017 in Juravičy and adjacent smaller villages (Kalinkavičy District, Homiel’ Region) doing participant observation and semi-structured in-depth interviews (N=100) with mostly randomly chosen (but in several instances specially targeted: Vjetnam, Vjetnamka, Andrej, to be spotlighted in the following) local residents involving various questions ranging from their households’ daily routine to their vision of the future of Belarusian villages. Most often, villagers spoke willingly, and in the case of older interviewees, I rewarded their input by helping with their housework. Even though my research concerned only one territorial cluster of settlements, I consider my study as representative of the Belarusian countryside, since the present-day organisation of land and labour is fairly uniform throughout rural Belarus.

The paper has examined the ideas as suggested by the literature for their consistency with the empirical evidence from a particular Belarusian village, such as: what is the status of the agrarian question and the stage of agrarian transition in Belarus; what topics are of direct relevance to the moral economy ; is the nationally specific moral economy is averse to political economy; who is excluded by

the present-day juncture of agrarian and political populism; what are the prospects for resistance or adaptation as well as routes to rural emancipation?

My analysis is intended to elucidate both broader structural questions and anthropological particulars. My approach involved, on one hand, structure-focused interpretations of rural life to fit the neo-Marxist literature on agrarian change intended to establish functional relations and, on the other hand, a post-structuralist and discursive view of reality (Drahmoune 2013). Wherever my focus is on cultural elements, the text becomes predominantly ethnographic.

In what follows I address 1) the historical background in terms of moral economy and country-specific setting for authoritarian populism; 2) the case study of Juravičy with a focus on a particular family prominent for moral economy traditions, 3) three arguments regarding such behavioural traits currency throughout the population, and 4) my findings discussion and conclusions.

### **Historical background: Shaping the autocratic state**

Echoing what has already been stated regarding Chayanovian ideas, it was the historical experience of Belarus within the Russian Empire (1795-1917) that led to such centrepiece of a moral economy as the redistributive commune with its land-and-labour complex. Since then, the attitude to land has been tied to the labour, with labour establishing the right to land (Lewin 1990). In its initial radical form, the Russian-style moral economy did not allow any significant accumulation of wealth (wealthy peasants were labelled as *kulaks*), and it included joint responsibility for the commune's contractual obligations, the power of public opinion and the peasant's sense of moral responsibility for the welfare of others. The latter corresponded with peasants' strained resources and thus properly covered family members but extended to the commune in the form of assistance in "all the trying events of life" (Bartlett 1990; Atkinson 1990).

Atkinson (1990) claims that since a preference for equal property translates into a consent on the unequal distribution of power, it has eventually led to a socialist revolution and has largely predisposed the autocratic state. The redistributive commune allowing occasional redistribution of peasant holdings under the imperial power later remained politically neutral to the Soviet power doing much more radical redistribution via collectivisation and expropriation of *kulaks*. Another peculiarity was the absence of an independent territorial aristocracy based on landed wealth, both in Russia itself and within its western colonies to include the territory of present-day Belarus.

While the Belarusian countryside largely complied with the general trends in the Russian Empire and later the Soviet state, its specificity has been said to be a proclivity for even more equal distribution of material resources and land. Thus, Belarusian historians have stressed recently that, relative to the then Russia and Ukraine, there were no wealthy people in historic Belarus, and that prior to its annexation by the Russian Empire (when Belarus was part of The Grand Duchy of Lithuania and later Rzecz Pospolita—1569-1795) there were even cases when local gentlemen were observed tilling the land like any ordinary peasant would do but with a sword at their side (Drakakhrust 2017). However, such comparisons of past configurations using patchy evidence might exaggerate the extent of erstwhile equality and moral economy: current researchers' have a *penchant* for national revivalist sentiments and their sometimes obvious desire to separate Belarus from Russia.

Certainly, Belarusian traditional culture and its survival to this day depend on oral communication, which includes *inter alia* popular sayings and proverbs providing practical advice, conveying norms and inculcating the importance of sticking to the old ways (Lewin 1990). An opposite, innovatory side of the traditional oral communication is the rumour. There is a literature on the role of rumour in peasant resistance: rumours help clarify intentions of the state, help collectively to explain important news, and unify villagers over their common complaints (Aytakin 2012). Another related social phenomenon, and simultaneously one most active in rumours spreading, is a simulacra form of the "holy fools". This often came to the fore of public life in the proverbial Russian world in its darker days and was intimately related to Russian Orthodox tradition. The literature on "holy foolery"



(*iurodstvo*) stresses that despite being a paradigm of marginality, a holy fool is typically actively engaged with the community and often acts as a vehicle of social reconciliation, a source of the community's cultural coherence and self-renewal. Crucially, they contribute to administering social order, reprobate, and often denounce the public authority (Kollmann 1988; Hunt and Kobets 2011).

The phenomenon of holy foolery is close to "naïve monarchism" (Mamonova 2016). Here, *inter alia*, popular masses consider the top in the power hierarchy as the intercessor against the lower branches, preferring to think that the top is unaware of injustices. Historically, this is the perceived opposition of tsar and boyars, recently updated to the "president versus *načalstva*" (folks-up-top, in Belarusian). This scheme reinforces the popular concept of social justice involving the equal distribution of land and unequal distribution of political power (Atkinson 1990). Keeping this scheme in place and updated to maintain visibility of social justice requires a system of populist subterfuges.

### **Present-day power landscape: Lukascism**

Mr. A.Lukašenka came to power in Belarus in 1994 during a period of transformism of populist discontents (Scoones 2017), when Belarusians were disappointed with democracy and the market. A previous study (Eke and Kuzio 2000) defines the present-day political regime in Belarus as "authoritarian sultanism". Exhibiting patrimonialism, it fuses the private and public domains. It preserves a feeling of the valued past, to imply Soviet values of communitarianism and collectivism intended to substitute national and cultural alternatives. "This has considerable appeal amongst the elderly", Eke and Kuzio (2000, p.535) add. Portraying Belarus as an Asiatic despotism is partly justified to the extent it relates to the state's unlimited power over society and productive forces in the Asiatic form of production that K.Marx introduced in "A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy" (1859). Whatever good point the authors otherwise make, they are erroneous in claiming that sultanism might be a nation-specific form of development in Belarus, because, by their own admission, "sultan" is typically not tied by rules, ideology, tradition and value system, and loyalty to him is based exclusively on fear and rewards (Eke and Kuzio 2000).

In Belarus of 1994 vintage, Lukašenka, a former director of a loss-making *sovkhos* (state-owned farm) first achieved his personal elevation and then appointed his cronies from the rural periphery to the ruling elite, with their vestigial grasp of moral economy that they have since employed to retain themselves in power. At this point, the moral economy became the agrarian myth, and agrarian populism joined political populism thus forming a specific type of authoritarian populism that could be labelled "lukascism", after its chief inspirer. Lukascism is anti-capitalist and rural essentialist. It targets the assumed aversion of people to the market and profit, penchant for drudgery, and reverence to this drudgery's preferential object of application, land. Technically, lukascism appeals to people's anticipated right to subsistence and solidarity obligations: it conditions the former on the latter, making people sanction each other in a vain expectation of the promised. Exploiting the archetypes, lukascism for many years promises a uniform wage equivalent to USD 500 (an equalising propagandist trick known in public settings as "*pa 500*"); people's respect for hard work is abused by increasing the retirement age and aiming to impose a tax on the jobless by calling them "do-littles". Lukascism employs the traditional concern over unused land to justify ploughing radioactively contaminated areas for an additional, risk-laden yield of grain.

At a 1996 referendum, Belarusians succumbed both to lukascism and to their deep-rooted naïve monarchism, and ditched their right to elect *načalstva* (in the first place, this concerned heads of executive power branches) in favour of Lukašenka, who has thus formed his "vertical of power", or *načalstva* unaccountable to the people. In the absence of much feedback from citizens (except for complaints concerning housing and utilities), lukascism nonetheless always does "on public request" rather than waywardly, as implied by sultanism. Also unlike sultanism, lukascism is not about fear-motivated *načalstva*. For all their ostentatious loyalty to Lukašenka and studied helplessness regarding the ordinary people with all their problems, *načalstva* is mostly led by personal business interests in managing the land and assets, wrangling public money, and dividing markets using their close ties with law-enforcers and prosecutors. Given their often mean and commonplace formal treatment of

ordinary people, *načalstva* assumes the role of “those to be protected from”, as presupposed by naïve monarchism (“tsar versus boyars”). In turn, it is only rational for the people to address their aspirations directly to Lukašenka bypassing “helpless” *načalstva*, which is tantamount to a not-so-naïve monarchism (Mamonova 2016). Given the mismatch between the promise and the reality, how far is lukascism able to retain its hold? What social processes and responses does it provoke? I consider the case of village Juravičy.

### **Juravičy: Moral economy and political economy meeting place**

Juravičy village was the first place in Belarus settled by humans: its primitive man sites date back to the Palaeolithic around 26 thousand years ago and feature remnants of mammoths, the then central component of subsistence for local hunter-gatherers. The local story of (initially off-farming) subsistence and related social upheavals thus outstrips what Edelman (2005) posits as ten-millennia history of (farming) subsistence accompanied, from the Neolithic onward, by subsistence crises.

Juravičy’s written history began around 1430, in the time of The Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Documents depicted the settlement and outlying smaller villages as oases in the Paliessie marshlands inhabited by subsistence farmers. Situated near an important East-West trade route between Poland and the Black Sea, Juravičy was invaded and pillaged by Mongols and Tartars, and later by Napoleonic, Russian, German, Bolshevik and Polish forces. Ultimately, the Soviets transformed the life of local residents and altered their idea of subsistence by forced collectivisation. The latest series of dramatic impacts came first with WWII, then in 1986 (Chernobyl catastrophe) and in 1991 (collapse of the USSR). There followed nearly three decades of economic and social travails, manifest in the protracted disintegration of the local *kolkhoz* (de-collectivisation) and de-population. Recently, Juravičy numbered around 600 villagers, whereas it had been home to four times that number in the 1930s.

### **Two Juravičy villagers**

During my study in 2016-2017, where moral economy was concerned, the key role in Juravičy was played by an elderly couple known by their unusual nicknames Vjetnam and Vjetnamka (the latter, Vjetnam’s wife). They were both in their eighties. They have spent most of those years in Juravičy, having grown up separately in two outlying smaller villages. Though unrelated to the Vietnamese nation, the couple with such nicknames coincidentally hit the right note with the Vietnam-focused research by Scott (1976) featuring the principle of moral economy. This childless couple embodied an authentic moral economy still to be found in Belarusian Paliessie. The nickname “Vjetnam” dated back to the early 1960s, to the man’s first encounter with the local *kolkhoz*. It happened when the newlyweds came to live in Juravičy in a house that the wife’s family received as a collateral for a cow (cows were precious, while the housing was more available due to the war losses). The man’s first assignment of putting a horse to the cart went awry and he was behind his colleagues in a *kolkhoz* coachmen team. A born wisecracker, he explained his coming late to the unit’s gathering place by that other workers were locals, while “he came from Vietnam, where there [wa]s a war”. This lame excuse was nothing unusual at the time when Soviet people were overwhelmed by propaganda on the collective struggle for social justice across the globe. The nickname Vjetnam attached to him for the rest of his life, but the reason behind his missing skills in approaching the horse was the absence of horses in his native village. Paradoxically, he was a grandson of a rich farmer who owned many horses but who was eventually recognised by the Soviet power as *kulak*, dispossessed and sent together with his large family to their certain death in the Gulag. Only one daughter, Vjetnam’s mother, was able to survive. No less paradoxical, this and other grandsons of successful farmers who were deprived of crucial skills and means have become part of a silent support base of the Soviet regime and subsequent lukascism.

Despite his modest education and unassuming career of a *kolkhoz* general labourer, Vjetnam was a local moral authority. This is evident from the fact that for many years he served as a church acolyte and the bearer of the icon during Orthodox church processions. However, it was mostly Vjetnamka



who has propelled the couple to the centre of the village moral economy. Accustomed from her childhood to charity, caring for others, and acquiring daily bread by the sweat of her brow, she has lived up to these principles. As an active communicator and ardent narrator, Vjetnamka daily spread the lore of her native village Lomuš (resettled after the Chernobyl catastrophe) that in her stories played the role of a lost Avalon of moral economy. There, she said, people had been “in kindness to each other” (*u laske*), friendly and mutually supportive—especially after WWII, when, in the absence of tractors or horses, five-six women had been pulling a plough. Lomuš dwellers formed a close-knit community so much so that they were “deluging the village” (*tapili syalo*) with their song. They helped each other, and nobody would ever accept a kopek for this. It seemed that they often worked hard for hard-working sake, which clearly was part of their idea of drudgery.

In Juravičy, Vjetnamka used to be a chef in the local school canteen (and was awarded a Soviet medal for her achievement) but was juggling that job with keeping a large household, including the mandatory several cows/pigs/poultry. The lion’s share of the household produce has been given away. The couple has had numerous nephews and godchildren (now scattered in various Belarusian towns and cities) who they have always felt obliged to provide with home-made food reserves for winter and earlier—for their initial traineeship in the city. However, Vjetnam and Vjetnamka in principle helped each and everyone. Despite their advanced age and failing health, it was only recently that they have given up their last cow, regretting themselves turning into “do-littles”. Vjetnamka also referred to herself as *pustal’ga*, meaning a bird kestrel in Belarusian but consonant with “emptiness”. Their house was a magnet for many villagers. There were always some helpers for their household routine, and many came to help with harvesting the couple’s large subsistence plot. The couple named their life-long hard-working using a verb encountered often in my interviews: “*haravać*”. It meant to be in sorrow, or to be involved in drudgery, in Chayanovian English-language scholarship. The couple occasionally referred to themselves, and others like them, as *horapašnyja* [*hora-pašnyja*], an endemic word splicing “sorrowing” and “harrowing”.

How representative was such life-long selfless devotion? As mentioned previously, there have been attempts to substantiate national superiority in terms of an equalising moral economy based on the anecdotal evidence of local gentry working in their gardens. The Juravičy couple themselves could provide similar anecdotal evidence. They shared a joking recollection of how, under the Soviets, they had allowed the *baciuška* (the local Orthodox priest) to have his vegetable beds within their fertile subsistence plot, and then kept telling puzzled passers-by that they had been so godly a family that the priest had to do their household chores for them. Even though this older couple appears to embody Chayanov and Scott’s ideas of an economically moral peasantry, this needs testing for the larger population by triangulating their experiences with economic, political, and cultural arguments (Brass 2000). In the following, I employ this triangulation not only to define the spread and mutual correlation of the diverging attitudes (inculcated by moral and political economies) but also to delineate the timeframe for the present-day rural status quo and for the hold of lukascism.

### **Economies: Need or accumulation?**

De-collectivisation in Belarus recently concerned post-*kolkhozes*’ economic decay and laying off workers. This plight was largely explicable by these economic units’ subordination to district *načalstva*” who demanded the post-*kolkhozes* to supply virtually all produce to the state at fixed low prices. In contrast, the Soviet-time *kolkhoz* acted on a clear plan, had more freedom managing its assets, and enjoyed abundance and cheap agricultural machinery supplied by the state: tractors were available at “a kilo for a rouble” (a “Belarus” tractor weighing three tons had a fixed price of 3,000 Soviet roubles, equivalent to approximately twenty monthly wages). Even when Juravičy *kolkhoz* did not need spare parts, the latter were nonetheless pressured upon it. Recently, a tractor costed the equivalent of US\$ 8-15,000 (80-150 monthly wages), and Juravičy post-*kolkhoz* had to lease tractors from the state; spare parts and fertilisers were also very expensive. Local people thought that their post-*kolkhoz* was doomed and doubted that the relative stability of the past would return, as they remembered that the *kolkhoz* had begun to fall into disrepair long before the collapse of the USSR.

The households' immediate response to de-collectivisation was the decline of agrarian work and the household economy, and disassociation from the local issues. This occurred instead of switching immediately to independent economic activities (via invigorated reliance on subsistence plots or seeking to cultivate even more land). There was also no particular increase in the reliance on rural social networks. In particular, the villagers' attachment to the land proved weak. Instead of becoming individual farmers they preferred to depart for cities, for occasional construction work. They became "wage hunters and gatherers", forming "transitory labour", and otherwise echoing the de-peasantisation that proceeds internationally (Scoones 2017). Recent post-*kolkhoz* workers looked for opportunities first in the village, next in the city, and then abroad (mostly in Russia). A low-paid (typically equivalent to US\$ 100) job was only occasionally on offer in the village and virtually absent in outlying smaller villages. If villagers had sought better-paid jobs previously, now they accepted any job and were ready to travel long-distance. Households commandeered their most mobile members for occasional jobs, each assignment commonly taking several months of toil and living in extreme environments. Even when they did bring their hard-earned money back to the village (often they were swindled by employers), they often spent it on drink, partly out of ignorance of how to apply the money for something worth-while (relevant knowledge and skills have been lost), but also due to an insufficiency of market institutes and sheer absence of the land market. Because the occasional money-earning mostly involved unqualified jobs in the construction sector, the occupational trips took place over the frost-free period. Such seasonal occupational trips of physically fit and mobile members also implied households reducing their agricultural activity and overall economic capacity.

Alongside reduced economic capacity, current processes caused demographic shrinkage and depopulation. Recurrent phrases expressed the cycle: "the village dies"; "no jobs, few people left, few children". All respondents mentioned the plummeting number of children attending the local school. People regarded the lack of youth as pivotal to the problems of the local economy, both collective and household-based. They gave contrasting examples of the erstwhile "buzzing village" when thriving local enterprises had been staffed by the many local residents, and larger local households had been dictated by subsistence requirements of the predominantly large families. Now, in the 2010s, families were small, a phenomenon which also contributed to the decline of agrarian activities. It was Chernobyl in 1986 that the exodus of local people started, and large swathes of local lands became unusable, tantamount to another negative synergistic effect for the local economy.

In this situation what could rejuvenate the village? The current extent of drudgery ("*haravač*") in agrarian work was not high. Locals clung to the view that "the village is where one has to toil", but, in practice, not many households engaged in intense tilling of the land, in defiance of the still extant cultural norm. Few households kept more than two cows. There were no such households in 600-strong Juravičy, but in a neighbouring village there was a family keeping nine cows. Even households with one or two cows and a few pigs, either sold extra milk and meat to the state procurers at fixed low prices or distributed it free of charge within their networks of relatives and friends.<sup>1</sup> If the household finally decided to stop keeping the cow(s), this decision automatically alleviated other kinds of household drudgery: without cows, vegetables (eg potatoes and beetroot), hay and straw also became less important to the household. Thus another combination of low fertility and unattractive procurement prices produced a decline of household agrarian activities.

The current land conjunctures in the village were also not compatible with small-scale, subsistence production. One interviewee claimed that "It [wa]s easier in the village. You d[id] not need money here—your subsistence plot w[ould] feed you". However, phrases like that were often said by elderly people who in fact relied for subsistence on their pensions. Next-to-house subsistence allotments (in official documents, "allotment to build and support the house") in Belarus did not exceed 0.25 ha of only moderately fertile land<sup>2</sup> and could provide staple food to a small family. By law, the local post-

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<sup>1</sup>Changing food predilections and Chernobyl-associated risks also played their role: while the state procurers accepted milk from households at a set price 0.25 for a litre, the same households often bought the processed and diluted milk products in the local store for at least double this price (starting with USD 0.5 for 1 litre)

<sup>2</sup> Moreover, it is ridden with the risks associated with spotty soil-borne radionuclide content

*kolkhoz* (the land's administrator<sup>3</sup>) could provide up to a hectare to a villager claiming it for agricultural pursuits, but in practice, the post-*kolkhoz* would only give badlands. Recent state regulations aimed to in some instances reduce and in other instances discontinue previous freedoms in using the land outside settlements, and most often Juravičy villagers feared that these regulations jeopardised the free pasture for their cows.

Prospects of larger, business-scale ventures, or “farming” (in the official definition), attracted only a few people. Subsistence plots did not support most commercially viable projects: for instance, a Juravičy villager tried to keep a hundred beehives but soon his bees became a threat to neighbours. To be entitled to receive a larger land plot (up to 100 ha) involved a lengthy process of state registration of a peasant farm enterprise, and it also required machinery, equipment and starting capital to prove the claimant's consistency as a business person and ability to pay the corresponding taxes. State credits were mostly inaccessible and feared even when offered. In the absence of landed property, villagers had nothing in terms of collateral. Their weather-beaten wooden houses had little commercial value in the midst of many similar vacant constructions (every second house in the village remained deserted, typically after the death of their last owners). Even if someone took the risk and used their own money (painstakingly earned elsewhere) to start commercial agricultural production, they eventually dealt with the purchasing agents from state-owned processing enterprises and their fixed low prices. Most importantly, starting your business required connections.

In Juravičy, there was only one villager, informally referred to as Jaroś, who has positioned himself well for the farmer's role. At the time of the field study, his business was comparable in scope to the local post-*kolkhoz*, and the latter occasionally asked Jaroś to help with seed material, machinery or even money to pay wages. Last winter, when the post-*kolkhoz*'s cows were starving, Jaroś gave silage in exchange for some bulls. Jaroś started as a perestroika-period (the late 1980s) cooperator by buying a *kolkhoz*-decommissioned tractor “Belarus” for 300 roubles, when nearly everyone could do the same. However, his subsequent business path could not be copied by each and everyone in the village. His business has had international backing (his sister married a German, who supported Jaroś first entrepreneurial attempts), and he was said to eventually become a “Bob's your uncle” for local and regional *načalstva*. Some say that Jaroś connections have reached Minsk. For certain, his daughter has become the public prosecutor for the administrative district where Juravičy is located. Such factors of business success were essential in Belarus. Not only was red tape a block, but strenuous efforts were required to protect a business from forcible takeover by someone in power and from numerous state inspectorates that readily fined and extorted.

Addressing the question of household economic differentiation, with Jaroś at the top of the income hierarchy, there were other levels of economic disparity in the village. The poorest category were people suffering alcohol addiction and eking out an existence by herding villagers' cows to the pasture in the summer and rendering occasional help to local pensioners throughout the cold period. There were people in local hired employment and the majority subsisting on their pensions (both categories scraping a living quite uniformly). There were also some jobless, or otherwise self-employed people, especially younger-age jacks-of-all-trades who were able to earn money in Russia. The latter often looked well-off in the local economic hierarchy, since it was measured not always by stable/official income but also by visible manifestations, such as the jacks-of-all-trades' visibly superior household constructions. Another—not ostentatious but fully functional—asset was privately owned agricultural machinery: the work on subsistence plots that traditionally had been performed manually with the use of horsepower, and more recently received mechanised assistance from the *kolkhoz*, is now often performed using privately owned machinery. Their owners were highly regarded due to their independent ability to earn their living locally, and the increasingly elderly population made their service increasingly sought-after. The economic hierarchy did not automatically translate into a social hierarchy, and equal relationships were still maintained amongst most social groups.

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<sup>3</sup> The title owner of most lands in Belarus is the state

Despite the social egalitarianism still in place, social and economic cohesion in Juravičy was gradually deteriorating. The erstwhile camaraderie, cemented by *kolkhoz* team-working, has now been replaced by aloofness of individual breadwinning. The penchant for mutual help and their ability to cooperate was least evident among younger-generation villagers who kept their families, and it was markedly higher among the older people (“of old hardening”). It is the latter who most actively communicated and shared their household products.

Vjetnam’s household was one example of the above: having stopped keeping a cow they nonetheless intended to plant vegetables at the previous rate, to be harvested by collective efforts of numerous volunteer helpers, and to be given away. This behaviour by older and physically frail people might be explained by their fear of losing their social network, and they also evidently adhered to the old customs. However, even for the older people, the replacement of manual land tilling with mechanised cultivation and harvesting rendered the non-monetary-based mutual help increasingly redundant. All the locals unconditionally helped in emergencies (“all the trying events of life”—Atkinson 1990) and assisted physically weak neighbours. However, the idea to do something together came to villagers “only as innermost thoughts”, as one villager put it. The last collective exploit took place ten years ago when villagers collectively re-roofed someone’s house. It is thus impossible to compare the role in the village of those typically older people who espoused self-abnegation, toiling and giving away their products (who are thus representative of the economy of need) and the relative weight of typically younger villagers acting in line with the economy of accumulation. Both solidarity and opportunism were thus present in Belarusian village. The village at large does not appear providing a “continuing basis for the nation” (Brass 2000). Besides the unfortunate economic circumstances, what other factors prevent its successful development and which is the way out? The ensuing analysis of firstly cultural barriers and then political openings might suggest the village destinies with more certainty. Reviewing the cultural barriers, most of which raised by populism, I eventually indicate a social group that has been left behind these barriers, or excluded (a central element in analysing populism—Scoones 2017) under the current conjuncture, and why.

### **Cultural barriers: Who is excluded?**

Since moral economy involves values, the question is which values are predominant and acceptable in a rural community. Does mass public consciousness contain morally charged barriers (that ultimately constitute “culture” and particular moral economies—Orlove 1997), such as with regard to commerce, wealth and landed property, to risk and to otherness? I address a number of social determinants with a view to understand which of them work as cultural barriers and stipulate or have bearing on exclusion. *Attitude to landed property* is above all a matter of social justice and is measurable by a stance toward restitution and privatisation. Elderly descendants of the repressed and dispossessed in Juravičy did not want any restitution. This can be explained by their declining years and Soviet patrimonialism that has replaced skills of proprietorial independence over their lifetime involvement in collective farming. Concerning the private ownership of land, my interviewees were averse to this idea and quite content with only *using* the land, as they habitually did, so much so it was in plenty and uncontested, given the population shrinkage and the economic downfall. However, villagers have had not seen any positive evidence of land reforms: the Belarusian official media said the same. Trips by village “wage hunters and gatherers” (Scoones et al 2017) to Russian largest cities have left them unaware of recent changes in the Russian countryside (such as described in Nikulin 2010). Villagers thus viewed land as something that should be available for whoever tills it, in accord with tradition (Atkinson 1990). However, this attitude was situational and defined by the present-day perceived conjuncture.

Regarding *attitude to private economic pursuits*, so far there was no conflict between the local entrepreneur Jaroś (potentially symbolising the economy of accumulation and capitalism) and the collective “Vjetnam” (standing for the economy of need). While many (typically older) villagers expressed their disdain for enrichment, this did not translate into their treatment of Jaroś. The attitude to him was positive (*jon haruje*: he is in sorrow/sheds tears on land/is involved in drudgery) and even condescending (“let him pull and plough if he wants!”). Vjetnamka called Jaroś *horapašnyj*. In his own turn, Jaroś did not prevent anyone from attending a local fishy lake that he leased from the



state—he was well-versed in fellow villagers’ understanding of justice, and discerned “what can be turned into a commodity, and of what natural or commonly held resources can be appropriated for private use and profit” (Edelman 2005, p. 332). The treatment of Jaroś thus reflected both the current relative availability of land and public respect of hard work, which evidently made people turn a blind eye to his privileges arising from being well-connected to the state.

Addressing the emotional sphere of *fears* as a source of cultural barriers translated into *risk aversion*, such recurrent fears as an apprehension to lose subsistence in Juravičy was perceptibly grounded in villagers’ past or present experience. Lending weight to the importance of subsistence, Vjetnam told a shocking story of how his undernourished small brother had died during WWII of a mere fright (that caused abdominal spasms) when a neighbouring boy had put on a discarded German gas mask and had appeared at their house window. The awareness of food-related death was all-pervasive in this Chernobyl-affected region, but there were other apprehensions that sidelined radio-phobia: “One should be afraid of not that radiation that you eat [with food] but the one that eats you” (to imply *načáľstva*), to be addressed later.

Often fears produced place-specific synergistic effects and refuted sweeping generalisations about “traditional” aptitudes and aversions. In her turn, Vjetnamka has depicted stigmatisation of her fellow villagers from Lomuš once resettled to a nearby but less affected by Chernobyl fallout village Azaryčy, where locals kept the newcomers at bay, and what was most upsetting, locals refused queuing with them to buy bread in the local store (in the late 1980s—the time of severe shortages and queues). The resettled saw it as an ultimate injustice and *tapili sialo* (kept inundating the village with their tears). Given that other settlements are known to meet *čarnobyľcy* (people from Chernobyl-affected areas) much more amicably, I explain the “Azaryčy fear” by this village’s tragic history: by the Winter of 1943, the *Wehrmacht* (as the only such instance among their war crimes) turned this Belarusian village into a death camp, where 20,000 peaceful residents died from camp fever, which was intentionally spread with a view to contaminate the advancing Soviet troops.<sup>4</sup> Even after the war local residents in Azaryčy had proceeded dying from camp fever, and no wonder that in the late 1980s they were afraid of the then unheard pestilence, radiation (now radiation has rather been part of the folklore, as above).

*Transience of fears* is related to risk-taking and is evident in Juravičy villagers’ overcoming courage and Christian compassion in treating neighbours suffering from tuberculosis and HIV. Villagers were cautious to them but also sympathetic and suggestive that sufferers might be not guilty of their decease, and should be treated rather than blamed. Quite expectedly, Vjetnam’s family were most compassionate: when a local woman with terminal-stage AIDS could not care for herself, they took her to their house and cared for, and then buried using their own and “crowd-sourced” money. When I asked Vjetnamka to explain, she told me a story from her childhood in Lomuš: a female relative suffering from tuberculosis visited the family but was reluctant to share family meals (at the time, a traditional way was to eat from the same dish)—but the father insisted, following his own usual instruction to the children: “somebody else’s illness is not catching”. Vjetnamka and other older people espousing traditional values proceeded living up to the principles of never rejecting anyone and to be unselfish, in high contrast to the “strong man” talk supposed to pitch insiders against outsiders (Scoones et al 2017) espoused by lukascism.

In their turn, younger villagers shown a penchant to defy “traditional” fears by bravely entering the capitalist labour market in the city but most often came back to their village. Juravičy “wage hunters and gatherers” (Scoones 2017) largely substantiated the claim by Brettell (1999, p. 23) that the “risks they took were often those that helped them to preserve a way of life”. As already noted, the institutional constraints back home (such as non-existent land market) would not allow them to correspond this phrase in full measure.

*Trust and treatment of otherness* is the sphere where the subversive impact of lukascism was most evident in exploiting the traditional disdain for material gain-motivated behaviour in its striving to

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.khatyn.by/en/genocide/ccs/ozarichi/>

undermine public trust to various “others” (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015). For many years since Chernobyl, owing to international organisations and with the Belarusian state “lumping it”, children from Juravičy and elsewhere in the region periodically recuperated in host families abroad, mostly in Italy. These children’s parents occasionally invoked these trips in my interviews but had “mixed feelings” rather than were they unreservedly grateful: parents were confused by Italian host families presumably motivated by tax exemption, as villagers learned from a certain “documentary investigation” on Belarusian TV. However, in this and suchlike cases, it was arguable whether lukascism secured its monopoly for benevolence and paternalism by striking the right note with the supposedly traditional aversion to capitalism or in many cases it just met a widespread cynicism, scepticism and appetite for conspiracy theories.<sup>5</sup>

My interviews gave evidence of the mistrust of the outside world inculcated exactly using rural peoples’ liking for fables. Recurrent in local folklore was a “provenance” myth of the Colorado potato beetle dating back to the 1960s: it linked the beetle invasion of Soviet territory to American imperialists seeking to undermine Soviet potato harvests. This myth is still widespread in Belarus, having been adorned with local details: its Juravičy-specific version involved *kolkhoz* herders (invoking in mind some legendary shepherds) who had seen a plane circling over their pastureland and dropping sacks with never-before-seen striped beetles. The mistrust of the outworld based on such Soviet and post-Soviet myths sometimes leave people disoriented when they meet evidence of real processes such as global warming. Besides the acquisitions in terms of new crops that they enjoy in the warmer climate, there is a downside in terms of new pests, such as a certain omnivorous “black fly” eating currents, raspberry and even apple bloom, and making villagers wonder as to its future spread and appetites. As one occasional visitor to Juravičy who had been on a work contract in Venezuela (a fruit of Lukašenka-Chaves friendship at the time much vaunted by state propaganda) the pest is nothing else but the Venezuelan “flying ant”. This update made local people clueless, unable to habitually explain the pestilence by “machinations of imperialism and reactionary forces”.

“Mixed feelings” and disorientation were not the only product of populist propaganda. There was also *racial exclusion, repressions, and genocide*. For five years, two dozen houses in Juravičy have been occupied by Roma families. Unlike other new-comers (like Ukrainian refugees and several Uzbek-Belarusian families) who were treated equally with fellow Belarusians, the attitude to Roma was uniformly negative. The usual prejudice concerned theft, swindle, and drug-selling, and yet “they are capable of casting spells on you”. Most of these accusations were ungrounded, and people finally admitted that “Roma are like other people, but they just have an ill reputation”. The only blame which appeared solid to the locals and indeed determined the exclusion of Roma was their “not working”. This implied their ability to remain self-sufficient without tilling subsistence allotments, and staying away from the post-*kolkhoz* or construction sites in the city. On a daily basis, Roma took bags with some cheap merchandise to a town thirty kilometres away, but peddling was not considered as valid work by locals. What was more, Roma kept receiving social pensions and material help for the children, they received medical treatment at the local hospital, and their children attended school (“because of free lunches there”, as locals supposed).

Roma sometimes tried to achieve rapprochement with locals, but in vain, even though the two groups had plenty in common. Older Roma, like their Belarusian peers, bewailed the disappearance of traditional community; and the younger Roma families also shared most problems with any other family in the village, and even worse—many children in Roma families implied frequent addressing the authorities, where they met the same ineffectiveness on top of prejudice. Even though Roma were excluded from the village community without being excluded from the social welfare and healthcare, their exclusion was furnished by the authoritarian state via its populist instruments (like the “decree on do-littles”) that referred to the still persistent popular ideas discriminating honourable versus dishonourable labour, and to the special attitude to land that in practice splintered rural community along ethnic and racial lines.

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<sup>5</sup> Personal communication with Professor Chris Pickvance on 19 December 2016



The present exclusion of Roma is a reminder of the horrible consequences of similar traditionalism during WWII: Juravičy was the only Belarusian settlement where local collaborators (rather than Nazi) organised the holocaust of their Jewish neighbours (nearly four hundred Jews died, in entire families—Studzinskaja 2017). Nowadays, older villagers remember their Jewish neighbours either as “good” or as “very good” people, remarking in passing that Jews have never tilled the land. At the time, this objection was probably strong enough and served to “define the boundaries of a moral community” (Snyder 2016) by Belarusian villagers that could prompt local scoundrels to action. The moral boundary drawing mechanism is presently employed by local residents to construct Roma as objectionable and to marginalise them. This historical parallel suggests a darker side of moral economy—the agrarian myth that might turn reactionary.

### **Prospects for political settlement: Resistance or adaptation**

To what extent was the moral economy of the Belarusian village an oppositional milieu? A question of direct relevance here has been whether Belarusian villagers that I observed were inclined to support the existing order (which was neither socialist nor properly capitalist), or whether resistance could be expected, and, if so, how? I am going to consider the circumstances, since a penchant for the opposition, resistance or rioting depends on community-specific factors (Bohstedt 2010), and its analysis should concern a configuration of power relationships (Wegren 2005).

Like elsewhere in Belarus, the *local community* in Juravičy was not institutionalised,<sup>6</sup> with only moral and informal leaders, like Vjetnam and Vjetnamka. Nobody ever asked my interviewees’ about their views over the last twenty-five years aside from their regular participation in elections<sup>7</sup>—commonly rigged, in their opinion. No regular contacts (such as in a form of meetings or discussions of local issues) occurred between the authorities and villagers, save for shortly prior to and on election days. It might seem that these people were stuck-in-the-mud and had no preferences to voice, but my interviewees invariably turned out to be intelligent and concerned people. When I addressed this question to a night watch at the post-*kolkhoz* depot positioned next to its gates, I was astonished to hear a phrase from Confucius: “Even the guard at the gate has his own opinion, but who is interested in the opinion of the guard at the gate?”. However, when my interviews touched upon independent decision-making and collective action, people were disconcerted, as already was noted regarding the lessened liking for mutual help. One villager once tried to fight against an impromptu landfill in the forest next to his house, but he could not find supporters. Most interviewees have had no idea how to revive the village, often suggesting that “it should take specialists to decide on such questions”, which was reminiscent of Soviet *ekspertokratiya*. When asked to apply an imagined “investment” money to the local economy or infrastructure, they were at loss, having no experience dealing with public funds.<sup>8</sup> Invited to express their long-standing problems, younger people invariably said that they would like to have just elections to bring “normal” leaders and “at least some democracy”. When asked about the essence of democracy, most of them said that it was the power of the people.

As mentioned, popular wisdom urged caution to *načalstva* above the heed to radiation, which was not necessarily the case but still suggestive. People distinguished between *načalstva* and Lukašenka. Typically older villagers still believed in Lukašenka’s ability to relieve the country from need, and yet they feared changes (Lukašenka promised “no reforms”). They said that they hoped that Lukašenka would keep himself in power *as long as they lived*. And they wished Lukašenka to force the youth into work—fully realising that there were virtually no (paid) jobs in the country and thus obliging young people to do drudge work (“working hard for hard-working sake”). They thus practised “naïve monarchism” (Mamonova 2016) and kept generating a social request for “security at the expense of

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<sup>6</sup> Belarus is the only country in Europe that has not signed The European Charter of Local Self-Government. The fledgling communities, wherever they might be the case, do not constitute a legal subject and are devoid of development opportunities

<sup>7</sup> Belarusians have been still entitled to “elect” legislative bodies of various levels and the president

<sup>8</sup> Tellingly, public funds in Belarus are called “the state budget”

civil liberties” and for a “strong man” (Scoones et al 2017, p.1). Younger villagers were mostly reticent, self-censoring and afraid of saying anything “in excess” about Lukašenka.

Regarding *načalstva*, interviewees spared no words and contrasted the regional and local bosses with their Soviet counterparts, who were said to have been more attentive to the common people. Specifically regarding the local authority (local *soviet*/council), there was a minority “condescending” attitude portraying it as objectively powerless and as devoid of own resources: “For the local council to be able to help people, it has to have tractors, a combine harvester, a team of builders”, as was the case with the Soviet-time local council, supported at the time by the *kolkhoz*. However, the predominant critical approach claimed local *načalstva*’s deliberate failure in duties. The local council chairman was appointed rather than elected, and probably for this reason unsupportive; and he was still considered via his previous function of the local učastkovy militiaman (“sheriff”), and as somebody acting more as enabler of “right” results at the elections, overseer and preventer of social unrests than in line with his direct responsibilities. The latter featured putting the settlement to rights and meeting older villagers’ common request to re-measure/trim their subsistence plots to correspond their actual land usage and to cut their land tax, tiny as it was (“because people love justice”). Probably by force of the habit, villagers commonly suspected the chairman, who was from another village, of thwarting the locals. However, nobody ever tried petitioning the authorities.

In the absence of heinous capitalist elements to address, the resistance was thus directed against the non-accountable *načalstva*. Its two concrete forms were *rumours and holy fools* that referred to the traditional culture of oral communications (Lewin 190; Aytakin 2012; Kollmann 1988; Hunt and Kobets 2011). Rumours in Juravičy were generated by villagers gathering next to/in the local store and at the local marketplace every Thursday. Older people necessarily watched TV news releases and then discussed them. While the Soviet regime had ensured local interpretation of its “political course” (via ubiquitous political propaganda briefings), present-day Belarusian villagers were largely left to their own devices. On such occasions, villagers concentrated on sugar-coating TV pictures of rural life in Belarus that glaringly mismatched their own existence, causing their indignation and invariably locating the seat of the trouble in *načalstva*, who kept misinforming Lukašenka.

Communicating and interpreting the extra-local information (which more frequently became the source of rumours) was different from spreading the unambiguous local news. Juravičy-based holy fool Andrej mostly communicated the guileless local message. In line with holy fools’ proximity to death (and thus to god, in villagers’ mindset), he was a harbinger of bad news: “Whoever, wherever dies—people learn it from him right away”. He also carried the icon at the head of funeral processions (however, carrying the icon during church festivals was the village moral authority’s, Vjetnam’s function, much to Andrej’s envy); and he even kept his primitive records of village deaths along with their causes that could put to shame the official statistics, which has been suspected of downgrading the mortality rate and cancer incidence in this Chernobyl-affected area. Having assumed the “holy foolery” as a “line of character”, Andrej inevitably assumed its constituent part of public intercessor before the power. Capable of saying anything in their face and often performing in a scandalous form, he pressed the local council to abide by their duties. Andrej was no fool and realised much of his social function: “If we keep silent, Juravičy will die”, he said. Even though resistance via rumours and holy fools was part of naïve monarchism, and its prospects for any real emancipation appeared bleak, these forms nonetheless conveyed public protest, unlike the “*pilfering from post-kolkhoz*”. While the latter has been regarded as belonging to everyday resistance in Russia (Mamonova and Visser 2014; Nikulin 2010), indicating a disjuncture was Belarusian villagers’ differentiating *pilfering and stealing* (from post-*kolkhoz* in both cases).

In Juravičy, villagers initially denied involvement in any such practice but getting more open conversationally, they admitted that “everyone was pilfering from the *kolkhoz*”. Recalling the 1960s, Vjetnam snickered at himself working with *kolkhoz* grain and taking some home, but only once, when he had been persuaded by colleagues to fill his pants with grain and thus could barely make it home on that day. Being a school chef, Vjetnamka also experienced moral problems of dealing with absentees’ meals. None of my interviewees recognised in their pilfering any opposition to the Soviet regime.

Explanations of these episodes either fitted the “abundance and good husbandry argument” (“because people worked hard and always produced in excess of the [government-assigned] plan”) or some liberally interpreted Biblical rationale, as in a local saying “to be next to the river without being able to drink” reminiscent of passages from the Exodus 7 and the “next-to-a-well” talk by Jesus and the Samaritan woman.

The tradition of pilfering has outlived the *kolkhoz*: post-*kolkhoz* mechanisers drained diesel fuel for their private (“coincidentally” diesel) cars; night watchmen could take a modicum of grain; and a local care worker for the elderly jokingly remarked that at such a work you could only pilfer time (take your time most literally). There was still a glaring mismatch between the *kolkhoz* and the post-*kolkhoz*: during my interviews people differentiated their pilfering from the commercial-level theft by *načalstva*. The popular explanation of this disparity positioned *načalstva* not only to steal but also to sell the stolen, whereas common people could only take a modicum to meet their household’s pressing needs. On the one hand, such pilfering suggested commensalism (or peaceful coexistence) rather than everyday resistance: locals did consider the post-*kolkhoz* as their common endowment and tolerated each other’s measured tapping into this public domain. On the other hand, they were discontent about the commercial-level theft by *načalstva*, whom villagers saw as undermining the village’s future. An example of how a related opportunistic behaviour was subject to public control, involved a post-*kolkhoz*’s heavy vehicle’s driver using it for his off-hour job for *dachnik* (summer-time resident), who paid in excess of a certain, locally accepted price that the driver himself was asking. Later, villagers repeatedly reproached both this *dachnik* and the driver for proposing and accepting the unjustified surcharge. The villagers’ rationale was as follows: for his side job the driver used the communal machinery and fuel, and he, therefore, was not liable for anything in excess the local consensual price.

There has been no shortage of conjecture about what could prompt Belarusians to political action, such as a recurrent claim that they may agitate if they finally discover the extent of Soviet repression and dispossession. My interviews and observations in Juravičy suggested that villagers were too averse to social conflicts to be effective politically. For instance, Vjetnam never resisted the Soviet regime despite his knowing the grandfather family’s lot. During WWII, *partyzany* (Soviet guerilla fighters) waywardly killed his father, who had been saying “do not hurt anybody and fear nobody”. And, in the 1970s when Vjetnam learned the name of the offender from among local residents, he refused revenge saying merely “outlived but unforgotten” (*perabytno ale ne zabytno*, in the local dialect of Belarusian). Aside from agency-related non-conflictual dispositions, there are structural factors contributing to the quiescence. Even though social injustice, increased dispossession and marginalisation might form the contexts for “counter-hegemonic and resistance practices” (Drahmoune 2013; p. 119), Juravičy villagers’ access to natural resources was so far quite liberal and their social differentiation was insignificant. Another structural factor inhibiting localised resistance and empowerment was that power petered out towards the bottom of the Belarusian hierarchy of power: it was simply inexpedient demanding anything, for instance, from the local *soviet*.

Even though I eschew arguing that Belarusian peasants are acquiescent towards the state I also want to avoid falling into a “resistance mentality” (Drahmoune 2013; p.135). I follow Weber whose attention to details made him pessimistic about prospects of class struggle in the countryside whereas Kautsky was an optimist (Banaji 1990). Since lukascism rests on reform avoidance, it is problematic proposing a theory about whether peasants adapt to or resist structural change (Wegren 2005). It might be the case that when Belarus embarks on a post-socialist land reform Belarusian villagers may collectively defend their moral economy and strive to obtain what they deserve. However, the Juravičy case might suggest that it is more likely going to be a picture of adaptation to capitalist realities than the reluctance to work with capitalist institutions and resistance. I subscribe to the view that the peasants’ moral economy is not an opposite to their grasp of market principles (Wegren 2005).

## Discussion and conclusions

The “how far does lukascism go” in this paper’s title refers both to its capture rate across the population and to its supposed timeframe. As the paper elicited, lukascism with its underlying agrarian

myth still has a hold on the older generation of villagers that retains the allegiance to the moral economy but regrettably passes away. Belarus is thus on the verge of changes.

The agrarian sector has enduring importance to Belarus, but the country only approaches the agrarian transition. For a century, the Belarusian village has been excluded from processes of capitalist development and thus remains largely pre-capitalist. Despite the forced collectivisation and due to the permanent Soviet food shortages, Belarusian villagers have partly preserved their household subsistence economies. Simultaneously, the Soviet forced collectivism and paternalism and their post-Soviet continuation ensured by lukascism proved a support for what has been regarded by Fafchamps (1992) as key ethical values of pre-capitalist societies—solidarity as a moral obligation and subsistence as a right. However, these values original meaning has been distorted.

Even though drudgery as a norm persists, especially among older villagers, as a self-reliance habit it is lost to Soviet paternalism that has made several generations of Belarusian villagers relying on hired, off-farm jobs. The drudgery has thus lost its implications of achieving household-based subsistence and self-sufficiency in favour of the “hard working for hard-working sake” notion. In this capacity it is used by lukascism for playing people off one another. Similarly, a habit to engage in collective responses to risk and in opposition to the state power is substituted by the mass behaviour of Soviet people based on fears, lack of trust to “others” and reverence for the authorities.

The paper has defined lukascism as political populism employing a rhetoric of agrarian populism, pitching solidarity obligations against subsistence rights, appointing lower-level authorities as a foil to the personalist top, and thus enabling naïve monarchism. The paper has shown that supported by ideological justifications, “romantic” aspects of the moral economy are easily converted into agrarian myth, where the crowd’s concept of what is “fair” can lead to exclusion of “others”.

Despite lukascism relies on anti-capitalist rhetoric allowing it to avoid market reforms for 23 years, and especially it is censorious of neoliberalism, it has led Belarus to much the same picture of the disillusioned, disenfranchised and marginalised rural population (Scoones et al 2017), and preparations are in full blast for disembedding rural households by exploiting and abandoning natural and social resources via what is known as “the corporate food regime” (McMichael 2006; p.408). Expansion of capitalism and processes of capitalist agrarian transition will necessarily bring about further de-peasantisation and transformation of the social classes as well as further income differentiation. Since the agrarian question and agrarian transition refer to larger societal transformations, it is possible to expect the erosion of the values of a small group but also the abrogation of the presently current disdain for commerce, penchant for equalizing justice. These changes will bring about freedom from public request for paternalism and strong leader and, in the long last, from populism. Conversely, the still extant cult of labour might stand in good stead for the village remodelling itself and shifting to commercial agriculture (Drahmoune 2013) and to bearing new contractual social relations, community institutions, and world-views.

The case study indicates that villagers are not against private property, while lukascism exploits the extreme version of the moral economy argument that renders these people’s certain precautions as their absolute aversion to capitalism. The paper shows that reliance on the moral economy alone, without political economy leads to agrarian myth, but also that a complex and sophisticated mode of household peasant production is not properly articulable via markets and commodities (Brettell 1999). Juravičy experience shows that economic gain does not exclude material security interests, subsistence production is not averse to the exchange of labour and commodities, and “the categories of political economy can indeed be linked with those of culture and community” (Brettell 1999, p. 22). Quite the opposite, younger Belarusian villagers demonstrate openness to adaptation and actively respond to economic incentives while still paying heed to the norms of the moral economy.

Belarusian experience shows that such primitive mutual insurance mechanisms as self-grown food transfers and labour assistance (Fafchamps 1992) are insufficient for preventing the rupture of village life and that only access to land can produce sufficient solidarity. In the future, massive



proletarianization of the rural populations can be avoided and the maintenance of a small-scale peasant mode of production can be ensured by engagement with the debt and credit market for the buying, selling, and exchange of land (Brettell 1999).

It has been shown that a versatile rural society and economy in line with the Polanyi's double movement has not yet been the case in Belarus since there is no "offensive movement" (propelled by such elements of political economy as landed property market) for the "counter-movement" (moral economy) to show its strength and usability (McMichael 2006). Belarusian village is presently suspended, with lukascism exploiting villagers' moral economy for the survival of the authoritarian populist regime. The absence of reforms blocks the development of the Belarusian countryside in many respects, similar to what Wegren (2005) says on social and institutional arrangements in Russia that still hinder the development of a modern society. However, it is evident that lukascism will not stand the test of time and the inevitable reforms. The prospective emancipatory politics in the country where presently there is only informal local community, only appointed local authorities and no land market would concern creating effective institutions—the institutionalised local community, electable local government, and true landed property. Exploring each of these prospective reforms should be the object of future research.

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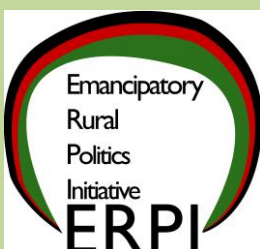
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**The Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative (ERPI)** is a new initiative focused on understanding the contemporary moment and building alternatives. New exclusionary politics are generating deepening inequalities, jobless 'growth', climate chaos, and social division. The ERPI is focused on the social and political processes in rural spaces that are generating alternatives to regressive, authoritarian politics. We aim to provoke debate and action among scholars, activists, practitioners and policymakers from across the world that are concerned about the current situation, and hopeful about alternatives.

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