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**Agrarian Studies**  
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# Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE  
YALE UNIVERSITY  
SEPTEMBER 14-15, 2013

Conference Paper #28

## Food Security in a Sovereign State and “Quiet Food Sovereignty” of an Insecure Population: The Case of Post-Soviet Russia

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and Alexander Nikulin

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Conference paper for discussion at:

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International Conference  
September 14-15, 2013

Convened by

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## Abstract

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In this paper we argue that Russian discourses on and practices of food sovereignty strongly diverge from the global understanding of this concept. We distinguish two approaches to food and agriculture that are crucial for understanding food sovereignty à la Russe. The first one is what we term ‘food security in a sovereign state’. This approach is close to the traditional food security concept and refers to the conceived necessity to produce sufficient food for the population domestically, instead of being dependent on food imports. This type of food sovereignty is to be realized by large-scale industrial agriculture, which further development is actively supported by the Russian government. It has the additional function of a potential political weapon in international relations, via growing grain exports and grain market power. The second type of food sovereignty we term ‘quiet food sovereignty’ of an insecure population. It is enacted by the population’s self-provisioning of food through production on household plots, as a coping mechanism. We show that these small-holdings are quite productive, and in general have similar yields as individual private farms (which make up a relative small sector) and large-scale farm enterprise. However, household plot production, which still has a symbiotic and sometimes adverse relation with large farm enterprises (and agroholdings), is grossly overlooked and even downplayed not only by the Russian government, but also by the small-scale producers themselves. We conclude that an emergent food sovereignty movement will be most likely a ‘Via Kremlina’, rather than a ‘Via Campesina–type. The dominance of large scale enterprises, the minimal government support for small-holders, and the existence of a large number of scattered, fragmented and still ignored household producers, do not yet provide much prospect for a ‘food sovereignty movement from below’ in Russia, in spite of emerging eco-villages and some indigenous movements that struggle to keep their traditional food systems intact.

## 1. Introduction

Russia, and most of the former Soviet Union’s main agricultural producers (e.g. Ukraine, Kazakhstan), constitute an area where the discourses on and practices of food sovereignty strongly diverge from the global understanding of food sovereignty as defined by Via Campesina and the Nyéléni forum. While varying definitions and approaches to food sovereignty exist in the Global South (see e.g. Patel 1999), we contend that the Russian take on food sovereignty is radically different from the basic premises of the food sovereignty variants studied until date. Therefore, a closer look at the post-Soviet space – and Russia as its largest and most influential agricultural producer in particular – may contribute to the critical examination of food sovereignty, which is registering a global rise in popularity (along with that of the food sovereignty concept itself).

With no study conducted on food sovereignty in Russia until now, the first question that arises is whether food sovereignty exists at all as a concept or practice in the country. Although the concept does not often figure in Russian debates in its literal translation (*prodovolstvenniy suverenitet*), the food sovereignty concept is certainly not irrelevant or absent. We will argue that there are two diverging approaches to food and agriculture that are crucial for understanding the relevance of the concept of food sovereignty in Russia.

The first approach is what we term as ‘food security in a sovereign state’. It is a top-down approach formulated by the Russian government. As the term suggests, this approach is close to the traditional food security (and even food self-sufficiency) concept. It refers to the conceived necessity to produce sufficient food for the population domestically, instead of being dependent on food imports. The Russian government sees large-scale, industrial agriculture as the means to achieve food security, as well as a potential political weapon in international relations, via growing grain exports and the promise of becoming a ‘global breadbasket’. However, whereas food sovereignty is often seen globally as an alternative or opposite to food security in its conceptualization of the last two decades (and certainly opposite to the current neo-liberal, industrial ‘food regime’ (McMichael 2009), in Russia this is hardly the case. Instead, within the ‘food security in a sovereign state’ approach, food sovereignty is used interchangeably with food security (*prodovol'stvennaya besopastnost'*), with the latter clearly the most dominant term and the former only used occasionally. Furthermore, ‘sovereignty’ in general has been a widely used term by the Russian government, with applications such as ‘sovereign democracy’ (a term to denote the form of ‘guided’ or some would say ‘semi-authoritarian’ variant of ‘democracy’ introduced by Putin).

The second, less pronounced, more diffuse, but widespread approach is more bottom-up, what we call ‘quiet food sovereignty’ of an insecure population. It is built upon the concept of ‘quiet sustainability’, introduced by Smith and Jehlicka (2013). We will argue that food sovereignty in practice plays an important role in Russia, with small-holdings of the population (both rural and urban) producing an important share of the food consumed, in or near their local places of living, and in a largely organic/ecologically friendly way. This all matches well the global understanding of food sovereignty. At the same time, the productive and agricultural importance of such small-holdings is grossly overlooked and downplayed by the Russian government, and even more strikingly, also by the small-holders themselves (and even the leaders of rural and urban gardening movements). Thus, we see a dramatic divergence between the economic role of the small-holdings and their conceptualization. Furthermore, a rights discourse, so central in the food sovereignty concept, is absent in the Russian approach.

Ownership of farmland by the population, and the possibility to cultivate their own food, are seen as survival mechanisms of an insecure population, in particular for times of crisis.

We will demonstrate that a central notion of ‘quiet food sovereignty’ is the tendency to be supportive, loyal, and even obedient to the state, instead of claiming rights; in other words, to stay ‘quiet’. This feature together with (among others) the implicit and unrecognized nature of the population’s substantial degree of self-sufficiency based on their small-holdings makes that this bottom-up approach in Russia can be characterized as a somewhat partial, but above all as one of ‘quiet food sovereignty’. We will examine whether this rather implicit and muted form of food sovereignty holds seeds of a genuine food sovereignty movement.

An intriguing aspect of the Russian food system, which we will analyze, and which has important implications for food sovereignty, is the following paradox. There are few countries on earth where the mainstream food system of large-scale agro-industrial corporate farming has gone to such extremes. Russia (along with Kazakhstan and Ukraine) constitutes the area with the largest farm enterprises in the world. This region shows arguably the most rapid increase in financialization, with numerous farms listed on the stock exchange, less than a decade after the first outside investors started to be interested in the former collectives. As such, the corporate farming sector contrasts sharply with the rural small-holdings of the population which are mostly well below a hectare and largely manually operated, with no or hardly any chemical inputs.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time however, these two contrasting forms of agriculture are intimately connected, despite the fact that this is frequently not recognized by policy makers and agrofood companies. The large-scale farming sector and the small-holdings operate in what has been termed a symbiosis (e.g. Nikulin 2003; Spoor and Visser 2004). The fact that both forms of agriculture are not simply alternatives to each other but are mutually dependent, has far reaching consequences for understanding the practice, conceptualization and future prospects of food sovereignty in this context.

This analysis will furthermore allow us to make judgments on the sustainability of the Russian food system on the longer term. We will discuss and provide answers to various questions regarding food security and food sovereignty in Russia, such as: What is the current structure of the Russian food system and how does it guarantee the food security of the country? What role do large-scale farm enterprises play in the country’s national food self-sufficiency and exports? What is the contribution of the population’s small-scale farming activities to local and national

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that there is a rather small number of private family farms in Russia, which are on average 65 hectares large.

food security? And is there a food sovereignty movement (or preconditions for its emergence) in Russia?<sup>2</sup>

The paper is structured as follows. The next section gives an overview of the Russian food system, tracing the Soviet legacy (a strongly bi-modal agriculture with a symbiosis between the large-scale and small-scale farming) and the effects of the market reforms after the demise of the Soviet Union and the planned economy after 1991. It gives us insights on formal introduction of land rights in a rights-based/property discourse of reform oriented towards the creation of small- and medium-scale family farms, with a reality of limited property distribution and actual erosion of informal entitlements. The third section describes the contemporary large-scale industrial farming sector in Russia, as well as the government's discourse on 'food security of the sovereign state'. It shows that the strong belief in 'big is beautiful' and a highly industrialized corporate farming result from a conjuncture of Soviet legacies, the growing influence of the global corporate food regime, and the rise of the Putin regime, which is characterized by a growing attention for security, national sovereignty, and the use of food as a weapon in international relations. The fourth section describes the bottom-up approach to food sovereignty, dealing with the discourses and socio-economic characteristics of the small-holder sector. This section analyses the relevance of the bottom-up 'quiet food sovereignty' discourse for the Russian case. Section five discusses the perspectives (and pre-conditions) of the emergence of a real food sovereignty *movement* from the current diffuse discourses and practices. It deals with the very recent movement of 'eco-villages' in Russia, and a growing discourse of food sovereignty among indigenous Russian people. It also traces the implications of the *symbiosis* between large-scale industrial agriculture and the small-holder sector, presenting it as a limiting factor in the emergence of a real independent small-scale farming sector and a more explicit and active food sovereignty movement. The sixth and final section presents the conclusions.

## 2. Land reform and the Soviet legacy of symbiosis

At the outset of the transition period in Russia, the process of land reform and farm restructuring was supposed to lead, at least if we look at the advice which was given by the IFIs (World Bank 1992), to a complete overhaul of the agrarian structure. Formally, there were two

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<sup>2</sup> The research for this paper is largely based on the analysis of secondary data derived from Russian federal and regional legislative documents and normative acts, interviews with politicians and businessmen, and mass media publications in both Russian and English. This study also uses primary qualitative data collected by the second author during her fieldwork in the Moscow region in the spring of 2011, and the spring/summer of 2013. Additionally, various academic sources, web-publications, and statistical material from the Federal State Statistics Service (Rosstat) and Russia's Ministry of Agriculture are used to strengthen the empirical base of our analysis.

broad aims. The first overarching aim was to improve efficiency in agriculture, which was infamous during the Soviet era for its resource waste and low productivity (World Bank 1992). The second major goal was to provide the rural population with rights to land and other resources to cope with the shocks of transition (World Bank 1992), and to increase their independence. Indeed, many Western advisors hoped that privatization would empower the population and stimulate the emergence of democracy and civil society in the countryside (Prosterman and Hanstad 1993; 155).

The means to reach both ends was the privatization of farmland (which had been state property until then) and farm enterprise assets (which had been under collective or state ownership), in particular through a “share-based” land distribution. This variant was also followed in countries such as Kazakhstan and Ukraine (as opposed to a “plot-based”, physical land distribution, used in most of Central and Eastern Europe). The rural population in Russia could choose to keep their shares in the privatized successors of the collective and state farms (under the heading of joint stock companies and the like) or to take out their paper shares, and convert them into real land plots in order to establish their own family farm. The reformers had hoped, and their World Bank advisors had expected, that many rural dwellers would opt for the latter variant (World Bank 1992). As Spoor and Visser (2001: 886) mention: “the [World Bank] report argued that privately-run (family) farms by definition would be more efficient and productive than the existing large-scale state and collective enterprises (*sovkhozy* and *kolkhozy*)”. The World Bank (1992) report pictured an optimistic scenario of a rapid rise of the private family farming sector, which might account for 40 percent of the total production by the end of the 1990s. In reality, the number of rural dwellers that chose to establish private farms was rather limited, and the growth of such farms (with an average size of 65 hectare) already stagnated by the mid-1990s (Pallot and Nefedova 2007; Visser 2008).

The number of individual peasant farms (at least according to the official data, as the real number might well be 25 percent less) grew initially in the 1990s – to a maximum of 278,600 in 1996 (occupying 12.4 million hectare) – and gradually decreased to 261,700 in 2010 (Table 1). Individual farms that were formed in the early 1990s had some policy support, but the fragmented and often non-functioning markets, made it very hard to subsist or accumulate (Spoor and Visser 2001; 2004; and Visser, Mamonova and Spoor 2012). As few rural dwellers opted for exit, the large farm enterprises (LFEs) stayed largely intact, and the number of large farm enterprises (“agricultural companies”) remained remarkably stable during the transition. While there were an estimated 25,800 *sovkhozy* and *kolkhozy* in 1991, by the year 2000 these

had been transformed in commercial or corporate large farm enterprises (LFEs), of which there were around 27,600.<sup>3</sup>

Instead of establishing independent farms, the rural population, remained wage workers in the LFEs while simultaneously expanding their ‘subsidiary household plots’ (*lichnoye podsobnoye khoziaystvo*). Table 1 shows that, from the early 1990s until 2010, the total number of household plots remained relatively stable (as most villagers already had such a plot), while their average acreage more than doubled, with the total land area growing from 3.2 million hectare in 1992 to 7.5 million hectare in 2010.<sup>4</sup>

Table 1. Russian Land Reform and Farm Restructuring 1992-2010

Agricultural Land	1992	1996	2000	2005	2010
Peasant farms					
Amount (x 1000)	0.05	278,6	263,7	267,5	261,7
Land (x million ha)	0.002	12.4	15.4	14.9	16.3
HH plots					
Amount (x 1000)	16,4	16,0	15,9	15,9	16,2
Land (x million ha)	3.2	5.7	6.2	7.0	7.5
Agricultural companies					
Amount (x 1000)	25,8	n/a	27,6	25,3	22,5
Land (x million ha)	193.2	174.8	149.7	130.8	121.3

Sources: For agricultural companies in 2005, the available data of 2006 are used; for 1996, those available for 1997 (SNG STAT, 1994; 1999). Most sources, such as SNG STAT and ROSSTAT, contradict each other on various accounts. For the second decade, we used Rossreestr (2011).

<sup>3</sup> With the bankruptcy law (1998) in force, an increased process of concentration followed, and in 2006 this number reduced to 22,300. Since the new Land Code was introduced in Russia (2003), the process of land concentration speeded up. The bankruptcy law stimulated the elimination of those enterprises which had been non-solvent for a long time (Spoor and Visser, 2004), but also the easy acquisition (sometimes at symbolic prices) of enterprises by capital groups or investors, partly to strip their assets, and to build up conglomerates of enterprises or agroholdings. Weakly defined user-rights (of the shares) and the overall crisis of the post-Soviet Russian economy made it possible for inventive entrepreneurs, former *Sovkhoz* or *Kolkhoz* chairmen, other members of the rural *nomenklatura*, but also criminal elements to gather large numbers of shares.

<sup>4</sup> The data in Table 1 confirm that land reform in Russia has not been a re-distributive or empowering one - whether because the intentions in the early stages of transition were not achieved, or because the intentions were never there at all.



Probably the most important reason for the disappointing results of land reforms in terms of individual private farm formation and the associated empowerment of the population was the fact that post-Soviet reformers did not sufficiently take into account the existing property relations. The blueprint of the reform was based on a superficial observation of the Soviet farm economy, with two opposing forms of production: on one side the state and collective farms, and on the other the small semi-private parcels of their employees (Spoor and Visser 2001). In reality, however, subsidiary plots did not exist in opposition to, or separate from, the collective, but were integrally connected to it in what has been typified as a symbiosis (e.g. Nikulin 2003, 2009, Spoor and Visser 2004). The population with their manual labour on their tiny plots accounted for an impressive fifth of the total agricultural production value in the Soviet period. They could produce relatively large amounts of food, because households were allowed to use a whole array of collective facilities, from obtaining young livestock from the collective and letting private cattle graze on collective pastures, to using *kolkhoz* machinery and selling their produce via the sales networks of the collectives. Therefore, boundaries between the collectives and household enterprises were permeable (Visser 2003, 2006). Under those conditions, a farm worker who would take out their share and establish as private farm, would deprive him/herself of pivotal (informal) access to a wide range of resources and services.

The land reforms that started in 1991 formally introduced the rights to land, through a rights-based/property reform discourse that was oriented towards the creation of small- and medium scale family farms. As we will show, however, they resulted in only a limited distribution of property and a partial erosion of former informal entitlements. The property rights to land and assets often appeared rather hollow, as insurmountable bureaucratic hurdles to register private property, the obstruction of physical share distribution by farm directors, and the unspecified location of the land shares (which enabled farm directors to hand out the worst plots to aspiring farmers) all made real ownership and/or actual control difficult for rural dwellers (Visser 2003, 2006). Furthermore, large farm enterprises, while mostly continuing some support to the household plots, gradually reduced the range of goods they provided, and/or the conditions or the number of villagers that were entitled to it (Nikulin 2003; 2009, Visser 2009).

In sum, indeed, as Wegren (2009: 143) states: “Russia’s contemporary land reform did not deliver on early intentions in that large farms continue to use most of Russia’s agricultural land. Individuals have not become ‘masters of the land’.” Instead, they remained dependent on large-scale farms, resembling to some extent a (semi)feudal, patrimonial, or Prussian form of agriculture (Nikulin 2003), with strong connections (through subsidies, for instance) between the directors of the large-scale farms and the state, as shown earlier on in section 3.

### 3. Food security in a sovereign state

As we have stated in the beginning of this paper, there are two different understandings of food sovereignty in Russia. This section deals with the first view, namely, the top-down food sovereignty, which was formulated by the Russian government, and is close to the traditional food security concept. Here we describe the state discourse of food sovereignty, the consequent Russian food policy, as well as the efficiency and sustainability of the state supported agriculture.

### 3.1. Discourse

Food security is a widely used concept in both the government policy of the Putin regime and in the media, often with a rather alarmist tone. Both the severe droughts of 2010 and 2012 and the long Soviet and pre-Soviet history and memory of food shortages and starvation contribute to such concerns. In some cases, ‘food sovereignty’ is used more or less as a synonym and replacement for ‘food security’. For example, Evgeniy Super<sup>5</sup> recently referred to the fears of ‘losing *food sovereignty*’ due to the poor harvest of 2012, and pointed these fears by stating that ‘the drought of 2012 has destroyed all the bread [wheat harvests] in the country and we have to buy it, as well as all other products, from the U.S., which means the permanent loss of *food sovereignty*’ (Super 2013).

The term food sovereignty in this context is interpreted as the ability of the country to produce sufficient food for its population and not to be dependent on imports, in particular from Western countries. This contradicts the increasingly popular understanding of the term worldwide, which is seen as ‘the right of the local population to control its own food system, including their own markets, production modes, food cultures and environments ... as a critical alternative to the dominant neoliberal model for agriculture and trade’ (Wittman et al. 2010: 2).

The Russian use of the term food sovereignty as ‘food security in the sovereign state’ is also sometimes interpreted in a way that resembles the previous central planning system – such as that proposed by Yarkova (2013). She sees national food sovereignty based on regional ‘food sovereignty’, which in turn depends on agro-ecological zones, planned decisions on food self-sufficiency, and the comparative advantage of certain grains for specific regions. Furthermore, ‘sovereignty’ in general has been widely used by the Russian government, with applications such as ‘sovereign democracy’ - a term denoting the form of ‘guided’ or some would say ‘semi-authoritarian’ variant of ‘democracy’ introduced by Putin.

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<sup>5</sup> Reporter for the Russian analytical newspaper *Odnako*

In order to further understand the meaning of food sovereignty for Russia, one can point to the most recent (2013-2018) five-year plan of the Russian Ministry of Agriculture, which was published in June 2013. One of the main goals is increasing crop production by 15.5 percent and livestock production by 14.7 percent over this period, ensuring the country's food sovereignty in line with the so-called Food Security Doctrine that Russia announced in 2010 (FSDA 2010). The Doctrine spelled out the following 'self-sufficiency targets' for Russia: 95 percent of grain and potatoes, 90 percent of milk and dairy products, 85 percent of meat and meat products, and 80 percent of sugar, vegetable oils and fish products should be produced internally.

However, food self-sufficiency is not the only goal of the Russian state. Talking about the Food Security Doctrine, then President Medvedev stated: 'contemporary Russia should in full measure use its unique agrarian potential, providing itself not only with basic types of food, but also we hope to become one of the leading exporters of food in the world' (*Sel'skaya Zhizn'* 2010:1, quoted in Wegren 2011: 144). The direct link between food self-sufficiency and the goal to become a global 'bread basket' dominates Russian agricultural policy (see Visser, Spoor and Mamonova, forthcoming, for a critical discussion of this 'breadbasket' objective). However, the country's capacity to expand production, especially in wheat, was (and is) oriented more to increasing its share of world food trade, rather than to supplying the Russian population with agricultural products (which in fact, has never been a problem even during the transition period that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union). Wegren (2011: 141) analyzed this 'agrarian potential' and the role of food security in Russia. He concluded that, since the collapse of the USSR, the country 'does not appear to be food insecure by measures of food availability' and that 'food security in Russia had more to do with politics than with objective conditions' (*Ibid.*).

The political rationale can be deduced from the protectionist policies of the Russian government. In 2010, the worst Russian drought in the last 50 years has threatened grain harvests, giving rise to the government's decision to restrict grain exports. An export ban was 'initially enacted to impede speculation and price hikes on bread and grain products. But in fact the ban [could] be seen as having been ineffective in stopping food inflation, as the price of foodstuffs increased 0.9 percent in August 2010 alone (a 10-year record)' (Wegren 2011: 150). At a global scale, the Russian export ban contributed to dramatic increases in grain prices and had a negative impact on the global grain supply. This created a 'self-fulfilling fear in grain markets that even minor supply or demand shocks will trigger export restrictions by big suppliers' (Paarlberg 2010). Therefore, the global food supply became largely influenced by the political decisions of the Russian government.

These top-down politics, aimed to guarantee this kind of food sovereignty and food self-sufficiency (in particular grain), are largely focused on the development of large-farm

enterprises (LFEs). In both the grain as well as the meat sector, the leading position has been taken by huge agroholdings (vertically and horizontally integrated groups of affiliated and associated agro-enterprises), which have become exemplary to characterise the contemporary agricultural development in Russia.

It was recently estimated by the Institute for Agricultural Market Studies (IKAR) in Moscow that agroholdings account for 25 percent of grain output in Russia (Rylko 2011) and are estimated to account for 40-50 percent by 2016 (EBRD 2008: 7), with a possibly even larger role in exports. In comparison, in Kazakhstan, agroholdings are estimated to control even 80 percent of the total grain output (Rylko 2011). The number of agroholdings (as well as the size of their land holdings) has rapidly increased since the early 2000s. According to the Russian Ministry of Agriculture in 2003, more than 90 agroholdings were active in 25 regions. By 2006, 319 corporate agroholdings were already registered (Uzun et al. 2009: 159). There are no official statistics of the land areas farmed by agroholdings (as these are reported for the individual farm enterprises), but by mid-2008, according to an estimate of IKAR, 196 large agroholdings controlled 11.5 million hectares (BEFL 2010: 9).<sup>6</sup>

### 3.2. State support

Visser, Mamonova and Spoor (2012: 911) showed that the Russian state stimulates large-scale agricultural production ‘through a range of instruments such as a debt restructuring programme, the establishment of a state-financed agricultural bank, subsidised crop insurance programmes, simplified and lowered taxes on agriculture, and subsidised loans for capital investment’. The state subsidised loans are predominantly aimed at LFEs, specifically the largest and most successful ones. For instance, Uzun (2005) states that ‘1.4 percent of the largest corporate farms received 22.5 percent of all subsidies’. Also, the more indirect forms of subsidisation seem to mostly stimulate the largest LFEs.<sup>7</sup> Various requirements for the loans, such as the need for matching resources and often brief repayment terms, tend to produce a bias in the loan portfolio in favour of LFEs and agroholdings. Moreover, there are calls for even more privileges for LFEs and agroholdings, such as favourable conditions for acquiring land and other resources from inefficient agricultural enterprises, support for exports, and favourable conditions for importing inputs needed for agricultural production (Berezhnoi 2002).

Some of these types of privileges already exist in a more informal form at a regional level. A policy favouring large scale investments in Russia is, of course, not unique. As Daniel (2012:

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<sup>6</sup> According to an earlier estimate by IKAR 350 agroholdings in Russia (including energy companies like Gazprom) farmed approximately 8 million hectares (EBRD 2008: 7).

<sup>7</sup> However, it should be noted that by the mid-2000s the national budget for the first time since the mid-1990s set aside a substantial amount of subsidies for household plots and private farms (Wegren 2011).

706) states, many countries have offered such incentives to attract investment in farmland - including duty exemptions, full or partial tax holidays, or tax rate reductions. In the Russian context of a weak financial system and near-absent institutions to support in particular the small-holdings the agricultural sector, it is difficult to develop agriculture without investors. In the 1990s, the few investors in agriculture and land were mostly coming from within the sector (agribusiness, such as food processors, food wholesalers, or providers of inputs). Current investors often do not have any existing link to the sector, and finance becomes detached from agricultural production. The 'big is beautiful' policy (a remnant of Soviet times) is also observed at the regional level. Thus, regional authorities may create extra rules that even hinder the emergence of small-scale farming. For example, in the southern Krasnodar area, aspiring private farmers were required to have at least 300 hectares of land in order to start a farm (Visser and Spoor 2011).

The 1990s were characterised by relatively free imports, aimed at guaranteeing cheap food for the urban population. However, by the mid-2000s when the oligarchs started to enter the agricultural sector, numerous changes in the import regulations took place to favour domestic agriculture, and in particular the position of the agroholdings. A flexible rate import tariff of up to 270 USD per ton was announced for sugar. The import duty on rice increased from a 10 percent import duty to 120 USD per ton. Also, import tariffs on various dairy and meat products were markedly increased (Rylko 2011). It has been suggested that these import restrictions were influenced by the agroholdings through aggressive lobbying (Hervé 2007). It is relevant to note that the first branch of livestock production which the large private agroholdings entered was the poultry sector. There seems, therefore, to be no coincidence that the poultry market was also the first to benefit from an import quota. When agroholdings started to enter other branches of the livestock sector, other import quotas on livestock products (most notably pig farming) followed subsequently.

### *3.3. Efficiency and sustainability*

The literature on agroholdings has a strong focus on their emergence and expansion, as well as on aspects of agricultural modernization. However, there is hardly any attention for the many agroholdings which face financial difficulties, let alone on the ones which have failed, gone through a bankruptcy procedure, or even disappeared from the sector. In-depth critical research on agroholdings is still rare, but those studies available in Russia give a rather mixed picture and certainly do not reflect overall success. Guriev and Rachinsky (2004) argue that the holdings of Russian oligarchs (in general) do not show a higher productivity than other enterprises within the same sector. Clarke (2004), who based his research on extensive case studies in various enterprises, states that innovation in these holdings is very limited. He speaks about holdings as largely a continuation of the Soviet firm. The few studies on the efficiency of

agroholdings also do not support a merely positive evaluation. Hockmann, Bokusheva and Bezlepkina (2007), reporting on a study in Orel, showed that agroholdings are doing worse than independent farm enterprises. However, a later study in Belgorod, Hahlbrock and Hockmann (2011) suggests that agroholdings do better on some accounts.<sup>8</sup>

According to Visser, Spoor and Mamonova (forthcoming), among the group of 25 of the largest agroholdings in Russia (with each controlling at least 100,000 hectares of land) at least 8 have experienced severe financial problems, with some of them being forced to sell their assets and/or go through bankruptcy procedures. According to the authors, once agricultural companies become large enough, they turn bureaucratic and are likely to incur large information, monitoring and governance costs. Grazhdaninova and Lerman (2004), in their study on allocative and technical efficiency of LFEs, concluded that 'The low productivity of Russian agriculture is mainly attributable to management factors, and not to technological or allocative factors'. Rylko (2011) also remarked that the 'long term technical and managerial efficiency of agroholdings is highly questionable' (Visser 2013). Also taking social variables (i.e. employment, the viability of rural communities) and sustainability into account, Alexander Nikulin recently remarked<sup>9</sup>:

Russia is on the way to the haciendas and the latifundias ...while post-kolkhozes were aimed to preserve the rural community, the modern raiders have been acquiring the most delicious pieces that could bring high returns on investments. The social sphere, the diversity of agro-production – are not the point of raiders' interest. For example, in the Kuban region, everything is oriented on market conjuncture there. What is profitable on the market now? Making oil from maize and sunflower! And, currently, the whole region is reoriented on plantation of maize and sunflowers. The milk production is not highly profitable these days, consequently, all cows of the region have been going under the knife. As a result, the Kuban region, where you can grow almost everything, has been turning rapidly to an agrarian mono-territory during the last five - seven years. This is harmful for soil. It is necessary to maintain agricultural diversity, alternate crop rotation. Nevertheless, companies that came to the territory do not respect the land and local communities. They aim to ensure their high and quick profits and nothing else.

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<sup>8</sup> They conclude: 'The result is twofold: on the one hand the conclusion can be verified that the technological and managerial innovations introduced by agroholdings do not necessarily increase the efficiency of agroholdings. On the other hand we could show that agroholdings are due to technical change the driving force of the shift of the production frontier.'

<sup>9</sup> Interview with A. Nikulin, *Russkiy Reporter* (Russian Reporter), No. 14 (243), 11/04/2012; Available at <http://rusrep.ru/article/2012/04/11/nikulin>, accessed 20 April 2012.

After an initially very strong decline in the use of chemical fertilizers during the 1990s, in particular with the emergence of agroholdings, the application of agrochemicals has increased across Russia. According to Rosstat (2013), the use chemical fertilizers (per hectare) doubled during the 2000-2012 period. This growth is influenced predominantly by a greater use of agrochemicals for grains and legumes (from 20 kilograms/hectare in 2000 to 40 kilograms/hectare in 2012), which are mainly produced by large farm enterprises and agroholdings. According to Skogoreva's (2006) research, there are a number of regions in the Russian Federation with overdoses of agrochemicals, although compared with Western agriculture (and during the last period of the USSR) per hectare use in Russia is still relatively low. However, at the same time the use of organic fertilizers has decreased more than by 7 times: from 389.5 million tons in 1990, to 60.0 million tonnes in 2000, and finally to 52.2 million tons in 2012. These data only represent the large farm enterprises, as no data is published for fertilizer use (whether organic or chemical) by peasant-farmers and household plot production.<sup>10</sup> The most dramatic decrease therefore already took place in the 1990s, while afterwards farm enterprises decreased their use of organic fertilizers more gradually, in particular in potatoes, sugar and vegetable production (Rosstat, 2013).

Overall, soil degradation has become a severe problem after the collapse of the Soviet Union, mainly because of the abandonment of many farmlands (see also Visser, Mamonova and Spoor, Forthcoming), but also through underutilisation. According to the Russian Department of Land Reclamation of the Ministry of Agriculture, there are 220.6 million hectares of farmland (including 121.5 million ha of arable land) currently available in Russia. From this total, about 190 million hectares (85 percent) are subject to various degrees of land degradation. The main factors affecting the quality of land are: water and wind erosion - 65 million hectares; waterlogging - 23 million hectares; salinization - 38 million hectares; acidification - 34 million hectares; desertification - 10 million hectares; and overgrowth by trees and shrubs - 16 million hectares (Pavlova 2010). As most of the LFEs (and particularly, agroholdings) are involved in promoting mono-culture types of crop production, it is quite possible that these soil degradation problems will not be solved, and are even likely to become more intense. Therefore, the state's reliance on LFEs to provide sufficient food for the Russian population and bring the country among the largest world food exporters is rather insecure and entails a number of undesirable side-effects.

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<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, we have concluded from extensive fieldwork observations that many of the households produce without chemical fertilizers and pesticides.

#### 4. “Quiet” food sovereignty

At a global level, small-scale farming is increasingly being seen by farmer movements, NGOs and some scholars as a critical alternative to the neoliberal, highly capitalised, corporate-led model of agricultural development (Desmarais 2007; Patel 2009). However, while rural (and some urban) households are a fundamental part of the Russian food system, producing around 45 percent of the total agricultural output, their role in the pursuit of the national food security and sovereignty is overlooked or consciously ignored at the national federal level. This section will first examine the discourses on small-scale farming (those of the government and agribusiness sector, and subsequently of the population), the state policy towards the sector, and then discuss their effectiveness and sustainability.

##### 4.1. *Discourses on small-scale farming*

###### 4.1.1. *Discourse by government and agrobusiness*

Whereas the Russian government and the agribusiness elite regard the large-scale industrialised sector in a positive light, the small-holder sector, whether operated by rural or urban dwellers, is largely depicted in negative terms – at least where its agricultural and economic function is considered. Descriptions like ‘backward’, ‘relic of the past’, ‘without long term perspective’, ‘low hygiene standards’ abound. This statement by vice-president of the Russian Grain Union, Alexander Korbut illustrates the negative stance of the agribusiness:

The reduction of the share of personal subsidiary farming is a normal process, because this farming is inefficient. And in the light of the forthcoming accession of Russia to the World Trade Organization, their fate seems pretty dismal.<sup>11</sup>

In a similar and even more negative vein, Oleg Machnakov, the chairman of the agricultural cooperative ‘Kolos’, states the following in an internet debate on the future of rural household production:

Personal subsidiary farming - it is a temporary and unpromising phenomenon. Gradually, these farms will become a thing of the past. The more advanced family farmers and large agricultural enterprises will emerge instead. Already, modern pork units were launched in the Altai region, which are capable to provide a high-quality processing of raw meat. This means that buying pork from private owners will be less and less popular. Given the fact

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<sup>11</sup> Alexander Korbut, a vice-president of the Russian Grain Union, in the internet debates: ‘Subsidiary farming - a relic of the past or the reality of the Russian countryside?’ Available from: <http://altapress.ru/story/80477> (accessed on 28 Aug 2013).



that the slaughtering of animals in the backyards does not often fulfil the health standards, this form of production must be eliminated entirely.<sup>12</sup>

International scholars, varying from economists to ethnographers, have also frequently described the increased role of small-holders after the demise of the Soviet Union with such negative terms as ‘muddling through transition with garden plots’ (Seeth *et al* 1998) or ‘involution’ (Burawoy, Krotov & Lytkina 1999).

However, Pallot and Nefedova (2007: 202) correctly state that, in Russia, ‘people’s farms have been constructed at the official “other” of the agri-food system’. Small scale farms are therefore sometimes seen as positive, but then in such terms as a ‘healthy life style’ (in terms of working with and in nature, and consuming fresh produce) or ‘recreation’, and rarely in terms of its productive function and its role in the agrofood system. At the same time however, households produce 93 percent of the country’s potatoes, 80 percent of the vegetables, 51 percent of the milk and 54 percent of the meat, either for family consumption or for sale in the local markets (Rosstat 2013).

#### 4.1.2. Discourse by the small-holders

While, in a large number of countries, the small-scale sector is negatively looked upon by the government, the striking thing about Russia is that the small-holders themselves often also adhere to elements of this negative view. The discourse of the small-holders themselves is less pronounced and more diffuse, but it is also widespread. Small-scale farming by rural dwellers and urbanites as a practice and narrative (Ries 2009) has a long history, going back to the Soviet era and even before. The widespread adherence of the rural population to the official terminology and categorization of rural small-holdings is very relevant here. As in the Soviet period, the small-holdings of the population are called ‘subsidiary household plots’. The absence of terms like ‘farm’ or ‘agriculture’ is telling here. The term ‘household’ has connotations of house chores and domestic and household caretaking tasks (much of the work on the household being done by women, and sometimes seen as an extension of other housekeeping chores).

Furthermore, the term ‘subsidiary’ is also crucial. Throughout most of the Soviet era (a society based on the principle of full employment), the rural small-holdings indeed functioned as a subsidiary income and food source, secondary to the formal salaried job in the collective farms. However, during the slump in agriculture that came after the demise of the Soviet Union, the

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<sup>12</sup> Oleg Machnakov, a chairman of the agricultural cooperative ‘Kolos’ (Talmenskiy district) in the internet debates: ‘Subsidiary farming - a relic of the past or the reality of the Russian countryside?’ Available from: <http://altapress.ru/story/80477> (accessed on 28 Aug 2013).

small-holdings quickly rose in importance. When the privatized successors of the collective farms became unprofitable and were unable to pay timely or sufficiently high wages, rural dwellers increased production on their small-holdings (and urbanites likewise increased production on their *dacha* plots). The share of income of rural dwellers from their household plots increased markedly after the fall of the Soviet Union (Mamonova, Visser and Spoor 2013; Pallot and Nefedova 2007; Visser 2009). Even with a slight decrease in their share in total agricultural production since 2009, these plots still constitute the main source of income for a substantial part of the rural population, and an important source of food and saved expenses for many urbanites (ibid). Thus, while the term ‘subsidiary household plot’ might have been reasonably appropriate during most of the Soviet period, it is now a stark understatement of its actual role in both agriculture and the incomes of the population.

However, as mentioned above, rural dwellers still adhere to the idea of subsidiarity. Essentially, they see it as a means of survival, when wages are not sufficient, not paid on time, or when one suddenly loses one’s job, hence responding to insecurity. The same holds for *dacha* cultivators. We agree with Reis (2009: 200) that the aspect of a fallback option, a means to survive in times of sudden economic crisis or personal misfortune, trumps other elements such as recreation, health, ecological values (Zavisca 2003). A *dacha* cultivator interviewed by Reis in 2003 (ibid) stated:

You can trust that if everything really *falls* apart, you have the skills and habits to survive. And, you can look at your potatoes [the main crop on the urban and rural plots] in the apartment hallway in dark November, and *see* your food for the winter. [You can see your own ability to labour like a horse, right there before your eyes].

While the personal small-holding is seen as crucial for survival, and few would do away with it completely, few rural dwellers would actually aspire to expand their plots if they could also opt to get a salaried job that would provide them with sufficient income. A considerable share of the rural household would in fact decrease production (although not fully, we suspect). As Pallot and Nefedova (2007: 205) state: ‘rural people would be among the first to sign their death warrant’. Hardly any rural dwellers would see the small-holdings as a cornerstone of the agrofood system, although ‘the strange thing is that it is precisely this small-scale activity that is guaranteeing the continued existence of the farmer collectivist enterprises’ (ibid). Furthermore, even fewer rural dwellers (or *dacha* cultivators) would see their small-holdings as a viable alternative to the large-scale food system for the future.

In sum, there is a remarkable paradox that the small-holdings are so important, both in terms of economic and ecological value, while at the same time they are seen as a coping strategy that

the households do not aspire to as a main endeavour. With the lack of recognition or silencing of the role of the small-holdings, the term ‘quiet food sovereignty’ of an insecure population’ – building on insights on ‘quiet sustainability’ (Smith and Jehlicka 2013: 148), – would probably be the best way to characterise this muted, diffuse form of food sovereignty, which is oriented towards subsidiarity and coping with insecurity, instead of aspiring for a role as an independent mode of farming. With regard to the muting of the small-holdings and their ecological practices regarding their sustainable contribution (partly due to lack of income to buy fertilizers, herbicides etc.), the concept of ‘quiet sustainability’ seems apt. Smith and Jehlicka (2013: 148) have described ‘quiet sustainability’ as follows:<sup>13</sup>

This novel concept summarises widespread practices that result in beneficial environmental or social outcomes and that do not relate directly or indirectly to market transactions, but are not represented by their practitioners as relating directly to environmental or sustainability goals.

Thus we see a stark divergence between the important role of the small-holdings and their conceptualization by the population, which is rather ‘quiet’ about it.<sup>14</sup>

#### *4.2. State support*

While households are a fundamental part of the Russian food system, their role in the pursuit of the national food security and sovereignty is overlooked or consciously ignored at the national federal level. Talking about the high efficiency and environmentally friendly production of small-scale farming in Russia, Tamara Semenova, a representative of rural social peasant movement ‘Krestyanskiy Front’, stressed: ‘the problem is: our government, somehow, is not interested in supporting this small-holder agriculture’ (field notes, September 2010).

The state support to small-scale farming is largely ineffective. Although there are federal programmes aimed at developing small forms of agriculture, they do not work in practice. A National Priority Project for the Development of an Agro-Industrial Complex was launched in 2006. This two-year project included three sub-projects: (1) accelerated development of the livestock sector; (2) support of small-holder farms, and (3) provision of accessible housing for young specialists and their families in rural areas. Mamonova (2012) has analysed this project

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<sup>13</sup> In the Russian context, however, the next sentence following the quote might sound like a form of ‘romanticism’, if one recognizes the powerful lobby in favour of large-scale agricultural production and the minimal recognition by the rural dwellers themselves of the role of the small-holdings: ‘These practices represent exuberant, appealing and socially inclusive, but also unforced, forms of sustainability’.

<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, a rights discourse, so central to the food sovereignty concept, is absent in the Russian approach – although, as will be shown in section 5, it is somewhat present in the emerging movement of indigenous people in Russia.

among others, and concluded that the organisational capacity of such projects was very low. '[T]his results from the state authorities' corruption and their illiteracy regarding policy issues. According to several audit reports, up to 60 percent of the recipients of state subsidies or support do not fulfil the requirements of the target group. Moreover, in many regions the criteria of the target group for state support are not defined. The Territorial Planning Documents are approved in only 34 federal subjects of Russia, which represents only 41 percent of the total. The money misuse is currently a highly discussed topic, because almost 50 percent of the programme funds aimed to subsidize the housing for young families was not spent according to their purposes. ...[Furthermore, the provision of] cheap credits for small farmers' had obligatory requirements for a mortgaged capital or property, thus excluding poor farmers and benefiting only middle and large-size farming' (Mamonova 2012).

Furthermore, the state does not recognise the important role of *dacha* plot production in population food self-provisioning. There is no official statistical data about the farm output of *dachas* and vegetable gardens. However, according to the research of Nefedova (2008), 17 percent of *dachniks* cultivate all the land they have, 30 percent cultivate half of their land and 20 percent – one third. Taking into account that every second family in Russia has a *dacha* with an average land size of 6 *sotka* (0.01 ha), it is a quite significant agricultural production. Despite that, *dacha* farming is overlooked by the state. Nefedova (2013) writes:

...local authorities are not interested in expanding the number of *dachniks* because of the low local budget revenues from property taxes (there is not much money that can be received from *dachniks*, but they cause a lot of hassle) and the conservative agrarian-industrial mentality.

#### 4.3. *Efficiency and sustainability*

Food self-provisioning in Russia is overall quite resource-efficient. Households often have no access to modern technologies and use family labour only, but can compete with large enterprises that use agrochemicals and modern machinery in order to increase crop yields. In Table 2 we calculated the yields of the most essential farm products (namely: grain and legumes, potatoes and vegetables) for each type of agricultural producers. The table shows that the yield gaps between the three types are relatively small.

Table 2 shows that small-scale farm producers are just as productive (in terms of land productivity) as LFEs. The productivity of large farms is primarily achieved through state support, use of chemical fertilizers, and intensive use of machinery. Household and peasant-farms have comparable yields, with essentially no support from the state, and with traditional

methods - often using animal traction and organic fertilizers (humus, peat, manure, guano, bird droppings, compost and sapropel) instead of agrochemicals.

Tamara Semenova, a representative of the rural social movement *Krestyanskiy Front*, explained the efficiency of small-scale farming in Russia:

...in my opinion, peasant-farmers, due to their attitude to the land, work more efficiently. They work for themselves, and, therefore, are interested in sustainable results. They are interested in maintaining the fertility of their land. It is not a secret: some agricultural holdings often pump as much they can out of the land. Peasant-farmers do not use pesticides and other agrochemicals in the way agrohholdings do. Peasants use predominantly organic fertilisers. They maintain the fertility of the land through the use of green manure. They also use crop rotations in their fields. They are keen to make their land more fertile. Well, if you look at the results of their work, in terms of yield, they are quite successful.

Table 2: Yields by different agricultural producers (t/ha)

	1991	1993	1995	1997	1999	2001	2003	2005	2007	2009	2011	2012
<b>Agricultural Enterprises</b>												
Grain and legumes	1,44	1,64	1,18	1,67	1,19	1,83	1,61	1,81	1,90	2,13	2,25	1,69
Potatoes	9,24	8,14	9,90	9,10	9,39	9,95	12,10	15,29	16,87	18,91	18,72	16,64
Vegetables	13,59	11,23	10,60	11,65	11,54	13,58	14,31	17,53	17,53	21,66	22,75	21,44
<b>Peasant-farmers</b>												
Grain and legumes	0,89	1,33	0,85	1,34	0,95	1,61	1,48	1,68	1,63	1,79	1,90	1,34
Potatoes	7,32	6,37	8,85	8,95	8,94	9,39	10,97	13,60	14,74	16,42	16,56	14,76
Vegetables	8,95	7,83	6,56	7,60	7,84	9,49	10,48	14,80	16,37	18,91	21,48	23,97
<b>Rural households</b>												
Grain and legumes	2,67	2,49	1,94	2,28	1,57	1,80	1,97	2,09	2,03	1,86	2,08	1,37
Potatoes	11,52	11,40	11,97	11,28	9,61	10,86	11,58	12,10	12,74	13,52	14,05	12,63
Vegetables	15,96	15,22	16,24	15,25	15,21	15,40	16,50	16,90	17,74	19,36	19,49	19,90

Source: calculated based on Rosstat (2013)

Therefore, the quiet food sovereignty in Russia could possibly contain the seeds for a more efficient and at the same time ecologically sound agriculture. But for this to take place, it would probably need to develop into a more pronounced food sovereignty movement, with also more support and recognition.

## 5. Preconditions for an emerging food sovereignty movement

Desmarais (2007) sees the food sovereignty movement as ‘a collective struggle to define the alternatives to the globalisation of a neoliberal, highly capitalised, corporate-led model of agricultural development’. Recently, some English language media started acclaiming the Russian household farming as an alternative to the neoliberal model of agriculture, and the pathway out of global food shortages. The following articles have recently appeared on the Internet: ‘Russians proving that small-scale, organic gardening can feed the world’ or ‘Russia's small-scale organic agriculture model may hold the key to feeding the world’ (Natural News.com 2012; Reclaim Grow Sustain 2010). Speculating on the fact that Russian population food self-provisioning is very effective and sustainable, these media have concluded that something similar to a food sovereignty movement has arisen in the country.

### 5.1. Obstacles

In the fourth section we described the ‘quiet food sovereignty’ concept and showed that the Russian population itself does not recognise the importance of the small-scale farming - they consider it a back-up plan for dealing with insecurity, and not an alternative to the existing food system. This is substantiated by the fact that, with a hypothetical increase of rural incomes from other than personal agriculture sources, 25 percent of the rural population would actually decrease farm production on their household plots (Nefedova 2008). Another factor in favour of the argument that the small-scale farming is not a movement but a necessity, is the fact that rural dwellers have nostalgic feelings about the Soviet past and express a desire for state (collective)-controlled farms, and not for private individual agriculture. An interview with Tamara (70) from the village of Gravornovo in the Moscow region is indicative in that respect:

... private property is not right... Before – it was right. Why did people survive? The *kolkhozy* had been working, produced grain... even during the war they produced grain. We went to the mill, milled it, everyone got bread; and now what? (Field notes, Spring 2013)

A real obstacle for the possible formation of the food sovereignty movement in Russia is to be found in the increased fragmentation of rural communities in Russia. A recent study by Mamonova, Visser and Spoor (2013) on the re-emergence of peasant-like agriculture in Russia

indicated ‘a very partial re-emergence of the peasantry, with fragmented communities, and an absence of the build-up of social capital’ (ibid). The authors distinguished several rural strata in the contemporary countryside, and detected that, although there are significant interconnections between different rural strata,<sup>15</sup> there are a lot of tensions between these groups. Thus, there is competition for space between the local rural population and the *dachniks* (*dacha* settlements are often surrounded by high fences, which prevent local population access to common pool resources). Moreover, there is a life-style conflict between rural dwellers and the urbanites which come to rural areas for the summer.<sup>16</sup> These tensions prevent the creation of social capital. Defined as a complex of ‘relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition’ in which social actors - both individuals and organizations - are embedded (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 119), social capital is an indispensable element of social mobilisation and social movements formation.

Furthermore, the composition of the agriculturally-active population is not beneficial for the food sovereignty movement, or the creation of any other movement. There is a ‘negative social selection’ in the Russian countryside (Nefedova 2009: 65), caused by the out-migration of young and economically active people from the countryside, while less active and predominantly ageing rural dwellers stay behind (19 percent of the rural population are older than 60 years of age according to Rosstat 2013; in the 1990s this was even higher, namely around 25 percent, see Hoff 2011). The left-behind rural population is not likely to represent a significant force to change or innovate the agricultural system. Young *dachniks* engage in agriculture less actively because of their urban work. They come to the countryside during summer weekends mostly for relaxation, while the older population remembers the Soviet food shortages and post-soviet food crisis, and therefore continues the tradition of small-scale subsidiary farming (Mamonova, Visser and Spoor 2013, Nefedova 2008, 2013).

Another major hindrance is the earlier discussed symbiosis between large-scale (strongly state-supported) agriculture and the people’s small-holdings. This symbiosis, while favorable to the small-holders, at the same time hinders the further growth of independent family farming. What is more, this symbiosis (and the *dacha* production) reinforces the status quo of the dominance of large-scale agriculture and the state, as it allows large-scale farms to pay low wages. More generally, this symbiosis precludes a more assertive, rights based stance towards farm enterprises and the state, which could hold the seeds of a food sovereignty movement. When salaries or land rents are not paid, when a crisis strikes, the engrained reaction is to seek

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<sup>15</sup> *Dachniks* often buy farm products from local rural population and small peasant-farmers, local population often assist *dachniks* with house holding and homes reparation, and also get employed by farmers during harvesting

<sup>16</sup> *Dachniks* are often not accustomed to the rural milieu with bad roads and facilities, while local population feels disrespected by those imposing city standards in villages (see Mamonova, Visser and Spoor 2013)

refuge at the household/dacha plots as a means of survival. As a Russian farm director stated (Visser 2010);

In France, farmers take to the streets to protest, but in Russia rural dwellers remain quiet because they can always get by on their household plots.

The same is true for part of the urban population, and certainly for the older generation (Ashwin 1999, Ries 2009). In this sense, the following quote is illustrative:

The average dacha grower lives seven to ten years longer than city-dwellers without dachas. And, as well, he rarely needs to go to the doctor, and does not go to rallies at the White House [the Russian Federal Building]. The government does not waste a kopeck on dacha growers. The dacha grower is an ideal citizen (Shmeleva 2007: 24, and cited in Ries 2009: 201).

## 5.2. Potentials

It would be wrong to say that there are no possibilities for a food sovereignty movement in Russia. Nefedova (2013: 41-42) describes the alternative ways of life that some of the (urban) population has chosen:

There is a new movement related to the creation of eco-villages, which got a lot of attention in the mass media today. There are individuals and ideologically connected groups who establish rural traditional settlements in order to escape from the consumerist society and the ‘horrors of megapolices’ with their crazy pace of life, bad ecology, and stresses [...] They often believe in a legend about beautiful Anastasia who lives in a taiga, and in the magic power of cedar, described in many books by Megre.<sup>[17]</sup> [...] These people try to unite with the nature, cultivate ecologically healthy farm products, and have a lot of children.

Although in the beginning stages this movement was seen as rather sectarian, it has become more popular and socially acceptable. The then prime-minister Medvedev even visited an eco-village project in the Belgorod region during his Presidential election campaign of 2007. He stated that ‘the outlook of the nation is shifting, and [the] psychology is changing too. People feel themselves in a completely different way’ (Online conference organized by the newspaper

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<sup>17</sup> Russian entrepreneur Vladimir Megre has written nine books about Anastasia, a Russian woman with remarkable abilities and insights. He describes his meetings with Anastasia in the Siberian taiga. Megre’s books about Anastasia and her message of hope to the world, collectively known as the Ringing Cedar Series, inspired the Anastasia Eco-village Movement in Russia



*Izvestia*, March 5, 2007). Medvedev supported the development of eco-villages in Russia, hoping that they will represent an ‘alternative way of life’.

To date, there are more than 100 eco-villages in different regions of Russia with about 18,000 people permanently living there. Usually, these settlements occupy former agricultural land and each of the household possesses about 1.5 hectares. The villages have their own internal rules and are governed by village councils. They have individual and common lands, and have established strict requirements regarding membership. For example, the eco-village ‘Kovcheg’ in the Kaluga region has the following requirements to the community members: ‘permanent residence; organic gardening (no pesticides, no herbicides – permaculture or traditional agriculture are welcome); no smoking, no alcohol; composting toilets; no animals for meat, vegetarianism is welcome; no walls between plots’ (Lazutin and Vatolin 2009: 29). The eco-villages are based on cooperation and mutual support, and a firm belief that ‘co-operation makes our life easy, effective and environmentally friendly’ (Ibid: 28).

Alexey Shchukin, a leading expert of the ‘*Russian House of the Future*’ project, said about the eco-villages that are become popular in Russia:

The idea of an eco-village as a community of like-minded people is a very interesting topic. Even yesterday, many of these communities were seen as extremism, or a sect. Tomorrow they may become the main means of survival in the global crisis. First, it is easier to survive in a commune during the crisis; sharing the burden, making a common cause. Singles will not survive. [...] Second, the main challenge in the current crisis is the issue of food. Especially in our country with an unsustainable agricultural system (in Moscow, 70% of the products are imports). With the fall in oil prices and growing concerns over imported food, subsistence farming will become more and more important. Communities will be able to establish that self-food provisioning is more efficient way than individuals. (Makarov 2008)

However, these people do not challenge the existing food regime, but rather try to escape it. They are convinced that the contemporary society is ‘stupidly wasting our natural resources through the senseless destruction of the environment’.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, they move to remote places, far away from cities, in order to create their “way of life”, which is independent from the dominant neoliberal rule and the state control. They argue: ‘...we take full responsibility for our life and the life of our loved ones. In such circumstances when everything depends on us, we cannot blame the “uncle” or “the system” for our mistakes’ (Lazutin 2009). Even the names

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<sup>18</sup> [www.eco-kovcheg.ru](http://www.eco-kovcheg.ru), accessed 25 August 2013.

of eco-villages speak about their escape from the pre-dominant society. For example, *'Kovcheg'* translates as "ark" and refers to Noah's ark. There are such names as *'Blagodatnoye'* (in English: 'grace'), *'Schastlivoye'* ('happiness'), *'Ladnoye'*, *'Garmoniya'* (both translated as 'harmonious'), and so on, which stress the sustainable lifestyle of their inhabitants. Many names are in old Russian, which expresses the conventionality of these settlements, but also made us think about the movement of 'old believers', who went to Siberia and other remote areas four centuries ago as they did not agree with the modernisation of the Russian church. These developments, however sparse they may still be for the moment, can possibly be seen as signs of 'food sovereignty from below'. Though they counter the currently predominant idea of food sovereignty as 'food security in a sovereign state', as we have argued above, they cannot be seen as a movement.

There are however some social movements in Russia which struggle for the local sovereignty of their traditional food systems. These are to be found in the struggles of indigenous peoples, in particular those in Siberia and the Arctic circle. Food sovereignty in that context means control over specific local food systems, such as fishing, animal harvesting (reindeers, seals) or using forest products, such as roots, mushrooms and berries. These areas of food sovereignty are sometimes (and incorrectly) seen as very different from crop production by small farmers or peasants; however, in a recent blog by a Russian activist of an indigenous NGO, Galina Angarova wrote that:

..it dawned upon me that although these communities are very different, unfortunately, some issues and threats that indigenous communities are experiencing these days are very similar. They are facing the same threats, be it impacts of climate change or land grabs, pollution and encroaching industrialization (IFIP 2013).

While food sovereignty for Latin American peasants producing food staples might be a struggle in different conditions (Rosset, 2009), the same blog contends that 'if you take away our food, you take away our soul' (referring to the limitation of fishing rights, and the recent land grabs which make traditional animal harvesting difficult), and that the issue of human rights 'is inseparable from food sovereignty..' (IFIP 2013).

## 6. Conclusions

With no study conducted until now on food sovereignty in Russia, and, to our knowledge, the former Soviet countries in general, the first question that this paper addressed was whether food sovereignty exists at all as a narrative or practice in the country.

Although the concept is not frequently used in Russian debates in its literal translation, the food sovereignty concept is neither irrelevant nor absent. We discussed two diverging approaches in Russia. The first approach, which we termed ‘food security in a sovereign state’, is the top-down approach as formulated by the Russian State. This approach is close to the traditional food security concept and refers to the conceived necessity of national food self-sufficiency (instead of depending on imported food).

However, whereas globally food sovereignty is often seen as an alternative or opposite to food security in its conceptualization of the last two decades (and certainly an opposite to the current neo-liberal, industrial ‘food regime’ (McMichael 2009), in Russia this is hardly the case. On the contrary, within the ‘food security in a sovereign state’ approach, food sovereignty is used interchangeably with food security, and large-scale industrial agriculture (in even a much more extreme form than in the West) is seen as the means to achieve it. Beyond this it is also seen a potential political weapon in international relations, via growing grain exports.

The second, more diffuse and implicit, but widespread approach is more bottom-up; we termed this ‘quiet food sovereignty’, building on insights on ‘quiet sustainability’ (Smith and Jehlicka 2013: 148). We showed that food sovereignty in practice plays an important role in Russia, with the rural and urban population using household plots and producing an important share of the food consumed, in or near their local places of living, and in a largely organic/ecologically friendly way. This all matches well the global understanding of food sovereignty. However, at the same time, the productive and agricultural importance of such small-holdings is grossly overlooked and downplayed by the Russian government, but even more strikingly, also by those who practice what is called subsidiary household production (and even by those using *dacha* gardens for some produce). Thus, we see a dramatic divergence between the economic role of these small-holdings and their conceptualization. Furthermore, a rights discourse, so central in the food sovereignty concept, is absent in the Russian approach (except for the indigenous communities who struggle to keep their original food systems intact). The population’s farmland ownership and the possibility to cultivate its own food are seen as a coping mechanism for the insecure, particularly in times of crisis.

What is more, we have demonstrated that a central notion within ‘quiet food sovereignty’ is the tendency to be supportive, loyal and even obedient, to the state, instead of claiming rights. We encounter this feature even in eco-villages, which constitute the most explicit alternative to the dominant large-scale food system. While the eco-village discourse is more critical of the status quo in the food system, it does not try to challenge the overall food system directly through its produce, claims or ideas. In contrast, the movement promotes withdrawal (and,

regularly, isolation (Maltseva and Pavlovna forthcoming) from the wider food system, focusing on the moral and physical health and lifestyle of its members.<sup>19</sup>

These two approaches to food sovereignty are either too statist and oriented at large-scale agriculture (the top-down state-guided conceptualization), or too diffuse (a bottom-up ‘quiet’ activities) to be classified as a food sovereignty movement. There are some signs of a forming food sovereignty movement, for instance in the shape of the recent emergence of eco-villages.<sup>20</sup> However, for a national food sovereignty movement to take shape, there are many hindrances to overcome.

An important factor is the symbiosis between large-scale (strongly state-supported) agriculture and the people’s small-holdings. This symbiosis, while favorable to the small-holders, hinders the transition to independent family farming both economically and cognitively. What is more, this symbiosis (and the *dacha* production) reinforces the status quo of the dominance of large-scale agriculture and the state. It does so by allowing large-scale farms to pay low wages, and more generally by precluding a more assertive, rights based stance towards farm enterprises and the state, which could hold the seeds of a movement formation. Faced with low salaries or wage arrears, low land rents, or a broader economic crisis, the primary reaction is to turn to the household (or *dacha*) plot as a fallback option.

Furthermore, the internal fragmentation of the population engaged in small-holdings (such as between rural dwellers and *dacha* owners) also hinders the emergence of a food sovereignty movement (Mamonova, Visser, and Spoor 2013).

Finally, the stance of the Russian State, with its approach of ‘food security in a sovereign state’ and the related sovereign or guided democracy, does not fit with a policy of enabling a genuine, rights-based food sovereignty from below. In some countries in Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa, governments have played an important role in the advancement of food sovereignty, with for instance inscribing food sovereignty in the constitution. In Russia, the current findings strongly suggest that food sovereignty has to emerge bottom-up, without much state support. What is even more likely is that such a bottom-up movement will face state opposition and restrictions, as is currently happening with various urban NGOs and emerging rural movements (Mamonova and Visser forthcoming). Alternately, the Russian government might take up the

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<sup>19</sup> As Maltseva and Pavlovna (forthcoming) state; ‘currently at eco-villages the first point of view [isolation and withdrawal] so far is observed much more’ [than engagement with wider society]. Notions typical for the first point of view are; ‘Construct one’s private paradise’, ‘safe oneself’ and ‘build a refuge’ from the surrounding world (ibid).

<sup>20</sup> To be precise a first, and very small, ‘wave’ of eco-village formation took place during the 1990s with a few eco-villages established, but the current wave, which started in the 2000s is more substantial.

narrative if bottom-up sovereignty would become more popular, but most likely in a tightly controlled manner. It would do so by molding the narrative ingeniously to take out the elements challenging the status quo, as it has previously done with democracy, and with various rural and urban movements (through the creation of state embedded civil society organizations) (Mamonova and Visser forthcoming). Thus, a food sovereignty movement in Russia would be less likely to be close to the term's global understanding (in the vein of a bottom-up Via Campesina), and more likely be something of a 'Via Kremlina'.

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# FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: A CRITICAL DIALOGUE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE PAPER SERIES

## Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue

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A fundamentally contested concept, food sovereignty has — as a political project and campaign, an alternative, a social movement, and an analytical framework — barged into global agrarian discourse over the last two decades. Since then, it has inspired and mobilized diverse publics: workers, scholars and public intellectuals, farmers and peasant movements, NGOs and human rights activists in the North and global South. The term has become a challenging subject for social science research, and has been interpreted and reinterpreted in a variety of ways by various groups and individuals. Indeed, it is a concept that is broadly defined as the right of peoples to democratically control or determine the shape of their food system, and to produce sufficient and healthy food in culturally appropriate and ecologically sustainable ways in and near their territory. As such it spans issues such as food politics, agroecology, land reform, biofuels, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), urban gardening, the patenting of life forms, labor migration, the feeding of volatile cities, ecological sustainability, and subsistence rights.

Sponsored by the [Program in Agrarian Studies at Yale University](#) and the [Journal of Peasant Studies](#), and co-organized by [Food First](#), [Initiatives in Critical Agrarian Studies \(ICAS\)](#) and the [International Institute of Social Studies \(ISS\)](#) in The Hague, as well as the Amsterdam-based [Transnational Institute \(TNI\)](#), the conference “Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue” will be held at Yale University on September 14–15, 2013. The event will bring together leading scholars and political activists who are advocates of and sympathetic to the idea of food sovereignty, as well as those who are skeptical to the concept of food sovereignty to foster a critical and productive dialogue on the issue. The purpose of the meeting is to examine what food sovereignty might mean, how it might be variously construed, and what policies (e.g. of land use, commodity policy, and food subsidies) it implies. Moreover, such a dialogue aims at exploring whether the subject of food sovereignty has an “intellectual future” in critical agrarian studies and, if so, on what terms.

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