



*Paper was presented at
Food, Farmland and Forests in Transition: The Eurasian countryside 25 years after
7 November 2014, Romanian Academy of Sciences, Bucharest*

Behind the veil of Russian rural ‘quietness’. Explaining popular responses to deprivation and inequality in the post-soviet countryside.

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Abstract

Poverty, mass unemployment, social exclusion, and violation of small-holders’ land rights have become the scourge of Russian countryside after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Under such conditions one could expect an outright social resistance and large-scale protests, while Russian rural dwellers seem to show remarkable tolerance and peaceful acceptance of existing deprivation and inequality. The peacefulness and endurance of the post-soviet rural population are often explained by the socialist history and contemporary non-democratic regimes, which create a structure that prevents dissenting expressions. This research looks beyond this common explanation, and aims to understand the so-called post-Soviet rural ‘quietness’ by studying different *spaces for contestation*. These spaces (social, economic, political and cultural) influence rural dwellers’ perceptions and practices, thereby, their attitude to the existing order and politics of change. By analysing various dimensions of rural everydayness this research explains why the existing socio-economic tensions in rural Russia do not escalate to a civil protest and large-scale mobilisation. This analysis aims to contribute to a better understanding of peasant politics, social relations, and mobilisation practices in the post-socialist context.

1. Introduction

The post-Soviet rural society is considered to be conservative, fatalistic, and politically passive (O'Brien and Wegren 2002). Mamonova (2015) writes: ‘while globally it is reported that peasants are fighting against land grabbing, Ukrainian rural dwellers show tolerance and peaceful acceptance of land grab-related changes’ (p.XX). Mamonova and Visser (2014), in their study of contemporary rural social movements in Russia, reveal weak ties between civil organisations and the rural population. Rural Russians rarely engage in political actions, despite frequent violations of their rights. Petrick et al. (2013) argue that rural Kazakhs do not resist large-scale agricultural development in the country, and chose peaceful mechanisms of adaptation to the recent changes.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, former Soviet republics launched land reforms which aimed to distribute lands of kolkhozy and sovkhozy (collective and state farms) to rural households in order to establish a family farming sector, and, according to some, to empower the rural population (Visser 2003). Although land distributions were pursued under different schemes in these countries, the outcome was roughly similar for the large agricultural producers of the former Soviet Union (Russia, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan): family farmers emerged in a very limited manner, the former collective

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farms went bankrupt, and the majority of the rural population fell into deep poverty and experienced social exclusion and high unemployment. The agricultural land became controlled by large farm enterprises (LFEs) – successors of former collectives, and rural dwellers were left with minuscule household plots, where they conducted subsistence agriculture, and showed nearly no resistance to the growing deprivation and inequality (Spoor et al. 2013)

The word ‘quiet’ often became used in the academic literature to describe the behaviours of the post-socialist (rural) population. Thus, Smith and Jehlicka (2013) introduced the term ‘quiet sustainability’ to define widely practised and environmentally sustainable food self-provisioning in post-socialist Poland and Czechia. These practices are not accompanied by explicit discourses and social movements, which justifies the presence of the word ‘quiet’ in their name. Visser et al. (2015) further develop the idea of ‘quietness’, and propose the term ‘quiet food sovereignty’ to describe small-scale food production by the rural (and urban) Russian population. According to the authors, such food is not only ecologically and manually produced for self-consumption or sale on domestic markets, but also responds to traditional and cultural understandings of food and farming, thereby coinciding with the international definition of food sovereignty². The main difference between international and Russian food sovereignties lies in the absence of overt struggles or mobilisation among the Russian rural population to defend its way of life.

The present study is aimed to investigate the post-Soviet civil ‘quietness’³ through the example of rural Russia. It addresses the following three questions: What are the factors that define the absence of overt rural resistance and social mobilisation in the post-Soviet rural settings? Why do focal forms of individual resistance not build into mass collective protest? What is behind the observed ‘quietness’ of post-soviet rural dwellers, and under which conditions can it lead to mobilisation and revolt? This study investigates rural responses not to a particular strain, but to whole array of contemporary socio-economic problems in the countryside: poverty, inequality, power discrepancies, smallholders’ land rights deprivation, social and economic exclusion, etc.

Many authors explain the absence of resistance among post-Soviet rural population by the history of 70 years of socialism, when the expression of disagreement with state actions was at least heavily condemned, and serious protest led to deportation in the Gulag labour camps during Stalin’s reign or prosecution in later periods (Visser 2010, Beissinger 2002). The contemporary authoritarian regime of Putin, which is able to repress, divide, and demobilize undesired civil protests, is often referred as the core factor that limits social mobilisation in Russia (Mamonova and Visser 2014). However, the socialist history and current repressive regime do not lead to the absence of collective resistance and bottom-up mobilisation in rural China, where protests against land grabs and fraudulent village elections have become contentious issues (He and Xue, 2014). Similarly non-democratic former-socialist countries in Africa face an outright rural mobilisation against the deprivation of land rights and social exclusion (see for example Neimark (2003) on Madagascan rural protest, and Pitcher (1998) on land struggles in Mozambique).

This study goes beyond the common explanations of the post-soviet rural ‘quietness’, and aims to look at this phenomenon from another angle. Contentious politics are often studied either from rationalist (focusing on rational action), structuralist (focusing on social structure), or culturalist (focusing on collective behaviour and relative deprivation) approaches. The analysis of the post-soviet rural ‘quietness’ requires a different research strategy, as the objects of study (i.e. protest and mobilisation) do not explicitly pronounced. The proposed framework is built on an analysis of potentials for collective protests. It introduces the concept of *spaces for contestation* and distinguishes political, economic, social, and cultural spaces in which Russian rural dwellers live and build relations with each other, other social agents, and their surroundings. This framework combines the subjective experience of social actors and the objective factors that structure the repertory available to

² The Nyéléni food sovereignty declaration defines food sovereignty as: ‘the right of peoples to health and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems’ (Nyéléni 2007).

³ i.e. the inability of a deprived population to address their issues through mobilisation and collective protest.

(potential)protestors, and, therefore, brings the society-centric dimensions into the structural analysis of the post-soviet rural ‘quietness’.

The notion of spaces in this paper is based on Löw’s (2008) ‘duality of space’, in which space is the context for and result of social practices. Space is generated through social actors’ perceptions and activities, and simultaneously determines them. The diversity of the analysed spaces is based on Giddens’ (1984) concepts of structures (e.g. economic, political structures) and structure, which unites individual structures into one multidimensional formation. Similarly, various spaces for contestation interact and coalesce with each other, thereby creating a multidimensional space, which defines the milieu for contentious politics.

The majority of studies on post-socialist spaces of the former Soviet and Eastern Bloc countries are urban-based. Cities are recognised to be at the vanguard of post-socialist transformations, which include the creation of new urban identities, the globalisation and decolonisation of spaces, the construction of positive or negative perceptions about the Soviet past, etc. (Young and Kaczmarek 2008, Rozhanskiy 2013). Rural spaces, which are significantly more conservative, present an interesting case of a hybrid culture: they contain Soviet values in the everyday life of rural dwellers, and capitalist symbols such as privatization, marketization and private land investments. Furthermore, the multidimensional analysis of rural everydayness explains not only the ‘quietness’ of post-Soviet rural population, but it reveals internal processes in society, which define societal viability and resilience, and, thereby, its ability to survive in a hardship.

This research is based on fieldwork conducted in the Russian region of Stavropol Krai during June-July 2014. The Stavropol Krai is an important agricultural region with a large rural population (42.8% of population) which features the coexistence of various forms of farming (large-scale industrial agriculture, private family farming, and small-scale peasant households). Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 28 rural households, 15 private family farmers, 5 LFEs executives, and 10 LFEs workers in three rayony (districts) of the Stavropol Krai: the Novoalexandrovskiy, Grachevskiy, and Arzgirskiy rayony. These rayony are different in terms of soil fertility, population density, agricultural specialisation, and distance to Stavropol – the provincial capital and largest urban centre in the region⁴. In the data analysis, much attention was devoted to the respondents’ discourses about social and economic relations in rural areas, national and local politics, and the norms and values dominating in their respective locales. Discursive consciousness, that is to say all the things that social actors are capable of expressing in words, defines everyday practices and perceptions (Löw 2008), which are the building blocks for different spaces for contestation. Therefore, many direct quotes are presented in this article in order to reveal the verbal expressions of the analysed spaces. Furthermore, a number of secondary literature and official statistical data are used in this analysis in order to explain the objective dimensions of prospects for contentious politics in the Russian countryside. This study also benefits from my earlier fieldwork in central Russia (the Moscow and Vladimir regions) during 2009-2013.

The paper is structured as follows. In the next section I explain the concepts of different spaces for contestation. The third section provides an overview of rural response strategies during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. The social, economic, political and cultural spaces for contestation are analysed in the fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh sections, respectively. The concluding section returns to the

⁴ The Grachevskiy rayon is located in the western-central part of the Kray and is the closest (among the analysed districts) to the largest urban centre – Stavropol. This district possess the most fertile soil, known as Black Earth (or *Chernozem*) and has a steppe landscape. The agricultural specialisation of this district is crop production, mainly winter wheat and sunflower. Livestock is only held by the rural population. There are 9 modern LFEs and 275 private family farms. Among the many family farms, few are profitable. LFEs hold the leading position at the local agricultural market. (2) The Novoalexandrovskiy rayon is located in the north-western part of the Stavropol Krai. Although its soil is fertile (Black Earth), it is located in a zone of unstable moistening. There are 14 FLEs which are Soviet-style farms, five of which retain the word ‘kolkhoz’ (collective farm) in their names. Independent private farmers are relatively successful here; their size and scale are the largest in the Kray. Private farmers occupy 68% of farmland. All major crops, including winter wheat, sunflower, and sugar beets are produced here. (3) The Arzgirskiy rayon is the most distant district from the city of Stavropol. It is located in the north-eastern part of the Stavropol Krai. The soils are less fertile (light-brown and solonets). This district is characterized by an arid climate. There are 17 LFEs (some of them of soviet-style, some fully modernised), and 224 private family farmers. Livestock and crop farming are dominant agricultural activities among LFEs and small- and medium-scale farmers.

questions raised in the beginning of this paper and discusses the conditions under which the analysed rural 'quietness' may transform to an open collective resistance.

2. Theorising the spaces for contestation

In the social sciences, space is viewed as an integral component of societal processes. Several definitions of space exist. The absolutist understanding of space sees it as a discrete unit or a container, in which social actions take place (Aristotle, Newton). However, the relativistic approach is more dominant among scholars today; it allows spaces to present a variety of appearances depending on the standpoint of the observer and various elements which surround and pervade the given space (Löw 2001, Giddens 1984, Bourdieu 1991). Therefore, the understanding of space moved to something more than just the backdrop against which societal developments take place, and became the dynamic expression of societal processes (Stoetzer 2008).

The contemporary academic debates on space are focused on the role of space (either passive or active) in relation to social events. The structure-theoretical perspective is anchored in the notion that space has the power to provoke social events (Lefèbvre 1991), while action theory conceptualizes space mainly as a result of or context for social action (Giddens 1984). This paper considers space as a combination of both approaches and uses the 'duality of space' concept proposed by Löw (2001, 2008). This position is largely based on Giddens' (1984) theory of structuration, and his concept of the 'duality of structure'. However, Giddens believed that societal structures do not have a rigidly determinative effect but are rather the medium and outcome of repeated action. The basic idea of Löw's 'duality of space' is that individuals act as social agents and constitute spaces in the process, but that their action depends on the spaces they cohabit. Löw distinguishes two processes which constitute space: spacing and synthesis. Spacing is 'the positioning of social objects and people and of primarily symbolic markings in order to denote as such ensembles of objects and people' (Löw 2001, 158). The synthesis is necessary in the structuring of space: people produce spaces through processes of perception, imagination and remembering.

The understanding of spacing and synthesis is important for the explanation of the 'quietness' of the post-Soviet rural population. These processes determine the actual and conceived impact of the strain in a given context, and the consequential societal responses to it. The existing literature, however, sees the relation between social space and resistance through the prism of societal opposition to the structuring of the space by external agents. Thus, Harvey (1990) and Lefèbvre (1991) described class tensions caused by the capitalist control of space, which they saw as one of the capitalist means of appropriation. Soja (1989, 86), similarly, saw resistance as an act towards 'the assertion of space into [a] position of historical and social determination'. This paper reveals the relations between space and resistance differently, and considers space as a milieu for resistance. Hence, the phenomenon of post-soviet rural 'quietness' is explained through the analysis of diverse spaces for contestation, where, despite the existing socio-economic strains, collective protests and mobilisation do not occur. The spaces for contestation are understood here as spheres of coexistence and interactions of diverse social actors in their everyday responses to various socio-economic strains. These responses, which include actions and perceptions, are shaped by the spaces in which they occur, and simultaneously compose these spaces; this, in turn, generates recursively reproduced structures that enable or constrain social resistance.

In order to understand the variety of different factors that shape rural 'quiet' responses to inequality and deprivation, I use Giddens (1984) notions of structures (isolable sets of rules and resources, e.g. legal, economic, political structures) and structure (the totality of different structures). I apply these concepts to the spaces for contestation. The individual practices and perceptions organized through institutions are the elements of social, economic, political, and cultural spaces for contestation. These different spaces interact and coalesce with each other, thereby creating a multidimensional space which defines the milieu for contentious politics.

The social space for contestation is represented here by the social ties between actors, their daily routines, and their belonging to different social strata, which constrain or enable social mobilisation

and resistance. By studying the economic space for contestation, I analyse the economic context in which the rural dwellers subsist, their formal and informal economic relations, and subjective perceptions about the role of peasant economy in the national agricultural system. The political space is represented here through the analysis of the relative openness or closeness of the institutionalised political system, and through the rural population discourse of the polity. Finally, the cultural space for contestation is examined by analysing the prevalent cultural values and norms, which determine what passes for legitimate action in a given context.

Time - or historicization - is an essential component of understanding the dynamics of spaces for contestation. Spaces change over time, and are (re)produced based on the past experiences of social actors who inhabit these spaces. The recent post-socialist transformations in a number of countries have gained significant academic attention. Most of the research is devoted to analysing the market-led developments in social, economic, or cultural spaces after the collapse of the USSR (Matveev 2011, Young and Kaczmarek 2008, O'Brien et al. 2005). The socialist past influences the ways in which people react to changes, which varies from attempting to escape the 'unwanted past' - as, for example, in Polish society (Young and Kaczmarek 2008) - to instead returning to Soviet ideals - as examined, for instance, by Abramov's (2013) study of nostalgia in contemporary Russia. The path-dependent legacies are engrained in everydayness and largely define people's responses to social strains.

Additionally, time has one more role in generating spaces for contestation. In everyday processes, time is the factor which defines the moment and duration of social interactions. From this perspective, time is a resource which shapes the relations between different social actors. It is similar to the notion of time as described by Harvey (1990) in his analysis of capitalism, where time, space, and money define the expansion of power. The emergence and expansion of social protests similarly require time resources for their organisation. Therefore, time is analysed in this paper as a resource, and as a representation of the dynamic nature of spaces for contestation.

Besides the processes of generation and (re)production of spaces by internal actors, spaces for contestation are highly influenced by the state and state-elite coalitions. Lefèbvre explored the state as the external agent that produces spaces. According to him 'the state and each of its constituent institutions call for spaces - but spaces which they can then organize according to their specific requirements' (Lefèbvre, 1991: 85). In his book *Seeing Like a State*, Scott (1998) analysed how high modernist states use their power in order to reshape society so that it functions according to the state's plan and will. This paper analyses how the state constrains different spaces for contestation through top-down methods of governance and manipulated perceptions. The first set of practices is expressed in the creation of objective barriers for civil resistance in different spaces for contestation. The second set of state practices aims to design perceptual processes of social actors according to the state policy goals.

3. Rural resistance during the Soviet and post-Soviet transformations

There are ongoing debates on whether the Russian rural population has protested during 70 years of socialism, especially during the period of collectivisation - when peasant land and property were expropriated in favour of newly created kolkhozy and sovkhozy. Before that, private small landholdings were allowed in the countryside. The collectivisation campaign was launched by Stalin in 1929-1933 and was aimed at the elimination of private property. The Soviet leadership believed that the replacement of individual peasant farms with collective ones would increase the food supply for the growing urban population, and generate resources for the country's industrialisation. These measures were accompanied by dekulakisation, a campaign of political repression, including arrests, deportations, and the executions of millions of the better-off peasants and their families.

Despite very limited spaces for contestation - the consequence of the state's political repression and the peasantry's economic dependency on established collectives - the peasants' focal protests and destructions of collective property occurred during this period of Soviet history. Many authors (Campbell 1939, Johnson 2003, Wegren 2005) link the rural dwellers' response with opposition and

resistance to the collective farm system. According to Ukrainian nationalist Isaak Mazepa (1934 cited in Tottle 1987, 94), at the time, 'a system of passive resistance was favoured, which aimed at the systematic frustration of the Bolshevik plans for the sowing and the gathering of the harvest'. For example, many peasants slaughtered their livestock instead of giving it to collective farms. Some scholars have interpreted these actions as ideological protest (Campbell 1939, Johnson 2003, Wegren 2005). Others, however, have noted that these actions were simply aimed at preventing starvation and did not constitute an intentional form of protest (Tauger 2005).

In the later Soviet periods, after collectivisation had been accomplished, a new rural generation with a 'typical kolkhoznik mentality' replaced the people who remembered the painful collectivisation and the period preceding it. Collective farming and the Soviet order became more welcomed than resisted (Kitching 1998). At the time, the state increasingly subsidized agriculture and, according to Tepicht (1975), villagers became significant 'winners' of the socialist revolutions. They directly benefitted, receiving wages, guaranteed employment and several other social benefits. Rural dwellers were allowed – and in the later Soviet period encouraged – to keep small-scale households on lands around their houses (0,2 ha on average). This helped people to mitigate food shortages and created additional source of family income. At the time, rural households used a whole array of the kolkhozy and sovkhozy facilities, from obtaining young livestock and letting private cattle graze on collective pastures, to using machinery (Visser et al, 2015).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia embarked on a course of reforms – which Goodman (2003) has called 'shock therapy' – with the ultimate goal of preventing a return to socialism. Kolkhozy and sovkhozy were restructured, and their lands were distributed by means of land shares to their former employees in order to create a system of private family farming. However, due to the absence of financial resources and informational support, fragmented and often non-functioning markets, and rural dwellers' unwillingness to leave the collectives, the majority of land recipients did not become private farmers (Visser and Spoor 2011). Instead, land became accumulated in the hands of former kolkhoz/sovkhoz directors, who convinced land recipients to invest their land (and property) shares in reorganised farm enterprises in order to preserve collective farming.

The post-Soviet market-led land reforms of the 1990s revived the debate about rural resistance versus adaptation. A common conceptualisation was that the piecemeal emergence of private farms was a consequence of villagers' resistance to land reform (Leonard 2000). This was an idea especially adhered to by reformers who placed the blame for the disappointing results of their privatisation policies on the rural dwellers (Wegren 2005). In fact, the institutional environment was/still is hostile to private farming. Rural dwellers preferred to stay within the collective enterprises, which allowed them to adapt and survive in the market economy (Visser 2008). However, the shift from a centralized to a market-oriented economy was accompanied by price liberalisation, rising prices for agricultural inputs, and the reduction of state support for agriculture, which led to the bankruptcy of many kolkhozy and sovkhozy. With the degradation of collective enterprises, rural dwellers lost not only their jobs, but also the collectives' support to their households, which drastically affected their subsistence (Visser 2003).

The post-Soviet transition period was characterised by the ruralisation of poverty (Spoor 2013). Bogdanovskii (2005) reports that agricultural wages in 1990 (before the transition began) were 95% of the average monthly wage, but had fallen to 40% of the average by 2002. The peak of rural poverty was in 1999, when 73.1% of villagers had incomes lower than the subsistence level (Independent Institute for Social Policy 2002). Many rural residents, especially the young people, 'voted with their feet' and moved to cities. Those who remained in the villages became highly dependent on subsistence farming on their household plots, experienced social exclusions, and succumbed to depressions, alcoholism, and poor health.

Land sales became legalised in 2002, which attracted new players to the Russian land market. Domestic oligarchs and foreign land investors started acquiring large tracks of farmland, spurred by the global financial and food crises. They practiced land acquisitions or long-term renting agreements with the rural population, or purchased the entire collective farms. Currently, 83.2% of farmland is controlled by LFEs (Rosstat 2014). Although many rural dwellers remain the official landowners, the

existing power discrepancies prevent them from deriving benefits from their land. The long-term land renting agreements often imply a very small (in kind) payment to the landowners, and offer almost no termination or renegotiation options. The various fraudulent schemes and land right violations under which land investors accumulate their lands allowed Visser and Spoor (2011) to characterize this process as an instance of land grabbing. Furthermore, LFEs practice control grabs – cases when large business controls agricultural value-chain and accumulates the majority of state subsidies to agriculture, thereby preventing the development of small-scale entrepreneurship in rural areas.

Visser et al. (2015) argue that land reform was not re-distributive: rural dwellers continued cultivating their small-scale household plots, while kolkhozy and sovkhozy were transformed into LFEs. The main changes were the significant reduction of social support to rural households and rural areas (which had previously been provided by the collectives) and the decrease of employment opportunities in the countryside. LFEs invested a great deal in the development of large-scale industrial farming, while needing significantly less labour than former kolkhozy and sovkhozy. Kalugina and Fadeeva (2010) estimated the current real rural unemployment at 55%. Those who are employed receive low wages, which are 10% below the official subsistence level (Ogloblin and Brock 2005). As a result, 65% of rural dwellers have per capita incomes below the minimum consumer budget (Kalugina 2014), and nearly 20% currently live in deep poverty (Ivolga 2014).

The debates on post-Soviet peasant engagement in contentious politics were revitalised in the last decade. The 2005-2010 period was characterised by the emergence of rural protests near large cities – although these protests were not related to rural unemployment and poverty. In suburban regions, especially around Moscow, land acquisitions for the purposes of transforming farmland into construction sites became a very profitable business (the land price could increase threefold if the land status was changed from agricultural to construction purposes). Land investors used loopholes in the Russian legislation and the corruption of authorities and courts to acquire suburban farmland without compensating their official owners (Visser et al. 2012, Mamonova and Visser 2014). These land deals raised a wave of civil protests in environs of major cities. The social movement *Krestyanskiy Front* [*Peasant Front*] emerged from such land conflicts and has been defending the property rights of deprived land shareholders for 8 years. However, in a previous study (Mamonova, 2014), I revealed that the protesters' subsistence did not depend on the disputed land. The shareholders expected material rewards for their contested actions (financial compensation for lost land shares), and as soon as their demands were satisfied, they left the movement. At country scale, this social activity was rather insignificant. At its zenith, the *Krestyanskiy Front* had 25,000 members, of which only 5,000 were active (Russia's rural population is nearly 37 million people). One of the Front's leaders, Tamara Semenova, said about their inability to mobilise large rural masses:

Unfortunately, our [rural] population is very passive... very inactive... This applies, in principle, to any issue. They can discuss the problem among themselves. But to do something to solve it – no! It is a tremendous effort to push them for any action.

Below I present the explanation of the post-Soviet peasant unwillingness to engage in overt group contentious politics based on the analysis of different spheres for contestation.

4. The individualisation of social space, social stratification, and negative egalitarianism

The development of capitalism in rural areas caused significant transformation in rural social life and interpersonal networks. Natalia (85) from *stanitsa* Rasshevatskaya, Novoalexandrovskiy rayon, recalls:

In the past, when we were young, everyone helped each other, supported each other. If you built a house, there would always be people to help you. Now – no one does this anymore. People became indifferent

to each other's problems. Everyone lives in his own little world. [...] And there aren't many local people left in the village. A lot of new people, strangers...⁵

Despite the long-time developed collectivist features of Soviet rural population, the era of capitalism led to the individualization of lifestyle in the countryside. This phenomenon was already noticed by Hegel (1955, 238), who stated that the 'individual has become the son of the bourgeois society'. Later, Back (1992) stressed the categorical shift in relations between the individual and society due to capitalist development, which led to the individual's isolation from society. The bankruptcy of kolkhozy and sovkhozy disrupted the organised daily interactions of rural dwellers and destroyed the common 'kolkhoznik identity', which caused the social space metamorphosis. The synthesis of space now occurs through the dissociation and individualisation of rural households in their survival strategies, and the absence of any common ideology that could band individuals together. The perception of social space as something disunited and separated clearly appears in Natalia's statement that 'everyone lives in his own little world'.

Several facts indicate the separation of individuals from their communities. According to a survey by Visser (2008), more than 80% of respondents in the Pskov and Rostov rural regions indicated worsening relations with their fellow villagers since 1991. They complained that relations had become less friendly and more distant. Nearly a half of the respondents do not participate in village festivals anymore. A similar trend was observed by O'Brien *et al* (2000), who noticed a significant decline in community participation since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

This disunity in everyday life affected mutual support, which is one of the characteristics of the peasant 'moral economy', as described by Scott (1977). Networks for money lending have become smaller (Visser 2008) and the food exchange traditions between rural households have largely disappeared. Social interactions are now based on market principles: '[...] no, we do not [exchange products with other villagers], we sell our milk, and buy their potatoes if needed... We exchange only with relatives...' (interview with Olga (52), the Krasnoye village, the Grachevskiy rayon). This separation from society, according to Lefèbvre (2003, 140), who studied everydayness under the development of capitalism, generated 'a social environment of sophisticated exploitation and carefully controlled passivity'.

The fragmentation of social ties within the rural community further occurs due to the transformation of geographical space. There is a direct connection between locale (or place for contestation) and spaces for contestation. Space is localised in places, where social actors and social goods are situated. A dispersed population has 'the greatest difficulty defining common interests and is the most vulnerable to 'divide and conquer' efforts from above' (Fox 1996, 1091). Russian rural settlements (similar to many in the former Soviet Union) experience significant depopulation. Over the past 13 years, 11,000 villages have disappeared from the Russian map. To date, 23.6% of all rural settlements have a population of less than 10 people (Rosstat 2014). In the southern regions, Roma people and migrants from former Soviet republics inhabit abandoned houses (Ioffe *et al.* 2013). Rural houses in the central region remain abandoned or have been acquired and rebuilt by *dachiniks* (urban dwellers that use village houses as vocational summer or weekend residences) (Mamonova and Sutherland, forthcoming). According to statistics, there is no permanent population in 12.7% of the rural settlements. Mikhail (57), inhabitant of the Krasnoye village, complains about the absence of neighbours:

Have you seen any neighbours? These are the third neighbours for the last 10 years. Bought-sold-bought-sold. They work in the city, I don't see them. The other neighbours immigrated to Germany, their house is abandoned... It is not like in the past. Neighbours were neighbours! We planted potatoes together, drunk *samogon* [an alcoholic drink] together. Everything was together. And now I don't have company to plant potatoes, cannot compare whose potatoes are better. I am here by myself...⁶

⁵ Interview conducted by the author in July 2014, in *stanitsa* Rasshevatskaya, the Novoalexandrovskiy rayon, the Stavropol Krai.

⁶ Interview conducted by the author in June 2014, the Krasnoye village, the Grachevskiy rayon, the Stavropol Krai.

The transformation of the geographical space over time has influenced the social space for contestation. The dispersed place creates spatial obstacles for social cooperation and mobilisation, constructs perceptions of disunity among social actors through symbolic elements such as abandoned houses, and segregates the community into included (locals) and excluded (in-migrants) subgroups in a common social space. These processes destroy social capital and shrink the social space for contestation.

If, in the Soviet period, relative equality was achieved through repressions against middle-class peasants (*kulaks*) and politics of state control over the size and scale of peasant household production, the recent neoliberal developments cause stratification within rural communities. Rogers (2009) analysed how the changes in access to a productive resource (*e.g.* a tractor) and the ability to deploy labour power (*e.g.* to cut and collect hay) cause social stratification in Russian villages after the collapse of the USSR. This transformed social relations and divided rural dwellers into ‘givers’ and ‘takers’. The inequality between these two groups is deepened by unemployment (*ibid*, 210). In my other study (Mamonova, 2015), I explain the contemporary stratification through the different response strategies of post-Soviet peasants to capitalism. I reveal that adaptive response strategies lead to more favourable positions in rural strata. For example, peasants who choose to occupy market niches free from the LFEs’ presence (*i.e.* time- and labour-intensive farming) achieve significant independence and have higher incomes. Those who do not undergo any transformations in their lifestyle get impoverished and marginalised. I distinguished the following rural strata: family farmers (who compete with LFEs), *odnoosibniki* (independent peasants), peasant-workers (engaged in subsistence agriculture, but who also conduct wage work), pensioners’ households (whose major income comes from social transfers), and marginals (who refuse to adapt to new life conditions).

It is difficult to define common goals and mobilise people for organised protests in a highly stratified community. For example, many livestock keepers want to withdraw their land plots, which were distributed during the land reform but remain in LFEs’ possession. The LFEs’ reluctance to return these lands to rural dwellers causes tensions and social unrest. Other villagers, in contrast, are tolerant towards LFEs but dissatisfied with rural unemployment and the meagre LFE support offered to households. Family farmers, in turn, complain about the LFEs’ land and control grabs. Lubov (61), a retired teacher from the Krasnoye village, who now represents the interests of veterans in the village council, stated about the difficulties of mobilising rural dwellers for a collective action: ‘when they get together, they act like “swan, pike and crawfish”⁷; everyone pulls to their own side, and the situation does not change at all⁸’.

Cooperation does exist; however, it is often within the same social stratum and related to common household work activities. Thus, peasants graze their livestock together on common lands and establish a rotation of herdsmen from each household. Family farmers often borrow farm machinery from each other, but the disunity between them does not allow them to create a common equipment base or achieve economies of scope by uniting their labour or possessions. According to the UroRAN survey (2011), 77.5% of respondents want to do business only with direct family members, avoiding any fixed obligations and cooperation with fellow-villagers or even their distant relatives (Gonin 2013). This mutual distrust leads to what Hardin (1968) described as the ‘tragedy of commons’: individuals act independently according to their self-interests, which contradicts the whole group’s long-term best interests. Thus, many joint farmer groups created in the beginning of the land reform in the Novoalexandrovskiy rayon have fallen apart. Out of 5 large farmers groups established in 1992 in stanitsa Rasshevatskaya, 15 farmers split off and established their own small farms by the 2014. One of those farmers, Yuri (30), explained this separation: ‘we worked together, but the result was

⁷ ‘Swan, pike and crawfish’ is a fable, written by the Russian fable writer Ivan Krylov in 1814. The writer highlights the disconnection of collective actions and their resulting ineffectiveness: ‘Once Crawfish, Swan and Pike set out to pull a loaded cart, and all together settled in the traces; they pulled with all their might, but still the cart refused to budge! The load it seemed was not too much for them: yet Crawfish scrambled backwards, Swan strained up skywards, Pike pulled toward the sea. Who’s guilty here and who is right is not for us to say - but anyway the cart’s still there today’.

⁸ Interview conducted by the author in June 2014, the Krasnoye village, the Grachevskiy rayon, the Stavropol Krai.

negative, we were not able to agree on the right management of the farm. Too many “I”, nothing about “we”⁹.

The rural stratification generates tensions in rural communities. However, it would be wrong to call them class struggles. The classes of bourgeoisie and proletariat have not been formed, as the main means of production – land and capital – remained in the LFEs possession; on the contrary, partial repeasantisation has occurred in Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union (Mamonova *et al.* 2013). The existing tensions can be explained by ‘negative egalitarianism’, when better-off peasants are attacked by their less fortunate fellows, who long for equalisation. Sergey (55), a village veterinarian who owns 15 cows in his household, recently received an official petition from his neighbours with a demand to eliminate his cows because of their smell:

What are they against? The smell? Come on! 10 years ago every household had cows! They walked along the central street. There was a herd of 100 heads in the village. And now what? Only two other people and I hold livestock. I keep my cows at the end the street. And it still smells! They organised a gathering, wrote a petition to the local administration, and demanded that I move my stable outside the village. I don’t have land to move it.¹⁰

Of course, this situation might be explained by the lifestyle transformation in the countryside: many people found jobs in urban centres and became daily migrant workers instead of peasants. However, that is true for the younger generation in the Krasnoye village, while Sergey indicated that the petition was written by people of his age and older, who maintain a rural lifestyle. This is not an isolated example of people taking actions against their neighbours. Visser (2008) reveals that stealing from fellow-villagers has become more common, contrary to the Soviet past, when this behaviour was very rare (Humphrey 1983). Negative egalitarianism can be expressed in even more destructive forms. Farmer Alexander from the Krasnoye village provides an example how villagers punish their fellows for evident success: ‘...his wife nags him every day: “look, your neighbour is doing well and you are doing nothing”. One day he burns his neighbour’s house and is happy: the neighbour is nothing too now.’ According to Wegren (2013), this destructive envy gives a new meaning to social justice; intracommunity punishment of better-off peasants acts as a hammer, which ‘hammer[s] down the nails that “stick up”’ (*ibid.*, 11). This destroys solidarity and propensity for collective actions.

5. The duality of the agricultural system and perceived economic space and time

The economic structures that are dominant in rural areas sharpen interactions between rural dwellers and other social actors and institutions, and therefore define the possibilities for collective actions.

The bankruptcy and reorganisations of kolkhozy and sovkhozy have drastically affected rural employment. LFEs use labour saving technologies and economies of scale, therefore only employing a minor part of the rural population¹¹. Although during the last decade registered rural unemployment became lower than in the 1990s (VNIIESH, 2011 reports it between 10 and 20% depending on the region), Kalugina and Fadeeva (2010) estimate the real unemployment at 55%. High unemployment has a profound effect on the sources, structure, and distribution of household income. One of its consequences is that household food production became the major source of family subsistence (Wegren 2005). To date, more than 32% of the total income of an average rural household comes from agricultural production on their household plots, and only 30% of the income comes from wage employment. For the largest part of low-income rural families, the income from household farming

⁹ Interview conducted by the author in July 2014, in *stanitsa* Rasshevatskaya, the Novoalexandrovskiy rayon, the Stavropol Krai.

¹⁰ Interview conducted by the author in June 2014, the Krasnoye village, the Grachevskiy rayon, the Stavropol Krai.

¹¹ For example, the population of *stanitsa* Rasshevatskaya, Novoalexandrovskiy rayon, is more than 5 000 people. In the Soviet past, nearly all of them were employed by the ‘Rodina’ kolkhoz. At the moment, only 12 people work in the reorganised LFE ‘Rodina’ (data from fieldwork).

contributes up to 70% of the family income¹² (Ogloblin and Brock 2006). This small-scale food production has a largely subsistent character: 75% of household produce is consumed within the household, while only 25% is sold (Timonina and Litvinoca 2009).

In 2013, rural households produced 82.3% of the country's potatoes; 69.4% of the vegetables; 61.1% of cattle meat; 71.5% of sheep and goat meat; 48.3% of milk; and 93.3% of honey. In total, they contribute to 41.1% of gross domestic agricultural output, while cultivating only 5.3% of agricultural land in the country (Rosstat 2014). Rural households are very productive and resource efficient (in terms of material inputs), however, they are often considered 'backward', 'relics of the past', and 'without long term perspective' (Visser *et al.*, 2015). The majority of state programmes are aimed at the development of large-scale industrial agriculture, which requires significant subsidisation and is, in fact, inefficient (Spoor *et al.*, 2013). However, the generalised belief that 'big is beautiful' defines the current economic practices. The post-socialist legacies and the contemporary distribution of economic capital create an economic space in which rural households are underestimated both by state institutions and society. Rural dwellers do not perceive their subsistence agriculture as an alternative to large-scale farming. Household farming is still referred to (both formally and informally) as a *subsidiary* personal agriculture [*lichnoye podsobnoye khoziaystvo*], being seen by the rural population as a necessary, but still auxiliary production. The majority of rural dwellers would decrease their food production if their incomes from other activities (wage work) increased (Nefedova 2008). According to Novokhatskaya (2008, 56), rural people 'were not and will not be able to accept the current situation as permanent and a fortiori perspective for their life'.

The societal subjective underestimation of rural household economy creates no internal stimuli to defend the position of peasant agriculture in the national farm system. However, the defence is not always required, as the politics of LFEs do not directly jeopardise rural households' subsistence. In many Latin American or African countries, peasants were displaced from their lands (or from their traditional markets) due to land grabbing; by comparison, large-scale land acquisitions in post-Soviet countries were carried out with no physical displacement, nor the exclusion of small-scale producers from agricultural market (Mamonova, 2015). Rural households produce labour- and time-intensive products for domestic consumption, and therefore do not compete with LFEs, which are mainly focused on grain production for export. De Schutter (2011) has mentioned a similar situation as a possible coexistence scenario, in which large-scale agricultural commodities are shipped abroad, while the food security in the home country is guaranteed by small-scale producers. The segmentation of agricultural markets allows peasants and LFEs to peacefully coexist in different market segments.

However, if the economic interests of LFEs and rural households collide, conflict is unavoidable – and its resolution is, as a rule, not in favour of the last ones. In 2012, the African swine fever was diagnosed in some regions of Russia, which led to an organised mass slaughtering of pigs at large and (predominantly) small farms. In several villages in the Stavropol Krai, the people I spoke with reported that swine fever was an instrument to displace rural households and family farmers from the pork meat market; at which time, many LFEs began large-scale pork production. Yuri (57) used to keep pigs in the Krasnoye village:

There was a campaign to strangle us. First were revisions, control checks, then they [epidemiological service] forced us to build a high fence, then there was a rule: no more than 5 pigs per household. And then, finally, this fever. I don't know if it was a real fever. Some pigs just die, it is normal... but they said it was a fever and killed all pigs in the village. [...] They needed to clean the space for the new pig farm complex, which was built in Svetlograd. Now it's the major pork producer in the rayon¹³.

¹² However, this proportion varies across different social groups. Thus, according to the Russian Longitudinal Monitoring Survey (2000-2003), in 24.6% of the high-income households, farming accounts for less than 5% of total income, while 74.1% of it comes from employment. At the same time, for 21.9% of households in the low-income group, farming is the source of 70.0% of total income, whereas the share of income from employment is only 7.8%. These differences in the rural population's income create high inequality: The poorest ten percent of rural Russians earn 10 times less than the most well-off *decile* (Ogloblin and Brock 2006)

¹³ Interview conducted by the author in June 2014, the Krasnoye village, the Grachevskiy rayon, the Stavropol Krai.

This expulsion of small-scale producers from the pork market, allegedly pursued by LFEs in alignment with state authorities, has caused diverse rural responses across Russia. Visser *et al.* (2015) observed protests among rural households in the Belgorod region: people wrote letters to newspapers, organized demonstrations, blocked roads, and even gathered in a small social movement ('Kolos'). However, these efforts were not met with significant success. The state-elite coalition creates a bias in state policy which makes it difficult for small-scale producers to defend their economic interests. In the Stavropol Krai, the pig slaughtering caused no significant resistance. Rural household economies are very diversified, and with the loss of one income source they quickly reorient to other farm activities. The difference between the Belgorod resistance and the Stavropolskiy 'quietness' can be explained by different syntheses of the economic space for contestation. The first case is rather exceptional: the rural income in the Belgorod region is among the highest in Russia, and the regional government encourages rural entrepreneurship (Dorofeev *et al.* 2014). This might be the reason for the emergence of more positive perceptions about peasant economy, than elsewhere in Russia, and could generate the economic incentives for rural dwellers to defend their small-scale production.

As with social space, time is an essential component of understanding the dynamics of the economic space for contestation. On the one hand it is expressed through an inclination towards the further *latifundisation* and eradication of small-scale farmers at the national level, on the other – it is a crucial resource in peasant economy. As it was mentioned already, rural households are engaged in time-intensive agriculture and often keep livestock, which require daily and even hourly care. Low prices for milk collection trigger frustrations and dissatisfactions among small-scale milk producers (for example, in the Grachevskiy rayon, people have to sell their milk for 10 rubles per litre, which is below their production costs, while the end price of 1 litre of milk in supermarkets is 40 rubles and higher). However, their gathering and collective protest are impossible, not only due to the earlier discussed constraints, but also because of the time shortage for activities other than farming. Olga (52) explained: 'if we protest, who will milk our cows? We can't leave them and go to protest.' Time is a resource here, which is needed for organisation of and(or) participation in contentious politics. The economic transition of the 1990s resulted in the institutionalization of private land ownership, and gave rural residents opportunities to expand their land plots and increase food production in order to guarantee subsistence for their families. If in 1992 the average land plot size in possession of a rural family was 0.2 ha, it has more than doubled by 2011 (0.47 ha per household) (Spoor *et al.*, 2013). While the scale and size of the agricultural production have increased, labour resources have decreased as many young people left their villages for urban jobs. Maria (53), who cultivates a household plot of 0.7 ha together with her husband and mother-in-law, and keeps various livestock, said:

...you ask me if I have *free time*. Have you seen my household? Do you think I have this *free time*? We wake up at 5 in the morning and go to sleep late in the night. [...] How else could we support our three sons? [...] They all are in cities now.¹⁴

One of the factors which create the rural disengagement from contentious politics, according to Ergil (1977), is the economic dependence. Visser *et al.* (2015) mentioned the symbiosis between smallholdings and LFEs as one of the defining factors for 'quiet' food sovereignty in Russia. In the Soviet past, rural households were allowed to use a whole array of collective facilities, from obtaining young livestock and letting private cattle graze on collective pastures, to using machinery. Moreover, 'aside from the support provided to households, there was also a wide practice of goods being taken (pilfered) by the households' (Visser *et al. ibid*, XX). These days, LFEs pay rent in-kind (grain and sometimes other produce) to rural dwellers in order to use the land plots distributed to them during the land reform. In my other paper (Mamonova, 2015) I viewed these payments as a formalisation and downscaling of former kolkhozy/sovkhkozy support to their workers. Although these payments are rather insignificant in a household budget, they provide additional stable income. Ludmila (51) explained the importance of in-kind-payments for her household and why she does not want to sell her land shares:

¹⁴ Interview conducted by the author in July 2014, the Arzgir village, the Arzgirskiy rayon, the Stavropol Krai.

There is a new investor who wants to buy our shares. He gives 100,000 rubbles for a share. It is, of course, a lot of money, but they will disappear immediately. Everything is very expensive these days. No, it is better to receive grain for our shares. It's not enough to feed our cows; we have to buy additional grain. But this is enough to feed our sheep¹⁵.

Pilfering still exists in rural areas. Although some LFEs are trying to fight this behaviour, the costs of control and theft investigations often exceed the losses from peasant pilfering; many companies have to accept these small losses as a part of daily routine and call them the 'angels' share' (Visser and Mamonova 2011). Meanwhile, for poor households, these little thefts are additional source of subsistence. These economic arrangements create an objectivised and subjectivised dependency of peasant households on LFEs, which prevents rural dwellers from challenging the existing order in the economic space for contestation.

6. Naive monarchism and state-elite coalitions in the political space for contestation

When asked who is to blame for the woes of their household and for the problems in rural areas, rural people unanimously answered: 'the government'. In their discourses about wrongdoings in the countryside (such as the bankruptcy of *kolkhozy/sovkhozy*, farmland abandonment, the destruction of village infrastructure, price politics that discriminate small-scale producers, *etc.*) peasants usually use the word 'they' to allude to the state-elite coalitions. At the same time, the head of the government – president Putin – is seen by the majority of rural residents in a positive light. Natalia (85) from *stanitsa Rasshevatskaya*, the *Novoalexandrovskiy rayon* said:

I support Putin. He is a good man. He increased our pensions [...] He makes it better for people, but you cannot be a warrior when you are alone in the field¹⁶. He cannot cover everything. The local authorities are those who do things wrongly¹⁷.

The belief of rural dwellers in the president's good will is shaped by historical legacies. Traditionally, Russian peasants' attitude to various state representatives was heterogeneous. The Tsar and his actions were recognized unconditionally, whereas all the failures were ascribed to officials, who, according to peasants' beliefs, deliberately misrepresented the Tsar's will. This so-called 'naive monarchism' prevailed in Tsarist Russia and was observed during the Soviet period (Mamonova, forthcoming). The folk proverb '*pridet tsar-batyushka i vseh rassudit*' (the tsar-dear father will come and judge us all) remains representative of rural attitudes to contestations in Russia. In 2008, there was an organised Peasant Walk to the president in order to draw his attention to the problems in rural areas. At the time, peasants from the *Krasnodarskiy Kray*, the *Omsk*, and *Moscow* regions, organised by the social movement *Krestyanskiy Front*, came to the Red Square in Moscow to talk with the president. However, the president ignored the walkers' arrival and the people-president dialogue did not occur (see Mamonova, forthcoming, for analysis of naïve monarchism and rural resistance in contemporary Russia).

The naive monarchism is strongly reinforced by the state-controlled mass media. Hopstad (2011) described how Russian news agencies are "guided" to promote the presidential autonomy, while being free to criticize local and regional authorities. Manipulated perceptions, according to Lefèbvre (1991), are among the mechanisms of space representation. Space might be built from the inside by its actors, but it is also constructed by outsiders through the system of institutions, in this case state-controlled mass media. Belief in a good national leader prevents the appearance of any political movements among rural dwellers, who have significantly less access to independent media sources than urbanites.

Contestation of lower level authorities does exist. However, because of a lack of solidarity among rural dwellers, it is often expressed in individual protests. Formally, the legal system provides a number of possibilities for the population to defend their interests; however, when the dissent is

¹⁵ Interview conducted by the author in July 2014, the *Arzgir* village, the *Arzgirskiy rayon*, the *Stavropol Krai*.

¹⁶ Russian folk proverb; it is similar in meaning to the British 'no man is an island'

¹⁷ Interview was conducted by the author in July 2014, in *stanitsa Rasshevatskaya*, the *Novoalexandrovskiy rayon*, the *Stavropol Krai*.

related to highly politicised issues, the outcome is not in favour of the deprived. Rolfes and Mohrman (2000) analysed villagers' formal appeals to local courts in the Vladimir region. They revealed that, when peasants asserted their rights to land and property shares that had been lost due to land grabbing, their appeals were stuck in a 'series of dead ends and refusals' (*ibid*, 13). The state-elite coalition in the countryside makes it nearly impossible for peasants to defend their interests in an open, legalised way. The 'milk mafia' – a covert alliance of milk-processing businessmen and regional authorities which controls prices for the milk collection from rural households – is spread throughout Russia and Ukraine, where rural households are the main milk producers. As previously mentioned, villagers in the Grachevskiy rayon receive 10 rubles per 1 litre of milk from milk collectors. However, the manager of the Stavropol Milk Factory, the company responsible for milk collection in this rayon, declared that milk is collected from the local population at the price of 20 rubles per litre¹⁸. The local authorities ignore the disappearance of 10 rubles from the price of each litre. The appearance of any other milk collectors in the rayon (who could give a better price to milk producers) is heavily restricted by the 'milk mafia'¹⁹. Rural dwellers sell their milk below its production costs, but do not have the courage to protest – they remember the example of their fellow villager who attempted to complain. A cow-keeper, Olga (52), shares this story:

There was one woman with cows. The price is too small, you can't survive. Her sister decided to help her. She wrote a letter to the governor about that. [...] Well, the governor considered it, and sent it to the SMF [Stavropol Milk Factory] with an order to solve the problem. SMF ordered: no more milk to be collected from this woman. That was it... She tried to sell milk by herself, make cottage cheese, but nothing worked out. Finally, she had to slaughter her cows. No one wants to complain anymore.

In different conditions, previous failure may raise even stronger resistance (see Hirschman's (1984) 'principle of conservation and mutation of social energy'). However, the mutation of social energy does not occur in rural Russia because of the highly individualised social space for contestation with no solidarity between its actors, and the peasant disbelief in the potentials of small-scale economy.

7. Soviet nostalgia and manipulated perceptions in the cultural space for contestation

Embodied cultural capital is important for explaining the limited cultural space for contestation. The system of knowledge, skills and values which were acquired during individuals' lifetime, as well as inherited from previous generations, is expressed in the daily practices of the rural population and their perceptions about the politics of change and contestation.

Such issues as land grabbing and the development of large-scale industrial agriculture – which in other contexts cause protests among diverse rural groups and mobilise them into global peasant movements such as La Via Campesina or MST – are not recognised as a problem or subject to change in Russia. First, large-scale land acquisitions by LFEs are socially accepted in Russia. LFEs are seen as the successors of kolkhozy and sovkhozy by the rural population (Mamonova 2015). People still call them 'kolkhozy' and 'sovkhozy'. The persistence of old terms not only expresses the habits of colloquial speech, but also demonstrates the actual and perceived continuity of the dual system of agricultural production: large-scale "collective" agriculture versus small-scale peasant subsistence farming. Nikulin (2011) even applies the term 'post-kolkhoz' to contemporary LFEs to stress the continuity of collective farming. Furthermore, the use of Soviet language in contemporary speech demonstrates the rural population's strong nostalgia for the Soviet past.

This nostalgia holds one of the central positions in the contemporary post-Soviet cultural space. Abramov (2013) indicates the identity crisis as the major reason for the Soviet nostalgia. Indeed, as it was mentioned early in this paper, the 'shock therapy' during the post-socialist transformation period destroyed the kolkhoznik-identity but did not give rural dwellers the opportunity to develop new identities. Moreover, the contemporary rural residents remember the Brezhnev period of the 1980s

¹⁸ Interview was conducted by the author in July 2014 in the city of Stavropol, the Stavropolskiy Kray.

¹⁹ Information from many interviews with small-scale milk producers, and confirmed in a private conversation with Ekaterina Agalarova, PhD, Associate Professor of the Department of Economics and Business technology business in agribusiness at the State Agricultural University of Stavropol, June-July 2014.

with highly subsidised agriculture, which was widely seen as ‘a golden era, a time of stability, economic abundance, national pride, social justice and the belief in the future’ (Humphrey 2002, 141). The villagers’ dissatisfaction with reality and their uncertainty about the future generate the cultural space, where large-scale collective farming is seen as a salvation from rural problems. Heady and Gambold-Miller (2006), for instance, showed in one of their case-studies that peasants welcomed the revitalisation of an abandoned kolkhoz by a new investor, hoping to return to the ‘good old times’.

No new values have emerged in the post-Soviet cultural space to potentially lessen this nostalgia. The peasant way of life, which is used by peasant movements as an alternative to large-scale agriculture in other countries, is not recognised by Russian rural dwellers because of the societal beliefs that ‘big is beautiful’ and small is ‘backward’. The value of food sovereignty in La Via Campesina’s interpretation is also absent from the post-Soviet countryside. The lack of spread of international peasant values occurs due to the rural society’s hostility towards new ideals, and the state’s modelling of cultural spaces for contestation. The Putin government restricts the activities of foreign CSOs and NGOs in Russia in order to prevent the inflow of the “western” values from outside the country, which could challenge of existing order and cause social unrest²⁰.

The role of the state in shaping the spaces for contestation through manipulated perceptions is especially visible in the cultural space. The indirect manipulation of people’s opinions about protests is a much more effective state strategy of societal control, than direct repressions of opposition. In the post-socialist context, civil disobedience and sabotage are often regarded as ‘uncivil’ and, therefore, unacceptable behaviour (Jacobsson 2012). Shevchenko (2009, 73) links the negative attitude towards open mobilisation in Russia to the prevailing belief that ‘rebellions never improve the situation, but only make it worse’. According to her ethnographic research in urban Russia, people see the attempts to dedicate oneself to reforming the discredited system as ‘naïve and self-defeating’. These perceptions are maintained and reinforced by the Putin government through mass media, thereby (re)producing the structures in which protest is not culturally acceptable. According to an interview with Natalia (27), an activist from the town of Mytishi, ‘the state uses mass media in order to propagate that it is stupid to protest, that nothing can be changed... and people believe this’²¹.

The state engineering of societal perceptions through the informational policy allows Putin to pursue his national and foreign politics with the support of (or lack of opposition among) Russian citizens. The civil society, which could contest state actions, is very weak; as Mamonova and Visser (2014) have shown, social movements and political parties, which aim to defend the interests of the rural population, are more likely state marionettes or phantom movements with concealed goals. The majority of Russians view state restrictions of civil society organisations positively; this is especially the case in rural areas, where the population is more conservative and more supportive of the regime than in the cities. A survey found that 72% of the respondents thought that the state should monitor the motives behind civil society organisations’ charitable activity (Chebankova 2012). The state’s negative propaganda on, for instance, foreign CSOs and NGOs, is also widely shared by the population. Therefore, the culture of protest is underdeveloped in rural Russia, while the existing order is seen through the prism of Soviet nostalgia, which makes it socially accepted.

8. Conclusion

This study analysed the ‘quietness’ of the post-Soviet rural dwellers, who do not defend their interests through organized groups protest and social mobilisation, despite their socio-economic exclusion, deep poverty, and land rights deprivations,.

²⁰ However, the absence of international peasant values does not necessarily mean the absence of similar, internally developed, categories. Visser *et al.* (2015) reveal the existence of a ‘quiet food sovereignty’ in Russia, or ‘food sovereignty without a movement’. However, they assert that quiet food sovereignty does not challenge the overall food system directly through its produce, claims, or ideas, but focuses rather on individual economic benefits, and - in the case of urban dwellers engaged in farming - a culturally appropriate form of sociality, generated by the exchange of self-produced food. The quiet food sovereignty is too diffuse and implicit to question the existing order.

²¹ Interview conducted by the author on a train from Sergiev Posad to Moscow, in April 2013.

This paper identified various factors that explain rural 'quietness', by analysing social, economic, political and cultural spaces for contestation. These spaces represent spheres of coexistence and interactions of rural dwellers in their daily responses to various socio-economic strains. The results indicate that the individualisation and social space segregation of Russian rural dwellers prevent the generation of social capital, which is important for organised group actions. The legacy of large versus small-scale farming and the segmentation of agricultural markets create coexistence conditions for LFEs and rural households in the economic space. The Soviet nostalgia, which dominates the cultural space, reinforces the existing dual structure of agriculture and prevents the emergence of any new ideas that may question the generalised norms and beliefs. Though the political space for contestation is highly constrained by the contemporary regime, the existing order is preserved to a larger extent by the 'naïve monarchist' sentiments of the rural population and by the state-manipulated perceptions of the 'uncivility' of social protest, than by the direct repressions of civil disobedience.

Regardless of the abovementioned factors, however, this research did reveal some forms of resistance in rural Russia. This resistance is largely expressed in individual protest actions, such as writing petitions to courts and authorities. However, these protests do not develop into mass collective actions. As shown in this paper, such individual attempts have often been frustrated and ended in repression. Contrary to Hirschman's principle of social energy mutation, these unsuccessful individual protests are not increasingly renewed and accumulated to reappear in a form of collective resistance. The absence of moral sentiments within rural communities prevents the emergence of mutual sympathy and solidarity-driven activities. The self-interested, isolated individual, who chooses rationally between alternative courses of action, has become representative of the post-soviet countryside. Although the individualisation of the rural social space is caused more by the destruction of kolkhozy and sovkhosy than by capitalist development, capitalist norms and values (such as individualism and market-based relations) have nevertheless penetrated the rural life, substituting food exchange traditions and mutual support (which had been the main characteristics of the peasant moral economy). Moreover, negative egalitarianism creates obstacles for rural dwellers to act in a group-oriented way. Instead of mobilising their efforts to punish their oppressors, rural dwellers engage in community destructing activities, such as writing petitions against each other, damaging properties, and stealing from each other.

As this study has shown, the observed rural 'quietness' does not necessarily imply the absence of all forms of resistance. This 'quietness' creates more of an illusion of peace. Whereas the open rural protest is rare and more individually based, hidden forms of resistance may be detected in the Russian countryside. Nikulin (2011) considers stealing and foot-dragging at LFEs as examples of the villagers' everyday resistance, similar to what Scott described as the 'weapons of the weak'. However, stealing from collective farms had partly been institutionalised during the later Soviet period as a source of additional income for the rural population. Humphrey (1983) discovered that the Soviet villagers used the word *theft* to refer only to stealing from each other, while the appropriations of collective farm belongings were referred to as *takes*. These takes remain popular in contemporary rural Russia and are a part of the symbiotic relations between rural dwellers and LFEs. The empirical research for this paper revealed a number of small-scale thefts from LFEs and farmers, which were inconsistently related to conflict situations, and therefore were not necessarily examples of hidden resistance. Moreover, these thefts (no matter their origin) only satisfy rural needs for food or vengeance, and do not represent a significant force of change in the existing order. Many LFEs have accepted these small losses as part of the daily routine and do not change their corporate behaviour accordingly.

However, under what conditions may these hidden rural acts and individual protests develop into more open and organised collective action? The answer can be found in the multidimensional space for contestation. The social, economic, political and cultural spaces are dynamic structures and change over time. The transformation of one element may cause consequent changes in all spaces for contestation, thus transforming the milieu for resistance. An empirical example is that of the different rural responses to state actions against the swine flu in the Stavropol Krai and the Belgorod region. As this paper showed, a better economic objective and perceived status of rural dwellers in the Belgorod

region (in comparison to other Russian regions) has expanded the economic space for contestation, which generated transformations in other spheres of everyday life, and consequently led to a group mobilisation for the protection of smallholder rights. Another example is the LFEs' recent tendency to end the symbiosis between them and the rural households (Visser *et al*, 2015), which creates fewer stimuli among the rural population to support large-scale agriculture. To date, it does not lead to significant changes in the spaces for contestation; however, if villagers' decreasing economic dependency on LFEs coincides with transformations in other spaces of everyday life, rural politics might change. Therefore, the factors that define the contemporary rural 'quietness' should be studied in their full complexity, but analysing their impact concurrently.

This research introduced the subject of rural post-soviet 'quietness' to the current debates on peasant politics and collective mobilisation. It demonstrates that, despite the observed peacefulness and lack of rural protests in Russia, various movements and tensions do emerge. The existing order is preserved by a combination of various social, economic, cultural and political factors; the absence of one of these factors might upset the current equilibrium, which could lead to unpredictable consequences.

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