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'Quiet Food Sovereignty' as Food Sovereignty without a Movement? Insights from Post-socialist Russia

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ABSTRACT *What does food sovereignty look like in settings where rural social movements are weak or non-existent, such as in countries with post-socialist, semi-authoritarian regimes? Focusing on Russia, we present a divergent form of food sovereignty. Building on the concept of 'quiet sustainability', we present a dispersed, muted, but clearly bottom-up variant we term 'quiet food sovereignty'. In the latter, the role of the very productive smallholdings is downplayed by the state and partly by the smallholders themselves. Those smallholdings are not seen as an alternative to industrial agriculture, but subsidiary to it (although superior in terms of sociality and healthy, environmentally friendly produce). As such, 'quiet food sovereignty' deviates from the overt struggle frequently associated with food sovereignty. We discuss the prospects of 'quiet food sovereignty' to develop into a full food sovereignty movement, and stress the importance of studying implicit everyday forms of food sovereignty.*

Keywords: food sovereignty, social movements, Russia, smallholders, post-socialist

1. Introduction

What shape does food sovereignty take in settings where rural social movements are weak or non-existent, such as in countries with post-socialist and (semi)-authoritarian regimes?¹ Food sovereignty is generally seen as something tightly connected to social movements,

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which are able to formulate a food sovereignty discourse and follow it up with collective action.

The expanding studies on food sovereignty have until now focused on the Global South and the West but have left Eurasia's post-socialist states—such as Russia, Ukraine, the Central-Asian states, and China, accounting for a large share of the world's countryside and population—out of the picture. Russia and most of the former Soviet Union's other major agricultural producers (i.e. Ukraine and Kazakhstan) constitute an area where the discourse on, and practices of, food sovereignty strongly diverge from the global understandings of it as defined by Via Campesina and the Nyéléni forum. Although the Global South and West already feature varying definitions and approaches to food sovereignty (Patel 2009), we contend that the Russian take is radically different from the basic premises of the food sovereignty variants studied until this time.² Therefore, a closer look at the post-Soviet space—and Russia in particular—may contribute to the critical examination of food sovereignty, which is registering a global rise in popularity.

With no study conducted on food sovereignty in Russia until now, and virtually none in the post-socialist area,³ the first question that arises is whether food sovereignty exists at all as a concept or practice in the country. Food sovereignty is hardly used in government policy and media in Russia, and even then it is mostly as a synonym for 'national food security' (e.g. Super 2012). Government policy is focused on food security and in particular national food self-sufficiency, through the development of large-scale farming. Although food sovereignty rarely figures in Russian debates in its literal translation (*prodovolstvenniy suverenitet*), the concept is certainly not irrelevant.

We argue that a kind of food sovereignty does exist in Russia, but in a less pronounced form—as it practically thrives without any organizations that could formulate outspoken discourses or coordinate actions. However, some of the actions and implicit ideas related to the concept are widespread among the population and clearly emerge bottom-up. We term these practices and implicit ideas 'quiet food sovereignty', building upon the concept of 'quiet sustainability' introduced by Smith and Jehlička (2013). We argue that food sovereignty in practice plays an important role in Russia, with smallholdings producing a large share of the food consumed, in or near their local places of living, and in a largely ecologically friendly way. These elements match well the vision of food sovereignty advocated by global social movements. We reveal that a rights discourse, which is an important element in the food sovereignty concept (Claeys, 2013; Nyéléni, 2007), is rather implicit in 'quiet food sovereignty'. Moreover, the agricultural and environmental importance of Russian smallholdings—which produce, for instance, more potatoes than all the commercial farmers in the US and UK put together (Ries, 2009)—is grossly overlooked and downplayed by the government. Even more strikingly, it is also partly overlooked by the smallholders themselves. We will demonstrate that this extraordinary productivity and 'quiet food sovereignty' are primarily linked to: first, longstanding concepts and practices of household security and self-reliance, which date back to the Soviet era food deficits; and, second, the symbiosis between large farm enterprises (LFEs) and smallholdings, which consisted of the LFEs providing smallholders with large farm assets, and the smallholders' pilfering from the LFEs.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 sketches the theoretical (and methodological) approach for studying settings with weak or non-existent movements. Section 3 explains the weakness of rural social movements in Russia. Section 4 describes the Russian food system and the symbiosis between large-scale and small-scale farming. Section 5 deals with the discourses and practices of Russian smallholdings, and explains how they constitute 'quiet food

sovereignty'. Section 6 discusses the implicit political dimension of quiet food sovereignty. Section 7 discusses the perspectives for the emergence of a genuine food sovereignty *movement*. Section 8 presents the conclusions and discusses the wider relevance of 'quiet food sovereignty'.

2. Rural Social Movements in Russia

In Russia, the policy space for social movements is very limited. In the Soviet era, virtually all social organizations were established top-down. After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, it became legally possible to establish social movements. However, due to 70 years of socialist reign without genuine social movements, the population starkly distrusted new collective endeavors and ideologies and lacked the experience of grassroots collective action. In addition, it was too distracted by the 'shock-therapy' reforms of the 1990s, with their sudden price liberalization, widespread privatization, and drastic reduction of state spending (Mamonova & Visser, 2014). Faced with such a context, Russians did not mobilize to resist changes collectively, but instead coped with (food) shortages by intensifying the Soviet practices of smallholder farming and informal exchange networks (Mamonova & Visser, 2014).

As a consequence, in the 1990s only a limited number of social movements emerged in the cities, and virtually none in the countryside. We refer below to 'rural movements', although some of them also represent urbanites with smallholdings. From the mid-2000s onwards, some rural movements emerged (Mamonova & Visser, 2014). However, due to increasing constraints imposed on civil society organizations by the Putin regime, practically all these movements became either strongly state led, with very weak links to their supposed constituency, or 'phantom movements', without substantial activities (Mamonova & Visser, 2014). The only movement that remained closely connected to rural dwellers was the countrywide movement *Krestyansky Front* (Peasant Front), which defended rural dwellers faced with land grabbing. However, due to mounting constraints by the state and the lack of social will to mobilize, the movement was disbanded in 2013. Thus, it is hardly an overstatement to characterize rural social movements in Russia as extremely weak or virtually non-existent. Moreover, it is increasingly problematic to call these organizations social movements: they are weak in terms of both their lack of popularity among the population and their lack of power (Mamonova & Visser, 2014).

3. Studying Food Sovereignty without a Movement: Analytical Tools

Food sovereignty is generally seen as something tightly connected to a social movement, which is able to formulate, promote, and execute a food sovereignty discourse, and convert it into collective action. The emergence of food sovereignty in the global policy arena is clearly strongly connected to the rise of Via Campesina as a transnational social movement, and various other peasant and farmer associations and networks (such as members of the International Planning Committee on Food Sovereignty). The study of food sovereignty, aside from being (among others) a response to the limitations of the food security studies, is very much a branch of social movement studies, with its focus on discursive aspects (discourses, visions on farming) and organizational issues (leadership, transnational alliances, and open/massive collective action).

Recently, some studies have explored food sovereignty beyond the node of social movements. Particularly relevant here are the studies that have gone beyond the 'global summitry' of large

social movements, by looking at localized forms of resistance against the global food system (Ayres & Bosia 2011). But so far, the localism of such micro-encounters ‘is still overshadowed by protest summitry and large-scale mobilizations’ (Ayres & Bosia 2011).⁴ Even with the growing attention for the various actors operating beyond social movements and the study of actors (or scales) in food sovereignty issues as ‘multiple sovereignties’ (McMichael, 2009), the social movements still remain the touchstone of analyses. This raises the question of what food sovereignty looks like (or might become) in settings where social movements are extremely weak or non-existent. Does food sovereignty exist in (semi)-authoritarian states where social movements are mostly forbidden (such as in China) or heavily restricted (as in Russia)?

For settings such as Russia as well as other post-socialist and/or semi-authoritarian settings with weak or non-existent movements, additional analytical tools are necessary to study food sovereignty. We propose to pay more attention to the level of everyday practices and customs (including the interconnections between large and small farms), ‘everyday resistance’ (Scott, 1985), as well as ‘muted discourses’ (Ardener, 1975). We advance these tools in contrast to the existing focus on outspoken discourses such as public speeches and declarations, and concepts from the social movement literature that are frequently used in the food sovereignty literature, such as ‘framing’, ‘mobilization’, and social movement strategies (e.g. Claeys, 2013; Desmarais, 2007; Torres, 2003).

The study of food sovereignty was initially very much a study of the framing, mobilization, and genealogy of the transnational movement La Via Campesina (Desmarais, 2007; Torres, 2003). This is, of course, fully understandable, taking into account the crucial role of the movement in defining and propagating—though not inventing (Edelman, 2014)—the concept. A focus on customs and everyday practices instead of social movements enables another approach to rights and entitlements. In the food sovereignty literature, the term ‘right’ appears frequently. The Nyéléni food sovereignty declaration (Nyéléni, 2007, p. 1) defines food sovereignty as:

... the *right* of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their *right* to define their own food and agriculture systems.
[emphasis added]

However, it is debatable whether this is about strict rights in the juridical sense, or about entitlements which would, for example, have a more social, informal character. Hospes (2014), for instance, argues that the choice of ‘peoples’ instead of ‘humans’ (individuals) as actors seriously complicates the conversion of food sovereignty claims into legally recognized rights, such as human rights (a more optimistic evaluation is provided by Claeys, 2013). As the legal impact of food sovereignty is (still) weak, it seems relevant to include ‘entitlements’ under the label of rights. Following up on Hospes’ (2014) call for more attention to legal pluralism within food sovereignty, we will draw upon work in legal pluralism and anthropology (von Benda-Beckmann, von Benda-Beckmann, & Wiber, 2006), and view rights (for instance in the sphere of property) as multi-layered. von Benda-Beckmann et al. (2006) propose the analysis of property on four levels; ideology, legislation, social norms/customs, and (everyday) practices. The literature on property focuses mostly on the first two levels (which often fall together), while ignoring the latter two (von Benda-Beckmann et al. (2006). Applying this multi-layered analysis helps us to uncover the symbiosis between Russian smallholders and LFEs, which exists underneath the ideological and legal divergence between the two groups, and which is an important element for understanding ‘quiet food sovereignty’. As mentioned above, this concept is inspired by the ‘quiet sustainability’ concept by Smith and Jehlička (2013). They argue, based on research in post-socialist central Europe, that healthy and environmentally sound agriculture can also be reached without explicit

discourses and social movements, and therefore they call it 'quiet'. The concept does not incorporate a political dimension, as there is no mention of rights and entitlements. We will contend that quiet food sovereignty does include a political dimension—although a rather implicit one. In analyzing this implicit political dimension, we will draw on the earlier mentioned anthropological work on property relations and the concept of 'everyday resistance' (Scott, 1985).

Aside from interviews with rural social movement leaders (see Mamonova & Visser, 2014 for methods), the data collection for this article consists predominantly of qualitative interviews and observations among the rural population and *dacha* cultivators. In total, 60 interviews were used in this analysis (18 and 32 interviews with smallholders were conducted by Mamonova in the Vladimir and Moscow region, respectively (October–November 2013); 10 interviews and numerous informal conversations with smallholders and state and agribusiness officials were conducted by Visser in the Belgorod region (November–December 2013).

Before elaborating on (quiet) food sovereignty, we will describe Russia's large- and small-scale agriculture (and their interconnections), loosely based on the above-mentioned property relations framework.

4. Post-socialist Agrarian Reform and the Soviet Legacy of Symbiosis

Large-scale agrarian reform started in Russia after the Soviet Union's demise in 1991. Farmland privatization took place through a 'share-based' land distribution, as opposed to the 'plot-based', physical land distribution conducted in most Central and Eastern European countries. The rural population could choose to keep their shares in the privatized successors of the collective and state farms, or take out their paper shares and convert them into real land plots in order to establish a family farm.

Few rural dwellers established private farms, and the growth of such farms already stagnated by the mid-1990s due to insecure property rights, bureaucratic hurdles, and lack of market access (Pallot & Nefedova, 2007). As a result, the LFEs, successors of the collective and state farms, stayed largely intact. The number of LFEs, with an average size of several thousand hectares, remained remarkably stable. Moreover, so-called agroholdings emerged in the course of the 2000s—companies that consist of various integrated LFEs and/or other firms in the food chain. Rural dwellers largely remained employees in the LFEs, while simultaneously expanding (more than doubling) their 'subsidiary household plots' (Rosreestr, 2012).

Two opposing forms of production existed in the Soviet agriculture: on the one hand, the highly mechanized and subsidized, but inefficient, state and collective farms; on the other, the small, but highly productive, semi-private parcels of their employees. Although they only represented 5 percent of the total farmland (Rosreestr, 2012), the rural population—using manual labor on their tiny plots (of 0.10–0.25 ha)—nevertheless accounted for an astonishing 22% of the total agricultural production value of the Russian Soviet republic in 1989 (World Bank, 1992). Moreover, many households had (and still have) their *dachas* (summer houses with a garden around the cities); as *dachniks* (*dacha* owners), they cultivated several fruits and vegetables for own consumption and exchange. Currently, every second family has a *dacha* plot, with an average size of about 0.01 ha; 47% of them cultivate half or more of this land (Nefedova, 2008).

The impressive production on the household plots (further enlarged by *dacha* cultivators) was seen as a strong indication that—once Soviet-era restrictions on private production would be lifted—rural dwellers would establish fully independent farms. This expectation was based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the existing (informal) property relations.

Although, on the ideological and legislative levels, the state/collective farms and the household plots were opposite and fully separated, on the level of rural norms and daily practices, they were interlinked in a so-called symbiosis (Nikulin, 2003, 2009; Visser, 2006). Household plots could produce relatively large amounts of food because they 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. As a result, households were able to ensure their own food security and get extra revenue through sales or exchange. The chairmen of the collectives were also interested in providing such support, as it was a way to motivate their low-paid workers. Finally, aside from the support *provided* to households, there was also a wide practice of goods being *taken* (pilfered) by the households.

The boundaries between the collectives and household plots were thus permeable—a situation which largely continued in the post-Soviet era (Visser, 2006). An LFE decline set in during the 1990s, and farm wages began not being paid for months. In reaction, rural households enlarged their plots and intensified pilfering from the collective. In the course of the 2000s, with some recovery in the LFEs and improved wage payment, households somewhat declined the intensified smallholder production, though it remained at a high level.⁵ While towards the end of the Soviet era (1989) the Russian household plots produced 22% of the agricultural output value, in 2012 this was estimated to be 43.2% (Rosstat, 2013b). In sum, land reforms unintentionally led to a continued co-existence of LFEs and (intensified) smallholder production.

5. Quiet Food Sovereignty: Discourses, Importance, and Quietness

Although rural (and some urban) households are a fundamental part of the Russian food system, producing a large share of total agricultural output, their role in the pursuit of the national food security and sovereignty is overlooked or consciously ignored. This section will examine the state and agribusiness discourses on small-scale farming, discuss smallholder productivity and sustainability, and smallholders' own discourses.

5.1. *Discourse on Smallholder Farming by State and Agrobusiness*

The Russian government and the agribusiness elite regard the large-scale industrialized sector in a positive light, despite such social and environmental risks of large-scale, industrial farming as soil degradation (due to mono-cropping) (Nikulin 2009; Visser, Mamonova, & Spoor, 2012). The smallholder sector is largely depicted in negative terms—at least where its agricultural and economic functions are concerned. Descriptions like 'backward', 'relic of the past', 'without long-term perspective', 'low hygiene standards' abound. This statement by the vice-president of the Russian Grain Union, Alexander Korbut, illustrates this view:

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 WTO, their fate seems pretty dismal.⁶

Western scholars have also frequently described the post-Soviet increase of the smallholders in such negative terms as 'muddling through transition with garden plots' (Seeth, Chachnov, Surinov, & von Braun, 1998). Pallot and Nefedova (2007, p. 202) correctly state that, in Russia, 'people's farms have been portrayed as the official "other" of the agri-food system'. They are seen as the opposite of the supposedly modern and efficient LFEs.

However, while smallholders are construed as backward and inefficient, and get little direct state support, they provide a substantial share of Russia's basic foodstuffs. Households produce 93% of the country's potatoes, 80% of the vegetables, 51% of the milk, and 54% of the meat (Rosstat, 2013a). It should be noted that smallholdings (especially *dacha* plots) are sometimes seen as positive by the state, but then as a 'healthy life style' (in terms of working with nature and consuming fresh produce) or 'recreation', and rarely in terms of its productive function and its role in the agrofood system.

5.2. Productivity, Sustainability, and Localness

Food self-provisioning in Russia is quite productive and resource-efficient (in terms of material inputs). Table 1 presents the yields of the most essential crops.

The table shows that rural households are currently nearly as productive (in terms of yields) as LFEs, having been even more productive until recently. The productivity of LFEs is primarily achieved through state support, use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and machinery. Households have comparable yields, with essentially no direct support from the state and with largely traditional methods.⁷

Those traditional methods result in environmentally friendly agriculture. Organic fertilizers (manure, compost) are used instead of agrochemicals, and fuel input is minimal as tractors are rarely used (occasionally for plowing) and much work is done by using animal traction (Pallot & Nefedova, 2007; Visser, 2009). These environmentally friendly practices do not emerge from wider concerns about sustainability or contributing to an environmentally sound or localized agricultural system. They arise mostly from the desire to grow healthy food (especially among *dacha* cultivators), the inability to buy expensive inputs, and self-interest in cultivating the small plots in a way that ensures longer-term fertility. The following quote by Tamara Semenova, a representative of the rural social movement 'Peasant Front', describes how the self-interest of smallholders brings about favorable environmental results:

They are interested in maintaining the fertility of their land. (. . .). Peasants use predominantly organic fertilisers. They maintain the fertility of the land through the use of green manure. They also use crop rotations (. . .).⁸

Table 1. Yields of LFEs and rural households (ton/ha)

	1991	2001	2012
Large farm enterprises (LFEs)			
Grain ^a	1.44	1.83	1.69
Potatoes	9.24	9.95	16.64
Vegetables	13.59	13.58	21.44
Rural households			
Grain ^a	2.67	1.80	1.37
Potatoes	11.52	10.86	12.63
Vegetables	15.96	15.40	19.90

Source: Yields calculated based on output and cultivated land data (by producer and crop) from Rosstat (2013a).

^aIncludes legumes.

A 61-year-old inhabitant from Vladimir region we interviewed stated:

Potatoes we plant for ourselves (. . .) not to buy the potatoes from the store! Look at those [latter] potatoes. They are 5 years old and still look gorgeous, clean, no rots, nothing! (. . .) It tells us that there are so many pesticides in those potatoes! And in the potatoes we plant—there is nothing.

Although the benefits of smallholder farming are not uncontested, globally, there is an increasing body of work arguing that smallholder farming is more ecologically sustainable (e.g. Altieri, Funes-Monzote, & Petersen, 2011). Relevant here is the fact that, while aversion of fertilizers (and in particular pesticides) is widespread in Russia, it is perhaps not surprising that some of the millions of smallholders do use chemical inputs. In a survey conducted in 2001–2002 among 43 LFEs, 12% of them indicated their provision of pesticides to households (Visser, 2009). This figure (as is the one for fertilizer) is much lower than that for other forms of support, such as ploughing plots (98%), fodder provision (79%), and use of pastures (53%). Overall, the intensification of household production from the early 1990s onwards was mainly achieved by expanding the small plots and, above all, by putting in much more labor (Visser, 2009).

Finally, smallholder production in Russia is highly localized, with a short food chain and distance from field to fork. Both the production and the wider food chain of these smallholders are rather sustainable. A large portion of the smallholders' produce is simply consumed by them and/or exchanged with fellow villagers. The sale of produce occurs within the district at market places, along roadsides, or via itinerant traders (Pallot & Nefedova, 2007). Much of the households' surplus, however, is exchanged via networks of relatives and acquaintances, and represents a sociality that is highly valued and has a long cultural history in the Soviet era (Zavisca, 2003).

5.3. *The 'Quiet' Discourse of Smallholders Themselves*

The discourse of the smallholders themselves is less pronounced and more implicit (with many adhering to the official view, but also some deviations), but it is also widespread. Essentially, they see their smallholdings as a means of survival when wages are not sufficient, or when one suddenly loses one's job—hence, responding to insecurity. The same holds for *dacha* cultivators. We agree with Ries (2009, p. 200) that the aspect of a fall-back option, a means to survive in times of sudden economic crisis or personal misfortune, trumps other elements such as recreation, health, and ecological values (Zavisca, 2003). A *dacha* cultivator interviewed by Reis (Zavisca, 2003) stated:

You can trust that, if everything really falls apart, you have the skills and habits to survive.

A smallholder from the Prokuzino village of the Vladimir region we interviewed, who currently cultivates only half of his plot, stated:

If there will be a year of famine, we will cultivate all our 10 sotkas (0.1 ha) with potatoes.⁹

There is a remarkable paradox that smallholdings are so important, in terms of both economic and ecological value, while at the same time the rural population is rather 'quiet' about these facts, and see them simply as a coping strategy. With the silencing of the smallholdings' role, the term 'quiet food sovereignty' – as inspired from the 'quiet sustainability' concept (Smith & Jehlička, 2013, p. 148) – would probably be the best way to characterize this muted, diffuse form of food sovereignty. The 'quiet' food sovereignty would then be one oriented towards coping with insecurity (also featuring a subsidiary function, as we will show below),

instead of aspiring for a role as an independent mode of farming. As for the overlooked smallholding benefits to the environment (partly due to lack of income to buy fertilizers, herbicides etc.), the concept of 'quiet sustainability' seems apt. The concept of quiet sustainability was developed based on research in Poland and the Czech republic, and we should note the major differences between Central European Countries and (post-)Soviet countries regarding socialist agriculture and post-socialist land reforms (to name but a few). Particularly between Poland and Russia, an important difference is that the symbiosis between LFEs and smallholders is hardly found in Poland, where few state farms were established and independent farmers remained the mainstream. However, and most importantly for our argument, the countries do share a common post-socialist setting and a widespread practice of urban and rural dwellers engaged in smallholdings. Smith and Jehlička (2013, p. 148) have described 'quiet sustainability' as follows:

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.

The practices are 'quiet' in terms of sustainability because 'the concern is with the state and quality of the food rather than the environmental impact of the food system per se' (Smith & Jehlička, 2013, p. 155). And they constitute:

not a programme to be implemented, a future ambition for society or an exceptional contrast to the norm. Rather it is a quiet but purposeful parallel to the market economy of food. (Smith & Jehlička, 2013, p. 155)

In Russia, the quiet and parallel nature of smallholder production is clearly indicated by the widespread adherence of the rural population to the official categorization of rural smallholdings. As in the Soviet period, the smallholdings of the population are called 'subsidiary household plots'. The absence of terms like 'farm' or 'agriculture' is telling. The term 'household' has connotations of household chores (much of the work on the household plot is done by women, and seen as an extension of housekeeping).

Furthermore, the term 'subsidiary' is also crucial. In the Soviet Union, with its principle of full employment, rural smallholdings indeed functioned as a subsidiary income and food source, secondary to collective farm employment. However, during the slump in agriculture, with widespread wage arrears that came after the demise of the Soviet Union, smallholdings quickly rose in importance. Rural dwellers intensified smallholder production (and urbanites did likewise on *dacha* plots) (Visser, 2009). Even with a slight decrease in their share in the 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 (Visser, 2009). Thus, while the term 'subsidiary household plot' might have been appropriate during the Soviet period, it is now a stark understatement of its actual role in both agriculture and rural incomes.

However, as mentioned above, rural households still adhere to the idea of the subsidiary nature of their plots vis-à-vis LFEs.

While the personal smallholding is seen as crucial for survival, and few would do away with it completely, few rural dwellers actually aspire to expand their plots if they can get a salaried job that provides them with sufficient income (Nefedova, 2008). A considerable share of the rural households would in fact decrease production (although not fully, we suspect). Furthermore, few rural dwellers (or *dacha* cultivators) would see their smallholdings as a viable alternative to the large-scale food system. On the contrary, rural dwellers have strong nostalgia for the Soviet past and welcome the revitalization of former *kolkhozy* and *sovkhozy* (Pallot & Nefedova,

2007). The striking fact is that the state and agribusiness' negative view on smallholders partly resonates among the latter themselves.¹⁰ While this is mainly the result of the longstanding subsidiary role of household plots, it is also caused by the longstanding stigmatization of rural dwellers (Ries, 2009), and reinforced by the official media discourse. However, while smallholders often expect a decline in the importance of smallholdings in agriculture, we rarely encountered smallholders who expect their complete disappearance.

6. The Political Dimension of Quiet Food Sovereignty

Many authors argue that the political dimension of food sovereignty is key (Claeys, 2013; McMichael, 2009; Patel, 2009). Desmarais (2007), for instance, speaks of 'a collective struggle to define the alternatives to the globalisation of a neoliberal, highly capitalised, corporate-led model of agricultural development'. Elements of the political dimension are: a clear vision to shift the control of productive resources to farmers, their subsequent claiming of rights, and finally their struggle (against state and/or agribusiness) to achieve those rights.

In Russia, at a first glance, the political dimension seems to be absent. There are no outspoken food sovereignty visions and claims. There is hardly any open struggle for food sovereignty. Could we then classify the Russian case as food sovereignty? In other words, in addition to quiet sustainability, can we call it quiet food sovereignty?

In terms of aims and claims, proponents and researchers of food sovereignty often state that it is, first a drive to roll back the mainstream large-scale food system (in terms of what it is against) and, second, a desire to gain democratic control over food production (and consumption) by establishing autonomous smallholder production (in terms of what it is in favor of) (Desmarais, 2007; McMichael, 2009; Nyéléni, 2007; Patel, 2009). We will discuss the relevance of these two aims for the Russian case.

Regarding the first point, it should be stressed that, whereas in many countries food sovereignty is inspired by the threats of the large-scale system for smallholders, this is has not been the case in Russia. Russian rural dwellers have traditionally experienced numerous benefits of the large-scale food system as rural workers and citizens (full employment, good social services, and support for their smallholdings have all been connected to their workplace in the LFE). As consumers, rural and urban dwellers' major concern constituted the frequent deficits of fresh and varied food. Long queues in front of half empty food shops became iconic images of this failure of the system. Thus, whereas elsewhere the dominance and pervasiveness (in terms of outcompeting other food options) of the large-scale food system is the main concern, in Russia the *lack* of pervasiveness and the resulting food insecurity have traditionally been the concern.

Second, are claiming more control by smallholders and striving for full autonomy essential criteria for acknowledging Russian practices as a form of food sovereignty? We would argue that the Russian smallholders see cultivating their own food as an important right. However, this right is implicit. It is hardly expressed as it is a longstanding tradition, and a substantial degree of control over their own production is seen as the natural order of things. Why would smallholders state the obvious?

Moreover, the right to cultivate (a part of) their own food does not necessarily mean that the right for autonomous food provision is claimed. As defined by the Peoples' Food Sovereignty Network (2002), food sovereignty is:

the right of peoples to define their own food and agriculture; (...) to determine the *extent* to which want to be self-reliant. [emphasis added]

For Russian smallholders, a parallel existence of smallholdings next to LFEs seems to be the appropriate cultural form, with a symbiosis between LFEs and households preferred over full self-reliance.

As long as the right to produce their own healthy food is not threatened, smallholders will not have much of an incentive to protest. Rural dwellers 'have the core land resource, the household plot, in their inalienable property' (Pallot & Nefedova, 2007, p. 203), and this resource is hardly threatened as the plots are too small for LFEs. The access to LFEs' resources, however, has always been informal, and here 'the legal basis for their claims is often tenuous or non-existent' (Pallot & Nefedova, 2007, p. 106). Access to these resources seems to be based on an implicit social contract in which rural dwellers keep quiet as long as the symbiosis between LFEs and smallholdings is maintained by the former, or at the very least the smallholders are not restricted.

As the rights discourse is so implicit in quiet food sovereignty, it raises the question of whether the rights discourse is muted or in fact absent. In other words, does quiet food sovereignty have a potential for political struggle or is it intrinsically apolitical?

It seems that people will claim their rights and engage in struggle when the implicit social contract of the LFEs and smallholders' symbiosis (or at least co-existence) is threatened. A strong indication of this are the smallholders' fierce reactions to the state policy aimed at fighting swine flu in the autumn of 2013. After the outbreak of the disease in the swine herd of a household in the Belgorod region, the governor decided to slaughter all the pigs held by the households in the region and to pay them compensation. This policy triggered a widespread response: letters to newspapers, demonstrations, road blocks, and even the emergence of a small social movement ('Kolos') to counter it. The state policy was frequently interpreted by smallholders as a pretext to eradicate smallholdings—to the benefit of LFEs. As a smallholder stated;

Initially pigs will be liquidated, then chickens, other birds. (...) In the end, by hook or by crook, the last peasants will be eliminated. (Park, 2013)

Furthermore, the current pilfering of farm assets by rural dwellers could be seen as a struggle in the form of 'everyday resistance' (Scott, 1985). It is not a form of resistance against LFEs as such, as rural households can hardly imagine a future without them; but it can be classified as resistance against the tendency of LFEs to curtail their support to smallholders in order to cut costs (Nikulin, 2003, 2009)—in other words, as resistance against the erosion of the 'implicit social contract' of symbiosis (cf. Pallot & Nefedova, 2007, p. 124).

These examples show that quiet food sovereignty is not apolitical. We agree with Pallot and Nefedova (2007, p. 106) that:

... rural Russia has been the scene of a muted, but real, contestation of market reform on the part of the population intent on defending their access to resources and services to which they believe they are still entitled.

That active claim making and open struggle have been rare is caused first of all by the fact that, by and large, people are able to engage in producing and consuming 'healthy and culturally appropriate food' as they wish.

7. Preconditions for an Emerging Food Sovereignty Movement

To gauge how likely it is that a food sovereignty movement would emerge out of 'quiet food sovereignty', we discuss below various obstacles and opportunities.

One cognitive obstacle for a food sovereignty movement is that the rural population associates sovereignty exclusively with the state level (such as the ‘sovereign’ or ‘guided’ democracy propagated by the Putin regime, or the national food self-sufficiency—for which food sovereignty is occasionally used as a synonym). The rural dwellers’ own food practices and narratives are mainly concerned with a secure food provisioning—control over food production is only a means to that end. Here we see a similarity with the situation in Honduras (Boyer, 2010), where Via Campesina’s food sovereignty campaign failed because it did not take into account the understandings of the Honduran peasant. The latter associated food sovereignty with the powers of nation states, and the concept of food security with their deeply held peasant understandings of, and desire for, security in terms of their continued social reproduction in insecure social and natural conditions. This resonates with the Russian case, with its tradition of food deficits and smallholder farming as a vital survival strategy for coping with that.

Another obstacle is the low potential for mobilization among the rural population. This is related to the fragmentation of Russian rural society (with, for instance, numerous divisions between private farmers, household plot holders, and *dacha* cultivators (Pallot & Nefedova, 2007, p. 36–38), in addition to a demographic composition which is strongly skewed toward the elderly and economically inactive (Nefedova, 2008). Furthermore, there is a generally low proneness toward collective action (Mamonova & Visser, 2014).

Another major hindrance is the earlier discussed symbiosis between LFEs and household plots. This symbiosis, while favorable to the smallholders, at the same time hinders the further growth of independent family farming. What is more, it reinforces the status quo of the dominance of LFEs. More generally, this symbiosis precludes a more assertive, rights-based stance toward 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 ingrained reaction is to seek refuge at the household/*dacha* plots. As a Russian farm director, interviewed by Visser in 2002, stated (cf. Ries, 2009, p. 201 on *dacha* cultivators):

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.

However, when the symbiosis is threatened, we might expect instances of sudden mobilization, as indicated by the earlier mentioned example of the smallholders’ response to the state’s swine flu policy. The ongoing modernization (read: further industrialization) of agroholdings, the sharpening of sanitary standards, and the rising influence of foreign agribusiness through Russia’s recent accession to WTO might put additional pressure on the continuation of this symbiosis, and subsequently create incentives for a Russian mobilization around food sovereignty issues.

8. Conclusions

Normally, one would expect to find food sovereignty within rural movements; in Russia, genuine rural movements are extremely rare and weak. The food sovereignty term is rarely used in Russian debates in its literal translation.

However, the food sovereignty concept is neither irrelevant nor fully absent. Food sovereignty in its Russian guise is a more implicit, but widespread approach and clearly emerges bottom-up; we termed this ‘quiet food sovereignty’, building on recent insights regarding ‘quiet sustainability’ (Smith & Jehlička, 2013). We showed that food sovereignty in practice plays an important role in Russia, with the rural and urban population as smallholders being able to produce a significant share of the food consumed, in or near their local places of living, in a largely

ecologically friendly and healthy way. Furthermore, the exchange of food from those smallholdings generates a sociality that is generally highly valued, and has a long cultural history (Ries, 2009), which presents a purposeful parallel to market exchange in agribusiness. These aspects match the vision of food sovereignty put forward by global social movements rather well.

However, at the same time, the productive and environmental importance of such smallholdings is grossly overlooked and downplayed by the Russian government, but even more strikingly, also partly by the smallholders (cf. Kitching, 1998; Pallot & Nefedova, 2007). Quiet food sovereignty does not challenge the overall food system directly through its produce, claims, or ideas, but focuses on individual economic benefits and ecological production for personal health, as well as a culturally appropriate form of sociality, generated by the exchange of self-produced food.

Furthermore, a rights discourse—which is so central in food sovereignty—while not absent, is rather implicit. It is grounded in the longstanding tradition of self-provisioning, and taken for granted.

Quiet food sovereignty is yet too diffuse to be classified as a genuine food sovereignty *movement*. Some emergent rural social movements do exist in Russia. However, for a national food sovereignty movement to take shape, there are many hindrances to overcome such as: the divergent understandings of food sovereignty and security among the Russian smallholders, and the low potential for mobilization among the rural population (due to, for instance, social fragmentation). The symbiosis between smallholdings and LFEs also impedes resistance; however, when this symbiosis is threatened—which we expect to happen increasingly—it might trigger sudden mobilization.

We contend that the Russian case is relevant for the wider food sovereignty debate and movement. Some media sources even heralded Russian smallholdings as offering a model that might be the key to feeding the world (NaturalNews.com, 2012). Our study suggests that food sovereignty as an everyday practice and discourse is more widespread in post-socialist and semi-totalitarian settings than one would suspect by evaluating food sovereignty by the presence of food sovereignty movements. Acknowledging this would further the global reach and inclusiveness of the food sovereignty movement, and build new transnational linkages with parallel struggles in non-democratic contexts.

Viewed critically, some might wonder whether considering 'quiet food sovereignty' a form of food sovereignty makes for a slippery slope, with the risk of weakening an already broad concept. We acknowledge this risk, and recognize that the inclusion of 'quiet food sovereignty' will be a major challenge, both conceptually and practically, for network building in settings without strong movements. However, the definition of food sovereignty has never been static over the past two decades, and the ambition to incorporate new local experiences to achieve 'a fine balance' between 'local realities and global actions' (Desmarais, 2007, p. 135) or visions is key to keep food sovereignty vital. Furthermore, we would argue that—for food sovereignty to constitute the global movement it claims to be—it should be inclusive of the large numbers of rural (and urban) people in non-democratic settings who in many ways practice the ideal of food sovereignty, even if they are less vocal in doing so.

Finally, we contend that the finding that 'quiet food sovereignty' has not (yet) turned into a solid social movement should not only be seen as a shortcoming. In fact, in less than democratic settings with limited open space for contention, the implicit practices and narratives, the strong orientation toward co-existing with large-scale farms, and the hidden or ad-hoc struggles of 'quiet food sovereignty' might be more effective than full-blown movements. Russia's 'sovereign' or 'guided democracy' approach does not offer much space for social

mobilization. It is very likely that a sizeable food sovereignty movement would face state opposition and restrictions, as is currently happening with various urban NGOs and emerging rural movements (Mamonova & Visser, 2014). Alternatively, the Russian government might take up the concept if food sovereignty would become more popular, but would likely do so in a tightly controlled manner. It might do so, for instance, by molding the concept ingeniously—taking out the elements that challenge the status quo—as it has previously done with various rural and urban movements and their notions, by creating state embedded civil society organizations (Mamonova & Visser, 2014). Thus, it would be less likely for a Russian food sovereignty *movement* to be close to the term's global understanding (in the vein of a social movement like *Via Campesina*), and more likely for it be something of a state-captured '*Via Kremlina*'.

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Notes

- 1 This applies also to urban food movements.
- 2 For varying definitions, see e.g. Desmarais (2007), Edelman (2014), Nyéléni (2007), Peoples' Food Sovereignty Network (2002).
- 3 An exception is DeMaster (2013).
- 4 Alternatively, some argue more recently that food sovereignty is becoming too locally focused (Iles & Montenegro, 2013).
- 5 Furthermore, though they mostly continued offering some support to household plots, LFEs gradually reduced the range of goods and/or beneficiaries (Nikulin, 2003, 2009; Visser, 2009).
- 6 See: Subsidiary farming—a relic of the past or the reality of the Russian countryside? <http://altapress.ru/story/80477>.
- 7 Some of the state support to LFEs may 'leak' to the plots through the symbiosis between the two; but this would be a small percentage, especially as the monitoring of large farm property became more strict from the late 1990s onwards (Visser, 2009).
- 8 Interview 21 October 2010, Moscow.
- 9 Interview 5 November 2013.
- 10 There are also differences between regions and households, with the small group of somewhat larger, commercial household plots likely to be more positive. For a slightly more positive view on smallholdings, see Alekhin (2012); for negative views, see Kitching (1998), Pallot and Nefedova (2007, p. 205).

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