



Analysis

The Art of the State to Intervene: Insights Into Agricultural Land Management in Russia

Yuliana Griewald

Division of Resource Economics, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Unter den Linden 6, 10099 Berlin, Germany



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ABSTRACT

In Soviet Russia, an agricultural directive could pass 30 management levels on its way from the central government to the farm. Central planning impeded the adaptation of agricultural practices to the local social-ecological contexts and virtually eliminated self-accountability in agriculture. Focusing on contemporary Russia, the paper examines how the state currently influences farmers' land management and how this subtle mode of intervention aligns with the local context. Qualitative research in the Western Siberian Grain Belt reveals that the state-designed institutions guide land management in a politically desirable direction. They aim for virtually unlimited agricultural growth and largely misalign with the social-ecological conditions of grain farms.

1. Introduction

As a social-ecological activity, agriculture requires adjustment to the local conditions, flexibility of agricultural schedules, and self-accountability on the part of the farmers (Moshier, 1966; Priebe, 1969). For decades, these preconditions remained eliminated in a country as diverse as Russia – embracing all climatic zones of non-tropical terrestrial ecosystems (Bukvareva et al., 2015). Under the Soviet regime, Russian agriculture was managed by central planning, which largely disregarded the local circumstances and ecosystem capacities (Libert, 1995). One directive could pass 32 management levels on its way from the central authority to the farm director (Van Atta, 1993, p. 72). Has the post-Soviet transition led to an abolishment of state intervention and a tighter alignment of land management with the local social-ecological context?

In the first post-Soviet decade, state involvement in farm management was still in place. Numerous studies showed how regional and local authorities affected farm finances (Amelina, 2002; Davydova and Franks, 2006; Franks and Davydova, 2005; Wolz et al., 2016) and created diverse administrative burdens related, e.g., to land registration by family farms (Allina-Pisano, 2008, 2010; Lerman and Shagaida, 2007). Preferential treatment of large, corporate farms was also well documented (Amelina, 2002; Uzun, 2005; Wolz et al., 2016). However, state influence on farmers' land management received little scholarly attention: state interference with crop rotations features as one of the few examples (Allina-Pisano, 2008, p. 83). Given that crop choice, agricultural schedules, and input use all used to be centrally managed,

the current manner of state intervention in land management deserves careful attention.

In Russia as a major grain exporter, state influence particularly on grain farms¹ is of high relevance. Employing an institutional economics approach (North, 1993), this study aims to answer the following questions:

- How do state-designed institutions shape land management of grain farms?
- Why do farms comply?
- How do these institutions align with the local social-ecological context?

To address these questions, qualitative research on the ground was conducted. The Tyumen region located in Western Siberia was selected as a study area. Semi-structured interviews and an extensive document analysis offered valuable insights into the interplay of state-designed rules and revealed their frequent incompatibility with the local social-ecological context.

2. Methods

2.1. Study Area

The Tyumen region (Fig. 1) is part of the Western Siberian Grain Belt, where 70% of all grains of Asiatic Russia are produced (Kühling et al., 2016). The region occupies an area of 160,100 km², and

E-mail address: yuliana.griewald@gmail.com.

¹ For simplicity, the term “grain farms” denotes all grain-growing farms, including those that are also involved in livestock production. Both corporate and peasant (family) farms are in focus.



Fig. 1. The Tyumen region (in black) comprises one administrative entity with the autonomous Khanty-Mansiysk and Yamal-Nenets regions (dashed). Source: ESRI (2010).

agricultural lands cover 28% of its territory (MED, 2012). As Fig. 1 shows, it is a compound federal state. The autonomous regions in the north possess major oil and gas fields in Russia, securing high agricultural subsidies in the south. Out of almost 1.5 million inhabitants (TYUMSTAT, 2015) around 36% live in rural areas (FEDSTAT, 2016). Agriculture, forestry and hunting constituted 3.8% of the Gross Regional Product in 2013 (ibid.).

The region has experienced substantial land use change in the post-Soviet period. Initial land abandonment has now given way to re-cultivation and agricultural intensification (Kühling et al., 2016). Climate change is expected to render the region warmer and drier towards the south, increasing drought frequency in the main crop production areas (Degefe et al., 2014).

Tyumen is a typical Russian region regarding both the key crops grown and the organisation of farming activities. Spring wheat is the main crop by the sown area, followed by barley and oats. When it comes to farm organisation, crop production predominantly takes place within *corporate farms* – in stark contrast to the preponderance of family farming in the world (Brookfield, 2008). Russian corporate farms are agricultural enterprises most frequently registered as limited liability or joint-stock companies. These are often successors of the former state and collective farms. *Peasant farms* represent a Russian version of family farms (State Duma, 2003). *Household plots* refer to subsistence agriculture practiced by rural households. While corporate and peasant farms predominantly grow cereals, household plots focus on vegetables (TYUMSTAT, 2015). The focus of this paper is on grain-growing corporate and peasant farms.

2.2. Analytical Approach

In this study Tyumen agriculture was conceptualised as a social-ecological system (Janssen et al., 2007). The analytical approach comprised two main steps. First, the types of state influence on land management were analysed through the notion of institutions, or “the rules of the game” shaping human interaction (North, 1993). Institutions were seen to comprise *rules* and their *enforcement characteristics*. Thus, the state-designed rules regulating land management and their

enforcement mechanisms were analysed. In particular, the following agriculture-specific types of rules were considered: mandatory rules, voluntary incentive-based rules, and awareness-raising measures (Prager et al., 2011).

Second, compatibility between the identified institutions and the local social-ecological context was examined. In particular, I focused on how the institutions accounted for the properties of land management transactions. A transaction was essentially viewed as taking place when one stage of activity ends and another one begins – like in automobile assembly (Williamson, 1985). But in agriculture, not all transaction parties and effects are easily and immediately observable, like, for instance, when farmers apply fertiliser and, through nitrogen leaching and eutrophication, over time decrease the fishers' catch in a nearby lake (Hagedorn, 2015). In this case, seeing a transaction as a “physical phenomenon that is induced by a decision of one or more actors and affects one or more actors” (Hagedorn, 2008, p. 363) rendered further interconnections between (potential) transaction parties visible. The scope of the transaction remains thereby observer-dependent.

Like in other areas, transactions in agriculture entail the dimensions of conflict, dependence (or mutuality), and order (Commons, 1931). Conflict refers to the original conflict of interest among the parties. Their dependence on each other translates into the need for reciprocity: for instance, one party can alienate a property right, and the other party can acquire it. A transaction, then, encompasses mutuality and creates “orderly expectation” (Commons, 1931). In turn, governance is “the means by which to infuse order, thereby to mitigate conflict and realize mutual gains” (Williamson, 2005, p. 3).

Three exemplary transactions related to land management were selected: applying mineral fertiliser, selecting crops to sow, and maintaining cropland size. Alongside the classical transaction properties of frequency, uncertainty, and asset specificity (Williamson, 1996), agriculture-specific transaction properties were considered, like jointness, heterogeneity, and time lag (Hagedorn, 2008). A so-called “use-perspective” (Padmanabhan and Jungcurt, 2012) was employed to accentuate the actors' interests and those transaction properties that the actors themselves consider relevant. It helped to analytically reconstruct the logic behind the existing rules and to reflect upon their

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