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Corporate social responsibility, coexistence and contestation: large farms' changing responsibilities vis-à-vis rural households in Russia

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the regionally varied changes in social support and responsibilities of large-scale farms vis-à-vis household plot holders and their rural communities in post-Soviet Russia. Ongoing marketisation puts pressure on the Soviet-inherited symbiosis between large farms and household plots. We observe that large farms' shift to Anglophone-style, explicit Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) hides declining support for villagers and sometimes even dispossession. In the second of our two case studies, a less well-endowed region, the inherited symbiosis continues with modifications ("implicit CSR") and helps sustain comparatively higher household plot production.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article examine les variations régionales associées au soutien social et à la responsabilité des grandes exploitations agricoles envers les détenteurs de parcelles domestiques et leurs communautés rurales en Russie post-soviétique. L'expansion actuelle du marché induit une pression sur la symbiose entre grandes exploitations et parcelles familiales héritée de l'URSS. Nous observons que les grandes exploitations optent pour une Responsabilité sociale des entreprises (RSE) de type anglophone qui occulte une diminution du soutien aux villageois, et parfois même leur dépossession. Dans la seconde de nos deux études de cas, menée dans une région moins productive, la symbiose héritée de l'ère soviétique se perpétue avec quelques modifications (ce que nous qualifions de « RSE implicite ») et contribue à maintenir un niveau comparativement plus élevé de production dans les parcelles familiales.


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Introduction

While proponents see Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), outgrower schemes and “inclusive business models” in agriculture as win-win “partnership”, those in critical agrarian studies have foregrounded the unequal relations and adverse effects for smallholders (McMichael 2013). This article investigates the changing nature of the coexistence between household plot holders (and their rural communities) and large agribusiness in post-socialist Russia, as well as some of the outcomes of these changes. The focus is on the re-shaping of the – traditionally extensive – social support by large farm enterprises that we view as symbiosis.

In the Soviet era, large farm enterprises (LFEs) provided a wide array of support to household plot holders and rural communities: full employment, rural social infrastructure and inputs and services to household plots. Ongoing marketisation increasingly puts pressure on LFEs to downsize or eradicate such responsibilities. Yet, as will be shown here, the reshaping of social support varies tremendously across farms and regions. This article will examine: How the social support and responsibilities of LFEs versus plot holders are changing; the factors inducing LFEs to reduce, maintain or re-arrange their social support and responsibilities; and the likely outcomes of these changes for plot holders.

Our general argument draws on CSR literature (Matten and Moon 2008) and distinguishes two different paths of transformation: a reduction of symbiosis and simultaneous emergence of Anglophone “explicit CSR” and modified persistence of symbiosis as a kind of “implicit CSR”. We argue that these contemporary models of social support, which both evolved from Soviet-style symbiosis, are determined by the specific post-Soviet relations and regional power distribution between the major actors: LFEs, the state and rural communities. Within that power configuration, the degree of power of the large “agroholdings” and the state’s regional power and policy, appear to be most influential.

We focus on the case studies of Krasnodar Krai and Altai Krai, two leading agricultural regions in different agro-climatic zones, with different regional power configurations. These regional characteristics together constitute one of the manifold factors influencing the particular shape social support takes. The case studies structure the argument, but are not meant to suggest a deterministic causality. Consequently, we also use findings from studies of other Russian regions, including our fieldwork in Perm (2008, 2010).

The article is structured as follows. First the theoretical framework and second, the methodology, are discussed. We then sketch the structure of (post)-Soviet Russian agriculture. Subsequently, we describe the two origins of social support in Russian agriculture. Next, two diverging regional pathways of change in LFEs’ social support are empirically investigated, followed by our conclusions.

Theoretical framework

We examine large-scale farms’ support to household plot holders from the perspective of CSR because (1) the concept is gaining influence in Eastern Europe and Russia (Crotty 2016), including in agriculture (Bugay, Akishina, and Fannenstiel 2015; Gagalyuk 2017); (2) it does not rule out compatibility of market orientation and social support; and (3) it allows one to go beyond superficial, PR-like CSR, by drawing on the concept of “implicit” CSR.

First, the rise of CSR vocabulary within this region’s agriculture is related to the huge scale of corporatisation of large farms (Visser, Mamonova, and Spoor 2012). Following the

Soviet Union's demise, the privatised large-scale state and collective farms did not split up into private family farms as reformers expected. Instead, they often merged into so-called agroholdings – consisting of multiple large farms – each controlling 10,000 or even 100,000 hectares. These agroholdings are led by “CEOs” and “boards of directors”, which sometimes issue annual reports.

Second, whereas studies on Russian agriculture often tend to see social support by LFEs as atypical for a market economy and bound to disappear,¹ the gist of CSR studies is that business can, and should, contribute to wider society rather than just revolve around making money. CSR theories may thus help to counterbalance the tendency to depict economic (market) motivations and social orientations as irreconcilable, although tensions between the two are very likely. In addition, recent work in economic sociology and geography problematises the idea of market rationality devoid of social dimensions. Fourcade and Healy (2007, 99) even argue that “markets are explicitly moral projects, saturated with normativity”. In the literature on Russian agriculture, a social orientation is seen as resulting exclusively from Soviet-style values, with managers showing “inertia” in responding to market signals.² (for critique, Visser 2006). However, a market economy can also harbour social orientations, such as CSR policies – although these may be cosmetic or have a tenuous relationship with actual practices. Further, instrumental motivations may also play a role in the continuation of social support. Whereas some motives to provide social support have disappeared with the demise of the USSR (it was needed to attract labour in a situation where the state did not allow wage differentiation), we will show that some instrumental reasons for social support have partly remained in place.

Relevant here is whether CSR could or should be based on intrinsic, social motives, or whether it is based on instrumental motivations, representing mere business rationality, constituting simply a PR device or way to neutralise criticism (Dolan and Rajak 2011). We take the more nuanced view (following van de Ven and Graafland 2006) which appreciates that instrumental (or “financial”), as well as intrinsic or social motives, can be revealed empirically. These authors find that within a single company both types of motivations may be at work, depending on the stakeholders or issues concerned. Intrinsic motivations, however, induce stronger involvement in CSR (van de Ven and Graafland 2006, 1).

Further, to get beyond CSR as a PR device and uncover its more taken-for-granted aspects, we draw a distinction between “implicit” and “explicit” CSR (Matten and Moon 2008). Explicit CSR is the articulated element of corporate policy. Corporations endeavour to make it visible to wider society, or even globally, often through websites and annual reports. Increasingly, firms attempt to cultivate a positive image through initiatives such as promoting sports and culture, or environmental preservation. The actors to which this form of CSR responds are primarily shareholders and customers. This CSR tends to be driven by strategic (instrumental) motivations (Matten and Moon 2010, 410) and represents voluntary, discretionary action.

Implicit CSR is a taken-for-granted element of a firm's institutional environment. It is not the company's choice, but behaviour that society or the state values. It is largely an obligation enforced by an institutional environment, rather than sheer goodwill. To characterise this distinction, in contrast with explicit CSR, Matten and Moon (2008, 411) use opposite terms such as “collectivism” (versus individualism), “systemic/obligatory agency” (versus “discretionary agency”) and “solidarity” (versus “liberalism”). The explicit CSR model is an outcome of liberal capitalism, originating from the USA, while the implicit model

originates from continental European, Rhineland-style “coordinated capitalism”³ (Hall and Soskice 2001), in which state and societal actors (for example, trade unions) are more prominent. Globally, the former model is becoming increasingly dominant.

Soviet collective and state farms were obviously not corporations, but in practice they had a degree of freedom in decisionmaking within the planned economy, suggesting that their relations with society constitute a relevant historical starting point when studying the subsequent development of CSR within a capitalist economy. To investigate changes in social support and distinguish between explicit and implicit CSR, we draw on the CSR literature cited above and pay attention to the following elements:

- (1) **Motivations.** As mentioned above, we distinguish instrumental motivations that underly support by corporations (largely economic or political, stimulated by state pressure) from motivations we call social or intrinsic (based on norms, customs). Matten and Moon (2010) suggest that norms motivate implicit CSR, and instrumental motivations drive explicit CSR. We agree with van de Ven and Graafland (2006) that the observation that obligations and customs drive CSR does not rule out the presence of instrumental motivations.
- (2) **Formalisation.** For companies to have discretionary decisionmaking power regarding CSR (as is desired in explicit CSR), it is important to disentangle claims and expectations from various stakeholders, enabling companies to honour them selectively. The degree to which stakeholders and their claims, and the corporations’ social activities, are clearly delineated (rather than entwined), indicates the degree of formalisation of CSR. Explicit CSR has a high degree of formalisation, with “policies, programmes and strategies” (Matten and Moon 2010, 410), in contrast with implicit CSR, which has more blurred boundaries.
- (3) **Visibility.** Visible social support activities are those that use specific CSR terminology and reporting via websites or annual reports. High visibility indicates explicit CSR (Matten and Moon 2008, 410).

Methodology

This investigation combines interviews (our own and others’), FGDs and observations with LFE representatives and other actors (plot holders, state representatives) and review of company websites and media. To examine motivations and formalisation, we use in-depth interviews with LFE representatives, where possible corroborated with other interviews or written sources. The visibility of CSR is assessed through web searches. Disclosure through company websites and annual reports is thus taken as a sign of explicit CSR. We note that a company might describe its CSR activities more favourably than they actually are.

If a company does not describe its social activities on its website, or lacks a website altogether, it might still conduct such activities. Evidence of this on the ground (from interviews) is interpreted as indicating symbiosis or implicit CSR. To be characterised as implicit CSR, we require a positive perception by the farm management and other “stakeholders” that such activities contribute to society. Cases where social support to plot holders is solely taken through pilfering, rather than given, do not qualify as implicit CSR.

Field research was conducted by Kurakin and Nikulin in Krasnodar (2011, 2014, 2017; and earlier) and Altai (2013, 2015). Our Krasnodar study, covering two districts, resulted

in 118 interviews: 72 rural households, 36 corporate farms (managers and employees) and ten non-agricultural staff (municipal administration, school, hospital). The Altai study covered three districts, generating 94 interviews. Based on corporate websites, documents and regional media, Visser mapped the reported CSR activities of the 20 largest agricultural producers in each region.

The evolution of post-soviet agriculture

Today, Russian agriculture consists of three major types of producers, registered by official statistics: (1) corporate farms or large farm enterprises, LFEs;⁴ (2) private family (peasant) farms; and (3) household plots, considered non-commercial.

Soviet agriculture was bi-modal, presented by collective and state farms (*kolkhozes* and *sovkhozes*), on the one hand, and household plots of the member-workers of those LFEs, on the other. While virtually all land was cultivated by these LFEs, the member-workers on their small household plots, with largely manual labour, produced an astonishing one-quarter of gross agricultural output. This was thanks to the symbiosis between LFEs and these plots (see below), in which LFEs provided inputs for households.

During privatisation in the 1990s following the Soviet Union's demise, the member-workers received paper shares entitling them to LFE assets and land. The members could take out these shares and start family farms as private businesses. However, in doing so, members would lose their access to LFE support. Thus, most families chose remaining within the LFE as member-shareholders (Wegren 2009), continuing their subsidiary household plots. Asset shares were mostly tradable and often accumulated by management. Villagers retained most land shares and LFEs rented from them. Despite this initial trend, ownership concentration of farmland is underway (detailed below).

Only recently have private family farms begun expanding, currently producing some 15 per cent of total agricultural output. Due to the simultaneous decline in LFEs and the expansion of household production, household plots' share in total agricultural output rose dramatically in the 1990s, to 60 per cent. Household plots became a major source of subsistence for impoverished villagers (Wegren 2009). When speaking of smallholders, we mean those household plots. In the 2000s, LFEs recovered. Their share in agricultural output increased, and is now 55 per cent, while households' share dropped to 33 per cent – still surpassing Soviet-era levels (Rosstat 2019). In Krasnodar, households' share plummeted to 22 per cent, whereas in Altai it declined slower and is now 30 per cent (Rosstat 2019).

In the 2000s, a new type of agricultural producer emerged: agroholdings. These are holdings -mostly owned by rich investors from outside agriculture⁵ – incorporating multiple LFEs and often other firms in the food chain. Private agroholdings control at least 4 per cent of Russian farmland, producing some 7 per cent of agricultural output (Uzun 2012). In southern regions, like Krasnodar, agroholdings' share is much higher, around 20 per cent, and growing.

Two origins of social support: agroholding-driven CSR and Soviet-style symbiosis

We distinguish two trends in the development of LFEs' social support in Russia: first, the (modified) continuation of symbiosis and second, the emergence of explicit CSR, mainly

entering agriculture via (urban) investors who made their capital in other sectors and took the CSR lexicon with them. While the explicit CSR model tends to break with the Soviet symbiosis, a continuation and acceptance of symbiosis in a market economy can be classified as implicit CSR. In both cases, we argue, the state plays a substantial role. In Krasnodar, a somewhat distorted version of explicit CSR originates from a tight state–business coalition in which state and business (agroholding) interests blur, but where the latter tend to prevail.

Soviet and post-Soviet symbiosis

The starting point for understanding changes in LFEs' social practices is the legacy of Soviet symbiosis between collective (state) farms and household plots within a planned economy.

The informal “social contract” between a Soviet-era LFE and member-workers in the rural community implied, among other things, the exchange of labour on the collective farm for LFE resources used in households' subsistence production. The resources could be transferred formally by a LFE or through pilfering, which the LFE head mostly tolerated. In return, the LFE head hoped for a more motivated labour force, necessary to fulfil production quotas. This implicit contract was possible because both sides needed each other.

LFEs were not just economic organisations; they provided rural social infrastructure such as roads, water and gas, cultural clubs, schools and kindergartens. The LFE head was also de facto head of the rural community. Overall, this symbiotic relationship provided three key benefits to villagers: guaranteed long-term employment, production support for their household plots and social infrastructure and services. Almost every distinctive feature of implicit CSR, namely collectivism, systemic agency and solidarity, is relevant when describing the Soviet symbiosis in rural areas.

LFEs had two types of motivations to engage in this symbiosis: instrumental (economic, political), such as guaranteeing sufficient labour, and intrinsic (moral). Over time, this symbiosis became customary practice, widely expected from LFEs by the state, plot holders and society at large, and perceived as a moral obligation by LFEs.

The plan of Russia's post-Soviet reformers in the 1990s was that privatised collective farms would downsize and preferably shed all their social functions, described as “backward”, “inefficient” and non-core business activities (Visser 2006; Wegren 2009). Post-Soviet reforms transferred the responsibility for social services from LFEs to municipalities, but without providing the latter additional funding. Consequently, they have fallen into decline, unless local LFEs have the resources and willingness to maintain them (Nikulin 2002; Visser 2006). Many LFEs downsized social support to varying degrees, but did not eradicate it. Soviet symbiosis thus largely persisted, but gradually transformed (Nikulin 2003; Pallot and Nefedova 2007).

Explicit CSR

Anglophone, explicit CSR entered Russia during the market reforms. Initially, most attention went to philanthropic initiatives of some oligarchs, but after the 2000s explicit CSR concepts started to spread more widely (Belyaeva 2013).

Those companies with Western stakeholders began introducing CSR in consideration of Western customers (Crotty 2016) or investors. Reporting requirements for Western investors normally include a CSR. Most companies, however, are rather closed and oligarch-led, predominantly targeting the Russian market. For them state pressure is the key driver for explicit CSR (Belyaeva 2013; Crotty 2016). Overall, CSR by Russian businesses – at least the explicit variant – remains limited both in terms of its range and depth, leading Belyaeva (2013, 495) to call it mostly “cosmetic”.

The CSR concept entered Russian agriculture with the arrival of investors from other industries in the 2000s. Agroholdings investors mostly introduced the explicit CSR model known from their sectors, rather than the symbiosis characteristic of agriculture. Furthermore, explicit CSR more easily communicates agroholdings’ social activities to the state, as pressure is a major reason to engage in CSR, than the implicit symbiotic arrangements, which are predominantly visible locally (see below).

Paths of agrarian transformation and diverging social support: Krasnodar and Altai

The emergence of agroholding and the growing importance of the state as a stakeholder, rather than rural communities, means that the extent to which symbiosis is being reduced greatly depends on the state. The different regional state configurations of Krasnodar and Altai in our discussion below demonstrate the diverging trends in social support. A range of factors, including but not limited to a farm’s economic condition, leadership and agricultural sub-sector, influence what forms social support takes. As the symbiosis in post-Soviet Russia is dynamically and unevenly changing, and research on CSR in Russia is in its infancy, it is too early to identify the single most important factor. Differences between regions are not homogeneous, and our regional focus constitutes but one angle to categorise social support.

Power distribution and pathways of social support

Our main argument is that the contemporary models or pathways of social support, which all evolved in varying degrees from the same Soviet symbiosis, are determined by specific post-Soviet relations and the power distribution between the major actors in that process: LFEs, state and rural communities. In Russia, the weakest actor is generally the rural community. Formally, decentralisation to municipalities occurred, but municipalities are mostly cash-strapped (Pallot and Nefedova 2007, 10). To fix everyday welfare problems, municipalities often must turn to higher state levels or the local LFE for support. The dependent position of rural communities is reinforced by the weakness of self-organisation. There is a virtual lack of rural movements and resistance from plot holders to expansion by agroholdings or dispossession by the state, for example, through land grabbing (Visser, Mamonova, and Spoor 2012). The history of a mostly subaltern rural population, both in Czarist Russia and the Soviet Union, is reinforced by state restrictions on civil society under Putin since the 2000s. That said, plot holders are not totally powerless. In the sections below, we explore how different power distribution patterns in Krasnodar and Altai shape LFEs’ responsibilities and the position of plot holders.

Social support in Krasnodar

Krasnodar is Russia's most fertile region. It has a favourable southern climate, prime soil, good infrastructure, excellent access to ports and is by Russian standards quite densely populated. Unsurprisingly, Krasnodar has become the centre of Russia's agroholding expansion, together with its neighbouring regions in the south (Rostov, Stavropol). We argue that a decline in symbiosis, and simultaneous rise in explicit CSR, is the dominant trend in the agriculturally attractive regions of Russia. The tendency toward increased visibility of social support via web-reporting testifies to explicit CSR. Simultaneously, decreased actual support, the absence of social motivations, instrumental motivations that mostly work against continuing symbiosis and a process of separating or disentangling villagers' multiple entitlements through formalisation into roles of shareholders versus other villagers, together indicate that symbiosis is rapidly declining and is not sustained as implicit CSR.

Visibility: a rise in explicit CSR

Many of Russia's largest agroholdings originate from, or are active in, Krasnodar. As Krasnodar agriculture has become quite corporate, we might expect elements of explicit CSR, first practiced in Russia's urban firms, to be present early in Krasnodar, via the numerous outside investors.

Currently, a substantial number of the largest farms in Krasnodar highlight their CSR activities on their websites. The website of agroholding Steppe, which operates in the Krasnodar and Rostov regions, describes its CSR activities as sustainable development. They include building a health club for employees, assisting orphanages and disabled children and providing a building for a mosque.⁶ Web searches revealed that of the 20 largest farms in Krasnodar,⁷ 13 have a website and seven mention CSR activities; additionally, in the case of one farm the non-agricultural holding to which it belongs mentions CSR. The most widely reported activities are: support for children and students, sports and cultural activities and support for vulnerable groups (disabled, orphans). CSR website texts cite support for employees, for the wider society of the region or – in the case of multi-regional agroholdings – forms of support country-wide.

It is also relevant to note which stakeholders, activities or indicators go unmentioned. Our web searches revealed that first, social responsibility toward customers and business partners is rarely mentioned. Second, the important stakeholder of the land lessors (villagers) is largely ignored. A substantial part of farmland operated by large farms in southern Russia (Nefedova 2013), as well as in other leading regions such as Altai, is still owned by villagers. Nonetheless, land as an arena of interaction between LFEs and villagers remains virtually invisible in official CSR statements. A single farm mentioned support to "employees, pensioners and land shareholders", but only elaborated on the first two categories,⁸ the lease relationship with the villagers. Numerous agroholdings in Krasnodar have obtained land through shady deals (see below). Land deals seem to be a topic purposely ignored in CSR reporting. Third, support for household plots of employees rarely figures (only one farm mentioned it⁹). This is part of the – much reduced – symbiosis rather than explicit CSR.

Further, our web searches indicate that reporting on CSR performance is weak, lacking transparency or commitments to measurable company-level targets, let alone to wider

codes of conduct. Only one enterprise from our searches provided some (aggregate) figures for funding allocated to CSR.

Symbiosis: decline

Comprehensive data on symbiosis is unavailable, but our interviews suggest a drastic decline in Krasnodar. First, LFEs have reduced investment in social infrastructure. Our longitudinal fieldwork in Privolnaya village, Kanevskoy district (Nikulin 2003) shows that the local LFE reduced its social support after the death of a long-standing director. A visible sign is the deterioration of the culture club, the village's former beacon of pride. Second, the new directors are curtailing provisions of inputs to households and have become less tolerant of villagers pilfering farm resources. The only remaining element of symbiosis is the in-kind payment (grain, hay) for land shares rented from the villagers. A pensioner complained:

I do not fertilise my garden, as humus is expensive and there are no other ways to get it in the village, because there are no more *kolkhoz* farms here and the magnates [new owners] use all humus on their fields. (Interview, spring 2018)

A common practice when LFEs are taken over by agroholdings is “business optimisation”, that is, closing down supposedly unprofitable branches and firing excessive labour (Pallot and Nefedova 2007, 117; Nefedova 2013; Ioffe, Nefedova, and de Beurs 2014). *Kolkhozes* mostly had diversified production across several branches of agriculture, often with small processing units and provision of social services. In recent decades, they transformed into monocrop grain producers. Enjoying privileged access to (subsidised) state finance, agroholdings have bought modern agricultural machinery, leading to further dismissals.

Motivations

We did not encounter managers expressing an intrinsic motivation to maintain social support (in contrast to Altai, see below). Even the abovementioned former director in Privolnaya, who provided wide support, noted that he tolerated employees pilfering enterprise resources because it divided the employees, reinforcing his power. While support is declining, the household plots remain vital to local livelihoods: “[a] subsidiary plot makes it possible to live here, while in a city it would be harder” (Interview, plot holder, spring 2017). While support to households is eroding in numerous Russian regions, in the southern breadbasket this “is exacerbated by the attractiveness of large farms to outside investors who are unhampered by ‘moral’ obligations to local people” (Pallot and Nefedova 2007, 117). Nefedova’s (2013, 280) remark about southern (Stavropol) agroholdings, is apt:

[T]he manager of the farm, whose boss often lives in another region or Moscow, is not a *kolkhoz* chairman [anymore]. He cannot solve the problems of the village and its inhabitants as a father (...) even if he would like to.

In terms of instrumental motivations, concern about ensuring sufficient labour has lost importance as a driver for support. Investors have an incentive to cut support to the household plots of their employees because the latter distracts them from employment on a corporate farm. This motivation seems to be more or less universal; however, in

those regions where the positions of agribusinesses are relatively stronger, it is easier for them to act accordingly.

The largest, most capitalised agroholdings (many of which focus on the south) are investing heavily in mechanisation. This means they have less interest in supporting households, as they are less in need of buying loyalty from the workers. Further contributing to southern agroholdings' power vis-à-vis workers is the abundance of labour in southern Russia. Contrary to the overall decline in rural population, the population in southern Russia is increasing thanks to natural causes and in-migration (Pallot and Nefedova 2007, 83).

Proximity to the heavily populated north Caucasus republics (...) has led to high levels of in-migration that have saturated the local labour market. Although, therefore, the surpluses produced by cereal enterprises in the south would allow them to make generous transfers to the household sector, they do not necessarily feel under pressure to do so. (Pallot and Nefedova 2007, 114)

Buying loyalty from those villagers who are land shareholders, however, motivates LFEs to provide some support (Ioffe, Nefedova, and de Beurs 2014). In southern Russia, faced with an increasingly weak position as farm workers, the last asset of plot holders in the negotiations with agroholdings is their land ownership. The description of an LFE in Krasnodar's neighbouring region Stavropol is telling:

When it is considered that the 600 additional workers Dubin [the LFE director] has taken on since 1998 are the 'sons and daughters' of existing shareholders, his labour policy begins to make more sense as a strategy to secure the long-term territorial integrity of the farm (...) The farm also offers a variety of services to its workers and shareholders, including ploughing allotments and (...) subsidized feed... (Pallot and Nefedova 2007, 126)

Although the LFE used 10-year land lease agreements, according to the chairman, the best defense against loss of its land is to maintain the incentive of shareholders to remain loyal via social support.

If the need for labour is less urgent southern in Russia than elsewhere, the competition for land is more cut-throat. Consequently, while villagers have less negotiating power as employees, in principle they have more leeway as land lessors, at least if they do not face fraudulent or violent dispossession of land (see below). When plot holders lose their land, agroholdings have little incentive to sustain a minimal symbiosis.

Finally, political instrumental motivations, due to pressure or incentives by the state, are low in Krasnodar (see below), reinforcing the tendency to reduce symbiosis and only engage in some explicit CSR.

Formalisation: differentiating among villagers

Often a key step in breaking down symbiosis is the formal differentiation between households with and without land shares. In the community of Novoaleksandrovsk, under the previous chairman, "anyone (...) was able to take a piglet for fattening and could buy subsidised feed-grains from the farm". Now, only those who hold shares – just one-fifth of the population – are beneficiaries of LFE support. There is a growing disparity between villagers with land shares as "entitled households" and those lacking shares and support from LFEs/agroholdings (Pallot and Nefedova 2007, 127–128).

A demeaning remark by a farm manager during one of our interviews in neighbouring Rostov (Visser), that plot holders clinging to their land shares signals an emotional attachment to the past, sidelines the key importance of these land shares in rural negotiations about the responsibilities of large farms, and obviously, the plot holders' livelihoods (Ioffe, Nefedova, and de Beurs 2014). This formalisation contrasts with the continued informality in regions like Altai, and other risky agricultural regions like Perm, where interactions between LFEs and plot holders proceed "without ceremony, so that we can take each other's word on trust" (Interview, Perm, summer 2018).

Regional power configuration

The emergence of agroholdings in Russia often goes hand-in-hand with a shift to thin explicit CSR and a decline in symbiosis. The rather drastic decline in symbiosis in Krasnodar, and the accompanying dispossession of plot holders through restriction of their livestock (output was halved between 2011 and 2013, to 100,000 tonnes see Appendix Figure A1) and land grabs (see below), stem from the specific power configuration in the region. While large agroholdings across Russia tend to have much better access than smaller producers to state officials and subsidies (Visser, Mamonova, and Spoor 2012), the relations between the state and the largest agroholdings in Krasnodar are particularly close and lacking transparency.

The most telling example is Agrocomplex N. I. Tkachev, an agroholding named after its Soviet-era director and the father of the former minister of agriculture. Before becoming a minister, Tkachev junior succeeded his father as director of the Agrocomplex. Tkachev junior also served as governor of Krasnodar District in 2001–2015, during which time Russian media featured many stories about nepotism and political influence peddling (see Tikhomirov 2017).

As the de facto owner of one of Russia's largest agroholdings, with a half a million hectares of land, Tkachev pursues a policy primarily in favour of large agribusiness, manipulating the state, courts and communities in their interest (and in his personal business interest). Resistance by communities (and lower-level officials) is aggressively suppressed by the coalition of agroholdings and the state. In our case study district, opposition of farm directors, private farmers and a district head to land grabs by agroholdings was crushed.¹⁰ In a particularly violent agroholding land grab in another district (Kushchyovskaya village), in which a farmer's family and ten visitors were assassinated, the responsible agroholding owner, who was also the district head, was jailed.¹¹ However, the land was ultimately handed over to large agroholdings – including the governor's Agrocomplex – instead of returned to the farmer, illustrating the relentless accumulation through dispossession employed by the well-connected agroholdings in Krasnodar.

The most recent form of dispossession of plot holders, which reflects an attitude toward the rural population diametrically opposed to the historically long-standing symbiosis, concerns the right to livestock (pig) production on household plots. Krasnodar's regional government, similar to various other regions (for Belgorod, see Visser et al. 2015), has imposed restrictions on plot holders' meat production, which favour agroholdings.¹² Restrictions and even prohibitions for households to raise pigs were issued because of the threat of African swine fever, which periodically breaks out in the southern regions.

In 2009, the federal parliament discussed a law to restrict livestock in households, but the law did not materialise.¹³ LFEs and agroholdings in Krasnodar however set out to

contain household pig production locally, first by ceasing to provide fodder and framing household livestock as a threat to large-scale livestock production.¹⁴ Then, in 2016, after another outbreak of swine fever, the director of the Kuban agroholding in Krasnodar openly blamed households for the disease's spread.¹⁵ According to plot holders, it is the agroholdings that have rapidly expanded pig production in recent years and lobbied for sanitary restrictions with the goal to wipe out the competition of cheap meat from the plot holders. All our Krasnodar interviewees said that the prohibition is actively enforced. Official statistics indicate that abovementioned actions yielded results: while the cattle (cows, sheep and goats) headcount in households remains stable, the pig headcount has plummeted since 2011. Whereas from 2011 to 2013 the share of plot holders began to plummet, from 50 to 30 per cent of regional livestock and poultry output (Appendix Figure A1), this is not the case for cattle. Prohibitions do not yet target household's cattle because agroholdings do not yet see it as a competitor.

This highly disadvantaged position of plot holders is increasingly the reality in southern Russia. While comprehensive data on the sensitive topic of land grabs is difficult to obtain, our own fieldwork and web research indicate that it is more widespread in the well-endowed Russian south (Visser, Mamonova, and Spoor 2012). Despite a certain level of censorship, Russian media have exposed a substantial number of fraudulent and criminal cases of land dispossession by various agroholdings, often implicating powerful officials, in Krasnodar (Tikhomirov 2017).¹⁶

While large agroholdings are widely reducing symbiosis and, particularly in Krasnodar, grabbing the land of smaller land owners, simultaneously they conduct explicit CSR activities. The Pokrovsky Agroholding in Kanevskoy and Kushchyovsky districts attempted to grab land from "unwilling" family farmers and independent LFEs (Tikhomirov 2017), but during the same period a special "charity" section on the agroholding's website celebrates its charity programme.¹⁷

Agroholdings are endeavouring to meet government expectations regarding social obligations. Russia's government is concerned to maintain a certain minimal legitimacy among the population to avoid social unrest, and actively monitors the potential for protests. At an April 2017 forum, Putin replied to a question about land grabbing in Krasnodar, "... there are many problems here including land issues. I am attentively observing what is going on in Krasnodar Krai. Many times, I gave orders to the prosecution to address this issue".¹⁸

Thus, in return for acting in favour of agroholdings, the state expects them to help avoid open social protest. It means that agroholdings must at least go through the motions of social responsibility, even if their sponsorship can be quite modest. Their CSR is likely to be driven more by concerns about the impression they make on external actors (the state, or other investors-shareholders) rather than by concerns about the wellbeing of their workers and rural communities. With such an instrumental approach, the imitation of outward-oriented CSR strategies of global corporations by Russian agroholdings is not surprising.

The rural population, although clearly the less powerful actor due to the virtual lack of social movements, is not completely passive in shaping the trajectory. Through various "weapons of the weak", plot holders try to influence LFEs, agroholdings and local authorities to continue social support (Nikulin 2003; Mamonova 2016; Moser 2016).

During fieldwork, we witnessed how villagers approached farm directors' offices with myriad requests for support. Another weapon of the weak is pilfering farm stores to take inputs like fodder or chemicals for household plots (Nikulin 2003). Finally, sometimes villagers file petitions against LFEs when they are seen as infringing on villagers' property. In 2016, Krasnodar family farmers organised a tractor march to Moscow with banners criticising regional agrarian policy, aiming to hand over a petition to the Russian government.¹⁹ The police stopped the march and detained the organisers (Mamonova 2016).

Overall, with the virtual absence of rural society as an actor in local agrarian politics, the major feature determining CSR policies in Krasnodar is the domination of a state–business coalition with a high level of informality, or even illegality, in interactions between state and agroholdings. This configuration allows the agroholdings to break down radically the long-standing and widely appreciated symbiosis, and replace it with a rather superficial explicit CSR consisting of scaled-down social services but with high visibility. Sometimes, the gap between the PR-oriented CSR and the simultaneous collapse of symbiosis is extremely wide. One agroholding's website claims, for example, that “every enterprise of the holding is an example of socially responsible business (...) [it] will always remain a large and friendly family where employees, as well as veterans and youth, are supported”.²⁰

This agroholding is none other than Agrocomplex, which obtained the farmland that was targeted by the abovementioned infamous land grab costing 10 deaths and did not return it to the original farmers despite a court conviction of the perpetrators.

LFEs' social support in Altai

Unlike Krasnodar with its favourable climate, Altai faces harsh and volatile natural conditions, particularly droughts,²¹ although Altai's steppes provide fertile farmland for profitable grain and livestock production in good years. Few agroholdings emerged in this risky region. Even the presence of LFEs is lower. LFEs produce 52.4 per cent of regional agricultural output, compared to 60.4 per cent in Krasnodar (Rosstat 2019), while household plot agriculture plays a bigger role.

Explicit CSR

As agroholdings appeared to be the main drivers of explicit CSR, it is no surprise that in Altai, with less agroholding presence, such CSR is not widespread. In Krasnodar, as far as we could determine based on web searches of the top 20 producers, all but three greenhouse farms were part of an agroholding, compared to only eight out of 20 in Altai. Agroholdings in Krasnodar are much bigger, with five of 20 large farms being part of an agroholding controlling more than 100,000 hectares, compared to one in Altai. Our web searches of Altai region's 20 largest agricultural producers show that only nine have a corporate website, of which only four mention CSR activities (compared to, respectively, 13 and seven in Krasnodar, which had also more elaborate CSR reporting). This much lower visibility indicates weaker explicit CSR.

Symbiosis: implicit CSR

Interviews and group discussions in Altai revealed that both LFEs and larger family farms maintain substantial support to local communities. This sharply contrasts with the situation in Krasnodar.

First, large farms continue to sponsor social infrastructure and services, such as clearing roads of snow and supporting schools and culture clubs (Kurakin 2015). A LFE we visited provided water and gas to the village. Second, in marked contrast with Krasnodar, LFEs in Altai provide employment by maintaining a diversified production profile. They maintain and sometimes even expand livestock headcounts, despite meagre profits or outright unprofitability, in order to keep up village employment (Interview, Spring 2013). The labour-intensive livestock branches are particularly important for employment (Bavorová and Ponkina 2018, 15). Third, while Altai has not escaped the countrywide erosion of support for household plots production, it has not seen the drastic and aggressive reduction as in Krasnodar (see Appendix Figure A2).

Motivations

Whereas in Krasnodar, instrumental motivations prevailed, leading to decline of symbiosis, in Altai, as will be shown, social (intrinsic) motivations are more prevalent, allowing continuation of symbiosis among LFEs and private family farms. This indicates implicit CSR.

Care for the settlement concerns a clear form of social motivation. Managers care about the village in which they live, and regard it as their home (Visser 2006). The manager's farm workers are also neighbours, friends or former classmates. Very often, management staff also originate from the same village or district as the employees. According to Bavorová and Ponkina's (2018, 13) Altai survey, a social orientation of the manager correlates with higher social support by the LFE. The strength of social motivations among Altai farm leaders is illustrated by this 60-year old who does not consider quitting farming despite health problems:

I am like a watchman on this land (...) I grew up in the village (...) and I want it to be like it was. It is very hard to do it though (...) I could live elsewhere but I do not want to. My homeland keeps me here (...). And I protect it. (Interview, Autumn 2015)

The social embeddedness of many LFE directors in Altai contrasts with the directors of large agroholdings such as those in Krasnodar, who mostly live in the regional capital. The leadership of the limited number of agroholdings in Altai, as in Krasnodar, also tends to be less inclined to give donations. For example, the deputy municipal head told us about the hostile takeover of the local sugar plant by a Moscow (agro)holding, which led to a shrinking of donations. The newly-appointed director of that plant had lived in the settlement for a long time. Though personally he is willing to donate, he faces severe financial restrictions from Moscow headquarters, which pushes him to minimise "wasting money" (Kurakin 2015).

Social motivation to provide employment can cause LFEs to maintain livestock branches in the face of weak or even negative profitability. The decline in animal husbandry, according to statistics, is far less than economic logic would indicate (Appendix Figure A2).²² One exchange with an agronomist went:

"Milk is more or less profitable, but meat brings losses. So, we are balancing around zero".

"Then why are you keeping it?"

“We have to (...) We have employees there, 420 men (...) Livestock farming occupies many people. Otherwise, it means to leave people without a job”. (Interview, Spring 2013)

Instrumental reasons too figure widely in motivating social support. We focus first on economic ones, and then on political ones. Among instrumental motivations, an important reason to provide employment and social infrastructure is to keep workers in the village in a context of a sparsely populated region with high rural outmigration, since skilled and motivated employees are vital to the functioning of LFEs. Altai lacks the supply of cheap migrant labour from the Caucasus that is available in Krasnodar. Further, LFEs often lack the high degree of mechanisation which Krasnodar experienced after the arrival of agrohholdings owned by oligarchs with deep pockets. As an LFE head states:

The main goal of our business is profit, but the creation of jobs for rural inhabitants is a very important goal, too. We don't have high salaries, but we support rural infrastructure (...) It is our role in the village. Who would do it if we wouldn't? (Bavorová and Ponkina 2018, 15)

The statement that the LFE supports rural infrastructure points to the instrumental motivation that infrastructure can serve to attract labour. Yet, the statement that the “creation of jobs for rural inhabitants is a very important goal, too” points to their social motivation.

Regarding support to household plots, instrumental reasons also figure. The bigger role of family farmers in Altai makes a difference, in comparison to Krasnodar, in that they are embedded in local communities. Furthermore, farmers do not engage in milk production, while households produce large volumes of milk and need fodder for their cows from farmers. Finally, farmers have an interest in providing this, as they depend on the land share leases from households (Kurakin 2015), or because it prevents pilfering from their fields (Fadeeva 2015).

Further, in contrast to Krasnodar, no obstacles are created to household plot production. Without agrohholdings expanding into livestock meat production, and without restrictive regulations for plot holders, Altai households have avoided a drastic downfall in meat production experienced elsewhere and maintain – although with some decline – a level of milk production that is comparatively very high for Russia (above 600,000 tonnes in 2017; see Appendix Figure A2).

Altai is ranked fourth countrywide in milk production, while well-endowed Krasnodar, which also has a significantly larger rural population (2.5 million versus 1 million in Altai), ranks third (Rosstat 2018). Whereas in many regions the domination of plot holders means that the respective sphere of agriculture is of minor importance, the large share in milk production from household plots in Altai might be seen as an indication of resilience, in a context of declining yet persisting symbiosis, in the modified form of implicit CSR. The current implicit CSR has not prevented a gradual decline of household livestock production, but it has kept it at a high level vis-à-vis LFEs (100,000 tonnes versus 80,000 tonnes in 2017; Appendix Figure A2) compared with Krasnodar, and has prevented a rapid collapse of household plot agriculture. We do not suggest that overall rural households in Altai are better off. Altai is commonly described as a poor region (Trotskovsky 2011), with a risky climate that hampers stable income from household plots and few chances for off-farm employment in towns. Furthermore, plot holders' livestock production does continue to decline, although gradually. At the same time, Altai's agrarian

situation is more inclusive, and largely lacks the stark differentiation between producers and social strata that characterises Krasnodar (Nikulin 2003).

Regional power configuration

The Altai case represents the bottom-up persistence of the modified Soviet symbiotic system in the form of implicit CSR (Kurakin 2015). The limited influence of agroholdings, and a state that is less biased toward them, characterises state–LFE–community relations in Altai. We did not find examples of very tight state–business connections. In contrast to Krasnodar and its restrictions on livestock holdings by plot holders, in Altai, the state stimulates companies’ social support activities locally by pressuring LFEs to maintain livestock for employment (Bavorová and Ponkina 2018, 6) and through a regional registry of socially responsible businesses, following a 2015 regional decree (No. 22).²³ As emerged above from interviews (Fadeeva 2015, 142), beyond the registry, the state pushes LFEs to maintain symbiosis in informal negotiations in what we can call implicit CSR: support for the provision of employment and infrastructure and no restrictions for household plots.²⁴

Agroholdings’ presence, and consequently their political role, is limited, as they are hesitant to engage in agribusiness in this risky area. Moreover, they are aware that some agroholdings in Altai, such as the agroholding Emerald Land (*Izumrudnaya strana*), have already failed.²⁵ Consequently, the explicit CSR that investors brought to the Krasnodar countryside is largely absent.

Households, though being subaltern, demonstrate considerable independence, which is reflected by their large share in regional production. This independence persists in the form of symbiosis (though eroded in comparison to the Soviet period) with LFEs and individual family farmers that is in fact a relation of mutual dependence rather than of oppression by the state or agroholdings. As explained earlier, Altai’s social infrastructure lags behind that of Krasnodar (Unay-Gailhard et al. 2019, 320–321). Therefore, as LFEs in remote regions like Altai have to rely mostly on the local labour force, they have to invest in maintaining rural life there.

Within the modified symbiosis in Altai we call “implicit”, both social and instrumental motivations sustain social support and overlapping, wide responsibilities. Fadeeva (2015, 142) demonstrates that Altai farmer owners ask their workers for information, with approval from local administrations, about the structure of their farm and then provide workers’ households with the necessary goods (grain, straw). Bugay, Akishina, and Fannenstiel (2015, 143) observe “a mutual interest of all parties” in developing CSR. This does not mean that corporate farms in Altai are widely happy to engage in implicit CSR. However, they are not as strong as in Krasnodar, necessitating negotiations and adjustments to local customs and rules.

Conclusions

Contrary to expectations of market advocates, in post-Soviet Russia social support for plot holders has not become a thing of the past, and an intrinsic motivation to “look after” the local community can be found among directors of LFEs and large private farms. Our findings suggest that the heterogeneity in forms of large-scale agriculture, as well as the particular regional power configuration and policy, are important in assessing LFEs’

social support and its outcomes. The studies of Krasnodar and Altai allowed us to distinguish these two sets of factors driving continuation versus decline in so-called implicit CSR.

The type of large-scale producer makes a difference. Agroholding expansion is associated with a sharp reduction of implicit CSR, camouflaged by a turn to rather cosmetic Anglophone, explicit CSR. Our study suggests that LFEs, and especially private family farms, are more likely to continue symbiosis as implicit CSR, although with substantial regional variation. We found several motivations driving the decline of symbiosis.

First, the arrival of agroholdings with outside investors means that efficiency considerations of the investor subsume local farm managers' social motivations. The rise of agroholdings represents intensifying corporatisation, exemplified by the primacy of investor interests over these of other "stakeholders", notably employees and villagers. Second, the rise of agroholdings also represents an erosion of instrumental motivations for social support. The financial resources of outside investors enable a deepening mechanisation. Consequently, agroholdings, needing less labour, are less inclined to maintain the social infrastructure that is otherwise vital for attracting workers.

While agroholdings' rise means a reduction in social and economic motivations that sustain social responsibility, the pace and extent of such decline is affected by regional power configurations and policies. Even when agroholdings need few workers, they mostly depend on villagers for the lease of their land shares, stimulating agroholdings to continue some social support (Nefedova 2013). In regions with shady state-agroholding connections such as Krasnodar, agroholdings can grab farmland unpunished. This undermines symbiosis, as it ends agroholdings' incentives to provide support to villagers as land lessors.

The extent to which agroholdings can downsize their workforce also depends on the regional state. In Krasnodar, agroholdings can dismiss workers and curtail livestock operations unfettered. In Altai, the state pressures agroholdings to maintain employment.

Agroholdings' reduction of social support is often presented as an unavoidable outcome of the transition to a market economy. Such a view ignores that social responsibilities constitute a contested terrain with alternative visions held by villagers who feel they are entitled to social support as land lessors or simply as villagers, or by some regional governments who expect agroholdings to invest in social infrastructure in return for low taxation or subsidies. Agroholdings' reasoning that their responsibility only extends to the few villagers they employ or rent land from ignores that agroholdings are "like company towns, but with their authority extending over large territories and embracing a number of populated places" (Pallot and Nefedova 2007, 106). Agroholdings' shift from symbiosis toward cosmetic, explicit CSR, using Western vocabulary, is devoid of related codes of conduct and measurable targets. It does not constitute a more transparent form of social support, but only a more visible, ceremonial one, as it is cultivated in response to informal state demands and negotiations. At the same time, the needs of rural communities that such CSR claims to address are increasingly marginalised.

Notes

1. For a critique, see Moser 2016.
2. For critique, see Fourcade and Healy 2007; Visser 2006.

3. Also Japan, South-Korea.
4. Post-Soviet corporate successors to *kolkhozes/sovkhoses*.
5. And governments.
6. <http://ahstep.ru/development/razvitie-i-podderzhka-sotsialnoj-infrastruktury> (accessed 1 July 2019).
7. Size ranked by revenue. Source: Ruslana database, by bureau van Dijk (a Moody's Analytics company). <https://www.bvdinfo.com/ru-ru/our-products/company-information/national-products/ruslana>.
8. www.zao-agrokomplex.ru/agrokomplex/social-politics/sotsialnye-proekty.
9. What, and how much, support is not clarified (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TLCDju5GBMA> accessed 1 July 2019).
10. In April 2004, district head E.Kuchlev was sentenced to three years' probation for abuse of office (<https://regnum.ru/news/272865.html> (accessed 17 February 2019), according to our interviewees as revenge for his resistance.
11. <https://rg.ru/2013/11/19/reg-ufo/pozhizneno.html> (accessed 17 February 2019). <https://ria.ru/20131119/978100199.html> (accessed 17 February 2019).
12. Restrictive measures commenced in 2012 with a regional program against swine fever initiated by governor Tkachev. A program goal is: "to decrease pig headcount in households and family (peasant) farms by substituting them with other farm animals" (2). <https://admkrasnodar.ru/upload/iblock/874/874a4979374090e6b3c29740f5bbb606.pdf>.
13. http://www.dairynews.ru/news/rossijanam_zapretat_derzhat_skot_v_lichnyh_podvorj.html (accessed June 13 2019).
14. <http://government.ru/orders/selection/401/19230/> (accessed June 13 2019).
15. <http://www.rbc.ru/krasnodar/29/11/2016/583d82ec9a794718f1ca0155> (accessed June 13 2019).
16. Media primarily cover larger land grabs, with agroholdings dispossessing farmers or independent LFEs rather than plot holders, but they indicate the weak position of smaller land owners in general vis-à-vis agroholdings.
17. <https://concernpokrovsky.com/charity/> (accessed 13 March 2018).
18. <http://onf.ru/2017/04/03/putin-podderzhka-agrariev-budet-prodolzhatsya/> (accessed June 13 2019).
19. <https://agrovesti.net/news/indst/zakhvachennye-perspektivy-agroholdingi-mogut-ostavit-stranu-bez-selskogo-naseleniya.html> (accessed 13 August 2018).
20. <http://www.zao-agrokomplex.ru/agrocomplex/> (accessed 24 January 2018).
21. Within the KULUNDA project.
22. Output declined from 110,000 tonnes (2011) to 80,000 (2017).
23. <http://barnaul.bezformata.com/listnews/sotcialnoj-otvetstvennosti-rabotodatelej/58559669/> (accessed 1 July 2019).
24. Although the registry's visibility is reminiscent of explicit CSR, the impulse from the state to place obligation on LFEs indicates implicit CSR.
25. <https://milknews.ru/index/Izumrudnaja-strana-bankrotstvo.html> (accessed 21 June 2019).

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