

# TRAPPED IN THE GREY ZONES: VOICING DISCONTENT AND STRATEGIES OF RESISTANCE IN RURAL POLAND

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Based on ethnographic research in Eastern Poland, this article deals with coping and resistance strategies in the context of present Polish agricultural policies. The author endeavours to show how Polish agricultural policy including the implementation of EU agricultural regulations force farmers to function in the grey economy. This in turn forms a (largely) politically muted group of people who are alienated not only from what they produce but also distanced from consumers and the state as imagined recipients of their goods. This has resulted in farmers employing numerous discursive and practical strategies in order to voice their discontent, cope and resist state mechanisms regulating farming.

KEYWORDS: Poland, agriculture, resistance strategies, negotiating, grey zones, discontent

This article's purpose is to analyze the coping and resistance strategies employed by the Polish farming community in response to the implementation of the European Union agricultural regulations by the Polish government, which have forced farmers to function in the grey zones of economy and agriculture. The article, that documents how farmers responded to this policy by engaging with the grey zones of agriculture and economy, is based on ethnographic research carried out from 2011 in rural communities in Eastern Poland<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based primarily on research within a project "Social memory of Polish village and small-towns' inhabitants. Anthropological perspective on food and postsocialism" financed by The Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology carried out in 2018–19 but stems from earlier research [2011–2016, NCN 172028 „Cultural and Social Features of Food Production and Consumption among Local Communities in View of Recent Geopolitical Changes. An Ethnographic Monograph of Dąbrowa Białostocka and its Surroundings"]. Through participant observation and in-depth interviews, I studied the farming and (postfarming) communities in and around the small town of Dąbrowa Białostocka in the Podlachia region of Eastern Poland.

Grey zones point to an ambiguous reality, much like the one analysed by Alexei Yurchak (2005, 4) who warned against looking at socialism in binary categories such as nation/state, official/unofficial economy, or indeed morality/corruption. I argue that this warning applies not only to state socialism but also to post-socialism in Poland. I understand grey zones not as being against or beyond the state, but rather as a feature permeating many dimensions of the present reality, and thus being more than “the remnants of the past socialist mechanism” (2015, 25), as is also argued by Frances Pine. In particular, I agree with her theorizing that in each period, be it socialism, times of transformation or membership of the EU, the grey economy has paralleled that of the state economy, and indeed has dominated many aspects of everyday life, with its own brand of morality that is associated with the family and household, relations of trust, and extended sociality. As Pine observed in *Ethnographies of the Grey Zones in Eastern Europe*:

The EU in many ways steps into the gap left by the socialist state – from centralized and levelling bureaucracy and regulations to five-year plans (...) accession to the union has brought with it a new range of possibilities for expanding the grey zone. It also seems to me, however, that the old grey economy, based on face-to-face exchanges, economies of favor and intimate transactions, continues to be the ordinary for many citizens (2015, 37–38).

This is a provocative claim, one which raises numerous questions such as whether and to what extent EU structures resemble those of state socialism. Are the mechanisms which push farmers into the grey zone imposed by external actors the same in non-post-socialist and post-socialist countries? I argue that there exist functional parallels between the socialist state and the EU, with the latter undermining the farmer’s position to a greater extent than perhaps the socialist state ever did. With this in mind, I endeavour to show how rural inhabitants have been employing numerous resistance and coping strategies of both an overt and covert variety (Scott 1976; 1985), which help them to function at the borderland between politics, economy, and the expanding grey zones. Yet another of my aims is to analyse practical and discursive means that people employ to negotiate their situation and have an audible voice (Hirschman 1970; 1995). In order to accomplish this, I firstly focus on the general context of farming in Poland, before moving on to discussing the various ways in which grey zones are portrayed in the narratives of local farmers and the discursive strategies they employ to voice their critiques of the official policy. Such critiques arise from the conviction that the state attempts to push farmers out of their role as food providers and exercises excessive control over their work. Then the discussion turns to the overt and covert forms of resistance (see James Scott). These include extreme diversification, flexibility, self-sufficiency, sliding towards an informal economy, phantom farmership, as well as private discursive strategies which bind the community.

## CONTEXT: THE CRISIS OF AGRICULTURE

The specificity of Polish farming stems from several historical aspects. During socialist rule, Poland mostly avoided post-war collectivisation, thus preserving not only many pre-war characteristics, connected with the history of partitions in Poland and serfdom<sup>2</sup>. Additionally, the proportion of the workforce employed in agriculture was (and is) higher than in other socialist countries.<sup>3</sup> The “farmer” (Polish: *rolnik*) had a defined role within the socialist state: food provider for the working people in towns and cities but also the keeper of the physical work-ethos associated with the working class (Brzostek 2010). However, the countryside was, in general, represented in official propaganda as a breeding ground of anti-state activities (see Brzostek 2010; Wedel 1986), with informal and illegal food practices chief among them. In this way farmers, who were the unofficial providers of many foodstuffs to city dwellers outside the market, formed a grey zone complementary to the official state economy.

During this time, and the transformation which followed, most farms in Poland, especially those in the eastern part of the country, had not evolved into large, industrialised farms. Presently, over 46% of Polish farms are under 5 hectares (Wilkin and Hałasiewicz 2020), and for historical reasons most of these smallest farms are in eastern part of Poland where I conducted my research. The EU accession was a crucial moment for Polish farmers, as their general situation has improved, although small-scale farmers (especially in Eastern Poland) have been pushed deeper into the grey zone. Poland still has a relatively large proportion of people employed in agriculture. In 2019, the sector was responsible for 9% of total employment<sup>4</sup>. There were about 1.4 million people employed in farming and about a similar number of farms (Wilkin and Hałasiewicz 2020).

In this light, European subsidies and quotas may be interpreted as a response by the state (and European Union) to address the problem of the overproduction of food or even the “oversupply” of farmers. Officially, the expected effect of these strategies is to enhance the competitiveness of agriculture, encourage sustainable development, and contribute to the balanced territorial development (Scarlat et al. 2015). However,

2 Serfdom had a great impact on Polish history. While in the large swaths of Western and Northern Europe peasants acquired and maintained personal freedom, in East Central Europe serfdom was either never fully abolished or reintroduced in the late 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. It is known as the phenomenon of second serfdom that was abolished in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, earlier in the Prussian and Austrian partitions of Poland and in 1961–4 in the Russian Empire (Kamiński 1975). It is estimated that under serfdom 65% of the peasants’ time was devoted to work on landlords’ estates). What is more, the abolition of serfdom did not alter the relations and livelihoods of peasants until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Bukraba-Rylska 2008, 112–113, 190–194).

3 [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/food-farming-fisheries/farming/documents/agri-statistical-factsheet-pl\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/food-farming-fisheries/farming/documents/agri-statistical-factsheet-pl_en.pdf) (access 08.10.2022).

4 [https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/rankings/employment\\_in\\_agriculture/Europe/](https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/rankings/employment_in_agriculture/Europe/) (access 08.10.2022)

even though in official public (political EU) discourse these strategies are portrayed as being aimed at “saving the Polish farmer”, farmers tend to see it as subterfuge. What is more, the clear ambivalence of official discourse’s logic is what fuels the anger of the farmers and pushes them into the grey zones of the economy, into small-scale subsistence farming and ignites them to protest. These strategies of the state may perhaps be seen as deepening the inefficiency of the whole Polish socio-economic system.

Many farmers are well aware of the political and economic mechanisms that have played part in reducing employment in agriculture and limited domestic agricultural production, in the form of quotas or penalties for overproduction. One such mechanism is the milk quota, which has for many years implied penalties for the overproduction of milk if a specific limit is exceeded. However, the logic of quotas is unclear to farmers, who believe that there exists strong demand for milk and indeed for other agricultural products among Polish consumers. This demand is evidenced, in their view, by the import of many food products that are produced domestically. With supermarket shelves full of foreign, imported potatoes, cabbage, carrots, and butter to name just some, the EU political mechanisms are perceived as unfair by many local people. In the minds of many, this current policy can only exist to push farmers out of their domain:

Yes! It is such a policy, in my opinion. If the state had not given subsidies, everyone would have depended on the welfare state, and they would not do anything, [and] because they would not be able to do anything, they would go bankrupt. And in the case of [giving] subsidies, the state gives only a few zloty, so that you can barely survive. They pay us only a little and we work hard (M, 46<sup>5</sup>).

What is interesting is that although policies limiting small-scale farming began in 1950s if not even earlier (Bukraba-Rylska 2008), socialism is remembered by my interlocutors as being the halcyon days of farming. Contrary to the popular perception that the Polish People’s Republic was a period when trade and private entrepreneurship were suppressed, my interviewees emphasised that at that time “everything they produced was for sale”. This did not only apply to crops and animals but also anything that farms had in excess, including old pots and rags. The state was remembered as a recipient – and not a very picky one – which did not show much concern with detailed quality control checks. It is enough to recall stories about stones being added to sacks of potatoes intended for export to the USSR.

What is characteristic is the impersonal and detached way of talking about the recipient of the products:

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5 Interview coding: M – male, F – female, age, additional information. All original names have been changed to preserve the anonymity of my interviewees.

-<sup>6</sup> And where were these things taken to, where did you have to deliver them?

F: To the state!

- But did they come to pick them up, or were there some sale-points?

F: No, no, you had to take them to Nowy Dwór.

- By yourself?

F: Yes, there were warehouses and farmers took products there and handed them over, well. Now everything is different (F, 74).

M: [...] The biggest problem now is with making a sale... once, when everything went abroad, here they took everything through Belarus to Russia, potatoes, grain, they loaded everything, trains day and night here [...], they opened the border, they packed it into the train. People loaded potatoes and stones into sacks, and they took everything. Whereas now, you know, this Union is giving us a few zlotych in subsidies and that's it... (M, 50)

However, despite the detached way the state is being described above, the memory of the predictability that goods would be collected is often contrasted with the present feelings of uncertainty that undermines farmers' identity as providers of the nation. This could be interpreted in terms of post-socialist nostalgia, a phenomenon pertaining across the post-socialist part of the world and seen as influencing present popular interpretative schemes (Todorova and Gille 2010). As such, many interviewees believe that the fall of communism and the subsequent abandonment of the focus on production (including agricultural production) has weakened Poland in general and has led to migration and unemployment.

#### DISCONTENT IN THE GREY ZONE

There are numerous ways in which people voice their discontent and describe how they feel when they are pushed into the grey zones of the economy and out of their "proper" roles as farmers. I will analyse this variety and show how many farmers' views take as their point of reference the systemic and economic transformations of the 1980s and 1990s.

People reported that after the fall of the People's Republic of Poland, the countryside experienced increasing difficulties in finding a market for its products. Furthermore, many people continued to believe that it was the state's role (as an imagined entity) to function as a reliable recipient. My interlocutors pointed to examples of authoritarian countries to argue that for them one of the most important features that determined the strength of any given country – was its production. To my surprise, the authoritarian president of neighbouring Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, was regularly mentioned

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6 Interviewer

by some and portrayed mostly in a positive light, because it was felt that his policies focused on the production and self-sufficiency of the state:

There used to be a slaughterhouse in Olecko, it was possible to buy meat, once in Augustów you could buy horse meat [...] and now they liquidated everything there, everything is from abroad... Now even nails are not produced in Poland! They bring everything from China! What the hell kind of a state is this that won't even produce its own wire or nails?! And Lukashenko has everything! Everything is self-produced! What if he keeps them on a leash! And here what? There were eight state enterprises in Dąbrowa, they screwed up everything, and now only the dairy has been left, and it is also being sold out. And what? And what are the youth supposed to do? Go abroad? How is this going to work in the long run? (M, 50)

This may also be interpreted as a longing for decommodification understood as independence from the market economy. This predilection to favour statist solutions may be connected to what Maciej Gdula has dubbed neo-authoritarianism in his study of a small town community (see Maciej Gdula's conclusions; 2017).

### **Disrupting the “farm to fork” process**

A farmer told me that he sold his potato crops to “the highest bidder” – suggesting the economic viability of his production. As we continued our conversation it turned out that only one person (entrepreneur) in the area had been buying potatoes from farmers in recent years. Thus, what appeared on the surface to be a competitive economy, although functioning discursively, in practice, turned out (in this and other cases) to be a monopoly<sup>7</sup>. And as such, the possibility of negotiating the price was practically non-existent. More interestingly, in addition to the inability to negotiate the price, the farmers did not have any knowledge about their products destination or their end consumers. One of the interviewees made a statement that potatoes are sold “to somewhere in Belgium” but most often farmers possessed only little awareness about the actual farm to fork chain. This contrasts with socialism, where farmers would often sell their produce directly to the consumer<sup>8</sup> or at least where the consumer was clearly defined as city folk. Now farmers are completely (both physically and symbolically) detached from the consumer.

7 Interestingly, farmers reminiscing about socialism, also talked about there practically being only one recipient for their goods, (the state), however in these accounts this near monopolistic practice was portrayed mostly in a positive light. To explain this apparent contradiction, it should be acknowledged that the state during socialism consistently attempted to acquire all goods produced by the farmer, whereas in this case no steady reception of goods was on offer, nor a regular inflow of profit for the farmer.

8 This was sometimes done in the grey zone in order to leave out the “official system” middleman, for example when farmers would bring their foodstuffs to cities and distribute them within a network of well-known customers.

Scholars have argued that due to mass production/technology and globalisation, food production is becoming more and more invisible (Belasco 2008). What I realized during my research was that both sides of the equation are important as it is not only the consumer who is detached from the producer but also the producer who is equally detached from the consumer: they have no knowledge or idea of who is eating what they produce. Thus, producers' alienation (cf. Aldridge 2003) translates to lower satisfaction with the control over their labour and leads to a shaken sense of purposefulness of his/her work.

### **EU policies undermining the farmer as “food provider”**

The necessity to take out loans and the detailed rules of accounting required of all farms, make many farmers consider the European Union and state politics in general to be intentionally aimed at limiting or weakening domestic agriculture. As one of my interviewees succinctly remarked: “We have western prices, but eastern wages” (M, 50)

Two mechanisms of the agricultural policy instituted by both Poland and the European Union provoked strong reactions. The first is the imposition of production limits (quotas):

I paid, I don't know, 15,000 or 20,000-[Polish zlotys] in fines, because I went over the quota limit. In my opinion this is so stupid, I don't know how this is possible? It would be the same as paying a fine for having too many children, that is the comparison that springs to mind! Some farmers would pour milk out [discard] rather than give to it the dairy plant, to an intermediary for free, so that they would profit on their misfortune [M, 50].

The second mechanism igniting discontent – one which makes quotas even more incomprehensible for local farmers – is the import of agricultural products, including dairy products from the EU and non-EU countries. This economic policy seems to be against what farmers view as the essence of their existence, captured in their self-conception as people who “feed the nation”. A simple visit to the local supermarket these days becomes a recurring reminder that their work is obsolete, as imported products are sold at higher prices while Polish farmers cannot find customers for their wares.

### **Excessive control**

Farmers consider more and more obligations that are now imposed on them as being outside the realm of agriculture and even standing in contradiction to it. Paperwork has become the bane of farmers' lives, as it is so much outside of the physical work ethos. One of my interviewees described how his work has changed as a result of EU regulations:

This is terrible! We have to keep books right now and I tell you honestly if you have one, two or three cows, you can handle it, but if you have, like my friend, you have a really big barn, it's hard,

you have to run it by computer, because, unfortunately, it cannot be done otherwise. Not only on the farmstead but also so much paperwork.

[...] Perhaps you are satisfied [to the interviewer] that this Union is here, that... you can go abroad... But I don't think it was a good idea because all prices went up. We have fertilisers 100% more expensive than they were, you understand? 100%! Where do we get the money for this from?! (M, 42)

#### Another interviewee related:

People laugh at it, but if you have to, you have to, because they require it. There is a lot of bureaucracy. Whether with milk or with cows you need everything, this filling in, these numbers. Each cow must have a number and be careful which calf, which cow, and tags you have to keep an eye on. Lots of papers. We have such a drawer – it does not fit in the drawer anymore. These folders ...

[Her husband]: After being in the Union for seven years, two drawers are already full. (F, 43, M, 45)

The top-down introduction of “paperwork” to the duties of the farmer profession undermined the previous category of “being a farmer”. Many farmers go further and see the continuous imposition of changing regulations and requirements to be met as a way of sabotaging farming altogether.

An illustration of how people understand this excessive control of the state is as follows. One day, during a barbecue in which I participated, the conversation turned to the state proposal to ban ritual slaughter in Poland. It was, at that time, a hot media topic and television debates were taking place discussing the persistence of discriminating prejudice against the Jews (Cała 1992). Questions were raised about whether the production of meat for export to Israel fitted in with “Polishness”, and secondly about ethical issues: whether such slaughter was moral or not, and whether the animals suffered more than during large-scale slaughter. These flash-points of the debate, however, went unmentioned during the discussion I participated in. What aroused the greatest emotions among farmers and the sharpest exchange of opinions was the issue of control – or more precisely, the growing control of the state over all spheres of the lives of its citizens. The political proposal to ban ritual slaughter (viewed by my interviewees as a religious activity) was unanimously perceived as state interference into the sphere of religiosity. In our heated discussion, a 40-year-old farmer finally asked rhetorically whether the government would forbid the Corpus Christi processions, which, after all, also could be viewed as a disturbance because they block roads. The potential ban on ritual slaughter was also seen as another blow to livestock farmers, or agriculture more generally.

The level of emotions evoked by the potential ban of ritual slaughter is even more surprising given the fact that it refers to cattle, which are kept in large herds only by the most successful farmers in this region. The majority I encountered had either no or a single cow, and any experience of slaughter would mostly involve poultry or pigs. These facts seem to indicate that what sparked most emotions was the possible threat



of expanding control. Interestingly, the common perception of the state as constantly expanding its control over agriculture, was paralleled by opinions that it has withdrawn from supporting farming and trade. In my view, both these aspects are what push farmers into grey zones. Farmer's strategies to resist this and cope in this context are mainly based on skillfully navigating the grey zone. Only rarely do these become open acts of rebellion.

#### COVERT AND OVERT STRATEGIES OF RESISTANCE

Some actions of farmers may be considered irrational from the point of view of representatives of the administration and state institutions. Yet I see them as reasonable and rational strategies of resistance and survival. They take this form because farmers' interests are simply at odds with the assumptions of agricultural policy. Due to the high degree of unpredictability of the state-level policies, farmers engage in practices that are sometimes considered irrational or uneconomic by economists or agricultural journalists. These practices may take many forms, both overt and covert, exactly as James Scott suggested. Most farmers' practices fall into the second category. Contrary to examples quoted by Scott (1985), these covert strategies are not so much "foot-dragging, evasion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander and sabotage" but extreme diversification, flexibility, self-sufficiency, a shift to the informal economy, phantom farmership, as well as specific discursive strategies.

#### **Extreme diversification, small scale production**

One of the main covert strategies adopted by local inhabitants is extreme crop diversification, rather than the intensive cultivation and limited diversification, a method implemented by large-scale profit-oriented producers. One of the interviewees, explaining why her farm was so highly diversified, producing "a little bit of everything", said:

And you know what Poland is like – nothing can be predicted here. If you plant potatoes one year, you can make a fortune, and the second year – nothing (F, 40).

Farmers, realizing that it is impossible to predict the official wholesale price of products, try to avoid situations in which they would be dependent only on one of their crops or single-species breeding:

- And it is possible to predict the prices?

M: Not with us. [...] there is no controlled market! This is the price today, and in a few months, it may be different.

- How do you invest then?

M: I don't know what to expect. You focus on pigs, and breed more pigs, and then the pigs are cheaper. You're ready for [herding] cattle, you invest in cattle, the cattle get cheaper. And the price also depends on other markets. For example, if the Turks would be buying [meat from Poland] or the Germans or someone else, then they [the state] will come up with something in a moment and there will be no export and the price of meat will fall (M, 45).

Farmers are urged to focus on larger-scale production, and generally, the model of neoliberal flexibility is promoted (see Gille, who wrote about two contradictory, though coexisting, tendencies of diversification and specialisation in the EU, 2009). However, the changing regulations, unstable prices, as well as unpredictable weather conditions and political factors, create extremely unstable situation for farmers, in which the rational strategy is “involution” (Burawoy 2001) and diversification combined with small-scale, extensive, self-sufficient production. Under this strategy, farmers hoping for solvency, are compelled to switch from crop to crop every year, apply new farming techniques, invest in new technologies, and search for new recipients season after season. They struggle to minimise losses by attempting to sell their produce locally or distribute it within the community. Additionally, much of their work is focused on self-provisioning rather than production for sale. This is a key factor contributing to the emergence of the grey zone – an economy not promoted by the state or the EU, an economy unable to bring in steady profit, but nonetheless a practice which keeps farmers afloat, though unable to expand their production.

### **Moving into the informal economy**

Milk production is still common in this region, with some large dairy farmers. However, there are still many homesteads where only one or a few cows are kept. Interestingly, milk obtained from one cow still exceeds the consumption needs of an average family. Unconsumed milk is kept in the refrigerator in plastic containers, and the cream is used in daily coffee. Milk is also added to pigs' feed. People said that “it is not profitable to bring it to collection centres, because then the milk has to meet the EU requirements”. Because of this, the hosts with whom I stayed most often kept only one cow; the mother made white cottage cheese, which was the subject of informal exchange, in the same manner as meat. Cheese was given as gifts to children who came to visit and sometimes it was sold to friends from Dąbrowa or neighbours.

This is another example of how the production of items for which there used to be a greater demand is now reduced and how production and trade are shifted into the grey economy and the private sphere. Despite the reduction in the number of dairy cows, there is still an overproduction of milk. In the past, feeding pigs with milk, which is something I observed during my research stays, would have been unthinkable.

Any surplus in milk flows into the informal milk trade. Sending milk to collection centres would curb the possibility of sharing this product with one's neighbours. However, where the cow is kept only for homestead's use, an informal “milky way”

lights a path between the farm and the community. It is part of daily routine and community relations based on trust, which allow people to leave an empty milk bottle in front of a neighbour's house and then pick it up when it is filled with fresh milk.

Similar strategies are at play when it comes to other foodstuffs. A case in point is that after a pig is slaughtered, some of its parts are distributed in a complicated network of local and even global social and economic connections (on this see: Mroczkowska 2014), and – simultaneously – expanding the grey zone of food distribution practices, a zone largely divorced from the official economy.

### **Phantom farmer strategy**

Tomasz, a 45-year-old builder, lives in the small town of Dąbrowa Białostocka. His parents live in the countryside, and the farmstead they occupy is officially assigned to Tomasz. He, in turn, would like his daughter to live in their countryside farmstead, but she and her husband bought an apartment in a nearby town. Tomasz is officially the farmer who grows rye, potatoes, and triticale, but it is his parents who directly supervise the farmstead and manage most of its daily tasks.

When asked to whom he sells his crops, he replies with a certain indifference characteristic of many farmers in the area: “To someone who will come to pick them up and give most”. He declares the lack of knowledge about whom the crops are then passed on to (and even about the exact price, though this may be his keeping this information close to his chest). In financial terms, revenue from his sale of crops is marginal, as a large part of it must be ploughed back into production. In terms of economic consideration, production seems of secondary importance to him. However, for his parents this is not the case. For them, the fact that Tomasz agreed to have the farmstead transferred to him, was of utmost importance, as it was a basic requirement for them to be able to receive a pension. The financial security of many retirees depends on finding a person to whom they can transfer the farm. It is easiest to transfer the holding to a family member who then takes on the obligation of “working the land”.

Tomasz, like many people in a similar situation, feels his role as farmer (Polish: *gospodarz*) is ambiguous. He is not tied to the land or bound by daily duties to care for animals or cultivate crops. His life is *de facto* a small-town life. He does not even call himself a farmer because he is separated from the farm not only physically, but also in terms of lifestyle, aspirations and means of consumption. Despite this distance, it is he (and people similar to him) who are central to supporting the old ways of farming in the countryside. What has happened in practice is that elderly people who have signed over their farms to younger relatives have in fact their employment period informally extended beyond that provided for in the Labour Code, because they not only have “physically” remained in the farming economy, but are also responsible for most of the ongoing work in it. Only when this informal mechanism of farm reassignment is revealed, do we realize that the official farmer is a resident of a modern single-family

house or block of flats in Dąbrowa Białostocka, a city of Białystok, or even Warsaw. Hence those who farm are no longer farmers and those who are officially farmers often do not farm at all.

In this way, a group of quasi farmers or “phantom farmers” have come into existence<sup>9</sup> – people living in a city or town who rarely or never work manually in the fields. Their position is ambiguous. “It’s worse for actually for everyone! But it is best for those who live in the town and only take EU money for their fields” (M, 45).

It is of course not a new phenomenon, as farmers have for generations combined different jobs and migrated temporarily if the situation required it; however what I see now is the intensification of these polymorphic strategies resulting in turning the farmer into a non-farmer. This phenomenon is partly due to demographic reasons and partly linked with increased mobility. However, the fact remains that there has come into existence a large group of people who distance themselves from farming while preserving some benefits from formally being farmers. There also exists a large group of people (for example retirees) who are farmers by declaration and lifestyle, but who officially are not regarded as such.

### **Grey zone ecology**

The phenomenon of farmer-nonfarmer is not a simple one. There are many shades of this phenomenon, which are related to the ambiguity of the “farmer” category and identity. One of these paradoxes is revealed in the notion of environmental friendliness, which, is becoming more important in farming. It is at the same time the most expensive and labour-intensive way of farming. Farms registered as organic can apply for larger EU subsidies, but at the same time incur higher production costs. Very few farms are registered as organic in the vicinity of Dąbrowa. Despite this, the ideal of healthy and organic farming is only seemingly impossible to realise:

- Does anyone run an organic farm here?

M: Yes, yes, I think so. By nature, most of the agriculture in this area is organic, although it is not registered as such. A poor farmer, and it must be admitted that most of the farmers in this area are poor, apart from some special cases, cannot simply afford to use fertilisers and chemicals. That is why farms are traditional, sometimes they move a little bit towards modernity. I can honestly say, and I know this matter, that the farms in this area are ecological (M, 48).

The inhabitants themselves use the term “ecological” in reference to their farms and agriculture. However, they do it with a palpable sense of irony, distancing themselves

9 To quote what Elisabeth Dunn said of non-farmers: “Peasants make nonobjects: food that cannot be found, grain that has never been harvested, land that is nonexistence, people who are phantomized. The technique of the resistance is the nonevent, the means is the nonobject, the actors are anonymous” (2009, 1507).

from the very idea. Aware of the formal meaning of “ecology”, they are also familiar with the media discourse related to organic farms. However, they have not turned their farms into ecological enterprises run mainly due to financial reasons. So, in a sense, ecology is being practiced (informally) because farmers lack the financial wherewithal to buy fertilisers and chemicals and it is not practiced (formally) because they lack finance to practice it. Here too, farmers remain outside of the “farmers” category, ending up again in the grey area of Polish agriculture.

### **Strategy: forced poaching and *chabor***

Another example of the informal strategies of survival used by farmers in this eastern part of Poland is a practice referred to as *chabor*, a word used to describe something between a bribe, a gift and a payment, resembling what Alena Ledeneva described for Russia as *blat* (Ledeneva 1998).

[on filling in an EU subsidy application] Damn it. I mean, it's not too complicated, but you do have to sit down. Because I remember the first year, when it came in, I was there until midnight and was filling it out and thinking, “F\*\*\* me”, apologizing, right? But there was a guy in our town who understood the application. [I] pulled up, gave him a bottle, and he filled out the form. And now this help has been available for free for three or four years (M, 46).

Such a practice can be interpreted as what Burawoy called an involution that is “turning away from the market towards non-monetary production” (2001, 269–291). At a time when there are no official problem-solving mechanisms (formal and administrative), people have to come up with alternative ways to overcome the situations they are faced with. This has resulted in an ever-so-expanding private sphere. Many matters can be arranged through a network of private relations and acquaintances.

Another example of a strategy of resistance or even Decertaunian poaching (de Certeau 1984) is a way of earning money from foraging in the nearby Biebrza National Park, a practice though officially outlawed nevertheless seemingly tolerated by the local authorities:

M: Great farmers [ironically], they have two pigs and one cow.

R: But they gather herbs in the swamps here.

K: You won't die here [i.e. you can always find ways to support yourself here], they earn a lot of money in summer [...] three thousand [Polish zloty] a month, if you want, really.

- What do they collect?

K: Three-leaf bean. And when you return the raw material, they pay less, and when you dry it .[more], you have to walk every day.

M: Bring the bag, sell it, the car that buys it comes and three thousand quietly.

- And this is allowed?

K: Theoretically no, but you can [do it], no one will bother you for this. There is a kind of a guard, but he doesn't pick on anyone. Maybe he turns a blind eye, I don't know. These people have been

collecting it here for many years, the park is new, so they don't want to come with the locals. They won't do much harm. [...] So, if someone wants to earn, go ahead. Or cranberry 18 zlotys a kilogram. These are also birch leaves. People go mushroom picking, 600 kilos this year. But a car comes and picks them up. You only have to have the desire and think, and you can always make money. You cannot die here because the forest is close. Not this year, but last year there were so many mushrooms that you could trample on them (M, 87).

In poaching, there is an ambiguous approach to what is legal, as Janine Wedel wrote:

I thought we knew what was legal and what was not, but it turned out that Poles themselves are often unable to explain where the border is. People function at both levels of the system. In the mind of the average consumer, the distinction is blurred – what's more, it is not important. [...] Legal and illegal activities are parallel and closely related. What is legal is not always moral, and what is illegal is often moral (Wedel 2007, 86).

At the same time, the paradox of the post-transformation raises its head once more. Similarly to the Communist Party's policies whose aim was to atomise farmers who had to engage (albeit informally) inactions disapproved by the state to survive, the neoliberal system has also atomised this group. This time many of them have become post- or phantom farmers, shifted their activities to the grey zone, and had to find the way to oppose or ignore new regulations and laws regarding food production (Dunn 2003, 1508). However, in the case of the Polish People's Republic, the system provided farmers with some frame of reference, with a socially designated place within the Polish society as food producers. My research suggests that this kind of symbolic stability is not guaranteed by the current system.

### **Discursive strategies: negotiating “humanity”**

Most farmers believe that the EU's agricultural policy and Poland's policy towards its citizens in general, clearly signals that both care more for the environment than for humans, and pay more attention to animal welfare than to human wellbeing. I have heard frequent complaints about EU's excessive – in the view of interviewees – regulations in regard to animal care and conditions. People speak of being disappointed that this care's concern is animals and not people. One person remarked: “My cowshed is beautifully tiled, but my bathroom isn't tiled at all”. In farmers' narratives, the state is the actor who should attend to the needs of its citizens first and do not privilege animals. In particular, the state should facilitate farmers' decision-making and agency, but it fails to do so. In their eyes the state of politics is far from ideal, as power is based mainly on the meticulous control of people. The liberalisation of abortion laws and enacted laws preventing the chastisement of children were also cited as examples of regulatory excess. In this sphere, many people also perceive the ambivalence embedded in politics.

Here is an excerpt from an interview conducted back in 2011. It is an example of how this rhetoric has been systematically formed over the years:

What has happened in Poland, what has happened in Europe? They want laws allowing a child to be killed as young as twelve weeks old, or even nine months old. They punish people for spanking a child! This mother in Łódź or somewhere, I heard, she will be answering before a court because she gave her child a spank. Yes. And they were building a motorway for Euro 2012, probably to Ukraine, and the construction was suspended for months because some frog was sitting there. Yes some frogs, maybe not a frog, maybe a bird or something. We had to pause the construction of the highway, until it hatched, these chicks raised, the little ones. Everything is already screwed up; you can kill a human [i.e. carry out an abortion]. But [if someone wants to] kill a frog or some bird?: no, [animals are] protected. This is totally unbelievable. Sorry, 3% of Poles use their brains (M, 60).

Such logic has become the basis of resistance movements and slogans used by farmers to strengthen their political voice. It is also a logic that reflects and is anchored in the current mainstream political discourse. However, the question arises whether farmers by referring to this mainstream discourse are indeed strengthening their voice and agency.

#### CONCLUSION

The period 2020–21 was eventful globally and Poland was no different. Apart from the coronavirus pandemic, a social revolution brought about by limiting women's rights to an abortion, the Belarus border refugee crisis, and a considerable collapse of the economy, it was also a time of several waves of farmers' protests. They protested both in larger cities and in places remote from decision-making centres.

At the same time, women's strikes (protesting a nearly total abortion ban) took place in many Polish cities and towns. Social media, suggested jokingly that an alliance between these groups: farmers (mostly male) from masculinised villages and women from feminised cities, is formed. Either way, these two highly disparate groups have given voice to their many years of growing frustration. However, while women's protests were (luckily) understandable to many Poles, farmers' dissatisfaction was not clear to most mainstream commentators. This is because the farmers' protest started with a dissent to the so-called "five for animals", a bill whose draft called for protecting animal rights, improving their living conditions, and making fur farming and ritual slaughter illegal. This considerable step for animal defenders was perceived by many farmers as a political knife in the back. As farmers attempted to explain, a ban on ritual slaughter would affect not only beef and dairy farmers but the whole Polish agriculture and endanger numerous European grants and subsidies.

I have attempted to show in this article, that farmers' struggle to achieve political voice has generally been difficult, as they have been systematically forced out of their "peasant/farmer role" and into the grey zones of farming, economy, and sometimes even society. This has resulted in the emergence of a (largely) politically muted group, whose members are alienated both from their products and consumers. There is however,

a popular belief voiced by the Foundation for the Development of Polish Agriculture (Wilkin and Hałasiewicz 2020) that in Poland, if you have the support of the countryside, you win the election. During the 2021 protest, farmers made themselves visible and even spectacularly heard. The bill protecting animal rights (but at the same time halting ritual slaughter as well as indirectly hindering other connected farming endeavours) was withdrawn. I do not wish to diminish the value of this success for the farmers, but I cannot help wondering about the long-term effects of such overt strategies, and whether farmers will be able to negotiate their position and navigate themselves at least a little out of the grey zone. It seems that overt resistance aimed at changing the structure will not completely replace covert everyday forms of resistance and will not (at least not in the nearest future) free the Polish farmer from the grey zone. As Scott has written, “most of the political life of subordinate groups is to be found neither in the overt collective defiance of powerholders nor in complete hegemonic compliance, but in the vast territory between these two polar opposites” (Scott 1985, 136). The emergence of this territory and its features cannot be however explained solely with reference to “communist heritage” or “communist mentality” (see also Pasięka 2008, 73). What needs to be taken into account, is the present embeddedness of farmers’ lives and work in a much larger structure – the EU.

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