

# “Paradoxical” Dissatisfaction among Post-Socialist Farmers with the EU’s Common Agricultural Policy:

## A Study of Farmers’ Subjectivities in Rural Poland

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Farmers in post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe are the major beneficiaries of the European Union’s (EU) Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), at least in monetary terms. Why, then, are they dissatisfied with the CAP? This study aims to understand farmers’ subjectivities (i.e., judgments shaped by personal opinions and feelings) regarding CAP and compares these subjectivities to the actual impact of CAP in rural areas. It is based on empirical research in the Błaszki commune in central Poland, where the farmers’ movement Agrounia originated. The study has found that in addition to its benefits, CAP created a number of new problems, such as socio-economic differentiation and related tensions in rural communities, misuse of the CAP’s direct payments, disappearance of rural (peasant) lifestyle, and environmental degradation. The empirical material has also revealed the fragile position of Polish farmers in the domestic market, which affects their dignity and self-esteem. Agrounia seeks to address the latter issue, yet it faces the problems of farmer mobilization and negative representation in the media. This article contributes to the discussions about the applicability of CAP in the post-socialist context, the impact of farmers’ subjectivities on their practices, and the farmers’ mobilization and social movements in post-socialist countries.

**Keywords:** *common agricultural policy; the post-socialist countryside; farmers’ subjectivities; Agrounia; farmers’ movements*

## Introduction

The European Union's (EU) Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has come under recent criticism from critical agrarian scholars<sup>1</sup> and other experts<sup>2</sup> for failing to prevent environmental degradation<sup>3</sup> in rural areas—even for causing it—and for provoking growing inequality within farming communities, as most agricultural subsidies go to large industrial farms.<sup>4</sup> Yet in political and academic debates in post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe, these critiques remain muted. There, the adoption and implementation of CAP remain being viewed overwhelmingly positive, as the policy boosted agricultural production and increased household income, especially among poor rural households.<sup>5</sup> Against this backdrop, recent farmers' protests in the post-socialist EU member states have come as a surprise.<sup>6</sup> Protesting farmers criticized the distribution of farm subsidies, the EU's common organization of agricultural markets, and the bureaucracy and opaqueness of CAP. Their protests have encountered uncomprehending and unsympathetic reactions in the mainstream media, especially at the EU level. Post-socialist European farmers were portrayed as "good at milking European taxpayers,"<sup>7</sup> with their protests labeled "paradoxical" and "baseless" since post-socialist European agriculture is the major recipient of CAP subsidies.<sup>8</sup>

This article investigates this "paradoxical" dissatisfaction with CAP among post-socialist European farmers on the example of rural Poland. It studies farmers' subjectivities (i.e., judgments shaped by personal opinions and feelings) regarding CAP and compares these subjectivities to the actual impact of CAP in the analyzed rural locales. The study is based on exploratory fieldwork in the Błaszki commune (municipality) in the Łódzkie voivodeship of central Poland. The area is characterized by a heterogeneous agrarian structure (i.e., the coexistence of small, medium, and large farms), farmers' involvement in various EU agricultural and rural development projects, and severe environmental problems that include drought and loss of biodiversity. Moreover, the Błaszki commune is the point of origin of Agrounia—a social movement that has been mobilizing farmers for protests, both regionally and across Poland, since 2018.

This article is structured as follows. The next section presents the theoretical framework. It is followed by the description of the case study and research methodology. Then the impact of CAP on Polish agriculture is discussed. After that, four empirical sections examine farmers' subjectivities toward CAP. The concluding section provides a discussion on the relevance of the study to other post-socialist contexts.

## Farmers' Subjectivities, Historical Legacies, and Social Movements in Post-Socialist Rural Areas

A growing body of literature analyzes European farmers' perceptions and attitudes toward CAP and its impact on their response strategies.<sup>9</sup> Scholars have analyzed farmers' perspectives on direct payments,<sup>10</sup> environmental protection,<sup>11</sup>

ecosystem services,<sup>12</sup> and other objectives of EU agricultural and rural development policies. They revealed “that the way in which farmers adjust to changes in agricultural policy depends partially on the latter group’s attitudes and mindsets.”<sup>13</sup> However, these studies deal almost exclusively with Western European farmers’ subjectivities, largely overlooking attitudes among their peers in post-socialist Eastern and Central Europe (with a few notable exceptions<sup>14</sup>).

In his study “Agriculture ‘East of the Elbe,’” Swain argued that the biggest problem with CAP is that it ignored historical legacies in post-socialist countries.<sup>15</sup> CAP, originally designed for Western European family farms, failed to take into account the “path dependency” in Eastern European agriculture, therefore was and remains not fit for purpose. “Path dependency” plays a crucial role in shaping post-socialist rurality. Similarly, Humphrey argued, “there is rather an unpredictable propensity to ‘turn back’ or at least resolute refusal to abandon values and expectations associated with socialism.”<sup>16</sup> Swain suggested that the memory of socialism and, even further back in time, the “collective memory” of long-term serfdom strongly influence farmers’ mentalities in contemporary generations.<sup>17</sup> In the same vein, Hann observed that despite the prevailing neoliberal ideology, the Central and Eastern European countryside remains “to [a] considerable degree a non-market world”<sup>18</sup> as farmers are not always guided by commercial considerations. Thus, if we want to understand the specifics of how CAP actually works in Eastern Europe, it is vital to understand farmers’ perceptions and beliefs, along with the standard measures of CAP’s impact in rural areas.

Subjectivities are understood here as personal considerations, judgments, attitudes, expectations, and understandings of the existing social reality.<sup>19</sup> They are abstract, intangible, personal, and private—yet they have concrete intersubjective social effects. Subjectivities are part of social imaginary, which is a common understanding of social reality that makes shared practices possible. Subjectivities range from personal and collective stereotypes about race, religion, and social groups to understanding social situation and mores.

Farmers’ subjectivities have been studied in various contexts. They are often analyzed as influenced and shaped by production regimes, technologies, and market forces. Haggerty et al.<sup>20</sup> revealed that farmers’ subjectivities in New Zealand enter complex and dynamic relations with “agroecologies: landscapes, bodies, climates” and respond to market and policy signals in constructing a notion of “good farming.” Wing Chan and Miller analyzed how pig farmers’ subjectivities in Hong Kong have been molded by production technologies in the government’s effort to influence farmers to stabilize colonial rule and ensure a stable food supply.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Galt revealed that farmers’ complex subjectivities regarding the lack of personal protection during pesticide use in Costa Rica influence farmers’ predisposition to certain political, environmental, and cultural influences.<sup>22</sup>

Subjectivities impact farmers’ daily strategies. On the example of Finish organic farmers, Herman, Lähdesmäki and Siltaoja demonstrated how farmers’ fluid and hybrid subjectivities shape strategies that contribute to farm resilience.<sup>23</sup> Thus,

subjectivities are subject to different influences of power structures and may also become engines of change. Subjectivities impact everyday strategies and, therefore, have the potential to transform into various forms of resistance and mobilization.

In her study of patriotism and food sovereignty in post-Euromaidan Ukraine, Mamonova argued that the rising Ukrainian national identity and patriotic sentiments during the geopolitical conflict with Russia have led to a change in the social imaginary of agriculture, including farmers' subjective perceptions of their activities.<sup>24</sup> If previously small-scale farming was seen as a relic of the communist past, after Euromaidan it became perceived by local food producers and consumers as having the potential to become a sustainable alternative to large-scale industrial agriculture, capable of feeding Ukraine and Europe with ecological and healthy produce. This, Mamonova argued, can be seen as the emergence of a movement for food sovereignty in Ukraine. Food sovereignty is an ideology, movement, and mobilization framework that promotes the right of people to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It is viewed as a sustainable alternative to the neoliberal agricultural model.

Whereas food sovereignty is popular in other parts of the world, it is a rather marginal movement in Central and Eastern Europe. Bilewicz demonstrated that the emergence and spread of food sovereignty ideas among Polish farming communities remain very limited due to the prevalence of the modernization paradigm in the public sphere and the history of communism in Poland.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, in their study of a Romanian food sovereignty movement, Hajdu and Mamonova demonstrated that communist legacies influence societal attitudes toward capitalism and socialism, rendering problematic the adoption of anti-capitalist ideology of food sovereignty.<sup>26</sup> Mamonova and Visser analyzed institutionalized social movements in post-socialist rural Russia. They revealed that many local movements, agricultural associations, farm unions, and rural political parties lack constituencies, support the status quo, and may have been created for other—often political—purposes (which they called “phantom movements” and “state marionettes”). Besides that, Mamonova and Visser observed the gradual “politicization” of rural social movements in Russia. Many rural organizations accepted their failure to change the current situation with apolitical means. Instead, they created alternative political organizations—often political parties—to “change the rules of the game themselves, [. . .] something only possible from inside the political process.”<sup>27</sup>

### **The Błaszki Commune: The Case Study Site**

The field research for this article was conducted in the Błaszki commune (Sieradzki *powiat* [county], central Poland) from September to October 2019. Błaszki is located in Łódzkie voivodeship, near its western border with Wielkopolskie

voivodeship, on the route between the regional cities of Kalisz and Sieradz. There are sixty-five villages with a population of more than fifteen thousand people.

Agriculture is the core socio-economic activity in the Błaszki region, where farmlands cover about 84 percent of the total area, with only 9 percent forested, primarily in the southern part of the commune. There are 3,258 registered farms.<sup>28</sup> Most of them grow vegetables, mainly potatoes, cabbage, and carrots.

The Błaszki area experiences serious environmental problems, particularly drought, which has been affecting the area for several years. In 2019, the municipality initiated a drought relief program to help farmers cope with the consequences of water shortages. The municipality received 1,113 applications from local farmers. According to municipal estimates, 7,561.43 ha of farmland were affected by drought; associated losses in agricultural production were estimated at 18,419,208.84 zlotys (some \$4.8 million, or over €4 million).<sup>29</sup>

The social movement Agrounia was established in 2018. Agrounia's leader, Michał Kołodziejczak, lives in Orzeżyn—a village several kilometers from Błaszki. The movement has organized numerous protests and events aimed to protect the positions of Polish farmers in the domestic food market.<sup>30</sup> The movement's members are primarily entrepreneurial farmers from various regions of Poland. Agrounia has quickly spread outside the Błaszki area and organized various protests in Warsaw and beyond, including road blockades in smaller cities and towns. The movement has successfully mobilized farmers for action by being very active on social media.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with ten farmers, including an interview with Michał Kołodziejczak. We identify most interviewees (eight) as entrepreneurial farmers, following van der Ploeg's definition.<sup>31</sup> Entrepreneurial farmers<sup>32</sup> are highly dependent on the market (in terms of both inputs and outputs<sup>33</sup>), seek to reduce the influence of nature within the production process ("artificialization"),<sup>34</sup> and are oriented toward intensification and scale enlargement of farms. Entrepreneurial farming is commonly defined as being in opposition to peasant farming. The remaining two interviewees are smallholders, who can be characterized as peasant farmers. Peasant farmers are food producers who aim to reduce their dependency on external resources (including credit), optimize the use of internally available resources, become closely involved in relations with "living nature," and differentiate their activities to increase family income. The critical condition for peasants' survival depends on a "logic of subsistence"—that is, an attachment to their land and knowledge of its cultivation, as the central component of a peasant mode of production.<sup>35</sup>

The small sample size was compensated by the targeted selection of study participants—interviewees—along with the optimized interview guide and extended in-depth discussion with the interviewees. In our design of data collection, we followed the transactional model of Willock and colleagues on the interaction between psychological variables (attitudes and objectives) and farming behavior.<sup>36</sup> This model integrates socio-economic, psychological, and farming variables into a

comprehensive framework. Accordingly, our interview guide included questions on socio-economic, psychological, and farming variables. We asked farmers about their food production and distribution, past and present activities on the farm and within the rural community, their plans for the future, attitudes toward CAP (pillars 1 and 2<sup>37</sup>), assessment of their position in the market (distribution channels, middlemen), opinions about drought and other environmental problems, and attitudes toward Agrounia. To ensure respondents' anonymity, their names were replaced with pseudonyms (except for Kołodziejczak, the leader of Agrounia, upon his agreement). Direct quotations in the text represent the authors' translations.

The interview data were analyzed using elements of discourse analysis to better understand the farmers' subjectivities. Cluster analysis—as a heuristic tool for discourse analysis—was used to reveal discourses on four research subthemes: (1) entrepreneurial versus peasant modes of production, (2) the CAP subsidy system and domestic market distortions, (3) environmental problems, and (4) mobilization and collective action.

The primary data were complemented by the authors', and secondary data were derived from sources including academic articles, analytical reports, statistical information, and media publication.

## **CAP's Socio-Economic Impact in Poland**

As Swain argued, the adoption and implementation of CAP in post-socialist agriculture not only brought many positive changes, but also introduced a number of new challenges. According to the prevailing public opinion,<sup>38</sup> the Polish rural sector is seen as a recipient of significant amounts of investment that contributed to poverty reduction and rural development. The situation, however, is much more complex.

Since Poland's accession to the EU in 2004, the nation's rural areas have recovered from the severe economic crisis caused by systemic transformation after the fall of Communism in 1989.<sup>39</sup> Poverty rates have dropped significantly and per-capita income has increased. After the country's inclusion in the EU Single Market, the Polish agricultural sector has seen an increase in exports, with 80 percent of agricultural exports going to EU countries.<sup>40</sup> Poland has become a major exporter of food products, especially milk and meat.<sup>41</sup> The country is also the largest net recipient of EU money among EU countries. During the period 2014–2017, Poland received €147 billion from the EU budget, of which a third (approx. €47 billion) came from CAP. This makes Polish farmers the largest recipient group of EU direct transfers.<sup>42</sup> Poland is the only country to move all of the permitted 25 percent of incentives from pillar 2 (support for rural areas) to pillar 1 (direct payments) to protect farm livelihoods, especially vulnerable small-scale farms.

However, the CAP direct payment system has led to some negative consequences, which include growing inequality between farmers in terms of financial support. Thus,

20 percent of the largest farms received 74 percent of the direct payments.<sup>43</sup> Incomes among all farmers have increased, but also became very unevenly distributed.<sup>44</sup> The direct payments from the first pillar of CAP remain lower in Poland than in most other EU countries (nineteen out of what were then twenty-eight EU countries receive higher payments per hectare than Poland).<sup>45</sup>

The CAP's direct payments are substantial for Polish smallholders, who still constitute the majority of farmers, but these payments are not enough to help them compete with large farms. In practical terms, the direct payments constitute more of social support than a basis for development.<sup>46</sup> Consequently, the CAP system has generated a large category of dormant farms producing (nearly) nothing, but maintaining the land in "good farming culture" to receive direct payments. According to the *Agriculture Atlas* issued by Heinrich Böll Stiftung, nonproducing farms account for about 15 percent of all Polish farms, while subsistence farms constitute only 10 percent.<sup>47</sup> As a result, a substantial group of farmers has emerged who live primarily on subsidies (combined with other sources of income). This transformation has broader implications than just economic. Small-scale farms are a hub of cultural values: they preserve the rural landscape, land heritage, and national (peasant) traditions. These values are pivotal not only to farming families but also to the very existence of the Polish village. Due to the inactivity of smallholders—the recipients of the CAP's direct payments—many small-scale farms are likely to disappear and their land will be bought by large-scale farms or other investors for nonagricultural purposes.

The CAP's direct payments also transform farming techniques and methods. Farmers who participate in CAP programs must learn new skills, such as technical, legal, and economic knowledge and processes. Moreover, CAP amplifies "revolutionary changes in relations between farmers and financial and advisory institutions."<sup>48</sup> For example, farmers should open their own bank accounts to pursue financial operations.

Despite the support for small-scale farms through direct payments and programs for young farmers in Poland, the number of small farms is rapidly declining, and land is being consolidated among an ever-reducing number of large farms. In 2017, 1.8 percent of farms with an area of more than 50 ha owned more than 31 percent of total agricultural land.<sup>49</sup> Traditional peasant-like farms are unable to compete with large farms and disappear. Many small and medium farms—that are trying to make ends meet by producing food for commercial purposes—must intensify production and cut costs, often by applying environmentally harmful methods. This single-minded pursuit of efficiency fosters the introduction of monocultures, the removal of boundary paths and trees within and between fields, and other measures that contradict traditional farming methods. The CAP's agri-environmental payments meant to protect biodiversity and farming within areas deemed "challenging for cultivation" (e.g. mountain regions) are too small to encourage farmers to farm and to follow traditional farming methods.<sup>50</sup> The increasingly specialized farms are largely divided into



crop and livestock farms, contributing to a reduction in the use of manure as fertilizer and, consequently, an increase in the use of chemical fertilizers.

Another consequence of CAP is inflated agricultural land prices. Since the CAP's introduction in Poland, land prices have increased sixfold.<sup>51</sup> The CAP's impact on land prices is especially observable in areas dominated by small-scale farms, where it petrifies the fragmented agrarian structure. Public policy in Poland fails to address these problems. The continuous disagreement between different authorities over land use policy results in a lack of coherent land management.<sup>52</sup>

## Empirical Results and Discussion

### Entrepreneurial Farmers versus "Pseudo-Farmers"

In Poland, unlike other post-socialist countries, farmland was not collectivized during the communist period, which preserved the nationwide dominance of smallholdings. Recently, this structure has begun to change, as larger entrepreneurial farmers purchase or lease land from smallholders. This process is visible in the Błaszki commune. Our study revealed a growing socio-economic gap between medium-size entrepreneurial farmers and smallholders. Those smallholders who largely live on the CAP's direct payments are often termed "pseudo-farmers" (*pseudo-rolnicy*, in Polish), as indicated in our interviews in Błaszki. Most of the interviewed entrepreneurial farmers hold negative attitudes toward their smallholding neighbors. Such attitudes are most visible in the interview with the middle-aged couple Maciej and Maria. They arrived in Błaszki twenty-five years ago from the neighboring city of Kalisz. They bought a small farm and gradually expanded it by buying plots from their neighbors. Today, they own 40 ha of land, cultivate vegetables and corn, and employ seasonal workers. They participated in the CAP second pillar program for the modernization of farms, during which they bought a new tractor and several machineries. However, according to Maciej and Maria, not many villagers are as "hard-working" and share the same "modernizing attitude":

They are not farmers, they are "pseudo-farmers" hopping from flower to flower. He [a "pseudo-farmer"] has not tilled the land for 10 years and wants to plant onions but does not know how. This should be outlawed [. . .] Those [direct] payments let these people keep the land no matter what they do. And they make their profit when the state gives money to them.

In contrast, farmers pursuing the entrepreneurial mode of production—though being the minority—are called "real farmers." According to Maciej, there are "50 or 60 farms [registered in his village], but only three of them are 'real farmers', and the rest have the land and benefit from the environmental payments."

Our interviews revealed two types of CAP-related tensions between entrepreneurial farmers and smallholders. First, according to the former, the direct payments



prevent land transfers from less efficient smallholders to “more efficient” and “modernized” farmers. Entrepreneurial farming is based on constant expansion, and the demand for land among entrepreneurial producers has been increasing. Such land-related tensions are vivid in our interview with Stanisław and Janina. The couple is entrepreneurial vegetable farmers (cultivating mainly potatoes and carrots). They own 33 ha of land and lease additional land from fellow villagers. Janina spoke of their neighbor, who does not cultivate his land but lives mainly on the direct payments and his wife’s salary:

He gets paid and would not ever give his land away, because it generates profit, and that is free money [ . . . ]. Today, practically everybody gets [payments], some for doing something, and some for doing nothing. It is a bit unfair.

Janina, however, does not consider a non-economic value of the land. Her neighbor may keep the land not only for direct payments, but also for cultural, emotional, and personal values attached to it. Janina’s judgment demonstrates the deep incorporation among entrepreneurial farmers into the dominant modernization discourse about land and farming.<sup>53</sup>

The second tension between entrepreneurial and smallholding farmers is related to production methods. European entrepreneurial farmers have to meet strict quality and sanitation standards that impose controls over every stage of production. They must comply both with quality control requirements of EU food safety policy and with demands from supermarket chains. Meanwhile, according to Maciej and Maria, smallholders do not follow the quality control procedures when growing their food. As a result, such “uncontrolled” food discourages middlemen from buying products from the area, including products of the “real farmers”:

They are a problem for us, so to speak, because we have to sustain ourselves and our farms, pay off loans, fulfill our obligations, and so on, and they . . . we know they are working [somewhere else] with stable incomes, and they farm their land for extra income. [ . . . ] But he [smallholder] is not interested in keeping the price [at a fixed level] and guaranteeing the quality of farm products, that [products] are produced in an adequate way, and that are processed appropriately.

These entrepreneurial farmers’ subjectivities about “pseudo-farmers” generate prejudice and feelings of injustice among the former. These subjectivities seem to be projected onto the entire category of smallholders. Nearly all entrepreneurial farmers interviewed for this study believe that small-scale farms should disappear in favor of large-scale entrepreneurial or industrial farms.<sup>54</sup> This mindset is evident in the way our interviewees spoke of the future of farming in Poland. The assumptions about the impending disappearance of smallholders and the dominance of large industrial farms are shared by both entrepreneurial farms and smallholders, yet in different emotional tones. Entrepreneurial farmers see the process as something favorable and just; they call it a “clearing out” of “pseudo-farmers” (interview

with Maciej and Maria). Smallholders view it as a negative but unavoidable process. In her interview, Jolanta, a smallholding farmer and a teacher, shares her views on the future of smallholders:

Small farms have not a chance of surviving. I do not see [a future for] these small farms. [ . . . ] It depends on who will remain here. When a young man comes here, he will look for opportunities to improve it [a small farm], he will take on some projects or buy more land. He will struggle to make ends meet.

The revealed tensions between “real farmers” and “pseudo-farmers” show that the post-socialist Polish farming community is deeply divided and that CAP’s architecture exacerbates these divisions.

### **CAP and the Market**

In our interviews, we asked farmers about the importance of the CAP’s direct payments for their farms. They responded differently depending on their farm’s size and their mode of production: the direct payments are more essential for smaller pluriactive farmers and are less important for larger, more entrepreneurial ones. Most of the interviewees argued that CAP did not protect them from the disturbing effects of an open market and price volatility. When asked about the main problem in agriculture today, respondents referred to unfair competition in agri-food markets and the weak position of farmers in the agri-food chain. All interviewees, regardless of their farm size, mentioned price volatility as a major concern. From their point of view, fixing agricultural prices would be a better aid for farmers than direct payments. Some farmers even suggested eliminating the direct payment scheme, as the support it provides is insignificant for larger farmers and provokes tensions within rural communities. The interview with Adam, an entrepreneurial vegetable farmer, is emblematic:

When there is a year like this [a good year for vegetable growing], they can drop the direct payments. [ . . . ] Then, when there is no productivity, those payments would not help. There is no money to invest. [ . . . ] It is a drip in the bucket when there is no productivity.

The same argument is put forward by Paweł, an entrepreneurial farmer with a 40-ha farm. He mentioned an importance of fixed prices not just for his business, but also for his dignity:

I would prefer there were none [payments] and that prices stayed normal. This is not a lot of money, believe me, we will get 20 or 30 thousand zlotys for 40 hectares of land, this is not much money, I would prefer selling my produce with dignity at a normal fair price.

For farmers, self-esteem and dignity are crucial aspects of their identity. Our interviewees indicated the importance of fair market prices and competition in farmers' satisfaction with their work and lives. Apathy and despair are often associated with farmers' feelings of unfair treatment by supermarket chains that control the food retail market. These chains are often foreign-owned and import (cheap) foreign products to Polish markets, forcing Polish farmers into an unequal competition. As Maciej and Maria said, supermarket chains buy places at open-air markets where the farmers used to sell their produce:

We should sell our products here, on the spot [open-air markets, local supermarkets]. Our produce is locally produced, in good ecological conditions, close to what our bodies need. But it turns out there are not any Polish products here.

Maciej and Maria complain that poor-quality foreign products are imported and sold at very low prices in Polish markets and supermarkets, making Poland the "trash bin of Europe." Moreover, the low-quality cheap products are often illegally labeled "made in Poland" to mislead consumers. Consequently, Polish farmers experience unfair competition along with growing mistrust among consumers. Most interviewees believe that national food security and self-sufficiency are downplayed in favor of the EU Single Market. Piotr, who owns 30 ha of potato, wheat, rapeseed, and corn fields, states this opinion in his interview:

When I think about problems, they are uncertain prices and the fact that we import goods from abroad, right? [. . .] I think we could be self-sufficient [. . .], we could produce wheat for our own market, potatoes for our own market, vegetables for our own market, and these could satisfy everyone's needs, right?

Most interviewees are disappointed with the EU and domestic agricultural policies. Some farmers mention the fact that the CAP's direct payments in Poland are lower than in Western European countries. Maciej and Maria recall unfulfilled hopes for a fair EU agrarian policy as Poland joined the EU:

We bought our farm when we joined the [European] Union in 2005. We believed the Union would [. . .] control production, that prices would be more stable. That is why we bought this farm. And it turned out that the Union really did nothing. There are no regulations. Maybe the Union is not to blame? It does not have a significant impact on our actions; our politicians, in fact, did nothing to reorganize the countryside to make sure everything functions in a normal civilized way.

The weak position of farmers in domestic market is at the center of Agrounia's agenda. Among other activities, the movement works to prevent the false labeling of products in supermarkets. Michał Kołodziejczak, its leader and a family farmer of 100 ha of land, criticizes foreign retailers as the source of the problem. He sees the problem as related to the "wrong rules" of Poland's EU membership:

The European Union, I always say “yes” to it, but the rules are not right, they do not favor us. Lithuanians, for example, when joining the Union, demanded guarantees that foreign supermarket chains would not be allowed to set their stores there. Nothing like this happened in Poland. During the first five years, we had a tremendous development of foreign trade networks that treated us as a market outlet. Today, we often have [ . . .] false labeling in stores, which baffles customers; these are the topics we strongly condemn at Agrounia. It is clear that they [foreign investors, supermarkets] want to sell foreign products as Polish, because they know Poles want our local products. It is unfair. Since the beginning of our accession to the EU, we have been used as an outlet for low-quality products.

Agrounia revealed that one of the most popular nationwide discount stores, Biedronka, falsely labels foreign products. They invited the police and the media to visit one of the chain’s stores to expose the fraud.<sup>55</sup> It was a successful action, resulting in stricter control over product labeling in supermarkets. Agrounia is primarily focused on protecting the domestic market, while CAP is not central to its agenda (to be discussed below).<sup>56</sup>

Farmers’ weak market position and their unequal struggle with intermediaries and supermarket chains are the critical issues for Błaszki farmers. Most of the interviewees would prefer the government to intervene in the market by maintaining stable prices and guaranteeing a place for Polish products on domestic retail shelves. These issues, which can only be resolved at the state level, are considered more important than CAP.

## Modernized Agriculture and Environmental Crisis

As elsewhere in the EU, CAP has stimulated intensive industrial agricultural production in Poland. This has proven harmful to the environment, but the new CAP budget for 2021–2028 is likely to sustain generous subsidies for large-scale farmers.<sup>57</sup> Although Poland’s agricultural structure remains dominated by small-holdings, large farms have already made a negative impact on the environment.<sup>58</sup> The industrialization of agriculture and the associated high levels of energy use and water consumption, as well as declining efficiency, have led to environmental degradation.<sup>59</sup>

The same holds true in the Błaszki commune. The most visible environmental problem in Błaszki is the severe drought that has adversely affected crops over the past two years. Water scarcity is not a recent problem: water resources have been shrinking for over a decade in this area. The region has no large rivers and water basins, while marshlands and meadows have been replaced by industrial farm fields.

Błaszki’s farmers recognize the problem and understand its long-term nature. However, the farmers’ subjectivities of environmental degradation seem to be largely influenced by the post-socialist legacy. Under socialism, the state-managed environmental resources<sup>60</sup> and environmental problems were caused mainly by state-owned

enterprises.<sup>61</sup> Consequently, there are no legacies of collective bottom-up action to tackle environmental problems.

To date, the only response to drought has been an individual one: farmers have been digging wells in their fields and installing rain barrels for crop irrigation. Thereby, they exacerbate drought through intensive exploitation of groundwater resources. In their interview, Stanisław and Janina argue that many wells were dug informally—in fact, illegally—as only three of the existing fifteen or sixteen local wells were officially registered in Błaszki. Farmers who cannot afford their own wells and rain barrels face heavy losses. This is a big problem for pluriactive smallholders, who could only await “the grace of God,” as an interview with the village teacher, Jolanta, revealed:

I am in God's hands, in the power of what falls from the sky. And drought is a horrible thing. I have already had losses, for example, I bought young celery [ . . . ] But there is no basic component, because there's no water. As the saying goes, nothing grows without water.

The Polish government has issued a program to help farmers affected by drought. However, according to Błaszki's farmers, that help was insufficient, but rather symbolic. The drought damage commission has assessed farmers' losses inadequately and arbitrarily. As one farmer told us, the commission has estimated the shares of crop loss without visiting and examining the fields.

Farmers argue that the state bears responsibility for the lack of a coherent policy in addressing water shortages in the area. As Michał Kołodziejczak said in his interview, there is no tradition of building retention reservoirs. Furthermore, dealing with environmental problems in Błaszki has a clear political dimension. For example, Maciej and Maria argue that various initiatives are commonly undertaken before local elections and disappear right after:

A project has been proposed [several times] to create retention reservoirs. This usually happens before elections but leads to nothing. Because, we know, this needs big financial incentives [ . . . ] If next year will be like the past two years, [farming] will suffer a total collapse.

In neighboring communes, water scarcity is already acute, and farmers report the disappearance of the water in wells.

Other environmental problems in the Błaszki commune include the decline in biodiversity and unsustainable land use, which produces uncontrolled changes in the natural landscape. Farmers recognize that their industrial farming is largely responsible for these processes, but they feel unable to change their mode of production because they are deeply embedded in the industrial value chain. The interview with Maciej and Maria is revealing:

There are fewer bees. In the past, stepping outside on a spring day, you would hear in the air that bees were busy working, right? Now, it is due to these chemicals. . . without them, you cannot grow, because the plants will look ugly . . . . The chemicals kill insects, right? The meadows are mowed flat [ . . . ], they need to be left natural and when there is no call for it, they must not be wiped out. Those meadows were the natural habitat for grasshoppers, butterflies . . . . There used to be loads of them.

Maciej and Maria's awareness about the environmental impact of industrial farming is consistent with recent research, which indicates that large-scale farmers pursuing intensive production in Poland are more environmentally conscious than smallholders.<sup>62</sup> However, they remain reluctant to modify their mode of farming because consumers expect vegetables to be "clean, nice, worm-free" (in Maciej and Maria's words). Moreover, some interviewees said that the number of parasites on agricultural crops has increased in recent years, which requires additional use of chemical pesticides. Furthermore, the contemporary distribution system, based on middlemen delivering farmers' produce to supermarkets, is preventing a transformation from industrialized, chemically intensive production to sustainable, environmentally conscious farming. Farmers express grief over lost biodiversity and landscapes—however, no common effort is undertaken to counteract those processes.

### **Mobilization and Political Representation of Farmers**

The farmers' discontent, expressed during our interviews, could be easily transformed into political demands. Yet our study reveals that Błaszki farmers are reluctant to get involved in politics. Most of them believe that no political party represents their interests, and the likelihood of such a party emerging is low.

Agrounia has tried to raise the issues that were crucial to Błaszki's farmers. Being registered as a foundation, Agrounia calls itself "a community of farmers and consumers." According to its statute, its mission is to ensure the viability and longevity of family farms, to encourage and support healthy food production and food security throughout the country, and to protect the domestic market.<sup>63</sup> The movement, though, rarely tackles the CAP-related issues directly. "Protecting the domestic market" (as stated in the Mission section of its website)<sup>64</sup> appears to be the key goal of the movement, along with its efforts to fight against the false labeling of foreign products and the dominance of foreign supermarket chains. Agrounia organized farmers' protests, both locally and in the capital. Since 2018, Agrounia has organized; its participants called to eliminate the direct payment system or to set equal payments for all European farmers.<sup>65</sup> Michał Kołodziejczak explained in his interview what could happen if the CAP's direct payments were liquidated:

I think Polish farmers would lose relatively little [ . . . ] if there were no direct payments. [ . . . ]. Because we would be much more competitive than Western farmers.

Kołodziejczak believes that the direct payment system cannot compensate for losses incurred by Polish farmers due to low prices for their products and fraudulent supermarket practices.

Most of the interviewed farmers in Błaszki have expressed moderate support for Agrounia (two were members of the movement at the time of interviews; several others have participated in the movement's protests). However, our study indicated serious constraints to the farmers' mobilization at the local level.

One of the reasons for the weak mobilization is the negative media coverage of the farmers' movement. Some journalists have portrayed Agrounia as populist, right-wing and pro-Putin.<sup>66</sup> Some of these accusations are not groundless. Agrounia has, indeed, supported several initiatives of far-right movements.<sup>67</sup> However, some Agrounia members have also joined the left-wing protest against Polish abortion ban in 2020 (from the interview with Kołodziejczak, though, he himself did not support that protest).<sup>68</sup> Thus, the movement's alliances and relationships with other political forces are rather contradictory. Agrounia is also criticized by progressive media for its protest tactics, such as throwing apples and pig carcasses on the streets of Warsaw during the March 2019 protest.<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, the movement is often portrayed as supporting large-scale industrial farms.<sup>70</sup>

Besides that, Kołodziejczak is often criticized for his unsuccessful attempt to enter politics. Recently, he has tried to establish a political party, yet to no avail. This is not unique to Poland. In post-socialist societies, people "tend to distrust any political action and assume hidden self-interests behind every form of collective action."<sup>71</sup> Kołodziejczak's political activity, however, can be interpreted as part of the "new game," as described by Mamonova and Visser in their study of rural social movements in Russia. Unable to change the current situation as apolitical actors, some post-socialist rural movements have established political parties to influence decision-making from within the political system. However, the "politicization" of Agrounia became interpreted in social media as the personal political ambitions of its leader. Kołodziejczak's political involvement has disappointed many farmers, both in the Błaszki commune and beyond, who refused to participate in the movement's activities. For example, Paweł, a friend of Kołodziejczak, doubted whether Agrounia's actions would be supported as previously:

Nowadays, I do not know [ . . . ] how many people here, in our neighborhood, would join a protest. . . . I do not know what people think about Agrounia [ . . . ] I hear from some fellows that not many [like] that Michał has turned into politics [ . . . ]. This may discourage people. [During] all meetings, Michał used to say that [he was] far from politics, that he just wants to pressure the government.

Another reason for the low mobilization is the farmers' subjectivity about solidarity and cooperation among farmers. Agrounia is commonly perceived as a movement led by a strong leader, which has trouble building strong grassroots structures due to that lack of cooperation and solidarity. Mobilization problems are partly the



result of Poland's post-socialist legacy, characterized by the "social production of mistrust."<sup>72</sup> This mistrust is further exacerbated by antagonisms between "real farmers" and "pseudo-farmers." According to the interviewees, the lack of solidarity and desire to cooperate is vivid at many levels. Thus, Grzegorz shared his opinion in the interview:

There is no solidarity among farmers [. . .]. This shows itself in contacts between neighbors. Today, neighbors do not visit each other, they do not know if a neighbor is at home or if he has died [. . .]. I do not know if he cares that his neighbor's having tough times. What is important is that he is doing better himself, unfortunately. We have no solidarity, and I do not see good things coming for Agrounia. I hope I am wrong. Maybe lousy market conditions will bring Agrounia together again. Everybody will start protesting again.

## Conclusion

In this article, we challenged the assumption about the "paradoxical" dissatisfaction of Polish farmers with the EU's Common Agricultural Policy. Based on the analysis of farmers' subjectivities about CAP and the actual impact of this policy on rural areas of the Błaszki commune, we revealed the following. Although Polish farmers are the main beneficiaries of CAP, the EU policy has created many new problems for them. Thus, CAP caused socio-economic differentiation in rural communities, and family farmers became more specialized and industrialized. The income gap between small and large farms has widened. A new group of so-called "pseudo-farmers" has emerged, who produce (almost) nothing but keep their land in "good farming culture" to receive the CAP's direct payments. This generates numerous tensions in rural communities.

Our research demonstrated that many Błaszki farmers are deeply alienated from CAP. They seem to agree that it would make more sense for the national government to control prices than to provide the CAP's direct payments. It is interesting to note that Polish farmers see their remedies at the national level, not at the EU level. Yet, even at the national level, farmers' voice is not heard, due to the dominance of foreign supermarket chains and the lack of solidarity and trust among farmers. Furthermore, this study demonstrated that the long-term goals of combining economically viable family farming with environmental protection and a healthy, egalitarian social structure are rather utopian, at least in the context of the Błaszki commune.

Our findings contribute to the discussion on the incompatibility of CAP with existing agrarian structures in post-socialist Eastern and Central Europe. Despite significant differences in the agrarian structures in Poland and other post-socialist European countries, CAP has triggered similar negative outcomes. For example, the implementation of CAP in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary indirectly led

to land grabbing,<sup>73</sup> increased inequality between large industrial farms and small-holders, and limited access to land and financial resources for newcomers.<sup>74</sup>

The emergence of “pseudo-farmers” is also observable in Slovakia, albeit in a different form. There, CAP subsidies have allegedly been received by powerful politicians and state authorities, provoking large-scale farmer protests in 2019.<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, farmers’ “unhealthy” dependence on the CAP’s direct payments was also observed by Kovac in the Hungarian context.<sup>76</sup> Kovac argued that CAP has generated a “subsidy culture,” which largely motivates farmers to rely on subsidies and, thereby, erodes the traditional values of physical labor. Similarly, in his study of Eastern Europe, Hann<sup>77</sup> wrote,


capitalized family farmers leave their fields fallow and their machines idle when it pays them to do so, due to payment of EU subsidies. They keep their hedges neat and preserve the “cultural landscape” not because of an altruistic concern with aesthetic tastes of urban tourists, but because these activities, too, are subsidized by Brussels.

Our research also contributes to discussions on rural social movements in post-socialist Europe. Farmers’ movements in the post-socialist countries have previously been considered underdeveloped, lacking incentives to create and spread goals of food sovereignty. It is assumed that most farmers are unaware of the problems posed by the modernization paradigm, and therefore, they support the existing neoliberal agricultural order. Our research has shown that the situation is more complex. Many farmers do pursue unsustainable environmental practices that are imposed by the existing agricultural system, but they feel that they lack the political, social, and economic power to change the present situation.

In this study, we also highlighted the obstacles that the farmers’ movement faces in its operations, which includes negative discourse of the mainstream media and social media. We showed that in their effort to protect domestic markets and farmers’ interests, the farmers’ movement can easily slip toward supporting the practices, discourses, and agendas of right-wing populist movements.

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