Why Belarusians Refuse to Work in Agriculture

Post-Soviet mass discourse often portrays Belarus as a country of villagers. A big deal of that comes from the image of president Lukashenka himself. He has been director of a farm in Eastern Belarus before going into high politics and is famous for his obsession with agricultural issues. This, however, did not help Belarus farming to turn into a thriving industry.

On 28 November, Belarus parliamentarians hosted deputy prime minister Michail Rusy. He presented plans for agricultural development and voiced some major problems of the sector. It becomes evident that the absence of reforms turned agriculture into a very unattractive place work destination.

An Everlasting Kalhas

Belarus agricultural sector remains largely unreformed since Soviet times. Collective farms, or kalhas (kolkhoz in Russian), is the main production unit in agriculture. Kalhas operates as a state-owned enterprise which usually employs workers from nearby villages.

In the Soviet Union, kalhas was not only the centre of rural economy, as practically all social life of rural community revolved around it. Belarus leadership chose to preservation the Soviet rural economy and community. However, it turned absolutely unattractive for Belarusians today.

Initially Lukashenka regime was not supporting private farming and today it makes less than 2% of Belarus agricultural production. The kalhas system, on the contrary, have been considerably subsidised despite significant losses. With the decline of Belarusian economic model, traditional support of
Soviet-style collective farms becomes virtually impossible.

In recent years Belarus attempted to implement some regional policies to support rural development. The government launched a number of national programmes: State Complex Program for Development of Regions, Small and Medium Urban Settlements (2007-2010) and State Program for Revival and Development of Rural Areas (2005-2010). The programmes aimed at fostering economic development and attracting workers to the countryside.

Although some sound measures were introduced, like tax reductions for firms operating in rural areas, little hope for real changes. Two decades passed since the need for transformation became evident, and the current policy tools are unable to change deeply entrenched negative trends.

Growing Problems of the Sector

On 28 November, Belarus deputy prime minister Michail Rusy reported to the newly selected parliament. The subject of discussion was Belarus agricultural sector. Rusy presented ambitious plans for modernization of the sector by 2015.

Meanwhile, he admitted a number of serious problems that exist in agriculture today. Notably, he mentioned that “the problem of personnel able to implement large-scale transformations in agricultural sector has become crucial in recent years”.

Indeed, for Belarus youth agriculture seems the least desirable sector of employment. First, farming offers lowest salaries compared to other sectors of employment.

It makes only 65% of the average national salary, while in industry it averages 120%, finances — 190%, public administration — 125%, education and health — 75%. Of course, the rates depend on the economic condition of various kahas. While richer ones (which are not a common case) can afford
paying higher wages, the poor kalhas practically keep their workers in poverty. A monthly salary lower than $200 is not rarity in Belarusian villages. People cope by managing small kitchen gardens of their own or raising a couple of pigs.

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Second, most kalhas have poor managerial capacity. Soviet-style management, rudeness, contempt for initiative keeps young graduates and specialists away from kalhas. Moreover, farms offer very unattractive labour conditions. For instance, sometimes workers do not have day-offs, because they have to replace their drunk colleagues or simply because the staff is scarce.

Third, rural settlements offer very poor infrastructure of culture and entertainment. Libraries with a dozen of old books present the sole element of cultural and social life. Village club serves as the only entertainment place for youth, where they can relax after a hard workday engaging in drinking and fighting. Often though, the culture exists only around the local store, where villagers buy cheap alcoholic beverages and usually consume them right on the spot.

No wonder the youth move to urban centres looking for education, employment and fun. A special policy of mandatory two-year employment in public sector for graduates does not work either. Most of them leave villages after finishing the period and often use various tricks to escape it altogether.

But the problem concerns not only the youth. As Rusy admitted, agricultural workers started to seek employment and migrate to neighbouring states, particularly to Russia.

Paradoxically, in many villages of Eastern Belarus most men
work in Russia and not in the local economy. They come home for a while to see their families and provide them with money, and then head for another period of work in Russia. This mode of economy favours neither households nor Belarusian economy in general. The government, however, seems unable to resolve the problem and prefers not to raise it publicly.

**Globalisation Pushes for Reform**

Addressing the parliament last month, Michail Rusy announced a rather ambitious goal of the program of rural development till 2015. According to it, government is planning to invest $7.5 bn in modernization of agricultural sector till 2015.

The policy of financial support of collective farms will shift from general subsidies to loans by business-plans. Average salary in agriculture will rise to BYR 8 m (almost $1,000) by means of rapid increase in economic effectiveness of production. Today’s salary in the sector varies from $200 to $400 depending on profitability of klahas.

This modernization rhetoric comes from an obvious fact, which Belarus leadership tried to deter for so long. Belarus becomes more and more involved in global economy through integration projects and therefore has to engage in stronger competition. The situation turned especially nasty when Russia joined WTO this year, being in Customs Union with Belarus simultaneously. Belarus *was not ready for such developments at all* and now has to catch up fast.

Russia consumes more than 80% of Belarus farming production. While other Belarusian production loses traditional markets, food remains a stable due to enormous needs of Russian megalopolises. Now and then, farming products appear in the middle of trade scandals between Belarus and Russia (“milk and sugar wars” for example).

Such an export strategy advantages Belarus producers, as they export at prices several times higher than domestic market can
offer. However, it is Belarus population who end up being disadvantaged, because better quality products are going abroad and what remains is sold locally.

The plans of government are costly and ambitious, officials operate with numbers and figures and promise unprecedented growth. Yet the thing is that without a complex regional policy which targets all aspects of human life people will not come to work on the land.

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