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IGOR CAȘU
NORA GEVORGYAN
ALEH IVANOU
MERT KOÇAK
SALOME TSOPURASHVILI

Editor: Irina Vainovski-Mihai

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New Europe College
Str. Plantelor 21
023971 Bucharest
Romania
www.nec.ro; e-mail: nec@nec.ro
Tel. (+4) 021.307.99.10

ALEH IVANOU

Born in 1971, in Belarus

Ph.D., University of Kent (2010)
Thesis: *Local Environmental Mobilisation in Moscow: Taganka 3 and Related Groups*

Senior Research Fellow, Institute of Philosophy, National Academy of Sciences, Belarus

Fellowships and grants:
Leibniz Institute for Regional Geography, Leipzig (2018-2019)
Institute of International Education, New York (2015-2016)
Visby Scholarship, Swedish Institute (2012-2013)
Foundation for Urban and Regional Studies, University of Essex (2007-2010)
School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research, University of Kent (2006-2010)
Open Society Intitute/George Soros Foundation, Budapest/New York (2003-2004)

Academic honor:
Colyer-Fergusson Award for academic excellence, Kent County (2007)

"A SECOND BREAD": ON BELARUSIAN CHOICES

Abstract

This paper considers the potato as an agent in social history, its role within an underdeveloped civil society dominated by the state. It uses guidance from previous studies, extending its research edge and focus to Belarus. Using qualitative methods, it shows that authoritarianism encourages work on subsidiary allotments to make workers economically and socially inactive. The paper investigates manifestations of "potato-induced" weaknesses of civil society, workings of governmental policies, and prospects for public resistance. It finally hypothesizes on the re-feudalizing perils for people subsisting on the potato but calling it "second bread."

Keywords: Potato, bread, Belarus, re-feudalizing, methodological individualism

"if a community is to be enslaved by
the simplicity of its own dietary"
(Salaman 1949, 426)

Introduction

Historically, there have been examples of the potato contributing to subordination and exploitation, but also cases where the potato enlivened the economy. There are also countries "the major part of whose long history is a record of suffering and tragedy" (Fay 1950, 401), where it led to a disaster. Belarus is one such country.

Potato is a cheap staple food that first appears as a blessing, but proves to be rather ominous upon a closer inspection of its societal role. Belarusian households consider potatoes as mainstay and they plant this tuber on subsistence allotments after doing low-paid jobs in the public sector. They cultivate potatoes instead of approaching the public arena. In general, specialized literature regards the potato as the main item of Belarusian

cuisine, preventing the mostly city-dwelling nation from forsaking village traditions. Singing eulogies to the potato as a tasty food or describing an emotional attachment to this tuber is common. This paper understands the potato as a tool for exploitation and self-exploitation, for domination, subjugation, and resistance. It is essential to see why Belarusians consider the potato as a primary food.

The paper brings to light those practices that make potatoes a staple food and a medium of domination by preventing labor division and horizontal communication, showing how Belarusians settle for potato and whether or how they resist it. The project determines the potato's societal role and ascertains its assumed instrumentality for the dominant power. It asks if political elites consciously employ this monoculture to put subalterns into inferior positions. The research subject of potato requires political economy and anthropological approaches. The paper combines various "why" and "how" questions into a specific potato discourse, considering such elements as "potato logic," "potato republic," "potato society," and "potato debate," to see what new, and specifically Belarusian, arguments it can add. The paper approaches issues of domination and subordination, wherein one should look for the potato's role.

"Why are we slaves?" Dialectics of Master and Slave

Slavery in Belarusian discourse can be expressed by the "Why are we slaves?" query (the title of a book by the Soviet dissident Zinoviev [1989]). It points to specific economic and social regularities. Dissident Timofeev (1985) writes that the life of Soviet villagers was synonymous with subsistence, pre-capitalist economy, while feudal land ownership was a trait of a society of mature socialism. Belarusian leadership, affectionately invoking the Stalinist era and *Tcheka*/NKVD (secret police) methods, continues to drive people into the workforce "like cattle to collective farm stalls," as an anonymous interviewee said. Modern-day *Tcheka,* the Belarusian Interior Ministry, uses the near-free labor of convicts in the post-*kolkhozy* it controls. Such cases bring us back to collectivization, where "resemblances to serfdom [a]re remarkable"; James C. Scott (Scott 1998, p.213) suggest that the process has been one of a *re-enserfing / re-feudalizing*.

Specifically, *food-induced subordination* and control involve "subalternity," a "perpetual existence of slavery" (Beilharz 2009, 25), and Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic (*The Phenomenology of Spirit*, 1807).

Bauman (1985) reflects on the interdependence between Bolsheviks and peasants. To put it in more clear terms, Belarusian realities correspond to feudalism when people receive a meager payment; the land belongs to the feudal lord, presently the State; presidential decrees supersede the law. Hann (2013) also interprets informality and neglect of formal institutions as "feudal" relationships. In Belarus, then part of Soviet Russia, serfdom reappeared through collectivization. Contrary to Marxism, a socialist revolution took place in an agrarian country as a reversal to a patriarchal society, opposing the onset of capitalism. In 1994, the newly independent Belarus relapsed into serfdom, when people elected the "good landlord" Lukašenka, who promised to judge fairly. Nowadays, the "employer" concept has little meaning in a country where the State is the only landowner. Rural enterprises are managed by "agrarian barons," whose feudal character surfaces in privileges, loyalty-based selection, and public assets granted "for service." Lukašenka promises to gift each "baron" with 25 percent shares of their post-*kolkhoz*. "Barons" go to jail for theft, but then receive again hundred-dollars-per-month "serfs."

Belarusian society is *feudalizing*. The presidential decree, known as "decree on do-littles," is designed to to turn them into serfs: avoiding the "social parasite" status and acquiescing to any minimally-paid job, a person disregards common good. Such a person is easily controllable and goes with the flow. Control over food is key to political dominance. Pre-revolutionary Russia had a primitive society with predominantly subsistence farming. In the 1980s, Timofeev (1985) described villagers (and urban *dacha* enthusiasts) spending off-hours on subsistence plots (often as small as 0.02 ha), but feeding half of the Soviet people. The potato is still a major nutritional factor for Belarusian city dwellers, yet less so than in villages: this is because rural wages are lower than in the city, villagers having readier access to land and the skills needed to grow potatoes, and because villagers are conservative.

Whether or not the crop itself is at the root of inequality is this paper's central issue. Food impacts the society via production routine and consumer habits. Contrasting cooperation and labor division to produce bread by the English vs. self-contained potato production by Irish peasants, Salaman (1949) showed how elites force or persuade the poor into a cheap, nutritious staple. Engels (*The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, 1884) noted the impact of the potato on societies and likened its revolutionary role to that of iron. Contemporary authors argue that certain crops involve a particular political economy, inequality in production means, and social

stratification (Mintz 1986; Mihály Sárkány, pers. comm., January 2020), defining, among other things, the societal penchant for *re-feudalizing.*

> *"Potato above all."*
> We observed Belarusians harvesting potatoes. All along our way, half-broken human figures were poking into the ground like moles, burrowing for potatoes, friskily and methodically picking precious tubers. Faces were sweaty and dirty, tight and focused, but also peaceful. They were sagging under the weight of sacks, stepping among the furrows like ants, dragging them to Ladas and Volkswagens. They did not notice anything aside from their potatoes. Potatoes reigned above all. Only now I understood a stout girl selling potatoes near supermarket 'Tsentralny' in Minsk after the 1995 referendum results replaced *Pahonya* [the historical Belarusian national emblem, the equestrian figure of St. George] with the present 'potato-shaped' symbol [Soviet-style, an oval contour of Belarus above the sun and the globe, amidst two sheaths of wheat ears connecting above with a red star]. I asked her if she voted for the replacement. She repeated to me the words of the 'potato-grower-in-chief' [Lukašenka]: 'What use would we have for this mare [meaning St. George's horse]?' Now I looked at these folks in the fields and understood: the one who picked up the spade would never take the sword. No military intervention is needed to occupy what is already occupied by the potato, which sits in the heads, entrails, and, most deploringly, in the hearts of Belarusians" (Daškievič 2017 – my transl. – AI). *(to be continued, see below)*

The excerpt above follows a logic once originated in Malthus, that Lloyd (2007, 10) calls *"potato logic."* It alleges that the State imposed potatoes on people as their staple. Once established, the potato determines their life. Following this excerpt and addressing "potato logic," the paper applies social science methods to assess the impact of the potato on Belarusian society. The potato as a research subject resorts to political economy, while also drawing on anthropological approaches. After the review of ethnographic data-gathering in authoritarian settings, the discussion first addresses potato choices anthropologically and follows the four questions of Bernstein's (2017, 2) summary of the Marxist political economy approach: "Who owns what? Who does what? Who gets what? What do they do with it?" Repeating the classical questions posed by Salaman (20th-century potato scholar and proponent, in Connell [1951, 394]): "Who benefited; who suffered?" and Trevelyan (19th-century opponent of "the corrupting potato," in Lloyd [2007, 318]) "what hope

is there for a nation which lives on potatoes?", the *aim* is to uncover the societal impact of the potato staple on Belarus.

Methodology and Context: "A silent and fragmented field"

Despite pride in their potatoes, Belarusians are ignorant about the potato's social effects and should learn from other nations once in critical relations with potato and where it has long competed with grain, such as Ireland, Britain, and France. The paper intends to set an example in applying international potato-focused scholarship to Belarus. Critical researchers of authoritarian Belarus are a rare species. Belarusian collectivized rural contexts, a "silent and fragmented field" (Hervouet 2019, 99), are notably challenging to study ethnographically. Looking into what was still possible to study, the seemingly innocuous topic of potatoes enabled this research. Seemingly apolitical, potato cultivation and consumption give a clue to life in Belarus.

This text represents an independent research. Sociological surveys in Belarus are conducted by "competent bodies" and the results publicized in a "managed" form, if at all. An independent researcher has no right to ask questions. Instead of interviews, the author informally talked to people (N>100) in several villages, in a district town, in the regional city Gomel, and in the capital Minsk, in settings ranging from a festive table, a public bus, a train, and a household allotment while helping to plant and harvest potatoes. It takes continuous engagement in local life to overcome stereotypes and restraint, although the author is an insider in his research settings, and many people knew his ancestors – that is to say, they knew him "peeled," as the saying goes, invoking the same old potato. As a Belarusian native, the author can be subjected to repression, though this opportunity has been underutilized. A recent episode, probably a reminder for him "to behave," took place at Minsk airport, where he lost control over his laptop, taken by someone avowedly by mistake during the usual airport security check. This experience echoes Hervouet's (2019, 96) evidence on the regime using "speculations, giving free rein to the most paranoid interpretations." The author believes that his contacts were safe because they talked about the potato, the most innocent of subjects.

A significant problem was numerical data. Systematic distortion by the authorities of statistical information for the sake of a propagandistic "picture" precludes any reliable data for numerical analysis. Official statistics are suspect, and many of their claimed achievements exist

only "on paper." The non-existence of independent sociology in Belarus should not exonerate turning to official sources, because the throttling of independent expertise aims to achieve this effect. To avoid losing grasp on Belarusian reality, the author substantiates his inferences from international literature with his empirical material. A good part of this paper reflects on domination, subordination, and other abstract but potato-related issues. Given that the subject matter involving potato cultivation and consumption is often qualitative and non-measurable, the argument array needed a tool to ascertain its findings' causal regularities. It employs the so-called *Austrian methodology*, featuring a principle of methodological individualism, claims about an *a priori* human action, and issues involving preference vis-a-vis action, especially time-preference, whereby people prefer to achieve their goal sooner rather than later, if possible.

Methodological individualism is essential to this study on potato-subsisting and atomized households, making individual decisions under risk and uncertainty. Herewith, the action is only purposeful behavior, and preferences apply via descriptions. Crucial for this study on food, methodological individualism presupposes social action stemming from individual human action, but irreducible to biology. Despite this paper addresses the symbolism and the social implications of potatoes, they more commonly stand for the material properties and the physiological effects of the food (Nozick 1997). Following the Austrian methodology, the paper's argument abstracts from the biology and physiology of potato. A similar logic has probably led Harvard's Anthropology program to separate Biological Anthropology, which affected those who studied food and regarded it as intrinsically bio-cultural (Wiley and Madison 2006). This study thus bypasses *biological essentialism* but espouses anthropologist Thompson's *cultural materialism*, "a moral economy of explanation that assumes reasonableness of popular action and its conformity to an implied human norm" (Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000, 67), insisting on placing economic behavior back into a broader cultural context.

"Second bread": Dialectics of Potato

Why potato is chosen. Anthropological argument

Peasant outlooks explain potato's reception across Europe: conservatism and avoidance of risk first kept potato down in the 18th century and promoted it in the 19th century, when it proved a reliable standby

(Zuckerman 1999). The potato arrived in yet pre-modern 18th-century Belarus to join its traditional culture, cuisine, and conservative tastes. As with other traditional cultures that persist with whatever gods or ancestors have created, growing and eating potatoes is thus moral for Belarusians (Rakicki 2006). What further determines the choice of food is its taste. As if implementing the acceptable (human-to-social) reductionism, taste is not individual, but shared by collectivities and even nations. Scaling up from nations, sedentary civilizations are starch-based societies that tend to cultivate complex carbohydrates: maize, potatoes, rice, millet, or wheat. Other food appears as secondary. People "feel they have not... eaten unless they have had [starch foods] *ubwali*..., but they will also feel that *ubwali* is not enough [without flavor-fringe] *umunani*" (Mintz 1986, 11). After Mintz (1986, 9) asks "how a preferred starch can be the nutritive anchor of an entire culture," he later answers, "[w]hy this should be so is not entirely clear" (Mintz 1986, 11), endorsing this research's avoidance of biological explanations. The dietary "center" and "edge" meet the Austrian methodology, given its penchant for paired choices. Besides taste, the Austrian methodology reverberates (via its choice-preference-action pairing, and particularly time-preference) in the convenience food as dictated by time, energies, and lifestyles (Sheely 2008). In rural areas, the choice of crops relates to associated risks. While in France "the soil... [sustaining the potato] was... on the side of the Republic" (Spary 2014, 177), the Irish adopted potato as fitting for their humid climate, friable acid soil, boglands (Armattoe 1945), similar to Belarus.

"The destruction of war and revolution" (Connell 1951, 389) increased reliance on potatoes, as in 17th century Ireland, when one-third of its population died. The 1800 famine led to the spread of potatoes in Romania and other European countries (Chiru et al. 2008). In Belarus, the full-scale adoption of potatoes followed the loss of one-third of the population in WWII. Mihály Sárkány contributed this argument with a baseline from his study of the Kikuyu (Kenya). The Kikuyu produced starch-rich maize already in the 19th century without making it their staple food. It became so in the early 20th century via locals hired by Europeans, who paid with *posho* (a portion of maize), which Kikuyu cooked into *ugali* (in Swahili, a dish of cooked maize flour, a variation of *ubwali*). The conditions in Kenya's Central Highlands favored maize cultivation, with its flour highly valuable nutritionally and easy to cook. The former staple foods, millet or sorghum, gave humbler yields and notably failed during WWI. Collapsing anthropology and political economy, the latter concerns the recognition

that everything that is produced should be reproduced, including producers and their families. The potato's political economy is crucial for understanding its effect on Belarusian society. The paper continues this line by considering Bernstein's four questions (2017).

What difference potatoes make. The political economy argument

The tuber pervaded individual households and entire societies until it started to define them (Zuckerman 1999) in what concerned land allocation, production routines, and consumption habits.

Ownership: Enclosure

Food should be discussed apiece with the land. With land in British hands, the Irish were *re-feudalized* into landless peasants surviving on potato (Hotopf 2013). Although imperial Russia abolished serfdom in the Belarusian lands in 1861, peasants did not receive direct (rather than via *obshchina*) access to land until 1910. After 1917, Bolsheviks collectivized land and assets into *kolkhozy* and peasants into landless serfs. Nowadays, post-*kolkhozniki* are landless potato-subsisting wage-workers. Collectivization meant the enclosure of small farms into large units, leaving small subsistence allotments for villagers. Like in post-enclosure Ireland, Soviet land arrangements required the potato. In Soviet Belarus, 0.25 ha was the allotment ceiling, compared to 1 ha in the Soviet Baltic republics, closer to Irish cottagers "who farmed nothing as large as the hectare" (Zuckerman 1999, 78). Enclosure changed the ways people fed themselves: they now had to buy all other food except potatoes.

A Soviet household plot was the object neither of tenure nor of free rent, while its allowed use was family subsistence (Timofeev 1985). Present-day Belarus is one of few countries worldwide with no land market: like a top feudal senior, Lukašenka transfers land to "barons" and such international friends as Arab sheiks. Again, post-*kolkhozy* occupy the better land, while villagers wishing for an extra land parcel should register as "farmers," implying paperwork, accounting, and taxes. Belarusian nomenklatura opposes the private sector's expansion, but some large, well-connected farmers can access even post-*kolkhozy*'s lands, forcing them to lay off their workers. Whether laid-off or still employed, villagers settle for potato from subsistence plots, reminding us of the Irish cottager, who "was not a serf – he was much nearer akin to a slave" (Salaman 1949, 266). Again,

"slavery" is an oft-repeated word in Belarusian talks. It is possible to privatize a subsistence allotment (it would cost USD 2-3 thousand per ha). Even this parcel cannot be sold, an epitome of ownership failing to bring independence. Belarusian households either avoid registering their parcels or choose lifetime possession – neither to sell nor to divide into parts, which represents a difference from Irish cottagers.

Expanding on the similarity between old Ireland and present-day Belarus, there are incessant legislative initiatives to reduce the amount of land in smallholders' use by diverting "extra" acreages over to post-*kolkhozy* (Zhminda 2012). While an average American family farm occupies 300 ha and a European family possesses 49 ha, a Belarusian household uses a land parcel comparable to that of a Roman slave's (0.06-0.25 ha), and an average post-kolkhoz occupies 22,000 ha (Hurnievič 2018). Western visionaries addressing the worsening relationship between land and people hoped the potato would compensate for the loss of common rights, while others blamed the potato for exacerbating the poor's plight (Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000). Soviet collectivization implied a pervasive loss of rights, but native discussion on the potato's role is non-critical.

Production: "Lazy-bed"

By the 19th century, the potato was already dominating the Belarusian fields, and it became the focus of the new-born agrarian science in the 1860s (Rakicki 2006). Even the illiterate contributed observations – because, to use Spary's (2014, 183) expression, "[t]he science of potatoes was democratic" – in republican France and tsarist Russia almost alike. Belarusian potato cultivation rated high in the Russian Empire: in 1913, the cultivated area was 583.3 thousand ha, each giving 6.4 tons, which made for a total of 4 million tons, or 12.6 percent in the Empire (Rakicki 2006). The advantage was relative to Russian inner regions. In the 1920s, the per-hectare yield was 8.7 tons at best (Zadora 2019) or 2.5 times lower than the per-acre yield of 6.5-8.5 tons in 19th-century Ireland (Zuckerman 1999). Belarusian households report up to 500 kg per 0.01 ha (acreage referred to as *sotka*), or on average, 8-12 sacks, each sack weighing 30-40 kg. If recalculated for a hectare, this harvest is a stunning 50 tons – such achievements are not scaleable in practice and apply to small plots and family self-exploitation. Both in Soviet and modern Belarus, official statistics have appropriated 80 percent of the harvest (recently, 4.8 million tons) gathered by private households. Post-*kolkhozy* avoid the potato due

to the required sizable input of manual (rather than mechanized) work and care.

Manual work in isolation on small parcels invokes the *"lazy-bed,"* a method of cultivation and individual survival on potato involving raised strips of soil, fertilized with animal manure and enabling a family of six to feed on less than an acre (Salaman 1949). It needed meager resources: spades and their operators, and amounted to a parallel domestic economy supporting a capitalist market with excessive land and cheap labor. As noted, Belarus matches Ireland's less fertile soils (their large proportion falling on former peat bogs), and its cold climate, unsupportive of wheat cultivation, but very suitable for potatoes. Individual potato plots in Belarus do not require elevation in its drier climate but still need spudding. Over the last two decades, mechanical cultivators ("mini-tractors") have been in use. Without much involvement of modern agronomy, it is the same variety planted year after year for lack of money for seeds. Growers say this tuber "loves a care": spudding no less than three times per season, sprinkling, preventing Phytophthora by using chemicals, and considering that it's better to manually remove Colorado beetles. Otherwise people tend to avoid chemicals both for economic reasons and in a strive for "good ecology." No interviewee applied expensive mineral fertilizers. Organics were applied sparingly, once every three years. Some interviewees explained this frugality by reasonable sufficiency (more organics would not improve harvests); others referred to manure as less accessible due to few privately owned cows and the high prices demanded by post-kolkhoz milk farms. Though familiar with the radioactivity risks of local firewood, respondents used stove ashes as nitrogen fertilizers. Traditional paring and burning of land to give potash to potatoes were discontinued in Belarus due to vigilant local authorities: fires compromise accident statistics. Authorities neglect whatever risk citizens are exposed to by consuming radionuclides with self-grown food. Relating other peculiarities of potato growing, people reported

- in the past, they followed a simple "hundred-day potato growths" rule (planted in May, harvesting in September),
- potato blights never happened,
- harvest could be preserved almost without decay,
- the Colorado beetle was the only enemy, and
- Potato harvests differ year in and out: an excellent potato harvest was in 2017, but Phytophthora damaged it in 2018.

Belarusian post-*kolkhozy* combine socialist traits with market elements. Everything Timofeev wrote still applies today in Belarus: the making of agricultural land a massive enterprise for exploitation; workers having to work on subsistence plots in their free time and to engage family members; individual allotments essential not only for the reproduction of rural households, but also for *dacha*-owning urbanites (Timofeev 1985). *Dachniks* are not only Soviet or Belarusian, but a regional and current trend of the city dwellers driving the potato broader-scope, with urbanites cultivating potatoes to earn psychological and economic security. What Timofeev viewed as exploitation and self-exploitation, some Belarusian researchers uncritically consider as helping "citizens escape from economic and political pressure" (Zadora 2019, 183). Without labor division and extra-family co-operation, it is a form of self-isolation (Rev 1987), escaping society and political reality. Deciding between exploitation and self-exploitation, the factor of economic necessity is vital. Often, a potato bed is not necessary for people earning enough to buy food. As Timofeev (1985) noted (bringing to mind the "potato logic" [Lloyd 2007]), by cultivating potatoes over the years, generations form a custom and a moral imperative requiring a household to engage with it. Because every villager plants and harvests potatoes, because people see avoidance as arrogance, or otherwise one should give up the land parcel provided on condition of its use for subsistence.

Growers invest potato with superior time-saving and nutritive properties (Spary 2014). The potato also casts many shadows. Some accused potato subsistence of killing off sea-fishing in Ireland, but this profession declined over decreasing profitability (Zuckerman 1999). Others asperse potato as a "lazy-root" for allowing subsistence with minimal labor and land (Connell 1951). Potato cultivation reveals time-consciousness. The Irish smallholders spent "a fortnight planting, a fortnight digging and another fortnight cutting turf, and for the rest of the year followed their inclinations without the least ambition of any sort" (Armattoe 1945, 154). In the "Austrian" framework, such references to time signify a penchant for action ("Action shows time-preference" [Nozick 1997, 136]), abrupt and dramatic, such as revolutions. Based on evidence from revolutionary France, the paper also posits potato growers' immunity – up to a point – to redistribution-upon-requisition incentives and other collectivization initiatives: "Replies to th[ese] initiative[s] show that – as before the Revolution – potato cultivation remained a locali[z]ed affair" (Spary 2014, 182). Potato has proved to be an individualistic crop. Negatively,

its distinctive political economy makes households reproduce at fixed consumption. Such household reproduction scales up to corresponding societal reproduction, making for a potato-subsisting society lacking progress.

Consumption: "Second bread"

"Eating ends the annual drama of the food economy that begins with planting and birth" (Berry 1990, 145). Before the advent of the potato, the Irish "consumed abundant milk, sour curds, butter, oatmeal, oaten bread, and pudding made from ox blood" (Armattoe 1945, 154). Though most Belarusians do not imagine life without potatoes, it is adjacent with such near-subsistence tillage and pastoral products as pork, milk, curds, and eggs. Belarusians were known for consuming *bocvinie* (beetroot, onions, dill, parsley, quinoa, nettles, sorrel), a laughingstock for the Polish nobility regarding their Belarusian peers, said not only to eat *bocvinie* but grow it as well (Rakicki 2006). Each subsequent war on the Belarusian territory, but particularly WWII, increased the role of the potato, and by the late Soviet period, Timofeev (1985) witnessed city dwellers, but especially villagers, consuming in excess only potatoes and bread. Elsewhere, the potato habit gradually weakened (Connell 1951). "That has changed... even with the Irish, who used to love their potatoes, despite the Great Famine. Now potatoes are a pretty subsidiary item in the diet and in popular discourse" (Cormac O'Grada, pers. comm., November 2019). If we are to believe statistics, Belarusians also tend to eat less bread and potatoes.

This research focuses on a popular reference to the potato as "second bread" (there is neither "third" nor "fourth bread"). Belarusian publicists and researchers reiterate that the potato has become a public mainstay and an alternative to bread (Zadora 2019), or a proverbial "second bread." There is historical evidence: for peasants it was often the "first bread" – when they sold their peas, barley, and oats, and ate potatoes throughout the year (Rakicki 2006) – but still counted as "second."

The potato is called "second bread" not only by Belarusians, but also by other Slavic peoples and even in Romania (Chiru et al. 2008). If potato is a mainstay, why then should it be a "second-best... bread"? It is a humbling assessment of this staple food grown by almost everyone: "we all eat bread, and next to none of us have grown it. We all eat potatoes, and most of us cultivate them, being aware at first hand of this season's shortage and last season's glut" (Fay 1950, 399). In Belarus,

despite being considered a national "second bread" while being the main domestic product, officialdom keeps the potato off focus, prioritizing grain. The paper hypothesizes: having switched to potatoes and a secluded, household-orbiting life, people affectionately remembered their previous, communal, grain/bread-based life. It can be suggested that for this reason Belarusians welcomed collectivization, perceived as a return of the *obshchina* communal life.

Uses of the potato

The argument ensues to define the potato's strategic applications and social effects (often perceived as "dangers"). The potato keeps resolving or alleviating problems of time and space, land and fuel, labor and income, promoting thriftiness and simplicity. The "corrupting potato," this section's priority focus, is a shorthand for the apprehensions of social change, accompanying the potato's success with suspicion (Zuckerman 1999). 19th-century authors considered the potato an "exploitative bondage" (Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000, 68). People have considered the potato as an economic, cultural, or social weapon. Malthus considered the potato dangerous as something grown in allotments out of the economy, thus preventing *homo appetitis* from becoming *homo economicus*. To others a mere subsistence and the end of culture, the potato blocked aspirations towards higher ends. The social body lost "radiating complexities," traditions such as home bread-baking, constituting the art of living (Zuckerman 1999; Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000). The potato could serve for turning people noneconomic, ego-less, and antisocial. The question remains: Is this incidental or the result of conscious action?

In Belarus, the predominantly enthusiastic reception casts the potato as a life-supporting resource and cultural asset (Rakicki 2006; Zadora 2019), and few view it as a concern rather than an asset (Daškievič 2017). There is then a discussion regarding the potato's social effects by correlating the material circumstances of the potato and the societal characteristics it reproduces, fitting the potato into a cause and effect pattern. The resignation to the potato often happened *"in times of national danger,"* when it gave support, encouragement to be content with little, and a feeling of belonging (Armattoe 1945, 154-155). Revolutionary France saw potatoes contribute to good citizenship and even to exemplary Republican citizens, due to its adaptability, versatility, and modesty (Spary 2014). In Soviet republics, individual potato cultivation made for

the provision of cities and urban-rural connections, alongside familial connectivity. Even the families of the defiant cultural elite representatives were involved in potato cultivation: the Chukovskys, the Pasternaks, the Kataevs (Pomerantsev 2018). Potato cultivation contributed to political degradation by undermining the will and social ties (Armattoe 1945), which added further resignation to potatoes (Lloyd 2007).

The potato is a *nation knocking-together factor,* being the mainstay for peoples (the Irish, the French, the Belarusians) during their formative stages. China's central government promotes the potato to the status of national staple, aligning national, regional, and local culinary cultures and identities (Klein 2020). Belarusians constitute a loose-knitted nation because it entered the 20th century dominated by peasantry with their potato-related rituals (Zadora 2019). The potato is still a marker of Belarusian culture, inseparable from surrounding and adjacent cultures, *bulʹba* ("potato" in Belarusian) being a Yiddish word. Researchers of Belarus portray the potato as imprinting the national character. What they posit as a unique linkage of potato's penchant to produce stable harvests and Belarusians' bent toward stability (Zadora 2019) is valid for peasant conservatism elsewhere. Calling potato-consumption a decisive element of Belarusian identity is an overstatement, similar to a time-unconscious viewpoint on the "Irish character," featuring a people stuck in feudalism (Lloyd 2007) and associated with laziness (Zuckerman 1999).

It is also unacceptable to re-invoke the pejorative nickname *bulʹbashy* as if constituting Belarusian identity. The word was in use in the Soviet Army (of which the author was part and witness), it was resisted there by Belarusians, and it has long gone. A Polish researcher understands *bulʹbashy* as a pejorative "potato-face" (Mamul 2009), whereas native specialists in Belarusian identity do not. Similar mocking phrases regarding potato-eating peoples were current elsewhere, such as *couch potato* (potato head) (Zuckerman 1999). Potato enables *the population to increase and enables cultural reproduction* (Lloyd 2007). Mihály Sárkány describes a connection between the consumption of maize and the Kikuyu's demographic and socio-cultural processes. After WWII, potato also helped Belarusian culture and language via the demographic reconstitution and enabled partial societal recovery after the Stalinist purges.

The potato contributes to the *reproduction of poverty* (Lloyd 2007). Repeatedly in Belarusian history and elsewhere (in Ireland – Salaman 1949; Lloyd 2007), it gave nutritional alleviation without improving material and social conditions. For centuries, it kept (via Belarusian lifestyles) the

Belarusian nation alive, but destitute and stateless. The role of the tuber in *capitalist and socialist development* is both well-studied and ambiguous. Like sugar, potato provided nutrition during industrialization, by permitting to increase the frequency of meals taken outside the home (Mintz 1986). As in Ireland (Armattoe 1945; Salaman 1949; Connell 1951), the potato enabled the post-war reconstruction and industrialization of Belarus, including by allowing the village youth to be city-bound. The potato could thrive untended, while the ex-villagers subsisted on home-grown potatoes. The potato could also hinder the transition to capitalism in contrast to the historical role of sugar (Mintz 1986). Capital-less (neither long-stored nor transportable long-distance), the potato was an obstacle in the transition to capitalism in historical Ireland (Hotopf 2013).

A pressing issue is represented by the prospective *de-collectivization reforms* in Belarus, and whether households' reliance on potato may delay them. Studies show varying amenability to reforms of economies specialized in cereals, sugar, or cotton (Visser 2008). In Belarus, the remaining crucial role of the potato in the private sector mirrors the persistence of large farms in the public sector. The intensification of agricultural production in the USSR took place in the public sector (*kolkhozy* and *sovkhozy*) and concerned, for instance, the wheat, leaving the potato for collective farmers' subsistence plots. Like rice, potato requires more care than, for instance, wheat. There is then a disjuncture between potato and rice relative to wheat. The intensive rice-growing in China and Vietnam was partially collectivized (with small producers retaining control). It later proved much more open to de-collectivization than wheat-growing, where collectivization had been complete (Visser 2008). Without a full-scale de-collectivization in Belarus, it is impossible to assess its system's permeability to reforms.

The tuber's main indictment is its *inducing docility*, its having been introduced with this intent. For Lloyd (2007), despotism makes subalterns resign to cheap sustenance and once they consent, they cannot change. The potato fits this scenario ("potato logic"), while the extent of dependence on it represents both the stage of oppression (Boswell 1950), and the level of appropriation of the production means by the oppressor (Hotopf 2013). Belarusians, formerly a forest-dwelling folk, are said to be dietary versatile, but their later switching to monocultures (first rye, then potato) changed their psychology and worldview. For instance, while eating *bocvinie* (a mix of plants), Belarusians could be more active, with initiative and dignity, and even "positively" aggressive in conducting some

offensive wars. Upon switching to the potato, the national character has changed, given that "biologists regard the potato as having some drug-like characteristics, certain chemical substances that calm down, make people docile and less aggressive" (Rakicki 2006, 173-174 – my transl. – AI). On the one hand, the erstwhile Belarusian *bocvinie* was hardly unique, but part of the 17th-century herbalism in Europe (Zuckerman 1999).

On the other hand, considering the soporific effects of the potato, belonging to nightshades, is unpromising in social research. That the physiological connects to the social cannot be verified within a social discipline or used comparatively. Such normative assertions represent the potato not as a crop, but as an object of contention over control of food being the locus of power in society. It is essential to view the mechanism at play and the *extent of intentionality and action.* Authors allege intentionality when they analyze government initiatives to encourage the working class into potato consumption. To Boswell (1950, 442) these initiatives "implied" that rulers and landlords "were emboldened to proceed with their succession of impoverishing *acts* [my emphasis – AI] because they knew that those whom they made poorer could stave off actual starvation [by using] the potato." Boswell (1950, 443) later admits that this has more likely been "[t]he effect of terrain, soil, climate."

Scott (2009) describes how the state encourages mono-cropping in place of biodiverse cultivation via *"internal colonialism"* and *"botanical colonization,"* to make households dependent on the state and isolated from each other. Whether these had been *conscious acts* is either unclear or not the case. It is also challenging to establish the potato's *causality*. In hindsight, the Famine emerged as the inevitable consequence of excessive population subsisting on a single crop (Lloyd 2007, 315). It is possible to retroactively blame the reliance on the potato in many instances. The adverse event sequence whereby Lukašenka has assumed power now appears as inevitable. The deeper into the history, the more certain such allegations sound. For the authorities, the most pressing political problem is *subsistence crises and food riots.* Pre-modern power holders formulated their food policies intuitively. Now they draw upon scientific advice (Spary 2014) in what Scott (2009) calls "*colonial governmentality,*" at times involving stringent measures. The potato may represent a milder remedy. Its introduction was met with resistance, since it had no biblical mention and conflicted with the attachment to wheat (Armattoe 1945). Despite some calling for the enforcement of potato cultivation in France (Spary 2014), the dietary about-face proved no easy task, unachievable by force.

Food habits could not be legislated either (Zuckerman 1999). Both empires and republics thus needed to propagate a favorable image of the potato, via moralizing and via *persuasive descriptions and examples*. In England, potato advocates presented it as a bread substitute. It was neither the King who declared his adherence to potatoes over bread, nor was it suggested by *The Times* (Zuckerman 1999). Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette had their potato field guarded by soldiers to stoke interest among commoners (Toussaint-Samat 2008). The intendant of Limoges ate potatoes in public and made peasants sit with him (Zuckerman 1999). The Russian empire both enforced and encouraged the transition to potato. Just like British landowners represented the imperial civilization in Ireland, so did Russian *pomeschiki* in Belarus by participating in the civilizing process, changing the consciousness and ethnic culture via a war of tastes (Rakicki 2006).

> *First encounters*
> How did Belarusians first familiarize with potatoes? At first, it was a cold reception. Belarusians were wary of the 'damned earthen apple.' Pressured by the local nobility, peasants planted potatoes reluctantly. In the early 19th century, [retired] General [implying Russian imperial presence – Russian generals/landlords represent a stock character of Belarusian folklore] Gerngros lived in his Mogilev manor obsessed with potato cultivation and cultivating the same passion in his serfs. Strangely, potato seedlings seldom sprouted on peasant allotments. Gerngros soon realized that after planting their potatoes in the afternoon, peasants dug them out the following night and swapped them for vodka in a nearby Jewish *karčma*/pub. The next time, Gerngros gave his peasants cut tubers instead of whole potatoes as seeds [now devoid of "market exchange value"], which yielded a good harvest. Since then, convinced of the potato's benefits and taste, peasants began growing it without coercion (Rakicki 2006, 195-196 – my transl. – AI).

Accommodating descriptions followed, showing that potato was now seen as good food, "not as good as bread, but worthy" (Zuckerman 1999, 241). There are Irish "potatoes and point" (Mintz 1986, 11), "dip at the stool," "herring up the road" (Zuckerman 1999, 276-277) jokes. Belarusian folklore also includes similar jokes, proverbs and sayings, such as "Without potatoes, you go hungry all day" and "Eat potatoes with bread, and you are ready to go" (Zadora 2019, 181). Such Belarusian descriptions remain without a proper analysis of their rootedness in the colonial civilizing process and transition from irrational fears to rational acceptance. Besides implicit descriptions, authorities of all times got involved – and

kept involving their subjects – in explicit *rational planning* of potato cultivation, distribution, and consumption (Spary 2014). An early example of this planning was by Inca authorities, who were in control of the land distribution, terraces, canals, fields, roads, and statistically controlled storehouses to distribute food excesses among districts (Salaman 1949). An early Belarusian example was an agricultural school established by the 1836 imperial decree and its first public exhibition in 1853 dedicated to the potato (Zadora 2019).

Revolutionary France also resolved subsistence problems by using a *scientific, statistically informed approach.* Like their royal predecessors, republican authorities promoted the potato, going so far as to plant it in the Tuileries and Luxembourg Gardens. They made a scientific nutritional truth a fact of life and political claims about food. For this reason, says Spary (2014), France between 1794-1795 was a *true potato republic.* The Incas had had a potato statehood that Salaman (1949, 43) defined as a fascist-type autocracy akin to communist autocracies, such as Communist Russia, with its façade of "primitive peasant communism." Soviet Belarus began as another potato republic but degenerated into totalitarianism, a testing ground of Enlightenment utopias placing state order over universal rights. As in France, the Soviet elites promulgated the potato republic by subsisting on potatoes. Lenin and other revolutionary puritans performed their ostentatious political commitment to it. Soviet schoolchildren (including the author) read a moving story on *Tcheka* founder Dzerjinski (born in Belarus): Dzerjinski once received "out of the left field" some potatoes and *salo* (lard). He refused to eat them in these times of hunger, but first moved along *Tcheka* corridors, asking what his subordinates ate. The pre-agreed reply was "potato and *salo*." Having put his mind at rest, Dzerjinski ate his either godsend or revolutionary gift.

In France, the potato idolatry ended up with the disappointing conclusion that potato cultivation remained a localized affair, and in year VIII of the Revolution ended with a call: "The revolution is over, Citizen" (Spary 2014, 198). Outside the early "potato republic" period and into the totalitarian statehood, the potato remains with the household. For the Irish, the potato was a blessing, because it was "their own and of no interest to the landlord" (Brown 1993, 366). Belarusian archival documents show an occasional inclusion of the potato in the Soviet planning: in the early 1950s, the state coerced villagers to deliver potatoes at state procurement prices (Zhminda 2012).

This research draws its idea of the "potato society" from Ries' paper on Russia, suggesting that "potato is a form of civil society in a neoliberal autocracy," where this mainstay "not only signifies but... solidifies the symbiosis between corrupt and careless governance and popular activity" (2009, 202). The symbiosis suggests the master-slave dialectic, way above either slavery or any other socio-economic system. As Beilharz (2009, 172) remarks, power is not bourgeois, but represents many dependencies. Lacking either self-motivation or external discipline, the Irish cottager was the antithesis of both the freeman and the slave (Lloyd 2007). The Incas had no slaves (but everyone had to work), no trade, but exchange under governmental control. These measures were to preclude famines, and the Incas reported none (Salaman 1949). No famines and no riots are not enough to guarantee the enduring goal of integration under the power-holders' will. Any authoritarianism faces a dilemma whereby subjugation falls short of integration into the economy and society (Ronnas 1989). The initiative by the French Republic to turn the potato into an integrative tool failed because, again, "potato cultivation remained a locali[z]ed affair" (Spary 2014, 182).

The master-slave dialectics reappears in the state vs. market, or equality vs. freedom tension. Planning relies on markets, making them interdependent (Beilharz 2009). Imposing the planned economy and large-scale farming in Belarus, the Soviets, and, later, the Lukašenka regime isolated villagers by displacing small-scale producers and absorbing them into *kolkhozy*. Present-day Belarusians find themselves in economic servitude and extra-economically enslaved. Like Soviet *kolkhozniki*, Belarusian post-*kolkhozniki* work overtime, looking for additional income or stealing, and spend their spare time on potato cultivation on their subsistence plots. A rural household thus detaches from the market, primarily when its members draw income from outside agriculture (Hann 2013). Timofeev (1985) termed these strategies "black market," and noted that the authorities covertly planned such relations. Invoking 19th-century English classics, Gallagher and Greenblatt (2000) warn that the danger of potatoes lies in such extra-economic activities.

A bird's eye social panorama of Belarus is a sackful of potatoes strewn on the ground, or small concentric circuits of separate households that produce, share within the family and subsist on potato. Marx ("The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon", 1852) also refers to French peasants as a collective class – "potatoes in a sack form a sack of potatoes" – as their mode of production isolates peasants from one

another rather than forms collective consciousness. The potato may create a false consciousness, numbing the people to their exploiters (Hotopf 2013). Orwell mentioned in his *Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) that fish and chips dampened workers' revolutionary moods. Vindicating the fish and chips, vans selling them traveled around the country during WWII to maintain the Brits' morale, and even Churchill called fish and chips "the good companions" (Zuckerman 1999, 471). The argument moves to the *potato plot as a resistance ground.* Preventing riots by avoiding famines is insufficient for the power-holders' immunity. "The master f[inds] himself at the mercy of his slave" (Beilharz 2009, 170), while Bauman (1985) referred to the same as the horror of the peasant beast unleashed. Some see the potato as a tool of resistance to further marginalization via agrarian reform (Hotopf 2013). To Zadora (2019), a subsistence plot besides food makes for a private space, and even Hervouet (2019) perceives a leeway for freedom, despite his viewing potato-subsistence as quintessential subalternity.

Potatoes interchangeably stand *for and against invasion and subordination*. There was a belief in the potato's destructive power, reversing its other image of providing against invasion (Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000). Trevelyan depicted the tuber as inciting the poor to revolt, which appeared to others as passive resistance, by self-removal from the economy (Zuckerman 1999). The daily resistance via stealing, lying, or shirking might be pre-political or even apolitical (first invoking "avoidance" rather than "resistance"). As Rev (1987) notes, there are times when no other kinds of action are possible, but when such micro-level actions lead to macro-level changes. Hervouet (2018) remarks that Belarusians' resignation to the dominant state monitoring their life plans *unintentionally* leads to state policies springing to life.

The potato debate as applied to Belarus

It is time for a *potato debate* concerning how the potato competes with grain and bread in paired choices, as begun by the English proponents of the potato in the 19th-century (Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000). It is a stage explaining the mechanism of societal re-feudalizing. Most people live on one food costing most of their income, while societies often have two standard, but socially unequal foods, such as wheat bread for elites and potatoes for laborers. A subset of the Austrian methodology concerning paired choices (Nozick 1997) reflects the situation. The

argument constructs the potato's specific societal place by opposing its qualities to wheat.

Each agricultural commodity is a bundle of qualities, such as perishability and amenability for large-scale production (Visser 2008). Commodities can be compared on this basis, and literature often contrasts potato with wheat. The most direct of the potato/wheat approximations, a shortcut between the two, was a recurrent interest into whether potatoes could be used to make bread (Toussaint-Samat 2008; Spary 2014; Zuckerman 1999). Another theme was growing potatoes instead of wheat. It employed such findings as potato cropping in inverse proportion to wheat; conditions favorable to potato but adverse to wheat; the potato as less prone to weather vagaries and more productive, and less receptive to ills but more tolerant of poor soils (Spary 2014). Wheat is often preferable because in times of plenty it is processable into storable flour for times of dearth (Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000). Relative labor expenses and necessary discipline are also essential: which of the crops requires more scheduling and discipline, division of labor, and a possibility for a few people to control production means. The labor organization may cause the polarization of society, such as found in grain production (Visser 2008). Taking into account such issues, large Soviet farms chose grain specialization. The potato became the main cultivation object for Soviet *kolkhoz* employees in their spare time.

Concerning storage and perishability, potatoes are bulkier and lend themselves to *in-situ* consumption. Potato enthusiasts regarded these qualities as resolving the political and social problems of monopoly and speculation (Spary 2014). The potato's perishability also accounts for its marketing problems and social communication waning (Toussaint-Samat 2008). A necessity to consume perishable potatoes instead of postponing consumption in less perishable foods leads to a habit of immediate satisfaction defined above as "time preference." The possibilities of subsisting on potatoes made it comparable to bread rather than other roots. Potatoes became a substitute for bread (Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000). For fragile households, the potato helped save money on bread and was easy to prepare, eat, and even digest (Zuckerman 1999). In the spirit of methodological individualism, the argument omits comparisons as to which staple proposes a more balanced diet and calculations inferring, for instance, that eight million calories with potatoes require four acres, for which wheat takes nine to twelve acres (Mintz 1986). Instead, it compares the two crops based on social agendas, such as proximity to an

idealized alimentary past and suitability for imposing centralized control by associated large-scale manufacturers and the State.

Grain and potato are different in their spirituality. Bread is the spiritual center of most diets, while potatoes are most physical (Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000). The grain is an honest product with mythic power and a long tradition coming from the Bible; it is moral and moralizing, as in "not knowing how the bread comes to be" reproach (Zuckerman 1999, 143-144). Bread reigns, as evidenced by literature and folklore. The potato looks rather primitive, stemming from the ground. Its earliest name in English was "bread-root." Potatoes are neither shaped by human hands nor circulate in an economy. Even in Ireland, people never addressed God by asking Him to give them their daily potatoes (Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000).

Comparing bread and potatoes involved the several features of bread and its stages of production. Bread partook of a culture of cooperation in society, with labor division and people sharing the same food. Potato culture bypassed much of the social and symbolic cycle in its production and represented pre-social isolation. Comparisons between England and Ireland are classical: while Englishmen formed a social body around bread, the Irish had no community because of the potato (Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000). In Ireland, the potato caused a population boom alongside marginalization and destruction of society, whereas in England, wheat proved favorable for the social fabric (Salaman 1949).

Potato and wheat are also dissimilar in terms of the various dependencies involved. Due to stability and resilience, the potato was "configured as the democrat of staples against the aristocratic and unreliable wheat" (Spary 2014, 183). These qualities made potato much more suitable for a people "jealous to preserve its independence'" (Spary 2014, 180), implying wartime. More often, it leads to dependency on authoritarianism, as discussed and observable, including in Belarus. Relying on a shop for food besides self-grown potatoes is the death of independence, as Zuckerman (1999) puts it, even in Belarusian villages. Two crops enable diverse applications either for control and depoliticization, or as a subversive crop. Grain allows state monitoring, unlike such crops as potatoes. In Scott's (2009) narrative, peasants in Asia fled to the hills to grow root vegetables giving harvest throughout the year instead of regular grain crops forced on them for taxation. As shown by Rev (1987), via such opposition peasants isolate themselves. There is then an open question of whether "a political culture based in the opposition of individualism to political despotism" (Lloyd 2007, 320) enables opposition or connivance.

"There comes a time for potatoes to come into ear."

Attempting to explain when the re-feudalizing process may happen leads one to a portrayal of the last 150 years of Belarusian history and its imperial colonization. The quote below contains the folk saying "*Čas kalasicca buĺbie,*" implying either "There is no chance of that ever happening" or "When pigs fly." It means that potato may sometimes turn into wheat:

> *"Potato above all." (continued)*
> "Every time [the national symbol] *Pahonya* is overthrown corresponds to 'a time for potatoes to come into ear,' as the saying goes. In 1860, Kalinowski's uprising and defeat was also a time for a "potato boom." The year 1918 saw the uprising and defeat of the Belarusian People's Republic and further reliance on potatoes, for lack of grain. Potato consumption then increased throughout the peaceful 1920s. Finally, the 1995 referendum came, when symbols of independent and free Belarus got overturned, a time again synonymous with a potato boom. [Even in the public sector], [p]otato yield reached 223 quintals (87 quintals increase), despite unstable weather and lack of funds, spare parts, and fertilizers" (Daškievič 2017 – my transl. – AI).

As previously mentioned, 80 percent of the average potato harvest in Belarus is produced on subsistence allotments, by collective efforts of extended families, with much higher productivity than in post-*kolkhozy*. What may this increase signify? Paraphrasing Mintz' (1986) words on sugar, the rise in potato production and consumption in Belarus is not accidental, but a direct consequence of the exercise of power. Discussing the effects of crops on development, Hirschman (1981) argues – rather than defining – that crops imprint specific patterns of the socio-economic environment. Given the above discussion on the Belarusian context and geographies relative to several other settings, the research infers the following: the potato exacerbates tendencies of individuation and economic and political dependency. The potato is linked to Belarus' subordination to the Russian empire, its Soviet projection, and to its homegrown despotic populism.

Reliance on potatoes is detrimental to cooperation and rarely profitable, it contributes to social exclusion and loss of human capital for most Belarusians, especially in the countryside. Potato cultivation has brought aversion to social conflict, political inefficiency, insufficient assertiveness in claim-making, lack of control over the State, and a debilitated civil society.

In methodological individualism terms, we end up with a country-wide situation of household interacting like Crusoe with the outside world, by forgoing others, doing what they prefer, abiding by diminishing marginal utility, and exhibiting time-preference (Nozick 1997). By inducing poverty and degradation amongst natives, the potato ruined both the exploited and the exploiter (Salaman 1949). Potato subsistence resulted in both the Irish national catastrophe due to Phytophthora attacking potato, and in the Belarusian plight with Lukašenka coming to power. By wasting their lives and energy to support the power holders by staving off food shortages, yet subsisting on homegrown potatoes, not only do villagers and dachnicks make themselves destitute, but also disassociated from neighbors or politics. They then become an easy prey for populists proposing protection and quick solutions by constructing "the other."

The argument approaches the point where unprecedented individualization follows an "anti-individualistic, collectivist, centralized society" (Rev 1987, 337). Household individualization involves "maintenance of certain social bonds (kinship and other parochial connections)" (Mihály Sárkány), which prepares the ground for a re-feudalizing of society. Experience indicates that power-holders achieve further subordination of popular masses by requiring self-sufficiency in food products (often already existing by potato subsistence), compulsory deliveries to the State, and the necessity to take up jobs in large production units for a meager pay. These measures are grounded more in compulsion (such as administrative restrictions on migration) than in incentives (Ronnas 1989). The foundation of such a national economy has to be grain, whose production increases in the state-controlled sector. It had happened in the 1920s, and it also led Lukašenka to power in Belarus in 1994, "a time for potatoes to come into ear."

Conclusions

"Plowing around" the potato, the paper strived to uncover how the crop influenced many aspects of life in Belarus and elsewhere. It combined political economy with political anthropology for its subject matter, and of Marxism with methodological individualism, in terms of its approach. This paper demonstrates that ownership, production, and consumption of potatoes illustrate power dynamics. It invokes such concepts as "potato logic": once established as the people's diet, the potato becomes a

determining factor in their production and reproduction. In Marxist terms, the societal base structure influences the potato uptake and then gets under its influence by sustaining an authoritarian regime.

The potato is not to blame for the system, but it does exacerbate the original exploitation problem, reflected in land tenure. Suppressing the potato or dismantling potato subsistence would thus not help. Insulating themselves from civilization and adopting subsistence farming instead of wage labor is also not a solution to contemporary problems. Moreover, the negative qualities that the potato subsistence allegedly encourages, such as laziness, ignorance, hopelessness, and childlike dependence, are positively explainable as time-preference combined with risk avoidance.

The potato has never robbed people of independence – a mere vegetable can neither steal nor grant self-sufficiency. Way more complicated is whether it encourages or stifles self-sufficiency, and whether self-sufficiency is even desirable. Many hated the potato: for representing the loss of freedom of self-supporting, for the poor no longer working for themselves and surrendering hold on the land and its fruits, and for ceasing to supply bread by domestic labor. Conversely, others made a likewise plausible point that the potato gave laborers a chance to retain freedom, or at least to survive. Even today, the potato is seen as a culprit for many social ills and moral evils, such as those that beset Belarus. Quoting Zuckerman (1999), the potato is not a maker or an unmaker, but a sustainer of society, preserving existing customs. The potato contributes to the associational problems of the Belarusian people, who often exist and subsist outside a regular capitalist economy. It enables household plots intensification, whereby the authoritarian regime postpones necessary changes.

Tapping into the potato debate, tracing age-old oppositions between the potato and bread enables the argument to switch to a social diagnostics and prognostics mode. The paper has attempted to integrate different arguments into a single scheme of analysis to show how the potato might be connected to collectivization. It considered individualization via potatoes as a preparatory stage for the country's collectivization via grain. It also saw collectivization as a re-feudalizing, implying a mode of production where people are simultaneously in and out of the capitalist economy. Aside from offering a lengthy discussion, the paper proposes a shortcut: if a nation subsists on potatoes but calls them "second bread," it is prone to collectivization.

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